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Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council

Speech to the European Parliament following the June 26-27 European Council

Let me begin by expressing my warmest congratulations on your election. Some of you have been here long, many are new to this chamber; others, still, return after a period away – congratulations to you all.

Together you reflect the changed experiences of the people of Europe who voted for you – even compared to 2009, you all carry with you new expectations, new viewpoints on their behalf. Let me also congratulate President Martin Schulz on his unique reelection and I look forward to continuing our cooperation.

Indeed, we live at a time where many things at national and European level can no longer be taken for granted. Politics and prosperity as we knew them, jobs, borders, geopolitical stability, the European idea: all have come under pressure.

Our countries are leaving the worst economic period in a generation or more – a period for our Union where solidarity and responsibility have been put to the test like never before; and where, for the first time, we have experienced the true extent of our interdependence as European nations.

The euro – and with it the Union – has been saved from the existential threats of the financial crisis (and as President of the European Council, I am grateful for the constructive work of your predecessors in legislating for a more solid monetary union). The recovery is now slowly but solidly underway, and growth is returning to all our countries.

P R E S S

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But as Europe re-emerges, there are many challenges to be met. And a thirst for hope, for tangible results – that was clear, again, in the results of this European election. Working for the recovery is our biggest task, restoring confidence, preparing our Union for the future. And it is with this goal in mind that, last week, the European Council set out the Union's priorities for the years ahead.

It was an extraordinary meeting in many respects, not least because leaders met on Thursday in Ypres, at my invitation, to commemorate the outbreak of the First World War beneath the Menin Gate. It was not a ceremony about the end of the war, but about how it could start, about the mindless march to the abyss, the sleepwalking, and the millions killed on all sides. Four generations have passed, but the memories remain untouched. Of where we, as Europeans, come from, what we have overcome, what we must build, and what we must prevent. And this awareness remained very much with the Presidents and Prime Ministers in Ypres, on Thursday.

In giving the Union a direction for the years ahead, my intention for the European Council was not to meddle into the day to day legislative work, but to play its role under the Treaties, namely to *"provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and define its general political directions and priorities"*.

We agreed, unanimously, a programme of priorities for the next five years, to guide the action and planning of the EU institutions over that period. It is important that all institutions organise their work accordingly, and also that national parliaments are kept closely involved.

To this end, the European Council intends to hold a debate, on 16 July in the evening, around this programme with Jean-Claude Juncker – who the European Council, after a formal vote, is proposing to this Parliament as next Commission President.

The priorities we have set out are fivefold.

First: stronger economies with more jobs. Making the most of the single market; reinforcing the Economic and Monetary Union; promoting entrepreneurship, job creation and investment; and reinforcing our global attractiveness as a trading partner: all this will be vital work.

This means prioritising key goals, like the digital single market, strengthened economic coordination, smart regulation, and concluding good TTIP negotiations by 2015. It also means finding the right balance between fiscal discipline and the need to support growth – something which the in-built flexibility of our Stability and Growth Pact rules allows.

All of these were key points during our discussions last week, not least as part of the European semester; and leaders also stressed the importance of addressing overdue investment needs: in transport, telecom, energy, innovation, education – by mobilising means and fostering a positive environment for long-term investments.

Second priority: societies enabled to empower and protect all citizens. People expect Europe to defend their interests and keep threats at bay, but also to respect their identities and sense of belonging. Besides being a "great opener of opportunities", the Union must also be seen as a source of protection. In short: be stronger outside, and more caring inside. Which is why the focus must be on fairness, and life chances for all. Unlocking skills and talents, safeguarding freedoms, and tackling abuses and fraud which not only affect societies but undermine trust.

Third priority: a secure energy and climate future. This is one of the Union's major projects for the immediate future. We want to build an Energy Union to guarantee access to affordable, secure and green energy. The current context shows clearly the importance of reducing our energy dependency – also on Russian gas.

Energy will be a major topic for our October European Council, when leaders are expected to decide the Union's 2030 climate and energy framework. Last week, we took stock of progress, and I am confident that we will achieve a good result in 4 months' time, in line with the Union's ambitious agreed targets for 2050.

Fourth priority: a trusted area of fundamental freedoms. In this field also, cross-border issues call for cross-border solutions – whether on organised crime, or justice matters, or migration flows. European citizens increasingly work, study, do business, get married or divorced across countries. The Union must do its best to accompany these changes – above all it must consolidate the decisions and work currently in progress. This message was also at the heart of our review last Friday of the strategic guidelines in the field of Freedom, Justice and Security, as required by the Treaty.

On migration more specifically, it is important that our countries keep attracting talent and skills through legal migration, whilst dealing more robustly with irregular migration, also through better cooperation with third countries.

Fifth and final priority: effective joint action in the world. Maximising our global clout, engaging our global strategic partners, especially our transatlantic partners, and developing security and defence cooperation: these are all issues on which we as a Union must keep working these coming years. But the most pressing priority will remain being a strong partner in our neighbourhood.

To our East, Friday's historic signing of Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have opened up an ambitious path of cooperation. On Friday, after speaking with President Poroshenko, the European Council laid out a set of urgent and concrete steps on which our next decisions would depend. The Council will assess the situation and, should it be required, adopt the necessary decisions. The European Council leaders are committed to reconvene at any time for further significant restrictive measures.

The years ahead are going to be essential for our Union – a time of consolidation, perseverance, a time of change. Let me conclude therefore by wishing you well. May these be good years for our Union too.
