

# Transcription of the interview with Viviane Reding – Part 1 (Sanem, 22 May 2015)


**Caption:** Transcription of the interview with Viviane Reding, Member of the Luxembourg Parliament from 1979 to 1989, Member of the European Parliament from 1989 to 1999 and since 2014, Member of the European Commission from 1999 to 2010 and Vice-President of the Commission from 2010 to 2014, carried out by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE) on 22 May 2015 at the Château de Sanem. The interview was conducted by Elena Danescu, a Researcher at the CVCE, and particularly focuses on the following subjects: Viviane Reding's childhood, youth and education; her early political career; her time at the Luxembourg Chamber of Deputies; the personality and working method of Pierre Werner; her activities as a Member of the European Parliament; her work as a Member of the European Commission in the fields of education, culture, youth, media and sport, the information society and media, and justice, fundamental rights and citizenship; and Luxembourg and the European integration process.

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1. Childhood, youth and education

[Elena Danescu] We are greatly honoured to welcome Viviane Reding to the CVCE today. As well as being an MEP and former Vice-President of the European Commission, Mrs Reding has also been a moral force in Europe in recent years. She has kindly accepted to share her experiences of European integration within the scope of our research project on Pierre Werner and Europe and in preparation for the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Hello Mrs Reding.

[Vivane Reding] Hello.

[Elena Danescu] Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. If you don’t mind, I suggest that you start by telling us about your childhood and upbringing. You were born and grew up in Esch-sur-Alzette. Could you describe your family background?

[Vivane Reding] Well, my father was a teacher at what we used to call a ‘vocational school’ at the time, but we now refer to as a ‘technical college’. My mother took care of the housekeeping. I come from a very Luxembourgish family in the sense that many of my family members were involved in the Resistance and I lived through returns from concentration camps, from prisons, I heard stories about ... one of my great-uncles was a smuggler and a stock and die maker, and in fact he was shot by the Nazis in Besançon. So, there was all this atmosphere, Luxembourg, how we kept the country alive, and this pride about our country, our language, our very being, that’s kind of the basis that went on to become my political basis.

[Elena Danescu] At the time, Esch-sur-Alzette was an important centre of the iron and steel industry. What was your childhood like in this town, and what do you remember about it, especially with regard to the socio-economic context at the time?

[Vivane Reding] First of all, it is the quintessential European town, because there is an extraordinary mix of population groups. As it’s home to the iron and steel industry, there is a great demand for manpower. This manpower can’t come from Luxembourg alone, as there isn’t enough of it. As a result, there are a huge number of immigrants living in Esch-sur-Alzette, and my childhood was shaped by an Italian influence, in a way. When I was a little girl, the majority of immigrants came from Italy. I learned Italian on the street and later on, whenever I spoke in Italian on Italian TV I used to tell this story: ‘My Italian isn’t perfect because I learned it on the

street, fighting with little Italians against other little Italians. I remember that when things used to get a bit too heated, we would suddenly hear “Basta, la pasta”, and one of the Italian *mamas* would call us into her kitchen to calm us down with some Italian pasta.’ So this was the Europe that I fell into in Esch, a Europe where people have to live together with others who are all different, and who have a different culture, and in the end by playing together, we live together and we grow up together. And of course the steel industry also shaped me, I think. I’m a real *Minettsdapp* [from the mining region in the south of Luxembourg], a tough character. Because it was tough in our house. We exploded, we banged our fists on the table, we said exactly what we thought. We learned everything but diplomacy. But we also learned about friendship earned the hard way — by that I mean we would fight over something then make up again just as quickly. But my very direct manner in politics, the fact that I don’t beat around the bush, stems directly from Esch-sur-Alzette, the mining area, the steel industry, the atmosphere which prevailed at the time.

**[Elena Danescu]** With this set of values and having experienced this mix of cultures, you completed your secondary education at the Lycée Hubert Clément, where you obtained your secondary school diploma in 1971. What do you remember about this period at the *Meedecherslycée*?

**[Vivane Reding]** Ah yes, as you quite rightly say it was the *Meedecherslycée*. When I left the school they were just starting to admit boys, but otherwise it was a girls’ school on one side and a boys’ school on the other, and we would meet each other on the street corners in the middle. Apart from that, it was a completely female environment. I can tell you that I learned several things. First of all, I was incredibly lucky to have had access to my father’s library from a very young age. I knew how to read and write before I started primary school, and I’ve always continued reading. But I used to read anything and everything. At secondary school, my teachers straightened this out. They taught me literature and I’m very indebted to them.

Apart from learning how to write correctly, especially in French and German, during my time at secondary school I also learned how to write summaries, which has been a huge help to me. That’s rather a strange thing to say, isn’t it? But writing a summary, in other words turning a long text into a short one and capturing the essence of it, has helped me in my political career, particularly in my journalism career, and it also came in handy at university.

Another very important thing that I learned about at secondary school was the freedom to act. I had extraordinary teachers who gave me the freedom to develop and have my own ideas rather than pigeonholing me. They pushed me a bit so that I could do it and take initiatives. For example, when I said, ‘We’re a bit bored at this school, there should be a theatre group, dance group, choir’, my teachers said, ‘Then make it happen.’ So I did. I organised the beginnings of what is now a very renowned theatre group, but during the early stages the pupils would put on a show for their families, and I was given the freedom to organise that. This sense of freedom that my teachers taught me has helped me a great deal during my life.

**[Elena Danescu]** Your time at secondary school also coincided with the first years of the Common Market, the ‘empty chair’ crisis and the customs union, then there was the merger of the executive bodies, the European revival in The Hague, not forgetting the ensuing Werner Report. Did you already take an interest in Community affairs at the time?

**[Vivane Reding]** No. We didn’t talk about politics or current affairs at school. We talked about the past, literature, the knowledge we had to learn, but I never came across any of those issues

at school. The only thing I came across at school was May '68. Because, as is always the case in Luxembourg, it arrived a bit late, then we made a half-hearted attempt — in actual fact it was more the boys who did it. We met at the boys' school to wage a revolution which was pretty feeble at a national level, but it's the only thing that we learned about external politics.

**[Elena Danescu]** You mentioned May '68, which necessarily means Paris. You chose to study at the Sorbonne University in Paris, where you went on to obtain a PhD in Human Science. What made you choose Paris and human science?

**[Vivane Reding]** Human science was a natural choice for me, because I was always very very good at literature and writing. In fact, I sold my first newspaper article to the *Républicain Lorrain*, which had an office in Esch-sur-Alzette, when I was just 14 or 15, and ever since I've earned my pocket money, so to speak, by writing. So I was a journalist before learning the trade, simply because I knew how to write, thanks to having read so much as a child. It was also natural for me to want to do languages.

And as for why I chose Paris, I came from quite a French-speaking background. It was also due to my family — because of the Second World War, I think, and the experiences of my family in the Resistance — we tended to look at the French perspective. So for me it had to be Paris. In Paris, I started off studying literature, but I soon became annoyed because Parisians, the French, talk a bit too much. There's too much blathering on and rather too much knowledge to amass without having your own ideas. I soon switched from literature to linguistics, but I didn't stick with that for long either, because it's really quite technical.

Then I had an enormous stroke of luck, because at that time Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes used to lecture at the French École des Hautes Études, and I always went there for lectures. This was before Umberto Eco became a writer, in fact. He was a very well-known semiotician at the time, and Roland Barthes was the father of semiotics. So I started studying semiotics. And there I met lecturers who simply let me do what I wanted. It was something that fascinated me because there was nothing — I didn't have to refer to a list of existing books, because there were hardly any, so I could develop my own theories, which I found really exciting. I wrote a PhD thesis comprising no more than 120 pages, a brand new theory on how to analyse the components of communication. Can you believe, the Parisians let me go to Stratford-upon-Avon to work on the corpus of Macbeth staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company — it was unprecedented — and to translate it into a theory on the analysis of a staged text, so including distances, lights, voices, colours and objects? It was exciting! I was incredibly lucky to have teachers who always instilled in me a sense of freedom, the freedom to invent and to present the results of my inventions.

**[Elena Danescu]** Paris was therefore an important stage in the development of your freedom of thought and your qualities as a pathfinder in a number of areas.

**[Vivane Reding]** Yes, because while I was there I also helped out at the Biermans-Lapôte Foundation, and I must say a big thank you to our Belgian friends for giving Luxembourgers this opportunity to have their home too in the Cité Internationale Universitaire. We learned about geopolitics at the Cité Internationale, because it brought together young people from around the world. This was where I first met some Iranians and learned about Iranian politics, something I knew nothing about beforehand. So I really discovered geopolitics in Paris, and it was wonderful.

I also took my first steps towards feminism in Paris, because it's very interesting and perhaps less obvious ... feminism was born in May '68 because ... let's put it this way: it was mainly the men who were waging the revolution, and then it was time for the warriors to have a well-earned rest and the women were good for organising this rest. At one point, they got tired of it, and this marked a time of outright feminism. The first main demonstrations, 'My belly belongs to me', demonstrations in favour of contraception and abortion, radical feminism, 'Women don't need men', pushing men to one side, quite simply. I arrived at a time of radical feminism and it was a learning process that I refined over the years, because I understood that it was nothing like that at all; because I understood that we needed a balance between men and women and for women's talents to be recognised. It was no coincidence that the President of the Commission put me in charge of women's issues at the Commission during my third term.

