

Ladies and gentlemen,
Members of the European Parliament,

As a former colleague of yours, on top of feeling honoured today, I am also thrilled and touched to be here in front of you, on the occasion of the commencement of the fifth Greek Presidency.

I address you today, you who embody the common consciousness of European citizens and the common desire of our people, to move forward with European integration.

I also address you as Chairman of the Council, an institution that expresses the sovereign will of the Member States to proceed with the Unification of Europe.

I would like to make a special reference to the European Commission, the institution that has implemented and monitors daily European integration in all its aspects and details.

We have thus the consciousness of the European Union, which is you; we have the sovereign will and the key blueprint of European Integration, which is the Council; and we have the delivery mechanism, which is the Commission: that is, the soul, the mind and the body of the European Idea.

There were times perhaps when these three pillars were not in absolute harmony with each other. Indeed ...

But we would not have come to where we are had they not figured out a way of working together and maintaining a balance. Their complementarity and balance was Europe's great achievement. It is what we work for and continue to support; and this is my first commitment to you.

As someone who was one of you a few years ago, I am aware of your anxieties. They were my own anxieties as well. The European Parliament must be strengthened. It is your ambition; and it was my ambition. The European Parliament should be able to control the decisions and project to the core of decision-making the needs and interests of the European citizen.

We all wish for a strong, hence responsible, European Parliament. We are proud of the growth of its influence. Greece as a country has supported this for years. And we are confident now that with its increased jurisdictions, it will use them to bring the ideals of a united Europe closer to the European citizen.

I am moreover addressing you at a very critical moment. United Europe has been tested in recent years. Its coherence has been tested, its strength has been tested, even an entire edifice, its common currency, has been tested: and important "structural deficits" were made apparent...

Now, however, the crisis is beginning to be overcome. Not by itself. Not automatically. The crisis is being overcome because Europe has begun to overcome its weaknesses, to see its mistakes and to begin fixing them. We have therefore shown

in the course of the crisis, and because of the crisis, that United Europe works. The changes that we launched in the last two years must be completed; and we must go even further.

The crisis showed us that we need "more and better Europe"! This is what we are doing. And this is the next my commitment to you: that we move even more decisively, further beyond, in the following period.

So that in the coming euro elections next May, which coincide with the end of the Greek Presidency, European citizens will not vote with the bitter aftertaste of the crisis, but with the feeling, the hope that the crisis is being overcome and that Europe comes out stronger and better.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

I am also addressing you as Prime Minister of Greece, the country most tested by this crisis.

My country has been tried in recent years to the point that no other member of the European Union ever has. It has been tried on account of its own mistakes, which went on for decades. It was even tried on account of structural weaknesses of the single currency. Finally, it was also tried because of errors in the development of the first **program**, as was the case of the "multiplier" that underestimated the impact of the first program in the recession that followed, which turned out to be much greater...

Greece was tested, but pulled through! And now it is changing radically, transcending its faults and is on the road to consolidation and recovery. I know that a lot has been said in this chamber - both positive and negative - for this period. Let us hold on to one thing here: Greece has abided by its commitments and honored its signature. In other words: we delivered!

And I want to communicate my own personal experience: to fail, my friends, is not to fall down but to fail to stand up again! When you fall, and then stubbornly pull yourself up again, with faith and with head held high, then it is a notable success. And I am proud that my country, through unimaginable painful sacrifices of our people, is back on its feet today.

This is why I will say a few words right now:

In the recent past, Greece has managed the largest fiscal adjustment ever made, and in the shortest time: within four years, it managed to reduce the deficit by 13 % of current GDP ! But in order to do this, it suffered a decrease of its GDP by 25 %, the largest GDP decrease borne globally since the Great Depression of the 30's! In six consecutive years of recession, the average Greek has endured on average a 38% decrease in his standard of living as compared to 2007.

The unemployment rate of 7 % is today well over 27%, while among young people under 25, it has skyrocketed to 60 %. I sincerely hope that no other country has to live through such a trial, to experience anything such ever again.

But what's most important is that in such conditions of prolonged recession, Greece launched one of the most ambitious, one of the most sweeping reform programs and structural changes that have ever existed. In the international rankings by OECD, Greece already ranks first place internationally in the implementation of structural changes. And the results were evident: According to all surveys, we have recovered our lost competitiveness since 2002, while eliminating the deficit in our trade balance.

