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50 years of European Integration
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Fifty years of European integration has brought a period of unprecedented peace, stability and prosperity to the continent. The enlargement of the original vision of the founding fathers to 27 Member States is a historic triumph, a cause for celebration. At the same time, this is a moment for reflection on how to take these achievements forward, and on how to ensure that this complex and unique political construction remains efficient and legitimate in the eyes of its citizens. We need to connect directly with the citizens to involve them in and give them ownership of our policies. Many of the problems which confront us at the beginning of the 21st century - from climate change to security - cannot be solved by individual countries. They need European policy responses based more than ever before on the strong spirit of solidarity which has characterised the integration process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be in Scotland today. My short visit to this Microsoft Forum, and later today to see European Regional Policy facilitating 21st century research at the Queens Medical Research Institute, is highlighting the 'buzz' concepts at the heart of my policy – new technologies, research and innovation, and engagement with citizens.

A few weeks from now, in March, European leaders will gather in Berlin. They will sign a declaration on the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the Treaty at the heart of the European Union. This is a moment to celebrate. We are marking 50 years of European integration, 50 years of unprecedented peace, stability and prosperity on our continent, but also looking forward to the next steps of our common European project.

For many of us, but particularly for the youth of today, it is difficult to grasp the immensity of what happened in 1957, 12 years after the end of the Second World War. It is hard to imagine the political courage and vision that inspired European leaders of the time to launch the process of European integration.

But we should not forget that we too are experiencing events of great historical importance. When the foundations of European integration were laid, the countries of eastern and central Europe were on other – I would say wrong - side of an impenetrable political and military barrier. But the founding fathers of the Union anticipated that one day these countries would come knocking on the door. They made clear that the Union would have to be prepared for this eventuality. But they would surely have been astonished at how smoothly this process has been accomplished.

Since the beginning of this century, the European Union has opened its doors to 12 new members. And this enlargement – from the original 6 members in 1957 to 27 today – is surely a historic triumph. It is the most successful example of peaceful political change mankind has ever witnessed. Within our living memory, more than half of the members of the Union – from north to south – were dictatorships. Enlargement, the most powerful policy of the Union, has been essential in transforming these countries into functioning democracies where the principles of liberty, the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law are firmly established. And it has been a catalyst for modernisation, for the transition to market economies, promoting the prosperity and well-being of their citizens.

The result of 50 years of integration is a construction as complex as it is unique: the largest most integrated community of democracies in the world. This is what we will celebrate in Berlin. A city which was once the symbol of divided Europe, will surely now come to symbolise the remarkable process of healing.

But while we have good reason to celebrate this 50th anniversary, it is not a time to be complacent. In this declaration we have an opportunity to take stock of what might be improved in our construction, to identify what remains to be done, and to see how best we should move forward. The European Union is, and will remain, in a state of permanent construction. Each generation has something new to contribute. And each generation has an obligation to ensure, in a changing world, that the construction functions as efficiently as possible.

Changes brought about by globalisation, by enlargement, or by the impact of new technologies on how we live and work have an impact on how citizens perceive the Union. This is mirrored in disaffection with national politics. Popular rejection of change is in some ways the standard fare of politics. But this is cold comfort. We cannot accept this situation. The causes of disaffection are complex, and finding and implementing solutions will also be complex. But we must try. To allow the inter-generational relay I just mentioned to take us forward, we must increase the legitimacy and accountability of the European project by reconnecting with our citizens and involving them more directly in the policy process.

Reconnecting with our citizens does not simply mean, however, that institutions must do more for citizens, and respond better to their

demands, expectations and aspirations. This goes without saying. It must also mean that citizens themselves are empowered, both practically and technologically, to do more for Europe. They want to feel ownership of the European policies which we put in place. They want to feel responsibility for Europe. As a globe-trotting Commissioner, I see at local and regional level how direct involvement of citizens on the ground can make miracles.

