

# FIVE YEARS AS PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL: LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

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**O**n 25 November 2014, a few days before the end of his term of office, the first president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, took stock of his five years as president of the institution, and of the challenges that the EU still has to face, during a conference organised by Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, in partnership with Sciences Po Paris. This Synthesis summarises the debates following his [speech](#).

“If you have never seen a retired person before, you are looking at one.” A few days before the transfer of power to his successor, Donald Tusk, Herman Van Rompuy took a step back to humorously review the end of what remains the very first term of office at the head of the European Council, institutionalised by the Lisbon Treaty.

This first term of office was acclaimed by both Frédéric Mion and Pascal Lamy, who praised the president’s facilitative talents. Pascal Lamy interpreted the return of Herman Van Rompuy, five years after his first conference as the newly elected president, as representative of the consistency, loyalty and friendship that he is capable of showing.

After a speech<sup>1</sup> detailing his vision of both the position, as well as the EU’s institutions and its policies, Herman Van Rompuy responded to questions from the floor, allowing him to better clarify the focal areas that he believes are the foundation of the role of president of the European Council and for conducting a responsible and effective European policy.

His speech, followed by a debate moderated by Yves Bertoncini, provided an opportunity to review the characteristics of the permanent presidency of the European Council, and the track record of five years of domestic and foreign policies, and to conclude with the prospects for the institution as well as for the EU.



## 1. The role of the European Council and its president

According to Herman Van Rompuy, the European Council has the competence to define major political orientations, but not to adopt a detailed programme. It nevertheless assigns its president with the missions, objectives and values that Van Rompuy believes are those of any political entity: “speaking the truth”, “creating hope” and “instilling and ensuring trust between countries, between institutions, and between leaders”. Some may lament the absence of the citizens in these bonds of trust to be established, but it was precisely with the citizens that Herman Van Rompuy began his speech, recalling that “Europe is you, Europe is us, it is our Europe”.

According to Herman Van Rompuy, although the idea of “speaking the truth” is suffering from a general

disillusionment towards the European idea and policy, it should not however be forgotten that Europe has never been so close to its citizens: it is in their pockets, present at each border crossing they don't notice, and it is on their supermarket shelves. While it is possible and necessary to understand the frustrations and anxieties, it is above all important to struggle to continue building a system that no longer only means peace, but also decompartmentalisation, openness and solidarity for new generations. This means "creating hope" for victims of globalisation or of the erosion of the European social model by creating new European solutions that can only work with the trust that the European Council is supposed to guarantee.



Introduced by Pascal Lamy as a solution provider and a creator of compromise, Herman Van Rompuy seems to consider that the fact that the prerogatives of the president of the European Council are so vague also allows the persons appointed to this role to sketch the outline themselves. When asked during an interview with *Revue des deux mondes*<sup>2</sup> what was the profile of a permanent president, Herman Van Rompuy replied "He should not have a profile that is too low, nor should he have one that is too high". He confirmed this position by indicating that it involves being able to facilitate and coordinate discussions between heads of state, and to do this, "being able to consider yourself at the head of an important institution without believing that you yourself are important".

In order to establish this trust, so vital for unanimous decision-making through compromise, it is the

role of the president of the European Council to listen, exchange and create in an informal manner all that has not been formally anticipated in the skeletal description of a post that is permanent only in name, as the term of office only lasts two and a half years and can only be renewed once. The prospects for development therefore depend mainly on what his successor will do.

While remaining cautious, he nevertheless repeated what he had already evoked in the interview with *Revue des deux mondes*<sup>3</sup> by indicating that he hoped that his successor, Donald Tusk, would be capable of doing more concerning foreign affairs. He also insisted on the three challenges of the new European leaders: growth, Ukraine and the British question. It is necessary to jump start the first and to find a credible, dignified and European response to the second. As for the British, he mentioned that he "never had to complain about them", describing them as constructive, and hoping that they would continue to be part of the great European project, without, however, specifying in what manner.

## 2. Taking stock of five years of domestic policy

When questioned on the situation of the countries having most suffered from the crisis, he considered it important to recall that "the victims of globalisation are those of reforms that were not carried out in time" and not of reforms proposed by the EU. The crisis highlighted structural shortcomings that were not addressed in time. However, the EU has remained highly supportive, especially through the €240 billion that was given to Greece to avoid bankruptcy; an action that was in everyone's interest, but that above all was a display of solidarity. Beyond his tribute to European solidarity, Herman Van Rompuy wished to salute the Greek people, who in 2012 voted in support of the Memorandum of Understanding, fully knowing what awaited them, but also knowing that it was the best solution for them and for Europe.

It is therefore about "creating hope" by starting afresh on new structural foundations in order to build policies of growth, investment and employment. However, not all European leaders seem ready to draw the right conclusions from the crisis, particularly on the subject of energy and telecommunications, where our fragmented markets undermine research programmes and future investment.

