

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos' opening statements at his press conference on the results of the Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Tuesday, 01 July 2014

E. VENIZELOS: Good morning. I thank you for being here. In particular let me note the presence of the Ambassadors of the EU member states, who are honoring us with their presence, and the Embassy press attachés. The presence of the Ambassadors is a great honor, but it also indicates how the Hellenic Presidency, which ends today, was received.

So, ladies and gentlemen, today, 30 June, the fifth Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the European Union comes to a close. Our fifth presidency since joining the European Communities.

The semester that ends today was a semester full of challenges, but, allow me to say, also full of achievements.

The Prime Minister and I will have the opportunity this evening – here at the same venue, the symbolic venue of Zappeion, which housed the Hellenic Presidency – to refer to the intensity of the first semester of 2014 at a brief closing ceremony.

For the purposes of our discussion, allow me to remind you that this semester was not only the semester of the Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the European Union, but also the semester of municipal, regional and European elections. The European elections concerned the 28 member states of the European Union, but here in Greece we also had politically charged municipal and regional elections.

This semester was the semester of the confirmation of the primary surplus that our country achieved in 2013, with all that that means for the completion of fiscal adaptation and exiting the crisis. And, of course, this semester was a semester full of international crises, topped by the Ukraine crisis, and, as such, the crisis in the relations between the West and Russia, with major impacts in all sectors, and mainly in the energy sector.

I said when the Presidency began that we possess a considerable institutional memory at the Foreign Ministry and throughout Greece's public administration, due to the previous four presidencies, which are associated with major developments in European affairs – mainly with major waves of enlargement of the European Union, which, during Greek presidencies, went from the Europe of 12 to the Europe of 15, and from the Europe of 15 to the Europe of 25.

We set clear priorities for the Hellenic Presidency of this semester. You are all well aware of these priorities. Priorities identified in reality with the concerns and needs of

the peoples of the European Union. We tried to organize the Presidency with a maximum of professionalism and as frugally as possible, and I think this combination worked.

We also managed to have the highest possible degree of internal coordination; that is, interministerial coordination in Greece. We coordinated all the individual configurations of the Council of the European Union, through the coordinating role of the General Affairs Council. And I must also point out here the role of the Committee of Permanent Representatives – Coreper I and II – and the Political and Security Committee.

We hosted our fifth Presidency of the Council of the European Union in a climate of close and productive cooperation with the permanent presidencies of the European Council, President Rompuy, of the Foreign Affairs Council, EU High Representative and Vice President of the Commission Catherine Ashton – and naturally in collaboration with her services – and also in coordination with the permanent Presidency of the Eurogroup, which is connected with issues of ECOFIN, one of the most important Council configurations.

We worked in full coordination with the President and members of the Commission, the European Commission, and, of course, in cooperation with the College of Commissioners. We also have very good and amicable cooperation with the Secretariat of the Council.

I would like in particular to stress – not out of institutional obligation, but because it reflects the truth – our very good cooperation with the outgoing European Parliament, under President Martin Schulz, with the Conference of Committee Chairs, with the chairs of all the Committees of the European Parliament.

Allow me to note, as the Foreign Minister, the cooperation with the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and chairperson Brok, and, naturally, with the Plenary and with all the Parliamentary Groups of the European Parliament.

I think it is very important that we make some indications of a statistical nature. Over 161 meetings were held in Greece, with 21 on the ministerial level. Under the Greek Presidency, 36 meetings of the Council – in various configurations – were held in Brussels and Luxembourg. Over 1,500 meetings were held of 150 different working groups. Sixty-seven meetings of Coreper I and II were held. Zappeion hosted over 12,000 members of delegations and over 3,000 journalists from European and international media outlets, technicians and communications-related people.

It is also very important to remember that the Hellenic Presidency held a frugal but symbolic cultural programme. Our communication policy, from the outset, with the Presidency's logo and motto, was met very warmly and rewarded. It had – thanks to

the Presidency spokesperson, Mr. Koutras, his alternate, the personnel of the Foreign Ministry and, naturally, of the Secretariat General for Communication – a very strong presence on the web and with the Presidency’s website, as well as on twitter, which got a very big response.

Allow me, before I move ahead to a political account, to express my warm thanks to my closest collaborator on Presidency issues, the Deputy Foreign Minister for European Affairs, Dimitris Kourkoulas, who stood in for me in a number of activities at the Council and the European Parliament. Deputy Foreign Minister Kyriakos Gerontopoulos, who took on longer-range and multilateral missions, usually beyond Europe.

