Mary Robinson, President of Ireland, - Mr President, Distinguished Members, it is a special pleasure for me to speak to the elected representatives of the European Union today. And since I am speaking in a place which is acutely aware of the heritage of all the countries which compose the Union, I would like to begin by speaking briefly in the Irish language. The languages of the peoples of the European Union are a precious part of its culture, and a very conscious part of its programme. They represent the many ways in which the peoples of this Union speak and think and envision their future. And so, in the happy knowledge that it is very European, let me begin by speaking Irish.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Union today is the need to provide an effective response to the dual scourges of unemployment and social exclusion. Unemployment and poverty are like poisons which attack the social fabric and for which the antidote has yet to be identified and administered. Failure to devise and implement radical solutions to these problems undermines confidence.

Action to stimulate the creation of jobs therefore must continue to represent the top priority for the Union. The endorsement by the Brussels European Council in 1993 of the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment is a welcome step and the possibilities which this presents for a joint approach must be diligently pursued. The advantages which have been bestowed on the citizens of Europe by achievements in the areas of free movement are in danger if large sections of the population are alienated from their benefits through the effects of poverty and unemployment and social exclusion.

Moreover, when the vision of a new Europe was first described, it was never intended that it should at some point limit itself to an exclusive club or to a chosen few. Such circumscription would have been unthinkable. The concepts and values which underpin the European Union are universal. By the same token, the prosperity which is derived from the common endeavour and which derives from our common pursuit of economic objectives is also to be shared. A vision restricted to the pursuit of these goals in the limited framework of a restricted Community is a mean one.

The challenge presented by the evolving political architecture in Europe requires an imaginative and open-minded response from the European Union. It is commonplace now to note that the old certainties have vanished. With the collapse of communism, a unique historical opportunity has presented itself. Have we really taken up that opportunity with vision and with commitment?

The process which was begun at the European Council in Copenhagen and which opened the perspective of accession to the Union for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe must be developed. We would do well to listen to the urgency in the voices of the leadership of those countries, who are coping within a democratic framework with the sharp deterioration in the standard of living of their citizens. For them, working in a structured way towards preparing for the demands of accession is a political as well as an economic lifeline which we should not underestimate.

Similarly, the opening towards a common understanding with the peoples of Russia and the newly independent states is both a necessary and an essential objective. For too long historical legacies have served to obstruct the natural bonds of friendship and comrade-ship between our peoples. However it is also important, as European Union Foreign Ministers have made clear, that relations with Russia should be based on respect for human rights and the principles of the United Nations and the OSCE. In this regard the Irish Government continues to urge that a determined effort be made to end the hostilities in Chechnya and to achieve a peaceful negotiated solution to the conflict, one which takes full account of the human rights of the Chechen people.

(Appause)

I am aware, Mr President, the Union is correctly seeking common ground with its Mediterranean neighbours. And we commend the French presidency in particular for its initiatives in this regard.

The challenge of fashioning an effective, worthwhile response to the changing European architecture is matched, of course, by the challenge of adapting our internal structures to accommodate the new realities. And I again realize this is a very central part of your discussions today. As you know, when they met in Maastricht to put the seal on the Treaty on European Union, the Heads of State and Government set the date of 1996 as the time when a further Intergovernmental Conference would be convened to examine the implementation of the Treaty and to consider revision of certain provisions.

The Intergovernmental Conference, which will continue during the Irish presidency, will be faced with the challenge of mapping out the future for the Union into the next century. In looking ahead to that chapter in the history of the Union, and therefore in the shared history of the peoples of Europe, the challenge will be not only to think ahead and provide for responsive and effective institutional arrangements in the context of the Union as we know it, but also to think ahead and provide a blueprint for a Union which may accommodate well over twenty Member States.