Rather than denying the disillusionment of the European idea, Herman Van Rompuy wanted to underscore the fact that European citizens, despite their discontent regarding the EU, seem to be ever more convinced that Europe “is them”. By sharing the same currency, the same citizenship and the same market, Europe is more visible and Europeans have the impression of being in the same boat, even though it has sometimes seemed like a “drunken ship”. The fact remains that apart from the Belgians, and some citizens who are Europeans in spirit, the plural identity is not natural for most Europeans, who therefore have to gradually become used to this new concept of “living together”.

And yet we cannot expect citizens to take possession of their European citizenship and of the opportunities it provides when populism and national reluctances seem to indicate that the leaders themselves are not quite ready yet. Insisting on the case of France, he wanted to affirm that “without France, the European idea would be dead”, and that it was particularly painful to see anti-European populism growing in this country which is in Europe and where Europe has always been at home. To go beyond populism and attachment to the past, he recommends once again the restoration of France’s self-confidence and that of the French people in themselves.



### 3. Taking stock of five years of foreign policy

According to Pascal Lamy, Herman Van Rompuy has been the “only real voice of Europe for the heads of state” outside the EU. While admitting he believes that given national sovereignties, it will not be possible in the near future to ensure that one or another of the heads of state of the member states does not express himself, the strategy is to ensure that all those expressing themselves do so in the same

direction, building upon a minimal common position. This is both the only feasible strategy for the member states, but also the only solution that permits their spokespersons negotiate in a serious manner.

When questioned on the EU’s change of trajectory in its trade negotiations with China, Herman Van Rompuy wished to emphasise the fact that relations between the two had improved. For all that, and despite the galloping growth of China, which has allowed millions of citizens to escape poverty, the EU remains concerned about the non-respect of human rights and territoriality, as well as the legal certainty of an investment agreement whose potential is enormous and that should not be squandered because of legal vacuums. Herman Van Rompuy further underlined that it was in fact the Commission that negotiated the agreement on trade liberalisation between both entities, and not the member states, a tangible sign of a European foreign policy.

On EU energy policy, Herman Van Rompuy stressed the need to develop awareness in several areas:

- Energy costs, due both to the policy of renewable energy, which is a long term policy but costly in the short term, and US competition, which has a greater energy potential than ours and the economic possibility of exploiting it;
- The need for concern about climate change and energy savings, to decrease greenhouse gas emissions, and to develop renewable energies;
- Energy security and the substantial energy dependence in Europe, and the need to find maximum independence stemming from this.

Concerning the need for a Common Security and Defence Policy, he once again referred to the European Council of December 2013, which dealt with this from the viewpoint of the defence industry. Although this perspective remains difficult for the member states to envisage, it is nonetheless interesting to address a broad question: how can a defence budget be maintained in a time of fiscal consolidation? And to respond to it through Europe: by cooperating. Here, the fiscal situation is putting pressure on the member states, who are forced to think about cooperation arrangements in terms of defence, which will once again be on the agenda in 2015.

Concerning the weight of the euro in the world, Herman Van Rompuy indicated that monetary policy would always be accommodating, and that this now only had a minimal effect on the exchange rate.

## Conclusion: a vision of Europe

Returning to the description of an outdated Europe by Pope Francis before the European Parliament in Strasbourg on the same day, Herman Van Rompuy concluded this exchange by indicating that on this subject, the Church could also call itself into question, but highlighted the foundation of European inspiration, based on the concept of "human dignity". Although this has not always been defended consistently, it is part of our cultural heritage, and should be the basis of the ecological, migratory and employment policies currently under debate at the European level, thereby giving them some meaning. According to Herman Van Rompuy, the past 70 years have been those of our greatest proximity to this heritage: after reconciling, the Europeans re-established peace, and the current generation is the third not to have known war. In Herman Van Rompuy's opinion, Europeans are as close as they can ever be

to what is best in their culture, and this must be protected as nothing can be taken for given in history. Now we must speak the truth and be relevant, which calls for the re-establishment of economic growth. The image of Europe in the world is more nuanced than we believe, despite the crisis: for many people worldwide, Europe is the natural ally and the greatest provider of humanitarian aid in the world.

We now must consolidate this image and make it the leitmotif of European action, a task that is now incumbent on Herman Van Rompuy's successor, who Pascal Lamy hopes will have the same capabilities as his predecessor.



1. Herman Van Rompuy, "Five years as president of the European Council", *Tribune*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014.
2. Herman Van Rompuy, "L'idée européenne: une convergence d'intérêts, un choix de valeurs", interview by Annick Seta, *Revue des deux mondes*, September 2014, pp 15 – 31.
3. *Ibid.*

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