



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL
THE PRESIDENT**



Athens, 8 January 2014
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**Statement by President Herman Van Rompuy after his meeting
with Prime Minister of Greece Antonis Samaras**

I am very glad to be back in Athens for the beginning of the Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The start of this new year can hopefully also be a new start for Greece and for Europe. Last year we put the existential crisis of the euro zone behind us. I hope that in 2014 we can finally leave the worst economic crisis in our living memory behind us.

This is easy to say but we know, and you know, through experience during the last years, how hard it is to do. Still, it is a positive and welcome fact that growth is returning to Europe. Exports continue to increase and confidence is slowly but surely returning. Unemployment is still much too high and remains the biggest challenge. Ireland and Spain are leaving their support programmes. Latvia just joined the euro zone. And the European Council in December reached agreement on the banking union – to prevent such banking crises from happening again in Europe. So yes, there are good reasons to be positive.

At the same time, we cannot and should not close our eyes to the social and often very personal costs of the crisis. We have to address those concerns as a matter of priority – both as Member States and together as a Union. And this is what we have been doing and continue to do, including by helping young people into jobs, and small and medium-sized enterprises to access credit. We need to be clear that we are still climbing out of a hole, and this is not the time to slip. This also means continuing on the path of necessary structural reforms.

P R E S S

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We are all fully aware of the social impact the crisis continues to have in Greece. We know that the people of Greece are still suffering from the consequences of the painful but nevertheless needed reforms that are taking place.

However, there is no better alternative to reforms. Stability, fiscal consolidation, reforms are not an aim in themselves but a means to create well-being and jobs. And we have to say clearly and honestly that this crisis would have happened – euro or no euro.

The European Union has supported Greece from the start and will continue to do so. Since 2010, the Union has shown solidarity by disbursing more than 180 billion euros to Greece. The glimmer of hope that we are now seeing is proof that the dedicated and courageous policies and efforts, the hard sacrifices, with the support of the European Union, are bearing fruit.

Greece is now assuming the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and the priorities for the coming six months: "Growth, Jobs and Investments", capture with great precision the concerns of all European citizens and what we are all striving for.

I am glad to see that Greece is ready and well prepared for this important task. Greece has a long-standing experience in exercising the role of the EU Presidency. This is already the fifth time. I am confident that the Greek Presidency will be both fruitful and successful this time as well.

Finally, a few words about the new year and another of your Presidency priorities. 2014 will be a very important year, in particular because of the European elections in May. We need to engage and deliver results across Europe.

Better perspectives; the first results of all our efforts; and an open, honest and responsible debate on what Europe means: those are the most effective remedies against fear and despair.

In all our countries, and together as a Union, we need to speed-up job creation. We need to show the work that societies and governments are doing. And we – politicians and opinion leaders – have to stand up for our European convictions, for our policies, and tell where the long-term interests of our citizens lie, as they prepare to vote.

Because, as your motto says, "United we sail further"!

Efkaristo poly.