In 2013, for the first time, Greece achieved a fiscal primary surplus. It attained a current account surplus for the first time in many years. As for 2014, the first rebound is foreseen after 6 years of recession.

We have no illusions. We have traveled a long distance, but still have a long way to go. We still have a lot to do. We have however managed to stabilize the country, the economy and society. In order to grasp the magnitude and importance of what we have achieved, suffice it to say that today Greece has the largest structural primary surplus in Europe and the Eurozone. And what structural primary surplus means is that if Greece realised its economic potential, then Greece could not only fully meet its current needs - already covered by the primary surplus - but to also cover its interest payments and have a surplus each year to reduce its debt.

And this is what we are trying for now: to accelerate sustainable development from now on, in order to do away with any need for support; and to be able to successfully complete structural changes. And why is this? It is because reforms, dear friends, are much more easily accomplished in conditions of recovery and growth, rather than in conditions of prolonged recession, which we are thankfully now overcoming...

All of this of course has been achieved thanks to the unprecedented sacrifices and maturity of the Greek people. But it has also been achieved also thanks to the support of our partners. And from this position, I wish to thank the people of Europe for their solidarity towards Greece. I particularly want to thank the European Parliament. I want to thank President Barroso, with whom we were in constant contact during the most difficult hours of this enterprise.

And so Greece avoided a disorderly bankruptcy and achieved the largest debt reduction ever made without going through bankruptcy. This is a European achievement, and one we must not underestimate .

Mistakes were made indeed, in the first phase of the program. I had pointed out these mistakes from the ranks of the Opposition, and I had been working towards rectifying them since then. Consequently, as Government, we fixed them to a large degree. Thus, while the program showed no signs of succeeding in the first years, now the main objectives are not merely attained, but at times exceeded, as was the case with the primary surplus planned for 2014, already achieved in 2013.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

A year and a half ago, my country was on the verge of destruction, and many speculated - while many felt sure - that it would exit the eurozone. Some even anticipated that this would lead to the breakup of the eurozone. Others even

proclaimed that the European Union would fall apart! We have proven all doomsayers wrong!

Today the picture is quite different. Greece has proven that Europe works, that Europe can do it, that our union is strong. And we have proven this in the most convincing way, by overcoming the crisis and rising stronger than ever.

A year and a half ago, we were the weakest link in the Union. Today we are assuming the EU Presidency and I believe that Greece thus becomes the symbol that Europe can survive the crisis, Europe can go forward, that Europe works and it can make it.

Dear friends,

The presidency agenda is very specific. We will first and foremost proceed with all agenda issues already put forward, to which we will add some new ones. All these are summarized in four major priorities:

Firstly, stimulating growth and employment: because unemployment undermines the cohesion of societies most affected by the crisis, but also threatens the cohesion of Europe as a whole. When countries are in a state of stagnation, they maintain the illusion that they can be saved by themselves. This is an illusion we must fight. Together we can achieve much more and much faster. And this "coming together" requires that we come out of the state of prolonged stagnation. Because recession pulls apart, it does not bring together.

Moreover, we must find the balance between consolidation and sustainable growth. Between the fiscal consolidation that we need and the growth that we seek. Only then can Europe remain a competitive economy with internal cohesion.

In the long-term, growth does not run against fiscal discipline: the one is the prerequisite of the other.

In the long-term, competitiveness does not run against Social Justice. The one cannot exist without the other.

The precise framework to promote Growth, Employment, and Cohesion consists of the following:

- the mid-term review of the "Europe 2020" strategy beginning in the first quarter of 2014,
- the "Pact for Growth and Employment " which we adopted at the European Council in June 2012 ,
- the deepening of the Single Market
- the new Multiannual Financial Framework and

- the coordination of economic policies within the 'European Semester' , in which the role of the European Parliament , and the National Parliaments, is rightly extended.

Promoting the financing of the real economy, with a focus on SMEs is of primary importance for the Greek Presidency. The joint initiative of the EU Commission and the European Investment Bank, offering specific alternatives for the financing of small-medium European businesses, has the full support the Greek Presidency.

