

# Belgium

Roel Heremans interviewed **Mark Eyskens**

Interview date: October 2019

**Heremans:** It's Friday 4 October today, eight past ten and I'm sitting here in the beautiful house of Viscount and Professor Emeritus Mark Eyskens. Viscount Eyskens is a Belgian professor, economist, politician and essayist who has previously served as Prime Minister of Belgium, as well Minister of Foreign Affairs, of Economic Affairs, of Development Cooperation and of Finance. He was President of the European Council and numerous other European academic centres and institutions. My name is Roel Heremans. I am a Flemish and European sound and conceptual artist based in Brussels, a radio producer, writer and speaker who currently works with the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Ghent. We are now having a conversation for the European archive of voices, a project initiated by Arbeid an Europa; in which stories are collected from intellectuals from all over Europe who were born in the first half of the 20th century and thus experienced the beginnings of European unity. A team of young international interviewers will talk to older compatriots about their experiences, fears and expectations of Europe. Let's talk about this beautiful house and this beautiful room: Is this the house you grew up in?

**Eyskens:** No, it is the house I built with my wife after our marriage. We first lived in a small apartment, then in a smaller house here in Heverlee outside Leuven. Then, at the end of the 70s we built this house and later enlarged it. By then we had five children and had to add a wing to the house.

**Heremans:** Did you grow up around here?

**Eyskens:** I am a 'Leuvenaar'. I was born and raised in Leuven but my parents lived in the city. On Naamsestraat.

**Heremans:** That's where STUK (art centre) is now.

**Eyskens:** Yes, even more towards the centre. Very close to the university halls, in the heart of the old part of Leuven.

**Heremans:** Looking back, what do you think of your youth in Leuven?

**Eyskens:** I found it very exciting. I went to St. Pieters College. It was a very good college and I enjoyed myself a lot. I also studied often and then went to university, where I first studied law.

**Heremans:** Maybe you could describe this insanely beautiful room for the listener?

**Eyskens:** You say beautiful, but that's not everyone's opinion. My wife thinks there's way too much junk here. There are a lot of books. Of course, a lot of reading is done on the computers, the laptop and so on. But when I started my career, I bought a lot of books. There are also encyclopaedias here. And a lot of trinkets. I brought back travel souvenirs when I travelled. I have visited many countries. Usually I buy a few things that remind me of the country I am in. It's all here so that when I look around, I remember very beautiful moments that I have experienced, mostly abroad and in this house that is now very big for

both of us. We had five children who have now all disappeared from the house. The five rooms that belonged to my children I have now also filled with libraries and books. The house bends under the weight of books. I have about 3000 books here - at least. I also had the attic reinforced to stack books.

**Heremans:** Going back to your childhood. How would you describe it?

**Eyskens:** If I start with my early years: I was born before the war; the Second World War. I was 7 years old the month of May 1940, when the Second World War broke out. My father was already a member of Parliament. And then we first fled to the Belgian coast under the illusion that the Belgian army, as it did during the First World War, would stop the Germans somewhere in West Flanders, but that did not happen. Then we fled to France in a rickety car, on those lanes between hundreds of thousands of refugees, those enormous masses. Once in a while we were shot at by German 'STUKA' fighter planes; machine-gunned. Then we had to lie down in the orchards away from the runway, praying that we would not be hit. There was a great panic. And then we drove on. The south of France was not occupied by the Germans; there was a demarcation line. And we ended up there— 'La France libre' – and we were welcomed very generously by French farmers in a small village. We lived there for three months until the situation in Belgium was more or less stabilised and then my father returned to Leuven. We were really welcomed by those farmers, almost as family members. I'm still in correspondence with those people, though now it's their children and grandchildren. And that has been an important experience for me because when I now see what happens to all those refugees who flee from the Middle East (in the majority of cases) to Europe, I find that there is a lack of compassion among many Europeans who wallow in their comfort and do not realise that one never leaves one's country as a refugee for pleasure. We are all people who have fled because it becomes unsustainable in our country. And, of course, you have to take that into account. Of course, we can't take in everyone, but some humanity is absolutely desirable, and unfortunately that has become a bit lost among all the reactions that have been exploited for political gain. If you proclaim: our own people first, then of course you strike a resonant chord with people who actually don't think. And that is a very unfortunate development in many European countries today.

**Heremans:** Regarding those farmers in France; that probably coloured the way you looked at European unification later on.