I would like to thank the Foreign Ministry’s Secretaries General – Secretary General Ambassador Mitsialis and Secretary General for International Economic Relations Mihalos – and all of the Foreign Ministry personnel and Greek public administration personnel in general. I would like to make special reference to the Director General for European Affairs, Ambassador Alexandra Papadopoulou, the Permanent Representative to the European Union, Ambassador Theodoros Sotiropoulos, Deputy Permanent Representative Andreas Papastavrou, and the head of the Presidency Office in Athens, Ambassador Dimitris Karamitsos-Tziras.

Before I review the political achievements of the Presidency, I would once again like thank all of the sponsors, who we will honor in an appropriate manner, because without them, we would not have been able to respond with the necessary flexibility on all issues.

Needless to say, from the very outset we were in very close coordination with the next Presidency, which starts tomorrow: the Italian Presidency. We agreed on the priorities. Together with the Italian Presidency we have put together what really is a Mediterranean Year in the European Union. It is no coincidence that the Med-Group was put together again during the Hellenic Presidency, with the seven Mediterranean member states of the European Union. We have already met twice: once in Brussels, and once in Alicante, Spain.

And I am pleased because, with Italy, the other two presidencies that make up the next trio – the Presidencies of Latvia and Luxembourg – are truly prepared to continue the work started by the Greek Presidency, which, in turn, capitalized as much as possible on the achievements and efforts of the Lithuanian Presidency. This is an ongoing EU relay that is of very great importance, because it points up a principle that must not be forgotten: the principle of the institutional equality of all the member states.

And if you want me to put into a single phrase the greatest challenge of the Hellenic Presidency of the semester that ends today, this challenge was the Greece of the crisis,

which fuelled many articles, many negative and unfair comments, many stereotypes that do not reflect the reality of recent years. So this challenge was for Greece, based precisely on the principle of the institutional equality of the member states, to exercise the presidency for the fifth time, to exercise the Presidency in an organized, effective, professional and, in the end, successful manner, because this points to a Greece that is different, a Greece of normalcy, a Greece that can successfully direct the procedures of the European Union on the level of the Council, representing the Council credibly and in a dignified manner at the European Parliament and internationally, within the framework of the responsibilities of the rotating Presidency, and not the responsibilities of the permanent presidencies and the EU High Representative in particular.

So I remind you that the first priority we set for ourselves as the Presidency was growth and the creation of new jobs – matters linked with employment, and with youth employment in particular.

It is very important that in this sector in particular – the sector of growth and employment – we managed over the course of these six months to put emphasis on the EU's own resources package, which can ensure the timely and steady funding of European policies in the context of the multiannual financial framework.

From this point of view, the agreement on the funding of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund – which ensures the uninterrupted funding of the new common Fisheries Policy of the Union – and the adoption of legislative acts of the single market, with the ultimate goal of strengthening the competitiveness of the European economy and the quality of services provided, to the benefit of the citizen, are two characteristic developments.

An even more characteristic development is our effort towards the activation of the EU's Youth Employment Initiative, which concerns the heart of the European problem, which is high youth unemployment and providing prospects for the absorption of young people, up to the age of 24, into the job market.

The second priority concerned the deepening of the Eurozone and economic governance in the European Union and the Eurozone. It is already very well known that we managed to agree on the regulation for the Single Resolution Mechanism, which is an important step in the direction of the Banking Union, in combination with the intergovernmental agreement on the Single Resolution Mechanism.

Also completed were a significant number of pieces of legislation in the sector of the financial services market, which are aimed at strengthening the security and transparency of the financial system, as well as the accountability of those involved.

Anything that has to do with economic governance, with the Banking Union, with

financial services does not concern bankers or banks, but citizens, their deposits, businesses, and SMEs in particular, that are trying to get access to the European banking system, and the truth is that a truly single market will never be able to function in the European Union if there is not a single Banking Market and if the major internal inequalities in this sector between the member states are not resolved.

These inequalities have to do principally with two matters: interest rates on loans to businesses, and particularly to SMEs. A Greek SME cannot borrow at an interest rate 5 or 6 points higher than that at which a German business borrows. And the second very important element is for there to be the same sense of security of deposits on a pan-European level, precisely for there not to be a flow of deposits from peripheral countries – from the weaker countries of the European Union – to the stronger countries of Europe.

