

Transcription of the interview with André Flahaut (Brussels, 18 August 2010)

Caption: Transcription of the interview with André Flahaut, an activist in the Belgian Socialist Party since 1973, Director of the Institut Émile Vandervelde from 1979 to 1995, Belgian Minister for National Defence from 1999 to 2007, President of the Chamber of Representatives from 2010 to 2014 and Minister for the Budget, the Civil Service and Administrative Simplification in the Government of the French Community since 2014, carried out by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE) on 18 August 2010 at the Chamber of Representatives in Brussels. The interview was conducted by Étienne Deschamps, a Researcher at the CVCE, and particularly focuses on the following subjects: the origins of Flahaut's European commitment, Belgium and European defence policy, and the establishment of a Europe of defence.

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1. The origins of his commitment to Europe

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Mr Flahaut, thank you very much for welcoming us here today at the Chamber of Representatives in Brussels. During the course of this interview, we will have the opportunity to discuss your memories of your work at European level, particularly in the field of European defence. I would like to start this interview by asking you, if you would be so kind, to tell us something about what sparked your interest in and commitment to European and Community affairs. Did you already have the chance to become involved in European affairs as a young socialist activist, then as Adviser at the Institut Émile Vandervelde?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes, when you become involved as a social activist, you become politically active and involved by force of circumstance. You inevitably become aware of your environment, not only the Belgian, local, provincial environment, but as Belgium is at the heart of Europe we are ineluctably directly affected by this European integration. Whenever we examined major international political issues, whether in humanities lessons or later on at university, we always looked not only at Belgium’s role, but at Belgium’s role at the heart of Europe as a founding country of Europe, and the more time passed, the more we understood this involvement, this driving role — at the same time, in fact, as a decrease in the other major organisation which had mobilised many Belgians, NATO; and the idea of the Benelux also resurfaced from time to time. I always compared the Benelux to a kind of small driving force of Europe, as small countries have this ability to come together to bring key projects to the table and perhaps have them taken up by others at some point.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] As a Belgian national, currently President of the Chamber [of Representatives], you have been an MP for many years and held ministerial positions, including Minister for the Civil Service and the State Buildings Agency — in fact in this role you were responsible for renovating and removing asbestos from the Berlaymont Building. In your opinion, how important is the status of European capital for Belgium and Brussels today?

[**André Flahaut**] You said it yourself. Asbestos wasn’t only removed from the Berlaymont Building, but also the Justus Lipsius Building and all the other buildings. It’s true that Belgium has played a key role in creating the best possible conditions to host and support the European institutions and the increasing number of people who work there and whom we must make a point of welcoming in the best possible conditions. Anyway, I think that nowadays, all Belgian political leaders, as well as a growing number of Belgians, automatically associate Belgium and Brussels with Europe. And now, in late summer 2010, at a time when we are forming a new Belgian Government in the midst of our European Presidency, you notice that — even with ‘caretaker’ governments — Belgians are priding themselves in leading a dynamic and original EU Presidency that contributes to driving European integration forwards. We boast key players, such as Herman Van Rompuy, former President of this Assembly and former Prime Minister, and thus a former colleague of mine too. It has become impossible to dissociate Belgium from Europe, just as we can’t dissociate Brussels from this key role as European capital. I therefore believe that this is the new reality in all areas today, in the debate on

the future of the government in Belgium. Even if Belgium undergoes a fundamental transformation — we have already progressed from a unitary state to a federal state which will undoubtedly become more federal in future — a whole raft of competencies will be drawn towards Europe. We will probably talk about defence, foreign policy as a whole, finance and the single currency later on. The world has changed since the introduction of the euro. Neither finance ministers nor governors have the same powers any more, and it was no doubt this currency that spared us a devaluation during the recent crisis. So we measure the positive aspects of Europe in this Belgium that we are redesigning; there are bound to be certain things which will go to Europe and others which will mainly go to the regions, including the Brussels region whose international role as global and European capital must be taken into account. All of this interferes in Belgian policy on a daily basis, probably much more so than in the other Member States.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You naturally experienced and analysed these European affairs, these European issues for Belgium, within the Belgian Socialist Party. You also participated in many activities undertaken by the Party of European Socialists, especially as ministerial coordinator for defence issues. What is your opinion on the work and efficacy of European parties, or at least of European alliances of parties?

[**André Flahaut**] I think that Europe will really exist in the minds of European citizens when the parties actually become structured at European level. You mentioned that I play a coordinating role, also by preparing programmes and manifestos, etc., but all of this remains a juxtaposition of contributions from different states. And yet there are values that underlie political parties, there are real values of socialism. Let's take the value of solidarity, to name but one example. This value should rather result in a European organisational structure for political parties. Parties whose purpose is not to monopolise power, but to act as an interface between the institutions, which are very often cumbersome, perceived negatively, misunderstood and generate a large number of texts, many of which are restrictive or even very restrictive in nature. Parties are there to offer a counterbalance and explain that Europe is a wonderful idea; Europe is something that has enabled us to live in peace for decades; Europe is the element that helps us restore an overall balance on a global scale. We cannot live in a unipolar or simply bipolar world with a central entity such as Europe that is not sufficiently present or organised. But we mustn't believe that we will gain respect for Europe simply by implementing concerted action between governments and heads of state! No. As far as I'm concerned, we need to go back to basics. First and foremost we need Europeans from Greece, Poland, the UK, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, etc. to be convinced that their future and happiness depend on Europe, and for that, we need a Europe that isn't simply geared towards markets, affairs and finance, but a Europe for the people. We need a social Europe which promotes labour and ensures respect for workers. Maybe we need to reverse the values that have been implemented. Only citizens have the means of reversing this process through the European Parliament, and the only citizens who can achieve this are those who are convinced because they have been informed by political structures and parties. It is therefore essential. If you ask me what I think today, I'd say that the parties' work is insufficient because they stir to action during elections, but that's too late. They need to work constantly on the ground, in all areas, to integrate this European dimension into their day-to-day work. In this Assembly over which I currently preside, for example, we clearly need to further boost ties with other assemblies in other countries as well as with the European Parliament in a way that extends beyond advisory committees, expert committees and such like, with more frequent action upstream as opposed to downstream. Because once measures have been implemented, it's too late; once the damage has been done, it's too late. It's better to play an active role in this integration process. Although I feel that not enough is being done, I do remain committed within the Party of European Socialists, especially via the organisational structure of the sections, units, federations, exchanges and study centres. I'm working together with other colleagues to ensure that in future there will really be a people's party, a socialist party and a liberal party with a true European dimension, with people of conviction, bolstered by their

values, capable of furthering integration much as our founding fathers of Europe did, but in our case by focusing on the human aspect.