**[Elena Danescu]** You just mentioned your term at the European Commission. Did European and Community affairs spark your interest while you were at university?

**[Vivane Reding]** No, not yet. I was more interested in geopolitics. Europe didn't exist; countries existed. There was France, where I lived, with its political problems. I started to take a serious interest in French politics because I was in Paris. I was also interested in other people's national politics because I was mixing with young people from all over the world. So at that stage, the focus in my life and in the young people I met was more on geopolitics than Europe. Europe wasn't yet on my mind when I was in Paris.

## 2. Her early political career

**[Elena Danescu]** You felt the tug of your vocation and decided to get involved in politics very early on. How and when did you decide to pursue a political career and why did you choose the Christian Social Party (CSV) to carry out your vocation?

**[Vivane Reding]** Let's start by looking at why I chose the Christian Social Party. First of all, because I come from a conservative Christian social family, whose conservative stance was actually very modern since they gave me the freedom to develop when I was a young girl. Secondly, our neighbour in Esch-sur-Alzette was Jean Wolter, so I was directly in contact with one of the historical leaders of the Christian Social Party. Thirdly, because in the context of Esch-sur-Alzette, I was confronted with workers' issues, so, the trade unions, and the first contact I made in that context was with the LCGB. Another factor is that when I was a young freelance journalist, I started out working for the *Républicain Lorrain* before moving on to the *Luxemburger Wort*. At the time, the *Luxemburger Wort* was very close to the Christian Democrats — again, Jean Wolter — so it was quite natural for me to head in that direction.

As for why I became involved in politics, it was actually down to an experience I had in Paris, because not only did I study in Paris, but I also worked there. I always earned my own money and at the time I wrote radio programmes explaining to African women why it's better to breastfeed a baby than to give it contaminated water mixed with Nestlé formula. I'm simplifying here. I was earning a good wage, then at one point they said to me, 'Yes, we will extend your contract.' I said, 'OK, but what has happened? Has anyone carried out an analysis? What effect have my radio programmes had on African women? Have they changed their perspective? Because if not, I need to change the perspective of my message.' I found out that these radio programmes were never actually broadcast. And at that point I thought, 'This is unbelievable! I'm going to stop writing these radio programmes, I'm going to decide what will

be put on the air, and for that, I have to get into politics.’ Because in Africa, it was very political. So, I decided to get involved in politics.

I went to see Jean Wolter to tell him about my decision. He nearly swallowed his pipe! ‘And why?’, he asked me. ‘Because I want to take decisions’, I replied. He burst out laughing and retorted, ‘Do you really think that in politics we take decisions and they are applied?’ ‘Ah yes’, and I explained to him why it was done like that. He was in stitches. Then he said, ‘It’s very good, very good, very good.’ A few weeks later he called me and asked me if I still had the crazy idea of getting into politics, to which I replied, ‘Yes, yes, of course.’ Then he put me in contact with Pierre Werner, and the rest is history.

**[Elena Danescu]** Your dedication and resolve to do something for others yielded their initial results during the legislative elections in 1979 when you stood as candidate for the Chamber for the first time and were elected with massive support. 1979 was also the year when Pierre Werner returned to power after what he referred to as his ‘desert crossing.’ Before going back to Pierre Werner’s profile, I would like to ask you, if I may, how you conducted your first election campaign.

**[Vivane Reding]** At the time, periodicals and newspapers were highly politicised, not in the ideological sense, but in the sense that they were close to a political party. Another man who played a key role in my life was André Heiderscheid, who was chief editor and manager of the *Luxemburger Wort*. I became a professional journalist at the *Wort* in 1978, but at first I had to make do with run-over dogs, then families, then everything a woman was supposed to do at the *Luxemburger Wort* and in journalism in general. So I went to see André Heiderscheid and said to him, ‘I want to do political journalism.’ He initially threw me out of his office explaining loudly that I should be happy to be accepted as part of the editorial team given that I was a woman and that I should do what women are meant to and leave political journalism well alone. So anyway, one week later, he called me into his office to say that he had changed his mind and that he agreed to give it a go.

This was how I got started in political journalism, and it was actually thanks to political journalism that I was elected. Because André Heiderscheid gave me the opportunity to make political comments too, so I laid it on the line. The facts were either black or white. He saw that we were in the opposition, that it was fighting journalism. People loved reading my little comments, so everyone knew Viviane Reding. That’s how I was able to win the first election. I didn’t come from a family that was in politics and no one knew me, so it was thanks to political journalism that I managed to become elected, and at the time, this political journalism was perfectly normal. There were political journalists in all of the daily newspapers, and it was hard at the time. So it was journalism that led me into politics.

**[Elena Danescu]** You mentioned meeting Pierre Werner earlier. Could you tell us more about how you met him and your memories of this first meeting?

**[Vivane Reding]** I have an absolutely crazy memory of it, and in fact it’s a story that I’ll never forget because I didn’t actually know who Pierre Werner was. I had heard of him, as most people had, but I didn’t realise what a real institution he was. So when Jean Wolter told me that I was going to see Pierre Werner, I just thought, ‘OK, I’m going to see Pierre Werner.’ At the time, I had long hair that went right down to my behind, a miniskirt that barely covered my behind, and thigh-high boots up to here, as they were all the rage at the time. Just imagine the scene! There’s Pierre Werner, a very traditional man, then I show up with my miniskirt up to



here, my thigh-high boots up to there and my long hair down to my behind. When I walked into his office, I saw him open and close his mouth, quite unable to utter anything at all. Anyway, we spoke in a very civilised manner, he asked me what I wanted to do, and I explained life and politics to him as I've always done. He listened and listened, then afterwards he said he was going to have a think and would get back to me. I left Pierre Werner's office and at the door I bumped into Jean Wolter. 'What are you doing here?', he asked. 'I went to see Pierre Werner', I replied. He looked at me. 'Like that?', he said to me, looking at my very cool outfit.

**[Elena Danescu]** You were a woman of your time, after all.

**[Vivane Reding]** Yes! But it wasn't appropriate for going to see Pierre Werner. So Jean Wolter said to me, 'Wait there, don't move, I'll go and explain to him.' He went up to see him and I said, 'Explain what to him?' 'That it's not what he thinks.' A few weeks later, Pierre Werner phoned me to ask if I wanted to be on the list. He told me I should think about it and that he would call me back a week later. 'No, no, no, Mr Werner,' I said, 'You don't need to call me back, the answer's yes.' 'No, no, you ought to think about it first', he replied. 'But I *have* thought about it, that's why I'm saying yes, the answer's yes', I exclaimed. 'Really?', he said, 'Really? I thought you had to think about it.' I said, 'No, I have thought about it, that's it.' I was already like that afterwards. I was already like that at the time. That was my first meeting with Pierre Werner, and it's quite an anecdote!

I later understood what Pierre Werner had done. He had inherited a party made up entirely of men of a certain age. There were no young people, no young men, no women and certainly no young women. And he took the initiative of giving it a new lease of life, of giving young people a chance and letting them do what they wanted. He didn't put us into a mould. He never told me that I shouldn't wear my thigh-high boots and miniskirts, for example. He simply let us get on with it. I remember that when we spoke out during the election campaign, the things we said were somewhat unusual for the ordinary party members. I also said things in front of an astonished crowd and when I turned around I saw Pierre Werner behind me, making a calming gesture to the people in the room. In fact, with these gestures he was saying to them, 'Let these young people speak. Just let it be, don't say anything. I am here, I'm responsible for making sure everything goes well.' People came to accept that there were these young wild things who didn't fit the profile of the very conservative, fusty party at all, but who wanted to revolutionise things in quite a different way. And Pierre Werner said, 'Let them do it.' And he let us do it in politics, up to a certain point, when he would tell us to stop. This allowed us to take initiatives. We were able to give this completely different image of a party, which, after a period in the desert, had transformed itself and let young people have their say. That's also something that I learned and that I've always applied in politics, with this guarantee that innovation and new ideas will be backed up by the wisdom and experience to balance both elements.

**[Elena Danescu]** You mentioned Pierre Werner's influence on the revival of the party. How did he influence the doctrine and later the development of the party both internally and internationally?

**[Vivane Reding]** Internally, it's hard to say, but I think that the very fact that he gave the party a new lease of life and allowed young people to enter politics — which necessarily leads to a revival and to ideas that are less outdated — was something of a revolution in itself, which he calmed down so that it didn't veer off course. That was his internal action. Pierre Werner was never a party man. He left that to the others. He was a leader, a statesman, not a party man. And this statesman also made quite an impression on the outside world, because Luxembourg always

needs statesmen. People who rise above the party politics of everyday life, which inevitably exists in politics, who rise a cut above and know how to lead a party, know how to lead a country towards the future. That was Pierre Werner's role; it wasn't a political party role.

**[Elena Danescu]** You mentioned Pierre Werner's qualities as a mentor to young generations. Do you remember how Pierre Werner prepared his successors and his younger peers to follow him as a head of state and European leader?

