Transcription of the interview with Mark Eyskens (Brussels, 30 March and 30 April 2010)

Caption: Transcription of the interview with Mark Eyskens, Belgian Minister for Finance from 1980 to 1981, Prime Minister in 1981, Minister for Economic Affairs from 1981 to 1985 and Minister for External Relations from 1989 to 1992, carried out by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE) on 30 March and 30 April 2010 in the studios of the Council of the European Union in Brussels. The interview, conducted by Étienne Deschamps, Researcher at the CVCE, particularly focuses on the following subjects: the origins of his commitment to Europe; the Ecofin Council in the 1980s; Pierre Werner, Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, François Mitterrand, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Margaret Thatcher; the upheavals in Eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall; the Assembly of the Council of Europe; the Charter of Paris for a New Europe (CSCE, 1990); the negotiations for the Treaty of Maastricht on European Union; the institutional development of the European Union; policy and organisation in Belgium in the area of European affairs; the role of Belgium and the other small states in the EU; an assessment of the European integration process.

Source: Interview de Mark Eyskens / MARK EYSKENS, Étienne Deschamps.- Bruxelles: CVCE [Prod.], 30.03.-30.04.2010. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (03:31:46, Couleur, Son original).

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1. The origins of a commitment to Europe

[Étienne Deschamps] Minister of State, I would like to talk to you today about the highlights of your political career in the field of European integration. You held many posts, at the highest level, and through them you were able to play an active part in the process of uniting Europe and discussing the future of the Community.

We will spend these few hours reviewing those events, which we will organise under a number of major headings. If you don't mind, though, I would very much like to start this interview about your first-hand experiences by going back to the beginning and to your childhood and youth in Leuven. My first question, in fact, is about your family background: as the son of former Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens, you grew up in a family setting which was steeped in politics. Was Europe already on the agenda, if I can put it that way, of the things you talked about, at home, when you were a child, in Leuven?

[Mark Eyskens] Absolutely. But it was Europe, I would say, in a negative sense, a Europe torn apart by the war and what came after the war. I was born in 1933, so I experienced 10 May 1940, in other words the beginning of the Second World War, at least as far as Belgium was concerned. I remember I was sharing a room with my brother. Mum used to come and wake us up every morning to go to school, and on 10 May she came into the room and she was in tears. That's something a child would notice, as you can imagine. So I asked my mother: 'What's the

matter?' and she said to us: 'There's a war.' We didn't know what she meant, and then she added: 'And today you don't have to go to school,' so we thought war was something really attractive. We had to change our tune later.

So I experienced the great exodus, the flight to France, along the roads of France. My father was a Member of Parliament and went where the Belgian Parliament went, to Limoges and to Bordeaux. Then we came back. My father was banned by the Germans from giving any more courses at the university for two years. And my father gave me an important job to do: he stuck a huge map of Europe as far as the Urals up on the walls of our sitting room. And he asked me to listen to the news on the radio and then, using elastic bands, to carefully show the positions of the armies, in other words, especially after Hitler had attacked Russia, the positions of the German army and the Russian army. And it was an extremely fast-moving war, with advances and retreats. And that was how, while I was still quite young, I learned the geography of Russia and, especially, the names of the Russian marshals: Zhukov, Rokossovsky, Chernyakhovsky and all those rather romantic names. And of course I had no idea what it could have been like on the ground. Later on I had the opportunity to go to Russia and visit some of the battlefields. I went to Stalingrad, among other places, and there, of course, it really takes your breath away. You realise what happened ... the carnage, too, the sufferings the people went through.

And after the war, once I became a student, already while I was in senior secondary school but especially at university, I became active in European groups. And a thing which left its mark on me was the speech by the Belgian Minister Paul-Henri Spaak to the United Nations, which was not yet in New York but still in Paris, I think, in 1948, right in the middle of the Cold War, where he said what later became the historical words: 'We are afraid.' We were afraid of Stalin. It was a very fine speech, which I learned by heart. And when I myself became Foreign Minister, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I had to give a speech before the United Nations General Assembly. I turned Spaak's words round and I said: 'We are not afraid any more.' Well, I was almost on the point of saying things had spontaneously come full circle, at any rate there was a strong link between my younger days and what I was able to do later.

[Étienne Deschamps] As a law student at the Catholic University of Leuven, did you keep up — you mentioned European groups — did you keep up with the discussions which, in the early and middle 1950s, were intense as far as European questions were concerned? Actually, if we even go back to the end of the 1940s, your father was closely involved in the implementation of the Marshall Plan for the Belgian economy and then the plan for a European Defence Community, the setting up of the ECSC … Were those things you kept abreast of, when you were at home, did you hear anything about what being said in the discussions, from colleagues of your father's who perhaps came round for meals or who would talk more or less officially about what was at stake for Belgium?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, indeed. At the university, to start with, we had clubs which used to invite the major European politicians of the day to speak. At Leuven I can remember seeing Robert Schuman, Georges Bidault, Paul-Henri Spaak and so on coming to give lectures in the main lecture theatre. But my father also used to have them round to the house sometimes. I went on a trip to Germany with my father, to the Belgian Embassy. At the time it was still in Bonn. The Belgian Ambassador was an extremely dynamic man. He had invited Konrad Adenauer, the Chancellor, and we had a family lunch, my father, my mother, my brother and I, with Konrad Adenauer. It was quite an experience, I must say. 'Der Alte', who had a quite astonishing face, craggy, I would almost say an Indian face.

And on another occasion I was able to shake hands with Winston Churchill, during one of his visits to Brussels. He was the Leader of the Opposition, I think, at the time. He had come to give a very major speech, on the subject of Europe as it happens, in the Grand-Place, and then my father received him. My father was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance. He received him in the Finance Ministry building, in the rue de la Loi, in one of the fine reception rooms upstairs. And my father called me over, and I was able to shake the great man's hand. I have to say that I was a bit disappointed. Churchill looked tired, half-asleep. He had a cigar between his lips (I won't use another word), but it wasn't lit, he was chewing it, and he casually gave me a rather soft handshake and said 'Nice boy,' that was all. But it did leave an impression on me, I must say.

[Étienne Deschamps] It was Churchill who, during the war, had been a model for you …

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, of course, but he was also a man who had an enormous personal influence on how things turned out later, you see. But a man who was very pro-European in his utterances throughout his career, which was somewhat in contrast to the attitude of the British subsequently. He was a very clear-sighted man, of course, he was a man of genius, absolutely, yes.

[Étienne Deschamps] So, once your law studies in Leuven were over, you decided to go to the United States. You won a scholarship for that and in 1956 you left for New York, for Columbia University. Firstly, why did you take that decision and why did you want to go and spend a few months abroad — but not just anywhere abroad: in the United States — being the young man you were at the time? Secondly, did that period you spent a long way away from your own country alter your view, not just of your country, but especially of Europe and the issues which were going to arise, the challenges it was going to have to face?

[Mark Eyskens] Certainly. You said 'a long way away' and, at the time, it really was: you didn't catch a plane, you went by boat. And it took a week. There were no mobile phones and we didn't ring each other up. My father had said to me: 'Ring me if war breaks out but otherwise don't,' and so our contact with our parents was by letter. And there and back, it took a good week at least.

I went to the United States because at Leuven I had read law, economics and philosophy. And as far as economics were concerned, I had come to the conclusion that when it came down to it you did have to go to the United States. All the great economists whose books I had read at Leuven were English-speakers. Already at that time economics was dominated by Keynes and so I wanted to put the finishing touches to my knowledge of economics in the United States. I got a scholarship from the American Hoover Foundation. And I spent 18 months in New York. I still miss it, both New York and to some extent the United States. I try to go there at least once, if not twice, a year, and every time I come from the airport into New York I see the skyline rising up — with the Twin Towers until a few years ago — and I feel very touched. It is a different universe, obviously.

And I have tried to get to the heart of the American riddle. Every civilisation has its riddle which has to be decoded, doesn't it? If you go to Washington, I advise you, if you haven't already done so, to go and see the place where they keep the archives: 'The Archives of the Republic', starting with the Declaration of Independence drawn up by Thomas Jefferson. It's a handwritten text. The preamble to it is extremely striking, because there is a phrase in it which explains a great many things. The aim of American society is 'the pursuit of happiness'. That

phrase says so much. It explains the enthusiasm and drive of American society, together with its shadows. Because, of course, one of its shadows is social Darwinism, ‘the struggle for life’ and ‘the survival of the fittest’: winner takes all and loser goes to the wall, as we say in Belgium. But when I come back to Europe, I sometimes have the feeling that our European model is in a way the opposite of that American philosophy. It isn’t ‘the pursuit of happiness’, it’s ‘the avoidance of unhappiness’, which is also highly valuable. So Europe is a much more protective political and social system, which perhaps also gives it a great deal more warmth. But that also means there is a slower pace in the flexibility, in the art of adapting to circumstances which change so much. There are pros and cons in both models.

What I notice nowadays, as I talk to you, is that under the presidency of Mr Barack Obama , well, the new President seems to take his inspiration to some extent from Europe, in adopting a healthcare reform which is a very European type of reform, including, as it does, a very considerable element of solidarity. It all goes to strengthen my belief that in the 21st century in Europe we are going to have to replace the old Platonic logic, the logic which involves the choice of ‘either / or'', with a kind of logic which is rather more Asian and which you also find in quantum physics, the logic of ‘both / and’. Not the logic of choice any longer, which is painful and arduous, but the logic of adding something extra, of things complementing each other. Well, I increasingly see the United States and Europe as complementing each other, with Europe also trying to unite, and that, I think, is a very positive development and a very interesting one to follow. So, as for me, I have had a ringside seat at everything that has happened in the Atlantic Alliance for at least 50 years. I have in fact gone on being very fond of the United States, but at the same time critical of certain things, though of course it is still a country of immense opportunities. But we have to defend ourselves, we have to fight. So in Belgium too, in Europe, I often say that we also need to fight, but we must at all costs learn to fight without striking any blows. That’s generally where everything starts going haywire. It’s that we fight by striking blows, and then things go to pieces.

[Étienne Deschamps] When you were a student in New York, did you have the feeling … when you met Americans and you told them you came from the ‘old continent’, were they curious, sensitive, interested, concerned or did they, by contrast, see you as someone from a world which was very different, very far away, very …

[Mark Eyskens] To tell you the truth, at that time they were perhaps more interested than they are today because we were, after all, in the middle of the Cold War. And it was Europe which was at stake in the Cold War. There was the Iron Curtain, and from a particular time onwards there was the Berlin Wall. And all that used to worry the Americans. They had their troops in Europe. There was the protection of the nuclear umbrella. Whereas nowadays, with the new international realities, Europe is a bit marginalised. Europe is turning back into what it was: a peninsula attached to the great Eurasian landmass. But you were saying just a moment ago: ‘Were you seen as a foreigner, almost an extra-terrestrial?’ What struck me about the Americans when I used to go there at the end of the 1950s was that they used to say to me: ‘You are from Europe, then you are a Caucasian.’ That was what they were taught at school. They were taught that all Europeans originated in the Caucasus. The Pamir mountains, that seems to have been the origin of the tribe, of a tribe which emigrated westward and ended up living in Europe. So they were taught at school that Europeans are Caucasians: ‘You are a Caucasian.’ And now that the Caucasus is often front-page news in our newspapers, I say to myself yes, perhaps they will make a link between us and the inhabitants of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and so on.

[Étienne Deschamps] And when you put them right and explained to them that you came from

Belgium, in other words a long way to the West of the European continent?

[Mark Eyskens] Well, then you used to get these rather absurd reactions, people asking: 'So do you have any department stores, do you have refrigerators?' They used to think we were really living in an underdeveloped continent because over there they still had those films and those photos of destruction from the Second World War.

[Étienne Deschamps] You began your studies in Leuven and continued them in the United States. Then you came back to Leuven at the end of the 1950s and started a career as an academic, and gradually you also went into politics. In your political activities, in your public activities, what were the first contacts you had with the European or Community question, if I can put it that way?

[Mark Eyskens] Well, first of all, it was inside my party, the Christian Democrats, which was, as it still is, in fact, a very, very pro-European, not to say Europeanist, party, with a strong belief in federalism. So yes, I was a member of various study groups. I took part in many discussions and I studied everything which came out about Europe: books which were more or less scholarly, but also publications which were purely political in character. And I was also teaching a course on economics at the university, with European aspects which were completely unavoidable. For example, I had to explain to my students why a customs union which was becoming an economic community would sooner or later have to turn itself into a monetary union. And then the time came when Mr Werner, the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, launched the Werner Plan, which was a first attempt at a monetary union. So somewhere or other I did see those parallels between what I was teaching and what I was studying and the almost day-to-day politics of Europe. So there was almost a spontaneous convergence.

2. The first European issues

[Étienne Deschamps] In the course of your long political career, you were, of course, often involved in, not to say confronted by, European questions. A question which is perhaps rather marginal, but which is possibly very revealing, nevertheless, of certain issues, is that when you became Minister for Development Cooperation, you were of course responsible for bilateral aid between Belgium and a whole range of developing countries. Claude Cheysson was the European Commissioner at the time. Can you tell me how, specifically, bilateral aid and Community aid work together in the case of a country like Belgium which, as we know, historically has interests in Africa, Central Africa in this case? It is something people know little about, how in practical terms you go about playing both sides of the fence while retaining your identity.

[Mark Eyskens] It's a dilemma still facing any Cooperation Minister today, in the sense that in your national Parliament often, and even within your government, it is felt that bilateral cooperation is a useful tool for promoting the interests of your country … psychological, diplomatic, humanitarian but also economic interests. And therein, sometimes, lies the rub, because you then have the feeling that development aid serves interests which hardly dare speak their name: promoting investment and so on. So the European aspect and the possibility of giving some development aid through Europe has the advantage that that you can to some extent denationalise cooperation. That was why I used to be very much in favour of

thoroughgoing cooperation with the European Commission.

I do actually remember, before I became Minister for Cooperation (it was the time when Mr Harmel was at Foreign Affairs), I was still teaching at Leuven. Mr Harmel asked me to give some thought to a system of development aid which would be almost automatic, being tied to economic growth. So I devised a mechanism whereby surplus growth above a certain threshold — I think I set it at 3 % — would automatically be converted into development aid so as to reach the famous figure of 0.7 %. And when I became Minister for Development Cooperation, I drew up a plan, a programme which I called the 'plan for growth through solidarity'. I took the same idea up again and put it to my European colleagues. Well, you know, they thought it was too generous and too mechanical as well. But I was approached at the time by the Austrian Chancellor, Mr Kreisky, who had read the plan somewhere and invited me to meet him. I remember very well: I was invited to Vienna by him to discuss the plan. He had a certain moral authority. At the time, Austria wasn't yet a member of the European Union, it was more or less a neutral, non-aligned country, so he found it very interesting. Well, the plan was never approved or carried out. But I think it was an interesting idea, and later on I had a chance, by doing some field work, by going to a great many developing countries, of seeing with my own eyes how tragic the underdevelopment was. And what the causes of it were, causes for which we also bore some responsibility.

And I've always been very much in favour of extremely intense, structured cooperation, with our former colonies as well. I did go to the Congo quite often and, each time, I was struck by the stock of goodwill which Belgium had managed to keep in the hearts of the Congolese people. Those countries have often fallen victim firstly to a struggle for power, among central African countries, for example, they have fallen victim to certain setbacks, fallen victim to certain abuses, too, and that's all very upsetting, but we must never break off with them; it takes patience, of course.

