Ladies and gentlemen,

This island, the island of Cyprus, is on the crossroads of cultures, of civilizations even. It carries with it a long history of invasion and migration. It started with the ancient Greeks, followed by the Persians, the Romans and the Byzantines. And before the Ottomans took over in the 16th century, there were the French and the Venetians. And only in the 1960s, after decades of British rule, Cyprus found its independence.

And because of its precarious geopolitical location, Cyprus still is today on the forefront of the European refugee crisis. Only last month, a group of more than 100 refugees stranded at a British military base on Cypriot territory. Together with Greece and Italy, Cyprus carries an unreasonably high burden. But this refugee crisis shouldn’t be a responsibility of Cyprus and Greece alone. It is high time we come up with a solution on the European level.

The deal that the European Union made with Erdogan is only treating the symptom. For the moment, Turkey holds back the migrants – often with violence and with disregard for international law. But this can only be a temporary solution, because when Erdogan runs out of patience with us, when he thinks we didn’t give him enough money, or the visa liberalization for the Turks is not coming fast enough, we will again be confronted with mass migration towards Europe.

We do not need symptom treatment, we need to treat the underlying causes of the refugee crisis. And that is the war in Syria, but also the enormous political instability in Northern Africa, in Libya, in Egypt. We don’t need a deal with Erdogan, we need a truly European approach to solve the refugee crisis. A single European migration policy and a European capacity in foreign affairs and defense.

(1) First of all, on migration

We must jointly protect our external borders. Since September of this year, the budget of the European agency Frontex has been doubled. Its mandate has been broadened so that it can buy its own equipment and can intervene when a member state fails to protect our external borders. At long last there also is a reserve force of 1,500 European border guards.

This is an important first step, but far from enough. This European border and coast guard should also be able to take care of the reception of asylum-seekers: to screen and register them at the border. So instead of the wall- and fence-building we have seen over the last years, and we can register refugees in a regular and orderly fashion. We must also develop a similar registration
capacity at the refugee camps outside Europe. In order to ensure that people are not compelled to travel on to Europe to seek asylum here.

On top of that we need to replace the Dublin system with an asylum and migration policy at European level. Today, the rules are in theory the same in each European country, but in practice that is far from the case. This must change, so that we can establish a permanent allocation system for distributing refugees among the Member States.

And we need a European migration system, a European ‘Blue Card’ like the American have their ‘Green Card’ and which allows people who want to work here, who want to contribute to our economy and our society, to do so. The existing European ‘Blue Card’ must be reformed. Today the Blue Card is nothing more than a 29th system operating in parallel with the 28 national systems. A single European system that is compatible with our single market is urgently needed.

(2) Secondly, in foreign affairs and defense

Also here, we need a drastic overhaul of the way we do things. We are hopelessly divided in Europe. It are again the Russians and the Americans deciding on our backyard. It is a bit back to the future. As if we are again in the time of the cold war where proxy wars were fought out on foreign territory.

Exactly a year ago, the Russian and Americans held a Syria summit in Vienna, in Europe. But not a single European nation was around the table and certainly not the EU. A year later, the war in Syria is fought between the Russian and the Americans, with us, Europeans, in a secondary role. While it are we who are confronted with the fallout of this dreadful conflict. The refugees do not flee to Moscow and the Washington, they seek refuge in Europe.

It is high time we come to our senses and see that we need a European defense community with a unity of command and a single European strategy instead of 28 separate little strategies who are useless and only lead to inaction.

A lot of people say this European defense community is a far away dream. I honestly think it is possible, perhaps even closer than ever. First of all because even the conservative governments in Hungary and Poland are in favour of it. They are normally very Eurosceptic but not on this issue. The Visegrad-countries understand better than anyone else that the threat coming from Vladimir Putin cannot only be dealt with on NATO level alone. Earlier this year, president Obama clearly indicated in an interview to The Atlantic that Europe should stop “freeriding” when it comes to military interventions.

A second reason why I think a European defense community is feasible is Brexit. The Brexit negotiations force us to review and rewrite the European treaties. And therefore they are an opportunity to reform Europe. We need to clean up the long list of ‘opt-ins’, ‘opt-outs’, rebates and exceptions. For too long, we’ve let every member state carve out its own path, its own unique version of EU membership. There is very little Union in the European Union of today. We need to replace this Europe ‘à la carte’ by a simple two tier, a two track EU.

A first track for countries who want an ‘associated status’. This could be useful for Britain, but also – why not – for Switzerland and Turkey. We can develop very close trade relationships with these associated countries. But we won’t develop a political project with them.
A second track would be ‘full members’ of the European Union. These countries participate in everything: the euro, Schengen, justice and home affairs, and also the defense union.

When we rewrite the treaties of the European Union, we shouldn’t deliver half work. We should resolve the systemic errors that are built in to the euro zone for example. And we should also give Europe new powers to tackle our geopolitical weakness, our security crisis.

Let me round up by giving you some recent figures, from last month. A national opinion research conducted in the Netherlands; considered as one of the most Eurosceptic nations. When asked if the foreign security crisis should be taken care of by the EU or by the member states, 63 per cent of the Dutch people said the EU should tackle the crisis and only 23 per cent said ‘the member states’. That is almost three times less. To combat terrorism, even 70 per cent of Dutch people said this should be done by the European Union, and only 19 per cent answered ‘the member states’. And we see the same figures for the refugee crisis and the problem of climate change.

So, people are not fed up with the European Union. They are fed up with this European Union. This weak, divided Europe without real power because it is constantly paralyzed by the veto in the Council. People do want a powerful European democracy, but they all they get for the moment is European vetocracy. That is what needs to change. And with Brexit, I strongly believe, we have an opportunity to change that.