



Subject: CDA-Congress speech: **'The soul of Europe'**
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This document contains the translated transcript of the speech by the political leader of the CDA, Henri Bontenbal, as delivered at the CDA Party Congress, attended by over 1.000 members. This speech marks the second on this vital subject.

On November 11, 2023, Henri Bontenbal delivered his seminal speech titled: "*The Revival of the European Dream.*" In this address, he articulated a vision wherein a decent nation like the Netherlands thrives through interconnected and flourishing regions within a robust Europe. He emphasised the importance of shared values, collective commitment to justice, and advocated for a socially and environmentally sustainable economy.

During this congress, the lead candidate of the CDA, Tom Berendsen, also delivered a passionate speech on the crucial importance of a decent Europe as a sturdy anchor in this tumultuous world.

Dear friends,

During the Christmas break, my family and I spent a week in Normandy.
A few days away, a moment to catch a breath after an intense election campaign.
A week to spend some time together.
But also, a moment to pass something on to our two boys; something about the price paid for our freedom.

We visited the beaches where, on the 6th of June 1944, young Americans, Brits, and Canadians landed and fought for their lives.
Omaha Beach, Gold Beach, Juno Beach...
In the distance, the remnants of the artificial harbour constructed by the Allies are still clearly to be seen.

On the beach lie the rusted caissons in commemoration of D-day.
We went to Pointe du Hoc, the 30-metre-high cliff that the boys of the American 2nd Ranger battalion ascended using rope ladders and grappling hooks while facing grave peril.
A bloody battle followed; every meter was fought for.
Around noon, Colonel Rudder sent a radio message: *"Arrived at Pointe du Hoc - mission accomplished - ammunition and reinforcements needed - heavy losses..."*
Of the 225 Rangers, 135 were eliminated. Wounded or dead.

We visited the American Cemetery with our boys, overlooking Omaha Beach.
A sea of white crosses, row after row.
Nearly ten thousand young boys, some barely 18 years old.
They fought for the freedom of the Western world,
For freedom from oppression,
For a world where every human being counts.

What struck me most, in the museums we visited, were the faces of these young men.
Numbers became names, numbers were given a face.
Young men, children still. And on their faces, that expression of desperation, fighting spirit, naivety, and courage.

These faces reminded me of a poem by Gerard Reve, *Grave at Blauwhuis (Graf te Blauwhuis)*.

The poem goes like this:

*He ran, but did not escape,
and was struck, and died, eighteen years old.
A militant inscription calls out all sorts of things,
but from a brown enamelled portrait
looks a sullen and silent face.
A child still. Bye dear boy.
Thou who art king, this and that, and whatnot,
yes yes, go try and get it,
Thou knowest why it is, I do not.
That Kingdom of Yours, You know, is that still going to be a thing?*

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And at the same time, there in Normandy, it hit me even harder that the battle of these young boys is not a battle of 80 years ago, But that two thousand kilometres from this spot, young Ukrainian men and women, in their foxholes and trenches, are fighting the same battle for freedom. They are the same faces, the same despair and fighting spirit, the same naivety *and* courage.

For Putin, human lives do not count; the lives of Ukrainians do not count, but neither do the lives of his own people. Ukraine's battle is a battle against a dictator with no conscience, who arrests, imprisons, and kills critics like Aleksey Navalny.

**For the CDA, it is crystal clear:
The Netherlands *and* Europe must continue to support Ukraine.
With money and with weapons.
That is non-negotiable.
Because Putin won't stop.**

It is as writer Lisa Weeda described it:

You wake up in your bedroom and discover a man standing in the corner of your room.
You are surprised and tell him that it is your house, that he does not belong here and that he has to leave.
But he refuses.
In fact, the next day he's made himself comfortable and reserved a corner of the room for himself.
He is not leaving, and every day, he takes up a little more space.

You tell your friends, but they are not worried.
Surely you can both live in a part of the house?
Until he has taken over the whole house.
And there is no place left for you.

And your friends?
They say: maybe you should just look for another house.
This is how Russia operates. It is pure selfishness to let that happen.

Politicians who claim that it is not strategic to fight back in Ukraine, have understood nothing of freedom.

A high price has been paid for our freedom; therefore, we have a great responsibility to come to the aid of others as well.