[Étienne Deschamps] When it comes to these issues confronting Europe's development aid policy, did you feel there were any differences of approach and sensitivity as between countries which, like Belgium, had actually had historical links with central Africa and other European countries which, for obvious historical reasons, do not have that, shall we say, African-oriented or colonial tradition?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, and there's a paradox there too. Take the Scandinavian countries, which never had any colonies in Africa and ran an extremely generous cooperation policy, being the first ones to reach the 0.7 % figure. And which also defended the cause of developing countries very eloquently, and very credibly, while the countries with a colonial past were often a bit reluctant, often had to straddle the fence, and sometimes, too, had great difficulties with the former colonies, including Belgium. The rebellion in Lumumba's time and so on, it was certainly no joyride at the time. But you're right, countries which at first sight were much more distant showed they were more firmly committed than the other countries, yes.

[Étienne Deschamps] And what do you put that attitude down to? How do you account for that?

[Mark Eyskens] I think they took a far more objective approach. We still had ties, economic ties, private interests, connections we had to keep up, each side was familiar with the other … 'Oh, don't do that, otherwise this, that and the other will happen …' And that kind of reasoning doesn't seem to come into it when you're a Scandinavian from another planet …

[Étienne Deschamps] So you were Minister for Finance, you even chaired the Ecofin Council. Do you remember the difficulties associated in the late 1970s and the early 1980s with setting up the European Monetary System and the creation — which finally came to nothing — of a European Monetary Fund?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, in fact as far back as the Benelux Treaty, which was drafted in London, I think, in 1944, there had been plans for establishing a monetary union between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. It remained a dead letter.

And then there was the Werner Plan, which was of course an important venture in the realm of ideas. So in universities we used to study the Werner Plan. And I remember at my university, in Leuven, from time to time they held symposiums, they brought in the greatest monetary union experts, including a future Nobel Prize winner, Professor Mundell, who explained it to us: 'Well, monetary union is a very fine thing and is in the nature of things because, as long as you have national currencies, you will have extremely fluctuating exchange rates, and every movement in an exchange rate distorts competition, because, if the rate drops, you get a competitive advantage, you import inflation, and, if the rate goes up, you will provoke a move towards deflation and hamper your exports. So you have to try to introduce a single currency, but,' Professor Mundell added, 'that's all very well but it's just letter A in an alphabet beginning with at least three letters which you have to put into effect. You have to make B and C work. And B and C involve, alongside and in addition to your monetary union, creating as thorough a political union as possible, at least as regards economic governance, budgetary governance and a single fiscal and parafiscal policy.' These words were written and spoken 30 years ago, and in Europe today, with the economic crisis and the crisis centred on Greece, you have to admit that Mr Mundell was right. And that monetary union is vulnerable as long as there isn't real political union. So I always took the view that you had to push for political union. And the Maastricht Treaty was an attempt at that, though we didn't go far enough; there was the abortive draft Constitution, the Lisbon Treaty, so we did create instruments, but instruments which are inadequate even today.

[Étienne Deschamps] And all the ideas, all the recommendations and suggestions you can find both in the Werner Plan and then in explanations like the ones from Professor Mundell, are ideas which are … which in some sense were embedded in you, and successfully guided you in the steps you took when you were Finance Minister or Prime Minister?

[Mark Eyskens] Certainly. There was also a Belgian professor who emigrated to America, Mr Triffin, who had a very great influence. I remember a conclusive meeting, where important choices had to be made, as happens sometimes in politics, a very important meeting. It was in Rome during an Italian Presidency. Mr Andreotti was President of the Council and he always arrived a bit late, five or ten minutes, the conventional quarter of an hour late, and people used to whisper: 'He's a good Catholic, he goes to Mass every morning and it's the Mass which makes him late for the Council' … Anyway, there was an absolutely vital question on the agenda, monetary union. And there were two drafts: there was the draft by Jacques Delors, which included a great many of Mr Werner's ideas, and a counter-draft by the British, put forward at the time by John Major, who was Minister for Finance for a very short space of time. He later became Prime Minister. So most of the countries went along with Jacques Delors' idea and were in favour of introducing a single currency. Abolishing the national currencies, that is, and replacing them with the euro. And the British were saying: 'No, no, no, not a single currency but a common currency.' It was something very different. It meant — at the time there

were 12 of us in the Union — that we would keep the 12 national currencies and tack on a European currency, and let the best one win.

So I had to explain, as an economist and having also, of course, drawn certain conclusions from the writings of Mr Mundell and Mr Triffin, that it would be extremely dangerous to follow the British proposal, that there was also a very well-known law in economics which goes back to the time of Elizabeth I of England: 'Bad money drives out good money' and that, very evidently, adding the euro to the 12 national currencies would have caused complete chaos in Europe.

So in the end we adopted the Delors proposal, for a single currency. But Mr Major said: 'I'm not going along with this,' and we gave him what later on, in the Maastricht Treaty, became an opt-out, so he didn't take part. Which is still the case today, but since then monetary union has actually been a great success, I would say. Because there were after all quite a few contraindications. But apart from the most recent upheavals, the most recent difficulties, monetary union has for ten years been something which is absolutely unique, indeed.

[Étienne Deschamps] When it came setting up, to implementing certain European Community decisions, you did have some difficult moments and painful experiences. To take just one: in 1981, with the Davignon Plan, there was a major economic crisis in the iron and steel industry. Do you remember the circumstances in which that plan had to be set up in Belgium and, in particular, how it was received and what the practical challenges for the Belgian economy were as regards that steel crisis?

[Mark Eyskens] Mr Davignon was extremely brave and intelligent because, to start with, his plan was seen as being rather against the spirit, if not the letter, of the European treaties, because it was, after all, rather protectionist. But as far as Belgium was concerned, we were very much supporters of the Davignon Plan because, as we saw it, it was an argument which carried weight.

In the Martens V government at the time, I was Minister for Economic Affairs with responsibility for the rationalisation of the Belgian iron and steel industry. It was a highly explosive problem that caused tensions between the different Belgian communities, because it was mainly the iron and steel industry in Wallonia which was hit by the economic crisis and a structural crisis. When I took on the economic affairs portfolio, there were 40 000 workers at Cockerill-Sambre, and when I left there were, I think, 9 000 of them left. A very heavy cut, in other words, and also a very heavy cut in production. The overproduction and overcapacity there were colossal. So the Davignon Plan was a huge, huge help to us. Actually in Belgium we also called in a foreign expert, so as to have someone unaffected by local and national influences, we called in Mr Gandois, a major French industrialist, who set up a rationalisation plan and also negotiated with the unions. To cut a long story short, it was extremely painful, but it the end it was a great success. We managed to avoid going bankrupt and, in the end, the steel industry in Wallonia got back on its feet. We were also able to do useful things for Sidmar, the steel industry in the north of the country, including action we took in very close touch with the Luxembourg steel industry.

And, as I have described in one of my books recently, it was quite a poignant human experience for me. Obviously, the rationalisation was hard for the unions. There were quite a lot of demonstrations here in the streets of Brussels and, I think, in 1983 or '84, there was an enormous demonstration with thousands and thousands of steelworkers who marched through

the streets of Brussels, it all got out of hand and they broke some windows, overturned cars, there was some violence and a lot of damage. The union leader was Mr Gillon, a towering great man, a tough nut, a hard-liner, who had the reputation of being a hard-nosed, convinced Marxist. So he wanted to come and see me with a delegation after the incidents here in the streets of Brussels, in the evening. I said: 'No, no delegation, but I'll see him on his own.' My office was in a tower block, on the 11th floor. Half an hour later, he came up in the lift and came into my office. I said: 'Take a seat in front of me,' and I started telling him his behaviour was disgraceful, that he'd lost control of his troops, that for a union leader it was completely outrageous, etc.… Well … Anyway, on my desk I had the steel industry files, a pile of papers and files. And I could see that the man was completely defeated, and he said to me: 'Minister, you have paper, the steel industry files, on your desk, with statistics, graphs and conclusions. And the conclusion is that there has to be a rationalisation and workers have to be made redundant. But as for me,' he said, 'I'm their leader, and in a way their father confessor. I know all those families and I know who's going to have to go. And I see the suffering of those people.' And then this Gillon, who had the reputation of being a tough nut, started crying in front of me. The tears were running down his cheeks. I got up, I was very moved myself, I gave him a few friendly pats on the shoulder and we parted company. He said to me: 'Well, there you are, I'm defending the men and you're defending a particular way of thinking.' And to tell you the truth, we were both doing our duty. My responsibility was to rationalise the industry, which was also in the interests of the workers in the long term. But he, right there and then, was faced with having to cope with this human tragedy. So it was something which really did make a great impression on me.

[Étienne Deschamps] We've talked about your personal commitment, we've talked about Belgium, we've talked about Europe, of course, but let us plough that furrow, that European furrow, a bit deeper. On many occasions, as Foreign Minister, you were involved in European Political Cooperation, EPC. How effective do you think those diplomatic consultations between Member States were, long before the CFSP was set up?

[Mark Eyskens] They were relatively effective. We were in intergovernmental mode, of course. There was no other way of doing it. I think that that type of cooperation, which took a lot of its inspiration from the Davignon report, was in a way the antechamber to what we nowadays call 'enhanced cooperation', which has been put into the treaty, into the successive treaties. No, I am positive, and there again Belgium played a major part, if only through the person of Mr Davignon, who of course later became the Vice-President of the European Commission. Yes.

3. At the Ecofin Council in the 1980s

[Étienne Deschamps] We've briefly mentioned monetary questions. As we have said, you took part in many Ecofin Council meetings, which used — though perhaps not so much nowadays — which often used to be presented as a club, distinguishing it from other EU Council meetings. Do you side with that interpretation, and how do you account for it?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, indeed. It was a club, the keepers of the purse strings. We often used to invite the chairmen of the central banks along too. We got on very well, it was very enjoyable too. There were also the informal Council meetings, the Gymnich meetings, where we often

dealt with extremely important problems, but without too many staff or too many reporters present. And it was extremely useful, because, in our own countries, we were the people responsible for public finances and therefore for budgetary balance, or at least a certain budgetary orthodoxy.

So there we all were, round the table. To begin with, there were nine of us, then 12 and so on. But we often used to complain to a foreign colleague about what was going on in our own government, where the other ministers were almost by nature big spenders: 'I spend, therefore I am,' that's the rather bogus Cartesian principle which prevails in politics. If you don't spend, you don't get noticed. Whereas those of us in the Finance Ministries had, of course, to try to make sure there was a degree of financial rigour. So we used to say to each other: 'How are we going to go about this, how can we prevent too much money being spent?' And there was a great deal of solidarity between Finance Ministers.

Then at the time, it was before monetary union, we did regularly have these 'currency realignments' — that was a euphemism, it just meant devaluation, on the one hand, or upward revaluation, on the other. The Deutschmark, generally speaking, was a currency which gained in value. The others used to lose value. Belgium was somewhere between the two. On many occasions with Luxembourg, in fact, we tried to follow Germany, if only partially. I remember one time I was on mission in Czechoslovakia, under the Communist regime, and there was yet again a problem on the foreign exchange markets. And there had to be a realignment. At the time I was President of the European Council. So I had to telephone all my fellow Finance Ministers from Prague — there weren't all that many of them; from Germany there was Stoltenberg, in France it was Mr Balladur, and John Major — to try to sort out the realignment while at the same time talking rates and figures. Well, I was sure that my telephone was being tapped, under a Communist regime … and that they could have misused it to organise speculation. Well, there you are, it's a risk you have to take. But after the single currency was established, of course, calm was restored to the markets and that was a major step forward.

[Étienne Deschamps] Was that club-like atmosphere of rather informal connivance not something you felt in other Councils, not to mention the European Council of Heads of State or Government?

[Mark Eyskens] There is a certain collegial feeling there too, of course. But no, at the European Council, at summits, the Prime Ministers and Heads of State — at the time, Foreign Ministers were also invited, which no longer happens nowadays, and that will sooner or later cause problems — we did of course often sense that there were national interests and election-related issues at stake. If a Head of State had an important election coming up soon, you did feel that that affected his or her behaviour, which is still the case today. Well, what do you expect? In a democracy politics depends on the voters. So yes, there is sometimes that sort of tension between the ethics of one's convictions and the ethics of one's responsibilities. You are answerable to your parliament and your voters, on the one hand, but, on the other, you have to have convictions and try, of course, to stay more or less true to them. It does give rise to tension, of course.

4. On Pierre Werner, Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, François Mitterrand, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Margaret Thatcher

[Étienne Deschamps] You've talked to us about the Werner Plan and the influence in terms of a plan and ideas, of gestation, which it had on European monetary policy and on your work on monetary issues when you were at the Finance Ministry. Did you meet Pierre Werner personally and, if so, what do you remember about him, at any rate as far as his work for Europe is concerned?

[Mark Eyskens] I met him quite often. He was an extraordinarily friendly man, of great integrity. He was the very definition of a wise man. And then, as you know, when a Belgian Prime Minister meets a Prime Minister of Luxembourg, we, as Belgians, always feel frustrated. Because a Belgian Prime Minister can lose his position as Head of Government every Thursday afternoon in a vote in Parliament. So with us it's always extremely shaky and provisional. You form your government and it can fall apart three weeks later or a fortnight later.

Whereas the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, well, that is stability personified. He is there for 10 years, 15 years, 20 years. So he is someone who has racked up a lot of experience. He knows everybody, especially in Europe. For him, European ministers are a bit like family. He knows how their minds work, and sometimes he also knows about the personal side of their lives. And between ministers and sometimes prime ministers too, when they've been in power for a long time, it creates a certain degree of intimacy. The wives get together, they go on excursions together while the ministers are working round the table at a Council of Ministers meeting. And all that is extremely positive, it all helps too. So Werner had very great influence because of his experience and his wisdom. Yes, I saw him a lot, as well as Jacques Santer too, later, and still later, Jean-Claude Juncker — a bit less.

I remember an annoying little incident which took place during the devaluation of the Belgian franc. It was after the time of my government. I had also been thinking of devaluing, but at the time the National Bank of Belgium was very much against it. So Mr Martens had succeeded me and, with the help of the International Monetary Fund, they concocted a complete devaluation plan, but in the strictest secrecy. We were in on it, but we couldn't say anything at a time when we were in a monetary union with Luxembourg. So the idea was not to say anything to the Luxembourgers. Well, it so happened that at that moment there was an accident involving a military plane. A plane which, I think, had knocked a pylon over somewhere in Luxembourg … well, at any rate there was an incident. And I had to telephone Mr Werner. So I telephoned him. We talked about the incident, and he said: 'Are you well?' Everybody knew the Belgian franc was under heavy pressure. And he said to me: 'You're not thinking of devaluing the franc, are you?' I said: 'My dear colleague, not as far as I know.' I couldn't say anything. Well, 48 hours later the news came out. The Belgian franc was devalued by 8 % to 9 %. Which wasn't very nice for Luxembourg. So the Luxembourgers did think we'd rather led them by the nose. I don't think Mr Werner took it badly as far as I was concerned, but there was a coolness between the Luxembourg government and the Belgian government at the time, yes. Luckily it all came right in the end.

