



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL
THE PRESIDENT**

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**Speech by
Herman VAN ROMPUY
President of the European Council
at the European Parliament**

I am delighted to have this opportunity to take part in a debate with you today, not so much to report on the informal of Heads of State and Government of two weeks ago - it was, after all, only an informal meeting with no formal conclusions to report - but to take this opportunity to meet with you early in my mandate.

Had I waited until the first formal opportunity to report on a European Council - that taking place at the end of March - I would not have come before this Parliament before the end of April, some five months after my designation as President.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to lay out how I see my role and function. I shall spend a few minutes on this, so as not to have to return to this on future occasions.

There has, of course, always been a Presidency of the European Council - not the same thing as a President of Europe, as some media put it. So what has changed? Three small things, but which will together, over time, have the potential to make a significant difference.

First is the element of continuity. Past Presidents changed every six months - that is after every second or third meeting. There was little opportunity to develop a long term strategy. Our partners in third countries were bemused at having to meet a different Head of Government every time they had a summit with the European Union. Greater continuity is fundamental to building relationships and carrying out a serious task.

Second is the full-time nature of the job. Previous Presidents had to simultaneously manage their own national government. This meant that, at best, they could only deal half-time with European affairs. By creating a full time post, dedicated to the running of the European Council and its follow-up, including external representation, the European Council now has a better chance to play its role within the European institutional system.

P R E S S

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Third there is the fact that Heads of State and Government now choose who they want who to hold this position, rather than it happening haphazardly from an arbitrary rotation system. I hope this too augers well for the support that the President can count on.

These three changes are all pragmatic improvements to the previous institutional architecture. But, taken together with the fact that the European Council now becomes an institution in its own right, they give the European Council a better chance of fulfilling its task under the treaties of "defining the general political directions and priorities" of the Union.

Some commentators have seen a great deal more in this role. Others have seen less. On the one hand, some consider the presidency of the European Council to be a sort of '*Président*' in the manner of an executive Head of State as in, for example, France. Others, on the other hand, see it as the mere chairmanship of the meeting of the Heads of Government.

In reality it is neither. It is certainly not a '*Président*' endowed with executive powers in its own right. The incumbent must express the views of the collectivity of the Heads of State and Government.

On the other hand, the role is not merely one of being a chairman, giving the floor to one or another member of the European Council to speak during its meetings. The task of preparing and then following up its meetings and representing the Union externally - for instance, along with the President of the Commission, at the G20 Summit - and his role as a bridge between the national capitals and the institutions clearly go beyond the task of merely chairing meetings.

The role of the permanent president is to enhance a shared sense of direction. Nothing more, nothing less. Where are we going? How do we deal with our neighbours? Who are our main strategic partners in the world? Where do we want to be in ten or twenty years time? These are vital issues.

As regards my relationship with the European Parliament, the Treaty is quite brief on this. It simply requires that I report to you after meetings of the European Council. That means a minimum of four times a year, though in most years that is more likely to be five or six and may, in the future, rise to ten. It will not be long before many of you will be fed up with the sight of me! I will continue to multiply other useful contacts with MEPs such as the meetings I have begun with leaders of Groups and the monthly meeting I have with your President.

My role indeed, should not be confused with that of the President of the Commission. Mr. Barroso chairs an executive that is elected by and is accountable to the European Parliament. It submits legislative and budgetary proposals to you - I do not do so. The Commission President has an intimate day-to-day contact with the European Parliament, not least in working on these legislative and budgetary proposals. My task is rather to ensure that the Heads of State and Government can collectively agree on their overall strategy for the European Union both as regards its internal development and in terms of its external relations.

I have a weekly meeting with President Barroso. We are both acutely aware of the need to avoid any conflicts of competence or misunderstandings as to who is responsible for what. Public opinion and third countries may well find it difficult to grasp the difference between the President of the Commission and the President of the European Council. I am confident we are on the right track.

In this context it is also important to remember that I am President of the European Council and not of the Council of Ministers. These are now separate institutions. The ordinary Council, which is the other branch of the legislature with the European Parliament, will still be chaired by a Presidency that continues to rotate every six months among the Member States. Only in the configuration of Foreign Affairs, where it co-ordinates executive power, does it have a permanent President in the form of Catherine Ashton, Vice President of the Commission and High Representative for Foreign Policy.

I pause at this point to pay tribute to the work being done by Catherine Ashton. In facing up to multiple challenges in the field of Foreign Affairs and Security and in preparing the External Action Service, she deserves our support. It will be my privilege to work closely with her in external representing the Union.

Let me just say a few words about the European Council itself. The first formal meeting under my chairmanship will take place at the end of next month. We did, however, have a useful informal gathering of Heads of State and Government earlier this month in the *Bibliothèque Solvay* just a few hundred metres from here. Whether it was because of the more intimate surroundings of the library or the physical proximity to the Parliament, our discussions were fruitful.

As I said, I cannot report any formal conclusions to you from an informal meeting. At most, I can share with you my own personal conclusions from the discussions, which I have set out in a letter to the members of the European Council and which I know has been circulated within the Parliament.

My aim with this informal Council was mainly to prepare our future deliberations on the issue of how to improve Europe's economic performance as we exit the immediate economic crisis. This involves looking at our targets and ambitions - and we had a very useful paper from Commission President Barroso on this - but also how to improve our governance on these issues. How we go about managing our integrated European economy - the world's largest market - in order to improve our economic performance is one of the central questions facing the European Union.

Our initial exchange of view on this involved looking at how we set targets, how we follow them up, how we evaluate results. It is in large part about coordinating the exercise of national competences whilst making full use of European Union competences and instruments available. It is therefore a task for which the European Council is eminently suited.

In the *Solvay* meeting, all members of the European Council agreed that we need a better, but more focussed, economic coordination in the Union. Both for macro-economic policy (certainly in the euro area) and for micro-economic policy. A lot of this is very technical, but let's just take the idea of bringing down the number of common economic objectives to concentrate on just four or five. These objectives should be quantifiable and divisible in national sub-objectives. It makes no sense to have scoreboards on, say, 65 different data.

Moreover, all members of the European Council were willing to take more responsibility in a common European strategy for growth and jobs. Such personal involvement is indispensable. We need to go from paper recommendations to real-life commitment. I was glad to find such a level of ambition around the table!

Whether you want to call it better coordination, better governance or even a *gouvernement économique*, the key is the common commitment to success.

We also had a quick discussion on how to better implement Europe's actions in the reconstruction of Haiti. We want to take this discussion further with an eye to better implementing Article 214 of the Treaty on the co-ordination of humanitarian aid.

A discussion on how Europe should respond strategically to the Copenhagen conference on climate change will be pursued at the next European Council.

Unexpectedly, of course, there was also a discussion on the situation in Greece. I took it upon myself to ensure that this was handled in the European Union's institutional framework and not outside it, and that the agreement reached met with the approval of all 27 Heads of State of Government as well as the Presidents of the Commission and the European Central Bank. This degree of consensus was a message about Greece's acceptance of its responsibility to cut its deficit in a credible way and of our solidarity with it, if needed.

I very much look forward to hearing your views on all these matters, not least on how we can face all the challenges facing our Union.

I can assure you that I have one over-riding goal for the coming years: to ensure that our Union is on track to be strong enough internally to maintain our own social model and externally to defend our interests and project our values. I think that all European institutions can and should work together for those goals.

You can watch the video in full here (available soon): <http://vloghvr.consilium.europa.eu>

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