



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL
THE PRESIDENT**



Brussels, 20 December 2013
EUCO 275/13

PRESSE 611
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Remarks by President Herman Van Rompuy following the European Council

This morning we spoke above all about foreign affairs. A lot is happening since our last summit, for instance with Iran, in the Middle East, in central Africa. But the most significant development for Europeans currently is the peaceful popular protest in Ukraine, at "Maidan" and beyond.

Leaders are obviously all very concerned with the situation and following events closely. Today all of us reconfirmed our message of strong support. The citizens of Ukraine have shown again these last days how fully aware they are, of the historic nature of Europe's offer. The most reliable road to a modern, open, independent Ukraine. And on behalf of the entire European Council, I can say that our offer, the offer of political association and closer trade ties, is still on the table. We are willing to sign, as soon as the country is ready.

We respect and regret the decision of Ukraine's government of late November not to sign. But the future of our relations is for the long-term. We can't let that be compromised by short-term calculations, by outside pressure. It must be a free choice.

To my mind, the future of Ukraine lies with Europe. One can try to slow it down, to block it, but in the end no one can prevent it. Geography and history will always mean a special relationship with Russia, of course we acknowledge that. We have made it abundantly clear that the European Union's agreements with partner countries in the region are not at Russia's expense. On the contrary, it is also set to benefit from it.

P R E S S

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At the end of the day, this is not about relations with either Brussels or Moscow. It is about the Ukrainians finding agreement among themselves, charting together a course for their own country. This must take place in peace and democratic dialogue, respecting fundamental rights.

What we see at "Maidan" is a yearning for a better future. This thirst for freedom will not disappear. And – perhaps most strikingly for us – this aspiration is expressed by men and women, young and old, waving flags – waving the European flag and its stars of hope... without a hint of cynicism. I cannot resist to say: that should make us reflect in our countries.

This aspiration to come closer to the European Union is shared also by the people of Georgia and of Moldova. And the European Council's message this morning is that we will stand by the side of these countries in their choice, and that we are willing to speed up the signing of the agreements with them, next August at the latest.

Let me now turn to the situation in the Central African Republic. Ce matin le Président François Hollande a partagé les dernières informations sur les opérations en cours. C'est la deuxième fois en l'espace d'une année que la France courageusement prend l'initiative face à une grave crise; la réponse française en Centrafrique a permis d'éviter le désastre d'une guerre civile, voire même peut-être un génocide; et je souhaite à ce titre rendre hommage à la France et au Président de la République.

L'Union européenne soutient évidemment cet effort militaire, avec une contribution de 50 millions d'euro à la mission africaine de maintien de la paix, et 60 millions d'euros sous forme d'aide humanitaire pour un peuple qui souffre. Nous avons par ailleurs demandé à la Haute représentante de présenter en janvier aux ministres des affaires étrangères des options pour contribuer à la stabilisation du pays à travers une mission de l'UE. Enfin, en tant que Président du Conseil européen, je souligne l'importance des contributions bilatérales d'autres Etats membres à l'opération française.

En lien avec notre débat sur la défense d'hier soir, cette crise montre à nouveau, si besoin en était, l'importance pour les pays européens de disposer des capacités de réaction et moyens de coordination appropriés, pour assumer nos responsabilités, quand il se doit.

Let me briefly run through the rest of this morning's agenda. We spoke about asylum and migration flows, and we welcome the operational actions taken since our last discussion, after the Lampedusa disaster. We've asked our Ministers to monitor progress, and we will come back to this in a broader setting in June.

We talked about Syria and the urgent need for more humanitarian aid, in the country itself and in Lebanon in particular. Think of the tens of thousands of refugees out there, facing cold and snow this Christmas.

We also had a discussion about Serbia, and reconfirmed that accession negotiations will start on 21 January 2014.

And finally, we came back to our overall work on competitiveness, growth and jobs. We have been regularly assessing the progress on the Compact for Growth and Jobs, and will continue doing so.

With President Werner Hoyer of the European Investment Bank, we followed up on the EIB stepping up its lending to the economy, in particular to small and medium-sized enterprises. From January, the new EU funds for 2014-2020 will be available including for the Youth Employment Initiative. In the past year we have mobilised all possible levers to spur the recovery forward, and thanks to this and all national efforts I am convinced 2014 will be a better year.

To conclude, let me express my huge gratitude to the Lithuanian Presidency and to the Lithuanian President in particular. Dalia, you and your team have done a wonderful job. From putting the last touches to the MFF, or European budget, to spectacular breakthroughs on the Banking Union, a long overdue agreement on posted workers and not to forget of course a memorable summit in Vilnius which we prepared closely together. It was really a pleasure to work with you. I wish you all a merry Christmas!
