

**Ireland's EU Presidency priorities**  
**Address to COSAC Chairpersons**  
**28 January 2013**

I would like to welcome you all to Dublin and to thank you for the invitation to address you today. I have participated in a number of COSAC events in the past and I am delighted to have the opportunity to address you this morning on the main priorities for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU. COSAC has played an important role since 1989 in exchanging best practice between national parliaments and building stronger mutual understanding of different systems and perspectives.

I understand that some of you may already have received briefings on aspects of our Presidency priorities from Irish Ambassadors in your home states.

Many challenges face Ireland as it starts its Presidency, but the grave crisis that faced the EU in 2011 and 2012 has receded and this is thanks in no small part to the actions of the Hungarian, Polish, Danish and Cyprus Presidencies in confronting the crisis. But the improvement in conditions also demonstrates once again that the EU can respond effectively to severe challenges when its members act together cohesively and decisively. That does not change the reality however, that much of that agreed response remains unimplemented, and indeed provides a good deal of the work programme for our Presidency in areas such as banking Union.

Ireland's Presidency in 2013 will be our seventh time holding this office. Much has changed since we last held the Presidency in 2004; with new institutional actors and the new role of national parliaments and the European Parliament in the EU legislative process. The Lisbon Treaty also recognised the importance of national parliaments in contributing to the effective functioning of the Union, particular in relation to ensuring subsidiarity and proportionality. COSAC has a key part to play in developing this role to its full potential. In this regard we welcome the many inter-parliamentary meetings which take place between national parliaments with the European Parliament on EU issues. We also welcome that the programme of meetings planned by the Oireachtas for the

Presidency covers a wide range of topics closely linked to the Presidency priorities.

As with our previous Presidencies, Ireland remains committed to maintaining the reputation that we have built up as an efficient, fair and effective office-holder. As the Union looks forward to Croatian accession later during 2013, Ireland celebrates the fortieth anniversary of its joining the EU in the very first enlargement in 1973. Today, Ireland remains a firm believer in the EU and the European project and the benefits of working together to resolve the common challenges that face us all. Our strong commitment to the Union is based, of course, on our shared values but also reflects, more concretely, the benefits of membership we have experienced over the past forty years and which have helped to transform Ireland, economically, politically and socially.

The benefits of enlargement and EU membership have had a similar impact on all Member States. We must not forget that in spite of the current crisis, Europeans have never lived longer or experienced such an uninterrupted period of peace, security and prosperity. This was recognised by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee last December.

But there is no doubt that many of Europe's citizens have suffered greatly over the past few years as a result of the crisis. Unemployment and particularly youth joblessness remain at record levels. This is unacceptable; worse, it is unsustainable. It simply cannot be left unchecked. We simply cannot have a generation who believes that their future does not include the prospect of meaningful work. That would represent a deep societal failure and call into question for very many, all that we have done together over decades.

Our Union has achieved a great deal in the past. But the crisis, some would even say mistakes made, of recent years have exposed the flaws in the EU's governance. Ireland will do all that it can to respond to the challenges that remain. We must implement the necessary reforms at both national and EU level to prevent any future recurrence of the events of the past few years. We must also now move beyond emergency responses to plan for the future and to create the conditions for long-term sustainable economic growth and jobs. Above all,

after years of difficulty, we must deliver hope to Europe's citizens of a better future.

Never before has our Presidency programme so closely matched our domestic political priorities and the domestic political priorities in most of your states. This is why our programme is tightly focussed on the objectives of achieving stability, jobs and growth.

In drafting the programme, the Irish Government has been guided by our own experience. While much work remains to be done, the difficult measures undertaken in recent years are now beginning to generate results in our domestic economy.

The Presidency's approach to restoring stability is aimed at promoting confidence among business, investors and consumers to get Europe's economy growing and, more broadly, to ensure that the Union's financial system provides a strong and stable foundation to support renewed growth and employment.

