

Your excellencies,

Dear partners of EUTOPIA and VUB,

Dear students, colleagues and friends,

Today, academia takes over politics.

The hemicycle resembles an auditorium, maybe that's why we feel right at home here. Unfortunately, we cannot vote on important issues.

The services of the European Parliament were smart enough to turn off the voting machines before we entered. If we cannot vote, there is only one solution: we will all have to agree. Agree on important issues.

And I do think we all agree that it is great to be here today. We are grateful for the hospitality of the European Parliament and its president Roberta Metsola. And for the support of two Members of the European Parliament, Hilde Vautmans and Kathleen Van Brempt.

And I guess we all agree that the opening of an academic year together with 10 universities is quite symbolic.

Founding father of the European Union Jean Monnet said:

« Nous ne coalisons pas des États, nous unissons des hommes. »

That's what we are doing with EUTOPIA: we're not just connecting universities, we're uniting students, researchers and scientists.

But the same Jean Monnet said :

« Rien n'est possible sans les hommes, rien n'est durable sans les institutions. »

And therefore, in a few minutes we will sign a document with the 10 rectors that will give EUTOPIA a legal basis.

Yes, EUTOPIA is here to stay. Here and everywhere, across Europe and beyond.

And I totally agree with Tiziana Lippiello: the genesis of the EUTOPIA Alliance lies in our enduring belief in a unified European identity.

And so we agree on the importance of the European dimension, we agree on the added value of EUTOPIA, but I think we also agree on another issue: that we are living in times that are troubled, confusing and challenging. That we are living in a world in transition.

My answer is that we need a new Renaissance. I'm not sure we all agree on that, but let me try to convince you. Convince you of the need we have today for a new Renaissance.

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I am occasionally approached by colleagues who wonder what these European networks are actually for and what EUTOPIA is for. What is its purpose? Why are we putting so much time and energy in it?

My short answer is that EUTOPIA aims to live up to a dream.

A slightly more detailed answer involves delving into history, more specifically to the time of the Renaissance, to explain how EUTOPIA can be a part of a NEW renaissance.

The Renaissance was driven by three elements: curiosity, openness and connectivity.

Think Da Vinci, think Vesalius, think Erasmus.

Together those three elements – curiosity, openness and connectivity – led Europe into a new way of thinking, turning diversity into an engine for individual, intellectual and societal mobility and growth.

First and foremost, curiosity.

The Renaissance was triggered by an enormous drive for new knowledge.

In philosophical, scientific and medical fields. And of course in the arts.

It is this curiosity that for instance made translators move to Spain to translate hundreds of Arabic books into Latin. Or to Constantinople to translate books from Greek.

As such, ancient knowledge and new insights came together in European universities and created a kind of electroshock that shook Europe awake, out of the Middle Ages.

The second element was openness.

Those new insights from other civilisations could only flourish in places where there was fertile ground, where there was openness to new, and yes, often heretical ideas. Des opinions hérétiques. Ketterse ideeën.

Fertile ground was certainly not found throughout the whole of Europe.

It was mainly in those regions where the Inquisition had less to say that scientific progress was made.

Firenze, Bologna, Padua, but also Saxony with Luther, and yes, even here in Brussels, where Erasmus spent half a year in 1521.

So, only where thought was free, and free enquiry was possible, could new ideas and thus the Renaissance come about.

The third condition for the Renaissance was connectivity. Thinkers, philosophers and writers such as Erasmus or Thomas More travelled from England across Belgium to France and Italy.

Contrary to popular belief, the group of Renaissance thinkers was relatively small, and they knew each other quite well.

They saw each other and debated new ideas, and the social and political condition of the time. It is from such discussions that books like Utopia emerged. And dear friends, from Utopia to Eutopia: it's only a small step.

And at the time there was also a revolutionary innovation that changed everything: the invention of the printing press. As a result, new ideas spread faster than ever before.

Perhaps we are witnessing something similar today, with AI and Chat GPT.

*(A colleague of mine compares Chat GPT to a new colleague who is smarter than all of us, knows every answer, but sometimes that new colleague gets drunk and begins to hallucinate.)*

But let's move on. Two centuries after the Renaissance, the Enlightenment took place.