**Eyskens:** European unification is another story. That is a miracle of history. After the Second World War - 50 million dead, most European countries totally destroyed. And then some very brave, brilliant politicians stood up. In France, Robert Schumann, Jean Monnet; Adenauer in Germany; De Gasperi in Italy; Spaak in Belgium and a few others who said: We are not going to repeat the mistakes of the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 was a vengeful treaty in which the Allies tried to destroy Germany economically by making them pay enormous amounts in compensation, which actually involved the destruction of German industry. This plunged Germany into a terrible economic crisis, a tremendous degree of inflation that of course created ideal conditions for extremists, such as a certain Adolf Hitler, who then seized power. After more or less democratic elections a democracy can also make a wrong decision – the end result was another 60 million dead. After the war, politicians said: Never again, we are going to do it differently. We're going to

work with yesterday's enemy again. Adenauer was, of course, a resistance fighter and an anti-Nazi. But they chose to work together in an original way. They started to unite and almost completely merge basic industries, namely coal and steel. To start off, they established the European Community of Coal and Steel. It was a great initiative. Afterwards, other sectors followed. The European Economic Community came into being, then the Political Community and the Monetary Union, and today we are almost a federation. I would add: if, in 1946-1947, during those first steps towards European integration with yesterday's enemy, the Germans had submitted this integration to the people in the form of a referendum, it would have definitely been rejected. So what is needed – in politics as well – is leadership, people with a vision who aren't afraid to implement policies, so that they can win the approval of the people after they see their benefits.

**Heremans:** That is more difficult now that everything has to be transparent.

**Eyskens:** Quite right, politics is now handled in a totally different way by the modern media. There has been a digitisation of politics, such as in the case with the American president [Trump], who governs by Twitter or by tweet. This, of course, is very difficult and causes democracies to function less effectively. You can no longer make agreements. Nothing is confidential anymore. Everything is immediately exposed in the newspapers or in the media. There is also no longer any trust; the political market is becoming very volatile. The traditional parties are crumbling. New parties emerge; they do pretty well for five or ten years and then they collapse again. So, it has become rather chaotic, which means our democracy having after all great importance, is demonstrating a number of functional problems that we have to think seriously about – and hopefully do something about too.

**Heremans:** Do you think it would be a good idea then to have the democratic system, which we have had for such a long time mutated into something new that can be a symbiosis between the new media and the existing system? Or do you not see that happening?

**Eyskens:** Well, politicians in a democratic country also have to learn to deal with this new media. But it's not so simple if one sticks to the old models. I read a very nice sentence in an English magazine which reads: 'The choice is not between right or left. The choice is between right or wrong.' Those political colours and political ideologies characteristic of the old model are in fact largely outdated. Socialism, liberalism are ideologies of the 19th, 20th century. They have bled to death or are being bled, and Christian Democracy also has major problems. The question is: What is the truth? What is actually needed? Politicians tend to tell the people, the voters, what they like. But you have to tell the voters what they need. You have to think about the climate, and then you have the tension between the short-term and the long-term. We have to take measures now that take effect in 10, 15, 20, 30 years. The politicians defending this proposition today will probably be all dead or retired at that time, the same for the voters. As they say in French: 'Après nous, le déluge' [literally: After us, the flood. Used to express selfish disregard for problems that may occur in the future]. This means that you have to overcome these challenges through leadership. And what you really need to do is try and explain the truth to the people.

And so, I think it's a paradox, one where politics needs to be depoliticised to a certain extent. We have to move away from these skirmishes between political parties. We have to tell the people: Look, that's the problem and we, politicians, accept our responsibility for it. We're

also going to seek the advice of experts who look at the matter from a scientific point of view. I'm thinking about the climate problem. I'm thinking about energy policy. I'm thinking about the fight against poverty. I'm thinking about solving the immigration problems. There are also objective approaches that are possible, but then you have to entrust some of that to other actors, such as our universities, for example. I've been saying for a long time that our major parties have research divisions. However, they are sometimes running in circles, and should thus receive input from scientific circles as well. And then you start making the political debate more objective and then you treat the voter like an adult.

Now regarding the voter, politicians are of course weak people who make many mistakes, but this is also the case with voters, as they tend to vote strictly in their own interest. Of course they do. A party will say: Ladies and gentlemen, in order to keep pensions fundable, the retirement age has to be extended to 67, 68, 70 years. Then most people say: Ah no, that's not OK with me, I vote against that. And then you get an election result in which 8 million voters in Belgium have actually voted out of their own self-interest, and then the politicians are expected to turn all those ideas and convictions based on self-interest, into public interest. In order to turn the self-interest of 8 million voters into the general interest, you would actually have to disappoint all those voters. Because they can never all be 100% right. So that's very frustrating, and if that tension is exacerbated by the modern media, then yes, you end up with a political circus with all the inefficiencies that it entails. And then, a very important challenge remains unresolved. That is of course the danger of the current situation.

That's why I often say: Many of those problems should be solved from a broader European perspective, because all those problems transcend boundaries. People don't realise that already 70% of the decisions taken by our national governments depend on European decisions, directives, laws and so on. Without Europe we cannot move forward.

