



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL
THE PRESIDENT**



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**Address by Herman Van Rompuy,
President of the European Council,
to the National Assembly of Armenia**

It is a great pleasure for me to be in Yerevan today. Armenia has brought so much to European history and culture – your country's influence is familiar to all Europeans, whether or not they have had the good fortune to visit. And I believe we have still much to share in the future!

On a personal note, I have always been captivated by your country's rich and remarkable history. As the most ancient Christian nation, you have among the most venerable churches and monasteries in the world!

It is an honour to address this assembly, which represents the people of Armenia in all their diversity.

Let me first thank you for this invitation to come here today, although the Parliament is presently not in session. The opportunity to engage directly with parliamentarians at this moment in our relations is one which I highly value, and I would like to assure you that I am here to listen and to learn.

I must say, Mr Speaker, that it is for me a very appropriate moment to stand in this chamber – the parliament is beginning a new mandate with an agenda for reforms which is important for your country, and important for the region. This commitment to reforms - reforms based on core values which we share - is an important signal for hope and change. Hope, and change, for which you have our full support.

P R E S S

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In deepening our ties we build on our shared values and aspirations. Europe recognises in Armenia a key partner in promoting international peace and security, in engaging in effective multilateralism, including for the peaceful settlement of disputes through the United Nations or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. I want to begin my remarks with this in mind, since the ambitions we have for our relationship with Armenia will only be achieved if they are built on peace, security and stability.

The situation in the region is a major challenge. A resolution of the conflict on Nagorno-Karabakh is the key to unlocking the region's enormous development potential and the prosperity that it can bring.

But for this to happen, much depends on the will not just of politicians, but also of citizens, to take difficult decisions and to work together, resisting the temptations of populist rhetoric and entrenchment.

The European project was born out of the idea that we would not be prisoners of our history, that we could overcome the scars of conflict and bring former enemies together to build a better future.

We started with small and manageable steps – the very first when former bitter enemies decided to mutualise their production of coal and steel, basic ingredients of war. One step led to another, tying the economies and societies on our continent ever closer together. Countries that had fiercely fought one another for centuries joined together to play a common role in the world.

Each stage along the way has brought its own challenges -- and we are facing some now -- yet this path has undeniably brought peace and prosperity to our continent.

The European Union is above all a community of values – values that we believe are worth defending and worth sharing. Armenia is a partner who wants to embrace these values. The closer association we are working to establish is directly linked to this aspiration, and it will take our relations to a new level, bringing our co-operation much more directly into the lives of citizens.

Uniting Europe was never going to be an easy task. Along the way, we have always managed to overcome difficulties through dialogue, consensus building and political will. Sometimes we have to admit we have made mistakes. The present economic and financial crisis is perhaps the most challenging one in the history of European integration. But if we can handle it with resolve, and with accountability, we will be stronger. There is much work still ahead, but we are determined to carry it out and lay the foundations for the future.

We are addressing systemic challenges for the Economic and Monetary Union, and working to make it fully secure, safe and stable. We are learning the lessons, in terms of fiscal discipline, structural reforms and deepening integration. But this has to be done in an accountable way, and it has to be done in a transparent way.

Armenia is intent on deepening its relations with the European Union, and this is something that we welcome. Your desire to bring your own standards and norms closer to those of the European Union represents a strategic choice for your country, which will lie at the heart of our new Agreement.

I believe we have a very solid framework for our co-operation. The European Union's renewed Neighbourhood Policy, which was launched last year, has clear goals: to offer greater support to partners engaged in building deep and sustainable democracies, and to support inclusive economic development more effectively.

One of its main features is the principle which we call "more for more", and I want to stress this because I believe Armenia has a lot to gain from it. At the basis of the Eastern Partnership lies a shared commitment to international law and fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as to market economy, sustainable development and good governance. Higher ambitions and achievements in these areas will attract higher levels of financial and technical support from the European Union: "more for more".

To take our relations to this new level of co-operation and support, Mr Speaker, there is no need to invent complicated new policies or agendas. The job ahead of us, a job where we will be working jointly, is already clearly set out in our agreements and instruments. I am glad in particular that our negotiations on an Association Agreement with its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area are quietly moving forward. The same is true for our work on visa facilitation.

