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Dear friends and colleagues,

It is a great honour and pleasure to be here in this special part of North Rhine-Westphalia to discuss with you about Active European Citizenship and how we can become active, together with young people, to shape a Europe of the future which offers job-opportunities for everybody.

Let me start by some reflections on what citizenship means and why it matters: as we know, citizenship defines who is part of a political community. In the English word we find the word 'city', in the German word 'Bürgerschaft' we find the word 'Burg' (= castle) – so it is clear that the origin has something to do with the place where people live, and also find protection. From these origins, the word has become later on very closely linked, for some even synonymous with 'nationality', belonging to a particular nation. Nations are a thing invented in the 19th century and the great 'innovation' more recently was that the European Union created something called 'the European citizenship' with the Treaty of Maastricht in 199, as a kind of 'post-national' citizenship.

This 'European citizenship' is something which unites as all – we all share the rights (and so far very few duties!) under European citizenship as listed in the EU Treaties and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This citizenship does not replace our 'national citizenship', it comes in addition – as an element to link people in the European Union to each other, and the EU as a political community.

Do you know what the specific EU Citizenship rights are? Of course we all know (I hope) at least some of them: the right to vote or be a candidate in European Parliament elections regardless of where you live in the EU; the right to move freely within the European Union to seek employment – one of the crucial achievements of European integration – but now under 'threat' by some who want to re-build national borders and prevent freedom of movement. There are also some less known, but equally important rights under EU citizenship: the right to seek consular protection in any EU Member State's Embassy outside the EU. So when you find yourself stranded in Nepal, and you cannot get to 'your' national Embassy, any of the other EU embassies should help you. Maybe even more important, European citizenship also means that you have a right to vote in local or regional elections in the country where you live – not just in the country whose nationality you have. That makes sense, no? You want to vote on issues in the place where political decisions directly affect you, whether you live in the country of your birth, or somewhere else in the EU.

Of course, as with many things in life, and also with the muscles of our human bodies: rights need exercising, otherwise they become weak and ultimately useless: people need to go and vote, people need to become active and take part in their communities, otherwise the very concept of democracy is at risk. For the European Union in these difficult times, this is more important than ever.

Citizenship is about being part of a larger structure as an individual. This larger structure can be local, regional, national – or European. In this sense, citizenship is about who and what we are, and about who and what we want to be. It is therefore also about 'identity' – and identity is about 'who am I, and who am I not'? We need to recognise ourselves as being part of the communities in which we live – that is the meaning of integration. Of course, if you are born in a certain place, you learn its rules, signs and language from childhood, and you never leave from there – then it is more or less automatic. But nowadays, this is not always the case – and it may not even be necessarily the best situation: you miss out on a lot of things. People move, and even if you do not move yourselves, others around you will – so communities change and you need to decide which ones you want to belong to. Whether you call it generation 'Ryanair' or generation 'facebook' or generation 'Interrail' – it is clear that already now, the world is technically speaking growing smaller, but this also means we need to think about the places where we live in different ways. Nothing and nobody is 'isolated' from what is going on around, and this is a good thing – but you need the right tools and institutions to shape this reality.

In the current debate about Europe, the European Union and what it is and should be, we very often hear the argument that the EU is 'unnatural', that it is 'artificial' and that it wants to force people together who are too different to share a common political future – and some even say that 'the nation' should remain 'pure' and is the only legitimate level to take decisions. This is a very short-sighted and backward- looking approach, in my view.

At the end of the day, it comes down to the question: whom do I trust to live with me – and in terms of democratic decision making: whom do I trust to take the right decisions on my behalf, to solve the problems which I see: can and should everything be done at national level, or are there other levels that matter? The answer is obvious: there are issues, which need to be decided locally, because they are local issues: where to build a kindergarten or how to support local businesses. Other issues are for the regions, yet other ones for the national level – and then there are topics where we need larger scale solutions, at the European level. And in my view, there are also many issues on which we will eventually need real global decision making structures, because we talk about problems concerning the whole planet –but that is a different issue.

So, if we all agree that we need to have structures and institutions we can trust, and democratic processes to shape the decisions of these various levels- we then need active citizens who are ready to recognise that there are 'different' kinds of identities, that these can change over time and there is no such thing as 'natural' identities. We need to be aware that each and every one of us is first of all a human, then the child of our parents, then we have a sexual identity, and an education and also a language background, and political views and a view on life – all this shapes different parts of our identity – and being an active citizen at city, region, country and European level is just one layer of our multi-level identity.

Here in North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, we just celebrated our 70th birthday as a region. As the long name of the region and our flag already show, this is a region which consists of three very different parts: The northern part of the Rhineland, Westphalia, and the special area of Lippe where we are today, represented by the little rose on the flag. Now if you asked people 100 years ago, and probably even 70 years ago if someone from Düsseldorf felt he or she had a lot in common with somebody from Detmold, they would have probably said: no way! They spoke different dialects, they ate different strange things, they even had the 'wrong' religion. Moreover, the idea to put these three smaller regions into one big one, came from outside - it was our British friends who did it, and called it 'operation marriage'.