[Étienne Deschamps] You've talked about the importance of not going back as regards the unity of the continent of Europe, which represented a fundamental break with its previous history on the global scale. It's a belief firmly rooted in the thinking of many European leaders. You've met and had dealings with a huge number of Heads of State and charismatic figures. We obviously can't talk about all those personalities — there would be too many of them. But I

would like it if together we could pick out a few of them who indisputably left a strong impression on your memory, whether positive or negative. Suppose we start with François Mitterrand? What are your memories of him, once again in the area of European policy?

[Mark Eyskens] A man of great intelligence combined with great sensitivity. Despite the slightly imperial demeanour, he was at heart a romantic, a sentimental man. There was a bit of the poet and bit of the philosopher in him. He was a very charming man. I've met other French Presidents who would look down at you from their position of grandeur and vouchsafe you a kind word, but you were fully aware it was all just on the surface. Not with Mitterrand. I did actually have the opportunity to have conversations with him on several occasions. One day I was seated next to him at a dinner, and we talked about literature and philosophy. Then I saw him again two months later and he said to me: 'Ah yes, I remember, we talked about …' It was very striking that a man who obviously met thousands of people had remembered a conversation.

And he played an absolutely historic role with his friend Helmut Kohl. It was also quite touching and poignant to see those two … well, hereditary enemies, after all — already at the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century, with the tens of millions of corpses piled up between France and Germany. It was after the fall of the Berlin Wall, at a summit in Strasbourg during a French Presidency. After the plenary meeting, we all retired to the Château of the Rohan family, the Palais Rohan, for an intimate dinner. And we were looking forward, of course, to the possibility of a reunification of the two Germanies. Our officials had drawn up a text for us which they passed round to us during the dessert, a text which was not very long and which said that the European Economic Community — that was what we were still called at the time — would support and promote the reuniting of the German people. Well, I could see Mrs Thatcher frowning, she was well made-up but it was still obvious. I could see the Dutch leader, Mr Lubbers it was at the time, also looking irritated. Mrs Thatcher said: 'What does that mean, the reuniting of the German people? German-speakers? But there are German-speakers in Austria, in Switzerland, in Luxembourg, in Belgium … I've heard that already: before the War'. The discourse of Hitler … Well, that cast a pall over the proceedings and Helmut Kohl, who was on a chair a little in front of me — he was a kind of Himalayan mountain, you remember — he started shaking with rage. He came out with something in German, saying: 'What can you be thinking of? I suffered under Nazism myself. There's obviously no question of any German expansion. My whole life long, I will defend a European Germany and fight against a German Europe. And if the two Germanies are reunited, I am prepared to recognise the Oder–Neisse line.' But the tension was still rising, and then Mitterrand, who is a fine tactician, said: 'Right, I suggest we have a pause in the proceedings.' He withdrew with Helmut Kohl for half or three quarters of an hour. Then they came back into the room saying: 'Right, we have a historic compromise to put before you.' Mitterrand went on: 'We are going to support the reunification of the two Germanies diplomatically, politically, economically, budget-wise. It's a huge effort, but it really is an extremely historic effort and we will do it in a spirit of loyalty to Helmut Kohl's Germany.' Then Mitterrand said, 'So there you are, but our friend Helmut Kohl is also going to make a gesture.' Then Helmut Kohl also took the floor, looking very moved, and said: 'Thank you. I'm ready to play the European integration game fully too. So I agree to abolish the Deutschmark and replace it with a European currency, so that the Bundesbank becomes a branch of a European Bank which is to be set up. To put it briefly, I am in support of a monetary union.' Whereas the President of the Bundesbank at the time, Karl Otto Pöhl, was radically opposed to monetary union. So that evening we put the two component parts of the future Maastricht Treaty on the table: on the one hand, reunification of the two Germanies, with of course a step towards political union, and on the other, monetary union. And so the conclusion

from Strasbourg was to convene an intergovernmental conference where we spent two years negotiating up to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and after the Treaty of Rome that was, I think, and still is the most important treaty in the history of European integration.

[Étienne Deschamps] And how did the the political representatives of Europe who were there feel about and react to that somewhat unexpected proposal for a French–German compromise at that summit in Strasbourg? How did Margaret Thatcher react, how did you yourself feel at that unexpected moment?

[Mark Eyskens] Well, the Rome Council came after the meeting in Maastricht. So we set to work, including the technicians, our officials, on monetary union. And then there was that British counter-proposal. We were proposing a single currency, they were proposing a common currency. And in the end the majority opted for the single currency. And the British stayed outside the monetary union, which nowadays, of course, is a bit of an incongruity. Later on, and of course I'm talking now about the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, I defended, and still defend — only now the circumstances are complicated by the economic crisis — I defend the position that at a certain time we should have had the courage to allow Britain onto the Board of the European Central Bank, into the Eurogroup, by letting the British bring the pound in. And we would have made a euro–pound monetary zone. Because I can understand why the British want to keep the pound, given how involved and interlocked they are with the Commonwealth, which does after all represent some 50 countries. So by adding together the euro zone, the pound zone and the Commonwealth, we would have made a very large monetary zone with enormous influence worldwide which could have been a negotiating partner respected by both the Americans and the Chinese. But that's another story.

[Étienne Deschamps] And why did that idea … did you sense that your interlocutors weren't especially interested in that kind of idea or …

[Mark Eyskens] To start with, there was an obvious weakness in my suggestion, which is that that kind of arrangement only works if there is enough discipline and enough cooperation between the two central banks, the European and the British ones, to maintain a sufficiently stable relationship between the two exchange rates. I'm not in favour of reinstating a tunnel or a snake, as that feeds speculation. But there are ways of doing that de facto and in a rather confidential way. But there does ultimately need to be serious discipline, and also we on the mainland do, of course, regard Britain as a relatively unreliable partner which always gives preference to its Commonwealth (which I can actually understand) and also to its historical alliance with the United States. So there's Britain with one foot in Europe and one foot on the other side of the Atlantic. That is an ambiguity which Britain will sooner or later have to put a stop to, that's clear.

[Étienne Deschamps] So François Mitterrand is one of the major figures you had the opportunity to meet and appreciate. Would you say the same of Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, Hans-Dietrich Genscher?

[Mark Eyskens] Ah, Genscher is also an extremely sharp, very clever man. He was in power for a very long time. I saw him again recently. He is still on good form. Yes, he played a very important part in the '4+2' negotiations. There was the time when he negotiated the reunification of the two Germanies, with the Soviet Union and the United States too, of course. And Genscher's way of thinking was actually dictated by a certain understanding of the Russian soul and he also knew East Germany very well, as he was born in East Germany, which is

certainly an asset.

Schmidt, of course, was before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He was an intellectual, a good economist. He got on very well with Giscard d'Estaing. They had of course also worked on monetary union before monetary integration with the snake, the tunnel and so on. What's more, at first sight he was quite a hard man, who was also capable of defending himself. But he was an artist, too, an excellent pianist. And I like Mr Schmidt a lot, but I knew Helmut Kohl better.

Then there was Mrs Thatcher, who was an enormously skilled debater, trained in the British manner at one of the ancient universities, you see, whereas there were ministers or prime ministers at those meetings who allowed themselves to be fed notes drafted by their officials. They read them out, which makes the debates pretty dull. As for her, she used to speak off the cuff — as Mitterrand did too, in fact — and she had an extremely firm grasp of reasoning in the sense that she used always to repeat the same arguments, formulated differently and with a touch of English seasoning, which gives a humorous flavour — she also had a sense of humour. While Helmut Schmidt was a true intellectual, Mrs Thatcher was a politician who knew what the right points to make, according to her, were and always used to bring them out. She didn't go for subtlety: 'I want my money back' was one of her historic phrases. But fundamentally she was a likeable woman. I was often next to her because, at the time, we were seated in alphabetical order. There was 'United Kingdom' with a 'U' and then Belgium, and as the table was oval, Belgium was the first country and the United Kingdom was the last. So there was Mrs Thatcher, and I was often next to her. Her hair was always immaculately styled. She had a personal hairdresser who used to go everywhere with her. She wore a nice scent, and she was an elegant woman. And I remember, the first time I was sitting next to her, I had brought a file with me, which I opened. And before the meeting, they let the cameramen in and they started filming everywhere … dozens of cameramen. And she nudged me with her elbow: 'Close your files! Close your files!' — meaning that they were copying everything. I was a little naive, perhaps, but she was always on the alert.

[Étienne Deschamps] You've talked about Strasbourg; were you a witness to any stand-offs between the British, the Germans and the French?

[Mark Eyskens] Oh certainly, yes, yes. She wouldn't let go; there would be deadlock on an issue, yes. In the end there had to be private meetings. Or it had to be put off to the next meeting. Yes, indeed, absolutely, yes, yes, she was very tough.

5. The upheavals in Eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall

[Mark Eyskens] But if I can add one more person to the gallery of portraits, someone who played an absolutely leading role, but who was not from the European Union, was of course the Soviet — later Russian — President Gorbachev, who was so different from his predecessors Brezhnev and Chernenko, Andropov and Khrushchev. All those people were immensely sad people, who sometimes had a rather Frankenstein look, who were frightening, who were also violent sometimes in the things they said. There was Khrushchev at the United Nations General Assembly banging on the desk in front of him with his shoe.

Whereas Gorbachev was a man who smiled, who was endearing. He had that birthmark on his

forehead, a bit like Latin America, a rather strange piece of cartography … Lively eyes, an endearing wife too, Raissa, who is dead now, unfortunately. So it was a wholly different atmosphere. And I've often said, and I've written it in a book as well, that Gorbachev is a completely paradoxical figure, unique in history, because he managed to achieve the exact opposite of what he wanted to achieve. His intention was to democratise the Communist party from the inside, with different points of view, while maintaining the single party. It didn't work, there was glasnost and nine months later the Communist Party fell apart. He wanted to keep the Soviet Union while giving greater autonomy to the republics — actually the provinces. That didn't work: the Soviet Union broke apart. So he achieved the opposite of what he wanted, and, thanks to that, he shot straight into world history.

[Étienne Deschamps] And although we can be very happy about it, why did he so completely fail, in the end, to carry out his plans, his original ambitions?

[Mark Eyskens] Because he underestimated how fast things move. Once the provinces had been given a bit of autonomy, especially in the Soviet Union, given the different ethnicities, there was a drive for separatism which took hold. And there is another factor which Gorbachev revealed quite recently in an interview for, I think, French television, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, where he said that after perestroika and glasnost were announced, the Americans were still extremely suspicious and also thought Gorbachev was a stop-gap. In fact there was an attempted coup against Gorbachev in August 1990. The Americans asked Saudi Arabia to step up oil production considerably, and got them to do it, so that the price of a barrel of oil collapsed. Well, for Gorbachev, conducting that new economic policy by means of perestroika was based on wealth guaranteed by high enough oil prices. And for him the oil price collapse was a financial disaster. So he was unable to carry out his economic policy, partly because of that, as he said on television. No one knows if that is strictly true, but it is a factor that I do think should be added. At any rate, it was largely thanks to Gorbachev that we managed to end the Cold War without bloodshed, except accidentally in a few countries such as Romania. But that was a colossal, peaceful revolution and one which was totally unexpected.

[Étienne Deschamps] As Foreign Minister, you had the opportunity of experiencing those unique historic events at close quarters, of course. So much so that at the end of November 1989, a few days after the Wall came down, you went to Berlin at the invitation of Oskar Fischer. What do you remember of that visit and the welcome you were given in the extraordinary circumstances of the time?

[Mark Eyskens] Indeed, and there again a visit marked by a great many unexpected paradoxes. I had been to Berlin several times, I had even been in Berlin as a student before the Wall was built. You used to take the metro from Kurfürstendamm in the west and arrive at Stalinallee on the other side. Stalinallee was the only avenue which had been rebuilt; all the rest was still in ruins. And after that I often used to go and look at the Wall, and look, too, at the crosses which had been planted in memory of people who had got themselves killed by the East German police. I had arranged that official trip to East Berlin a long time in advance and, as luck would have it, I was expected in East Berlin ten days after the opening of the Berlin Wall. I was welcomed by my colleague from the East, Oskar Fischer, received by Egon Krenz, the new president, by Modrow, who was the new Prime Minister. And I had also asked to be allowed to call on the opposition Neues Forum, and Gerlach, who was the leader of the liberals. To my astonishment, everyone I spoke to, from the communists to the liberals or the Christian democrats with de Maizière, said the same thing to me: 'We are going to tone down and soften

the authoritarian regime, we are going to pursue a new internal policy and we are going to reach an understanding with the Federal Republic of Germany,' in other words with the West, and then they would ask me how to go about it. And their idea was to set up a kind of Benelux between West Germany and East Germany. As for reunification, 'No,' they said to me, 'that's going too far.' Even the liberals, the opposition, Neues Forum said to me: 'No, no, no, in the West they're too much under the influence of the American multinational model, we also want to hold onto our economic system a bit, it works fairly well. We have full employment and so we're staying how we are for the moment, and we'll see what happens. No reunification straight away, that's for sure.' And then there was that mass movement, finally, that 'Wir sind das Volk' people's movement.

[Étienne Deschamps] Do you think they said that to you because they really believed it or just to reassure you?

[Mark Eyskens] No, they really believed it, they really believed it. There were actually some socialist parties in the West which argued for exactly the same position: no rushing into anything. There should be no reunification. All that was needed was a proper understanding between the two countries. And then reunification became unavoidable owing to popular pressure in the East. In Leipzig, every Saturday evening or on Sundays after High Mass — I later visited the Nikolaikirche, which is a splendid church — they put a kind of soles, soles of shoes, into the copper floor to remind everyone that people were basically voting with their feet. And in the end that movement managed to overcome the political resistance. There was that extremely rapid reunification in the end, rather to everyone's amazement.

[Étienne Deschamps] And could you say a few words about the atmosphere in Berlin at the end of November 1989?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, it was an almost indescribable atmosphere. Not only of joy, but for the East Germans it was a miracle, it was something metaphysical. People were weeping. And I was taken there around 20 or 22 November, to the Potsdamer Platz, where there was a breach in the Wall. We were a small Belgian delegation of three or four people. And we were standing looking at that breach, feeling very moved. There was an old German who came up to me and said: 'Ich bin ein Berliner', a reminder of Kennedy's historic words. He said: 'After the war I lived here, in the cellars.' Everything was destroyed, it was the place where the Friedrichstrasse and Hitler's bunker had been. And then he saw that we were actually very taken by what we could see, the opening in the Wall. And he then said to me, pointing at the Wall, in very poor English: 'This is the work of the spirit.' And that greatly struck me, what spirit it was that lay behind that collapse or that erasing of the final scar of the Second World War. And three or four weeks later, I had to go to a CSCE meeting somewhere which was attended by a representative of the Vatican, it was Cardinal Casaroli, who was Secretary of State to the Pope. And we were talking about the fall of the Berlin Wall. And the Cardinal said: 'You know, the fall of the Berlin Wall was the work of the spirit.' Exactly the same words, only with the cardinal it was the result of a degree of occupational bias, of course. With the man in Berlin, it was something which came from the depths of his soul, it really did.

[Étienne Deschamps] During that trip, among other people you met Lothar de Maizière. Before the Wall came down, did the Christian Democrat parties in Western Europe already have any relations, official or otherwise, with their counterparts on the other side of the Wall, if I can put it that way?