Participatory democracy of a kind rarely seen in Europe is becoming a core principle of the Union. The Constitutional Treaty already foresees this. It provides for citizen's initiatives. A petition of at least one million signatures from citizens in a number of Member States may request the Commission to take a legislative initiative. If this provision becomes part of the constitutional settlement, then we will have to make it a concrete reality. Citizens will have to learn to use this new instrument responsibly to make their voices directly heard. Leaders will have to learn to listen. Political leadership will be a different leadership and will have to take into account that we have better informed and more active citizens. And the process of policy formation will have to change. Dramatic improvements will be needed in the quality of public debate, the transparency of our discussions, and the quality of information used to justify our actions.

When it comes to improving dialogue on European issues, however, it is not only in Brussels that we can decide how this should be organised. This will vary from country to country. But I am convinced of one thing – the communication must involve not just national authorities, but also local and regional authorities and civil society; not just national media, but local and regional newspapers, radio stations and television programmes. As Commissioner for European Regional Policy, I am

fortunate in having direct contact with the people not just designing and implementing our policies on the ground, but also those who benefit from them. It is to local structures - media and authorities - that people turn most frequently for information and advice.

It is not only more information that they need – but a face that they recognise, a voice that is familiar, someone with whom to interact. In this context, given the location of today's activities, I draw your attention to the initiative of the Scottish Executive and the European Commission on "Building a Bridge between Europe and its citizens". This looks at how Scotland has translated its devolved legislative powers and new system of government into a political process that is accessible, open and responsive to its citizens, and what lessons might be learned in helping all of us in the EU to do the same.

This process of reconnecting with our citizens is already influenced by the unprecedented development – indeed the explosion - of communications technology, particularly the internet, and this will be even more the case in the future. In English you have a saying which runs along the lines of "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing". It takes on a new meaning in the internet world. With the amount of information available in real time, our citizens are potentially better informed than ever before. But I emphasise the word 'potentially'. Because this world, so rich in information, raises many new and challenging public policy issues - how do we ensure that our citizens are not just fully but also fairly informed in the internet world? That they are able and willing to hear and compare different opinions and points of view? How do we ensure, in the mass of creative exchanges that results, that their views can be effectively expressed and heard by those who make policy? In

what way must our political leaders – and their legitimate opponents – communicate in this complex information jungle? These are issues which need serious reflection and good answers so that the potential benefits of the information revolution are fully exploited. I trust that you will make good headway with these issues in your discussions this afternoon.

I want to turn now to another way in which ICTs are changing how we live – their impact on competitiveness. We all agree that the dissemination of ICTs is a major lever for improving the competitiveness of regions, by encouraging the emergence of new businesses and new ways of doing business. An "information society for all" is one of the major components of our growth strategy for improving knowledge and innovation that will make our regions more attractive places to live, to work and to invest.

Indeed innovation – by which I mean the transformation of research and ideas into concrete reality - is now high on the agenda of the Union. The long-term growth performance of the European economy will be determined by our ability to build up and to use our innovation capacity. How do we go about doing this? It is increasingly evident that effective policies on innovation – and a wide range of other issues - cannot be imposed in a top down fashion. Decisions on policy design and implementation must be taken not just at the level of Member States, but at the level of the regions and local authorities. We need to find a new form of multilevel governance.

Experience has shown us that innovation stems from the quality of interactions among firms, education and research institutes, financial

authorities, and with local public authorities which very often play the role of catalyst. Indeed in my own contacts with CEOs of ICT companies, I have been told that regional and local authorities are often more creative partners than national governments when looking for innovative ICT solutions and projects.

It is at the regional and local level that we find the essential knowledge and expertise for identifying strengths and weaknesses and appropriate policy responses. Proximity is essential, and partnership of all relevant players in the process of establishing regional economic development programmes, fosters consensus building, helps to tailor strategies to the needs of the region, and provides legitimacy.