The Presidency is determined to implement the European Semester system of budgetary and economic coordination in the most effective way possible. The Presidency welcomes the steps that are being taken to enhance parliamentary involvement in this process including the European Parliamentary Week in Brussels over the coming days. There are complex issues at play here, and it is not in fact enough to say that what is decided at European level should be held accountable at European level. The nature of the Semester process is that national issues of a fiscal and structural nature can now be decided at European level, yet the responsible parliament – in terms of the people who will bear the effect of those measures, is the national parliament.

I know that you will debate key questions around the future of the EMU with Commission Vice President Sefcovic later this morning. The question of ensuring appropriate democratic legitimacy and accountability in the Union is an integral part of this debate, and COSAC is an important voice.

Last week the Irish Minister of State for European Affairs held an informal

Ministerial meeting which focussed on issues including the issue of democratic accountability and legitimacy. Representatives of the European Parliament, Elmar Brok, Roberto Gualtieri and Guy Verhofstadt, took part in the discussion and were joined by Dominic Hannigan Chairman in his role as Chairman of COSAC, While there was general agreement on the respective – and separate – roles of national parliaments and the European Parliament in providing legitimacy and accountability, there was wide support for greater interaction between the European Parliament and national parliaments, including through COSAC, and above all on the need for greater involvement of national parliaments in the Semester process.

The Irish Presidency will also prioritise the early completion of the “Two-Pack” proposals with the European Parliament.

Ireland knows all too well the critical importance of how problems in the financial services sector affect wider economic health. This is why we are attaching such high priority to the proposals for Banking Union. Effective implementation of the proposals is critical in restoring financial stability in Europe and for breaking the link between banks and sovereigns.

As Presidency, Ireland will seek early agreement with the European Parliament on the Single Supervisory Mechanism proposal. The Presidency will also place a strong emphasis on other proposals to strengthen financial regulation to protect consumers.

In preparing for the Presidency, the Irish Government sought to identify measures across all Council formations which, if implemented, can deliver long-term sustainable growth and jobs. It also plans to tackle the very pressing issue of youth unemployment.

The Presidency will work to advance proposals which can best support job creation, including the proposal to introduce a Youth Guarantee providing

young people leaving school with an offer of employment, continued education or training. I welcome the determination to engage in fresh thinking which some of this work represents. Next week Ministers from Member State Governments will gather here in Dublin Castle for an informal Ministerial meeting to discuss this and other ways of tackling youth joblessness, including through the provision of enhanced skills and training. In this regard, reaching agreement with European Parliament on the Erasmus for All programme will be a priority.

The Irish Presidency will also seek to remove the barriers that hinder European citizens in living and working in other Member States. Reaching a First Reading Agreement on the Posting of Workers Directive and securing agreement on the proposal on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications will be a priority.

Twenty years after its launch, the Single Market continues to deliver jobs, growth and competitiveness. But the full potential of the Single Market remains unfulfilled, and during its Presidency Ireland will work to secure agreement on the dossiers that remain open under the Single Market Act I. The Presidency will also, where possible, advance the proposals to be published by the European Commission under the Single Market Act II.

The Irish Presidency is placing a very strong emphasis on the Digital Agenda to drive growth and competitiveness in Europe and to deliver the smart jobs of the future. We will seek to advance issues spanning different Councils including intellectual property, cyber security, e-Signatures/e-Identification, Data Protection, web accessibility and high-speed broadband roll-out.

Small and medium enterprises form the backbone of the European economy and are essential to the Union's future economic prosperity. The Presidency will seek to advance agreement on the Programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs (COSME), the Smart Regulation agenda and the Company Law (Accounting) Directive which aims to reduce the administrative burden on microenterprises and SMEs.