2. Belgium and European defence policy

[**Étienne Deschamps**] What is your view of Belgian MPs' involvement in European issues? What would you say to an MP or a parliamentary candidate who explains — as we sometimes hear — that he has trouble 'selling' these topics to his electorate or potential voters and feels that if he takes too great an interest in international or European issues, he will lose visibility on the national or regional stage?

[**André Flahaut**] I believe that a Belgian elected representative ... and I am one myself in that I deal with international affairs for the Socialist Party. My term as minister came to an end at the end of 2007 after 12 and a half years of service, when I became a backbencher again, as I wanted to. However, dealing with international affairs, while remaining close at hand and available, didn't prevent me from substantially increasing the number of votes at the last elections and becoming President of the Chamber again. So, my advice to MPs, parliamentary candidates or future candidates for various positions would be not to neglect the international aspect, and certainly not the European aspect, because that's the overall context and the new environment. As others have said, today's world is a village. Belgian students today no longer simply remain within the confines of their Belgian university. They go further afield; they go to meet others on Erasmus programmes, etc. The world is their oyster. This is a good thing, and it's also undoubtedly an element that promotes peace. But it also requires people to deal with international politics while maintaining the balance between international or European affairs and day-to-day matters, and coming up with ways of showing that they are interconnected. But to illustrate this and drive the message home, people need to be both well informed and well educated. Not only well-educated citizens at Belgian level, but at European level, too. We can no longer consider citizenship learning today without including a European dimension in order to teach young people as well as the players of today — we always say that 'today's children are tomorrow's future', but they are already key players today — to teach them that the world around them is a place where they will discover people from other places, with different cultures, skin colours and languages, but that what matters are the human relationships which provide a basis for peace.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] As you said, you served as a minister for over ten years, eight of which were within two successive governments led by Guy Verhofstadt. You were in charge of defence and, in that context, you were involved first hand in the 2001 Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Could you describe how decisions are taken — or were taken if the procedure has changed — in the area of foreign policy when there were defence implications at stake? Could you explain how decisions are prepared, how arbitration is conducted, when required, and how the decisions taken are subsequently implemented in practice?

[**André Flahaut**] In any government, when discussing international, European or more global politics, there needs to be a fully functioning triangle between the prime minister, the minister for foreign affairs and the minister for defence. Additional key players which may be involved from time to time include the minister for cooperation or the secretary of state for European affairs, if such exist. At any rate, that's the basic triangle. Gescroix [sic], who presided over the work carried out by the two governments in which I participated — I was very lucky, like the Prime Minister, to have been in two successive governments, because ultimately this helps to ensure continuity. International relations need this continuity, too; they need time to influence the policies pursued to a significant extent. A

four-year term is very, very short. So anyway, the triangle worked well and was comprised of MPs and political players who were fundamentally convinced of the importance of Europe. Guy Verhofstadt is continuing this demonstration in the European Parliament today, even if, how can I put it, he didn't have the opportunity to ascend to the highest European positions as he would have wished, but anyway, he is nevertheless continuing his fight at the European Parliament, the institution which must become the very heart of European democracy. Louis Michel also pursued a career in international cooperation at the European Commission after his time in government, and this field suited him very well in fact. For my part, I continued my career at Belgian level, and I intend to pursue this policy that integrates both Belgium and the international and European dimension either here in my current position or perhaps elsewhere in the future. It's undoubtedly this underlying conviction that enabled me to cultivate a great deal of energy and proactivism, sometimes by shaking up European habits — the 'Praline Summit' etc.. In such a context, a Belgian Presidency can never be commonplace or ordinary. In Belgium, there is always a certain proactive and disruptive element that says 'Just because we are a small nation, it doesn't mean we have to remain silent and keep our opinions to ourselves.' We are on an equal footing with the others around the table and we must have the capacity to drive projects forward. And that's precisely what we did in terms of defence, because we are convinced that Belgium's national defence must be part of a much bigger picture. Because we are convinced that one day, there will be a real European defence system either within or outside the NATO framework, but probably within it — a system whereby Europeans will be representatives per se who are capable of making themselves heard and stressing their points in a fundamentally different international context which is no longer under the shadow of the two blocs. Our armies are or were often built upon unfortunate past experiences. Investments were made to procure tanks to fight battles in the lowlands of the former Eastern bloc countries — but these countries have now become part of Europe, so all that has become outdated. This was more or less the indication we wanted to give under the Verhofstadt Governments, which were strongly marked by a European dimension and the development of a European defence system, and I remember having set the stage for the first White Paper on defence. We also thought about how we could incorporate typical questions on 'defence' and the 'perception of European defence' into the Eurobarometer survey. All of this served to fuel or strengthen our resolve as Europeans who firmly believe in a European defence policy and a real European foreign policy. Because we realised that unfortunately in certain conflicts in certain locations, Europe was expected to speak with one voice and take part in negotiations to strike a balance between one argument and another. We have to remember that at that time, we were faced with a US Administration led by Bush — not by Obama — which was particularly aggressive, committed to unilateralism and which defended the doctrines of preventive war and the 'axis of evil': 'You're either with us, or against us.' When the war broke out in Iraq, the countries of 'Old Europe', i.e. France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg, opposed the war, and that clearly showed that we had the capacity to say 'no', because we strongly believed that getting involved in such a conflict could lead to deadlock. We can see that the Obama Administration is still struggling to break this deadlock today. It was a huge challenge. As regards Afghanistan, we also had some reservations, even if we always showed solidarity. So I think that the Belgians in that government ... we were Europeans with conviction because we had become aware of this new environment ... I also believe that for the future of Europe, it is high time to develop a strong axis of solidarity between North and South. We have inevitably opened up towards the East, for various reasons, but now it is high time for Europe — without necessarily extending to Africa, let's be serious — to quite simply develop a strong axis of solidarity towards Africa, especially Central Africa and the Congo (two affairs we administered when we were in power), not forgetting the countries around the Mediterranean which are a natural connecting point. I believe that this is the future of Europe, not only in terms of defence but also of expressing solidarity in a whole host of areas.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] We will be able to return to all these issues later, but for now I'd like to make a specific point: when you first joined the Defence Ministry in 1999 you very quickly implemented a series of initiatives aimed at introducing more European symbolism into the protocol of the Belgian

