



EUROPEAN COUNCIL  
THE PRESIDENT



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**Speech by President Van Rompuy  
upon the Conferral of his Doctorate *Honoris Causa*  
from the University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin)**

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak with you today: it is always a pleasure to visit a centre of knowledge.

It is a great honour to have a Doctorate *Honoris Causa* bestowed on me by your university, all the more so as this is my first African doctorate. I was very impressed to learn that no less than 100,000 students are enrolled at your university. And it is clearly here, in higher education institutions such as this, that the future of our nations and your nation will be decided. By investing in our youth, we can decide the path that tomorrow will take. To come to university, then, is to look to the future with a hopeful eye.

This is all the more important in African countries, where the great majority of the population is young – between 50 % and 60 % – and their strength and enthusiasm must be channelled to help build a continent that is fully integrated in the modern, globalised economy. Enthusiasm is a virtue! The European Union is equally committed to this development project and shares these aspirations with its African partners. And I see the honour being paid to me today as confirmation of your desire to further strengthen our links and our cooperation.

First and foremost, I would like to confirm that the European Union is here by your side and will stay by your side. Our commitment to Africa, and Benin in particular, is a long-term one.

**P R E S S**

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We have just set our cooperation budget for the ACP region. More than EUR 20 billion has been allocated to Africa for the period 2014-2020. But of much greater significance, trade between our regions grew by 50 % from 2007 to 2012, and almost 50 % of foreign capital in Africa comes from Europe.

Because it is through trade and investment that the changes and developments which we are all hoping for can be achieved.

Here again, Benin, along with the other ECOWAS Member States, is playing a pioneering and crucial role.

I am delighted that technical negotiations on the Economic Partnership Agreements for West Africa have come to a successful end and that the conclusions have been endorsed by the chief negotiators. I am confident that the agreement will be signed this year.

I must also salute the political will of West Africa's leaders, who were able to see what their region stands to gain from such an agreement. The Dakar Summit of October 2013 is now bearing fruit.

The proposed compromise supports the economic development of the region of West Africa as a whole. Such a partnership will guarantee that all West African countries have unrestricted access to the European market, representing a source of economic growth and future prosperity. The European Union has taken the regional development priorities into full consideration, accepting the exclusion of agricultural products that are sensitive for the region and products which the region has earmarked for future industrialisation.

The European Union is ready to provide ongoing support for progress in all West African countries in terms of development, competitiveness and regional integration. Indeed, between 2008 and 2013, almost a quarter of EU aid to ACP countries – in other words, more than EUR 5 billion – was used to stimulate trade.

Proof that when the European Union says that trade stimulates development, it speaks with actions as well as words.

What does this mean for you?

Economic Partnership Agreements are not just a matter for economists, although I am one. The establishment of regional markets and the improvement of trade agreements will have a very tangible impact for African citizens. With the reduction in the cost of imported and exported goods, they should enjoy a wider range of products at lower prices in shops, as well as benefitting from cheaper commercial services. Young Africans will also see more avenues opening up for marketing intellectual services. It reminds me of the beginnings of the European Union; the common market was one of the first steps.

Allow me to add here that maritime security, both in the Gulf of Guinea and elsewhere, is crucial for the smooth functioning of trade.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you know, Europe has been severely affected by the storms that have buffeted the global economy in recent years. Europeans have had to face new challenges, make new sacrifices and to show unprecedented solidarity. The economic crisis that we have been through was the worst recession since the 1930s. Yet that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger, and our efforts have started to bear fruit. It is now widely recognised that the euro area will remain intact, and positive growth figures have been forecast for 26 of the 28 countries of the Union for 2014.

This has been possible as a result of the increase in consumer and investor confidence, a confidence based on the European Union's ability to make the right decisions at the right time. This has been achieved by strengthening our economic and monetary management structures and deepening the European integration project.

Within the Union, we know that what we do together, we do better. I am pleased to see that West Africa has arrived at the same conclusion. Benin's commitment to this, and your own support for regional integration, Mr President, compel admiration.

Mr President,

Dear participants,

At the beginning of April, Brussels will host the EU-Africa Summit.

It will be the first multilateral Summit to be hosted by the European Union. An historic step for us all. We look forward to this unique opportunity for a dialogue between our two continents.

"Investing in People, Prosperity and Peace". This will form the basis of our dialogue. This Summit will enable us to take stock of the progress made by our partnership, its key aspects and its relevance. It will enable us to step up cooperation at all levels: regional, continental and global.

Indeed, as a result of our own history and experience, we Europeans are also convinced that cooperation, and especially regional integration, are key to ensuring peace and development.

That is why we are very committed to regional organisations around the world, and to ECOWAS and the African Union in particular. Indeed, our continents are pursuing parallel paths of regional integration. The time has now come to more fully integrate the continents themselves.

We are at a crucial juncture, both in our respective regional development and in the relations between our two continents. The European Union's involvement in Africa has increased in recent years, both in the security field and in the economy. At the same time, increased regional integration in Africa has helped to push back the threshold of collective awareness and actively contributes to a greater acceptance of a common destiny based on democracy and fundamental freedoms.

We must use this fourth Summit to reinforce these trends and deepen relations.

However, beyond official and political realities, this Summit also intends to maintain its more direct link to the lives and opinions of our citizens. Contacts have already been made between civil society on both continents. A joint meeting of the Pan-African Parliament and the European Parliament is planned prior to the Summit. A youth forum will also take place. Finally, a high-level Business Forum will take place on 30 March and 1 April and will provide a platform for trade partnerships, particularly in the area of enhancing the role of SMEs and public private partnerships.

Yesterday I had the honour of hearing at first hand that Benin has confirmed its participation in the Summit.

In return, I look forward to welcoming His Excellency Boni Yayi to the heart of Europe for this Summit, not only as President of Benin, but also as President of the WAEMU and as President of the Least Developed Countries Group.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by emphasising that economic development can only be achieved through stability. Democracy has sunk its roots throughout the world. The notion that people have a say in their governance has become almost universal. More than half the world lives under a democratic regime.

It is important to remember this when the aspirations of the Ukrainian people – neighbours of the European Union – are being bloodily suppressed. All our thoughts are with the victims of the last few days in Kiev, in the hope that the agreement which seems to have been reached last night through European mediation will finally put an end to the violence and will enable a political process of reconciliation to begin, culminating in elections.

I strongly encourage the government, the opposition and civil society to seize this opportunity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For the people of Benin, these dates in mid-February also hold great symbolic value, fortunately of a less tragic nature. Exactly 24 years ago, of Benin's Conference of the Vital Forces of the Nation began. This conference was to chart a new way forward, subsequently copied by a number of emerging democracies. It is this pioneering, precursory role of Benin to which I would like to pay tribute today and which I would urge the country to maintain in the decades to come.

I strongly believe that the ties of friendship that unite us, the sharing of common values and the liveliness of our relations will continue to support our actions.

Thank you for your warm welcome and your attention, and for the honour you have bestowed on me.

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