

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos' speech to the Conference of Chairpersons of the European Affairs Committees of EU Parliaments (Athens, 27 January 2014)

Mr. Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament,

Mr. Chairman of the European Affairs Committee,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome you with great pleasure, on behalf of the Greek government, to Athens, and I thank you because your presence here – which is, of course, institutional – strengthens the Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the European Union during these six months.

The Hellenic Presidency is fully aware of the strengthened and critical institutional role of the National Parliaments of the member states in the functioning of the EU architecture. We are fully aware of the significance of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in the functioning of the institutions and processes of the EU, as well as in determining the pace of European integration.

As the Presidency, we attach particular importance to our cooperation not only with the European Parliament and its configurations – its Committees – but also with the National Parliaments of all the member states, many of which, of course, have not just one, but two houses, belonging to the bicameral traditions, as opposed to the unicameral tradition of the Hellenic Parliament.

I am truly pleased to be addressing the Chairpersons or the representatives of the European Affairs Committees of the Parliaments of the member states, because I am aware of the long tradition of the COSAC, as well as the new institutional role the Lisbon Treaty and its attached Protocols bestow upon the European Affairs Committees and the Parliaments of the member states.

The fact that, as the Presidency, we attach particular importance to the Parliaments of the member states is also apparent in that both I and the Deputy Foreign Ministers respond with alacrity to member-state Parliaments' European or Foreign Affairs Committees' requests for direct briefings. With great pleasure, I myself briefed the French Senate's European and Foreign Affairs Committees, and Deputy Foreign Minister Kourkoulas briefed the Belgian Parliament and the French National Assembly.

Ladies and gentlemen, the current Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the EU is an historic fifth Presidency since Greece joined the then European Communities in 1981. We retain a very powerful institutional memory from the previous four Hellenic Presidencies, and mainly from the two most recent – those of 1994 and 2003, which are linked with a very significant European acquis. First of all, they are linked with the two latest major enlargement waves in the EU.

The Hellenic Presidency of the first six months of 1994 culminated in the Corfu Summit Meeting and the signing of the Treaty of Accession of the three new member states that took Europe from 12 to 15 members – and almost to 16, had Norway, which also signed in Corfu, not rejected membership for the second time in a relevant referendum. At a very defining historical moment in Athens, in 2003, the Accession Treaty – the Treaty of Athens – was signed for the 10 states that would take the number of EU members to 27.

And, in fact, our 2003 Presidency, as you know, which culminated in the Thessaloniki Summit, in Halkidiki, dealt in particular with the uncompleted – and what would be unsuccessful – efforts on the issue of the European Constitution, which was not adopted in the end, but which paved the way for the reform Treaty of Lisbon and our existing European institutional structure.

I often hear the objection – sometimes stated directly, sometimes indirectly – of how it can be possible for the Greece of the crisis, the Greece of the Memorandum, the Greece that is negotiating with its partners in the Eurozone and with the troika – which is an institutional hybrid not provided for in the Treaties – to exercise the Presidency of the Council of the EU and to act and speak on behalf of all the member states. You are well aware that the exercising of the rotating Presidency is not an option, but an institutional obligation that is provided for by the Treaties.

As an institution, the rotating Presidency symbolizes a fundamental principle of European integration, which is the principle of the institutional equality of all the member states. The crisis that the EU and, in particular, the Eurozone have been going through in recent years has, in practice, downgraded the Principle of Institutional Equality. We no longer have the old, traditional distinction between the net paying and net receiving states, with regard to EU own resources and the allotment of community funds and the various programmes.

We now have the countries that are fiscally virtuous – a few – and these very often dictate the terms to the fiscally “prodigal” countries, which, in one way or another, are put into adjustment programmes and must obey the rules of increased and strict supervision.