Army. We know just how important symbols are in politics. First of all, what were these specific initiatives and how did the army respond to them?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes, it's true that symbolism is very meaningful, and if we think about the latest discussions on the Lisbon Treaty, on the use of flags and anthems, etc., we can see that even the finest and most ambitious projects can sometimes be stopped in their tracks as a result of symbolism or protocol. I am not particularly one for symbols or protocol, but sometimes they are necessary to move things forward. This is just a minor detail, but when I arrived in office, I wanted there to be a European flag next to the Belgian flag on all the buildings I frequented, including on the barracks. This raised a question mark. People didn't understand why I wanted to do that. At any rate, it was done and I think that now nobody could imagine removing the European flag from Belgian national buildings, which also demonstrates Belgium's very strong involvement in the European debate. Then there was the issue of the anthems. It's obvious that not everyone knows the European anthem, and I remember ordering that the two anthems be part of Belgian military protocol: the European anthem and the Belgian national anthem (the 'Brabançonne'). I recall that at the beginning, some of the soldiers weren't sure if they were supposed to stand up and salute the European anthem just as they would their national anthem. But nowadays, it has all become standard practice. Yesterday, for example, I took part in a ceremony and it has now become completely normal, so normal in fact that the European anthem was played and not the Belgian anthem, which is rather worrying the other way around. Something quite odd happened when I decided to withdraw the Belgian troops who were still stationed in Germany. A ceremony was held in Germany, attended by the then [German] President and King Albert, and when the European anthem was struck up, the King stood up spontaneously and saluted. His neighbours wondered why the King rose for an anthem that wasn't exactly a well-known anthem. It wasn't the Belgian anthem or the German anthem ... but anyway, the example was set from the top. Other things too ... the new defence flag that I designed includes the European stars, which also feature on the vehicles that transport our troops. By the same token, I decided to open the door to a military career to all European citizens here in Belgium, including at the Royal Military Academy, which we have had integrated into the Bologna Process. So I think that by means of a whole series of actions ... and we were also helped by the European Presidency at the beginning of the decade, because I recall meeting all of the EU Member States and candidate countries as well as all NATO member countries and candidate countries at that time. There have been enlargements in both directions. I consider that to have a successful multilateral framework you need a good bilateral framework. You need direct contacts, and the same applies to diplomacy as to football: there are home and away matches. It's important to be able to assess the conditions under which the other party analyses its difficulties and advantages, etc. That's how we build real partnerships. I asked my contacts the same question every time, 'But at the end of the day, what is your priority today: NATO or Europe?' They very often replied NATO, for security reasons, pointing out that it would require tremendous resources and heavy burdens on the population to meet NATO's equipment standards. The political leaders replied, 'Yes, but the public are ready', but it soon became apparent that they weren't. This just goes to show that political leaders can, and very often do, get things wrong too. The public want peace and I think that they realise that a well-oiled organisation at European level and perhaps in terms of defence could help to make serious savings and improve efficiency, rather than multiplying the number of duplications and having everyone making individual purchases, etc. That's one of the main challenges of the future: making people work together. For that, we needed to work on the ground. And in that respect, we can't do enough to honour Javier Solana, one of the key players of this foreign policy who knew NATO well given that he was Secretary General there for a time. He was a politician with extremely strong values. This anti-militarist, this pacifist, became without doubt not the most militaristic person, but the person who knew best the meaning of peace and the war that had to be waged to gain this peace throughout Europe. Javier was very quick to grasp the opportunity, for example when we created Operation Artemis to be deployed in the Congo, firstly at bilateral level with the French Defence Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, he said, 'Perhaps we could turn this into a European initiative.' His vision was indeed to open up Europe in this strong axis

towards the South and towards Africa, and to raise the European flag where it should also be flown. It is therefore crucial to have Operation Atalanta, for example, in the fight against piracy. All these initiatives enable states to work together either to combat maritime piracy — without doubt one of the major issues for the future — or to organise a rapid response strategy to international crises; not necessarily military crises, but humanitarian ones, for example. I think that's the best way to build Europe. I deplore the fact that when problems arise in Haiti or Pakistan, for example, Europe is quite slow to react — maybe it's because it's during the holiday period right now — as well as sometimes limited in the measures it implements or its readiness to open its wallet. I think that with the military resources available in each European country we could accomplish an enormous amount at European level, without necessarily creating White Helmet forces or anything, or a duplicate task force for humanitarian aid.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] In this respect, do you think that Europe has provided itself with the means to realise its ambitions from an institutional and logistics perspective?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes, I think so. If we examine all the military resources available in each state, in addition to the international military action that we take, it is possible ... and sometimes action that we don't take (we hardly make use of the Franco-German Brigade or the Eurocorps, which is absurd because we mobilise resources without using them, maybe just to make a few generals happy). Let's use the resources available, examine the specific resources available for taking action, but without restricting ourselves to military action. Let's promote the use of these resources at European level to become a real EU-FAST, a rapid intervention force in the event of natural disasters. Let's not ease our consciences as rich Europeans by saying, 'We will give such and such an amount.' No, we have people capable of being on the ground and being seen on the ground and who may even want to do this kind of thing. This would give us a different image from that of an institutional, bureaucratic, sometimes narrow-minded Europe, a Europe that deals with its own internal affairs while it is actually expected to be present on the international stage. That's a little gripe of mine.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] In 2001, Belgium held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Do you remember the circumstances in which this Presidency was prepared internally at both a political and administrative level? What were the main priorities set by the Belgian Government in terms of defence and European defence policy at the time? And last but not least, were you satisfied with the results achieved?