Many of the programmes and issues that we have identified as Presidency priorities will be dependent on the conclusion of negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework. The role of the European Parliament will be central to securing agreement to support the EU's future financing for programmes including cohesion and regional funding and Horizon 2020 that have such a critical role in underpinning future economic growth across Europe. We look forward to reaching agreement with the Parliament on the Union's future financing to deliver jobs and growth for Europe's citizens and to ensure that the programmes supported by the MFF can be implemented as soon as possible.

These programmes include the Common Agricultural and Common Fisheries Policies. CAP reform is the major priority for Ireland in the AgriFish Council to ensure food security, to support sustainable growth and employment in the sector, and to promote rural development across the EU.

Reform of the CFP is also critical to assuring a sustainable future for Europe's fisheries sector. The Presidency will also work to build on the strong results of the Cyprus Presidency to advance the Integrated Maritime Policy and will support the development of an Atlantic Strategy.

We in Ireland are well aware of the positive impact that cohesion funding can have in delivering growth to regions and communities. A well-resourced cohesion policy can continue to play a vital part in promoting sustainable and fair economic and social growth in Europe. The Presidency looks forward to working closely with the European Parliament to secure agreement on the cohesion package.

At regional, national and trans-European levels, investment in Europe's transport, energy and telecommunications infrastructure today will deliver enormous benefits for Europe's citizens and business for decades to come. This is why the Connecting European Facility is also a major priority for the Irish Presidency.

The Presidency has also identified research and innovation as a critical area which can deliver sustainable growth and employment and maintain the EU's global competitiveness. Reaching agreement on the Horizon 2020 programme is critical to support growth in this sector. The Presidency will also work to reach agreement on the European Research Area.

While the Presidency will work to enhance Europe's Single Market, the EU must look beyond its borders to growing markets for its exports. The Irish Presidency programme outlines our plans to finalise free trade negotiations with Canada and advance discussions with key partners in Asia. We will also work to agree a new free trade and investment agreement between the EU and US. The Presidency will host an informal Ministerial meeting in Dublin in mid-April focussed on boosting the EU's external trade.

The Irish Presidency focus is not solely on growth, but *sustainable* growth. As Presidency, Ireland will work to advance agreement with the European Parliament on several important pieces of draft legislation in the environment area. Finalising agreement with the Parliament on the 7<sup>th</sup> Environment Action Plan and fighting climate change will also be a major priority.

While the Presidency no longer chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee, Ireland will support the High Representative for Foreign Affairs in her work internationally to promote the Union's foreign policy and its core values. As Presidency we are also attaching strong importance to helping the world's poorest regions. A Ministerial meeting focussed on development issues in February will be followed in April by a major Presidency conference on addressing the linkages between climate change and hunger.

During its last Presidency Ireland welcomed ten new Member States into the EU. While we will not see any enlargement during our Presidency in 2013, we will work intensively, nonetheless, to promote and advance the enlargement process.

One of the very great challenges that the EU continues to face is to explain to citizens what it is doing. We do not pretend in Ireland to have an arrangement

which should apply to others. We are respectful of subsidiarity and very conscious that it is for others to organise their constitutional affairs as it is for us to organise ours. Nonetheless, with recent referendums on EU Treaties, Irish politicians are acutely aware of the challenges of communicating the EU more effectively to citizens and the very great need to do more to ensure that citizens can express their views and opinions on EU policies, legislation and the future of Europe.

During the European Year of Citizens in 2013, the Irish Presidency wishes to hear more ideas about promoting much greater engagement between the EU and its citizens. The Committees that you represent can play a critical role in this process and I note with great interest the planned debate at the June plenary Conference on the challenge of engaging with young citizens.

My remarks this morning highlighted only a few of our Presidency priorities. Unfortunately, time does not allow me to highlight many other key areas in detail. However, I would be pleased to respond to any questions or issues that you would like to raise. To conclude, the Irish Government is determined to deliver results for Europe's citizens during this Presidency. But we cannot do this alone. We very much look forward to working closely with you, our partners, and the European Parliament to make the progress that our citizens rightly expect.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a very pleasant stay in Dublin.