

Speech by Margot **Wallström**, Vice President of the European Commission responsible for Institutional affairs and communication strategy

**Fifty years of the EU:  
Greece in Europe – Europe in the world**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here in Greece – the land of Homer and Sappho, Plato and Socrates and Pythagoras...

A land which has contributed so much to the roots of science and of European civilisation.

A beautiful country too, with lovely landscapes and idyllic islands set in an unbelievably blue sea!

A Greek friend of mine told me this joke about the creation of Greece. When God decided to make the world, he divided up the task among a whole team of angels. Each of them had to produce a design for a different country.

The angel responsible for Greece came to God a few days later, really pleased with his plan.

“Look!” he said: “I have designed a wonderful sunlit land with majestic mountains, sandy beaches and beautiful bays. The countryside is ideal for raising sheep and growing fruit. And just look at all these lovely islands! They'll be great for tourism!”

God frowned and said: “Don't you think you've been a bit over-generous to the Greeks?” The angel smiled and said: “Ah, but I have compensated for that. Look who I've given them for neighbours!”

Well, European countries have had a long history of difficulty with their neighbours – in fact a very long history of very bloody conflicts.

And that is precisely why the idea of the European Union was born, in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Integration between EU countries have made further wars between them virtually impossible and certainly unthinkable.

Conflict on the battlefield has been replaced by compromise around the negotiating table.

By creating an institutional framework within which to take their collective decisions, they launched the world's most remarkable experiment in trans-national democracy.

It is therefore appropriate to celebrate the EU's 50th birthday here in Athens – the city where democracy was born.

Birthdays are a great time to get out the family photograph album and remind ourselves

how much has happened over the years,

how the family has grown

and how we have all changed.

So let me spend a few minutes flipping quickly through the pages of Europe's photo album. I will do it with the help of a very short video-clip – by courtesy of AMO and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Here it is.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Seeing those pictures, I wonder what struck you most?

One of the most impressive things to me is the political transformation of Europe.

In Greece, Portugal and Spain, we have seen dictatorship and poverty replaced by democracy and growing prosperity.

Former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe have also become young, vibrant democracies with fast-growing market economies.

And the European Economic Community of six nations founded in 1957 has grown into the European Union of twenty-seven countries today, with half a billion citizens.

That's why we now need a new Treaty.

Simpler rules for taking decisions together.

You cannot run a Union of 27 countries using machinery designed for a Community of six.

In practice, most of the borders between EU countries have disappeared. Gone are the days of long queues at the frontiers, and having to change from one currency to another.

The Euro and the single market have cut costs and opened up huge opportunities for business.

Partly as a result of this, standards of living in much of Europe have risen beyond our grandparents' wildest dreams.

The EU's Cohesion and Structural Funds have been very important in helping revitalise the economy in poorer countries and regions.

This is certainly true of Greece. Since its accession to the European Communities in 1981, this country has received over 50 billion euros from European funds. It will receive a further 20.4 billion euros over the next seven years.

Thanks to this support, Greece has been able to modernize its agriculture, help its less privileged regions, build new infrastructure networks, create new jobs and improve its education and training.

Greece today is an outward-looking country, fully involved in European decision-making.

It was very active in helping Cyprus prepare for EU membership, and it plays a prominent role in EU relations with the Balkans and the Middle East.

Clearly, the European Union – with Greece as a very active member – has come a very long way in the past 50 years and deserves to celebrate its birthday.

But birthdays should not only be a time of self-congratulation. They should also be a time for critical self-appraisal.

We must not only look back: we must look ahead.

The modern world presents us with new challenges:

Globalisation;  
climate change;  
our ageing population;  
the need for economic reform  
the need for security...  
...to name but a few.

We must meet these challenges for the sake of our children and grand-children 50 years from now.

These challenges are all inter-related. It sometimes seems as if they are all packed into a Pandora's Box called "the future of Europe" – and that once we open it to look inside we are overwhelmed by problems.

But remember – in Greek mythology Pandora's Box also contained one last thing, and that is hope.

I am hopeful that Europe can indeed meet these challenges if we summon up the collective political will.

