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**Speech by President of the European Council
Herman Van Rompuy
at the University of Foreign Languages of Baku
on the occasion of the award of Doctor Honoris Causa**

It is a pleasure for me to be for the first time in Baku today, and to have this opportunity to exchange ideas with you on the ties between the European Union and Azerbaijan. Your country is unique in so many ways. At the crossroads of Europe and Asia, in several respects.

A transit corridor through the ages – from the ancient Silk Road trail to today's energy pipelines. Trade and exchanges across borders have fostered over centuries a tradition of openness in your society, where many ethnic and religious communities have thrived together. At the same time, Azerbaijan's impressive recent economic growth spurred by oil and gas shines many spotlights on the country. I am impressed to see this modern dynamism here in Baku. The challenge today is to build on this momentum and secure the sustainability of your growing economy and modernisation.

I will try to convey some thoughts to you which hopefully will lead to a discussion after this ceremony, which I feel is my duty as a new *Doctor Honoris Causa* of your University. I am specially happy to have such a debate here at the University of Foreign Languages, a University which has enjoyed a long cooperation with the European Union. It is also a pleasure to do it for an audience of men and women from so many different circles: from the university, from the civil service, from the *corps diplomatique*, from wider civil society, and from the press.

In a long tradition, stretching all the way back to the Middle Ages, European universities like those in Bologna, Paris or Oxford (to mention only the most famous ones) flourished because in their quest for truth and wisdom, they valued curiosity and critique, doubt and dialogue. The university from which I myself graduated, the University of Leuven in Belgium, embodies this tradition since 600 years. Mr Rector, it is in this spirit I gladly accept the honour which your University has been so kind to bestow upon me. Thank you.

P R E S S

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We, the EU want to deepen the ties between the EU and Azerbaijan. I should like to emphasize this right from the start, since the ambitions we have for our relationship with Azerbaijan will only be achieved if they are built on peace, security and stability in the region.

I share these observations with our own European experience of reconciliation in mind. The European project was born out of the idea that we would not be prisoners of our history, that we could overcome the scars of conflict and bring former enemies together to build a better future.

We started with smaller and more manageable steps – the very first when former bitter enemies decided to bring together their production of coal and steel, two industries that had fuelled war. One step led to another, tying the economies and societies on our continent ever closer together. Countries that had fiercely fought one another for centuries joined together to play a common role in the world. Each stage along the way has brought its own challenges -- and we are facing some now -- yet this path has undeniably brought peace and prosperity to our continent.

In the course of sixty years of European integration, we have always managed to overcome difficulties through dialogue, consensus building and political will. Each time further progress was questioned, the forces tying us together have proven stronger than those setting us apart.

The present economic and financial crisis, which erupted in 2008 in the United States, has affected almost all economies across the world. In Europe, we weathered the first phase relatively well, but the situation has become more challenging since the banking crisis turned into a crisis of public debt. Since I myself took office as President of the European Council early 2010, overcoming this crisis has been our overriding concern. It may well be the most challenging period in the history of European integration. But if we can handle the situation with determination, and with accountability, we will be stronger. There is much work still ahead, but we are determined to carry it out and lay the foundations for the future.

We are addressing systemic challenges for the Economic and Monetary Union, and working to make it fully secure, safe and stable. We are learning the lessons, in terms of fiscal discipline, structural reforms and deepening integration. But this has to be done in an accountable way, and it has to be done in a transparent way.

It will be work for the months and even years ahead: strengthening the foundations for continued future prosperity, adapting and safeguarding the European model for the next generations.

This European model, based on principles and values, on freedom solidarity and justice, has also inspired the way we deal with neighbours in our immediate surroundings and further away. As you may know, we have a Neighbourhood Policy for all our neighbours to the South and to the East.

Last year, drawing the lessons from the developments in the Arab world, we reflected upon our approach. Europe's renewed Neighbourhood Policy has clear goals: to offer greater support to partners engaged in building deep and sustainable democracies, and to support inclusive economic development more effectively. Those who do more in terms of progress, get more in terms of support. We call this the more-for-more principle.

