

**Speech by Mr. Van der Linden,
President of the Senate of the Netherlands
on the occasion of the symposium
“60 years of the Council of Europe – 50 years of the Euro-
pean Court of Human Rights”
2 November 2009**

Distinguished guests,
Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the Senate of the Netherlands. As newly elected President of this House and former President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it is a great honour for me to open this symposium on the 60th anniversary of the Council of Europe and the 50th anniversary of the European Court for Human Rights. As you can imagine today's topic goes straight to my heart.

One glance at the program tells me that our plenary hall is filled with people who share a dedication to the Council of Europe and to the Court. I am proud to say that today is not an exception. Every Tuesday, this room is filled with Senators who acknowledge the importance of these extraordinary European institutions. The delegation to the Assembly of the Council of Europe is a very active, devoted and highly qualified group of parliamentarians. Their work in the assembly is a source of inspiration for the activities of this Senate.

The foundation of our European cooperation was – and still is – laid by the Council of Europe. Democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights are preconditions for a stable, prosperous and peaceful European continent. The importance of which, today, is just as vivid as it was 6 decades ago. We will celebrate one week from today: the twenty-year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Council and the Court have played and still play a crucial role in healing our European wounds. After the Second World War we were guided by the principle of "no more war". After the fall of the Berlin Wall we added the principle of "no new dividing lines" in Europe.

Europe has truly come a long way. Safeguarding and promoting our core values, however, will never be a process completed. It requires our continuous attention and efforts. Celebrating the past results in obligations to the future.

Times do change and these days we are faced with challenges different from those of decades ago. There is an increasing risk of renewed nationalism and even more worrisome, we are confronted with rising xenophobia and religious intolerance.

We need to counteract any signs of these phenomena as well as an unacceptable renewed adoration of Stalin.

It is our common responsibility to close the gap instead of letting it widen before our eyes.

The Council of Europe, the Court, but also the structures such as ECRI, the CPT, the Venice Committee and the Commissioner for Human Rights, are of indispensable value in this fight.

To be able to use them to the fullest of their ability, we must also safeguard and strengthen the organisations themselves instead of merely focusing on their instruments and values.

In this context I see a special role for national parliaments.

In the Senate of the Netherlands we practice and preach that Europe extends beyond the borders of the EU.

We acknowledge that the work done in the international parliamentary assemblies and the instrument of parliamentary diplomacy bear continued relevance for what we do in national parliaments. Hence taking seriously the views expressed by our colleagues and friends who find it difficult to be heard through the EU alone, enables us to help prevent new dividing lines from occurring in Europe once more.

The possibility of new dividing lines on the European continent is not just hypothetical.

I am indeed concerned about certain developments. It is legitimate to raise the question whether today's geopolitical developments and relations underline the need for new, all-encompassing wider European politics. Exporting our core values beyond the borders of the EU. Constructive relations with countries bordering the EU, such as Russia, are of crucial importance for a stable and peaceful European continent and is one of the most important international political questions.

An important lesson we have learned over the last decades, especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall, is that patience is a virtue. The common journey we embarked on after the fall of the Berlin Wall is still ongoing. It is – and will remain - our joint task to reconcile rather than to confront. Building bridges and solving conflicts instead of bickering out our differences.

Dear guests, before I give the floor to your excellent chairman today, Mr. Erik Jurgens, former vice-president of the Senate and a highly respected member of the Assembly of the Council of Europe, I would like to personally welcome Mr. Hammarberg. Dear Thomas, there is no better upholder of human rights than you. You have centred Europe around your unique institution. I personally hold you in high esteem, you are a man of great merit for the Council of Europe.

I also would like to welcome state secretaries Frans Timmermans and Nebahat Albayrak. Two exemplary and highly regarded politicians who on a daily basis demonstrate their commitment to democracy, the rule of law and human rights. I've had the honour to work with Frans on many occasions. We share the European heart. And Nebahat always knows how to impress the audience when we speak of the Council of Europe. No doubt, she will do that again today.

I wish you all a very inspiring conference.
Thank you.