Exactly the same conditions as during the Renaissance were present. Enlightenment thinkers looked with fascination beyond European walls and sought knowledge in ancient Egypt, in China, in India and numerous other remote exotic places.

That curiosity about the world was essential to our European Enlightenment.

The same goes for openness.

The Enlightenment came about only in those regions and countries that were tolerant and open to new ideas.

The Renaissance began mainly in the South of Europe. The Enlightenment emerged mainly in the North of Europe. Les Lumières, die Aufklärung.

Connectivity was also required.

Enlightenment thinkers went to live in places where they could express their ideas. Descartes and Spinoza lived close to each other.

Thinkers discussed ideas with each other. Books were exchanged.

Without that connectivity, the Enlightenment would not have been the European upheaval that changed thinking across an entire continent and eventually the world.

Connectivity, openness and curiosity. It all started with the Renaissance.

Well, dear students, colleagues and friends,

that is exactly what we need to achieve today, with our universities, with all our European partners, with EUTOPIA:

A new Renaissance in Europe.

Because that is exactly what Europe needs.

We see polarisation and populist forces emerging everywhere. Forces that question democracy, dismiss the emancipation of the individual and ridicule science and scientists. Forces that subordinate universal human rights to their own tribal group goals.

No curiosity.

No openness.

No connectivity.

Those forces are gaining ground not only in Europe, but also around the globe. The rise of such closed and tribal thinking goes hand in hand with the building of walls. And walls go hand in hand with trenches.

It is therefore urgent and necessary to formulate new ideas and arrive at new insights.

And it is precisely by building new academic networks and rethinking the role of universities that we can arrive at a new Renaissance.

We need a renewed curiosity and ways to challenge and transcend boundaries. We must make more efforts to understand and learn from other cultures without prejudice.

**Let's build bridges to the east, and to the south. Let's build bridges instead of walls. And trenches.**

We must not only defend our openness and tolerance but also increase them. The polarisation emerging all over the world pushes people too easily into one corner or another, into one camp or the opposite.

Openness also means listening to opinions with which we largely disagree. And as my predecessor, the late Caroline Pauwels, used to say:

Always listen carefully. Maybe the other is right.

And we need to reinvest in connectivity to address our societies' complex problems. The challenges we face go beyond nations, languages and cultures. To address them we need to bring together nations, languages and cultures.

So we are lucky to have EUTOPIA.

Every EUTOPIA member, every student, researcher and staff member is at the same time in Brussels, Paris, Barcelona, Dresden, Gothenburg, Lisbon, Cluj-Napoca, Venice, Ljubljana, and... Warwick. There's no Brexit within EUTOPIA. And isn't it telling that only three years after Brexit, the EU and the United Kingdom very recently reached an agreement on the UK's participation in Horizon Europe, the EU's research and innovation programme. The British are back.

At EUTOPIA, they never left.

It is through our EUTOPIA network that students, researchers and professors can gain new ideas and new insights. And it is precisely through this connectivity between our universities, **and our students**, together with curiosity about the world, together with openness and free enquiry, that we can start working on a new Renaissance in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me just give you two examples of how our EUTOPIA network can and will play a part in this new Renaissance: one is multilingualism and the second is science diplomacy.

First of all, multilingualism.

Few people will disagree with the fact that understanding, speaking and writing several languages is an important asset for all of us, for every citizen. Multilingualism is all about curiosity, openness and connectivity.

It's about embracing diversity and learning from others. Thinking in different languages about a topic is dealing with this topic from different angles in a kaleidoscopic world.

If we want to learn from other cultures, just like they did in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, multilingualism is essential.

Unfortunately, today, we are facing obstacles.

Universities are under increasing pressure from conflicting policy agendas.

On the one hand, universities are supposed to produce highly skilled and competent knowledge workers for a global economy with English as the language of international communication.

On the other hand, the same universities are often perceived as national or regional flagships, where teaching in the national or regional languages is seen as an essential part of our identity.

As a result, educational language has become an ideological battleground.