[**André Flahaut**] Well, we first need to put it all into context. Since the failed attempt [to create a European Defence Community] in the 1950s, defence was not the main priority. We had to implement bilateral initiatives, then I arrived in 1999 with Verhofstadt. We were lucky to arrive at the start of a process, at a time when a process was being launched. So we seized the opportunity, and in politics seizing opportunities is what leads to victory. On top of this opportunity was our dynamism, proactivism and firm belief that we would make something out of it and show that we were capable of doing something different. I have already mentioned the more specific, more symbolic aspects. A survey was also carried out, because it gave credence to the Eurobarometer survey when people said, 'We need a European defence', well that gives you a boost, even if they are just statistics, surveys. When you arrive at preparatory meetings, etc., and you say to yourself, 'We will really work towards a European defence', you know that the public are behind you.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Because that was the message you received: at that time, the public were more receptive, or had expectations or demands, in the military arena.

[**André Flahaut**] Above all, the public had demands, especially as we dealt with public opinion in those fields, because during the Presidency, I raised the question of public opinion and the perception of public opinion in the field of defence, for example. I also raised other issues that were never

addressed in relation to the armed forces, such as health care. As far as defence is concerned, it is in our own best interests to coordinate our medical and health care services, for example, something which remains far from being accomplished. But the first time I spoke of public opinion wasn't at a European meeting; it was at a NATO meeting in Toronto. The first time I gave an address stating the need to take public opinion into account, I saw a number of my colleagues turn towards the new arrival, clearly thinking, 'Who is this Martian turning up and telling us, members of the armed forces and defence ministers from NATO countries who know more than anyone what to do for peace, that we have to deal with the views of the general public?!' I consistently maintained and repeated that 'Today, we are undoubtedly more sensitive to this perception of the general public, including in the field of defence, quite simply because of the costs it represents and the investments.' Anyway, being right too early is not always useful, but it was gratifying to have said it, and even more satisfying to see with the benefit of hindsight that it actually served a purpose. So public opinion ... and then we said 'We are actually going to work to drive this process forward.' Because at the time we already heard voices saying, 'Yes, but what's the point? We tried it and it didn't work.' There are still many reservations. We already have NATO, why do something extra? All this despite us having insisted that it wasn't necessarily in a spirit of competition, that it wasn't because we were enemies of the US, etc., but that we wanted to be able to communicate and express our feelings. We didn't know at the time what was going to happen to the Twin Towers in 2001, nor did we know that there were going to be attacks in Iraq and then in Afghanistan [*sic*]. We had no idea, but we said 'Europe must be able to express itself and exist, too', which also meant working on investments. Hence the idea of a White Paper, or was it a Green Paper? Europe is always complicated with its White and Green Papers, it's all codified. We had to ask ourselves 'In terms of investment, where do we Belgians want to sit in the European averages? How can we manage to achieve a certain form of specialisation? How can we turn our handicaps into advantages, and our advantages ... how can others share the benefits?' At that time, we worked a great deal at bilateral level and took specific action. I just mentioned the Royal Military Academy, which is now very accessible, an instrument or window also to Africa, but when we decided, for example, to train our pilots with French pilots it was for purely practical reasons. Belgium had a great number of Alpha Jets but only a few pilot candidates, whereas France had a large number of pilot candidates and hardly any Alpha Jets. So what did two sensible people decide to do? We suggested pooling our resources to Michèle Alliot-Marie, and given that it rains less in the south of France than in the south of Brussels, we decided to do it there! We had to overcome a certain amount of resistance, but we got there in the end! When we fought for the major A400M project — which is without doubt the most symbolic military investment of our European existence — it wasn't easy because we had to have 193 machines. If we didn't have 193 machines, we would have had to rethink our position in Belgium. We cancelled orders elsewhere.

The attack on the Twin Towers led certain European countries to reconsider their position and prompted changes in government. Mr Berlusconi came to power in Italy and actually withdrew his undertaking to purchase European carriers in favour of a closer alignment with the United States. We had to reconcile with all of that. At the time, Mr Aznar was closer to the US than to Europe. So that's how we fought hard, together with Schröder, Chirac, Verhofstadt and others, to bring this cell into being and develop it. But the battle is not yet won. If we take the example of the European agency for military investments that we wanted to create, it should have far more resources and be much more dynamic. We wanted ministers to be on the Board of Directors of this agency. Today, we quibble more about a hundred thousand euros in the budget or taking on three secretaries than actually dedicating ourselves to finding procurement projects and tangible European investments on the ground. In Belgium, we have developed the minimum sufficient level of investment. As we no longer wanted to buy things which wouldn't be useful in the long term, we created a single defence structure to prevent the land, air and sea forces from making their own individual purchases — a single structure for the minimum sufficient level, a true expression of needs as opposed to an expression of needs resulting from the accumulation of needs voiced by all the small units. The idea was to have a coherent management, therefore the minimum sufficient level, off-the-shelf purchases, not creating an

ad hoc vehicle for the Belgian infantry while the French infantry may have vehicles that are available immediately. The same is true of the soldier of the future. Why would we want to develop a prototype with the Dutch if many other soldiers are already equipped for the future? Off-the-shelf purchases and optional tranches so that investments can be adapted in light of requirements and developments, where necessary. We disseminated this in other countries, just as our single structure influenced other countries too. It's no secret; if you do away with duplications you can make serious operating savings without necessarily jeopardising your staff or the quality of its equipment, supervision or training, and without being found to lack solidarity in international operations. And you work together. If you harmonise logistics at European level, you will prevent a situation in the future whereby the French soldiers set off with their logistics and the Belgians with theirs, etc. You can think of it in medical terms: if you're ill when deployed on an operation abroad, you go and see a doctor from France, Germany or wherever, and he may offer you a different medicine with a different name but it will make you better. And that's the crux of the matter, I'd say. So on the basis of this, these common-sense arguments, we can create a kind of single structure at European level, avoid duplications, force people to work together on the basis of minimum sufficient levels, etc. in the form of a European agency for military equipment. This can or could lead us to a European defence which, although not enormous in scale, would certainly be effective, rapidly deployable, with interoperable resources that cost less, but with staff who are well trained and capable of anticipating problems and not engaging in 'World War II' with the tools of 'World War I'. That's what we should be looking into; that's more or less the essence of the fight we wanted to instigate during our first Presidency in 2001. But of course, a Presidency only lasts for six months. It all takes time, then others arrive with different priorities. They are less preoccupied with public opinion, health care and soldiers' well-being but more interested in operations, aligning themselves with the US, joining NATO and fighting terrorism at all costs. Events also change politics. When the towers were attacked, we were in charge of the Presidency and the meeting held at the time concluded that in terms of defence, we needed more Europe not less Europe, in particular when it came to intelligence. Intelligence is, by definition, a compartmentalised word in a manner of speaking, and people like this compartmentalisation because having intelligence means having power. So at the time we asked Javier Solana to say 'Well in that case, we now need to make efforts to encourage Europeans to work together in the field of intelligence, too.' Let's use Belgian expertise for the Central African Republic and French expertise for other parts of the world, and let's work together! Prevention and peace are the key here. That also progressed rather chaotically. I fear today that the External Action Service exists on paper, the organisation charts have been drawn up, the balances have no doubt been adhered to, people will probably have an extra flag or badge on their lapel to represent Europe, but I think that is perhaps approaching the problem the wrong way round. The same goes for the European defence system. If we had started to create a defence academy, our officers and NCOs would reason from a European viewpoint today, as opposed to a French, Italian, English or German one, etc. After all, on the ground we have no choice but to work together. I believe that we urgently need to invest in joint training; that's the example we wanted to give with the pilot training, for example.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You mentioned a Europe of arms and Europe of intelligence. How were the Belgian authorities and the Belgian Army involved in the Helios satellite programme?