On the issue of climate change, for example, I am encouraged at the boldness European leaders are now showing. They recently took a historical decision to cut

20% in carbon dioxide emissions by the year 2020. And we will increase that figure to 30% if other major economies also play their part.

These reductions are to come from energy savings and more investment in renewable energies, which are to cover 20% of our energy needs by 2020 – compared to only 7% today.

What about globalisation? Europe is facing tough competition from emerging giants like China and India.

To compete, and to maintain our way of life, Europe needs strong economic growth that generates more and better jobs.

We have a strategy for achieving this: it was launched in Lisbon in March 2000 and it is at last beginning to bear fruit. Economic growth and employment levels are now rising in countries across the EU.

But we have to keep up our efforts. EU countries need to invest much more in research and technological development. The current figure is less than 2% of our collective GDP – compared with around 3% in the US.

Governments must also invest heavily in education and training so that Europeans acquire the skills they need to work in tomorrow's high-technology jobs.

We need jobs, not only for the sake of our young people but also to enable us to look after our pensioners.

At present, for every retired person there are four people of working age. In 20 years' time, there will be only three – and in 40 years' time only two – potential workers to every pensioner.

We therefore have to reform our social security systems and make them sustainable so that our grandchildren can enjoy their benefits. This is solidarity with future generations.

One way to rejuvenate our workforce is to encourage skilled immigration from other parts of the world. But we must do more to integrate immigrants into our societies. This is about social inclusion.

Worker mobility is another way of putting people where the jobs are when the vacancies occur. That is the whole point of a single market for labour in the EU.

Of course, we have seen the scare stories about hordes of Polish plumbers invading France – but the reality turns out to be far less scary than the stories.

What's more, the new member states have booming economies!

Thanks to the economic reforms these countries undertook before joining the EU.

Reforms that were painful at the time but are now paying big dividends.

There is a lesson to be learnt here by some of our "old" member states.

Economic regeneration is not the only benefit of EU enlargement. It also consolidates democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights in the candidate countries. That is good for the whole of Europe.

It is this same logic that ultimately justifies enlarging the Union further to include Turkey and the Balkan countries.

They have a young and growing population, which is just what Europe needs. And their potential for economic growth is enormous.

Enlargement makes it essential to reform the rules and procedures by which the EU takes decisions. We need to make policy-making more democratic and more transparent.

What kind of Europe do the people want?

Are their views being heard?

Is there a real public debate going on?

The Commission has been working hard to get such a debate going in each country because we want Europe's future to be decided democratically – through dialogue and debate. What we call Plan D.

However, there are not enough public forums in which citizens can debate European issues and influence EU policies. Such forums need to be created – at local, regional, national and European levels.

On TV, on the internet, and in face-to-face meetings.

That is one of the key recommendations the Commission will be making this year when it publishes its proposals for a European Communication Policy.

This is a fundamental matter of democracy. A political project such as the EU can work only if the people support it as a commonly agreed venture.

That requires cross-border discussion between the citizens of different countries, and a genuine dialogue between the people and the policy-makers.

Roughly half of Europe's citizens are women: yet there are fewer women than men in the workforce, and on average they earn less than men. There are also far fewer women in positions of political power or professional responsibility.

That is something we have to change. Women must be encouraged to play their full part in society. Women's voices – whether it be the business-woman in Greece or the farmer's wife in Estonia – should be heard.

The Agora of European democracy is not just for men, as it was in ancient Athens.

To sum up, ladies and gentlemen:

The future of the European Union must be about delivering prosperity while at the same time protecting the environment and preserving social justice and inclusiveness.

It must be about embracing globalisation within a framework of solidarity and sustainable development that ensures the security of Europe's citizens – including future generations.

And it must be about listening to the citizens and allowing them – women as well as men – to set the agenda.

To create the Europe they desire.

A strong and secure Europe acting forcefully in the world.

A prosperous, dynamic Europe succeeding in world trade.

To quote your great poetess, Sappho

Some an army of horsemen, some an army on foot

and some say a fleet of ships is the loveliest sight

on this dark earth; but I say it is whatever you desire.

Europe will be truly beautiful once it truly embodies the hopes, the dreams and the aspirations of its citizens.

On the EU's 50th birthday, that is something to look forward to.

Something worth working for.

Thank you!