The Presidency is, however, for Greece, a very good institutional opportunity for us to project another profile – the profile of an ordinary European country, the profile of the post-crisis Greece. Because the truth is, these six months are not just of European significance, due to the Presidency, but also of very great national significance, because to us these six months are the six months of the confirmation, the definitive exit from the memorandum for the crisis, due to the major fiscal achievements we have to show following four years of harsh sacrifices by the Greek people. And the fiscal data that symbolize this success are that Greece, for 2013 – a year earlier than scheduled – shows a primary surplus in the execution of its budget, which is an indication of the redressing of fiscal equilibrium. And if, in fact, we read the primary surplus not nominally, but structurally – if we look at the primary surplus cyclically adjusted and bear in mind the one-off measures – then we have a structural surplus of 6.5% of GDP: the best globally; better than that of Singapore.

Ladies and gentlemen, the rotating Presidency of the Council is conscious of the Presidency’s relatively limited role now that the Lisbon Treaty has gone into force, as there are key permanent Presidencies of the European Council, of the Foreign Affairs Council, under the Vice President of the European Commission and EU High Representative, as well, I would say, as on the level of the Eurozone and the permanent Presidency of the Eurogroup. We have very good and close cooperation with the permanent Presidencies, the Secretariat General of the Council and, naturally, with the Commission, and very close and practical cooperation with the European Parliament, its Plenary and all of its Committees.

My colleagues have briefed the Committees corresponding to their portfolios. I personally briefed the Foreign Affairs Committee. We have collaborated on the programming of the legislative work, because these six months are brief in parliamentary terms, because the European Parliament will be breaking up due to the European elections, so we have less time at our disposal, in parliamentary terms. This also concerns the national parliaments, which have a say in these procedures, based on the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality, but there is a trade-off. This semester, which is shorter than usual in parliamentary terms, is denser and more intense politically, because it is the six months of preparation for the European elections, and, thus, the six months of the great pan-European debate on the future of Europe. Because we all have need of a new narrative for Europe.

It cannot be that in the minds of many European citizens in many societies of Europe, it cannot be that in the minds of young European citizens, Europe is identified with austerity, with unemployment, with the crisis. We need to renew the conversation on the major values. We need to talk again about the Europe of democracy, rights, rule of law, plurality, tolerance; the Europe of innovation, of competitiveness, of the rule of law and the social state that needs to overcome a twofold crisis: fiscal and demographic. Every European political current, every major European political party, every current of ideas and thought in Europe is saying this in its own words, but the common denominator is the need for us to once again point the way to a Europe that has a goal, that has a political concept that it can promote, responding to the new forms of Euroscepticism that are rife in many, many countries.

To the extent that this narrative – ahead of the European elections – concerns the initiatives of the European Council, and to the extent to which the European Council is prepared by the General Affairs Council, Greece, as the Presidency of the General Affairs Council, will be playing a coordinating and consensus-oriented role, so that the European Council, in the end, before the elections, can say things that go beyond the usual, that go beyond the bureaucratic, that are not cliché, but that are alluring and specific for the citizens of Europe's societies.

The general priorities of our Presidency this semester are the priorities of Europe's societies and of the vast majority of member states, because no one can question that the number-one major issue is a return to positive growth rates for Europe and for every country, dealing with the acute problem of unemployment – and especially youth unemployment – avoiding the pitfall of credit-less and jobless growth, and, of course,

restoring social cohesion, renewing the foundations of the European social state to the extent feasible, because in actuality this takes us to the problem of own resources, of the community budget, of the redistribution of the surpluses in the history of the EU.

The European Council and the European Parliament have already taken many decisions on these issues. The degree of implementation is limited. So we have much to do, not just in terms of introducing new ideas or new declarations, but also in terms of shaping the conditions for practical measures for immediate implementation, with the help of the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and all the other tools at our disposal.

Our second priority is the deepening of economic governance through the experiences of the crisis, on the level of the EU-28 as well as of the Eurozone of 18, with Latvia's recent accession. We know how important the banking union is from our experience with the crisis of the Greek banking system and the restructuring and recapitalization of the Greek banks.