This is also the case in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

We, as partner universities of EUTOPIA, believe that this battle between English and national or regional languages is the wrong battle that leads us to nowhere. That's why we want to propose a different approach.

An approach with multilingualism at its heart, in what we call the nurturing of an inclusive linguistic ecosystem.

An ecosystem that provides opportunities for speakers of different languages to use their own linguistic resources in the process of their learning.



By the way, a couple of weeks ago, the Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez asked that three of the country's languages – Catalan, Basque and Galician – become official EU languages. *It's another step towards – once again – more multilingualism.*

In the Brussels region where I live it is normal to speak several languages at home.

Brussels is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. And we definitely should do more with the richness of the diversity here.

All the living languages you hear in our cities form a linguistic ecosystem, whose power must be unlocked.

Multilingualism is not a problem, it's an opportunity. One of our partner universities, the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca in Romania, has academic programs in no less than four languages.

Romanian, Hungarian, German and English.

If this is happening at the Babeş-Bolyai University, it means that this is happening in EUTOPIA.

We are experimenting with multilingual pedagogy in a scientific way.

We need to increase the knowledge of languages.

We need to take down the barriers to multilingual participation in European education, training and mobility.

And we need to walk our talk.

It is through multilingualism, and through the connected learning communities of EUTOPIA, that we will be able to learn from others at a deeper level.

With a multilingual approach, we can unlock new ideas, new concepts and new visions. And of course, a new Renaissance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me go deeper into the second tool that EUTOPIA has to help create the new Renaissance. And that is **science diplomacy**.

There are several dynamics that are profoundly changing the relationship between science and society.

There are changes in how science is carried out, for example the idea of open science.

There are also changes in societal expectations and demands from society, for instance regarding climate change and its solutions.

At the same time, there is growing distrust in science and scientists and there are limitations to scientific cooperation imposed by governments.

Today, we are facing big challenges, related to a world in transition.

There is the Anthropocene, with climate change, there is the abrupt digitalisation of society, and there are geopolitical changes.

These developments not only impact the way we function as universities, but they also force us to rethink our values and to reconsider our place in society.

The global, planetary nature of the problems we are facing implies a major transition in the relationship between science and society.

States cannot continue to use science and science policy merely to advance national interests and priorities. Today there is a growing awareness that science also has to serve global interests and humanity as a whole. Planetary wellbeing.

It is in this context of the growing entanglement of science and foreign affairs that science diplomacy is becoming more and more important. It is a kind of dialogue between two different worlds, the world of science and the world of diplomacy.

It consists of three principles.

First of all: Science in Diplomacy. It's about scientific advice to the foreign policy community.

Secondly, Diplomacy for Science. Here we are talking about joint governmental initiatives to facilitate international collaboration. Good examples are the human genome project, CERN in Geneva, or – as we saw in the movie *Oppenheimer* – the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The third principle is Science for Diplomacy. This is about maintaining research collaboration between conflicting states.

And I'm sure Federica Mogherini, as former High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has strong views on the role of science in diplomacy. (*to FM:* ) We all look forward to your speech, Ms Mogherini.

The idea of science diplomacy is now taking off in Europe.

And I am proud to announce here in the premises of the European Parliament that EUTOPIA has a work package on science diplomacy .

We will not only give science diplomacy a firm academic grounding, but also make sure that each and every scientist in our alliance can act on a daily basis as a diplomat for science, an ambassador.

The world needs more scientific knowledge and cooperation to face the global challenges and that's exactly one of the major aims of our EUTOPIA alliance. And it's not a utopia, it is a reality.

Dear students, colleagues and partners,

I hope it is now clear to everybody why we are putting so much time, effort and energy into this EUTOPIA European university.

EUTOPIA is all about the values that are so needed today: curiosity, openness and connectivity.

EUTOPIA encourages each one of us to start working on a new Renaissance in Europe. Connected to the east and to the south.

EUTOPIA wants to play its role in a new era of global cooperation and scientific progress, and aims to make our world a better place. For everybody.

That's exactly what the new Renaissance is about.

Thank you.