[**André Flahaut**] Once again, this goes hand in hand with intelligence, because it's impossible for a small country like Belgium to have a satellite capacity. We thus became involved in a broader programme that certain European countries offered us, and as such enhanced our intelligence capability. The satellite actually flew over part of Africa and provided us with the necessary images. This is how we saw that the vehicles that the UN had put onto a boat in order to ship them to the Congo for the Beninese (who were going to support the Congolese) were actually blocked in Guinea because the authorities deemed it to be an attack on the country in question. This is a real-life illustration of the usefulness of satellites in addition to joint training initiatives in this field. I strongly believe in it, which is why I'm a bit sad to note the extremely slow, if not virtually retrograde,

progress of the European Arms Agency, because national interests always prevail. We have to tell it like it is. Sometimes, companies, national industries are concerned with selling, basing their reasoning firmly on employment and the economy, whereas they should perhaps ask themselves if the goods they produce actually correspond to people's expectations and if they could perhaps be more efficient by pooling their resources. The A400M project is a classic example. And that's why it's essential to identify rapidly a single vehicle for all European armies, because that would represent a new, extremely important programme that would create jobs and benefit the economy. The problem is that each government launches its investment programmes at different times and they have nothing in common. It's vital to be able to step back and see the bigger picture. Do we now have to talk about European fighter jets again? We are well aware that competition is fierce between Rafale, Gripen and US jets, and that decisions aren't always taken in the interests of a coherent European defence. Some countries may no longer be or wish to be involved in fighter aircraft and will focus instead on specialising in transport, because I believe that European defence also implies a form of specialisation among the various stakeholders.

3. The establishment of a 'Europe of defence'

[**Étienne Deschamps**] In late 1998, although you weren't yet a minister, you were directly confronted with the consequences of this decision at the St Malo Summit. Tony Blair indicated without doubt for the first time that the UK was prepared to accept greater European cooperation in the field of defence. In your opinion, were the commitments made in St Malo actually implemented?

[**André Flahaut**] I think that the key element here, as you just said, was that it was the first time that ... In the end, the commitments were not necessarily backed up by action. It's true that it was attractive, even exciting, to talk about that, and it was reassuring for the public. At last, there was a chance that we would converge towards ... move away from this duplication policy, this idea of 'every man for himself', and achieve something coherent, because — and I'll reiterate once more — the general public instinctively feels that if we pool our resources, if we try to avoid doubling up on things, it will cost less and be more efficient. People realise when things make sense, when it is a question of common sense, and I try to maintain this common sense approach at all times. But of course, afterwards, interests often take the upper hand. During my eight and a half years working in defence, I participated in a great number of European and NATO meetings, and how many times did I hear colleagues expressing different views depending on when they were speaking or which assembly was being addressed?! I have heard European ministers make zealously pro-NATO speeches at NATO assemblies only to contradict themselves one week later by taking on a pro-European stance. So much so that a British NATO Secretary General called Mr Robertson (not mentioning any names!) always used to say that he should be close to me as he was from Labour and we were therefore from the same party, but he and I nevertheless had strong differences of opinion, me as a socialist and him as a member of the Labour party (maybe there were also strong differences of opinion between Mr Blair and other European socialists, especially at the moment). At any rate, Robertson decided to cancel the 'Eurodinner', a nice tradition according to which European ministers would gather together during each NATO meeting. Then one fine day, Robertson came along saying he thought the Eurodinner concept could be considered as an act of mistrust that could offend our American friends, and so there would be no more Eurodinners. This made me particularly ... I said that I didn't understand why and that I didn't agree, but, well, the decision was already made, that was how it was, and as they were paying for it I couldn't exactly say anything. But my point is that all of these showcase speeches and handshakes — not embraces — between Solana (who had become the European from NATO) and Robertson (who succeeded Solana at NATO) alongside the rhetoric of, 'We're going to work together', etc., were nothing but a façade. Nothing but a façade! Everyone did his own thing, and whenever we decided to do something, it often took time to implement due to

convoluted administrative procedures, military staffs, etc. That's what I condemned. I always have and I always will. Because we ... and that was also the case for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister, it was a case of: 'Right, listen up, there has been an attack on the Twin Towers, and we're going to respond, we are in this together,' but when we say that we'll stand together, we are told that we aren't needed. I thought that was over with. It makes no sense, but that's kind of how institutions operate; they are there and they make sure above all that they retain their institutional powers. And yet the aim of politicians is to help institutions develop and to transform them in line with the public's wishes.

[Étienne Deschamps] How did the US's NATO partners react to this doublespeak depending on the circumstances and who was being addressed, and to Europe's obvious inability to speak with one voice? Did it suit them in some way?