Much of the work we do together requires efforts, patience and commitment and not all of it gets the political recognition it deserves – we need “champions” to support it and it is in this house that I would expect to find those champions.

At the same time, citizens and civil society organisations, NGOs of course but also trade unions or the media, can also play a crucial role in driving forward reforms which meet real needs and which stand the test of time.

Let me try to illustrate what I have said about our joint road ahead with a few observations I have drawn when reviewing recent reports on internal developments in Armenia, and on the progress in our bilateral relations.

The first remark I would like to make is on democracy. I am glad that the elections on 6 May demonstrated progress towards a more transparent and competitive electoral system. This was an important step forward, and I encourage Armenia to continue on this path, by strengthening democratic institutions, promoting transparency, human rights and the rule of law. At the same time, it is clear that a number of issues still need to be addressed to further improve the electoral system.

Valuable work has been done by the observers of the OSCE/ODIHR as identified in their Final Report. I trust these issues could be addressed in good time for the presidential elections next year.

My second remark is more generally related to what I would call the “core reforms”, those we really need to get right if our political association is to fulfil its potential. The European Union welcomes Armenia’s reform efforts and advancement of Human Rights and the Rule of Law. But there are critical areas such as free speech, press and broadcasting, religious freedom and anti-discrimination where still more can be done, and we will certainly want to look again at the reform priorities agreed between us in areas like justice, human rights, the media and nuclear energy.

So, I hope that Armenia continues to focus its efforts on pursuing genuine reforms. You can count on our support and that is why I wanted to join you today – to show that our commitment is sincere and lasting, and held at the highest level by the European Union. In line with the “more for more” principle, so provided Armenia takes the right steps, we are ready to scale up our support.

As I move to my conclusion, I would like to return to the regional context. The benefits of the Eastern Partnership cannot fully be realized without a sustained effort to build stability -- stability between neighbours. Indeed, the medium to long-term goals of our future agreement make no sense if the threat of conflict is going to be a permanent presence in the background. But let me be clear: this is a reality and it has to be faced. The European Union will continue to insist that Armenia and Azerbaijan step up their efforts to reach agreement. The so-called Madrid Principles remain a valid basis for peace, in accordance with the commitments made by the Presidents of both your countries to France, Russia and the United States as co-chairs of the OSCE's Minsk Group. And we will continue to ask for unconditional access for representatives of the European Union to Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions.

I was with great concern that I learnt about the recent serious armed incidents along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the line of contact. I deeply regret the loss of human life. The clock cannot be turned back on these tragic incidents, but lessons can be learned.

The European Union calls on both sides strictly to respect the ceasefire and exercise restraint, on the ground and in public statements, in order to prevent a further escalation of the situation. Threats and the use of force do not contribute to a resolution of this persisting conflict.

The efforts of the Minsk Group and its co-chairs to seek a peaceful resolution have our full support. Where useful, we stand ready to provide extra assistance for confidence building measures. And once there is a settlement agreement the EU will be ready to help implementing it including with rehabilitation assistance.

Finally, I would like also to say a few words on the relations between Armenia and Turkey. Obviously this is a relationship which has been loaded by history: I am fully aware of that.

The European Union will continue to encourage both sides to remain committed to the process of normalization of bilateral relations, without preconditions from any side.

I am deeply convinced that fully normalising these relations with our common neighbour and EU candidate country would be an exceptionally positive contribution to security, stability and cooperation in the Southern Caucasus and beyond.

The path of prosperity, sustained development and security is also the path of genuine reforms, democracy and peace. Progress in the resolution of the regional conflict will have a positive impact on the growth and investment potential of Armenia and of the region, since it will encourage confidence from investors and partners, allowing you to enjoy the rewards which this great nation should be enjoying. What is needed now is more trust, more contacts, more confidence-building. The status quo is no option.

Without trust, there will never be peace. And trust will depend on both sides showing leadership and compromise.

Every effort -- every small step -- towards a peaceful, negotiated settlement will bring the entire region closer to the secure and prosperous future that its citizens deserve.

I remain convinced that your resolve can pave the way towards this brighter future. The citizens of Armenia -- the men and women who voted for you -- would expect no less.