**Heremans:** Why do you think there is so much Europe-scepticism? Why is it continuing to grow?

**Eyskens:** Well, Europe isn't perfect either and has its weaknesses: for example, solving the migration problem. We have let the influx of migrants proceed through Greece, Italy and now part of Spain, and throughout there has not been enough solidarity amongst the 28 member states. That's not the fault of Europe as a whole, that's the fault of the member states. Europe's problems are the problems of the member states, as the latter's reactions are too selfish, too nationalistic and too focused on sovereignty. That is the problem and you have to be able to break away from that.

It also has to do, of course, with expenditures, with the financing of a number of policies. Everything costs money, of course, and so I have been defending a hypothesis for a long time, which tends to offend the public a little during presentations. I often say: ladies and gentlemen, Europe is far too cheap. Then in the audience there is much consternation. The European budget is 1% of Europe's gross national product, 1%. In the United States of America, federal expenditure is 25% of the American GNP. You know, the Americans staged a revolution against the British colonialists in 1776 with the slogan: No taxation without representation. We pay taxes to London from America and we have nothing to say, so we

also demand our own parliament. And they got it. And that's how the United States came into being.

We now have to apply the American slogan of no taxation without representation in Europe, but in the opposite sense. We have to say: no representation without taxation. We have a parliament, a European Parliament. It is a wonderful institution. Not only in terms of its buildings, but in how Parliament works. It works very efficiently. The regulations are strict and being applied. There are 765 European parliamentarians who also work in numerous committees, and that actually runs quite perfectly. But they do not have any budgetary power – the budget is far too limited. And so, my proposal is that a number of important national expenditures should be Europeanised: climate policy, defence, fundamental research, security policy, common migration policy and major infrastructure projects should be Europeanised. They should become European policy, and then, of course, the European Parliament should not only approve a European budget – say, of 10 percent of the GNP. Taxes should also be levied, but the type of taxes that are not harmful: VAT, excise duties, luxury tax, environmental taxes, that sort of thing. With that we would finance those expenditures. Then national governments could reduce their own expenditures considerably and also reduce their taxes. Then those national governments would become popular again, which would all be thanks to Europe. So you have to create that kind of reversal, but of course that means a very considerable renunciation of sovereignty. If you have such an important European budget, then every country, every member state becomes a province. And that's definitely the intention.

**Heremans:** I am now thinking of Denmark, which has a special role within Europe, of course. They have now adopted a very specific migration policy. What's your view of when a member state goes a different way?

**Eyskens:** That is, of course, a bit paradoxical, the more so when you consider that in Denmark this strict immigration policy is supported by the socialists, the so-called left-wing party. Well, indeed, we can't let everyone in, so we have to be a bit selective. We have to distinguish between different types of immigration. There are the war refugees, the asylum seekers. Being an asylum seeker and getting asylum is a human right. That is insufficiently explained to the population. This is stated in all kinds of international treaties. It's in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It's stated in the European Charter of Human Rights. A poor guy who comes here because bombs are falling from the sky on his house in his own country is entitled to asylum. Under certain conditions. So that's what we have to accept, that's our duty as a civilisation. Second category: those who are economic refugees. These are people who come here because they can no longer earn a living in their own country, because they have no future.

Of course, we can't take in all of these people, but we do need them. We have to explain to the people that Europe is the only continent where the population is declining. At the end of the century we will have 50 million fewer Europeans. So, at the same time, we will have a phenomenon of significant ageing amongst the population. People are getting older and are thus more of a financial burden on the health sector. At the same time, there is also the phenomenon of having fewer and fewer young people. Their demographic is shrinking, and we need to support them, otherwise our social security system will go bankrupt. And how

does one do that, given that there are too few births in Europe? You have to appeal to people on other continents, though of course, you have to organise that. We need a selective immigration policy, like in Canada, for example. Of course, Canada is not comparable to Europe. Canada is a huge country geographically. There is room enough for everyone there and we are all on top of each other, but we definitely need to organise it in a way that is suitable for Europe.

And then there is a third category of migration which doesn't look promising. These are the climate migrants, especially those from Africa. Africa is a continent with a huge demographic explosion. There are 2 billion Africans now, 4 billion by the end of the century. Doubling. If agriculture breaks down in Africa because of global warming, if the desertification continues, those people will have no more food, they will all move north to affluent Europe, because they all have illusions of Europe being a land of paradise. What are we going to do with them? Are we going to shoot at them? Are we going to let them drown in the Mediterranean? No, of course not. Then we would descend into barbarism. Of course, we won't, which means we have to do something else. We need a paradigm shift, which, of course, requires us to reason like civilised and generous Europeans. They still exist. We must approach immigration in a humane way.