We will help in every way possible to the success of this initiative. The aim is to improve growth rates with labor intensive projects in sectors such as transport, energy, shipping and tourism. Interventions through investment are absolutely necessary in order to avoid the risk of a jobless recovery. Funding initiatives to combat unemployment, such as 'Youth Guarantee ' are important, but not sufficient means to prevent this risk.

At the same time, we need to continue the debate on long-term financing of the European economy, a discussion which began in March 2013 with the 'Green Paper' of the European Commission.

Furthermore, the Greek Presidency will promote the objectives of the "Pact for Growth and Employment", as well as the integration of the Single Market, the fight against tax evasion and tax fraud, the enhancement of innovation, the improvement of the regulatory framework in the EU and the strengthening of Foreign Trade.

Secondly, supporting our common currency, as well as enhancing confidence in the European economy. This means deepening of the EMU, with the key immediate step being the completion of the Banking Union. We will work closely with you (in the trilogue) to get to the adoption of the Single Resolution Mechanism (SRM), which would break the vicious circle between banking and sovereign debt, without any concessions to the single European nature of the mechanism. And thus the European financial system will effectively be shielded. It is difficult, but we need to get it done. Only yesterday, I am pleased to say, we had a first success: a few hours earlier, there was political agreement in principle, regarding both the Regulation and the Directive on the key market of financial instruments, the MifID- II.

Of course, we should never forget the social dimension of the EMU. We must not forget that a solid banking system does not only concern 'bankers', it concerns depositors, investors, it ensures the liquidity that an economy needs. But it also concerns the trust that is essential to producing liquidity. Finally, it directly concerns competitiveness and employment. All these are neither different, nor in competition with one another. They are different aspects of what we call "more and better Europe", a Europe of stability, confidence and growth.

Thirdly, we need to give an answer to the immigration issue, whose tragic dimension emerges almost daily in the sea and land borders of Europe. We need overall management of this purely European problem. It may affect more some of us: the countries on the geographical boundaries of the [European] Union. Yet, this concerns all of us.

The principles that should govern our approach are solidarity among partners, shared responsibility for the protection of the common European border, proportionality in burden sharing and - of course - the engagement of third countries from which migratory flows originate or pass through to get to us. Because the phenomenon must be efficiently tackled at its source; and that includes provisions for repatriation of illegal immigrants, those who do not come from conflict areas and who do not qualify for asylum. But here, I want to stress to you that we have a purely humanitarian duty: combat criminal networks that traffic people - and this is what is most tragic - as if they were objects, from different areas of the world, to Europe.

Finally, Greece aims to give new impetus to the EU Maritime Policies. Member States and institutions are already working towards their strengthening and implementation. However, it is deemed necessary to redefine, reconsider these policies in order to meet the citizens' needs, but also to face tomorrow's challenges, in the best possible way.

We intend to move along a double axis: Growth, including the energy sector, and Security, which includes the demarcation and management of European maritime zones. Do not forget that the underwater wealth can be the answer to the great problems of our energy supply in the foreseeable future. May I remind you that since 2004, when I was a MEP, we used to hear it in the EU auditoriums that "Europe must at last address the problem of energy insecurity".

I will also refer to a pivotal topic of European policy, that of European Enlargement! Greece has extensively supported the European course of enlargement countries, and especially of the Western Balkans. As far as this issue is concerned, we are interested in being practical and effective.

The accession process for countries of the aforementioned region has acquired a strong impetus in the last two years, thanks to the accession of Croatia, the beginning of accession negotiations with Montenegro, and the granting of candidate status to Serbia. These developments indicate that enlargement progresses and especially in a transitional period for the European Union.

The Greek Presidency will thus approach the Enlargement process vigorously, and where appropriate, will promote the integration process of each of the countries concerned, depending on the performance and individual attributes. I remind you that the fundamental principles and mechanisms of the "Thessaloniki Agenda" continue to govern the region's progress towards European integration.

Dear Friends,

The European agenda of the upcoming months, includes:

Strengthening our relationships with major strategic partners in Europe, both to the west across the Atlantic and to the east and the Far East. We need to give a new boost to our economic relations with them. This is dictated not only by the necessity to combat recession, but mostly by Europe's obligation to play a leading role in international developments, co-shaping global trends.

In addition, we will deal with our influence to our surroundings; we need a region of stability, peace and growth that will radiate our values and principles, where we'll

offer our assistance to those who need it, enjoying at the same time, along with all our neighbors, the benefits of stability and peace.