[André Flahaut] Just by asking the question you have your answer! Of course. And sometimes you're told, somewhat derisively, 'It's a real shame that Europe can't speak with one voice!' I also heard people within the Bush Administration saying things like, 'You must understand that NATO can't wait, because there are even some countries which need their parliament's opinion to send troops abroad'; this particular remark was aimed at Germany. That was the Bush Administration. But, how can I put it? But on the other hand, for example, as regards this Administration, I think that contrary to the views of certain colleagues who pandered to this Administration by embracing the theories and sometimes being more like Bush than Bush himself, those colleagues weren't necessarily more respected. I think that even this very forthright, very heavy-handed Administration respected those who dared to say 'no' to it. This attitude tended to be condemned more by the members than the Bush Administration itself. That's a very clear perception, but which made us confident in our ability, our desire to really stake out our positions. Of course, we weren't shielded from diverse pressures, the economic interests, the port of Antwerp, but there was also ...

[Étienne Deschamps] ... the NATO headquarters ...

[André Flahaut] ... the NATO headquarters, there was also the universal jurisdiction plan, which we had had adopted in a flurry of almost revolutionary enthusiasm and which prompted Rumsfeld to say one day that no more dignitaries, no more US officers would be headquartered in Brussels unless the plan was revoked, forcing Belgium to revise it and take a step backwards. We always need to stop and think. Acting in haste is not always a good thing. But, well, what's done is done. I think relations between Belgium and the US are restored now, even more so with an Administration which is totally and fundamentally different, even if it remains American.

[Étienne Deschamps] In January 2003, the Prime Ministers of eight EU Member States signed a letter practically pledging their entire support for Washington and their desire to do battle against Saddam Hussein, without consulting the EU or the other Member States. What's perhaps even more surprising is that certain candidate countries for EU accession also followed the movement. How did the then Belgian Government and you, as Defence Minister, respond to this attitude not only among countries which were already part of the EU but also those who were planning to join?

[André Flahaut] I'll start by going back to what I said earlier. When we asked political leaders of the former Eastern bloc countries or indeed those who had just arrived to choose between NATO and Europe, they clearly answered NATO so that they would be protected against what for some remained the Soviet Union, even if it had become Russia. When, for example, the Baltic states needed aerial surveillance and the Belgians were the first to provide aerial surveillance for the Baltic states, we never witnessed an incursion by a Russian aircraft during that time ... but anyway, we have to take reassurance from this! So I mean that this attitude didn't come as a complete surprise. The fact that the candidate countries expressed it in such a way was more surprising. But it showed that they

needed the United States, so they couldn't do it any other way than to pledge their entire support. You see, they were faced with this Administration whose motto was 'You're either with us or against us,' so it was perhaps a response triggered by panic or based on genuinely held beliefs. In any event, it didn't stop us from maintaining our stance. We didn't let that kind of thing distress or deter us. We were even dismissed as 'Old Europe' at one point. But if 'Old Europe' means the ability to respect parliaments, engage in dialogue, do everything within our power to ensure diplomacy, prevention and on-the-spot checks on the ground within the scope of the UN as opposed to a gung-ho attitude, then so much the better! I'm proud to be part of Old Europe. Since then, people have come back, other leaders have taken over their responsibilities, and I also think there was been a real awareness of ... in this case once again, it was the political leaders who signed the letter, but they didn't entirely reflect the voice of their people. In fact, they were at odds with them. The only thing that we can say is that in Belgium and the other countries which said 'no' to the war in Iraq we were in step with the views of the general public. That doesn't mean that we blindly followed public opinion — because our role as politicians is not to follow public opinion wherever it takes us, but to take it into account and promote acceptance of positions. And we were in step with the views of the general public. That wasn't the case in other countries, as we saw later on. Some of the countries which had signed the famous letter subsequently agreed on the missile defence plan, then they backtracked saying that it shouldn't be construed like that and that no, they still needed to think about it and it was going to cost a lot, etc. Then the US said, 'We will set up bases, etc. for you', but they didn't get their bases so they were cheated. Going back to what I said to you earlier, the US ally sometimes has more respect for an ally who says 'no' than a yes-man who just says 'Yes, yes, everything is wonderful, come, come, do whatever you like.' I think that the same applies to relations between nations and between allies within an alliance such as NATO as to relationships between people. You have to be upfront enough to say 'no' to people and stick to it.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Do you recall the conditions or circumstances in which the response to this attitude adopted by several major European countries and certain candidate countries was prepared? I'm referring of course to the Tervuren Meeting held in April 2003 and attended by four countries: Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg. How was this reaction, this initiative, taken and organised within the space of three months?

[**André Flahaut**] I think it was mainly due to Guy Verhofstadt's determination.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Was he the one who picked up the torch right away?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes, he was. Whether he picked it up by himself or he was ultimately supported by certain leaders of other countries is another matter, but I think it was more a case of the latter. He didn't get involved on his own, he was sufficiently cautious for that. At any rate, he was almost certain that he could make a demonstration out of it. It was naturally difficult for one of the four of us to take the initiative because ... But on the other hand, the fact that Belgium participated ... well, it wasn't the first time! So I think that it was important, and then there were all those discussions which reveal once again the amount of time and energy that can be lost when we become attached to certain symbols. There was outright opposition to the European headquarters in Tervuren! It was simply out of the question. We had a turnkey district in Belgium that we could make available, close at hand, operational immediately, but it was out of the question! So what did we do? Well, pragmatically, we figured that we were still going to ... I mean, we weren't going to be deterred. There was the PSC on Avenue de Cortenbergh, and one day when I was looking at the plans with Guy I said, 'But there's that building at the Military Academy, it has been renovated and everything!' So, he said to me, 'Yes, we'll do that!' So we actually suggested a building that wasn't in Tervuren or in the PSC building, but which was on Avenue de Cortenbergh, virtually opposite. So we did it anyway. It was really ... some people spoke earlier about symbols. I think that there are positive symbols, but by God there are also negative symbols that take an awful lot of time and jeopardise the development of a project. So after

all, there is now an EU Military Staff building on Avenue de Cortenbergh, and no one even mentions it any more. Those who were against it are no longer there today.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] One thing that we haven't yet mentioned is how or indeed if the war in the former Yugoslavia had an impact on people's awareness of the need for a European defence and on the tangible achievements in this area. Do you think it acted as a catalyst?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes. The former Yugoslavia was above all a NATO matter. Europe intervened later, in a somewhat watered-down fashion.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] But was it a NATO matter precisely because Europeans weren't ready or willing ...?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes, I think so. There was ... there needed to be scope for action at a certain point and someone to implement this, and Solana was at the EU afterwards. This begs the question which we should perhaps put to Solana himself: when he acted as NATO Secretary General, was he already acting as the pioneer of a European defence system? Because later on, he had perfect knowledge of Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia and ended up becoming one of Europe's most eminent operators. I don't think we can ever overestimate Solana's role in this respect. But of course, yes, there was the former Yugoslavia, but I think that the level of awareness was raised the most after '98 and '99, with 2001 acting as a strong stimulus. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 made people realise that things could come to that.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] It opened people's eyes ...

