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Bertha von Suttner - a visionary European

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Opening of Bertha von Suttner Building, Committee of the Regions – ECOSOC

Brussels, 8 March 2006

Dear Madame and Mr. President,

Dear Professor Hamann,

Dear Ambassador,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege and pleasure for me to be here today at the re-naming of this building of the European Economic and Social Committee and of the Committee of the Regions as “Bertha von Suttner Building”.

The timing is no coincidence, of course. Today is International Women’s Day. What moment could be more fitting to “baptize” this workplace of two important EU institutions after a great woman and a great European?

Bertha von Suttner was a pioneer of European integration. At a time when the European Union is engaging in soul-searching about its future direction, it is particularly important to look at this pioneering spirit and at the foundations of our European success-story.

Bertha von Suttner’s main book, the philosophical novel “Die Waffen nieder” – “Lay Down Your Arms” – is a passionate plea *for* peace and *against* any kind of fanaticism. This is its most renowned, but not its only message. It also contains a clear vision of a unified, social Europe, on which she elaborated further in her book “The Machine Age”. There, she already envisages common and even supranational institutions as the basis of European security and prosperity, as catalysts, arbiters and engines of innovation.

In short: Bertha von Suttner understood – more than a century ago – that only European integration could overcome destructive nationalism and create a stable and safe Europe.

Tragically, her message remained unheard throughout the darkest chapters of our history. She was ridiculed as a utopian thinker by many, even though she was the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Only few understood her vision, among whom the writer Stefan Zweig, a fellow Salzburger of President Sigmund and myself. He wrote: “Bertha von Suttner is not afraid of demanding the seemingly unthinkable. Even though she knows that pacifism may seem superfluous in peacetime and mad in times of war.”

Today, however, Bertha von Suttner’s ideas and those of other founding fathers - and “founding mothers” - of our common European home are deeply rooted in society. They may even seem self-evident. Today, it is not peace that is unthinkable in Europe, but war and fratricidal destruction. That fundamental change alone is proof of the EU’s success.

But Bertha von Suttner’s ideas reach far beyond Europe. They stand at the basis of global efforts to safeguard peace and security.

The Hague Conferences of 1907, the founding of the League of Nations after World War I, and last but not least the creation of the United Nations, they would have been unthinkable without the seeds sown by Bertha von Suttner’s and her co-activists.

In today's open, complex world, in the era of globalization with all its new opportunities and risks, we absolutely need such a rule-based global order. Only through cooperation, common institutions and the rule of law can we really create worldwide human security,

Therefore, there is no alternative to effective multilateralism. That is why the EU is so strongly committed to reforming and strengthening the United Nations family and other multilateral institutions as a broad frame for globalization.

Last year's Nobel Peace Prize for the International Atomic Energy Agency and its courageous head, Mohamed Al Baradei, reflects this renewed appreciation of international organizations, their hard work and strategic importance.

I may add that I am especially happy that so many women have been among the laureates of this Prize in recent years, like Shirin Ebadi, Wangari Maathai and Jody Williams.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bertha von Suttner was not only a European "idealist" but also a European "practitioner". She spent several years in the Caucasus exploring "Europe's neighbourhood" and working with the local population. Her life was highly unconventional for her time.

Her dedication and commitment therefore also shows that we need an internationally active Europe, a Europe that assumes its responsibility on the world stage, a Europe that forges an even stronger foreign policy to promote peace and human security – in particular in its immediate neighbourhood. In an open world, fortress Europe is not the answer.

Europe has no choice but to be a global actor: This must be part of the new political "Euro-vision", which we need to bolster the confidence of our citizens in the European project.

Bertha von Suttner's life and work may therefore serve as a source for inspiration at the beginning of the 21st century.

I congratulate you for naming a building after this remarkable Austrian – and European – woman, who is a source of inspiration for many of us, and for hosting this exhibition dedicated to her.

I am sure that it will strengthen her memory and that it will help her idealism to live on. We will need it through the European project and in the emerging world order of the 21st century.