This is the approach of European regional policy which over the next seven years will promote investment on an unprecedented scale: €350 billion of European investment, almost €500 billion including the national contribution, and around €800 billion when we include the impact of leveraging on private investment. We have strongly increased budgetary concentration on innovation, research and development, growth of the knowledge economy, knowledge transfer, and information and communication technologies. And to mention one of our own policy innovations, we will work with key European financial institutions to help regions to develop financial instruments such as risk, seed and venture capital and micro-credits. Improving access to such instruments is essential if we are to release the full potential of our entrepreneurs and our SMEs who continue to be starved of the funds to finance their ideas.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we need institutions and processes that involve our citizens more. We need a new form of multilevel governance which

draws on the expertise of all levels of government in designing and implementing policies. This is the way forward, and to be successful we will have to exploit fully the potential and inspiration offered by information and communication technologies. These institutions and processes must implement policies, policies which respond to our citizens' needs. If we do so, engagement will take the place of disaffection. I said earlier that the narrative of peace and stability no longer carries the weight it once did with our citizens. I believe that we have a duty never to forget these achievements. They cannot be taken for granted. These will always be achievements that underpin what our European values. But we also need a new narrative to convince our citizens of the value-added, indeed of the necessity, of the Union. And I believe strongly that there is a credible one. Many of the problems confronting us at the beginning of the 21st century cannot be solved by our Member States on their own. They need a European policy response based, more than ever before, on the spirit of solidarity that has characterised the integration process. I will give you four examples.

First, the advantages of economic and political strength that we gain by being part of the world's largest integrated economic area are so well-established that they are easily taken for granted. We must not forget that even as the Union we are a small part of the globe, both in terms of surface and of population. And in the decades to come our relative size in terms of GDP will be shrinking as emerging competitors experience the faster rates of growth of those catching up, and in terms of population as our populations shrink. Our single market, and our single voice on trade policy are essential elements in our strategy to rise to the challenges of globalisation. The number and weight of problems whose solutions require a Europe-wide response will grow.

Second, the youth of today recognise that climate change is of particular importance for their future. It is an area where joint action is essential. The EU was a key player in the Kyoto protocol negotiations. It was the combined strength of our Member States under EU leadership that secured the final agreement. We now have made an additional commitment to cut emissions by at least 20% by 2020, and will go further if others will join us. The EU has also lead the way with an emissions trading scheme to reduce greenhouse gases in a cost effective way.

Third, energy is also a European challenge. Working together we will be better able to cope with high prices, renew and rationalise our infrastructure, reduce our dependency on imported hydrocarbons by pooling our resources to negotiate with our suppliers, drive forward research into alternatives and into improving our efficiency. Working together we can increase our energy efficiency by 20% by 2020, triple renewable energy use by 2020, and increase our annual energy research budget by 50%. The Union together is taking a clear global lead in this essential area.

Let me also say that acting together we can have a greater impact in terms of promoting stability and security abroad. At the beginning of my speech I mentioned the benefits of past enlargements of the EU. Looking to the future, the Western Balkans, which witnessed such terrible instability in the 1990s, are progressing on the road to EU membership. While much remains to be done, this prospect is providing a powerful incentive for economic and political reform. It is encouraging reconciliation among peoples of the region who until only recently were deeply and often violently divided, and where we have a new generation

which has experienced on only war and conflict. And further afield, we must build on our actions in areas that already range from Darfur to Lebanon, and from the Congo to Aceh.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, let me return to where I started – the Berlin declaration. What will this declaration do? Well I hope it will do four things. First, I hope it will rapidly become a symbol of a reunited Europe. Second, I hope it will be a clear political statement of how the current 27 Members of the Union want to renew and take forward their shared commitment of principles and values. Third, I hope that it will lay out clearly for our citizens why the European Union is the answer to the many challenges of the 21st century – to globalisation, climate change, energy security, to a more effective role for Europe in international affairs. And I hope finally, that it will move us significantly closer to a constitutional settlement that will allow the Union to become more efficient, more transparent, and more democratic.