Prime Minister Buzek,

Rector Banis,

Minister Steinhoff,

Mr. Samborski,

Mr. Freudenstein,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today, on behalf of Belgian Ambassador Raoul Delcorde, at the launch of the book “*Europa. Nikt nie mówił, że będzie łatwo*” by former Belgian Prime Minister and current President of the European People's Party, Mr. Wilfried Martens.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Martens could not be with us today due to a recent spell of ill-health and we wish him all the best for a smooth and swift recovery.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was asked to talk 10 minutes about the role of Prime Minister Martens in Belgian politics. I must admit that this is a true challenge. After all, we are talking here today about one of the most important Prime Ministers in post World War II Belgian history, whose different governments laid the foundations of the current outlines of modern Belgium.

It also comes to my mind that I should avoid making an in-depth analysis of the different governments Prime Minister Martens presided. Indeed, he was nine times Prime Minister, which would only give me 1 minute and a few seconds to analyze each one of these governments.

Last but not least, former Prime Minister and previous President of the European Parliament, Mr. Jerzy Buzek, has just elaborated on the "crafting" role of Prime Minister Martens on the European scene. The renown of the previous speaker and the topic of Europe undoubtedly make my intervention less interesting to a Polish audience. Still, I will try to do my best, as Belgium is often being referred to as a "mini laboratory" for further European integration. And also later at the European scene, Prime Minister Martens undoubtedly always kept his Belgian experiences "in his pocket" for further reference.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I will tell you a bit more about the role of Prime Minister Martens as one of the "founding fathers" of the current modern Belgian state, as well as on his role in the stabilization of the Belgian economy. Let me start with the first topic.

Modern Belgium is -that is the least one could say- difficult to explain to foreigners, even as well as to Belgians. I will spare you the details, but briefly summed up Belgium looks a bit as follows. We have 6 governments and 6 parliaments. The federal government encompasses the entire Belgian territory and is in charge of matters such as defence, home affairs, foreign affairs, justice, and social security. Apart from that there are 5 regional governments, split up in respectively the “Communities” which are in charge of “person-related matters” such as culture, education, health, sports and language, and the “Regions” which are in charge of territory-related matters such as environment, spatial planning, housing, mobility, infrastructure, economy and employment. Depending on the matter, either the federal government / Regions / Communities are exclusively competent, or they share competences among each other. For matters where the Regions or Communities are exclusively competent, they also have full international powers including the power to sign international treaties with other countries.

To put it short, Prime Minister Martens could also have titled his book *"Belgium, no one said it would be easy"*. Belgium is indeed not easy, but it has one big advantage: it works.

This "modern Belgium" has been the result of 5 so called "state reforms" - a process that has started in the 1960s and that is nowadays still going on with the 6th "state reform" which is currently in the making by the government of Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo. But what is important for you to know here, today, is that the main "grand directions" of all these "state reforms", the main "outlooks" of them, were at the time decided by Prime Minister Martens and his team and still continue to be the main guiding principles for our politicians today.

By the 1970's, ladies and gentlemen, the so-called "communautarian issue" appeared once again high on the Belgian political agenda. All universities were by then split between a Flemish and a francophone variant and, by 1978, also all political parties were split along the language divide. "More regional autonomy" became the call in both parts of the country. A more complicated political agenda, with more interests to be taken into account, was the result thereof.

But the second half of the 1970s were also characterized by the breakthrough of a new generation of young politicians with -I may say- a vision for the future. One of them was Wilfried Martens who, as young President of the Flemish christian-democratic party, was one of the architects of the so-called "Egmont agreement", which was signed in 1977 and foresaw in an important devolution of powers towards the regions. Although the agreement finally did not make it through Parliament, it was at this negotiation table, in the splendid rooms of the Egmont Palace in Brussels, that the characteristics of the Belgian state as we know it today were outlined for the first time.

What is even more important: it was at the Egmont negotiation table that this new generation of politicians, all defending a wide variety of different political interests, found the key on how to negotiate with each other. They even became close friends and realised that a good negotiation is one where nobody leaves the table empty-handed. After all, a good negotiation is no win-lose, but a win-win.