Again, I do not want to go into the history too much, of course the situation in 1945-46 was clearly very different – and I don't know about marriages of three parties either – but it seems to have worked reasonably well in our region. We work together, we go to the same kind of schools, we more or less speak the same language – and yet we keep our different identities. And I am also very proud to say that we also work very well with people who come to us, and with our friends in Europe and elsewhere.

This is just to say that differences which may seem impossible to overcome at some point, may appear insignificant some years later – and this is what we must work towards in Europe. We have so many problems facing us all together at the moment, and the world around us is changing faster and faster. Climate change and international terrorism on the negative side, but also global communication and travel, exchange of ideas all mean that we have to be active citizens together – not least to create an economic situation in which the creation of exciting and sustainable jobs for future generations can happen.

The European Union is one of the best tools we have to move in this direction. It is still necessary, I believe, in its original function to preserve peace and create more understanding among people from different parts of the Union. One part of this understanding is that many ideas and problems exist in similar forms all over Europe – so why should the solutions not be developed together? It also means understanding and appreciating diversity: we have friends here from Schiedam, from Saint Omer and from Reggio Emilio. Each of you will be very proud of their cheese traditions, I am sure – and the cheeses are very different, but all great! When it comes to speculoos from Hasselt, or the sweet Panorama Triangles from Greece, we don't need to decide - we should try them both, as well as Baumkuchen from Kaunas. Saint Omer probably shares many culinary specialities with Hasselt via the Flemish connection, and possibly also with England across the channel – and after all, Sandwich has given the whole world something to eat! Whether you like Galician Pulpo or Detmold's potato-pancake called 'Pickert', this is not a problem – the diversity as such is a good thing, within the common framework which is European.

For this we have a set of European institutions, to organise democracy at larger scale and activate our citizenship. This is not always easy, because the EU is complex, it works in many languages, the media are not always that interested, and it is easy to say that 'Brussels is far away'. By the way, do they also say that in Hasselt (which is about 100 km from Brussels?) – and from here, Brussels is actually a lot closer than Munich and only a little bit further than Berlin.

The EU decision making system is complex indeed- because it has many different elements and tries to bring together many different ideas and points of view. Actually, the EU institutions are one of the most sophisticated compromise-making machineries in the world. This is sometimes slow, it is not always 'sexy' and of course not everybody likes every compromise – but democracy is all about compromises, and we should mistrust all those who try to tell us 'vote for me and there will be no need for compromise anymore'.

The EU tries to promote its citizenship, as you know, with information campaigns on citizens' rights, for example with the passports which I have handed out, or by financing projects such as this – and through the activities of its democratic institutions. The European Parliament, of course, but also the European Committee of the Regions, which I represent here today. The Committee of the Regions or COR brings together 350 elected representatives (mayors, city council or regional parliament or government members) from all EU member states. We are there to comment on EU legislation from a local and regional point of view, to tell our colleagues in the EP or the Commission what works, and what does not work on the ground.

We are organised into political groups and we try to support our members in communicating their experiences and concerns to 'Brussels' - and also the other way around, bringing 'Europe' to their region, providing citizens with opportunities to discuss EU matters and to make them aware what the EU can, and also what the EU cannot, do – because we have to be realistic and honest when talking about European integration: The EU can only do, what the Member States allow it to do – it all comes back to the issue of trust. The EU, unfortunately in my view, cannot yet make a European refugee policy – because some member states don't want it. We do not yet have a common unemployment insurance scheme – because some member states are afraid of what it may cost. On the other hand, we already can do a lot on climate change as 'the EU', or on negotiating international agreements together. And we need to make sure that we also do more together on those other issues – because otherwise rightly, the citizens (that is, you and me) will say: we don't need a European Union that cannot offer solutions to the most burning issues!

So, it is work in progress, this European project – and making our citizens, making us all feel that we can and should be part of this. That is what 'active European citizenship' is about, and in this, it is not opposed to, and not even very different from – active Detmold or Hasselt or North-rhine Westphalia or Greek citizenship – for people of all generations, but in particular for the younger generations. The European project is a great idea and it offers great opportunities - but it will not be able to solve our problems UNLESS WE ENABLE IT to do so! The fight today is to defend our ideas of open, diverse and democratic societies which allow individual freedom AND collective action and decision-making. Getting to know each other is the most important first step – but then we need to move on to discussing ideas, building trust, finding compromises and develop common projects. And after that, we need to convince the others of our ideas and proposals and build democratic majorities – and at that moment we have truly become ACTIVE (EUROPEAN) CITIZENS!

Best of wishes for your and our European project and thank you very much for your attention!