

Dear President, Your excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today to celebrate Africa Day. I very much thank the African Ambassadors for having invited the European Union as guest of honour.

Allow me to start with a personal note which will explain my satisfaction. I come from a country where, from our southern tip, looking at the horizon, we can see the African continent. My previous post was in the heart of Africa, in the Central African Republic. So in my family our hearts are still split between the Ubangui and the Danube.

The European Commissioner for Development, Louis Michel, said yesterday that "Africa Day is a chance to reaffirm Europe's Commitment to Africa. Together, as two continents, we can work to tackle the challenges of the 20th century- such as globalisation, climate change, energy, peace and security.

The Commissioner further said: "Africa Day is an opportunity for all of us to recognise and support the huge potential of this continent. It is also an opportunity for us to recognize that reliable partnerships are critical for long term progress".

Ladies and gentleman, a few days ago we celebrated together in Belgrade Europe Day, marking 58 years of European integration. I should remind that cooperation between our continents is nearly as old as this year we are also celebrating the 50th anniversary of the European Development Fund.

And today Europe's commitment to Africa is as strong as ever. Europe is the largest donor of development aid. And Europe has committed around 90% of the increase in aid to Africa.

Africa is striving to address the many challenges it faces like poverty, poor health and conflicts. It has decided to use the powerful tool of regional integration and cooperation across the continent to fight these problems. We Europeans entirely encourage and support this process, because we have seen its merits in our own continent. This is why the EU is firmly supporting the African Union as a sister organization.

EU-Africa relations have very much advanced over the past few years: from the Cairo summit (2000) to the Lisbon summit last year. But much more needs to be done. To increase dialogue on issues of common interest, looking for two-way benefits, for instance on governance, migration, trade

and employment. Also to change attitudes, building a true partnership of equals.

We are celebrating today's event in Serbia, a country whose process of European integration the EU strongly supports. I am convinced that by bringing Serbia closer to the EU we shall also bring her closer to the agenda I have just outlined and closer to Africa where so important historic ties already exist.