Win-win was also the negotiation tactic of Wilfried Martens who soon afterwards, in April 1979, was asked to lead his first government. He sticked to the basic principles of the 1977 Egmont agreement and with success. He very quickly brokered an agreement that was voted in Parliament in August 1980 and which foresaw, among other things, in the establishment of "Communities" and "Regions" that would no longer be part of the national government. They started functioning effectively in 1982.

In 1988, Prime Minister Martens brokered yet another landmark state reform - still essentially with the same partners that had met in the Egmont Palace, 11 years before in 1977-. The "Communities" and "Regions" were now provided with more and very important competences. The Regions gained spatial planning, environment, economy, energy, public works, transport, local governance, employment, and scientific research. The "Communities" were entrusted with person-related matters such as culture, education, and the use of languages. In much of these domains, the "Communities" and "Regions" then gained their exclusive competency, which I explained to your earlier. Last but not least, it was in 1988 that they were entrusted with the right to conclude international treaties with other countries in all these domains. A possibility that also Poland would quickly make use of: already in 1994 Poland signed a fully-fledged cooperation treaty with the government of Flanders. Poland, by the way, was the first country with which Flanders signed such a treaty.

In sum, what was brokered by Prime Minister Martens in 1980 and 1988 is very much how modern Belgium looks like today; the basic foundations of the current Belgian state were laid there and then.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now turn to the second part of my intervention: the role of Prime Minister Martens in stabilizing the Belgian economy.

The starting point here is also the second half of the 1970's, which in Belgium were characterized by an economic debate that was very similar to the one as we know it today in Europe: should we go Keynesian or rather classical? Or, as we would put it today: should we provide the economy with more oxygen or should we stick very rigorously to a policy of budget restraints? A very difficult question that Prime Minister Martens managed to answer, or I should rather say bridge, very fast, as we will soon see.

Out of respect for a great economist such as John Maynard Keynes I immediately have to slightly correct myself: the economic policy that was pursued in the 1970s was not that much about providing the economy with more oxygen in a controlled way, what Keynes would have favoured, but rather about an unbridled increase of public expenses. To give you only one example: where in 1976 state expenses accounted for 50% of Belgian GNP, they would climb to 60% of GNP in 1980 (and were brought back by the Martens governments to 52% in 1989).

The result of all this was that, by the end of the 1970s, Belgium became increasingly considered as the "sick man in Europe". Indeed, coming from a peak public debt of 137% of GDP, public debt was gradually brought back to acceptable levels which enabled Belgium to enter the €-zone right from its beginning.

So the next issue Prime Minister Martens had to deal with, after coming to power and having brokered a deal on the communautarian issue, was to fix the economy. And also here nobody said it would be easy: by 1980 more than 600.000 persons were without a job (on a total population then of 9 million), but at the same time the government coffers were as good as empty.

Prime Minister Martens and his team did the trick by starting off, as of 1982, with a Balcerowicz-like approach, followed by a more moderate approach combining insights of both Keynesianism and classical economic theory. The "economic compromise" Prime Minister Martens managed to find in the 1980s still applies to Belgium today: a policy of sound macro-economic finances as key to the maintenance of the modern Belgian welfare state.

Looking back at how Belgium has fared during the recent years of economic crisis, I would say we did not perform badly and in contrast to some other EU Member States we managed to withstand the major recent economic storms. To a large extent this is still due to the economic instruments that were first tested and put into practice by politicians like Wilfried Martens.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Also after his departure to Europe, Prime Minister Martens was never forgotten in Belgium, to the contrary. He was soon nominated by the King as "Minister of State" and thus became part of the highest and most prestigious "college of wise men" the King might call upon in times of crisis or societal challenges. He thus was and remains one of the closest confidents of three succeeding Kings: H.M. King Baudouin, H.M. King Albert II and H.M. King Philippe.

It thus comes as no surprise that, during the most recent Belgian political crisis from 2007 until 2011, Prime Minister Martens was called upon twice by the King as a mediator. His endeavours then have paved the way for the political solution that was reached at the end of 2011.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we are celebrating one of the most exceptional and successful Belgian politicians of the past 50 years. His political vision and decisions have made that, today in 2013, we can still look forward positively to the future of our children. I thus can only recommend “*Europa. Nikt nie mówił, że będzie łatwo*” as an essential read.

Thank you for your attention!