**[Vivane Reding]** I think that he showed us what to do. We observed his know-how. Let's take the example of the iron and steel industry. I remember really really well one of the key lessons that I learned in politics, it was ... in fact there are two lessons: one in connection with the steel industry and one in connection with media technology. Let's start with the first. There was a serious steel crisis when we came to power at the end of the 1970s. Pierre Werner said to me, 'You know, something unbelievable has happened to me. For the first time in my life, I had a sleepless night because of politics. That won't happen to me a second time.' Then he added, 'But if you can no longer sleep because of politics, then get out. Get out right away.' 'Ah,' I replied. Then I saw how he took control of the situation. How he succeeded in completely innovating the way we do politics, because the tripartite — bringing together the management, workers and politicians around a table to save Luxembourg, and keeping it in check thanks to his power as statesman, and achieving an incredible thing by cutting salaries or increasing taxes to save Luxembourg — all that was a great lesson on how to do politics. I've often thought about how he did it, how he managed to achieve the impossible. Luxembourg could have been destroyed back then, but it was saved.

Then, when I saw him taking completely hare-brained media initiatives, turning Luxembourg into a country of satellites ... It was sheer madness! We were much too small! It couldn't work. Then he brought in non-Luxembourgers to help us create SES, the *Société Européenne des Satellites*. Everyone thought he was stark raving mad, but no, he knew very well what he had to do.

I can also think of a third example, in fact that's what got me into European politics. It was at the time of the Belgian franc crisis. I remember how furious Pierre Werner was — I've only seen him furious once and that was when the Belgians devalued the Belgo-Luxembourg currency without informing the President of the Luxembourg Government. He became furious, and said, 'That's the last time.' It was at that point that I realised the efforts that Pierre Werner had made so that we — not only we as a union, but also we Luxembourgers first of all — could have a single currency. He had understood it very well for a very long time. He already had the idea back in the 1960s — but I only found that out later when I started to analyse Pierre Werner's work — when he wanted a single currency for Luxembourg, a currency shared with the big nations, where we would sit around the table to decide jointly what we would do with a single currency. And then he was informed afterwards that the Belgians had decided to devalue the currency without even telling us. It was at that point that I understood the European political action that this country had to take, the European action to survive as a nation. I had already learned that as part of my knowledge on the Second World War, but I learned the other, more technical aspects from that time onwards.

### **3. Member of the Chamber of Deputies: 1979–1989**

**[Elena Danescu]** After your first term as an MP, you were re-elected for a second term and you



also became a Member of the Benelux Parliamentary Assembly. Could you tell us about how the Assembly operated and the role it played at the time?

**[Vivane Reding]** There were two very interesting assemblies: the Benelux Assembly that I'll tell you about now, but also the NATO Parliament, of which I was also a Member.

I also stumbled into the Benelux Assembly without realising it, because the CSV was looking to fill a position as Chair of the Agriculture Committee. No one wanted to do it or knew how to do it, but I was simply told to do it. I had no clue about agriculture. I grew up in the iron and steel industry, not the agriculture sector. I didn't know the difference between a cow and a bull. Useless!

So I ended up in a committee made up of trade unionists from the agriculture sector, mainly from Belgium and the Netherlands. I chaired the Belgium–Luxembourg–Netherlands Joint Committee despite not having a clue about anything. I pretended I knew everything, but it didn't take long for them to realise that, no, I wasn't a farmer's daughter and that, no, I didn't really know anything at all. It was at that stage that I learned how we could work together at multinational level, because they were so nice to me. They really taught me about agriculture and showed me what to do. My colleagues from the three other countries helped me, and my chairship was a real success, not only because I didn't have a presidential style, but also because I found out what they knew and we acted together. In the Benelux Parliament, I learned what my predecessors already knew a long time ago, i.e. that the Benelux is a laboratory and we must use it to move forward. It was also a laboratory for free movement, for example. I learned about free movement and cooperation in the Benelux Parliament, and I managed to put what I had learned into practice later when I joined the European Parliament.

In the NATO Parliament, I learned about the Americans because it was led by members of the US Senate and the House of Representatives, something I knew nothing about at all. This was when I learned about US politics. I also learned about defence policy, which came in very useful later on, and I became Chair of the Christian Democratic/Conservative Committee at the time. I've got a never-ending supply of anecdotes from my time at the NATO Parliament, because I was a parliamentary leader and, as I'm sure you can imagine, when we went on our military trips, the generals wanted nothing to do with a young girl like me. They always greeted my colleagues and thought that I was the secretary, whereas I was the one giving the speeches! Their faces turned ashen, they would never have thought it. They thought that the world had turned topsy-turvy. There were only two or three women in the NATO Parliament at that time, and I learned how to handle an entirely male world that focuses on geopolitical defence issues. That was another extremely interesting learning experience.

**[Elena Danescu]** But maybe it was also a question of your skills and the fact that you, as a Luxembourgish, knew how to build consensus — a trademark shared by all Luxembourgish leaders.

**[Vivane Reding]** And that is one of our great political advantages. Because we don't want to be the leaders, we want to serve a cause and a purpose. Who better to do that than a Luxembourgish, who by his or her very essence already understands cultural diversity, linguistic diversity and the diverse workings of political systems, which are not identical at all? Germans do politics completely differently from the French, etc. So we have a great advantage as Luxembourgish. I always observed how our statesmen, such as Pierre Werner and Jacques Santer, operated and how they managed to get people to take decisions together. It's one of Luxembourg's special characteristics. We know how to do it better than anyone else, and that's what helps us defend

ourselves at international level.

**[Elena Danescu]** Pierre Werner was a consensus builder, we'll come back to that later. During his last term, he was also Minister for Cultural Affairs. In this role, he initiated the Language Law in 1982 and you, as a Member of the Chamber of Deputies, knew it very well because you were part of the team behind the drafting of this law.

**[Vivane Reding]** Who initiated the law?

**[Elena Danescu]** You did.

**[Vivane Reding]** I did indeed.

**[Elena Danescu]** That's right.

**[Vivane Reding]** It was taken up by the government afterwards because at that time they didn't really appreciate parliamentary initiative. Because they weren't used to it, MPs weren't supposed to take the initiative at the time. However, you know what I'm like, I took the initiative all the time. In this instance, as was so often the case, it started out as a German polemical tract written by former Nazis, who denied Luxembourg any independent cultural existence, etc. We didn't have a language because we spoke German, etc. That was all the information we had. This was when I took my pen and wrote a law, which was subsequently taken up by the government and became a government law. There's another one that I wrote myself, but I'll come back to it later, and that time I didn't let myself be pushed around and it became a Reding bill. The first time, however, I let myself be pushed around a bit, and it ended up becoming a government initiative afterwards.

When I was drafting the law, I had a ringside seat, and eventually, after some very long debates, the law reached a very Luxembourgish conclusion, a profession of faith: the national language in Luxembourg is Luxembourgish, full stop. And then we negotiated on what we would do with multilingualism in the other articles. The greatest opposition to this law came from the public service, the public sector employees, because they didn't like this idea (which the MPs were strongly in favour of) that Luxembourg citizens would have the right to contact them in Luxembourgish, German or French, and that where possible they would have to respond in the language chosen by the citizen. Public sector workers who were used to writing in French didn't like the idea at all and were opposed to it. In the end, we manage to pass the law. It didn't revolutionise the way the administrative authorities operate, but it just goes to show some of the difficult cases we encountered when we sought to innovate.

**[Elena Danescu]** So the administrative authorities' opposition to this law resulted in it not actually being implemented until two years after it was introduced?

**[Vivane Reding]** That's right, because public sector workers were afraid of writing. Because no one had ever learned to write in Luxembourgish, so they were a bit scared of having to respond in Luxembourgish — what style of Luxembourgish, how would these letters be written, and if the Luxembourgish wasn't perfect, could that be used against the administrative authorities? So you see, it was more an administrative matter than a matter of principle. The MPs made it into a matter of principle, the administrative authorities made it into an administrative matter, and in the end this delayed the actual implementation of the law.

**[Elena Danescu]** The Grand Duchy is perhaps the best illustration of Europe's motto 'United in diversity.' Luxembourg's national identity is a permanent construction in which foreigners — those who work here and participate in this joint project — have their place. You are strongly committed to this project, because you were responsible for modernising the nationality law. Could you tell us about the nationality reform that you instigated in 1983?

**[Vivane Reding]** Yes, it was a Reding bill that once again stemmed from a specific problem. I became pregnant when I was a young member of the Luxembourg Chamber of Deputies. Since my husband didn't have Luxembourgish nationality, when I looked at the legislation I realised that my child wouldn't be Luxembourgish. I said this had to stop. I was a Luxembourgish MP, I was carrying a child and this child wouldn't even be Luxembourgish! It made absolutely no sense! So, once again, I got out my pen and wrote a bill to change the provisions on obtaining nationality according to the principle that any child born to a Luxembourgish mother would be Luxembourgish. I fought for that law, because at the time there were no DNA tests, by pointing out that the only thing that was sure was that the child was mine. Logically, a child also belongs to the husband, but well, you never know. One thing that was sure was that the child was mine, so it was only natural for him or her to have my nationality.