[**André Flahaut**] And so we said, 'We need European intelligence.' Then we all went back to our respective drawing boards to see what we could do at European level. And then ... I think it was positive for Europe. It created a movement, because we closed our meeting by saying, 'We don't need less Europe but more Europe in terms of defence.' In some way, that was a positive element that came out of the attack. Afterwards, the European front became dislocated during the Gulf War, which led to a profound regression. And now, we are in a stage of trying to knit things back together, but in a particularly difficult economic context with a resurgence of states vis-à-vis Europe, and on top of that a NATO which is trying to figure out how to withdraw from Afghanistan and exist afterwards. So I think that history perpetually repeats itself. In '98 things sped up a little — '98, '99 — then more dramatically in 2001 with a stronger presence in many places, sudden increases in European presence at certain times, particularly in Darfur in Africa and also in the Congo. Now, the European defence system and its external representation are once again at a standstill in the implementation of the External Action Service. We set up institutions, put people in place, created structures, established offices, and that was it! And on the ground, where it could really work: the European Agency, because it's something tangible, initiatives, making better use of the Eurocorps, making better use of ... it's all at a standstill.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] ... it hasn't yet taken off.

[**André Flahaut**] Anyway, earlier on we spoke about the fight against piracy. I strongly believe — and I often said it when I was a minister — that national armies have an important new mission as part of much bigger picture, at the level of the marines. Mechanisms for preventing terrorism by means of intelligence are being implemented, but a great deal still needs to be done in terms of investment, especially in satellite technology. Airspace is controlled, that goes without saying and it works. We have our Renegade system here in Belgium, our two F-16s on 24-hour standby to intercept a pirate plane entering Belgium airspace. I've had first-hand experience of the Renegade, because during the attack on the Twin Towers, I was here in Belgium and the Minister for Foreign affairs was

abroad, as were the Minister for the Interior and the Prime Minister ... So I was the operator, but as the Minister for Defence is responsible for deploying the Renegade, it was OK! But as regards airport checks ... by road or land there is Schengen, etc., but of course there is also the sea! There is also the threat from the sea, with missiles that could be on board submarines. We know that terrorists sometimes buy submarines too, and certainly missiles, but there is also drug trafficking, human trafficking, all of which can be done by sea, so the navies also have a vital coordinating role! I gave this example the first time we deployed a Belgian frigate carrying a Dutch helicopter in the Caribbean to collaborate with the US in the fight against drug trafficking. At the time I said, 'But what we can do with the US in the Caribbean we can also easily do with our national navies in the Mediterranean, etc.' There are fleets in the Mediterranean, it's happening more and more, and Operation Atalanta is a perfect example that we can do things together at European level. I think we should be very pleased about this.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Do you believe, as some do, that in comparison with what NATO and the US are capable of, there should be a European defence trademark, notably for its overseas missions, particularly when both military and civilian resources are used on the ground? In other words, do Europeans have skills or an approach which differ from what the Americans or NATO can do in this very specific area?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes, and this can be seen in certain places. Right now, the Belgians are still in partnership with the Germans as part of the support operation in Afghanistan — the ISAF — and our work there combines civilian and military action. I am convinced that it is possible to have civilian and military forces work together on humanitarian missions. Humanitarian workers wouldn't agree. They would say that these are two separate worlds ... But I'm a practical man and I feel that during the initial stage of a crisis — and crises can last a long time — if you don't have this cooperation between military and humanitarian workers, whereby the military forces do a bit of humanitarian work as the provincial reconstruction team is doing right now in Kunduz, and which is undoubtedly bringing more positive results than other missions conducted in Afghanistan — if we are able to do that, it's because there is this collaboration with this European mentality. The Germans are on the ground, but the troops who operate are under the control of the Foreign Affairs and Cooperation department. So I think that yes, in some countries we can develop a form of participation in peacekeeping or peacebuilding efforts with joint civilian and military cooperation in the initial phase. I believe that's possible. It was also done in Africa at one time, and it's pretty clear that it also gives local populations a different view of the work done by Europeans and that done by Americans, who have a different approach to this work. That is the difference between ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom. But the problem is that when an Afghan sees an F16 fighter plane, he doesn't know if it belongs to ISAF or Enduring Freedom. For him, it's a plane that could bomb the area at any time, not a C-130 that will drop supplies. No, but there is a distinguishing feature ... they are completely different approaches. The European military approach is more humane and more civilian with less of a military slant ...

[**Étienne Deschamps**] that isn't hawkish ...

[**André Flahaut**] ... and that is less hawkish, indeed. However, I didn't say that there aren't officers, high-ranking officers, non-commissioned officers in certain national armies who ... there were some here too who always viewed my defence work as too humanitarian, too pacifist, too geared towards the impact on civilians and on solidarity, etc. As a socialist minister, those are my values and I was also there to promote them. I don't think the troops were worse off, nor were the populations with whom we were in contact. You'd have to ask them.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] We've spoken at length about the difficulty of having ambivalent, sometimes difficult relations between NATO and the European Union regarding the European policy which it is

