

(Only the spoken word prevails)

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Opening speech

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Welcome to our 15th EPP Congress !

It's a special pleasure to meet here in Portugal, with our political family solidly back in power after the hard-fought election earlier this year.

I have of course congratulated you before, Jose Manuel. But permit me to do it again, here on your home territory....and also to thank you and all our friends in the PSD who have worked so hard to help organise this congress and ensure its success.

So thank you also to the many government and party leaders and the delegates who have made time to be here ! We are delighted to see you. I am certain your journey will not have been wasted.

I firmly believe that we, the parties of the EPP, are closer than ever to how most Europeans think. Recent elections have seen the mood swing back towards this still, quiet centre: In Spain, Italy, France, here in Portugal, in the Netherlands, in Denmark, in Luxembourg, Finland, Norway, Slovakia. In Germany, the result was extremely close. But even there, our ideas are established as the mainstream

We have watched with admiration how loyally our two sister parties in Germany, the CSU and CDU, and their leaders Edmund Stoiber and Angela Merkel, have defended our ideas against the frequently irresponsible populism of their political opponents. Now in opposition, but surely soon back in government, together they form the real alternative in Germany to unstable 'red-greenery'.

- In Austria and the Netherlands two Christian Democratic leaders, Wolfgang Schüssel and Jan-Peter Balkenende, are confronted with a new challenge. After a lengthy, and in the second case very brief coalitions with populist parties, their political credibility has emerged unscathed . Indeed the prospect is a good one - after a decisive election campaign, a long period of clear policies and stable government.

- In Greece, Kostas Karamanlis is fighting for a return to power. Meanwhile he is wielding great influence as the inspiration for the "Western Balkan Initiative" to reconcile and bring together in the EU and in our party the countries and political forces of the region.

- In Belgium and Ireland a young leadership has taken up the challenge of renewing our parties. I am also full of hope and expectation for my own country, and have every confidence that, with the backing of a new, younger generation, Stefaan de Clerck can win back the power the CD&V exercised for so long.

- Bo Lundgren and Alf Svenson, the leaders of the Moderaterna and of the Swedish Christian Democrats, should also not give up hope of returning to government.

- Ten years ago they were the first to promote Sweden's membership of the European Union, and they remain our hope for the future.

In France, President Jacques Chirac, his party and political allies, had a famous election victory. It is a triumph of which Europeans can be proud. The extreme right suffered a total defeat, along with racism.

We are happy that the RPR joined the EPP as a full member a few months ago. And yesterday that membership was confirmed by the new UMP party. Along with our founder party, the Nouvelle UDF, France can now play a decisive role in the EPP.

At our last Congress in Berlin, at the beginning of January 2001, I strongly condemned ETA's bloody acts of terror. And I denounced those who, voluntarily or involuntarily, support their aims.

We have, I said then, been able to see how exclusive nationalism, blind to the Europe all around us, has run out of answers. It is why the nationalists try to obtain by force what they cannot obtain through the ballot box.

Since September 11 2001, and now at Bali, terrorism has become a global issue.

That is why we are going to speak our minds by supporting the Partido Popular's resolutions aimed at creating a permanent defence against terrorist fanaticism and violence. Whether through blackmail or terror, they seek to compromise the democratic system and deprive citizens of their basic rights.

In the same area we firmly reject illegal immigration and traffic in human beings and the phenomena associated with them - organised crime, drug-trafficking, and corruption.

But another fundamental question arises: How to achieve a common European policy for asylum and the integration of immigrants in European society?

- The case is urgent: if fewer and fewer children are born in Europe, and we refuse to integrate immigrants legally, we Europeans are digging our own graves.

- Furthermore, previous enlargements have proved that there was a new sense of hope and confidence among the populations in EU candidate countries: they felt encouraged to stay at home.

Several of you are from countries which, by the time of our next Congress, will be members of the Union. Others of you - Nadezhda Mihaylova from Bulgaria and Victor Ciorbea from Romania - are surely not far behind.

And it will be a European Union worthy of the name !

We can be proud that it is the EPP - the EPP above all - who stuck to the vision of a re-united Europe.

That meant showing solidarity with our fellow-Europeans through the bad times, through Communism. And we were still with you in the better - but still often difficult - time of this decade.

On that subject I am pleased to hear of a cross-party initiative in Poland on the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty this weekend. This really is the last brick of the Iron Curtain, and it must be removed !

Here in part is the message to the Irish people:

"Our names are probably unknown to you. Others may be familiar. We are artists, business people, politicians, academics and students from Poland. All of us admire Ireland and its achievements. We take it as a compliment to be known as 'the Irish of the East'.

Soon we expect to conclude our accession negotiations to join you in the European Union - in a re-united continent. We want if possible to repeat your extraordinary success. Please help us. You will soon be voting again on the Treaty of Nice. We recognise its imperfections. But they are already being corrected at the European Convention. And its main outlines are what Europe needs: a stable continent undivided by barbed wire and minefields.

A resounding YES vote will be a great gesture of European solidarity. A NO will reaffirm the rejectionists who can only look backwards. We appeal to you to support us in the referendum on October 19."

Signed: Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Zanussi, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and others.

The European People's Party is the largest and fastest-growing political movement in Europe. We represent no particular social class, or interest group, or lobby. We are what our name proclaims us to be - the voice of all European citizens, of the political centre.

The EPP is made up of 60 member parties from all over the European Union and the future. Our parliamentary group is the largest in the European Parliament, and we are in the forefront of the current debate about the future shape of the Union.

That is as it should be. The EPP was founded in 1976 anticipating the direct European elections three years later as the direct inheritor of the long political tradition which created the European Communities after the war. The founding fathers of Christian Democracy are also Europe's : Schuman, de Gasperi, Adenauer.

A historical tendency has characterised much political debate in recent years. The EPP, Europe's first transnational party, is for instance characterised as populist or simply "right-wing", as if that explained who we are. It does not, and such labels are vulgar and misleading.

In 1976 the EPP represented only Christian-Democratic parties. In the tumultuous quarter-century which followed, much changed. The EPP opened out to other traditions, and integrated powerful new forces like Spain's Partido Popular and Italy's Forza Italia, Portugal's PSD, Hungary's Fidesz and France's UMP which don't have a Christian democratic origin.

But our politics, our programme, and the values on which they are based, are Christian-inspired, social and European, and remain so. Moreover, we see

ourselves as the inheritors of a movement which is an expression of European civilization.

We are now closer, I think, to a genuine political space in Europe, a European polity, which is being given shape in the European constitution which is being debated at this congress. I believe this document expresses our, and Europe's, political culture at its best.

And it is evidence, despite all the groundbreaking changes of the last 50 years, that there is a solid consensus here in Europe. A consensus which will help us to make the Union politically more robust. And also a better, more civilised, more creative place to live.

Thank you.