We are very well aware of how important it is for there to be single supervisory and resolution mechanisms, how important it is to complete this mechanism, which is the new mechanism for resolution on the national and European level. There are reservations from the international banking market and the United States. For us, of course, a banking union without a third mechanism – as Mario Monti has long proposed, a single European deposit guarantee mechanism – cannot function, because the higher interest rates in some countries may be tempting for depositors, but the ultimate criterion for every depositor is the security of their deposits. And it will not suffice for this security to take the form of a Community Directive and a national mechanism. There has also to be a European mechanism. In the final analysis, at least for the 130 major, systemic banks, among which are the four major, restructured, recapitalized Greek banks, on which we have spent €50 billion from the loans we have received from our partners.

Our third major priority is the protection of European borders, the issue of mobility, the management of migration flows, in the light of a humanitarian crisis of dramatic proportions. The conscience of the European citizen cannot bear tragedies such as that in Lampedusa or other, smaller incidents we are facing, in our country as well, unfortunately, because we are a country with a very extensive coastline, a country on Europe's external border, and we are coming under these

pressures together with Italy, Malta, and Cyprus. So this is a priority of the Council and of the European Council.

There is an intensive programme on migration issues. We put the Med-Group back together again recently, with Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, Malta, France and Greece. It is significant that the EU-Turkey readmission agreement was signed, though it was unfortunate that this signing was accompanied by a statement of non-recognition of an EU member state, and the non-implementation of said agreement in the territory of a member state. But the functioning of this Readmission Agreement and other similar agreements is of catalytic importance in the management of migration flows, but it is even more important that we link this issue with the crisis in the southern neighbourhood, with the crisis in all the countries of the Mediterranean, of the Middle East and North Africa, because Europe is very, very close, and if we don't deal with the causes of the crisis, at the source of the crisis and, thus, at the source of refugee and migrant flows, we will not be able to confront the problem substantially and definitively, but I will talk to you about this shortly, with regard to the major pending issues.

Our fourth and horizontal priority, which concerns our very nature, our geography and history as a country, is integrated maritime policy. The Greece of shipping, the Greece of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean cannot but have a major interest in these issues, particularly following the Cypriot Presidency and the Limassol Declaration. We have agreed with the next Presidency – the Italian Presidency – to make 2014 a Mediterranean Year, with two six-month presidencies held by Mediterranean countries, for the continuation of this policy, which includes everything from issues of energy sources – mainly renewable – protection of the environment, maritime spatial planning, fisheries, to issues concerning the implementation of the International Law of the Sea and delimitation of maritime zones in the Mediterranean – delimitation that the relevant European Commission study showed to be of very great economic interest for all the member states. But of course we also have smaller, more practical goals, like the declaration of the Adriatic-Ionian macroregion and the promotion of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) into a pipeline – a branch of the TAP – that passes through this macroregion.

Naturally, there are priorities for each configuration of the Council. These priorities concern mainly the configurations being handled by the Foreign Ministry; the configuration, mainly, of the General Affairs Council, without our also having the Presidency of the Foreign Affairs Council.

My colleagues have presented these priorities to the European Parliament, and I think that there is willingness for extensive cooperation with the Hellenic Presidency. The trilogues with the Commission and the European Parliament have already started, and I think we will have significant results in the legislative procedures.

On the level of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), I had the opportunity and honor last Monday of briefing the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) on the conclusions of the latest European council. In recent months, our agenda consistently includes the major problems of the Southern Neighbourhood: Syria, Egypt, the Middle East peace process, the Geneva interim agreement with Iran on its nuclear programme. Now, of course, many other issues have been added. We are following the acute crisis in Ukraine, in the post-Vilnius era.

For us it is obvious that the geographical priority is the Southern Neighbourhood, but, as the Presidency, we will faithfully implement the conclusions of the Vilnius Summit on the eastern neighbourhood. We see how vital it is to manage the new crises, like that in the Central African Republic. Our decision for there to be a mission within the framework of Common Foreign and Security Policy is very important. In cooperation with France, Greece will host – in Larissa, at one of the five military installations available for CFSP operations – the training of the European unit that is to intervene in the Central African Republic.