However, I also think that we must say that people in Africa are entitled to stay where they are. That is to say, one's right to stay in his own country and live a normal life there with his wife and children and sufficient wealth. In such a way that they no longer have to emigrate to Europe but can stay in their own country. But that presupposes support from the rich countries throughout the world – Europe, America, China, some Arab countries, and Saudi Arabia, even though they don't do anything for developing countries. On the contrary, they engage in conflict there. All of these countries have to work together to give shape to a new modern Africa policy, one where we promote investment on the ground and promote health in such a way that the people can stay in their own country. We must give them the right to stay where they are. But of course, we have to contribute substantially to this; financially and humanely; through cooperation, through development. But of course, we have to develop a new policy. It must become a policy of partnership. We have to do it together with them and they with us. Immediately. Just giving them the money without taking into account the influence this has on the local economy is very dangerous, so we have to do it together. That of course requires a great amount of political effort. For example, our relationship with the Congo could even become a kind of model for a new partnership. Belgium is, of course, a bit of a small country. You could do that with the Benelux or together with France – I'm just thinking out loud. Because, of course, part of the Congo is French speaking. So those kinds of things are new prospects that are of immense importance for our future.

**Heremans:** You just talked about global warming and desertification while a bit after that you talked about investing in Africa so that there is less of a need to emigrate. Isn't that a paradox? Why invest in this cooperation if life in post-agricultural Africa turns out to be impossible?

**Eyskens:** You have to do both at the same time. That goes hand in hand with a sensible climate policy, of course. That is more or less set forth in the Paris Agreement. But today,

the countries don't seem to be doing much of that. These efforts also need to be stepped up, including in Belgium.

**Heremans:** You were just talking about the Congo. The question that is asked a lot today is: Do we have a greater responsibility towards immigrants from the Congo than those from elsewhere?

**Eyskens:** Not necessarily. A human being in misery is a human being in misery, and they are all equal. But of course, if you talk about cooperation agreements, those have content and deals with specific areas of application. For example, if Belgium finalises an agreement that spends so many hundreds of millions each year on projects in the Congo, it is to the advantage of the Congo and not to the advantage of Mali, where we would do nothing. It is a matter of organisation, but of course we have to make an interesting agreement so that the whole world, at least the whole rich world, wants to do something for Africa. So what we actually need is of course international governance and, if possible, world governance. Europe can be a pioneer in that field.

**Heremans:** But at the same time, it seems to be crumbling.

**Eyskens:** Yes indeed, because of increasing nationalism, collective selfishness – it's true. Nationalism is the application of Darwinism within a society. Struggle for life and survival of the fittest. It is deeply rooted in human nature and in our animal nature. Man was once an animal, so he has to eat the other one to live. That instinct is still deep in there.

**Heremans:** Isn't it possible for people who understand that principle to find a way to use that Darwinian urge in order to form unity? Couldn't there be a way, starting with ourselves to evolve towards a more cohesive oneness?

**Eyskens:** Yes, we don't say that enough. I say that often. Darwinism, which represents individual and collective selfishness, was, for at least 3 million years, necessary to evolve and defend man against all the threats that he faced. But a few great moralists - think of Socrates, of Buddha, of Jesus and a few others – they said: Beware of this selfishness, because you will ruin yourself. In the time of Jesus there were no atomic bombs and no weapons of mass destruction. But now that we have them, that message is all the more pertinent. Our selfishness, individual and collective, can lead to the extermination of human civilisation on earth, which is why a message of charity, solidarity, justice, fighting against discrimination, considering everyone a fully-fledged human being is even more relevant today than it was 2,000 years ago. But of course, this means that we in a way have to fight against our own nature, which is selfish. We must transform that into a sense of solidarity. It's not easy.

**Heremans:** In addition to this selfish nature within man, there is also a response that involves, in an altruistic sense, making sacrifices on behalf of the community. In most cases an act like that is appreciated.

**Eyskens:** That instinct might exist, sometimes. But not always, of course. Sometimes selfishness is so radical that someone who wants to show solidarity is considered a fool, a naive person or even someone whom others have to fight against. There is a curse word in German for it now: *ein Gutmensch*. Ah yes, a good man, *ein Gutmensch*. Somebody who is naive, a foolhardy person, somebody we should have no sympathy for at all.

**Heremans:** What I actually wanted to talk about: Don't we as Belgium have a responsibility to the old colony? Do other European countries also have a responsibility to their old colonies?

**Eyskens:** Yes, they all think they still have interests in those countries. But I've been to the Congo a few times. The Congolese people actually still share a lot of sympathy with the Belgians.

**Heremans:** I've seen that there too.

**Eyskens:** They say: "*il faut revenir hein*"! "*Il faut pas nous abandonner, revener, revener hein*"! That's what's being said there, so there we still share a great deal of sympathy with each other. Unfortunately, there is the Belgian people, the Belgian public opinion. Yes, they see the Congo as a nuisance. By the way, the people who were once raised in Congo, the ones who grew up as Belgians during colonialism, they are almost all dead. Or they are all very old, so there is also a lack of knowledge, of course. But the Congo is a fantastic country. I call the Congo the African Brazil – very rich in raw materials. As far as what is happening right now: The Belgians still have very few economic interests there. It's the Chinese who are settling there, more specifically in Katanga. They are exploiting the mines and treating the Congolese as slaves – in a very harsh way – without any sympathy for human rights. Of course, we can't make an interesting agreement as a small Belgium even less so a small Flanders. But we have to create a partnership out of European solidarity. My dream is that a Belgian-Congolese cooperation, now with this new president, can grow into a model for how the whole of Europe can form a new partnership with Africa.