Therefore, above all, we need two things:

To give confidence to European citizens and pride for their Union.

We need to become a beacon of stability and growth, competitiveness and democracy, culture and prosperity; eventually, that's what the world wants from us.

Of course these two tasks cannot be carried out by the Greek Presidency alone in the next five to six months. We have to do it together in the coming years, we have to built up European citizens' pride for their Union and to help the European paradigm shine bright around the world.

Dear friends, allow me to conclude in English.

As a political Union, as a single market, even as an aid donor, Europe is a superpower of a global vision.

Of course, sometimes we are all consumed in our everyday problems or disputes, thus losing both the "big picture" and our optimism.

Let us discern the essential from the trivial.

Let us look back at our past and realize how far we have come. Deep in their hearts, the Europeans always wanted to come together, one way or another. But they often ended up in bloody wars among themselves. In the last decades, we undertook the most ambitious endeavor in human History: To have so many and so different peoples converge, on their own Free will, with Freedom and Democracy.

Two generations ago, the dream of a United Europe seemed unthinkable. One generation ago, this dream still seemed difficult and distant. Yet it has now been realized more than anybody ever expected.

Next, let us look inside ourselves: Small states and big states alike, we all know that in the contemporary world we can achieve much more and must faster, if we are united.

All of us together, we can unlock our economic depth and our geopolitical weight, and play the leading world-wide role Europe deserves.

All of us together, we can better safeguard our security; we can better protect our democracy; we can better advance the prosperity of our peoples; we can better project our cultural values to the rest of the world.

Our Union is not a “luxury”! It is a vital necessity for all of us.

Lastly, let us look around us. We see turmoil emerging and major challenges appearing, almost everywhere! We can better respond to such challenges, if we are united. We can better stand in the face of world turmoil, if we grow even more united.

To put it bluntly, United, we can export stability and security from Europe to the rest of the World. Separated, we will only import insecurity and destabilization from the rest of the World to our own house.

No matter which way we see it, no matter where we look at for guidance and

inspiration - within ourselves or around us, back in our History or ahead of us in the Future - what we need is “More Europe and Better Europe”! The best response to the current crisis is again: “More Europe and Better Europe”. And the rest of the world also expects from us: “More Europe and Better Europe”!

A “United Europe” is not just some administrative bodies, not just some institutions, not the bureaucratic procedures and the technically complicated regulations.

Primarily, “Europe” is Us! All of us: Everybody in this chamber; All European citizens who voted for us and sent us here. All of us, debating and sometimes disagreeing; all of us working hard for Europe and enjoying the fruits of our Union. “Europe” is the heavy historical heritage we all, collectively, carry on our shoulders. “Europe” is the common cultural root and expression of our societies, the values of Freedom, Human Dignity, Social Justice and Compassion for all, Progress and Democracy across the borders.

It is the future of the generations to come; of our children and the ones that will come after them. It is precisely this common future that we are shaping up today. And it is this future that unites us, perhaps more than anything else...

We are moving ahead step by step. Sometimes we are making mistakes, we pause, we correct them and take it from there on. But we have gone far enough, we have progressed more than any of the previous generations could imagine. By overcoming our recent crisis, we are moving even more decisively.

Remember the example of my country. Greece suffered and still suffers; but we are now standing on our feet, we are proud, we are holding our ground, we are returning to normality and by doing so, we prove to everyone that Europe works, that Europe can make it. By defending our destiny as a nation, we also defended the future of Europe, in every step of the way.

Dear friends,

Europe started as a legend about a beautiful princess, seduced and kidnapped by an ancient Greek God, who fell in love with her and transformed himself to a white bull to approach her.

Then this legend, evolved to an epic story, full with glory as well as full of drama. And then, Europe evolved as the cradle of human History; as the spring of Culture and Civilization across the continents.

Now it is transforming itself yet once more, through inspiration and innovation, through trial and error, through successes and failures – as it is always the case in History. Now Europe is being transformed, to not just a common institutional framework for all its countries, but to a common identity and a common conscience for all its peoples.

So Europe does move ahead!

Not without problems, not without obstacles to jump over.... But make no mistake: Our United Europe moves ahead. To its destiny.

And you, its elected representatives, are Europe's heart and Europe's soul.

Thank you very much.