[Mark Eyskens] No, not before it came down, no. It was very closed. There were practically no contacts, but once that historic moment came, there were, yes. We rushed at them and said: 'Right, we're going to support you, we have our documentation, we can print magazines, publications, for you. Come to us and see.' We went over to them and de Maizière was a man who inspired confidence and who responded very intelligently, and who was also an artist — he played the viola da gamba. Later on there was something strange, he became the first democratic Prime Minister in the East but people started whispering that he had worked for the Stasi. It was never exactly proved, but that did cast a shadow over him as a figure, indeed.

[Étienne Deschamps] You, of course, followed … you were right in the thick, I would say, of these events which shook Europe and the world. And that was when you floated the idea of a pan-European confederation. What was that about exactly, and, to your mind, how could a pan-European confederation such as that have been compatible, if I can put it that way, with a partnership with the Americans, with the United States?

[Mark Eyskens] The idea arose out of my belief that after the reunification of the two Germanies we would be seeing the Eastern European countries going into a European structure. But putting them straight into the European Community as it then was seemed to me premature. Also, you should remember that the negotiations with Gorbachev and especially his Foreign Minister Shevardnadze were extremely difficult, because the Soviet side were saying to us: 'Right, a reunified Germany. Fine. But as long as it's a neutralised Germany, outside NATO.' They fairly soon agreed to the reunified Germany becoming a member of the European Union, the European Community. As for NATO, they were extremely reluctant. Actually they were propped up in that belief by, shall we say, the Left in Europe, which was saying: 'The Warsaw Pact has been dismantled. Why do we still need to keep NATO?' And that was what got the reaction from America, of course, including President Reagan and then later President Bush, the older Bush. And I can still hear Helmut Kohl, who was extremely brave, because he was being berated by his left-wing opposition as well, saying: 'If the price of reunification is that Germany has to leave NATO, then I prefer there not to be any reunification.' It was an extremely brave attitude, and possibly a suicidal one on the domestic front.

And finally Gorbachev caved in; what I mean is — and he reproached us for it bitterly afterwards — the Americans and the Europeans too promised Gorbachev considerable amounts of financial aid to put his economy back on its feet. Investment, we were going to set up a European bank, etc. to look after the East. Anyway, heaps of structures and proposals to coax him along and in the end he agreed to the reunification of the two Germanies coinciding with the reunified Germany joining NATO, provided no military bases were built in the East. So it all ended in a quite unexpected way for us, for the West, you see. An end to the Cold War, without any bloodshed. A reunified Germany, a reunified Germany joining the European Union as a full member, and a member of NATO. And, what is more, the Soviet Union completely taken apart and split into 13 pieces. The whole thing, just like that. After that, when he was no longer President, Gorbachev invited me to spend a week attending meetings at his research institute in Moscow. When I asked the taxi driver to take me to Gorbachev's institute, the driver said, 'But you mustn't go and see that man. No one has anything to do with him any more. He's a traitor, he sold off the empire. He abandoned all our interests. He's very unpopular in Russia.'

[Étienne Deschamps] Is he still?

[Mark Eyskens] He still is. I think it was about ten years ago or so that he took part in the presidential elections with a little party and he got, I think, 0.5 % of the vote. Nothing at all.

[Étienne Deschamps] No prophet is honoured in his own country.

[Mark Eyskens] No indeed, that's clear. Yes, the more he's applauded here, the more unpopular he becomes in his own country.

[Étienne Deschamps] As we said, you kept a very close watch on all that. You were obviously directly involved. You were very taken up by the events unfolding in the East. Even so, you found time, if I can put it that way, to draft a guidance note of the greatest importance, in the sense that it contained 14 specific measures to be taken to re-establish, or at least reinforce, trust between East and West. Do you remember that paper, the circumstances in which you wrote it and what it contained? And lastly, what effect it had, how it was received?

[Mark Eyskens] Actually, when it came down to it, I felt a certain amount of pity for the Soviet Union. If you tot up all the concessions they made of their own free will or against their will, it was obviously difficult for them to stomach. And what was needed was what we used to call in English confidence-building measures, to build confidence back up on both sides. So I thought it over and came up with 14 points, as you say. They included a security pact between the new Russia and the West, economic and financial aid and scientific exchanges. A whole range of confidence-building measures, to also give a bit more substance to the CSCE, which later became the organisation for cooperation in the West, and a whole range of measures. And I put it all down on paper because Shevardnadze wanted to see me. And something did come of it because later on, when he became President of Georgia, he also invited me. I went and saw him twice for a bit of a chat. So I handed the plan over to Shevardnadze and afterwards he wrote a book, a sort of memoirs, in which he cited my plan — well, 'plan' is a big word. I would observe, though, that out of those 14 points, more than half of them were more or less carried out later on, in the new structures, the approach to the Soviet Union.

But it's still a sensitive issue today, confidence between Russia on the one hand and America and Europe on the other, especially America. But Europe can play an extremely useful part as an intermediary between America and Russia. Russia is once again becoming a great country, it's a country we need, if only in terms of energy supplies, natural gas. It is, though, a country with a great civilisation, a great culture, a highly developed intelligentsia. So it's in all of our interests to get on with Russia. I was also able, at one time, to go and see Sakharov, who was living in a very run-down apartment in Moscow, somewhere on the tenth floor. I had got authorisation, through our Belgian Ambassador, to go and see him. I went up in an extremely rickety lift, then I had to ring the bell at a very dirty little door. An old woman came and opened it. It was his wife. Madame Bonner. That was her maiden name. They were a Jewish couple, Sakharov and his wife. She had a cigarette hanging from her mouth, and she asked me into the apartment, which looked as if there was a house move going on, with crates and boxes everywhere. And finally there he was, in a small room, rather slumped in an armchair. He looked very old although he wasn't all that old. What had an effect on me is that at a certain point he said to me … I had asked him first if he was bugged. He said: 'Yes, probably, but it doesn't really matter: I'm old now and they can't do anything against me any more and I can say what I want and so can you.' So he said: 'Gorbachev is an exceptional man. He's a godsend. It's a window of opportunity, and we must take advantage of it to do business with him. Among other things, you must conclude a major disarmament treaty, especially for nuclear disarmament. And it must be done quickly, because in a year's time he may very well be overthrown by a coup. There's more and more opposition to him.' It was certainly a very important message. And we did it and Sakharov was right, because there was an attempt to

overthrow Gorbachev, as you know, in August 1990.

[Étienne Deschamps] There was, of course, what was going on in the Soviet Union, what was going on Berlin, but little by little the various former Eastern bloc countries too, of course, were affected by that democratic 'contamination', if I can put it that way. Like many Belgians and like many Europeans, you followed virtually live on television what was happening in Bucharest during the Christmas holidays in 1989. We were in effect eyewitnesses of the fall of the Communist system in Romania, a country which you had been to previously. Were you surprised by what was happening in Romania? Were you surprised by the tragic and extremely rapid and violent end of the Ceauşescu couple, on a personal level, and, on a European level, how did the Twelve try, or manage, to set up a common strategy for dealing with the events which could very well have caught them rather on the hop in Eastern Europe?

[Mark Eyskens] I wasn't surprised at what happened in Romania. There's no denying that Ceauşescu was a dictator, but one who pursued an international policy which was somewhat detached from the policy of the Soviet Union. So he was to some extent popular, in inverted commas, in the United States on the principle that 'our enemies' enemies are our friends'. I met Ceauşescu during the communist period at a trade fair where I was to inaugurate a Belgian pavilion. I had a chance to say a few words to him. He was, at first sight, a rather insignificant figure, but someone who had, after all, established an extremely tough, extremely stable dictatorship. The fact that he was executed like that, in a very brutal manner, distressed me. What I mean is that we were inaugurating a new stage in the history of Europe and that summary execution went against the most elementary principles of the rule of law. I have some understanding of violence but, when all's said and done, it was reprehensible.

But what happened in Romania was already the consequence of the fall of the Berlin Wall. You have to go a bit further back in history than the fall of the Berlin Wall, though. There were also profound upheavals in Poland and Hungary. In Poland, as soon as the Polish Pope, Karol Wojtyła, John Paul II, was elected, so from as far back as 1979, 1980, it was he who gave a sort of moral immunity to the Solidarity movement set up by Lech Wałęsa , which had become untouchable. Shevardnadze told me one day about a conversation he'd heard between Brezhnev and the Communist Party ideologist Suslov. The conversation went like this — it was at the start of John Paul II's reign and Lech Wałęsa's movement was growing and growing in Poland, especially as the Pope used to go there from time to time; he used to say masses which were supposedly purely religious but which were basically also political sermons, and he used to get crowds of a million people. So Brezhnev must have asked Suslov at some point: 'Comrade, don't you think things are really going completely off the rails in Warsaw and that we ought to do the same thing in Warsaw as we did with a certain amount of success in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968, in other words send in our tanks, crush the opposition, put the leaders in prison — bring in the weapons.' 'No,' Suslov said, 'Comrade president, don't do that: the interventions in Budapest and Prague were already very unpopular all over the world, and they sparked off serious crises of credibility inside the friendly communist parties in the West.' At the same time as Brezhnev was asking Suslov these questions, the Soviet Union was committed to a war in Afghanistan against the Taliban, who at the time were being supplied with weapons by the Americans. And Suslov said: 'No, the situation will be much too sensitive. We mustn't intervene militarily. We need to be cunning and smart. And I have two pieces of advice for you: 1) We need to set up a dictator in Poland, but one who is a patriot and who is liked by the people. I know one, he's a general who fought with the Red Army during the war, a man called Jaruzelski. He needs to be given full powers. He must dissolve the Solidarity trade union and put Wałęsa in prison. And my second piece of advice for you is this: the Polish Pope must be

eliminated.' And as it happened, three weeks later Jaruzelski was appointed President, etc., in Poland. And a month later, there was the attempt on Pope John Paul II's life in Rome in front of St Peter's Basilica. But it didn't work, it wasn't much use. Jaruzelski was forced to release Lech Wałęsa, and then he had to hold democratic elections for the Senate, though still on the basis of a single party in the Chamber. In the Chamber, the communists had held onto, I think, 99 % of the seats, and in the Senate it was practically the other way round, the democratic parties had a large majority. So in Poland things were already falling apart.

In Hungary, too, with that extraordinary, famous photo of the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Mr Horn, whom I knew well; Gyula Horn, with a huge pair of pincers, cutting the barbed wire between the Hungarian and Austrian borders. And from that moment on there were already — the Berlin Wall collapsed in November but this happened as early as August of the same year — quite a number of Hungarian refugees who went into Austria through that opening in the border between Hungary and Austria. So there was already quite a substantial amount of movement going on, in fact.

[Étienne Deschamps] Seen from Brussels, Paris, London, West Berlin, Copenhagen, Rome, how did the 12 Member States' Foreign Ministers gear up, shall we say, to adopting a common position, to singing from the same song sheet, so that there wouldn't be any misunderstanding about what was going on in the East and would inevitably have an effect on the process of European integration?

[Mark Eyskens] Well, we spent practically the whole time having meetings. And what's more, there was a historic event happening almost every day. It was an absolutely exhausting time, but of course an exciting one. The biggest task we had was to make a success of reuniting the two Germanies, and to make sure Germany became a full member of both the European Union and NATO. And all the rest followed more or less automatically from that. Obviously we had to prevent a civil war, for example, breaking out in Romania. But that was brought under control. What was not brought under control, a bit later, was Yugoslavia — not a war between the communists and, let us say, the capitalists or the Right, but an ethnic war between the Croats, the Serbs, the Bosnians, etc.; the Muslim population and the others. That was a tragedy, of course, and there Europe neglected a great many opportunities, and there we were not up to the job.

[Étienne Deschamps] And why was that? Because it was something no one was expecting to happen? It took everyone by surprise?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, to begin with, and because we hesitated over what strategy to follow. Many countries, including France and the Netherlands — the Netherlands held the Presidency at the time — felt that the unity of Yugoslavia had to be preserved. Tito had done it, by dictatorship, but it was felt that perhaps the provinces should be given a bit more opportunity, but that at any rate there still had to be a single, unitary government, with possibly a rotating presidency. And all that was tried but it immediately failed.

There was Serbia's desire to assert itself. There was Croatia. Then there was the extremely distressing problem in Bosnia, with the Muslims. So as long as Yugoslavia was still a unitary country, what went on there, whatever the consequences and whatever violence there was, was considered, according to the United Nations Charter, to be an internal conflict. And we couldn't intervene. I myself was in favour of international recognition of Serbia and Croatia from the outset. And I was the only person at the table who took that line, together with my Danish

colleague, Mr Ellemann-Jensen. And I considered that if we agreed to the independence and sovereignty of Croatia and Serbia we would have been able to appeal to the United Nations Charter, the Security Council, and get a peacekeeping force in — the Blue Helmets or even, under a mandate from the UN, NATO — which is what happened later. But the other countries were reluctant to act — the Dutch and the French, among others. I remember the reaction from Roland Dumas. When I was defending the independence of Croatia, he passed me a note — which I still have in my papers somewhere — saying: 'Are you also defending independence for Wallonia?' Well, it was his little joke …

[Étienne Deschamps] Well, in those circumstances, there's no harm in that. But why was there that opposition from France? Did France have interests that were different from those of Belgium in that matter or in that part of the world?

[Mark Eyskens] To begin with, France has always, historically, had a certain fondness for Serbia. And they were afraid that recognising one or the other would obviously lead to a break-up, would in the end weaken the position of Serbia. Secondly, certain countries were, of course, always anxious, and still are today, when a country breaks up by giving certain regions autonomy. There are hankerings for independence in certain regions; in Spain, to some extent in Italy, even sometimes in Belgium. They are unfortunate precedents but I think we were right to advocate independence and international recognition for Croatia, which happened fairly quickly. So it was not the United Nations but NATO that intervened and finally there was the bombing etc., the military intervention. But in the end it all settled down. I remember a conversation I had by telephone. Helmut Kohl too eventually came round to the idea that Croatia had to be recognised. We telephoned Mr Tuđman, here, from the Council, and said to him: 'Right, we are prepared to recognise the independence of your country, but you are going to have to hold democratic elections. You will have to disband your secret police and become a democrat.' Tuđman said: 'Yes, yes, yes, of course, of course, of course!' in Croatian. He did it, more or less. It is true that Croatia is now, I think, mature enough to join the European Union, but the matter has been badly handled by Europe because of internal disagreements, there's no doubt about that.

[Étienne Deschamps] Some people have said — tell me if you think this makes sense as an argument or not — some people have said that there was, how can I put it, a greater liking for Croatia, a Catholic country, in our countries than for other parts of Yugoslavia which are more Slavic, Orthodox, use the Cyrillic alphabet, with a civilisation, so to speak, that is more different from our own.

[Mark Eyskens] That's true. There was also the fact that a great many Belgians and European used to take their holidays in Yugoslavia, and always went to the Croatian part. The Dalmatian coast is one of the most attractive coastlines in Europe. That all played a part. There were other factors, and that used to make Germany's attitude, of course, suspect. During the Second World War, Croatia had collaborated disgracefully with the Hitler regime. So that made Germany's attitude rather cautious at the beginning. But in the end, well, it was obvious that Yugoslavia was no longer manageable and that the only way forward was to give all those countries their independence, with the result, of course, that nowadays there is a fragmentation which is probably making some countries, such as Kosovo, completely non-viable.