This sparked a terrible debate, especially within the Christian Social Party, with a rather conservative fringe all the same, who thought it made absolutely no sense. Doesn't the father count for anything anymore? The child belongs to its mother, yes OK, but previously nationality was passed on by the father only. So in the end, we reached a compromise: dual nationality for these children. But the child would have a choice when he or she turns 18 and must give up one of these two nationalities. That was the compromise. No one wanted this dual nationality at the time. There were never-ending debates, everyone was shocked by my extremely feminist stance of wanting the mother to have a role to play with her child. Fancy that! So the dual nationality idea was completely rejected. I think that Colette Flesch was Minister for Justice at the time, unless I'm mistaken, we'll have to check that, and she also thought that of course the child should take the mother's nationality, and of course we should modernise these practices from another age, so we did. In fact, I don't think that having to give up a nationality at the age of 18 is put into practice very much.

**[Elena Danescu]** You opened up completely unknown paths at the time.

**[Vivane Reding]** It was shocking!

**[Elena Danescu]** Yes. You introduced a revolution, not only in the ethical values of society but also in law.

**[Vivane Reding]** Yes, absolutely.

**[Elena Danescu]** As author of the Luxembourg Language Law, does it not bother you that Luxembourg, which is of course trilingual, did not promote Luxembourgish as an EU language? What comments do you have to make in light of this?

**[Vivane Reding]** In Luxembourg, we spent a long time discussing whether or not we should promote Luxembourgish as an official language. These discussions took place before the enlargement to include much smaller countries, or countries which had language situations that were less well established than in Luxembourg. If they had taken place later, we would have probably insisted on having Luxembourgish as a working language, or even an official

language. I think that at one time, for example, we were really shocked when Ireland imposed Gaelic, even though no one even spoke it in Ireland. We said, 'But here, everyone speaks Luxembourgish, why didn't we do it?' I'll tell you why: because Luxembourgers were very realistic. They understood that Luxembourgish would never become a working language of the European Union. What would be the point in translating the texts into Luxembourgish? Everyone who works on the texts in Luxembourg can read French, English and German. It would have simply been an extra burden on the European machine, without any benefits, apart from that of having made a declaration which was implemented in practice. Whenever people asked me that question I would explain, 'We are the former Department of Forests. We love forests. And we're not going to tell you that we need to cut down so many forests to be able to print everything out when it will never even be read in Luxembourgish.' Everyone started laughing because that summed it up. But I must say that it would probably have been much harder to do later on.

My language experience in Europe is very simple. Right now, it's impossible to survive in Europe unless you have an excellent grasp of English. All negotiations are held in English; if you can't speak English, you lose your grip. If you want to negotiate, you're better off negotiating directly in English rather than waiting for a translation. So we use multilingualism with English as a basis. The other languages are used for bringing in votes and for doing politics, because I can't do politics in Germany in English, for example. The fact that I speak German is useful to us. In France, it's the same. So the multilingual situation in Luxembourg is an asset to Luxembourgers and to our way of doing European politics.

**[Elena Danescu]** It also helps to understand negotiating partners in their language and their culture.

**[Vivane Reding]** And to be able to influence them, too. For example, I was at the Cannes Festival a few days ago, and we were talking about copyright, but my message got through [00:57:00] because I said it directly in French. The others needed a translation and the message got lost in translation. It's always better to be able to speak the language of your negotiating partner.

**[Elena Danescu]** Let's move on to 1984, when Pierre Werner announced that he no longer wanted to stand in the legislative elections and that he wished to retire from politics. Do you remember the circumstances of this announcement, and could you possibly tell us the impact that his retirement had on the party and its political line?

**[Vivane Reding]** Pierre Werner had kept the secret very well. He announced the news at the party congress. I was there at the time and everyone went 'Ooh', people were shattered, some started crying, others said 'No, no, no, don't do that!' but he had taken his decision, which I believe was a family-oriented decision. Pierre Werner was a family man, which is perhaps something that people on the outside didn't tend to know. He was very close to his wife and children. He took a very personal decision. He had prepared it well within his party so that his successors could continue the line that he had put forward. He had decided to get the party out of a slump, and he did that, he had decided to guide future generations, young people, and he did that, so it came to a time when he took a personal decision.

#### **4. Member of the European Parliament: 1989–1999**

**[Elena Danescu]** Mrs Reding, you were elected as a Member of the European Parliament in 1989. You were subsequently re-elected in 1994, serving as an MEP for 10 years. Could you tell us how you were appointed as a candidate on the Christian Social Party's list in 1989?

**[Vivane Reding]** There weren't throngs of people who wanted to go to the European Parliament, because most national MPs believed that it was a kind of dumping ground. Once you were there, there was no way of getting back into national politics. No chance of being part of a government or achieving breakthroughs in politics. Given that I had had the tremendous advantage of enjoying an exciting international experience when I was at the national parliament, especially at the NATO Parliament, and given that I had seen Pierre Werner's achievements in international politics and witnessed the power he wielded, for example, in the creation of the euro, I said to myself, 'That's where things happen.' My friends at the NATO Parliament said to me, 'Are you mad? It's much too soon to go to the European Parliament. In 50 years maybe, but not now.' My English friends said that. I replied, 'No, that's where things are going to happen.' So I took the decision to get involved in European politics and never regretted it.

**[Elena Danescu]** You are also head of the Luxembourg delegation to the European People's Party and a member of the Bureau of the EPP Group in the European Parliament. The European People's Party originated in Luxembourg, because it was founded in Luxembourg City on 8 July 1976 when Jacques Santer was leader of the party and the party was in the opposition. And if I may, I would like to add that in 1979 Pierre Werner masterminded the socio-economic platform of the election campaign for the first European elections by universal suffrage. In the process, the EPP became a new forum for strategic reflection for Europe. How did the EPP, via certain political foundations or the European Union of Christian Democrats, play a role in the organisation of party systems in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism?

**[Vivane Reding]** The European People's Party has always played a fundamental role, even before it existed, via the parties which went on to become members. The Christian Democrats were the ones who wanted Europe. They were the ones who thought up Europe ... the best ideas on how this Europe could become a reality came from the men — they were mostly men — who dreamed up this Europe in their heads before it became a reality. So putting together these parties seemed an obvious choice, and it was once again Luxembourgers who traditionally played a key role, including Jacques Santer, who was much more of a party man than Pierre Werner; Werner was a man of reflection and action. Given that Pierre Werner had already invented the euro back in 1960, it was only natural for him to be asked to write the economic and financial part of this platform. From 1960 onwards, he already imagined what this financial and economic union could be like, and when I read what he wrote at the time, there are still things that we are putting into practice today. In some cases I think, 'If we had listened to Pierre Werner, we could have prevented some of the mistakes we've made in the meantime.' It was only natural for those great thinkers, who didn't emerge with the creation of the EPP but who were already there before, who had already thought about such matters in the past, to put their heads together in the EPP.

We should remember that at the time, and it was very noticeable to me, the EPP was the party that thought up the development of the successive treaties. We always had a group of EPP members from all the parties that belonged to this party which brought together the parties, wrote the treaties and reflected on the development of the treaties. That's what fascinated me about the EPP. It wasn't a party that followed developments; it shaped them and made them happen. That's what I experienced, and I felt at ease.



I was lucky to be part of this party and I must say that it shapes Europe less nowadays than it used to once upon a time. It has become much bigger; that was a decision taken by Kohl at the time, to enlarge the party on a massive scale and expand the EPP platform, to open us up to parties that weren't necessarily Christian Democratic parties but rather adopted a more Liberal or Conservative stance; this somewhat distorted the strong line of the party which shaped Europe afterwards. But as we became the biggest party, we became the party that dominated politics.

At the time when these decisions were taken, there were two leanings within the EPP. The CSV always belonged to the hard-line stance adopted by those who said, 'We're better off having a smaller party but with real Christian Democrats, real European federalists.' Then another stance grew in status, claiming, 'It doesn't matter, we want to be the strongest party so that we can get our point of view across.' I remember that all those decisions were taken at the EPP congress in Athens and, together with the Luxembourgers and the other Christian Democrats, we set up the Athens Group within the EPP for those who wanted to maintain a completely federalist approach.

**[Elena Danescu]** Does the long-term view of Europe that used to exist still prevail today in this diversified, enlarged EPP?

**[Vivane Reding]** It still exists, but it is not as clear or as easy. I can give you an example to demonstrate how it still exists. The idea of *Spitzenkandidaten* germinated in the minds of several EPP politicians and was incorporated into the constitution. You know what happened to the constitution. It never came into being because it failed to get the unanimous approval of all the countries. Luxembourg voted in favour of it, but France and the Netherlands voted against it, so the constitution no longer exists. The same people who included the idea of the *Spitzenkandidaten* in the constitution ensured that this idea was echoed in the Lisbon Treaty, without anyone noticing. So on the basis of the Treaty, there were others who were in power. The Commissioner for Justice and Citizenship wrote the basic texts so that it could be implemented without anyone noticing either. We were at a congress in Estoril, where we came up with the idea of *Spitzenkandidaten* 10 years before it became a reality. 10 years later, we won the *Spitzenkandidaten* battle by being the strongest party. Because that was how it was done. So, you see, federative ideas can be pushed through, but yes, Kohl was right, we needed to be the strongest party to do it. So both of them were right. The federalists need be able to lead the party to victory as long as possible within the EPP. That's what we did with the *Spitzenkandidat* Jean-Claude Juncker from the party with the most votes, and for the first time Parliament policy predominated over national policy.

