

Address by Herman Van Rompuy on his election as President of the European Council (19 November 2009)

Caption: At their meeting of 19 November 2009, the Heads of State or Government of the 27 Member States of the European Union appoint Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy as the first permanent President of the European Council for the period from 1 December 2009 to 31 May 2012.

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Acceptance speech by Herman Van Rompuy following his nomination as first permanent President of the European Council

(FR) Though I find it especially difficult to relinquish the direction of my country, I accept your decision and would like to thank you for this honour. I take it as a mark of recognition towards Belgium, which, as a founding State, has dedicated itself constantly to the construction of Europe. I have not sought this high position. I have intervened in no way. But from tonight, I will take it up with conviction.

(EN) I think I speak on everyone's behalf when I thank our colleague and president Fredrik Reinfeldt for his remarkable efforts and when I express the hope that he will continue to lead his country's current Presidency until December 31 of this year, in accordance with an agreement within the European Council in December 2008, but also because of my respect for his achievements in this role.

(FR) The position to which you have just elected me is a new one. One of the aims of the Lisbon Treaty is to bring more continuity and coherence to the work of the European Council of Heads of State and Government. The six monthly presidencies held by one country have the advantage of involving every one of the 27 Member States in the work of the Union. They have the disadvantage of lacking perspective. It is my firm intention to ensure that our work develops over the long-term. A perspective that goes beyond six months will allow us to be better organized where the major multi-annual dossiers are concerned, such as the financial perspectives and the Lisbon Strategy.

I also think that a "return to the roots" of the European Council could help us to discuss from time to time, in an informal and open way, the big questions of the European project. I'm thinking more specifically of the economic and social agenda, this in particular being urgent; of the environmental and energy challenges; and of our aspirations for greater security and justice for all our fellow citizens.

We are living through exceptionally difficult times: the financial crisis and its dramatic impact on employment and budgets, the climate crisis which threatens our very survival. A period of anxiety, uncertainty and lack of confidence. Yet these problems can be overcome by common efforts in and between our countries. 2009 is also the first year of global governance, with the establishment of the G20 in the middle of the financial crisis. The climate conference in Copenhagen is another step towards the global management of our planet. Our mission is one of hope, supported by acts and action.

(EN) Our Union belongs to every one of us, we are not playing a zero-sum game. Europe must be in every Member State's advantage.

This cardinal principle leads me to a two-track approach: First of all, I will consider everyone's interest and sensitivities. Even if our unity is our strength, our diversity remains our wealth. Every country has its own history, its own culture, its own way of doing things. Our journey may be towards a common destination, but we will all bring along different luggage. Denying this would be counterproductive. Without respect for our diversity, we will never build our unity. I will always bear this principle in mind.

Logically, this principle has a consequence for our actions: as far as I am concerned, every country should emerge victorious from negotiations. A negotiation that ends with a defeated party is never a good negotiation.

(NL) As President of the Council I will listen carefully to everyone and I will make sure that our deliberations turn into results for everyone. There has been much debate about the profile of the future president of the Council's meetings, but only one profile is possible and it is one of dialogue, unity and action. The image of the Council is shaped by its results.

(FR) To ensure that all our deliberations can be concluded without defeated parties, the Institutions must work in an optimal way. After the painful path taken by the Lisbon Treaty, I think that, as from 1 December, the new institutional framework and the new rules that have been set up will be there for the long run, or even for the very long run. The institutional debate is closed for a long period. I wish for my part to make this framework and these rules, freely chosen by all our governments, work well. I will do so in permanent consultation with the Presidents of the Commission and of the European Parliament, ensuring, at all times, the equilibrium of our Institutions. I shall also do so alongside those of you whose governments, in turn, will be called upon to preside over the Council's work.

(EN) The three presidents must seek success. Negotiating will be the only right thing to do, tensions will be productive and produce result accordingly. Political impetus will remain indispensable, including support for concrete actions and projects, a token of genuine solidarity. Yet a step-by-step approach will remain useful in our political action as long as we keep a common perspective and direction: 'step by step', but not 'too little, too late'.

The Treaty entrusted the permanent President of the European Council with a special responsibility. In foreign affairs, he will represent the Union at his level and in his capacity. Thus, I will be present at the summit meetings with our partners across the world and I will put forward the positions that the Council has approved. In doing so, our position in the world, our security and our prosperity will all benefit from a stronger institutional presence. I also count on the President of the Commission to fulfil a similar role in areas other than the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The European Union is an economic player of importance, representing half a billion women and men and conducting a social project in which solidarity and creativity are essential. Europe is a Union of values. That is why we have a responsibility to play an important role in the world. There can be no future for this world without many of our values. It is also my hope that the Union will enlarge over the next two and a half years to include countries which, of course, meet the conditions.

(FR) It goes without saying that the High Representative will contribute in a decisive way to the day to day work of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. She will be our main player in foreign affairs. Thanks to her dual position, she will be able to draw, in a convergent way, on the multiple instruments of foreign policy which are at the disposal of our Institutions and our Member States. She will be able, at any time, to count on my support and advice. As has been my custom in Belgian politics, I will remain discreet in the media, certainly during the forthcoming weeks.

My whole political life has been marked by a search for understanding, respecting both adversaries and travel companions. I shall continue along this same path.

This speech was delivered on 19 November 2009 by Herman Van Rompuy, at that time Prime Minister of Belgium, following the announcement of his appointment as the first full-time President of the European Council.