[Étienne Deschamps] Those disagreements among the Twelve as regards whether or not to recognise the states emerging from a disintegrating Yugoslavia, didn't you feel them when Czechoslovakia itself divided into …

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, indeed, but it was a completely different matter. It was a 'soft' separation, a verbal one, without any violence. What was also painful in Yugoslavia was that, when NATO intervened, the European armies proved to be completely incapable of doing anything. Even the supplying of the troops had to be done by American military aircraft. So Yugoslavia also revealed Europe's military weakness. I myself have often said: 'Europe is an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military earthworm.' We are not a political dwarf any longer these days, of course, but, as far as military matters go, we are still completely negligible, that's plain to see.

6. The Assembly of the Council of Europe

[Étienne Deschamps] You mentioned the WEU Assembly. You were also a member of the consultative Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. As you know, those structures have been fairly heavily criticised for a long time, particularly for their lack of coercive power, of power over the Member States, of being in a sense organisations which are excessively, or solely, intergovernmental. You were very familiar with those parliamentary institutions from the inside; do you share those criticisms or do you tend to defend what they achieved?

[Mark Eyskens] I need to draw a distinction between the Council of Europe and the WEU Parliamentary Assembly, which in any case has been abolished. It no longer exists. We obviously need to go over the history again a bit: WEU was set up after the collapse and failure of the European Defence Community, which was rejected at the time by the French National Assembly, in 1954 I believe. So at the time it was a sort of consolation prize. But one which did nevertheless, I think, demonstrate its usefulness. We used to be in contact with Eurocorps. WEU had excellent contacts with NATO. The WEU Secretary-General was to some extent the colleague, at a less exalted level, of the NATO Secretary General. And we used to discuss foreign policy and military policy. It was certainly instructive and useful. We used to go to Paris and we also sometimes went as a committee, practically every year, to Washington and so on. But actually we had very little direct impact on the decision-makers. And in the end I had to admit that we had the greatest difficulty getting Ministers to come to the WEU Assembly. We used to invite the Defence Ministers, and sometimes the Foreign Ministers. They would send their junior ministers — well, in the end, we were overtaken by events, unfortunately.

The Council of Europe in Strasbourg, on the other hand, is, to begin with, the oldest European institution. Mr Spaak, in his day, was its first President. And I find that it's an extremely interesting assembly because what you have there is the greater Europe. I think there are 46 members now, including associate members such as Russia. Let me tell you a story: I was in Trier, the town where Karl Marx was born, one day. I was due to speak at a conference and, between two sessions, I had two hours to kill. And there was a magnificent exhibition in Trier about the Empire of the Roman Emperor Hadrian. I went into the museum and there in the hall, up on the wall, was an enormous map showing Hadrian's Empire, which started in the West, of course, in Scotland, with Hadrian's Wall, then into central Europe, Eastern Europe up to the borders with Russia, then into the Middle East, the ancient Empire of Alexander the Great as far as India, and then, of course, north Africa. And I said to myself: 'That may be the map of the future. That's Europe 20 years, 30 years, 40 years from now.' I often tell the — slightly fictitious, of course — story of President Thomas Jefferson in 1800, who at the time was President of a Union consisting of 13 states (the former British colonies), and an academic, a

professor, a bit of a dreamer, came to see him and said: 'Mr President, in 200 years' time, your distant successor, a Clinton or a Bush, will be the president of a union of 50 states, including, to the north, the descendants of the Eskimos, Alaska, and, in the south, the descendants of the Indians, New Mexico and Texas,' — territories which at the time were part of Mexico. I imagine Jefferson would have said: 'My friend, you're completely dreaming, that's completely unrealistic.' You're tired. Take a rest.' It's happened, so anything is possible, of course, yes.

[Étienne Deschamps] And to your way of thinking the Council of Europe is the institution which, for the moment, best covers that …

[Mark Eyskens] The Council of Europe represents the greater Europe, though obviously without much power. We concern ourselves mainly, among other things, with culture, but also economic matters. And then there is the Court, of course. The Court is in fact something very important — the Court watches over human rights in the heart of Europe. I do remember quite a few problems with new members, including problems with Russia, with Turkey, the debates about abolishing the death penalty … There, I think, the Council of Europe played an absolutely key role, absolutely key. And then there's election monitoring, that's become a sort of speciality. We do send delegations everywhere. No, it's still a useful institution in my view, yes.

[Étienne Deschamps] Which goes a lot further than being an antechamber to the European Union?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, indeed. Absolutely, yes. And then it's based in Strasbourg, which is after all a great city which also symbolises the great reconciliation around which Europe has been rebuilt. No, it's a fine institution, certainly.

7. The Charter of Paris for a New Europe (CSCE, 1990)

[Étienne Deschamps] In 1990, in the spring of 1990 to be exact, you floated several very specific proposals for the drawing up of a charter for security and cooperation in Europe. Do you remember how those ideas, those proposals, were received and then incorporated into the charter which was adopted in Paris in September 1990?

[Mark Eyskens] We were quite unexpectedly living through the miracle of the end of the Cold War. And we had to re-establish confidence with Russia after the dismantling of the Soviet Union. And then I have to confess that I had a sort of … almost of pity for those former Soviet leaders. For them, it was the collapse of a whole world. Take a man like Gorbachev. He had been brought up in that Communist, Leninist ideology. It was his faith. And it had all disappeared. Everything he had wanted to do in life had eventually turned out to be unworkable and even counter-productive. Well, I also knew that Russia would be facing very serious difficulties, enormous challenges, and that they had to be given confidence. Also we had actually agreed that East Germany, reunited with West Germany, would never be used by NATO as a military base.

But I felt we had to do more. So I had given it some thought. I had even written a small pamphlet, also published in English, at speed, in which I set out a number of confidence-building measures. And I published it. I gave lots of interviews. I talked about it in the

government. And then I talked about it to Mr Shevardnadze, who was very interested. And I noticed later that some of those ideas made some headway, including, at the time, in the CSCE, which later became the OSCE (the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). And then there was that famous conference in Paris where we signed the Paris Charter, which had also been duly drawn up by the diplomats, etc., and where my ideas, which as ideas were not all that original in the sense that there was also a dose of common sense in those proposals, were also taken up by other colleagues who had had the same ideas at the same time. The Paris Charter, ultimately, was in a way the conclusion of the Helsinki process — Helsinki, the treaty to which Mr Harmel had made an absolutely key contribution and which also had an impact on peaceful coexistence and, in the end, the modern ideas which the Soviet side eventually agreed to.

The meeting in Paris made a great impression on me. Firstly because of the ceremony surrounding it, in the French manner. The French, Mitterrand, gave an evening reception for us in the Palace of Versailles. All the Heads of State in the Hall of Mirrors. With no electric light, with just candles and tapers lit, thousands and thousands of them. It was pure Louis XIV. And before that there was a concert in the delightful opera house in the Palace of Versailles.

It was also at the time when Mrs Thatcher was fighting for her political survival. There was a great deal of opposition to her within her own party. She kept leaving the plenary session to make telephone calls. There weren't yet any mobile phones at the time. And that conference, I think, lasted three days. And she made a return trip to London. Douglas Hurd, her Foreign Minister, stayed behind, but she went back to London to defend herself. And there was a vote in her parliamentary group which she only just won, but the observers all thought it was not enough to let her stay on as the leader of her party. So it was the beginning of the end. She came back to Paris for the end of the conference. And a week later, I think it was, she had to resign. So it was also a bit poignant because we had a certain liking for Mrs Thatcher, however obtuse and radical her ideas sometimes were.

And some way into the conference I was given the floor and, when reading the text which we were supposed to approve, I had the idea of proposing that we add a fourth basket to the three existing baskets. Because I was very struck by that conference, it was the white world's conference. It was the northern hemisphere, the Soviet Union, the Soviet empire and the Western world, 'the free world'. And the developing countries were crying out, and rightly so, that the end of the Cold War was going to mean a stepping up of cooperation in the northern hemisphere at the expense of cooperation with the developing countries. So I proposed that we add a fourth basket insisting on the need to develop proper synergy with the Third World countries. Starting not just from the West, but now starting from the West and the East, moving together. And it was felt to be a sound proposal. Gorbachev later sent me his associate Zagladin, who asked me for my text, which I gave him. It was not very much borne out by later developments. Well, everyone went ahead with their own cooperation policy, but I think it was an idea which was both generous and wise.

The Paris Charter is an important document, of course. And I remember Gorbachev's speech where he said: 'So there you are, we're kicking away the ladder, we're drawing the curtains. We are going to share the same human values as you.' He didn't talk about democracy, tolerance, freedom of opinion. It was quite moving, I must say, it really was.

[Étienne Deschamps] And why do you think President Mitterrand made a point of staging that event, that meeting, with such splendour? Did he want to leave his mark on history, in a way, in

terms of the part he played in that process of rapprochement, of détente between East and West following the Cold War period?

[Mark Eyskens] I'm absolutely sure of it. To start with, the French like splendour. And they have the infrastructure for it, they have the legacy of the past, when all's said and done. But Mr Mitterrand himself had played a very major role in the ending of the Cold War. He was, after all, the prime mover behind the drive which eventually led to the Maastricht Treaty. He managed, and managed very well, the enlargement of the Union, so he enjoyed a great deal of prestige at the time. And we were very glad that he hosted us in such a way. In any case, shortly before, we had signed a disarmament agreement with the Soviet Union. With a little alarm signal going off, even so, because the espionage and intelligence services had reported to us that the Russians — who were determined to sign the disarmament treaty whereby part of the conventional armaments, namely the tanks, tens of thousands of tanks, had to be destroyed — that the Russians were simply moving their tanks to the other side, the far side of the Urals, to keep them well hidden in the shadows. So a point came when the Americans pointed the finger: 'Yes but after all they're cheating.' We didn't make too much of a fuss about it, because we knew the tanks in question were already out of date compared to the new American models. We let it go, and we signed the treaty. It's been referred to again now that Mr Obama has just negotiated and signed a new treaty with Russia, in fact. It was in a sense, after all, the start of a momentum which is important: the shift to controlled, reciprocal disarmament.

8. The negotiations on the Treaty of Maastricht on European Union

[Étienne Deschamps] In February 1992, as Foreign Minister, you signed the Maastricht Treaty for Belgium. How do you see the legacy of that treaty 20 years later? With hindsight, what do you see as its value in the history or the development of European integration?

[Mark Eyskens] It's of absolutely fundamental value. Maastricht is the second most important treaty after the Treaty of Rome. The Treaty of Rome, of course, is a founding treaty. The Maastricht Treaty is the treaty which came at exactly the right time following the end of the Cold War. The treaty which contains the historic compromise between enlargement on the one hand and the introduction of the euro and monetary union on the other. It turned out later on, of course, that managing an enlarged Europe is not a simple matter and even maintaining a European Union without sufficient coordination of economic policies is still a sensitive exercise. So the lessons of the Maastricht Treaty need to be drawn.

The attempt was made subsequently by successive treaties, which were much less impressive — Amsterdam, Nice, the Convention which was a major undertaking but one which unfortunately was a partial failure. The Lisbon Treaty came out of it. We need to see now what comes of it. Lisbon, I think, is a useful instrument, but it does have to be used. So everything is open, but since then, obviously, there have been a great many new challenges: a radical globalisation; all the markets have become world markets, global competition has become oligopolistic, offshoring, climate issues.

And the handicaps Europe suffers from, of course: a population which is ageing compared with those of the emerging countries, and the evident fact that Europeans often do not hear very easily or simply refuse to hear and face the facts. In 20 or 30 years' time, there will be between

nine and ten billion of us on this planet, of whom only 5 % will be Europeans. We will therefore have to work and live with 95 % non-Europeans on our little blue planet. It's a huge mental, psychological, economic, scientific and, of course, political challenge. And I think we will indeed have to think about the consequences, the lessons to be learned, and the way Europe is organised, that is obvious. The Lisbon Treaty isn't going to be the last one.

[Étienne Deschamps] Do you remember, when the Maastricht Treaty was being negotiated, the famous black Monday for the Dutch Presidency, which was torn, if I can put it like that, between the supporters of a supranational Europe, including Belgium, perhaps — you can tell us — and those who, by contrast, were more in favour of a strictly intergovernmental Europe? How did the Dutch get out of that diplomatic tight spot?

[Mark Eyskens] It was hard, and it really hurt the Netherlands. I knew my Dutch colleague, Hans van den Broek, very well; he was a friend. I still see him occasionally. We had a very good relationship. Our wives too. But I was still a bit surprised when the Netherlands, who held the presidency, suddenly produced a paper which it presented on that famous Monday and which contained something which for me was, theoretically speaking, magnificent — it was something like the ideal Europe, a truly federal pyramid where the intergovernmental level was reduced to the appropriate size in a process moving towards total disappearance — but the others round the table, especially the large countries, found, of course, that it went a great deal too far and especially that it was completely unexpected and unprepared. So we went round the table asking people to give their views, and it was very negative. I was the only one who to some extent spared Mr van den Broek, saying: 'Well, what you say is very interesting, but maybe it's a bit premature. It's a note which perhaps ought to be brought out again in a few years' time.' But as far as he was concerned, that was a cover-up. And in his own country, in his Parliament, people said he had manoeuvred badly, that he hadn't prepared the ground enough, that he'd been naive. And it's gone down in the annals of Dutch diplomacy as 'black Monday', *de zwarte maandag*, indeed.

[Étienne Deschamps] Two questions, two follow-up questions: how do you think someone who was competent and experienced and well-advised can possibly have committed that error of judgement, and how did it come about that there wasn't, apparently, a modicum of joint consultation, if only among the three Benelux countries? Was it a complete surprise to you?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, it was a complete surprise. To tell you the truth, at that time, Benelux was already having some problems functioning. Mr Lubbers was the Prime Minister of the Netherlands and I remember, as I have also described in some of my books, that we Benelux people always used to meet before the European Council of Ministers which generally started at 10 am. We used to have breakfast together at 8.30. We would talk about the items on the agenda and, if appropriate, a common attitude to be adopted on certain issues. Firstly, we had been noticing for many years that the Dutch were very much oriented towards British positions, and secondly Mr Lubbers sometimes used to say to us in a rather hesitant manner: 'I haven't got much time to spend with you, I have an appointment with my British colleague, Mrs Thatcher, or with the German Chancellor.' He wanted to make himself look important, I suppose, by saying he was in touch with the major players in Europe. So he would swallow his sandwich and leave us. It used to make a bad impression. What's more, in Belgium, my French-speaking colleagues were less keen on these Benelux meetings where, most of the time, we spoke Dutch. So all these factors meant that van den Broek had not consulted the Benelux members. And he just rushed in. He no doubt thought that there was a favourable atmosphere. He made an error of judgement, yes, that's right.

[Étienne Deschamps] As you've just told us, the Maastricht Treaty was close to your heart. You invested yourself heavily in it, you fought long and hard to make sure the treaty was brought to a successful conclusion, signed, ratified and implemented. What do and did you think of the difficulties there were in certain countries as regards ratifying the treaty? To put it another way, what do you think of the chasm which separates the leading elites, the political elites, from a certain strand in public opinion and, in a more general sense, what do you think of what is called the 'democratic deficit' in Europe?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, we saw the same thing happening with the Convention, where the whole thing fell through completely. Even the founder Member States rejected the Convention. Well, it's one of Europe's open sores, a sore which has spread even wider, if I can use that term, over the last 20 or 30 years. At the beginning, there was the enthusiasm which followed the end of the War. It was all about reconciliation between the two hereditary enemies, France and Germany. But since then, all of that has been overtaken by events and what we are actually seeing is this kind of divorce between the elites and the ordinary people.