**[Elena Danescu]** Do you agree with those who denounced the EPP for making an ideological headlong rush and claimed that it had encouraged the emergence of a 'right-wing-Europe' by working together with the British and Danish Conservatives, José Maria Aznar's *Partido Popular* and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*?

**[Vivane Reding]** It's a people's party with three branches, a bit like the CSV. We have our left wing, our right wing and our liberal wing. Luxembourg's Christian Social Party, the CSV, has the same set-up. The main thing is that there's a central leadership which prevents the wings from taking power. Throughout the development of our party, there have obviously been politicians who have strayed from the path of the European People's Party by means of what they have said, advocated or done within their national parties. A current example of this is



someone like Orban, who doesn't have the approval of the vast majority of EPP members because of his populist tendencies towards the far right. A party needs to be strong enough to stay on the right track together.

**[Elena Danescu]** Let's return to your work in the European Parliament, if you would be so kind. From 1989 to 1992, you chaired the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions. What was the role of this Committee and what do you remember about the important issues that you had to deal with during this period?

**[Vivane Reding]** It was the school of Europe for me. Because when I was Chair of this Committee, I received all the petitions sent to me by citizens, thousands of petitions, and I had to sort them out so as to include only the most important ones on the agenda. We found administrative responses for the others.

When you do that full-time for several years, you understand where the shoe pinches and what people's problems are. It's not just pure theory, it's actually what people feel, the areas in which they believe Europe doesn't do enough or does too much, in which they would like Europe to find a solution to personal problems. My conclusion on these formative years was that it was my first real learning experience in European law, because I had to learn what we could do, where there was jurisdiction and where there wasn't, things that I didn't know about. I had to learn about European law during that time, and it did me the world of good.

I also understood how mentalities worked. For example, I received petitions on animal protection signed by millions of people, but I never received any on child protection. Where is our society heading? How is it developing? What is important in our society? Not in theory, not in major debates, but in reality.

Most of the individual petitions came from people who had lived in cross-border areas, who had worked for a while in one country, then another, and when they were entitled to a pension, they had trouble having one that consisted of several parts. I learned how hard it was to work with national authorities that weren't interested in the reality in Europe and that blocked solutions. I also learned to pinpoint emerging policies, for example when I received the first petitions on the environment, I understood that there was genuinely something wrong and that there needed to be a real environmental protection policy in the long term. I understood the importance of free movement, I saw all the obstacles to this free movement. And when I became Commissioner in charge of these issues, as the first Justice Commissioner with the power to do something, I remembered my years of training when I was on the Committee on Petitions.

**[Elena Danescu]** In the subsequent period, from 1992 to 1994, you were Vice-Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Social Affairs and Employment. What do you remember about your work in this Committee during this period?

**[Vivane Reding]** It was frustrating. Because given that I had been, I think, Chair of the Luxembourg Parliament's Social Committee, I understood that there was still a huge difference at the time between European and national power in terms of social affairs. National power predominated. Europe had very little to do in this area, so these were years when I saw the shortcomings in the composition of the treaties. I realised that Europe needed much more power in social issues because all of these problems related to the free movement of workers, above all, could only be resolved with more extensive social powers.

**[Elena Danescu]** I would like to make a brief comment, if I may. Pierre Werner, influenced by the Luxembourg social model and the Luxembourg social dialogue model, included in the 1970 Werner Report the obligation to consult with the ‘social partners’ — both sides of industry — regarding any major decisions related to Economic and Monetary Union. So you managed to incorporate these elements during the subsequent years of your activities as European Commissioner. But here, once again, a Luxembourg emphasis can be felt with this sensitivity to the social dimension and to an awareness of the social aspects at European level and not at a separate national level.

**[Vivane Reding]** Except that in Luxembourg, the tripartite as it was at the time, as it saved Luxembourg during the steel crisis, as it perhaps functioned afterwards as well — it doesn’t work as well today — was something very tangible. We worked on laws, we agreed on laws. The system even went so far at one time in Luxembourg that the Chamber of Deputies ended up powerless. Once the tripartite had taken a decision, all the Chamber had to do was approve it. The Chamber no longer took the decisions. To a certain extent, the power of the Chamber and the elected representatives was diverted with respect to tripartite decisions. In European policy, this dialogue was much more theoretical. It was a dialogue that had to take place, but its direct influence on the final decision-making was much, much smaller. So it wasn’t the same direct influence on how to make a policy work in Europe as at national level.

**[Elena Danescu]** From 1994 to 1999, you were Vice-Chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs, another area which is close to your heart. What were the major issues that you were faced with during this time?

**[Vivane Reding]** Once again, I arrived in a committee that had no say, because there was no real basis for the common security policy or citizenship in the treaties. They were mentioned, but there was no basis to turn them into an actual policy. So what did the MEPs do at that time? They imagined what it could be like. I was extremely lucky to have been in this parliamentary committee full of great minds across the spectrum, from the Greens to the right wing. We put our heads together and imagined what an interior policy, an internal security policy, a policy on rights and a justice policy could be like. It was very interesting. In this parliamentary committee we actually prepared what I would go on to do later as Justice Commissioner, because it was only the Lisbon Treaty which implemented the ideas that this parliamentary committee, in which I participated, came up with in theory. It was very amusing, we had come full circle. I was one of those who came up with the policy, then I was the first to be able to implement it during my last five years at the European Commission and as the first Commissioner for Justice and Citizenship with real powers after the Lisbon Treaty.

## **5. At the European Commission: 1999–2014**

**[Elena Danescu]** Talking of the European Commission, in 1999, you were appointed as European Commissioner responsible for Education, Culture, Youth, Media and Sport. How were you appointed as the Luxembourg Member of the European Commission and what did this appointment represent for Luxembourg?

**[Vivane Reding]** You know what had happened just before. There was a real hiatus in European politics because the European Parliament forced the Santer Commission to resign. The European Parliament really asserted its power. It was a very big deal. I was at the European Parliament, so I experienced this drama when Parliament broke up the Santer Commission and

held a vote of no confidence against it, which pushed my friend, Jacques Santer, to tender the resignation of his Commission. It was extremely hard, extremely difficult, but it was part of the history of the European Parliament. It was the first time that the directly elected Parliament could show that it was boss. The second time was when Jean-Claude Juncker was elected, which made a nice revenge story, in fact. Parliament asserted its power twice, once negatively and once positively with a Luxembourgish leader.

So I arrived after Jacques Santer in a new Commission which was very weak, which was afraid of Parliament and its power and in which I played a key role, not necessarily in my areas, which were soft power areas, but insofar as I was able to make a connection between the European Parliament and the Commission. The European Commission's administration was absolutely horrified by Parliament. Parliament was demonised and the Commission was afraid of it. I tried to re-build bridges, because I knew Parliament, I had a responsibility as a Member of the Commission and so I tried to build these bridges. It was slow and took a long time. Parliament had asserted itself; it wouldn't let itself be pushed around ever again, it had taken power and the Commission would have to deal with it. But it was a long and difficult learning process, especially for the administration.

**[Elena Danescu]** At the European Commission, you worked with Romano Prodi, who was President at the time. How would you describe his personality and working method?

**[Vivane Reding]** First of all, Romano Prodi is Italian, which means that he is a very open man who is a real European. Italians are generally very European-minded, and Romano Prodi is no exception. He's a teacher, so he has a very thoughtful approach. He's not someone who gets stuck in right away, but someone who thinks about the theory before taking action. He often reaches good theoretical conclusions but has trouble convincing those around him, or governments, to follow him.

I'll give you a very specific example: when Prodi saw the difficulties associated with the full enlargement, the incorporation of all of those Eastern countries, he said it was necessary to develop a new neighbourhood policy, to bring these people and these political structures with us, and he called this approach 'everything but the institutions'. Bring them into the single market, the structural funds, the regional funds, an agricultural policy, whatever you like, but not into the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers or the European Commission, to avoid putting an extra burden on these institutions. Today, we can see that he wasn't wrong and that we should perhaps create a new, much more concise and stronger neighbourhood policy than in the past, based on Prodi's model.

During the Prodi Commission, I had some issues that I knew quite well, and I knew that my chances of making progress on them were minimal. I therefore needed a great deal of imagination to move forward. Together with the ministers, I broke the deadlock of the Bologna system, which was completely moribund. We brought the system back to life with the Bachelor, Master and recognition of educational qualifications. At the same time, based on the Erasmus programme, I created Erasmus+, which first and foremost opens up Erasmus worldwide. It's not just an exchange between European students and universities, but an exchange, a marriage between European universities and universities in different parts of the world. I'm laying the groundwork for creating a European Master's — that's the Luxembourger in me! — whereby at least three universities from three different countries offer a joint Master's programme. The students and teaching staff go from one university to the other. Always with this cross-border dimension, but in an organised structure. So, that's one of the things that I accomplished. I

carried out a major reform of the 'Television Without Frontiers' Directive, which I turned into an 'Audiovisual Without Frontiers' Directive by including the internet before it even existed. Once again, it was a question of how to innovate, how to make sure that Europe moves forward.