We are implementing the conclusions of the 19 December 2013 European Council with regard to CSDP. We attach very great importance to cooperation with NATO on equal terms – organization-to-organization. It is very important to us that Europe always remember that it has 28 member states, including the Republic of Cyprus. It is very important to us that the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base be maintained. We also want to maintain the Hellenic Defence Industry, despite frequent pressure from the troika. One of our initiatives is the holding – in early June, in Athens, in cooperation with the EU High Representative – of the Joint meeting of EU and Arab League Foreign Ministers, satisfying a relevant request from the Arab League, and we are in very close cooperation with the Romanian Chairmanship of the SEECF, with the Bulgarian BSEC Chairmanship, and with the Swiss Chairmanship of the OSCE during these six months.

Enlargement policy is more strictly within our competencies. For us, the Text of the Conclusions of the latest European Council and General

Affairs Council of 19 and 20 December 2013 is very important with regard to enlargement. We are very, very glad that we had the opportunity to chair the Intergovernmental Conference for the opening of Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU. As the chairman of the Intergovernmental Conference, I expressed the twofold satisfaction of the Presidency and of the Greek Government at a development that is so very important for Serbia, as well as for Kosovo and the European perspective of the whole of the Western Balkans.

I will visit all the capitals in the region, including Skopje, naturally, because the matter of their accession is not a bilateral issue. It has to do with compliance with the general criteria that have to be met by all candidate countries, in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria and the Conclusions of the aforementioned European Council. Good neighbourly relations and respect for international law are not bilateral issues having to do with a name; they are fundamental criteria that must be met by every member state.

We are very interested in domestic policy, economic and social stability in Turkey. We are pleased that, after years, another chapter opened, and we want to see Turkey on a stable European track, which is, however, a track of democracy, rights and rule of law.

I referred briefly to the Eastern Neighbourhood, but I want to stress that we attach very great importance to the re-examination of EU-Russian relations through the upcoming summit meeting. We attach equally great importance to the Euroatlantic dialogue and the completion of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). We are not forgetting the southern neighbourhood's existing institutions, like the Union for the Mediterranean, but, naturally, we want to be practical and oriented towards specific results rather than endless procedures.

Organizationally, our Presidency is frugal. It has a limited budget. The necessary number of activities, here in Athens, with the focal point being Zappeion, an historic building that is associated with the revival of the Olympic Games. We attach importance to the Presidency's cultural activities, because Greece is identified with culture. You will perhaps have the opportunity in your capitals to see some of the cultural activities. In Brussels, the "Nautilus" exhibition is already open, exploring Greece's relationship with the sea, the timeless dialogue between ancient and contemporary art, between archaeological artifacts and works inspired by the sea, works of contemporary culture.

The Presidency's logo is a sailboat in full sail. This boat is our common home, and thus our Presidency's motto is, "Europe: Our common quest." The common quest, historically, can and must become an attainment. This is judged by the citizens and peoples. It is them that we are addressing. We are answerable to them, and it is from them that we hope new momentum will come for European integration, through the upcoming elections for the new European Parliament, and naturally for the persons who will hold vital institutional offices in the EU. Our Presidency will close in June, with the deliberations and negotiations regarding the new President of the European Council, the new President of the European Commission, and the new High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission. These are deliberations of an inter-institutional and intergovernmental nature, but there always remains a role, however limited, for the rotating Presidency of the Council, which we will still be exercising.

With these words, I want to welcome you once again and wish you every success in your parliamentary political and personal goals, because it is the office of MP that comes before all others. I would like to ask you to support the role of the Presidency institutionally; a role you perceive through the European institutional framework, but naturally without ignoring our own sensitivities and priorities. But we know how to maintain the distinction between the national and European levels.

Thank you.