I still go to the European Parliament from time to time. I used to feel quite all right there when I was a minister. I was always uplifted by the European Parliament; although it has more than 750 Members, it's well organised, the debates are serious, much more serious than in our national parliaments. They work well, and the Commission and the European Parliament do actually decide on something like 70 % of the decisions which we take in our own nations and which derive from European decisions. Citizens don't realise that. Elections to the European Parliament generally leave people completely indifferent. The media do very little reporting of debates on European affairs. You make an effort but it does leave a lot to be desired. There is an excellent programme called Euronews and so on. I watch it regularly. People do talk about a democratic deficit, but I think there's more of an information deficit. And as there is an information deficit, European democracy works badly.

As far as democratic representation is concerned, there's nothing to complain about: there are 750 Members of the European Parliament. There are parliaments in the 27 Member States. I did the sums once: in each country there are between 200 and 300 members of parliament, times 27. So you easily arrive at a figures of 6 000, 7 000 or 8 000 members of parliament. Every parliament has a committee in it dealing with European affairs. So you can't say there is under-representation in terms of democracy. But there is a lack of interest because, to start with, Europe is rather far away from the daily concerns of ordinary European citizens. At least that's the impression they have. The truth is the opposite.

So there are quite a lot of gaps that need filling. To start with, I think teaching about Europe, its past, its present and especially its future, needs to be put into education syllabuses. That is a serious shortcoming. The press also needs to be much more Europe-oriented. The audiovisual media, obviously, especially television, there's a lot of work to be done there. I must say that in Belgium a few months ago, when our Prime Minister Mr Van Rompuy was appointed President, it did raise a media storm. For several weeks that attracted the attention of people in Belgium. The Belgians were actually proud. So the old idea of having a European President elected by direct universal suffrage isn't a bad idea if we really want to mobilise European public opinion. But that also entails other consequences. I can't really see a European President from a small country becoming more important that the President of France of the German Chancellor. It has to be said that Europe is obviously still a Europe consisting of nations. I don't want to downplay the importance of the nations in terms of history, but we have to think of the future. I still think

a Europe defined in purely geographical terms is a more and more outmoded concept and that the nation is also a romantic concept which no longer fits in with the reality of the world as it is in the 21st century.

9. The institutional development of the European Union

[Étienne Deschamps] You've used the expression 'an argument which carries weight', but isn't it rather sad in this case, in these types of circumstances, that Europe should be put forward in a way like a sledgehammer argument, the scapegoat, the pretext?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, that's true, that's true. At the national level we often take shelter under the European umbrella to defend unpopular measures, that's right. Of course, insofar as we are becoming a federation, the apex of the federation, the European Commission, obviously also bears a very heavy responsibility. And we always have to explain to people that 70 % of the measures we adopt derive directly or indirectly from European directives or decisions. Europe exists. It is also cheap. In the end it costs the taxpayer very little. People think that Europe means waste and that money is flowing in all directions. It isn't true. When it comes down to it, Europe, the European budget, represents 1.0 % odd whereas in the United States, which is also a large federation, the federal budget accounts for 27 % of GDP. So in the end Europe, so far, has been cheap.

[Étienne Deschamps] But if that is so how do you account for the fact that in the best case most of our fellow citizens know nothing about Europe, and in the worst case it is criticised and accused of being responsible for every evil? People talk about a democratic deficit, a lack of information, a failure to get the message across. How is that possible?

[Mark Eyskens] Of course there isn't a democratic deficit. We have a European Parliament elected by universal suffrage with nearly 750 members. In the 27 Member States we have 27 democratically elected parliaments. I did the sums one day and I think there are more than 10 000 members of parliament. It's a whole army. And in every one of the national parliaments — I'm talking here about Belgium, where I'm very familiar with the situation — in the Federal Parliament we have a European Affairs Committee which meets regularly, two or three times a month, to consider European matters. So all those parliaments are associated with Europe. And the Lisbon Treaty gives the national parliaments new powers.

So in my opinion there is no democratic deficit, though there is an information deficit, that is true. People are not told enough about what goes on at the European level. It's very complicated, of course, the issues are very technical ones. There is something which is called, which I call, the reign of the passive voice: it is decided, people are governed, things are administered. Some impersonal power does all this. Who does what in Europe? We have a president, but unfortunately he is not the President of Europe. Mr Van Rompuy is the President of the European Council. That is something else. And there are the members of the Commission, and there is a Foreign Minister for Europe who cannot speak his or her name, who is the High Representative and so on. It's all extremely ambiguous and it confuses people too. So what is lacking is clarity, it's information, and that also undermines credibility, yes.

But what is the alternative? To put an end to this immense European venture which is, after all,

a turning point in the history of Europe, of our old continent? No, I hope you agree, no, never, never, never. So we have to press on through the highs and the lows, and from time to time we have to pull together.

For several years now I have been advocating a different institutional model for Europe, a Europe which I call a 'Saturn-like Europe' by analogy with the planet Saturn, with a big planet in the middle and rings going round it. In other words, with a nucleus consisting of countries which are sufficiently integrated economically, financially and monetarily, the important countries in the monetary union or the countries which follow the rules, including the Maastricht rules, and then rings going round it with countries on the way to integration, with a mechanism for convergent integration. That is how new countries could be temporarily accommodated on an outside ring.

It is also an approach which could defuse the difficulty with Turkey. What status should Turkey be given? We must not turn Turkey down, because if we do Turkey may well tip over into the fundamentalist camp. That is not in our interest. On the other hand, putting Turkey into the nucleus of Europe is also difficult because they still have a long way to go, their history is of course rather different from ours, etc. So Turkey must be given a chance to adjust. That may take 10, 15, 20 years, but Turkey must be allowed to join the larger European family.

[Étienne Deschamps] And in what way is the Saturn-like scheme you are talking about different from the concentric circles which Jacques Delors, in his time, and Edouard Balladur too, also talked about? It's the same idea of grouping, of layers, if I can put it like that, of strata.

[Mark Eyskens] It is rather the same idea. Of course Jacques Delors' concept was a concept from before the fall of the Berlin Wall and enlargement, where, in his mind, the concentric circles were circles which would very rapidly reduce. They were circles which it would soon be possible to abolish. Nowadays, convergence would be much slower and more difficult. Today, what is more, with this great Union of 27 countries, decision-making in a Saturn-like Europe would, of course, be a problem: how to get the members of parliament to vote, how to take decisions centred round a Council of Ministers. So it has to be thought out. It isn't simple. It has become much more complicated now. But at any rate a Europe where everybody is handled the same way when the situations are so different from each other is a Europe which will always be running into increasing tension. That is what has to be avoided.

[Étienne Deschamps] Isn't the enhanced cooperation mechanism a way of, I daren't say solving, but at any rate of at least finding partial solutions …

[Mark Eyskens] Enhanced cooperation is a good option, of course, yes. It can help, but it's very little used. Well, you can say that monetary union is de facto a form of enhanced cooperation, but in other fields, like defence, for example, there is not much sign of it.

[Étienne Deschamps] And didn't Benelux, ahead of its time and without saying so or knowing it, have enhanced cooperation?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, yes, it did. Yes, indeed. Yes, absolutely. That was where Benelux was a pioneer. Yes, absolutely.

[Étienne Deschamps] For some years now the European Union has at various points appeared to be going backwards; it has experienced some undeniable difficulties. Would you say —

looking beyond what you might call one-off, not to say anecdotal, situations, that closeness in terms of friendly relations or family ties between some of Europe's leaders in the course of successive EU enlargements — do you think it is one, among many others, no doubt, of the causes of those difficulties? The fact that Europe's leaders know each other to a lesser extent, don't know each other any longer, at any rate no longer know each other to the same level, almost, of friendship or of intimacy.

[Mark Eyskens] That's absolutely true. There are 27 of us now. Five or ten years from now, if all goes well, I imagine we will be admitting certain Balkan countries. Then there will be 32, 33, 34 members. Our ministerial meetings nowadays are meetings of a parliament. So, yes, in fact, you can obviously have, I was going to say special relationships, with some ministers, but not with everybody.

But in my day, when there were 12 of us at the table, especially when we took the Gymnich option of holding confidential meetings without officials, the conversations were extremely friendly ones. You could allow yourself to say: 'Look, I agree with you, but you have to understand it's a position I can't defend in my own Parliament because there are nationalists or I have anti-European members in my Parliament. That has to be taken into account.' But we used to say what we thought. That isn't possible any longer in such a large Union.

So the question is whether we want to be moving into a sufficiently developed, rather American type of federalism (America does consist of 50 states, but in the end it is a real federation with Washington exerting a great deal of influence), whether we are opting for a, how shall I put it, American-type model, or whether we need another formula for Europe, a Europe of concentric circles which I call the 'Saturn model': a big planet in the middle, Saturn, and the rings surrounding it, but convergent rings which mean that the countries can discuss the pros and cons of convergence and start moving towards it, in such a way that the large planet can actually become more and more coherent and follow an increasing unified policy — such as a policy centring on monetary union with properly consistent economic, budgetary and fiscal governance. That, in my opinion, is the great challenge for the future.

[Étienne Deschamps] Mr Eyskens, in the various political posts you have held, you have been a witness to many rotating presidencies of the Council of the European Communities. Are you among those who nowadays say or think that the Lisbon Treaty, by instituting a standing President of the European Council, who is Herman Van Rompuy at the moment, as well as a High Representative for External Affairs, Catherine Ashton, de facto reduced the importance of the half-yearly presidencies?

[Mark Eyskens] That's obvious. That was actually the idea, too, although I still think the national presidencies have their usefulness, so I feel that the Lisbon Treaty struck a compromise which is not just honourable but also useful. Completely abolishing the national presidencies would, I think, have been a mistake, because holding the national presidency mobilises a country. People do try to do their best; they try, if they can, to avoid having a ministerial crisis, they try to be constructive, to have ideas and make progress on particular issues. There are some presidencies which are an all-round success, there are others which are a dismal failure. But in the end I think that that motivation is an excellent thing, and as there are 27 of us, of course, with six-month presidencies, it does mean that it's 13 years before a country holds the presidency again, with each one taking its turn. No, I think it's the right solution. But of course the three main figures, who are now the President of the Council, currently Mr Van Rompuy, the High Representative who is our European Foreign Minister, Ms Ashton, and the President-in-

Office, have to get on with each other, not only as regards the content of the matters to be discussed, but also when it comes to the rather lighter aspects, in other words, the order of precedence, who represents who at which meeting, because there are large numbers of international meetings — who goes to Washington to represent Europe when we are talking about disarmament, etc. — and that does sometimes cause rather ridiculous frictions. But it's not that simple, of course and, seen from the outside, I can understand the Americans, the famous remark by Kissinger: 'What's their telephone number? Who do I have to talk to?' The profile is a bit clearer nowadays, but there are still three of them, at least three, after all, plus the President of Parliament, who also plays an important part. So yes, it hasn't yet been simplified enough, that's true.

[Étienne Deschamps] And if we look ahead to the coming weeks or months, do you think that the fact that the full-time President, Mr Van Rompuy, and the Prime Minister of Belgium, as Belgium will be holding the Presidency from 1 July, come from the same country, the same region, the same party, will play any part in reaching these specific agreements, if I can put it that way, this good understanding on the order of precedence, on setting the agenda, on a common-sense approach to be adopted for at least six months?

[Mark Eyskens] That can certainly make things easier. But there is also a risk: Mr Van Rompuy, as President of the Council, must not give the impression that he is turning back into a Belgian. I have myself been in a rather different situation with Mr Jacques Delors, who was an excellent President of the Commission, and who was already de facto the President of Europe. But it was rumoured from time to time that Mr Delors was too much under the influence of his government, that he still used to go meetings of his party occasionally. That's something Mr Van Rompuy doesn't do, I can assure you of that. I go to meetings of my party, the Christian Democrats, but Van Rompuy doesn't appear there any more, that's over. But yes, he is obviously in a very exposed position, so he can't give the impression that he's hand in glove with the Belgian Prime Minister who holds the rotating Presidency of the EU, that's clear. He will have to keep his distance, certainly.

10. Policy and organisation in Belgium in the area of European affairs

[Étienne Deschamps] You have always introduced yourself — and still do — as a European federalist. What does that mean?

[Mark Eyskens] 'To federate' means 'to put together', whereas in Belgium, when people talk about federalism, they often mean the opposite. Federalism is actually a practical form of subsidiarity. I was once at a meeting during the Irish Presidency, I think it was in 1990 or 1991, in Parknasilla, a little bay on the west coast of Ireland, very charming, with a micro-climate of its own, in a delightful hotel. We were busy preparing the ground for the Maastricht Treaty and we were running into snags with resistance mainly from Britain but also from other countries, concerning the transfer of powers and jurisdiction towards, shall we say, the supranational level, and we were really stuck. And then there came a moment of grace. Jacques Delors, who was President of the Commission, said to us: 'Listen, I was an activist in the Christian trade unions when I was young and at university I did a course about the social teaching of the Church.' I myself took more or less the same course at Leuven University. It was an optional course, but I enrolled for it, and on that course they explained the Church's encyclicals on social questions in

general, including the encyclical Quadragesimo Anno which was issued at the end of the 1930s, on the 40th anniversary of the Church's main encyclical on social questions, Rerum Novarum, of Leo XIII, and in that encyclical, as Jacques Delors reminded us, there was talk of subsidiarity. But what the Church was referring to was the relationship between private education and the state. And the principle was that 'We must respect private initiative in the private education sector but, if the need arises, if the private sector fails to do what it should do, the state must intervene.' 'Well,' said Jacques Delors, 'we are going to apply this principle of subsidiarity to relations between the supranational level in Europe and the role of the Member States.' But, as he explained clearly from the outset, subsidiarity is a two-way process and mechanism involving a transfer of powers upwards, if necessary, and a transfer of powers downwards, if wished. So that was the process that we set up in practical form.

So there is an article in the Maastricht Treaty which speaks very, very explicitly about subsidiarity. And since then there have been a great many doctoral theses and publications devoted to that principle, a vital principle and one which is given concrete form in what is called European federalism. Now, I am realistic enough to understand that Europe is not yet a federation like the United States, for example, or like Germany. And I often say: 'Europe is a mixture of an integrated vertical structure, which means it is federal, but also of powers which are still horizontal and intergovernmental and which can be regarded as being confederal.' So Europe is a cross, which sometimes, by the way, has to be borne. So it is a kind of synergy between confederal features and federal features. And there are those who say that Belgium, too, is similar to that compromise at the microcosm level.

[Étienne Deschamps] And in the course of your career, especially as Foreign Minister, were you ever able to take any steps to encourage and further advance the supranational character of the Europe which was in the process of integration?

[Mark Eyskens] Of course. Monetary union, for example. But there, given the type of aim we were pursuing, too, which was to create a single currency in a monetary zone, we limited it to countries which wanted to sign up to it. So that was one example, a little before its time, of enhanced cooperation. But monetary union is obviously one aspect of integration.