I also strengthened the MEDIA programme to ensure the survival of the European film industry. When I took charge of this issue, the European film industry was in dire straits. I'm very proud to say that I nevertheless managed to restore the European film industry's confidence by bringing together the culture ministers and film-makers on a joint project, something which had never been done before, a joint project with film-makers. The rest is history. The film-makers regained confidence and this led them to start making great European films once again, moving forward, innovating. We can see the result today: the European film industry is at the pinnacle of success. In fact, it's interesting as the film-makers called me back to Cannes this year, in light of all I had done in the past, to help them with what they needed to do for the future, because they are currently under attack by new media which run the risk of jeopardising copyright and no longer remunerating the European film industry. That would put paid to new European films. They called for my help so many years later because of this vision of a strong European creation: we have to write our own story, our own stories, in their diversity. That's incredibly important. And I also ... for example my colleague Mario Monti helped me, because state support schemes for films weren't very logical, so Mario Monti and I worked together to ensure that they would remain logical and that we would make these exceptions to state aid systems to support cultural creation.

I also accomplished something else that was never on the agenda: sport. Sport was never a European policy, but I turned it into one. I worked with FIFA and UEFA on a new version of the legislation on youth transfer rights. I'm sure you can well imagine that FIFA didn't want to negotiate. UEFA wasn't too keen on the idea either. Once again, with the help of Mario Monti, we came up with a European law that we imposed on UEFA and FIFA. So we really innovated during this time in quite an interesting way.

**[Elena Danescu]** You opened up new horizons in European culture and the current and future forms of European culture, not to mention in education, including sport. As a media and culture expert, I'd now like to ask you to cast an eye on a Luxembourgish project that you referred to earlier, i.e. the satellite project, which was one of Pierre Werner's visionary initiatives. What are your views on this project and how is the Luxembourgish language continuing to establish itself in audiovisual production and in cultural production in general?

**[Vivane Reding]** They are two completely different things. The *Société Européenne des Satellites* is an industrial company which has managed to become a global company specialising in the private use of an instrument initially intended for the army. Satellites weren't developed for TV or anything else, but for the army. And yet Luxembourg really knew how to use this niche and turn it into a global business. In my subsequent policies, I always tried to put the satellite issue on the agenda. For example, in terms of high-speed access coverage, I don't understand why we should concentrate exclusively on telecoms instead of satellites, because the latter could provide access. I've always argued for much greater access to satellites in Europe than at present in our general policies. We use satellites for global coverage but not enough for European coverage, especially when we think of our rural and mountainous areas and our islands. That's one thing.

Luxembourg's film industry actually experienced a tremendous boom when we created the Film Fund, invested in the European film industry and tried to attract co-productions to our country.

Thanks to this, we managed to develop a whole host of professions that are essential for film creation: cameramen, those who do the lighting, the colours, everything that revolves around the film industry. We now have 750 film industry specialists living in Luxembourg, so we have really managed to create something significant. At the same time, also thanks to the film support schemes that we granted, we managed to create a Luxembourg film industry, something which didn't even exist beforehand. This gives our little country a sense of importance, because there are Luxembourgers telling Luxembourgish stories in Luxembourgish about our society, our language, the way we live together, but also our history and our future. It's an extremely important element and I see it as a success story. We really managed to achieve something great in this field.

**[Elena Danescu]** From 2004 to 2014, José Manuel Barroso was President of the European Commission. Could you please tell us about him and his working methods? My second question is linked to the first: what differences did you notice in the way the Commission operated in comparison with the previous presidency under Romano Prodi?

**[Vivane Reding]** José Manuel Barroso is a completely different character. He's an Atlanticist who looks very closely towards the US, the UK. He's a former prime minister who has a much more intergovernmental perspective than many of his members of the Commission, who are a lot less intergovernmental, such as me, for instance. So José Manuel Barroso played a role in starting this return to power of the nations. He didn't always manage to push it through because he had quite strong opposition within his Commission among those who wanted it to be a more Community-oriented, less intergovernmental Commission. But José Manuel felt most comfortable with the prime ministers.

**[Elena Danescu]** In September 2010, the Commission criticised France's failure to transpose the 2004 directive on the free movement of citizens. I'm referring here to the situation of the Roma, which drew your attention in particular. Your departments analysed the Ministry of the Interior's circular which targeted these people in particular and arranged for them to be sent back to their countries of origin. On 29 September, the College of Commissioners debated whether to institute infringement proceedings and eventually decided to allow France extra time to rectify these criticised texts. With due regard to the confidentiality of College debates, could you nevertheless tell us which factors resulted in granting a reprieve as opposed to instigating a litigation procedure?

**[Vivane Reding]** I'll start by responding very quickly to your last question, because it is a simply technical matter. I'll get back to the crux of the matter afterwards. If a state is brought before the Court and does not comply, we always try to change the law of the country in question which contradicts the European law. In this case, the French changed their law, so we no longer needed to bring France before the Court of Justice.

Now, getting to the bottom of the problem. I was the first Commissioner ... it was the second period of the Barroso Commission. The Lisbon Treaty was in place. I became the first Commissioner with legal authority over justice policy, values policy and citizenship policy. The Lisbon Treaty granted this power to the Commission, and it was extremely important for me to lay the groundwork of this policy, because it was different from before. Previously, the Commission didn't have any say in these policies, then suddenly it was granted power but no one knew it. We had to affirm this power. I did so because I became Commissioner under the Spanish Presidency, and the Spanish continued to act as though the Commission didn't exist with regard to justice, and they were the ones who took the lead. I said 'stop', the Commission



was the body which made the proposals. We were at daggers drawn. I won, and from that time on, the Commission took the initiative in matters of justice, too. Each time I had to say, 'The Lisbon Treaty exists, the government no longer has jurisdiction, the Commission has jurisdiction now. I no longer accept what the governments put onto the table for me. I am putting a counter-proposal from the Commission on the table and that's what we're going to discuss.' So it was a real fight to make the ministers understand that there was a new treaty. No one had read this treaty. They acted as though it was a continuation of the old treaties. So that was one thing. I had to assert myself at institutional level to show that the Commission proposes and the Council and Parliament dispose under the codecision procedure. But it's no longer the Council of Ministers which makes proposals.

Secondly, the values are no longer those declared, but those which are based on laws. There are always Member States which don't do what they are supposed to. Every day, each week, the Commission steps in to bring them back into line, so that they will change their legislation. But in this case it was different. It was a government which deliberately took a regulatory initiative that was completely inconsistent not only with European laws but also the European values of free movement and non-discrimination of European citizens. In France at the time, the Roma people were being sent back home. Everyone had their own problems with the Roma, it wasn't easy at all, but going as far as to send back entire convoys, that was overstepping the mark. Given my experience of France, I knew that France found it a bit hard to accept European laws and to get told off. So I said, 'If I do it normally, I'll never manage. I'll have to do it spectacularly.' That's the time, if you recall, when I put on a red jacket, went to a midday press conference and said, 'Enough is enough', to the French President. The French and their President saw this as a major insult, 'Who does she think she is?' The whole world heard my 'Enough is enough.' What's going on? Then everyone became aware that there was a problem.

The problem was that the government's directive completely contradicted the European law on free movement and non-discrimination. So in the end, the clash prompted the French Government to change the French law which had incorrectly transposed the directive on free movement. While I was at it, I analysed what the other countries had done. Twelve Member States had incorrectly transposed the European law into national law. They all had to make amendments. But in my role as a politician, I understood that this went beyond a simple question of legislation being incorrectly applied, that it was a matter of substance. And if I didn't establish my authority on matters of substance as first Justice Commissioner with the power to enforce the rules, I would have been lost.

I did it again several times afterwards. In Romania, I challenged the Romanian Government when it wanted to dismantle the Superior Court of Justice. All I had to do at that time was challenge them and they complied, because they had seen what I had done with Sarkozy. They thought, 'We'd rather do it straight away, that way the Commissioner will be quiet.' I did it with Orban, who tried to get rid of all the judges who weren't members of his political party and simply pension them off on a massive scale, which was an extremely serious threat to the independence of the judiciary. He refused to cooperate, so I had to bring Hungary before the European Court of Justice. I was in the right. The ECJ took its decision very quickly, I think it was out of solidarity between the judges of the European Court and the national judges in Hungary. I had to take very drastic action several times to show what was at stake, to show what the law was and make it clear that the Commission wouldn't play that kind of game and wasn't flexible about it. Certain governments frowned upon it and tried to get rid of me, requested my resignation, but without success. Barroso stood his ground.



**[Elena Danescu]** In tricky situations such as the one you just mentioned, how does an EU Commissioner discuss matters with the rest of the College?

**[Vivane Reding]** The story is rather ... Sarkozy ... I didn't discuss it for long, I used my prerogative as Commissioner to do it. So I communicated. It was more communication than anything else. Afterwards, of course, the negotiations with France so that it would change its law were conducted together with my colleagues. But the communication style that I used was very personal. I'm glad I did it. If I had asked for permission, I never would have been given it. But I understood that I had to storm in there to make myself heard.

**[Elena Danescu]** Does the President of the Commission have a strong influence on decision-making?

**[Vivane Reding]** Yes, absolutely. The President is the *primus inter pares*. He can influence the Commissioners, try and stop them or decide not to support them, so he can wield a great deal of power. If he had wanted me to stop after the proceedings against France, he could have made me, even if that would have impeded European law, but we could have let it lie. He chose to support me and not to let it lie. France changed its law. As for whether it changed its practices, that's another question. But at least the law was amended and those who felt they had been mistreated could approach the French courts, which wasn't the case beforehand.

