

PRIORITIES OF HIS MANDATE

When I was elected as President I had been thinking about it and campaigning for it and had developed a project with three themes. The first theme was reuniting Europe – so the enlargement theme. The second theme was reforming Parliament. The third theme that I had was to try to reconnect with people in terms of communications.

The enlargement theme was the dominant one of that moment. Its time had come. History demanded of the European Union a response to the collapse of communism, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the implosion of the Soviet Union, and this had been a very long process. The Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989, I was President in 2002 and the negotiations in a certain sense were only getting real in the new Millennium.

I felt that you needed to wrap around this the embrace of parliamentary democracy, that you needed to animate it with ordinary politics, that you needed to get a message to politicians and to the media and to the public that this was not all about experts doing technocratic things but that it was something deeper and more substantial. This had to be a consensual project for society, so finding mechanisms in politics to cause people who normally are opposed to each other, at least on this thing, to see things the same way was a huge challenge and this was a real opportunity for the European Parliament to play a role in what I would call the chemistry of consent.

In our case, what did it do? It opened the door. In fact, even before the Accession Treaty we organised [a debate] in November 2002. For the first time ever in Parliament without it being related to a summit meeting, we had the President of the Council, Mr Rasmussen, the then Danish Prime Minister, we had the European Parliament, the European Commission and we had observers from all of the accession states to listen to this debate because there was a very major Copenhagen Summit in December 2002. There was huge focus on it, lots of anxieties, lots of arguments, lots of different interests and we wanted to give one really big message: that these details are important, that they would need to be worked on, that we would have to find compromises. But through the fog of war in all of those words there was one clear path and that was a determination and a political will to make this succeed.

People then across Central and Eastern Europe were filled with anxieties about what might emerge from the post-Soviet space, what kind of traumas could await them that reminded them of an unhappy past; and anchoring themselves variously in NATO and the European Union gave them a new sense of purpose, a new orientation, gave them the capacity to undertake these radical transformations. These were states that had centrally planned economies – statist economies – that had to go through the most extraordinary transformations. This is very difficult to do anywhere, exceptionally difficult to do in a democracy, and the transformative soft power of Europe was the magnet that pulled them in that direction