



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL
THE PRESIDENT**



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**Remarks by President of the European Council
Herman Van Rompuy
following his meeting with
Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Bohuslav Sobotka**

Let me first of all thank Prime Minister Sobotka for his hospitality. Looking back at when I last visited Prague, almost exactly a year ago, the issues on the agenda are very much the same: the economic situation, energy and the Union's Eastern Neighbourhood. At first sight, one could say that not much has changed. At a closer look, it is clear that everything has changed.

First, the economy has turned around. Growth and confidence is returning, in the Czech Republic and in the rest of Europe. Exports continue to increase, deficits to decrease. Spain and Ireland have exited their programmes. Greece - with a primary budget surplus - has made a successful start to a return to market financing. Latvia joined the euro zone - as the 18th country - at the start of the year. The banking union is being put in place to prevent financial crises from happening again in Europe at the expense of citizens. So, the signs of recovery are many. Still, challenges remain and the high unemployment in many countries, not least among our young, leave no room for complacency. We need to continue our reform efforts to support the recovery while ensuring sound public finances. In this context, let me congratulate Prime Minister Sobotka and his government on the decision to join the other 25 signatories of the fiscal compact treaty. You are again in the heart of Europe.

P R E S S

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Secondly, our Eastern neighbourhood. The situation in Ukraine keeps evolving - sometimes hour by hour - but remains a source of great concern. It revives memories of a history, which we thought was over. It is vital that the door opened by the Geneva statement of April 17th is used and that we advance urgently towards true de-escalation.

The Ukrainian government has taken several steps to fulfil the Geneva pledges. Unfortunately, the continued violence and lawlessness in Eastern Ukraine runs counter to Geneva. And sadly Russia has not lived up to its commitments in the Geneva Joint Statement. The EU has introduced targeted sanctions in the form of visa bans and asset freezes against a number of individuals. We have made it equally clear that any further steps by the Russian Federation to destabilise the situation in Ukraine would lead to additional and far-reaching consequences for our relations in a broad range of economic areas. The European Commission has been asked to prepare such broader sanctions. At the same time, the EU is actively supporting the necessary political and economic reforms in Ukraine. Today, I expressed my gratitude to the Prime Minister for the continued support to the European and international efforts in finding a peaceful negotiated solution to the crisis.

Thirdly is the issue of energy. It impacts European competitiveness. It impacts climate change. And it impacts our security: our dependence on Russian gas - high also in this country - has become increasingly worrying in light of developments in Ukraine. At the last European Council in March, we decided to move decisively forward to address all three challenges and bring us closer to a genuine energy union. We asked the European Commission to present by June a plan to reduce our dependence. And some countries are already contributing actively to this.

Finally, a few words about the 10 year anniversary of the enlargement and the upcoming European elections. The Prime Minister and I participated in the Business Forum earlier today. A key theme there was the enormous benefits for new as well as old Member States of the enlargement on 1 May ten years ago. I will not repeat all this now but just stress what a historic change the enlargement was for the Czech Republic and the European continent. It reconfirmed the position of the Czech Republic in the heart of Europe - where it belongs. It created more freedom - for citizens to travel and for companies to do business across Europe. And in turn it has created more, much more welfare and prosperity for the citizens.

The 10 years anniversary of the Czech Republic's accession comes at the same time as the European elections. The elections are a time for citizens to reflect before giving their vote. And it is equally a time for politicians to reflect on their role and responsibilities. The European Union needs to prove its worth by delivering results in terms of prosperity and jobs, by making a difference. And we - politicians and opinion leaders - have to stand up for our European convictions, for our policies, like we do on Ukraine. Djekuji, thank you!