

Excellencies,
Dear colleagues and students,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you today at this international conference commemorating fifty years of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, here at our University's Promotion Hall.

The date chosen for this conference is a good one: Europe Day! The day we commemorate another very important event for European integration, namely the declaration of Robert Schuman in which he called for a supranational institution to bring Germany and France and other European countries together after a devastating Second World War.

The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations which we commemorate at this event, was actually signed on the 18th of April 1961. Remarkably enough, this fiftieth birthday has largely gone unnoticed. There has been very little fanfare surrounding this event. Not only in the media, but also among diplomats and scholars, relatively little attention has been paid to this anniversary.

On the one end, this does not come as a total surprise. The Vienna Convention is in the first place a technical instrument, codifying the rules for the exchange of embassies among sovereign States and going in a fair amount of detail as to diplomatic immunities, privileges and inviolabilities. On the other hand, there is no denying that this Convention is one of the most important multilateral treaties ever concluded under the auspices of the United Nations. This is reflected not only by the high number of ratifications – the Convention counts no less than 187 States Parties, in other words almost the entire international community – but also by its undeniable impact on the day-to-day conduct of international relations. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to declare that for the past 50 years, the Convention has provided the fundamental framework for diplomatic cooperation between States. It constitutes clearly a cornerstone of the modern international legal order.

The aim of today's conference is at least partially to remedy the lack of attention given to this important milestone in international law and international relations and to praise the Vienna Convention's merits. At the same time, as befits a University, we also aim at engaging in a critical analysis of the track record of the Vienna Convention and its future viability, together with several distinguished and experienced diplomats, scholars, international civil servants and practitioners.

This assessment gives rise to a plethora of legal and political questions. To what extent is the notion of diplomatic immunity – the sacrosanct fundament of diplomatic relations since the earliest of times – coming under threat as a result of the advance of international human rights law and international criminal law? And to what extent is the Vienna Convention still adapted to the realities of diplomatic relations in the 21st century? In the past fifty years, there have been quite a number developments that, in one way or another, pose a challenge – think, for instance, of the development of electronic communication or the wikileaks saga. The question also arises to what extent the tenets of diplomatic law and diplomatic relations may apply in respect of certain non-State actors, such as supranational organisations like the European Union – which has set up its own diplomatic service by now, the “European External Action Service”, or in respect of sub-state authorities like for instance the Flemish Community, or even in respect of non-governmental actors like international NGO's.

The University of Leuven is particularly pleased to host this conference on diplomatic law and diplomatic relations. Located so close to a city with one of the highest concentrations of diplomats and international civil servants in the world, our University has long held excellent ties with the broad diplomatic community in Brussels. Several of the distinguished diplomats present, whether speakers or guests, themselves studied at this university. Some still find the time to lecture at their Alma Mater. In turn, some of the students attending this conference will of course grow to become tomorrow's diplomats.

As part of our endeavour to strengthen ties with the diplomatic community, at the start of this academic year, the University has launched a series of

Ambassador's Lectures, inviting, each time, a Brussels-based ambassador to lecture on a socially relevant theme.

It is also interesting to note that, a mere two weeks ago, the Flemish Minister-President struck a plea for greater involvement of universities in foreign relations and diplomatic contacts under the umbrella of 'academic diplomacy'. Our University remains of course interested in further developing that notion in a positive, mutually beneficial way. After all, with about 12% of our total student population being international and representing some 140 countries, our university is ever more becoming an international community of its own kind.

Let me conclude by stressing that we are extremely glad and honoured to welcome so many distinguished guests in Leuven. I also wish to specifically thank the partner institutions that have generously helped to make this conference possible: the Belgian Society for International Law, the Belgian Branch of the International Law Association, the United Nations Association Flanders-Belgium and the United Nations in Brussels.

I wish you all an interesting and enriching experience at the conference.

Thank you.