**[Elena Danescu]** You were Commissioner when the Commission welcomed the Commissioners from the new Member States. Do you remember the first meeting of the College of the Commission of 25?

**[Vivane Reding]** I particularly remember the arrival of the first Commissioners, for example, because at the beginning, some of them were referred to as 'trainee Commissioners', as opposed to fully fledged Commissioners. My 'trainee' was Dalia Grybauskaitė, who is now President of Lithuania. She wasn't at all pleased about being a trainee. I met her with a big bunch of flowers and held a reception with our team, with Luxembourgish sparkling wine and cakes. She got the message. Later on, she invited me and my team to sample some Lithuanian drinks and cakes that they had prepared, to ensure consistency between our teams.

It wasn't easy at the beginning, because we Central Europeans had been in Europe forever. We had our benchmarks, we knew how things worked, we knew how to negotiate with people who had different ideas. All those countries which came from dictatorships had never experienced democracy; they didn't know how to negotiate with others with equal respect. So they had to learn. They did it very quickly, I think. They learned on the job. A real sense of solidarity was forged between the old and new members, and as the Commissioners were very intelligent, they soon found their position, but of course in discussions it was clear that they had no reference points to the past. A Luxembourger always knows why we have a single currency: because there's a history of creating this single currency in Luxembourg that dates back many decades. How can you expect someone from a Soviet dictatorship to understand the creation of common policies by democracies cooperating together equally? They didn't have those benchmarks. They had to create their own ones and learn about the specific nature of European politics.

**[Elena Danescu]** In your opinion, what positive and/or negative consequences did this enlargement have on the functioning of the Commission and the spirit of collegiality in particular?

**[Vivane Reding]** The collegiality worked well. However, in my opinion the cooperation with the Council didn't work as well, especially as democracy isn't something that can be learned in two or three years. The structures, the institutions ... If we don't have an independent judiciary, for example, it's hard to create one quickly. It sometimes takes one or two generations, it has to evolve over time. The way you negotiate, the way you respect politicians who have a different opinion to yours in countries which have only known dictatorships ... it's all a bit complicated. There's the one who's in charge and the other one who has no say. Respecting the opposition in a democracy, for example, is something that takes time to learn and can't be imposed as such. We've seen that this learning process has been painful at times, and there are some countries which still haven't reached a democratic balance in their homelands. At the Commission, it works well because the individuals have the intelligence to adapt. In the Member States, it's a slow, laborious and difficult process, but the next generation will get there.

**[Elena Danescu]** During your terms of office at the Commission, you put forward several key legislative proposals, including the proposed directive on quotas in the boards of non-listed companies. People often regret the fact that the Commission no longer really exercises its power to propose legislation and that, above all, it formalises the projects called for by the European Council. What do you think about this perception? What proportion of genuinely new projects come into being in the Commission's departments?

**[Vivane Reding]** If I may, I'd like to talk about women on boards of directors later on. I would, however, like to point out that this perception that the Council puts forward proposals as opposed to the Commission is completely wrong. I have spoken to you now about three terms as an EU Commissioner, and in the majority of cases, I made my proposals by myself and tried to persuade the Council afterwards. I told you about the fight on my hands over a new policy, the justice policy, because it was proposed by the Council before the Lisbon Treaty and then by the Commission after the Lisbon Treaty; I had to enforce it because in this case too, the governments wanted to continue with the old system. It all depends on a Commissioner's assertiveness.

I developed policies that I presented to Parliament and to the Council, and they were *my* policies. During those 15 years, they were always *my* policies. As you can imagine, no one told me to bolster the European film industry during my first term. As you can imagine, no one told me to fight with FIFA and UEFA on player transfers. These were initiatives that I took myself. As you can imagine, no one told me to hold the first European Year of Languages. I took this initiative precisely because I understood the importance of multilingualism in Europe. As you can imagine, I had to go against the governments when creating the common emergency number in Europe, 112, because they didn't want to apply it across the board. So I took a huge number of initiatives. The most recent one that I recall was when we saw all these diversions ... dismantling a superior court of justice, failing to respect the independence of the judiciary, etc., so I decided to create the Justice Scoreboard. I also created a procedure for intervening if a state fails to respect the fundamental values of the European Union. I'm sure you can well imagine that I did this against the governments' wishes. They didn't want it.

So it depends on a Commissioner's personality. Commissioners are legally entitled to make proposals. If they want to be the governments' poodle, then they are free to do so. But *this* female politician always refused to do that, she always made her own proposals. I didn't turn down any good ideas that came from the Council or from Parliament, I took up these ideas, not only from the Council but also from Parliament. But most of the ideas that I brought to the table were 100 % Viviane Reding. My allies were first and foremost at the European Parliament,

because a Commissioner who knows how to work well can easily find an ally in the European Parliament, given that its main purpose is to serve citizens and develop policies for the citizens. Well, in this case it ended up with a Commissioner who put forward a citizenship policy. As a general rule in everything that I did, I first sought my allies in the European Parliament, then the Council followed.

**[Elena Danescu]** It depends in particular on the Commissioner's vision and personality.

**[Vivane Reding]** It also depends — excuse me for interrupting, but there's another very important factor — on who is in charge of the Commissioner. Is the Commission's administration in charge of the Commissioner or is the Commissioner in charge him or herself?

**[Elena Danescu]** I think it depends on the Commissioner's own free will.

**[Vivane Reding]** There are some Commissioners who leave matters to the Commission's administration. The administration will work with the governments first and foremost. Commissioners who manage their administration as opposed to letting themselves be managed by their administration will make proposals themselves and not allow themselves to be managed indirectly by the Council. It all boils down to a Commissioner's personality, strength and vision.

**[Elena Danescu]** Have you experienced tensions such as these in your work?

**[Vivane Reding]** Always, because administrations stay and Commissioners come and go. There are always such tensions because the administrations are very strong and there are excellent officials working in the Commission's administration who often know their files better than the Commissioners themselves. They are there more often, that's all they do. You really have to have a firm hand to tell a strong administration full of great minds that the Commissioner is the one who takes the initiatives and that the administration is there to help ensure that these initiatives are accepted. You have to be assertive. Oh yes. I had to assert myself three times.

**[Elena Danescu]** And you succeeded brilliantly. Europe owes you a great deal. The Lisbon Treaty led to the application of the ordinary legislative procedure. It would appear that over two-thirds of the texts that are adopted are done so at the end of their first reading. The ability of the Council, Parliament and the Commission to achieve such a result is largely down to the development of informal 'trialogues' between representatives of these three institutions. Could you tell us how these trialogues work and how important they are for negotiations to run smoothly?

**[Vivane Reding]** It's very simple. The Commission proposes, and the two legislators — the Council and Parliament — dispose. So I put forward a proposal. The Council of Ministers deals with it, Parliament deals with it. Parliament conducts a first reading and gives its opinion on the proposal. The Council also conducts its first reading. At that point, there are three texts on the table. There's the Commission's proposal, the Council's amended version of the Commission's text and Parliament's amended version of the Commission's text. Both Parliament and the Council have to come to an agreement. They do this through the presidency (and this is another instance where the rotating presidency plays a key role), the rapporteur from the European Parliament and the Commissioner who put forward the initiative. They sit in a closed room and negotiate the details and what will remain in the text for hours, weeks or even months. Then, once they've negotiated the details and agreed on a joint text, the Council of Ministers and

Parliament have to either approve or reject it. If the two institutions — the lawmakers — approve the text, it becomes a European directive or regulation. There you go, it works all the time. It's nothing spectacular but that's how real legislation is made.

**[Elena Danescu]** You experienced the euro zone crisis within the Commission, an institution which was one of the main participants in devising an exit strategy from this crisis. This so-called 'austerity' strategy came under fire in Europe and abroad. Were there any doubts or divides within the College of Commissioners on the soundness of the strategy?

**[Viviane Reding]** First of all, there was no such thing as an austerity strategy, that was purely an invention of certain governments and the media. There was an exit strategy from the crisis. Let's not forget that this crisis came about in 2008 because of a banking failure that subsequently undermined the European banking system, and certain governments had to rescue their banks. The best example of this is in Ireland where there was no Irish budget crisis or state crisis, but a banking crisis because the banks quite simply failed to function properly. They had too many non-productive commitments, too much debt. They were on the brink of collapsing, which would have made the entire financial system collapse. The states saved their banks, which then caused a budget crisis, so we had to rebalance all of that. We did it by means of a joint method. We needed the Central Bank, as we needed to help banks and give them money that was no longer in the public coffers. We needed the IMF, i.e. the global system to help bail us out, and the Commission. The three organisations worked together on the basis of a political decision to make them work together. The decisions were taken unanimously by the finance ministers. No decision was taken by any troika in the world, but each decision was unanimously adopted by the finance ministers. People tend to forget that.