**Heremans:** Sounds very positive and very optimistic. What do you do in response to the many pessimists? When I was in the Congo, in Katanga, in Lubumbashi, I had the feeling that a lot of Congolese people share sympathy with the Belgians, but the few intellectuals I met there, who know a lot more about history and what actually happened in terms of exploitation, said: Go away, this is not your place. How can you achieve any form of cooperation with Congo knowing about that history?

**Eyskens:** We must be knowledgeable about that history and –for better or worse – be aware of our responsibility. Terrible things happened during colonialism but also positive things. Schools were built, hospitals were built and so on. But the past is the past. We have to look to the future. We have to be aware of the mistakes of the past and certainly not repeat them. Knowing about history is in that sense very important as a mirror for not making the same mistakes again. However, the future is of a very different nature in a global world. As I always say, the world today is called 'globalistan'.

**Heremans:** You just spoke about the atomic bomb, responsibility and communal feeling. I don't know how active you are on social media or on the Internet.

**Eyskens:** I'm on Facebook and I also tweet occasionally.

**Heremans:** Now that everything is part of a global village, I have the feeling that a World War might not break out where we massacre each other, because we are all so closely interconnected now. Do you have the same feeling?

**Eyskens:** That's a reasonable analysis, but the reality is full of unpredictable behaviours where a small conflict can suddenly explode and grow into a global conflict, especially

because there are a number of atomic powers in the world, more and more. If they were to start using atomic weapons, what would happen then? The world is very explosive. It is true that to-date, major conflicts have been avoided. We've certainly had peace in Europe for 75 years. That hasn't happened since the time of Julius Caesar. The fall of the Berlin Wall ended miraculously at the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev could have sent his tanks to Berlin, like the Russians sent their tanks to Prague and to Budapest decades before that, in order to shoot down a few hundred Berliners and re-establish the dictatorship. They didn't do that. So indeed, this has to do with the global feeling that we're all connected, that there's a great interdependence – but accidents, unforeseen circumstances that suddenly become explosive – are always possible. Like recently in the Gulf, in the Strait of Hormuz. With that tanker.

**Heremans:** Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

**Eyskens:** There have been several attacks. So an Iranian tanker was attacked, probably by people from Saudi Arabia. The Iranians detained a British tanker. It was immobilised for weeks, but the conflict has now been settled. This is a very dangerous type of situation. Iran probably has nuclear weapons or is capable of producing them. Israel has them too. Pakistan has them, India is trying to produce them, China has them, the Japanese are trying to produce them. And of course, England, France, the United States of America and the Russians have them. As a result, it's a very dangerous situation.

**Heremans:** Speaking of China. China will probably be the new world power. What's Europe's position on that? What are the interests? What are the possible collaborations? How do you see that evolving?

**Eyskens:** China may become a world power economically. Maybe also in the field of technology. We underestimate the progress of Chinese science. China is also likely to become a model for climate policy. They are, of course, very badly affected by the pollution. They're going to do something about it, and in an efficient way. Why? Because it's an authoritarian state. So it could well be that the 21st century will be China's century. The 20th century was largely the century of the United States of America and the 19th century was rather the century of the German Empire and the Austrian Empire. And so on and so forth. Before that, Napoleon's French Empire and so on. All these periods represent changes in human civilisation, of course.

But what's Europe's opinion on China? It isn't an ideal social model, of course. Now I do know that it's not easy to govern a country with 1.3 billion inhabitants democratically – one in which everyone has his input – the way we do. But of course, it is a bit frightening. It's a colossal ant's nest, but it's completely controlled by the modern media. They now have a system of points. Every citizen gets points. Good points and bad points. And if you get too many bad points because you have a bad work performance or if you are too critical of the media.

There is a great paradigm shift happening in China helped by modern media and modern technologies. Yeah, of course, that is quite terrifying. It can't possibly become our model of society, so our hope must be that China, as prosperity rises there, will evolve and implement values that are in part our own. More tolerance, more solidarity, more social justice and things like that. It is also to our advantage that we maintain as much contact as possible

with China and that many Chinese young people come and study in Europe, to see how we live here, how we work here, how we think here.

**Heremans:** Why don't we go back to your history. We have already discussed some very global topics. I would like to go back for a moment: After you graduated –what were your first experiences in the workplace. What was your first job?