Our third priority put emphasis on protection of the European Union's borders, management of migrant flows and movements, mainly through the promotion of the debate on the future of the European space of freedom, security and justice.

I think we managed to make it clear that migration is not a problem just of the countries of the European south or the countries on Europe's external borders. Rather, it is a problem of a pan-European nature, because its impact on the economic growth and cohesion of the European Union is felt by everyone, though to a different extent and at a different intensity. From this point of view, we think that perhaps the Hellenic Presidency's greatest achievement was the setting of the strategic guidelines for legislative and operational planning in the sector of Justice and Home Affairs. This is the so-called package of European Union measures. This new text once again places at center stage the principle of solidarity and burden sharing among the member states. It places this principle, in practice, at the center of our policies on asylum and the management of borders and migrant flows. It links migration with the Union's foreign policy, with development cooperation and cooperation with third countries. It introduces the principle of positive conditionality into the European Union's cooperation with third countries, and it includes the development of effective visa and readmission policies.

The fourth pillar of our priorities, as you will remember – our so-called horizontal priority – was a comprehensive maritime policy, which reflects the nature of our country as a shipping and island country.

Over the past six months, Greece pointed up the value of the sea as a source of prosperity and security for European citizens and set the terms that must govern maritime governance, with the aim of ensuring security and capitalizing on the opportunities arising from maritime activities for the economy of the European Union and its member states.

A pivotal development in this area was the adoption of the European Maritime Security Strategy at last week's General Affairs Council, on 24 June 2014, which was the last General Affairs Council of our Presidency. We reached an agreement on an exhaustive inventory of the strategic interests of the Union and its member states, which will facilitate the promotion of these interests. We pointed up the importance of the delimitation of maritime zones to the economy and prosperity of the European Union, as well as to the citizens themselves and to energy security and the importance of energy security to the European economy.

The Strategy for Maritime Security sets out and delimits in a clear manner the term "external maritime borders," and it points up the importance of patrolling these borders and confronting relevant threats: migration, piracy, terrorism and other illegal activities. It also notes the importance, as a frame of reference, of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This, as you can see, is of obvious importance to Greece, given that a large portion of our national border is also the external border of the European Union.

The new Maritime Security Strategy points to solidarity amongst the member states in confronting threats in the maritime space as a basic principle governing this strategy. It ensures respect for the principle of the autonomous decision-making of the European Union within the framework of the Union's cooperation with international organizations, such as the UN and NATO, as well as with third countries, for the joint management of threats in the maritime space.

We have to bear in mind that 90% of the Union's external trade and 40% of its internal trade is transported by sea. The European Union is ranked third among exporters and is in fifth place among producers of fishery products. Over 400 million passengers travel through the ports of Europe every year. I think this gives us an idea of the magnitude of this achievement from an economic and political standpoint.

Beyond that, I would like to note certain achievements in the sector of European institutions. One important development is the adoption of the Regulation and status and funding of European political parties and European political institutions. Also important is the fact that we pointed up various aspects of the principle of solidarity as a fundamental principle of the European Union.

On the one hand, I should point out the new regulations for the European Solidarity Fund, which will allow for shorter reaction time in cases of natural disasters, and on the other hand, the decision on the manner of implementation.

The solidarity clause is provided for by the treaties and is now being put into implementation. Practically, this means the strengthening of the joint actions of the

member states and of the Union for assistance to member states in cases of terrorist attacks or man-made or natural disasters.

Apart from this, there were, of course, our longstanding priorities with regard to the enlargement of the European Union in the Western Balkans, as well as with regard to the Neighbourhood Policy, and to us this meant mainly sustaining the southern dimension and contact with the Middle East and North Africa, with the Arab world in general, because, in any case, the Eastern Neighbourhood, due to the crisis in Ukraine, was the focus of international attention throughout this semester.

You will allow me to note that, during our Presidency, we hosted the Ministerial Conference of the Foreign Ministers of the European Union and the Western Balkan countries, on 8 May, in Thessaloniki, to revitalize the Thessaloniki Agenda launched during our 2003 Presidency.

Our meeting provided an opportunity to reaffirm our support for the Euroatlantic perspective of all the countries of the Western Balkans. The conclusions of this meeting will, I think, impact future relevant decisions from the Council and the European Council.

In terms of the Southern Neighbourhood, you will allow me to attach particular importance to the fact that we hosted here in Greece, on 10 and 11 June, in Athens, here at Zappeion, the Meeting of EU and Arab League Foreign Ministers.