Secondly, we saw just how vulnerable our banks are, so we urgently needed to create the provisions that were missing in Maastricht. The Maastricht Treaty provided for the creation of a currency, not an economic and financial system. Pierre Werner had provided for it in his texts from 1970. If we had listened to him in Maastricht, we wouldn't have made the mistake — we didn't think it was a mistake, it was a political decision not to include the economic and financial aspect and to create just the currency without this aspect. However, a common currency can't function without a shared finance minister. We understood that afterwards. So we had to create a banking union in a panic. We managed to do it, but not on the basis of European treaties because, amongst other things, there was one country that didn't want to: the UK. So, we had to create this banking union in an intergovernmental system. We didn't want this, because we wanted a European system, not an intergovernmental one, but it wasn't possible any other way. Intergovernmental treaties were drawn up to create today's banking system, the banking union. We wrote in these treaties that from 2018 these intergovernmental decisions must be communitised, i.e. incorporated into a Community system, hence the debate that we are holding right now on possibly turning the euro zone into a banking zone in the short term, more strongly connected than the rest of the European Union and with an opening for non-euro zone countries. So that a country such as Poland, for example, which hasn't adopted the euro, would be able to belong to the banking union without even being in the euro zone. That's the ongoing debate right now, so you see the importance of what's happening in the UK right now. I hope that the British will take a decision as soon as possible so that we can move forward, so that we know whether we are in it with them or without them, because it's not very nice wanting to make reforms but having at least one Member State which is everywhere yet nowhere, preventing us from making clear progress.

**[Elena Danescu]** Talking of which, what is your opinion on the United Kingdom's future in the

European Union?

**[Vivane Reding]** It's up to the UK to choose, but it must decide; it can't take the EU hostage because it is playing internal party politics. I don't like what Cameron is saying at all, because his declarations are not based on reality. He wants to be more right-wing than the anti-Europeans in his own party and other parties such as UKIP. The free movement of European citizens is one of the EU's fundamental values, as is non-discrimination. You can't be a member of the European Union and fail to respect that. Furthermore, it has been proven by many studies that citizens who go to another country to work don't go there simply to claim unwarranted benefits. If I look at the breakdown of welfare benefits in the UK, 85% go to British citizens, 15% to third-country nationals, most of whom are from the former colonies, and just 5% to European citizens. Where is the problem? What's more, the country can take an internal decision to reorganise the benefits system to stop welfare abuse. What it can't do is discriminate. And it doesn't even need to because the problem is not those who go, for example, from Poland to the UK to work, because they contribute more to the economy than what they get back from it. They pay more in taxes than what they receive in welfare benefits. This has been well proven by all analysts. This crass party politics is doing ever such a lot of damage to the whole of Europe and it's high time that it stopped.

**[Elena Danescu]** How would you sum up your personal achievements as Vice-President of the European Commission? What are you most proud of?

**[Vivane Reding]** It's hard to say because I was very innovative in most of the issues that I took care of. I think that generally speaking I helped Europe to move forward. I drove forward the Europe of cinema and the Europe of students, I furthered research by creating research platforms on which companies, universities and start-ups could work together to drive science forward. I reformed the world of telecoms, I cut roaming fees, against the governments' wishes in fact, to name but one initiative that really caught the governments unaware. No one wanted that, but we enforced it. As Justice Commissioner I showed that justice is a European policy. I completely innovated in many measures which have consolidated justice policy for the future: for example, which court is competent for spouses of different nationalities when they divorce? Which law applies to Europeans who live in another Member State at the time of an inheritance? So a complete reform of inheritance law. Last week, the European Parliament voted in favour of my new bankruptcy law to give viable business a second chance.

I've done so many things which have radically reformed the way in which we do European law. I really hope that by doing so, I have laid the foundation so that the next generation can keep building a much stronger Europe, a Europe which listens to its citizens, a Europe which gives an answer. And I also did something that had never been done before: I went to meet the people. I'm referring of course to the famous 'Citizens' Dialogues'. We did 51 of them when I was Commissioner, to change politics a bit, because before it was — and in fact it's still the case in the Member States — a politician turns up, gives a long speech, two people are allowed to ask a question and then he or she leaves to rapturous applause from a cheering crowd. No. Citizens' Dialogues are when politicians are there to answer citizens' questions. No more speeches, but questions and answers. It has completely transformed the way we will do politics in future. I'm really pleased to see that the new Commission is continuing along this path.

## 6. Luxembourg and the European integration process



**[Elena Danescu]** I'd like you to give us your opinion on various questions in connection with Luxembourg's role in European integration. Thanks to its politicians, Luxembourg has established itself as a European mediator, due in particular to its policy of presence, its even-handedness and its 'discreet availability' as Pierre Werner put it. A real 'Luxembourg lineage of mediators' has become established in European politics, first inaugurated by Joseph Bech, continued by Pierre Werner, then by Gaston Thorn, Jacques Santer and Jean-Claude Juncker, and you are a brilliant example of it yourself. In your opinion, what are the main reasons why Luxembourg — and its politicians — has become established as a European mediator and resolved a good number of crises, driving Europe forward?

**[Vivane Reding]** Well, you see, for Luxembourg it's a question of survival. We have experienced it several times in our history. We are too small and surrounded by countries that are too big with completely different cultures. Historical enemies, with us always in the middle. We were the first to be crushed. So we created this Europe to some extent out of necessity and a sense of survival. Then we saw that, well, the Germans are bigger than us, and the French too, and almost everyone is bigger than us, so it's difficult for us to assert ourselves. But if we handle a matter well, we do a favour here and there, we act as interpreter between different parties because they have completely different cultures, in the end we are taken seriously. We can have an influence that extends well beyond the narrow confines of our borders, and that's what European politicians from Luxembourg understood from the outset. Entire generations have seen how their elders operate, have understood the message, how things work, and tried to do the same thing. Although Luxembourg is a small country, it is a major player in European politics because it does favours for others. Because it evidently doesn't act in its own interests all of the time. And because it doesn't constantly try to force its point of view on others, as certain big players do.

As long as Luxembourg continues along those lines — oh, there will be ups and downs, we saw this with Luxleaks, with other problems — but if we stick to those lines and if we put our hearts into this European integration because we want to, we can and we need to, then we will win. We will win in the long term. There's also the fact that we have always been able to provide Europe with new talent, people who are capable of leading this Europe for the benefit of Europe. It often seems as if brilliant politicians in big countries come up with purely national policies. European politicians from Luxembourg have always devised European policies, and that's the secret. A national policy can only be a success if we create a European policy. That's the principle of Luxembourgers and it's a principle which we have dealt with well, but which will become increasingly difficult to deal with because Europe has become much bigger than the Europe of the founding fathers, but it's still valid today. So Luxembourg should always follow this path forged by the founding fathers — there were no 'mothers' at the time, there were only men behind the creation of Europe. Luxembourg really played its cards right and was able to give an important, vital, significant helping hand so that Europe could be created. And I'm sure there will be a new generation to do this in future, too.

**[Elena Danescu]** Luxembourg's European policy is well known for its continuity and also for its consensual approach. Is this really still the case?

**[Vivane Reding]** Do you mean in Luxembourg itself?

**[Elena Danescu]** Yes, in Luxembourg itself.



**[Vivane Reding]** I'm starting to have serious doubts when I look at today's policy. After 35 years in politics, I can safely say that you should never pass judgement on a very short period and a very specific problem. You can only judge a policy on the basis of continuity. There are always accidents, always things that aren't right. The main question is whether we achieve a balance again after an accident. Yes or no? Luxembourg has had the particular advantage of being able to co-exist between political parties without there being any hatred or rejection, with great respect for the role, for each other's difficulties. Live and let live, that's the way we ... And let's respect the institutions, the opposition, those who have a different opinion, let's make sure that this country lives in a balanced way, with the diversity on its territory; no one can impose on others indefinitely, it's just not possible. We should always try to reach a consensus, whatever the problem. That's the secret to Luxembourg's balanced development, and I hope it will also be the secret to Luxembourg's future development.

**[Elena Danescu]** Mrs Reding, our interview, the experiences that you have been so kind as to share with us, is drawing to a close. I would like to give you the last word by asking you: what is your vision of Europe?

**[Vivane Reding]** It's very, very clear to me: the United States of Europe. I know that it's not really in vogue any more, but I'm not saying it to be in vogue. I'm simply saying it for the good of our citizens. And when I refer to the United States of Europe, I don't mean a copy of the United States of America, because we aren't a melting pot. We won't have just one language, just one culture, but we will safeguard our cultural diversity, which is one of our greatest assets. We must use it to build a *sui generis* system. I also believe that a small country such as Luxembourg and a minority language such as Luxembourgish can only survive in a federation within which each entity is respected and a common policy is forged.

When I look at how the world is developing, globalisation is a fact of life and Europe's influence is declining from one decade to the next. Our grandchildren will have to stand up to the influence of China and India. If they don't have a strong Europe, they will not be able to measure up. In future, I would like young Europeans to be able to decide for themselves what will be their values, their way of living, eating and singing together. And that will only be possible if the continent is united in its diversity. That's why we need to create, we need to move towards the United States of Europe, because it already exists in a way. We need to bolster this model and make it very strong. We need to add policies that don't yet exist, such as a common defence policy. We'll get there. We have to create it because we need it if we are to be able to exist as a very strong continent. There are lots of innovations which can be added to our past achievements by our future generations. The most important thing is for each generation to build its own part of the house, and I think that our generation really built a major part of this shared house. Now it's up to future generations to complete the building.

**[Elena Danescu]** Thank you very much once again for sharing your experiences with us. Thank you.

**[Vivane Reding]** Thank you.