**Eyskens:** During my law studies I studied philosophy, and after that I went to America. In New York, at Columbia University, I studied economics and came back and did a PhD here. Then I was appointed assistant at the university. At the start I was already teaching a few courses, afterwards I became a lecturer. Then I became a professor in 1968. That's when my academic career started. Then I was immediately accepted into all kinds of research divisions and had to speak a lot. When I was very busy, I also came into contact with the CVP's research division. In 1976, I received a phone call from Prime Minister Tindemans. He was forming a new government at the time. He asked me: Would you like to join my government? So I became a minister as an extra parliamentary. Tindemans said: I'd appreciate it if you would accept. It'll be short-lived because my government is very shaky. So I said yes and I've been in successive governments for 16 years. I have been in 13 governments. I was very happy to do that. It was very exciting, but of course very exhausting, especially foreign affairs. I worked through that period starting from Tiananmen, then the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the implosion of communism, the end of the Cold War, the first war in Iraq, the beginning of genocide in Rwanda. On a European level: the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty. I had to work on that for about two years. Almost every week I had a conference about it.

**Heremans:** Can you elaborate on that a little bit more?

**Eyskens:** The Treaty of Maastricht took shape in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of both Germanies. We could see that this was going to be a historical event. We knew that the entire united Germany had to become a member of the European Union and that all Eastern European countries would eventually follow. At first, we were 12 member states, and in no time there were 28, so all kinds of new rules had to be invented. All of us worked it out and discussed it. Among other things, the issue of the currency came to the table. Before that, each country had its own currency. It was very annoying because there were fluctuations in the exchange rates. If the exchange rate falls, which is about the same as a devaluation, the revaluation rises. That distorts free trade. The proposition of all economists was: We have to put an end to the exchange rate fluctuations. The best way to do that is: abolish the national currencies and create a common European currency. That was of course a revolution, but we succeeded. Another miracle of history. Some countries did not want to participate. England got to opt-out but a lot of other countries did participate, and then in the year 2000 we started to introduce the euro. That was all actually made possible by that Treaty of Maastricht, which was one of the most important European treaties. You have the Treaty of Rome, the Treaty of Maastricht '92, and then the Treaty of Lisbon. Those are the three treaties that made Europe what it is today.

**Heremans:** The Lisbon Treaty – can you tell us more about that?

**Eyskens:** The Treaty of Lisbon emerged out of the failure of a very good idea, which was to work out a European constitution. So a text was made, a very nice text, a wonderful idea for a European constitution. That was submitted to a referendum in some countries. It got rejected by member states such as France and the Netherlands, and we were very down at the time. They had been working on it for years. Sarkozy became president in France afterwards and had a brilliant idea. He said: There will be no European constitution; it got rejected, but we are going to make a treaty out of it. We are going to put in other things as well. So they made a new treaty, the Lisbon Treaty. That was about further integration and promoting cohesion in the European Union.

**Heremans:** In what year was that?

**Eyskens:** Lisbon, Sarkozy. That wasn't that long ago – in 2010, 2011, 2012 – must have been something like that.

**Heremans:** Have you seen much progress in Europe since then?

**Eyskens:** Of course we have had two problems: the big financial crisis that was imported from America and had subprime mortgages as its cause. First there was the bankruptcy of the mortgage companies and afterwards that of the big banks, those in Europe, those in Belgium – all of them: KBC, Fortis, Dexia and so on. The government had to help them all, so they put thousands of billions into the bank. That took a couple of years. That caused a tremendous shock wave for Europe, but in the end, since we were able to keep the damage to a minimum, we succeeded. The rescue operation was successful. People don't realise what a big thing that was – the whole financial system was on the verge of collapse. We were able to keep the whole thing intact. So that was a big test for Europe, and then came the migration wave following the failure of the Arab Spring in a number of Muslim countries. The market vendor in Tunisia who committed suicide in protest? His death marked the beginning of it.

**Heremans:** Can you tell us more about that?

**Eyskens:** Strangely enough: Tunisia was a relatively moderate country yet very religious. In that sense, also authoritarian. At a market there was a man who sold fruit and at one point he gave a speech. For him it was intolerable what was happening here, it's a disgrace, we have to put an end to it. We have to be free. We must have democratic rights. And then he poured a jerrycan of gasoline over himself and set himself on fire. That caused a great sensation, didn't it? Then it all started in Tunisia and Algeria, in Egypt with the fall of Mubarak and in Syria with the resistance against Assad. And then it got completely out of hand. Today we still bear the consequences of that. The civil war in Libya too, where Gaddafi finally fell and was killed. It's a civil war. The situation in Syria is terrible. And in Yemen.

**Heremans:** To go back again. We were at the migration wave due to the Arab Spring and then you were moving on. I interrupted you.

