

Speech Leiden University Alumni, Brussels 18-2-25

Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy, MEP D66

Entire days, weeks, even months go by, without having a conscious reminder of the knowledge bestowed on me by Leiden University, our beloved Alma Mater.

Had it all been for nothing? Certainly not, because since a few weeks I use my Leiden knowledge on an hourly basis. For the past 29 days, to be exact, I feel very grateful to have followed classes on political science and international law.

Donald Trump makes a lot more sense, when one has studied Thomas Hobbes and the Leviathan. To be clear, what comes out of Trump's mouth makes very little sense, but as a phenomenon, he is a good illustration of what Hobbes' '*State of nature*' looks like.

Perhaps we will learn about his *Kingdom of Darkness* as well

Professor Timothy Snyder recently warned Europe to be less occupied with what Trump says, than with the things Europe actually does.

This is what I want to talk about with you today, as we find ourselves between Trump and Putin, with Xi Jinping lurking somewhere in the background.

The mirror image of the Hobbesian world was sketched several centuries ago by someone like us: a most illustrious alumnus of Leiden University. OK, he was somewhat younger when he attended (11 years old!), and definitely more successful, but Hugo de Groot, Hugo Grotius walked the same streets and must have entered the Academiegebouw at the beautiful Rapenburg. Just as we did. He had to study without coffee, since it had not reached Leiden yet!

Very few media reflect on Grotius as we deal with the externalities of the war in Ukraine, but thanks to my Leiden education, I actually did when this weekend the Dutch Navy escorted six Russian ships, of which a few were from the Russian Navy, through the North Sea.

Thanks to Hugo de Groot and his 'Mare Liberum' they have the right to passage through Dutch waters.

This foundational work is now a big pain in the behind for the EU, as we try to stem the flow of oil revenues into the Russian war chest. Upholding maritime law and upholding sanctions at sea is proving to be very difficult.

This single dichotomy is exemplary for a bigger trend. People like Trump and Putin want us to give up our belief in laws. They prefer a dog eat dog world, in which they are the apex predators.

A world in which Hugo de Groot's magnum opus *De iure belli ac pacis* was relegated to the dustbin of history. When Hugo de Groot laid the foundation of international law with this work, he accomplished one of the greatest achievements of humanity. A book he wrote in Paris by the way as a political refugee after his famous escape from Slot Loevesteijn.

Without it, we might have never had the European Union that I just mentioned for the first time. And will mention a lot more frequently from now on, because the European Union is the center piece of my contribution today.

Thanks to the founding fathers of European integration, the European Union is the best place on earth. The level of freedom, democracy, welfare and wellbeing is unique in the world. 'No more war' and 'Never again' successfully superseded the status of mere words. They became deeds, and enabled prosperity for all. With the rule of law as its cornerstone. Thank you, Hugo de Groot. One of us!

But unfortunately, every beautiful fairy tale gets disturbed by the dark side. Yes, the EU is currently heavy under attack. Internally and externally.

From the inside. Not like Vice-President Vance argued, not by a leftish woke agenda or mass migration, but by those who attack the foundation of the EU: the rule of law, democracy. In Hungary, in Italy, and painful to admit, in the Netherland as well.

Then the external threats. These are currently difficult to miss.

Obviously, Russia and its war in Ukraine. Costing hundreds of thousands of lives. Destroying the lives of millions. Costing billions of euros. What for?

We must take all additional threats from Russia extremely seriously.

Europe used to spend three times as much on defense as Russia, but the war economy from Moscow has not just equaled Europe's military expenses but even surpassed it.

With Putin in the Kremlin, we should seriously prepare for an attack on NATO countries like the Baltic States. They are vulnerable militarily and Putin might want to test the NATO unity.

In a different way, China is also threatening the EU. Its thirst for resources from all around the world in combination with its economic growth model forces us to react. And it is not just foul play. The way the Chinese car industry is now outsmarting the European is more a show of hyper capitalism. That used to be our battleground!

Thirdly, and I'm afraid the most disturbing of all, our biggest former ally the USA. The last few days were disastrous. The secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, giving away Ukraine's negotiation position vis a vis Moscow. Vice-President Vance falsely lecturing us on democracy and immigration. And Trump behaving like he, Putin and Netanyahu are project developers running the global geopolitical show.

The world we love and cherish, the safe and prosperous post WW2 world has disappeared. If we do not act, the EU will be like Eastern Europe at the 1944 Yalta conference. There, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt divided the post war world. Eastern Europe was sacrificed and left to the Soviet Union. It took 44 years to repair.

Therefore, Europe should act, and act boldly. Not out of weakness. Out of strength! Simply because the EU is still a giant, a superpower in today's world.

The biggest consumer market, huge, combined military spending, the most innovative industries, a very low state debt, and loads, really loads of money. We are filthy rich and can afford global competition. And we still house the best universities in the world, like Leiden.

The one thing we should do is unite! We have no time to waste.

What do we need? I will name a few items on my own wish list:

- A single European defense, if necessary, even without Nato
- A true European minister for foreign affairs, who cannot be vetoed by single member states
- Tripling of the European budget. And yes, through own resources. We need to get rid of the current national contributions by member states
- Double Europe's foreign aid. Let's jump into the US vacuum.
- The completion of a true Single market. We now have 27. That does not work!
- A true European Energy Union, based on massive spending in renewables and grids.
- More free trade agreements with Latin-America, Africa and Asia. We should still believe in an interconnected, rules based world.

Are these ideas radical? Yes, but a radicalizing world demands radical responses. And let me turn up the heat even more: I want this to be done before the end of the year. No, we should not appoint a former president to discuss possible changes to the EU treaty during several years. We need these changes now.

Clearly, we must arm ourselves against the above threats. However, there is something else that is collapsing: multilateralism.

The biggest achievement after WW2 has been the development of multilateralism, based on international law. The EU itself is the strongest example of this. Nation states not just working together, but excepting a cross-national Court of Justice.

Along the same line of thinking, we created the United Nations, with a Security Council, and many subsidiaries like the WTO, WHO and many others. Although far from perfect, it has functioned relatively well for decades.

In the zero sum world of Trump, Putin en Xi, there is no place for multilateralism. But that doesn't mean that it is lost. Just like smaller EU member states have always benefitted from a neutral European Commission and a truly European wide rule of law, many countries in the world benefit from multilateralism.

It is for Europe to keep that dream alive and find new strategic partnerships around the globe. Who knows what we can achieve.

I would like to end with the words of Hugo Grotius from *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*: "Where the rule of law falls short, violence begins." That simple realization is the foundation upon which European peace floats.

I have the honour of defending that idea in the political arena—in a Union founded to ensure that our conflicts would never again be fought on battlefields and in trenches, but in parliaments and courtrooms.

This time demands something great and something new from Europe to keep that idea alive—an unprecedented reform in body and spirit, a New Europe. We can only bring it about if we heed the lessons of history and make them servants of the future.

To that task, I try to make a modest contribution as an alumnus of Leiden and a citizen of the European Union.

I ask the same of you. Do not let yourselves be beaten down and worn out by the daily muck of the new extremist elite. Draw courage from small acts of resistance, which, like unique stones, can together build a mighty wall. Defend justice through peace, and peace through justice. That is the Leiden tradition. That is our common responsibility.

Thank you.