That is why the CDA continues to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with all those brave men and women in Ukraine.

And commit to investing more money in our defence.

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Dear friends,

The war in Ukraine is ultimately about who we, as Europe, want to be.
About what *really matters* to us, what is of *real* value to us.
If Europe were merely an *economic* project, we would simply calculate the economic benefits of a free Ukraine.

Indeed, some political parties think like this.
They see the EU solely as an economic project.
They talk of freedom or call themselves the Freedom Party,
but are unwilling to do anything to protect our freedom.
Freedom is not in good hands with them.
Freedom is an empty concept to them.
They treat it as free of obligation, with a sense of indifference.
It is an attitude of looking for an easy way out and a lack of historical awareness.

How different was the concept of freedom to the Christian Democrats who laid the foundation of the European Community?

It makes me think of Robert Schuman.
In 1950, five years after the terrible World War, European leaders were determined to prevent a reoccurrence.
Steel and coal, the raw materials needed to wage war, would be traded in one community, making war between France and Germany "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible", in Schuman's words.

The European Community was, first and foremost, a community of shared values, of a shared moral compass.

The European dream was deeply rooted in the existential experiences of the tragedy of both world wars, which the founding fathers carried with them.

If the EU is more than a common market and primarily a community, then what are its shared values?

What is the soul of Europe?

Romano Guardini spoke of Europe as both a *reality* and as a *task*;

A Europe as it is *now* and a Europe as it *should be*.

Europe's identity lies in a task: building a community where every person counts and people can freely dedicate themselves to service, to one another and the community.

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Forgive me for this somewhat lengthy exposition on the soul of Europe ;-)

On this note, you might want to get used to getting long speeches from me.

For too long, Dutch politics has been based on technocratic and procedural narratives.

But politics is and should be based on vision, ideology, and beliefs.

That, in my belief, is what the Netherlands craves.

And that is what the CDA is supposed to be:

A battle for the task that is embedded in our Christian Democratic ideals,

Bringing it one step closer every day.

That is the course for the CDA that I passionately believe in.

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Back to the soul of Europe.

The soul of Europe, I believe, consists of the following principles:

- the dignity and equality of every human being;
- the freedom to shape your calling in life;
- the responsibility to look out for another, the world, and our planet;
- the solidarity between -, and fellowship with other people and peoples;
- the democracy in which everyone's voice is heard, and everyone's interests count;
- and the social rule of law that protects the constitutional rights of every citizen.

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The realisation of these ideals is hindered by two enemies.

I have already spoken about the war in Ukraine and what is at stake for Europe.

This is not just a battle between two countries fighting over a piece of territory; causing unimaginable suffering and grief for families;

This is a battle between two fundamentally different ways of looking at the world. That is *also* what is at stake in this war: the soul of Europe. Therefore, we must also be honest about that other, less visible enemy. That enemy lies within Europe itself, in our own collective thinking and actions. Or in the lack thereof.

For the past decades, we have lived off the peace dividend. As Jaap de Hoop Scheffer puts it: after the fall of the Wall, we sat down on a folding chair, with a glass of wine, and watched as the US ensured our security, how Russia supplied us with energy and how China made our stuff.

In recent decades, we have become facile. *"The problem is not our democracy". says political scientist Jonathan Holslag, "but our decadence. We no longer want to fight to secure our future."*

A long period of prosperity has made us lazy and ardent for convenience. With the war in Ukraine, we are also confronted with the crisis within ourselves.

Are we, as Europe, still willing to make sacrifices for our freedom?
Are we still willing to dedicate ourselves to something bigger than ourselves,
More than just saving your own skin?
Do we still want to fight for the soul of Europe?

Then we will have to start with ourselves, in our own homes. Because in Europe, and certainly in the Netherlands, we see right-wing populism gaining strength. Polarisation-seeking politics is given free rein, also in the Netherlands, by a new cabinet in which the PVV is a full-fledged participant.

Populists claim to fight for freedom, but their definition of freedom is nothing more than simply doing whatever you like.

Populists claim they want to stand up for people, but undermine the very rule of law that is meant to protect people.

Populists claim to put the Dutch first, but in fact, they put their self-interest first. Freedom, as we Christian Democrats see it, always goes hand in hand with responsibility and solidarity.