**Eyskens:** The migration wave started when the Arab Spring derailed completely. With all that violence in the Middle East, those migrants moved wherever they could get to. Lebanon: 2 million people. Turkey: 3 million. Europe much less, but they still made a big fuss about it. All in all, we've taken in far fewer immigrants than Turkey. By the way, we pay money to the Turks so that they keep migrants there. It's a kind of commerce, but of course that has had

paradoxical consequences. Brexit in Britain, for example, is the result of the migration crisis. In 2014 Cameron was Prime Minister in England and there was an anti-European, pro-sovereignty tendency within his party. 'I want my money back'. Under pressure from Farage, a major demagogue who had set up an anti-European party that was very successful, and Cameron said to himself: I have to put an end to this. So I'm going to organise a referendum on Europe on whether or not we stay in Europe. According to the opinion polls at that time –it was 2014 – 70% of the British were convinced that they should stay in Europe. The referendum took place in 2016. In those two years, the migration crisis broke out and all those migrants came to Europe and many went to England. Because that's a country without an identity card and so it's easier to integrate there as a foreigner, they thought. Moreover, many of those migrants also spoke a little English, so yes, England got all those migrants.

**Heremans:** How many migrants are we talking about?

**Eyskens:** Then? There have been periods when Europe had to receive 150,000 migrants each year, so demagogues like Farage and Johnson said: It is a disgrace that those migrants come from elsewhere in Europe, from the continent. To put an end to that, we have to leave the European Union. Many British people believed that and voted against Europe because they were against the migrants. And now we are seeing the consequences. Brexit is an insoluble problem.

**Heremans:** Can you tell us more about that? You say insoluble problem. What could possibly be a solution?

**Eyskens:** The insoluble problem lies in the border between Ireland, the Republic and Northern Ireland. So that's called the backstop. Peace was established in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants by erasing the border with Ireland. People and goods circulate without any hindrance. It's almost the same country. That is the position of the Catholics. The Catholic Irish of the North and the Republic want to become one country again. The Protestants, of course, are against that and want to stay in the United Kingdom. That is a compromise that they can live with if there is no border control between North and South. But now with Brexit, when the United Kingdom leaves the Union, you also get a border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Then the movement of goods and services will no longer be free. Then any customs duties will be levied, and that is, of course, very unacceptable to the Catholic Irish. That is also very difficult for the Irish themselves to accept and all kinds of formulas have been attempted. Miss May had finally agreed on a deal with Europe in which Ireland, Northern Ireland – in fact the whole of the United Kingdom – would remain a member of a toll union with the European Union for a number of years. In other words, the goods and services would continue to circulate freely. But if you are a member of a toll union, you may not enter into a trade agreement with a third country as a separate country. In this case you cannot separately, for example, conclude an agreement with America, such as Johnson wants. And so, Mrs. May's formula was unacceptable. That's where the whole thing got bogged down. Now Johnson has made another proposal, but it's worthless. So that border between Northern Ireland and the Republic is the big, big obstacle.

**Heremans:** So what could be a possible solution?

**Eyskens:** A possible solution is that Northern Ireland stays, not only in the toll union, but also in the common market with the European Union. That there will be a border not between

Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland but with the sea. That the United Kingdom will indeed secede from the Union with the exception of Northern Ireland. But if you do that, then the United Kingdom will become a disunited Kingdom. Because Northern Ireland would then have a separate status and would actually become a member of the Union, and thus a member of the Irish Republic. That is a triumph for the Catholics and a slap in the face for the Protestants. There would be a risk that they would take up arms again. This is a very difficult problem. In a logic course this is called *het theorema van de onmogelijkheid*, the theorem of impossibility, *le theorem de l'impossibilité*, *l'imagination au pouvoir*.

**Heremans:** We have already addressed many topics. We have talked about a Brexit, we have talked about the Arab Spring, about the migration wave. Can you tell me a little bit more about when you were Prime Minister or Foreign Minister, just before the Berlin Wall fell?

**Eyskens:** I was in Berlin three days after the fall of the Wall. It was a trip I had planned., and I went to Eastern Berlin. I was at the Wall when the first breach was made. That was an intense experience.

**Heremans:** Did you ever have a meeting with Gorbachev as Foreign Minister?

**Eyskens:** Yes, I have met him several times. He was a very nice man. Unlike Brezhnev, his predecessor. Brezhnev was a kind of Frankenstein, always angry. Gorbachev was a kind man, always smiling. A fit, lively, sympathetic man. I didn't speak Russian with him, it was with an interpreter. When I was no longer minister and Gorbachev was no longer president, he set up an institute for international politics and later invited me once to visit. I was at his institute in Moscow for a few days. We sat at the table with a few people from different European countries. There were about 10 of us. We talked about international politics.

**Heremans:** Also via an interpreter.

**Eyskens:** Yeah, always via an interpreter.

**Heremans:** I saw on your Wikipedia page that you were a member of many European academies. Can you name them? Can you tell me some anecdotes about those experiences?