Very important conclusions were drawn from this Meeting, impacted, naturally, by the ongoing crises in Iraq and Syria. But many bilateral meetings were held – of equal importance to the meeting we had in Brussels, on the margins of the EU-Africa Summit.

Equally important is the fact that, during the Hellenic Presidency, we had important developments concerning the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood. We had the pleasure of welcoming the political leadership of Moldova here, on the day the visa constraints were lifted, and we also had the opportunity to chair a number of Association Councils or intergovernmental conferences that were of great importance in this area.

Indicatively, I note that, during the Hellenic Presidency, we held EU Association Councils, Association or Stability and Association Councils, with Iraq, Uzbekistan, Tunisia, Albania, Algeria, Turkey, Montenegro, and Moldova.

We had the honor of chairing the first Intergovernmental Conference for the opening of accession negotiations with Serbia, as well as the EU-Montenegro Intergovernmental Conference, at which we opened another 5 substantial chapters in Montenegro's accession negotiations with the European Union.

In particular, allow me to note the EU-Turkey Association Council that was held last week, on 23 June, in Luxembourg. At this Council we had the opportunity – on behalf of the European Union, naturally – to point up the importance of Turkey's accepting a very simple reality: that the European Union has 28 member states, including the Republic of Cyprus, with everything that this means for the implementation of the Ankara Protocol, as well as for the ratification and implementation of the readmission agreement signed recently by the European Union and Turkey.

The fact that, at the General Affairs Council of 24 June 2014, under the Greek Presidency, accession-candidate status was granted to Albania also pleases us, because Albania is very well aware that this status is granted within the framework of the European Acquis, European Law, the Copenhagen political criteria, and, naturally, international law.

I remind you that candidate status was granted to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2005. Turkey not only has candidate status, but is a country in open negotiation with the European Union, at the rate, of course, at which chapters open. And chapters are opened by unanimous decision of the member states, because this process is of a strictly intergovernmental nature.

I think this provides a snapshot of what we managed to do during this semester; a semester that was parliamentarily shorter than usual, because our contact with the European Parliament lasted only four, rather than six, months, due to the European elections.

The Greek Presidency coincided with the European elections. To the extent possible, we handled – within the framework of the European Council and, thus, of the General Affairs Council, which prepared the meetings of the European Council – the major issue of a new narrative for Europe.

A narrative that responds to the various forms of euroscepticism; a narrative that responds to the real concerns of European citizens, who, in many European states, do not see how it is possible for Europe to be identified with austerity measures, with slower growth rates, or with unemployment, and with youth unemployment in particular.

This is a major issue that is being faced – and must be faced – by the European Union on the level the European Council and on the level of the Council and the European Parliament. We are now in the process of filling posts at the EU institutional organs, based on the results of the recent European elections.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker, because he was proposed by the European Council for the post of President of the next

European

Commission.

As a choice, this respects the new strengthened role of the European Parliament, the votes of European citizens, and a parliamentary interpretation, I would say, of the Lisbon Treaty.

And because, at a very critical phase for Greece, I have worked closely with Mr. Juncker, President of the Eurogroup, I know that he is a man who can operate constructively, not just synthesizing, but often transcending, as a genuine European who is conscious of the difficulties the EU has and of the sensitivities and reservations of many member states.

In the context of our Presidency, we had the opportunity to organize, at the General Affairs Council, with President van Rompuy in attendance, a very interesting debate on how to interpret and implement the principle of conditionality, and I believe that this, now, can be used by the new Commission and the Council in contact with the new European Parliament.

It is also very important to stress – and I will close with this – that journalistic interest may easily focus on the choice of persons who will fill critical European posts, but for the peoples and citizens of Europe, the issue is not the choice of one person or another, but the choice of one policy or another.

A smarter and more effective policy might be based on the existing texts for the Stability and Growth Pact, but the existing texts must be interpreted in such a way as to really fuel growth and job creation, and to create prospects for European citizens of all ages, and for young Europeans in particular.

From this perspective, the Greek Presidency did everything it could. We know the limits of each rotating Presidency. We do not lack a sense of proportion from this perspective. But we believe that insistence on the principle of the institutional equality of member states is of very great importance.

And finally, it is of even greater importance for us, as Greeks, to say that Greece showed that it is and will remain a normal, institutionally equal member of the European Union and the Eurozone.

Thank you very much.