These are not available separately.

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Can Europe respond to populism?

I am convinced that we can overcome the scepticism about the European Union by once more regarding it primarily as a community of values. And thus, not merely as an economic project.

The European elections are about *this* fight:

The fight for a decent Europe.

That is why we will have to put away our folding chairs and, as our leading candidate, **Tom Berendsen**, just said in his speech, diligently work on:

Getting our defence in order so that we can ensure our own security;

A Europe in which every member state embraces and respects the democratic rule of law;

A green and strategic industrial policy, so that we are less dependent on fossil energy from outside of Europe and able to supply ourselves with essential products; and

A European migration policy, so that migration does not just happen to us, but that we act together as member states to achieve a just and humane migration policy.

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At the same time, let us be careful not to present Europe as the solution to all problems. Because she is not.

Europe is not only a task but also a reality; a reality with shortcomings.

We must be honest about that too.

Indeed, Europe may also suffer from something Professor Mathieu Segers, who sadly passed away far too soon, called Europe's '*fixation on uniformity*'.

That is the tendency to leave too little leeway for local and regional customs and traditions.

Even though we, people, are always rooted in our communities, in our language, in our cultures.

It is precisely this diversity that Europe must nurture. There are many rooms in the house that is Europe, all of which may look different.

Public support for Europe disappears when there is no more room for local and national differences.

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In addition, Europe must find its place in the new world order.

After all, the future holds a multipolar world, in which the United States will no longer have the leading role, but must share it with China, India, Russia and emerging African countries.

Europe can show the world what a social market economy can look like within the planet's borders.

A Europe that, in cooperation with other continents, paves the way towards an economy where respect for every human being and our planet is at the premise;

Where corporations and citizens work together for common welfare;

Where not only healthy competition, but also cooperation are drivers of innovation and fair distribution of wealth.

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Dear friends,

I spoke about Europe as a reality and task.
Does this not also apply to Christian Democracy itself?

There is still a gap between reality and our Christian Democrat ideals.
I am convinced we are finding our souls again.
I see in a lot of places that the CDA is alive and kicking.

We do not need to build a new party.
Fortunately, our base in the middle of society is still very solid.
That is why I am hopeful about our CDA.

Besides, I am convinced that our country *needs* a strong CDA ;-)
(Incidentally, this is evident from the fact that, when good people are needed, the four forming parties still look for a CDA member...)

All kidding aside...These are the three pillars with which the CDA must be associated in the coming years and on which we will build our story:

1.

We choose *hopeful and decent politics*.
We choose hope, instead of distrust.
Decency, instead of sensation and polarisation-seeking politics.
We fight against injustice and for a just government.
As a party for the people, we are the bridge between street and state.

2.

We are a *party of society*.
Because in a responsible society, everyone has a place and a task.
A sense of community, blooming associations and neighbourhoods make people happy.
We cherish that, in every region.
That is also our appeal to all Dutch people.

3.

We opt for *new ideas* based on *established values*.
The Netherlands yearns for a political reevaluation of responsibility, solidarity, justice and stewardship.
These values, as well as those of family, traditions, and citizenship, deserve our protection.
We continue to build on these three pillars.

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I draw to a close.

We are entering a decade in which we will face great challenges.

Geopolitical-, social-, and financial challenges.

We do not shy away from these big issues, such as the future of Europe.

We don't give easy answers, even though that may sometimes be rewarded in this day and age.

We choose the radically honest story.

Because if we are not careful, the contrasts in our society will be increasingly magnified.

We face a fundamental choice.

Are we letting ourselves be driven further apart as a society?

Do we retreat further into our own bastions and bubbles?

Are we letting polarisation-seeking politics become mainstream?

The CDA chooses a different path.

Because only by overcoming differences,

Learning to coexist with people who have different ways of thinking,

Cherishing the art of working together,

Are we able to control these problems.

This way, a time of substantial trouble can become a time of hope.

Becoming a time of social renovation.

A time to rediscover what *living together* really is and how beautiful it can be

That is my hope. That is my commitment.

This is the new CDA that we are building together. This is *our* task.

We started it and we will continue.

The Netherlands can count on us.

Thank you.