Nowadays I say loud and clear, given the incidents and serious problems there have been, for example, with Greece and other countries, that monetary union is obviously not enough, in the way it operates and in the structures underpinning it, so there is a shortcoming, a deficit in terms of integration. There is not enough economic, fiscal and budgetary governance, that is clear. You know, this European federalism is an extremely delicate piece of engineering, and if you stick your finger into it but refuse to put your whole arm in, it leads to inconsistencies which, in a globalised world, can bite back at you. So it's one thing or the other, it's almost all or nothing. And in Europe today — this is obviously a rather critical, negative observation — it appears that nowadays we have no choice, we have to keep moving along on the path to integration, otherwise we risk seeing everything we've spent 50 years putting together being taken apart.

[Étienne Deschamps] Concerning this commitment to Europe and federalism, in other words to a supranational Europe, do you think there is unanimity about it among the ruling class in Belgium, or, on the contrary, did you sometimes have to fight hard in the governments you belonged to to impose or at any rate put forward that point of view?

[Mark Eyskens] No, in my day everyone had been won over to the cause of integration being taken much further. Before that, if I can go back in history a little way, after the War, at the start

of the European venture, the Schuman Plan and so on, the successive stages, I found in the archives what are known as diplomatic documents, notes from certain Belgian Prime Ministers, in a language we would nowadays called 'sovereignist' which is very suspicious of forms of integration that entailed a surrender of sovereignty. But all that is in the past nowadays, for the simple reason that we — those of us who want to defend our country — think that European integration puts a restraint on Belgium which has the effect of ensuring that Belgium continues to be a coherent Member State. For us, too, it's also a safeguard against our own country falling apart, let us be clear about that.

[Étienne Deschamps] Now you knew King Baudouin very well and spent a lot of time in his company. What was his attitude to, and his interest in, his position as regards international questions and, in the case in point, European questions? Was he, for example, fearful of a certain loss of sovereignty for the country or a step backwards as regards his institutional prerogatives?

[Mark Eyskens] No. No, not at all. King Baudouin was very much, very much a European. He saw it as a wonderful venture, a historic, colossal undertaking. He had a sense of history, King Baudouin. He realised that it really was a turning point in European history, so I myself never heard any reservations about if from King Baudouin. On the contrary, he thought that Belgium should play an important role, a guiding, steering role within Europe. And he supported everyone who was working to consolidate European integration, certainly.

[Étienne Deschamps] We have talked a lot about Belgium. Let us now talk, if you don't mind, about a rather specific point, which the general public usually knows very little about, which is what I would call parliamentary democracy. During your time in Parliament, in the Chamber, you were for a long time a member of the Finance Committees, Foreign Affairs Committees, European Affairs Committees. You were the rapporteur, the co-rapporteur for the Maastricht Treaty and the Amsterdam Treaty. All in all, how interested do you think national MPs, and particularly Belgian MPs, were in European questions and how knowledgeable were they about them?

[Mark Eyskens] I find European questions fascinating. In Parliament, the number of people interested in them is limited, but they are passionate supporters, they have a taste for them. And we have had a European Affairs Committee in Parliament for a very long time. The discussions there are extremely interesting and open. There is much less marking out of territory between the political parties. You can have an extremely open discussion there so I always used to go to the meetings with great, great pleasure. And it was instructive, too, because those Members of Parliament, something like 20 or 25 out of 150, were generally people who travelled a lot. They were often in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg as well, or in the Parliamentary Assembly of Western European Union, which meant they were well informed about the international aspects of European integration. And we used to have excellent discussions which even helped ministers clarify their own positions. So it was an extremely useful exercise.

To such an extent that when we negotiated the European Convention — at the time, I was Vice-President of the WEU Parliamentary Assembly — I proposed setting up, alongside the European Parliament, an interparliamentary assembly consisting of members appointed by delegation, not elected by universal suffrage but consisting of delegations from the national parliaments, to deal with intergovernmental issues. It seemed to me there was a lack of symmetry. The European Parliament, by definition, of course, deals with the purely Community matters, that is its role. But everything that is decided on by the Council of European Ministers

at the intergovernmental level is decided on in the various national parliaments, of which there are 27 at the moment, but what is missing is a common pedestal. So let us set up an interparliamentary assembly, it would also give some satisfaction to the national MPs who concern themselves with Europe, who criticise other countries, who say, in Belgium: 'Yes, but France's stance is unacceptable, Britain is going too far.' But that just goes on in a vacuum. Anyway, the idea was to make the most of the WEU Parliamentary Assembly. I myself tested the idea out on a number of MEPs, starting with the Belgians. Well, they found it completely preposterous and a kind of lese-majesty against the European Parliament.

[Étienne Deschamps] Unfair competition?

[Mark Eyskens] That's right, as the European Parliament also aspires to concern itself with the intergovernmental aspects of European policy. In my opinion, though, and I haven't changed my attitude, it would have made a fine symmetrical structure if we had also had an interparliamentary assembly for purely intergovernmental issues. And we could also have addressed the frustrations of national MPs to some extent.

[Étienne Deschamps] You tell me there are rather few national MPs, rather few with a real taste or enough interest in European questions. Would you say that was down to the technical character of the questions, the issues at stake, the debates or, more prosaically, because they are subjects, or often areas of action, which are difficult to sell to local or regional voters?

[Mark Eyskens] You're absolutely right, I think the second reason is the more important one. It is true that European problems are technical and do call for some investment of brain power. But when you are actively dealing with Europe, you get sent abroad, you spend several weeks a year at the Council of Europe, at WEU. There are sometimes committees which travel. You are often away. You lose touch with your own voters, your own constituency. You haven't time to get to your surgeries so, yes, voters often say: 'Well, that's odd, we never see him any more. We aren't going to vote for him any more.' There it is, it's unfortunate in a sense but yes, there is a risk. So very often MPs who really specialise in European affairs at the national level sooner or later aspire to become Members of the European Parliament.

[Étienne Deschamps] When you were in harness, if I can put it that way, in government — you were even head of government at one stage — how were decisions taken on international policy, and in this case European policy? I'm thinking of the coordination between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, but also the ministers with technical portfolios — finance, agriculture — who were directly concerned by European questions, and possibly even the Palace … How did all that happen?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, there is an unwritten rule in Belgian politics. It's a very long-standing practice in the field of foreign policy: the government takes a decision and only afterwards, ex post, does Parliament give its assent, or dissent, as the case may be, to the government. So people sometimes say: 'Yes, but the government presents Parliament with a fait accompli,' but that's the rule, otherwise we can never get anywhere.

So, in all the governments I was a member of — there were 13 of them — we had a European Affairs Committee which was basically a foreign policy committee with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the State Secretary for European Affairs, generally the Finance Minister as well, and other ministers with responsibility for European matters, and sometimes the Minister for Agriculture too. So what happened was that we used to take decisions which, if appropriate,

were ratified by the Council of Ministers in plenary session. So generally speaking, yes, sometimes we had to discuss things vigorously because there were also Belgian interests, which were sometimes economic and social interests, involved. I'm thinking of agricultural problems, for example.

I'm also thinking of some disagreements which were not particularly European and which actually had to do, for example, with the consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall. At a certain time after November 1989, when we were hearing the position of the Soviet Union — Gorbachev, but especially his Foreign Minister Shevardnadze — saying: 'Well, we can agree to the reunification of the two Germanies, but the reunited Germany would have to became a neutral, denuclearised and, of course, disarmed country in the centre of Europe.' As the Warsaw Pact was being dismantled completely, they were calling for the same thing for NATO. So, in the Martens government of the time, some people round the table were saying: 'The Soviet attitude is a logical one. There has to be symmetry.' These tended to be, shall we say, the people who belonged to the left-wing sphere of influence, the Leftists, with the best of intentions. There was a certain logic in their line of reasoning, but both the Americans and the Germans themselves, Helmut Kohl, were very determined to make the reunited Germany a NATO partner. So very heavy pressure was put on the Soviet Union. It took several months. And we also promised the Soviet Union — the promise wasn't all that well kept — that Gorbachev would be helped to put his country's economy back on its feet. Gorbachev finally gave in and agreed to the reunited Germany's becoming both a full member of the European Union, at the time when it was the European Community, and a member of NATO. But there had to be some discussions in government.

Another time when there was tension in the government was over the Iraq War: the first Iraq War, where we were committed alongside the other NATO allies by sending our minesweepers into the Persian Gulf. But certain ministers at the Cabinet table thought we were going too far, that what was needed was diplomatic, verbal, possibly financial support. And there was a problem with Britain, of course: the British asking the Belgians to take part militarily by also making bomb stocks available to the allies, which the Defence Minister at the time, who was a socialist, refused to do. So the compromise which I had to negotiate with my British colleague Douglas Hurd was that Belgium should give financial compensation. And I went to London with a big symbolic cheque which I handed over to Douglas Hurd before the television cameras. That was Belgium's contribution, but it was heavily criticised: people thought we weren't very brave.

[Étienne Deschamps] And when there are disagreements of this kind within government, who is the final arbiter? The Prime Minister?

[Mark Eyskens] The Prime Minister, yes. Well, there was a majority of ministers who were inclined towards solidarity, that's true, yes.

[Étienne Deschamps] In December 1990, you attended a famous European summit in Rome which actually launched the two intergovernmental conferences that later led to the Maastricht Treaty. And the Belgian delegation on that occasion included not just representatives of the federal government, of which you, as a minister, were one, but also representatives of the regions. Did you, on that occasion and particularly later, feel the influence of regionalisation in Belgium as regards its representation abroad?

[Mark Eyskens] Not yet at that stage in Rome, but later, of course, especially in the fields

which had been largely transferred to the regions. I remember a discussion, I don't know which council it was at, about Television without Borders. There were reservations about it in France, but also in Belgium because, particularly in Flanders, there was a fear of the airwaves being swamped with foreign, French television channels. Some were even going on about Luxembourg, and other countries … Of course, the Americans. There was quite a stench of cultural protectionism. So we had to negotiate our way to positions which I, as a federal minister, then had to try to defend.

And I found that sometimes, on certain issues, there was no agreement between the regions, or to tell the truth between the communities. It was a community matter. So then I just had to abstain, which was the best I could do. I've very often said it, because a minister who can't take a position at a meeting doesn't take part in the discussion. So it was as if we weren't there. Since then, I think we have somewhat improved the situation in a typically Belgian way, so that when it comes to genuinely regionalised matters, it isn't even the federal minister who argues Belgium's case anymore; instead we alternate the representation for Belgium — one time the Flemish minister goes, one time the French-speaking minister. So far there haven't been any major incidents. We negotiate, we talk and talk, and in the end I think we do it with a certain amount of good humour.

[Étienne Deschamps] Might that be because, basically, looking beyond the divides between the Flemish Region and the French-speaking Region, when it comes to European questions there is actually a fairly widely shared consensus?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, yes, indeed. Where the emphasis falls is, of course, different depending on the situation. When it comes to agricultural policy, for instance, that is very obvious. There is, for example, a chapter on 'port problems'; that concerns Flanders but hardly affects Wallonia at all, and so on. In the old days, we had so-called national sectors, which obviously included matters of major regional significance. The steel industry was mainly concentrated in Wallonia, and so on. So there were sometimes community-related aspects, of course, but in the end, at that level, the European level, we never allowed ourselves to be too clearly seen as being in dispute at Council meetings of European ministers.

11. The role of Belgium and the other small states in the EU

[Étienne Deschamps] You mention intra-Belgian disputes at European meetings. You have held the most important posts in the state. How, in your view, can, or should, a small country like Belgium defend its position, defend its interests, in a European Union which is growing ever wider, with 27 Member States now, and in a European Union in which an executive board of the large countries, which does not always call itself by its name, may well, at irregular intervals, emerge?

[Mark Eyskens] You raise some absolutely fundamental questions there. De facto, there is indeed an executive board, that is clear. On many issues it is actually a duopoly of two major countries, Germany and France. On other issues, there are three of them. Of course I am also a realist and a pragmatist, and I must say I prefer an executive board of two or three to complete chaos and inconsistency. But I do, of course, regret the fact that integration hasn't gone far enough in Europe and that there isn't a federal-type European government which would make

the executive board superfluous. But failing a properly coherent structure at the apex of the Union, let us try to live with that kind of executive board.

Obviously, in principle, we are not very keen on developments of that sort. So the small countries, Belgium, but others, too, defend the original institutions of the Union, i.e. the Commission, Parliament, the powers of the Council of Ministers, which is, after all, more intergovernmental, so what are really called the 'Community institutions' and the Monnet method. For us that is something vital. In the European structures already established in the ECSC Treaty, we see that there was protection for the small countries.

When you are representing a small country at the conference table, how can you make your point? To start with, when you sit down at the table, it's usually already too late to make your point. So you have to prepare for the meetings in advance by making personal contacts. It is extremely important for the Belgian Foreign Minister to have excellent personal contacts with the major players.

[Étienne Deschamps] More with the major players than with the minor ones, although there are actually more of them?

[Mark Eyskens] Both. With the small countries so you can put up a joint front. It can be useful to be able to say: 'Well, I'm talking on behalf of five or six or seven small countries.' But of course you have to have a tongue in your head and talk to the German, British, French ministers, that's obvious. The Spanish one too, sometimes, and the Italian. So the psychology is very important, having good contacts, being able to speak languages. If you only speak one language in Europe, obviously you are a bit handicapped. And you have to prepare the documents and the meetings properly. And for a small country, it's important to have a minister, both for Finance and Foreign Affairs and in other departments, who has some imagination. So you have to be creative. You have to be able to say to the people round the table: 'Right, well, we have a serious problem. There are dissenting views. I can think of an attitude we could take or a solution we could apply.' And then you explain. Then, generally speaking, you have to put forward a compromise. We are very good at compromises, because Belgium is a huge compromise. We have been doing it since at least 1830. So people listen to the Belgians, generally speaking. So then, at a preliminary meeting, people say: 'Yes, what you've just said is useful. It's interesting. We take note of it. But of course there's no way we can implement your suggestion today.' And then, very often, I've noticed, six months later, the same problem or a similar problem comes up at the conference table. And then there'll be a colleague who says: 'Ah yes, our Belgian friend put forward this possible solution six months ago. Perhaps we should adopt it.' And then it's adopted and a working party is set up, and thus from month to month, from day to day, you contribute to finding a solution and you enhance the prestige of your country. And that explains why the Belgians, in general, in the European hierarchy, are in very important posts, including the Presidency of the Council. It's due to our reputation for intellectual dexterity, flexibility, creativity. That's a very important thing.

[Étienne Deschamps] And sometimes when things seize up, can't smaller countries — I'm thinking of Belgium, I'm thinking of the Netherlands, I'm thinking of Denmark — can't smaller countries act a little bit as middlemen, as 'go-betweens'?

[Mark Eyskens] Not just a little bit. In a very important way, I would say. The small countries are often called in to break a deadlock. That's the reason why the Luxembourgers, for example, play a very major role at the European level in terms of the posts they hold. There have been

two Luxembourg Presidents of the Commission: Mr Thorn and Mr Santer. And Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the Eurogroup. The Belgians, too: Mr Van Rompuy, who is President of the European Council. That all has an impact because, yes, we are less dogmatic, we have fewer national interests to defend, so we can try to bring people of different views closer together. Yes, that is where the small countries are important and useful.