striving to establish. Despite everything, do you believe that the 2003 ‘Berlin Plus’ agreements made it possible to clarify the relationship between the two organisations?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes, I think they contributed to this and, once again, Solana played a major role here because he knew both sides of the coin — but the same goes for the ‘Berlin Plus’ agreements as for many other agreements: it’s what you do with them afterwards that counts. And as I told you earlier, people very often say ‘yes’ on the one hand and ‘no’ on the other. Or worse still, they don’t back up their ‘yes’ with any action. I’d say that Berlin Plus is to be welcomed because, like any agreement, I think it plays a key role in pushing forward a process, but as far as its execution and implementation are concerned, I don’t think there have been enough corrections or determination. We waste time, we hold meetings, and some people think that we made a great deal of progress because the NATO Secretary General was systematically invited to meet European defence ministers before their meetings, but it didn’t work the other way around. And then we made a few corrections, but even simply inviting one person to meet another involves getting round a number of diplomats or bureaucrats who say things along the lines of, ‘It’s not possible, we’ve never done that, you understand ... we have schedules, it’s difficult, what will we be able to talk about? Will we really be able to say everything?’, etc. How can you cooperate with people if you start by asking yourself whether you’ll invite them to your table? It used to be the same thing at one time: At NATO you had meetings and at certain points the doors would open to welcome the Ukrainians and Russians. But there was also a time when, before the doors opened, people would say things like ‘Right now, be careful because of this or because of that ...’ Either you cooperate or you say that you want to progress in transparency by fostering dialogue and you do it, or you don’t pretend to do it. It’s pretty ‘revolutionary’ in certain institutions when someone dares to say that. You may be told to alter your language to make it slightly more diplomatic, but incomprehensible. Personally, I prefer direct language.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] In March 2010, a few months ago, Western European Union announced that it will cease its activities in a few months’ time, in 2011, 50 years after it was first launched. How do you feel about this? Does it leave you indifferent, do you see it as a logical conclusion or do take a take a benevolent view of the work conducted by WEU over all these years?

[**André Flahaut**] First and foremost, I see it as a logical move. We won’t be able to keep maintaining a whole series of things. At some time, you have to ... I sometimes use the expression ‘You have to be able to remove a carpet from a mosque without always adding a new one.’ If we want to progress, we really have to strip back to the original base and rebuild on it again. I think that ... I took great pride every time I was asked to go to WEU and the Assembly and present our projects. I did this before and after the Presidency, and when I was a minister I went several times; and of course, it’s a forum for exchange, for dialogue, etc. But that’s not enough; it’s also crucial to have the political means of making changes. Once WEU realised that although it is a respectable assembly, full of respectable and respected people, that may well make statements and recommendations, but that everyone takes it as ... there comes a time when you have to be honest and wise enough to say ‘Let’s stop!’ Likewise, there are certain places ... I mean there are other places where people have the opportunity to meet each other, such as the Council of Europe, etc., where people can also discuss defence issues and international politics, where exchanges can also take place, but the best place for taking decisions is the European Parliament. Because in principle, the people there have power as they have been elected. But if we really want to change things — and this brings us back to what we said earlier — the parties really need to be structured and do more than simply compensate for things, as is common practice in financial terms — compensation in assembly offices, compensation in everyone’s interests so as to build some sort of consensus. The European Parliament must also become a real forum for political confrontation in issues just as important as defence. I think that ensuring greater accountability for Parliament and giving it greater power are steps in the right direction. MEPs are directly elected, whereas this wasn’t the case for Western European Union,

whose Assembly members were appointed indirectly. Talking shops are great, but they don't lead to much action. So I think we must ... and that has an effect ... Because let's take the citizen ... the citizen of Western European Union, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, etc. And what's Parliament's role in all this? The Commission ... Van Rompuy ... help! So we have to turn our focus back to developing the understanding of European citizens, so the dissolution of the Western European Union is a wise and logical act which must be extended by stepping up political discourse — real political discourse, not a semi-institutional debate — within the democratically elected political assembly that is the Parliament.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] So presumably, European defence will be all the more powerful, respected and efficient if it includes ... if it involves many members, and in this context, how do you feel about countries who wish to retain their neutral status? Do you think this is a weakness for European defence?

[**André Flahaut**] Yes, because you can't have one foot in and one foot out. So we have experienced some rather difficult situations. There was an urgent need for action in the Congo. There were some countries which ... then in the end those countries became involved because Sweden pledged to support us in the Congo. They took civilian and humanitarian action, and it worked admirably well. They weren't there as military forces but to back up our action with very strong support. I therefore think that we should welcome everything that is conducive to clarification, because sitting on the fence always makes things a bit difficult.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] To conclude this interview, I would like to ask one last question on stabilisation missions outside the EU. Do you feel that they have met the expectations of both European citizens and the international community? What does the international community expect of Europe in terms of defence?

[**André Flahaut**] I think the international community expects Europe to speak with one voice and to be more proactive, with a greater presence around negotiating tables in conflict areas. I think that we talk about Lebanon, the Middle East, that we talk about Africa, but we are dangerously absent from Africa. Not to do politics instead of the Africans themselves, but simply because we could help certain things to progress if we foster triangular relations, and so I think there is a genuine expectation. We have the future in our hands. It's up to us to decide. On the other hand, I think that when we take action we do it well. So in that respect we meet the expectations of both the international community and local populations, because we show a great deal of respect for local populations and even for the authorities involved. We don't go there to occupy them.

As for whether or not we need a greater presence, the answer is clearly 'yes'. And to have a greater presence — which would also enable Belgium to step up its presence in foreign operations, at European level — we need to have foreign operations. This leads us back to the same problem of the decision-making process, of the consensus which has to be achieved, of who's going to do what and who's going to pay, different approaches, philosophies and resources. So it always boils down to the need to structure, in terms of equipment and training, all of these elements which remain far too dissociated at the moment. Regular ministerial meetings aren't going to make things progress, it's perhaps something to do with the PSC too, but it boils down to the idea that if we had had a real European military headquarters, we would have undoubtedly saved a lot of time, just as we would have saved a great deal of time if we had created a European academy. That was the aim of the 'praline approach'. But things were decided differently and they progress more slowly. However, we must remain optimistic, and I think an irreversible process is currently under way. One day, Europe will ultimately exist in terms of a real foreign and defence policy. It will still take a long time, and all the while crises are unfolding, humanitarian crises are unfolding, there are military crises for which we could be extremely useful, but because of our organisation and our failure to adequately pool our

available resources, this rich Europe — because that's what our continent is — lacks solidarity, much to my regret. This is why we need to make political reinvestments to return to this principle of solidarity, to forge a human Europe that is useful for the people of Europe both today and in the future, and that is also useful for people elsewhere.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Thank you very much, Mr Flahaut.