

EUROPE LARGEST ENLARGEMENT

I loved the time as President. It was very demanding but exceptionally interesting and very, very privileged. I feel a deep sense of gratitude to all those colleagues who permitted me, by their vote, and then when I was President by their consensus, to do the things that I did. In all sorts of ways we were able to do things that do not measure high, if I might say so, on the political Richter scale, but that are real accomplishments.

For me, the European Parliament, which was facing its first continental-scale election in June 2004, should be the theatre of and the heartbeat of European democracy. The biggest moment that was coming up in Europe, that we could anticipate many months in advance, was the official arrival of ten new Member States on 1 May 2004.

I invited the speakers of the ten national parliaments to each come and to hand their flag to a student, who handed it to the Eurocorps, who, with all the solemnity required, brought it to one of the ten new flagpoles and, to the sound of 'Ode to Joy', raised those flags on that day.

Someone who visits the courtyard of Strasbourg today can go and see that these ten flagpoles are there and they say 'made in Gdansk'. I then wanted to personify this – the flagpole as a symbol – and to personify it I invited Lech Wałęsa to make a short speech. The speech was about the journey that started in the shipyard that led to the unravelling of communism, that led to freedom, that led to Strasbourg on that day. To me, it was the perfect bookend to the most perfect challenge that I ever faced in my life.