The 2011 Warsaw Summit of the Eastern Partnership has emphasised the common values which underpin our relations. We want to see our partnership with Eastern neighbours based on stronger foundations than just economic cooperation.

That is why we attach such big importance to civil society. And that is why I am happy to see many members of civil society in the audience. Your work is important to us. We understand the difficult conditions you sometimes face.

The role of civil society is paramount in any country's modernisation. The greater the engagement of civil society, the deeper the democracy with political pluralism and a system of checks and balances. Civil society was a force of progress in our own history and can be one in Azerbaijan.

In addition, embracing and furthering democratic reforms and advancing Human Rights and the Rule of Law will add to the long-term success and prosperity of Azerbaijan, and for the strengthening of EU-Azerbaijan relations.

We therefore encourage the authorities in Azerbaijan to continue and to deepen the reform process, including creating the necessary conditions for fair and transparent elections in 2013.

In this regard, I welcome the release last week nine imprisoned participants of a peaceful rally held on 2 April 2011. This is a positive step taken by Azerbaijan in its efforts to improve civil and political rights, although more steps are needed.

The EU is happy to see Azerbaijan as a rising international partner, with a growing regional role. In assuming a seat as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Azerbaijan is showing its commitment to work for international peace and security. This comes with great responsibility that I am confident your country will fulfil.

The EU sees Azerbaijan as a strategic partner on energy. Azerbaijan is considered a reliable supplier and, will become in the future, a reliable transit provider for both gas and oil. The EU strongly supports the Southern Energy Corridor and the Trans-Caspian Pipeline: they will benefit all sides.

While we look towards the Caspian, I must say that developments in Iran are as much a source of concern in Europe as they are here in Azerbaijan. We are still hopeful that progress in the Moscow talks will contribute to solving this delicate issue, as the need to maintain stability in the region is key. Earlier today, I had a productive discussion with President Aliyev on strategic challenges in the region.

Before concluding, a word on the current developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The benefits of economic and political development, trade and prosperity cannot fully be realized without a sustained effort to build stability -- stability between neighbours. Indeed, the medium to long-term goals of future agreements make no sense if the threat of conflict is going to be a permanent presence in the background. But let me be clear: this is a reality and it has to be faced.

The European Union will continue to insist that Azerbaijan and Armenia step up their efforts to reach agreement. The so-called Madrid Principles remain a valid basis for peace, in accordance with the commitments made by the Presidents of both your countries to France, Russia and the United States as co-chairs of the OSCE's Minsk Group. And we will continue to ask for unconditional access for representatives of the European Union to Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions.

It was with great concern that I learnt about the recent serious armed incidents along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the line of contact. I deeply regret the loss of human life. The clock cannot be turned back on these tragic incidents, but lessons can be learned.

The European Union calls on both sides strictly to respect the ceasefire and exercise restraint, on the ground and in public statements, in order to prevent a further escalation of the situation. Threats and the use of force do not contribute to a resolution of this persisting conflict.

The efforts of the Minsk Group and its co-chairs to seek a peaceful resolution have our full support. Where useful, we stand ready to provide extra assistance for confidence building measures. And once there is a settlement agreement the EU will be ready to help implementing it including with rehabilitation assistance.

Reaching a solution will take time. Building trust is the first step towards finding solution. This is one of the messages that Ambassador Lefort, the EU's Special Representative for Southern Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, who is accompanying me on this trip, tries to convey to all our partners in the Region. Without trust, there will never be peace.

Many of the good things in life take time to achieve. You do not build a house in one day. You do not make peace in one day. You do not establish a democracy in one day. But if you want to get to the roof, you must start by laying brick by brick. The work must continue, knowing that it will take time.

I am confident the Azeri society can successfully complete this house of national democracy and regional peace. The EU will continue to work with you.