

SPEECH OF BELGIAN EX- PREMIER GUY VERHOFSTADT
FOR THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION
OF DEVELOPERS AND HOUSE BUILDERS UEPC
BRUSSELS, APRIL 24, 2008

Mister President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last year, the 27 member states of the European Union celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, the founding treaties of the European Economic Community and Euratom. Next to the treaty of Paris of 1951, founding the European Community of Coal and Steel, the treaties of Rome completed the birth of the widest and most encompassing Union ever seen in recorded European history. Already in 1967 the European institutions, born in Paris and Rome, merged into a single Commission, a single European parliament and a single Council for the European communities. In many aspects, in those days the European Union was born.

Following the signing and ratification of the treaties of Rome, the European Economic Community and Euratom effectively started January 1, 1958. This celebration of the 50th anniversary of the European Union of Developers and House Builders, can not be closer to the founding of present-day Europe. The analogy does not stop here. Indeed, your Belgian federation, the *Union Professionnelle du Secteur Immobilier UPSI* – the *Beroepsvereniging van de Vastgoedsector BVS*, already celebrated its 50th anniversary last year. The Belgian federation was launched in the year 1957, the year our political forebears signed the treaties of Rome.

Even the membership of the UEPC reflects the constant enlarging of the European Union. Originally the UEPC started with federations of house builders in France and Germany, the oldest axis, next to Italy and the Benelux countries, of the European Union. Your European headquarters always stayed in Brussels. Even your first European president, architect Jean-Florian Collin, was a Belgian. At the same time Collin was president of the Movement for the United States of Europe and president ... of the National Action and Coordination Committee of the Belgian liberal party in the 1960s. Today the UEPC counts member federations and unions in twelve European countries, including the new EU-member states Poland en Rumania, and even Turkey, encompassing more than 30.000 enterprises all over Europe, signing for about one million houses and millions square meters office buildings per year.

Commemorating these fifty years of common European history, Ladies and gentlemen, first of all takes me to the European Union. *Noblesse oblige*, I am a politician, neither an architect nor a project developer. The most striking phenomenon in these fifty years of European Union building for me was the constant enlarging and deepening of the Union. The treaties of Rome were signed by six founding states, France, Germany, Italy and the three Benelux countries. Only six, although the original Europe of 1957-1958 was already as wide as the Europe of Charlemagne. The United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark joined the Union in 1973, Greece in 1981, Spain and Portugal in 1986, doubling the original membership to 12 member states. Finland, Austria and Sweden followed in 1995. Yet, the greatest enlargement would follow soon, thanks to the liberation of the former Eastern Europe in 1989-1991. In 2004 the Union went from 15 to 25 member states, including eight states in Eastern Europe, Cyprus and Malta. Bulgaria and Rumania closed the ranks in 2007, the Union being fully aware that

others might follow, particularly on the Balkan, where only the European Union can fill the gap left by the disintegration of former Yugoslavia.

At the same time, Ladies and gentlemen, the European Union has been constantly deepening its many forms of cooperation and common decision-making. Originally Europe was a community of coal and steel. The treaties of Rome particularly focused on agriculture, a common market and nuclear energy. For decades half of European funds went to agriculture. A major year for the common market of persons, capitals, goods and services was 1986, thanks to the signing of the Single Act, promising a Europe without internal boundaries for 1992. 1986 brought us the most far-reaching revision of the European treaties since 1957. Yet, 1986 proved to be only the beginning, not the end of an ongoing series of European treaties – Maastricht in 1992, Amsterdam in 1996, Nice in 2001, Lisbon in 2007 – not just to widen but to deepen European cooperation and togetherness.

In Maastricht and Amsterdam the Economic and Monetary Union, followed by the introduction of a European currency, the euro, was the crown on forty years of economic and monetary cooperation and integration. But at the same time a political union was about to be born, turning loose European Political Cooperation into a genuine European Foreign and Defense Policy and growing European cooperation for Internal Affairs, police-matters, migration and anti-terrorism.