**Eyskens:** I think that already in 1995, I had become a member of the international think tank the International Crisis Group, which still exists and which consists of former foreign ministers, prime ministers and presidents. There I met very interesting people, for example, Mandela and many other ex-premiers. We talked about global hotspots and worked on how to prevent, avoid and resolve conflicts. ICG had a budget that was very substantial, at one point it was about 50 million dollars and with that we financed the employees we dispatched to the hotspots. They wrote reports and analyses for each situation. We then received these by e-mail, reviewed them, and then met each other again afterwards. We would discuss and then try to draw political conclusions on what to do next. These suggestions were passed on to the appropriate local governments. In this way we managed to avoid or resolve a conflict once in a while. The ICG kicked me out because I was getting too old, but I was part of the think tank for about 10 years. I found it very fascinating.

**Heremans:** What conflicts did you manage to avoid?

**Eyskens:** Among others, there were some in the Middle East, in Algeria, in Tunisia. These countries more or less escaped civil war. We've worked on Morocco a lot as well.

**Heremans:** What were your specific concerns with respect to Morocco?

**Eyskens:** We should of course first try to control the extremists, and then neutralise them. To do this, we got in touch with locals and had conversations with them and we invited people to come here. We gave them a scholarship to study here and we tried to implement our values in a suitable way.

**Heremans:** Speaking of the Moroccan community here in Belgium. We just talked about migration and different kinds of migration. There's a lot of talk in Flanders about this now. Today, for many people within the population, there's little distinction between the second, third and fourth generations of Moroccans who came here as workers in the 50s and 60s. How do you see the attitude towards these population groups evolving going forward?

**Eyskens:** That's a very difficult problem. This is an example of the tension that exists between multiculturalism and interculturalism. We live in a multicultural society and it is expanding all the time. All possible cultures come together in Belgium. This is because Belgium is home to the capital of Europe. In Brussels, I believe, there are 76 kinds of ethnic communities, perhaps 30 different languages are spoken there, all mixed together, but all these small communities form a bit of a ghetto. They live near each other because they know each other, that's a pretty human thing to do. But then, to some extent, their contacts with others break down as well, so a tremendous effort has to be made to move from multiculturalism to interculturalism. First of all, we need a housing policy. Let those people live next to Belgians. Let them integrate into schools. Sports are very important – practicing sports together. I know of one intercultural group and that is football players. Look at our national team. They're almost all foreigners. There's one white guy and he's called De Bruyne. People accept that. They all agree with it, but in other areas we fall far short. You have to pursue a policy of multiculturalisation. If you look at the Flemish government's new programme, it's the opposite, isn't it? That is an example of shielding oneself. It's making people's lives difficult and impeding them, and so on and so forth. I don't think that's the ideal formula. So yes, you must also have the courage to defend multiculturalism, and the only solution is a transition towards interculturalism. Fortunately, we now have a lot of people of immigrant origin in parliament, including on television. People on television, including speakers with an immigrant background, of course make a positive impression on immigrant communities. It's a way of saying: We can make it here as well. But that took many years of work.

**Heremans:** You were talking about a housing policy. To go back to Denmark's policy, which within specific 'ghetto' zones aims to group less than 50 percent of all ethnic minorities together with native Danish people. Is that something that can happen in Belgium as well? How could that happen? Could a policy like that facilitate the transition towards a more intercultural society?

**Eyskens:** It's already happening in some cities, isn't it? In Leuven we also have immigrants. Most of them are students. They live together with everyone else, with the Flemish and other Belgians. That's not a problem, but of course, a student is different from an immigrant worker. But this also has to do with how housing itself is conceived. It even has to do with

architecture, with how houses are built in order to promote social cohesion. In many respects that is a very difficult approach. Every government should have a minister that deals with it. It is a daily task. A minister for interculturalism. Of course, that's a completely different story from all those nationalist predications. They say: Our people first! That's the complete opposite of interculturalism.

**Heremans:** But of course, we live in a democratic system. Many people in Flanders have voted for Vlaams Belang [Flemish nationalist, right-wing populist political party] and/or NVA [nationalist political party]. What is the reason for this?

**Eyskens:** Demagogy. Because politicians think: We're going to charm the people, we're going to prove them right, then they're going to vote for us. Although the smartest among them say: What we actually say is nonsense. Yet we say it to win votes. Pure popular deception – demagoguery.

**Heremans:** We should have to start telling people: There is no other solution than interculturalism.

**Eyskens:** From demagogy to pedagogy.

**Heremans:** Yes.

**Eyskens:** Yes. Friend, I have to leave you. I have to go.

**Heremans:** Thank you so much for this interview.

**Eyskens:** Good luck. Good luck. We'll stay in touch. Don't forget anything.

**Heremans:** *Merci, merci beaucoup.* Thank you for this wonderful interview.

**Eyskens:** With pleasure. Make the most of it.