



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL  
THE PRESIDENT**



Athens, 8 January 2014  
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**Intervention by Herman Van Rompuy President of the  
European Council at the official opening ceremony of the Greek  
EU Presidency**

As Greece takes centre-stage in the life and the running of our Union for the coming six months, what better place for us to gather tonight than a theater?

The Megaron's stage may be grand and modern, but a theater at the heart of Athens will always echo the amphitheaters of ancient times – cradles not only to bygone dramas, but also to democracy, the political life of the city.

Today in our Union, the rotating Presidency embodies the idea of shared responsibility for the common good. Each country in turn steps forward to take the helm in the Council of Ministers.

For citizens, this is a visible and tangible sign that our Union is a work of every Member State, big and small, prosperous and less prosperous, North and South, East and West.

Greece has of course a long-standing experience in holding these responsibilities. This is already the fifth Hellenic Presidency. This fifth time comes at a particularly difficult moment for your country. That your government and administration were able to prepare so admirably for this Presidency despite difficult circumstances, certainly goes to your credit.

The path of economic and social recovery is long and arduous, and has exerted – and is continuing to exert – hard sacrifices. But we all pay tribute to the courage and fortitude of the men and women of Greece. Your government, with the backing of your Parliament, has launched the needed reforms to bring the country back onto its feet.

**P R E S S**

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The Union has shown solidarity and support. We will be by your side along the way to recovery. Sound fiscal policies and reforms are not an aim in themselves but a means to foster well-being and jobs. And we say clearly and honestly that all this is needed, euro or no euro.

We are now at the start of a new year – a year that should mark new beginnings. Last year, we put the risk of an existential breakup of the eurozone behind us. We continued as a Union to navigate our way out of the crisis, away from the storm. I hope that in 2014 we can finally leave the worst economic crisis in our living memory behind us, in Greece and in the rest of the Union. Our efforts are bearing fruit, here and elsewhere.

2014 should be a better year. A year where we must focus again on results – first of all in terms of jobs. The priorities you have set for your presidency illustrate well our common goals, what citizens care most about: jobs, a growing economy; strong banks in the eurozone and security at our common borders.

These will be the common priorities for the whole of Europe for the coming year.

Four months and a half from now, citizens in all our 28 member states will take part in European elections. An important moment for all our democracies. What will be key is to keep the long-term interest of this nation and of all fellow member states in mind. No country can survive on its own in this new global economy and in this dangerous world. A stronger European Union still remains the only way to face these challenges and ensure a better future for our children. It secured democracy in this country, peace on the continent, and with the efforts of each, we will reconnect with prosperity for all.

We are brethren nations: in good and more difficult times. This is something we shouldn't forget. It is something worth defending. Your Presidency motto is right: Europe remains indeed "our common quest". A constant endeavour, a collective work that deserves our efforts and our attention, day after day after day – but always with a view to longer-term goals. Being in Greece and so close to the Mediterranean, I am tempted to use sailors' words... And it is often said that "*We must sail, sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it, but we must sail*".

Democracy doesn't stop at elections. Democracy means: listening to each other, looking for lasting solutions; making agreements, respecting them and being accountable for the results; telling the truth, acting responsibly, providing social justice. These are our founding values – values we owe to Ancient Greece. We must protect these values above all.

Dear friends, *Agapiti Fili*,

You have chosen to place this Hellenic Presidency under a maritime note, echoed in this sober and elegant image. A ship with full sails. To me it is a symbol of hope.

Ultimately, it is our set of sails, our common will, not the upheaval of the winds, that determines our course. And Europe – and Greece – are on the right course, to the harbour of a renewed and durable prosperity. We – the people of Europe – are in the same boat, a boat that we have to look after, constantly. But taking care of our common ship goes beyond reinforcing and fixing. So allow me to end with a quote that I hold dear, by the French explorer and author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *"If you want to build a boat, instill in people's hearts a longing for the sea"*. For Europe and for Greece, now is the time to reconnect with such wider longings, with shared hopes for a better future.

I thank you very much. *Efcharisto*.

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