As a matter of fact not all EU-member states are frontrunners. A growing number of them take the lead, while others may follow. This was particularly the case for the eurozone, encompassing the member states who introduced the common currency: 11 (of the 15 member states) in 1999, 15 (of the 27 member states) in 2008. The case of the Schengen-countries, deciding to abolish their internal frontiers, providing strengthened police-cooperation, is even more appealing. In

1985 only five of the ten EU-member states agreed to lift their internal frontiers on the given conditions. Nowadays 'Schengen' counts 22 of the 27 EU-member states, including non-EU-members Norway, Iceland and Switzerland. Thanks to Schengen about 400 million European citizens, spread over 3,6 million square kilometers, really live and work in a Europe without internal frontiers.

The most appealing lesson of fifty years of European unification, Ladies and gentlemen, is that Europe is not made by one central mastermind nor by one single revolution, but by a variety of minor efforts, one following the other. Step by step, following the advice of the European founding fathers Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, Europe is moving. Stone by stone and floor by floor, a new Europe is being built. Slowly, but constantly moving in the same direction.

The most comprehensive challenge, we learned in the years 2002-2007, is an internal challenge: to finalize and to adopt a new European Union treaty, in order to renew the political shape of Europe in keeping with the times. Indeed, the basic European treaties we commemorated last year were signed by the six founding states of the Union. Although those treaties have constantly been renewed, following the ongoing enlargement of the Union, while taking into account the growing responsibilities of the Union in an ever changing world, the existing treaties had to be finalized in order to adapt EU-institutions to the enlarged Union.

A first genuine attempt to do so was the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, prepared by a first European Convention and signed in October 2004 by the 25 Heads of State and Government of the then Union in Rome, has been ratified by a great majority of member states (20 out of 27). But the rejection of this constitutional treaty by France and The Netherlands, by referendum in 2005, asked for a two year reflection period, decided by the European Council in 2005 in order to clear the way for a new attempt to prepare the Unions future.

This reflection period coming to an end in 2007, the Heads of State and Government at the Brussels European Council in June 2007 decided to convene a new Intergovernmental Conference to finalize and adopt a new EU treaty, now called a Reform Treaty. The mandate for the most recent Intergovernmental Conference, starting its activities in July 2007, stated that the Reform Treaty would not have a constitutional character. But in fact the IGC mandate took over the founding principles of the Constitutional Treaty of 2004, particularly concerning the number of seats in the European Parliament, the size of the European Commission, the chairperson of the European Council – a permanent EU-president – and the strengthened position of the High Representative of the EU for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, who will be both the Council's representative and Vice-President of the Commission. Not to forget a more balanced European decision making, taking into account the majority-rule while limiting the unanimity-rule according to the European treaties.

The mandate for the Intergovernmental Conference wanted the new Treaty on Institutional Reform to be written and to be completed by the end of 2007, so the resulting Treaty can be ratified by the member states before the next European Parliament elections, scheduled for 2009. This date coincides with the timetable of the Berlin Declaration of March 25, 2007, calling the states to be 'united in our aim of placing the European Union on a renewed common basis before the European Parliament elections in 2009'. The challenge was met. A new European treaty was finally adopted by the 27 in October 2007. The Heads of State and Government signed the treaty in December 2007 in Lisbon.

Mister President, this European story does not directly affect the UEPC-goals and perspectives. Indirectly, it does, as the free flow of persons, capitals, goods and services – within a Europe of 27 member states – has immense consequences for

every company, every enterprise, every economic activity. Reading the annual surveys of the EUPC, I am struck by the many European targets: Energy Efficiency, Soil Protection, Waste Management, Flood Risk Management, Housing for Senior Citizens, Real Estate Investment Trusts, Urban Logement, Environment, Sustainability, Construction Products, Public Private Partnership, and other European matters so closely monitored by UEPC.

I guess, we are both, politicians and real estate developers, building a new Europe. EUPC-enterprises are operational builders, while we are building another European economical and political home. To fight poverty and backwardness, we learned, politicians and companies first of all should provide jobs and real estate. Jobs to give any European a descent income, real estate to be a capital to overcome poverty in a lasting way. As a matter of fact the EUPC does both, providing ever more jobs and helping ever more people to gain their own real estate.

Europe, Ladies and gentlemen, is made for the many, not for the few. The EUPC has given us a powerful organization to provide any European citizen with a personal home; a workplace and a community center to cherish. Congratulations for the fifty years of European building projects. I do hope that EUPC-architects, EUPC-constructors and EUPC-project developers provide us a European home to cherish, to restore and to build for the great variety of peoples who found their way to this most remarkable continent. To remind your own patent of nobility: *Restoring the past – Building the future*. Congratulations.