[Étienne Deschamps] If we can close this chapter, if I can put it that way — though all these things are linked together — anyway let us close the chapter on political, economic, geopolitical events taking place in Eastern Europe to refocus on the preparatory work for the Maastricht Treaty. You played a part there, too, an extremely important part at the Dublin European Council in April 1990. In fact, questions about Germany did actually come up at that Dublin summit, but you also brought up issues which on the face of it had very little to do with those, but were linked to the question of the seat of the institutions, with the French, with Roland Dumas and with François Mitterrand. What was the actual situation on the ground as regards the distribution of the seats among three capitals, three cities: Luxembourg, Strasbourg and Brussels? And what was the disagreement, if I can call it that — it may be a strong word for it — the disagreement between the Belgians and the French over this question all about?

[Mark Eyskens] Well, that disagreement is still there to some extent in latent form, especially as regards Parliament. I myself have never been a partisan of the view that Belgium should take a radical stance. It is true that Parliament's two seats do cost a lot of money, it's very inefficient, it irritates the MEPs. If you ask the MEPs what they want, the huge majority of them have only one obsession, which is to establish themselves in Brussels with the committees, the assemblies, etc. I myself have to say I well understand the importance of symbols in politics and here, in Strasbourg, a city which has already been fought over for centuries by Germany and France, the seat of the European Parliament, the partial seat of the European Parliament, it is, after all, the symbol of reconciliation. To take that away from France would, I think, be clumsy and frustrating. So that isn't what needs to be done.

There was once an idea of having other kinds of assemblies meet in Strasbourg. There is the Council of Europe, of course, where I sat for ten years. That isn't bad either. Now that huge ziggurat has been built next door. It's a very impressive building. Well, the MEPs are getting used to it. I think it may just be a stopgap, but it is an unavoidable and necessary stopgap. So I'm not in favour of taking that away from France. It would have disastrous psychological effects on the French. They already tend towards separatism sometimes.

And the fact is that the enlarged Europe, I won't say it needs an executive board, but there is an executive board. The ideal executive board for me would have been the Paris-London-Berlin triangle, but on too many issues it's just the Paris-Berlin axis. But if that means things get done, then I'm not against it. So Strasbourg is rather like the system of points on the rails which link France and Germany. And, through that alliance, the whole of Europe too. So the formula we arrived at therefore seems to me perfectly acceptable.

Later on we had other problems: the problem of where to locate certain agencies of the European Union, where we had to do something for the Eastern European countries, give them something. At the time, they were still Czechoslovakia and Austria. If I can just interject something here, Brussels suffers from a handicap, a geographical handicap. Obviously, because of the enlargement, Brussels is a long way to the west, and therefore off-centre. Vienna is more in the centre, especially if we go on enlarging Europe to the East. I often say in Belgium: 'If certain people carry on playing the fool in this country, waving the flag for a particular kind of

independence and the break-up of the country, we'll be in danger of losing Brussels as the capital of Europe.' The alternative being, in the centre of Europe, not Berlin — Germany is too important to have the capital of Europe — but Austria, Vienna, which is a magnificent city with a great imperial history. That is a possible alternative. But to go back to something which I also experienced, the agencies which had to be located in the East. One time round the table there were people saying: 'It's an agency we are going to site in Prague.' Some of my colleagues said: 'No, no, not in Czechoslovakia, it's a country in the process of falling apart, it's too risky. We'll put that agency in Vienna.' It's an argument I occasionally bring up here in Belgium to those who want our country to break up. You have to think of everything. Nothing is final in politics.

[Étienne Deschamps] And do you have any examples in mind of specifically Belgian, if I may say so, ideas which in the past made it possible both to defend the interests of the country and to promote its image as a go-between, and which really highlighted that expertise in the mechanical institutional field, in relation to the risks which might arise of an executive board or a …

[Mark Eyskens] Certainly. There was the time when we decided, at the ministerial level, to convene the intergovernmental conference from which the Maastricht Treaty emerged. When I got back to Brussels, I said to my officials: 'We ought perhaps to draft a paper with a few ideas.' And the director-general for policy at the time was Ambassador de Schoutheete. So, with his diplomats and the members of my private office and myself, we drew up a document which we tabled before the Council of Ministers. And all through the negotiations on the Maastricht Treaty, they referred to what they called 'the Belgian paper'. It was very useful. And in that way Belgium, I believe, made an absolutely key contribution to the drafting of the Maastricht Treaty.

In the Maastricht Treaty there is a sentence about defence where I myself, after a long discussion in the course of which it turned out that neither the British nor the French wanted any mention of a European Defence Union — there were very bad memories at the time of the failure of the EDC proposed by Mr … at that time it was Mr Mendès France — and I finally proposed a form of words, after making a contribution to the discussion, of course, to say: 'Right, we are going to agree in the text on the need to pursue a policy of having common defence systems which may eventually lead to a common defence system,' without mentioning a union. Well, to my complete amazement, the British said: 'That's a feasible compromise. We can agree to it.' And we put it into the treaty.

[Étienne Deschamps] Now that really is a contribution …

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, indeed. We can be of help, certainly.

[Étienne Deschamps] And do the other small countries in a way trust Belgium when it comes to taking positions such as that, a bit like an unofficial spokesman?

[Mark Eyskens] In my day, I made a start, at the time; I was around when Greece joined the Union, you see. At one moment we were nine countries, then twelve. We knew each other personally. The ministers often used to bring their wives to the meetings and we'd go out together, we'd have dinner together. We had quite close relations. And so we used to talk about business, but also about other things. And that does help. In Belgium that helps as well. That's what's missing nowadays, the close relations between political leaders.

I've always noticed that Benelux was something that was very useful. Unfortunately Benelux has been weakened since Europe took over Benelux's objectives, that's obvious. Because we have been made to realise that the Dutch are rather British-oriented, more than we are. But anyway, Benelux is still a benchmark model. So much so that after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the enlargement of the Union, the Eastern European countries, or rather the central European countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, set up the Visegrad Group. And I remember the discussions I had with several of their ministers, including Mr Horn and other ministers, about doing something similar. So Benelux is still something very useful, I think, yes.

[Étienne Deschamps] What place is there for Benelux in the European Union of today and in the future?

[Mark Eyskens] Listen, Benelux was the laboratory for European integration as far as back as 1944 in London and after the War. It's quite clear that what was done later, even as part of the Schuman Plan, was to some extent inspired by Benelux. So we were pioneers, the three of us. At the outset, we were the six founding member countries of a first exercise in European integration, with France, Germany and Italy. But Benelux was in a sense the glue that held it together. Nor is it altogether an accident that in the end Europe established its capital in Brussels. So, from the outset, cooperation within Benelux was very intense and on a very large scale. And so were the councils of Benelux ministers. I went to a great many of them.

But as time went by that all got a bit frayed at the edges, for obvious reasons. The European Community became a Union and grew more and more important. Many powers were incorporated with each successive treaty. And lastly there was enlargement, which took the number of members from 12 to 27. So Benelux was marginalised. That's my first observation. The second one is this: in the monetary union, obviously, what matters most is monetary and economic policy, which is drawn up by a much enlarged Council of Ministers, and also by a European bank. All of that reduces the impact of Benelux. And then there's a third thing that happened, of course, and one which mainly concerns Belgium and even the Netherlands: the Netherlands have always tended, especially when I was Foreign Minister, to have a great deal of understanding for the attitude of the British, and they did actually have a case. I think that we on the continent are sometimes a bit too standoffish and bit too negative about Britain, but anyway … whereas both Luxembourg and Belgium rather took the opposite attitude, in other words that we absolutely had to push ahead with European integration. So there you are, to begin with there were these differences of opinion between the Netherlands and the other two countries. And as for Belgium, I have to say that the French-speaking Belgian ministers from Wallonia going to those Benelux council meetings had the impression that it was all too much dominated by the Dutch speakers and that the Flemish found themselves in a setting there which was almost their own. For the French speakers, on the other hand, it was a bit difficult, it was more of a psychological thing, and it all plays a part.

I'm sorry, but we absolutely must reinvent Benelux. The more of us there are — and we're going to make Europe still larger, with the Balkan countries; in a few years, there will probably be 33, 34, 35 members — so that the more of us there are, the more important it is to have a few nuclei. And Benelux is a major nucleus. And the fact is that Benelux, when you add up the statistics and the figures, is still today the fifth largest trading power on the planet. So it's something very important. And we have the largest ports, at least in Europe, if not in a part of the world. So all of that is vital, indeed.

[Étienne Deschamps] And for the other EU countries, whether it be the long-standing members

or countries which joined more recently, and of different sizes, is that Benelux experiment, that laboratory aspect of Benelux, something which is still taken into account or still put forward as an example?

[Mark Eyskens] Oh, certainly. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the enlargement of the Union, some of the Eastern European countries combined together in a set-up which resembles Benelux: the Visegrad Group, with the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, to name just a few. It is sort of the Benelux model. So there too, along the lines of Benelux, we remain a model, yes, that is true.

[Étienne Deschamps] Do you have the feeling that the Benelux countries have been able to act as a guide in some way, that they've been able to take those countries by the hand and explain to them how to draw closer together, how to pool their skills, how to set up mechanisms?

[Mark Eyskens] Yes, indeed. And it goes a lot further. I remember, when I used to go the Middle East, to Israel among other places — where I often went because I even taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem — I met Mr Shimon Peres, the Foreign Minister, the Prime Minister and now the President. Mr Peres had what was to my mind an extremely constructive vision, and his idea was not a two-state solution but a three-state solution on the Benelux model, that is to say Israel, an independent Palestine and Jordan, for certain economic problems to be managed together, even if it was only the problem of the shortage of drinking water in those countries, energy in general. So he asked me how Benelux worked.

And I was in Berlin — an unheard-of stroke of luck — ten days after the fall of the Wall, to be received by the President at the time, Egon Krenz, who succeeded Mr Honecker. And he wasn't thinking about a reunification of the two Germanies at all, but of a Benelux-style arrangement, with a joint ministerial committee, a joint parliamentary assembly, which would have met twice a year. He used to ask me how Benelux worked. So Benelux is still an important model, even today.

12. An assessment of the European integration process

[Étienne Deschamps] Mr Eyskens, for 40 years, perhaps even longer, you have been taking an interest in international relations and European questions. If today, in 2010, in the spring of 2010, you had to carry out an overall assessment of developments in the European Union in general, but also of the place which Belgium used to, does and will occupy within that ever-growing Union — whose powers are becoming increasingly important — what would that assessment be?

[Mark Eyskens] I would be inclined to say the assessment is an extremely positive one. A flattering one, even. We have had some Foreign Ministers who were great in terms of their past history and also their personal qualities, their Belgianness, their sense of compromise: the greatest of all was perhaps Mr Spaak, in historical terms, and he was after all the person mostly responsible for the fact that Brussels became the capital of Europe. It was hanging by a thread. At one time people were even thinking of concentrating all the European institutions in Liège, around the steel industry at the time when it was the ECSC in Luxembourg. No, it was Spaak who managed to bring the European institutions to Brussels. I know, there are still some

questions as regards the European Parliament, but in the end there are many of its meetings which are actually held in Brussels, so Brussels has become more important than Belgium. There are many Belgians who refuse to acknowledge that obvious fact. Brussels, with its level of social and economic development which accounts for 20 % of our gross national product. I myself think it's even quite flattering when you consider the average importance of our country in economic and technological terms. But the whole of Belgium benefits from it.

What's more, the record of achievement is, of course, completely unexpected if you project it onto the big screen of European history, in other words the fact that finally, after nearly 20 centuries of murderous conflicts, we now have the Pax Europaea. Who would have believed it? Reconciliation between France and Germany, the virtual impossibility of ever having a war between European countries again. We have had some extremely sad problems in the Balkans, but it was actually outside the perimeter of Europe at the time. So that's for the young people. Young people don't really grasp what a break this has been in the history of Europe: a continent at peace on the one hand, and on the other a continent which no longer dominates the world, even in people's perceptions. Europe dominated the world from the time of the first industrial revolution onwards. We need to look back over history and study how that came about. But even from the beginning of the 19th century, certainly, Europe was dominant, with that enormous colonial expansion. Then history was shared between Europe and America in the course of the 20th century. It was a system of joint management. Today, though, Europe is slightly turning into a sort of peninsula hooked onto the Eurasian landmass, with other players. That must not diminish our worth, our pride, our responsibility, our wish to have an impact on history and to be of service.

I am still extremely attached to European values. It's a whole different subject, but I think they can be summarised in four pillars, on which this European civilisation of ours has been built, quite recently as it happens, over the last century, in other words pluralist democracy, which is an extremely delicate mechanism, pluralism, because there are many democracies in the world which are only democracies in form. It isn't enough just to hold elections or elect a president by universal suffrage to have a democracy. So I mean pluralist democracy. The socially corrected market economy, and a market economy which also has an ethical aspect. The recent economic crisis proves how important it is. Then the 'state of law', the rule of law as the British put it, the total independence of the judiciary. That is an absolutely vital established right. And lastly, our social security system. And I am extremely gratified to see that the President of the United States, Mr Obama, has decided, with the support of his Congress, to reform the healthcare system on very European lines. So that European model, the values that those four pillars entail, that for me is something fairly unique which we must hold onto.

Nor do I think that it will be America which will continue to influence the world. It is the world which is going to influence America, and which is going to, and must, influence China and India and the major players. It is a globalised globe, which is not a tautology. It is the globalised world which is going to influence all the major players — including the minor players too, of course. And borders will begin to blur. We must work for a world of shared values.

And Europe is also becoming rather virtual. It is everywhere. You see it everywhere. I'm very fond of travelling. I meet Europe wherever I go. When you go to St Petersburg, it's Europe. When you go to San Francisco, it's Europe too. It's a kind of Europe even in New York. In the museums, the greatest connoisseurs of some aspects of our European culture are often Americans. Universities, too, that's an area that is becoming integrated at international level. There, Europe plays a very large part. Well, we can be proud of what we have done, but we

need to think of the future. So we need to give thought to the ongoing construction of a new world which we will have to constantly reinvent.

The great challenge, in my opinion, is that the surge of changes in every direction, with a mix of the best, the imperfect which needs improving, and sometimes also the worst, all these changes basically need to be transformed into genuine human progress. And I think Europe has a certain conception of human progress and we have an important message to pass on in that respect — without lapsing into ethical imperialism, in other words in a framework of tolerance. But we can take pride in our own beliefs. And we need to transform all these changes into genuine human progress, which, when it comes down to it, is an ethical challenge. Distinguishing between good and evil: what is good, what is bad for future generations. And that, I think, is where Europe can go on playing an absolutely vital part.

[Étienne Deschamps] Well, Mr Eyskens, thank you once again very much indeed for giving us your time and sharing with us all these memories, your experience, but also your realistic, optimistic and forward-looking vision of the situation in Europe. And I genuinely thank you again for hosting us, for giving us your time, and I have no doubt that your eye-witness account will be rightly valued for a long time to come.

[Mark Eyskens] The thanks are all on my side. It has been a very, very great pleasure for me. And you did your job in a very open-minded way with extremely pertinent questions. I am enormously grateful to you, Mr Deschamps.

[Étienne Deschamps] Thank you, Mr Eyskens.