

**Herman Van Rompuy
President of the European Council**

**Remarks at the occasion of the "Foundation Week"
Organised by the European Foundation Centre**

**Le Square, Brussels
3 June 2010, 12h25-12h35**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to say a few words on the occasion of this Foundation Week in Brussels.

It is a pleasure to find so many people gathered together who are aware of the essential role that foundations play in our societies, to see here so many men and women -- young and old, from all over the world -- who spend time and energy to do things for the public benefit! People who want to improve their knowledge and their network, to become more professional, at the service of education, of health care, of the environment, of development.

To a politician -- and even in my new job, I am still a politician...! -- this is, quite frankly, heartening.

Why? It is heartening to find this commitment to the public good in these times of individualism, in this era of "what is in it for me?", when one can sometimes be discouraged by a general atmosphere of indifference towards the good life. You offer all of us politicians an antidote; that is why I am happy to be here.

But now let's talk of why you are here, that's more important.

This Foundation Week, organised by the European Foundation Centre and hosted by the King Baudoin Foundation, is an opportunity to exchange ideas and practices. But is also, especially as we are here in Brussels, a chance for you to get a better feeling of the European institutions, to see what they can mean for you.

That's why I thought it might be interesting for you if I'd share some thoughts on two issues: first, on the general background of the new European Treaty. Second, on the role foundations can play within the Union and in furthering the public goals that the Union promotes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start with the first issue, the Treaty of Lisbon and my own experiences in these first few months.

For some audiences, it is difficult to explain why a new Treaty is such a big thing. But here today, in the world of foundations, I am sure you are all aware of the importance of *founding documents*, of *statutes*, of *rulebooks*.

No doubt many amongst you have spent countless hours in your own organisation -- as a President or a Secretary or a Treasurer -- to find out why certain rules apply to a certain

case, to rewrite the old statutes because you were faced with a new situation (and have them voted in a General Assembly!). Some of you have maybe founded an entirely new organisation, having to ask legal advice on writing the basic principles and rules.

Well, basically that's what we have been doing in the European Union at large for almost a decade. In December 2001, here in Brussels, in the Royal Palace of Laeken, we kicked off a debate on our *founding document*; it was only ended in November 2009, with the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.

I could even push the analogy somewhat further and say that the European Union *is* like a foundation, an organisation for the public benefit of Europe as a whole. Other people say it is more like a club, a club of states, with shared institutions.

It is now nearly 6 months since the Treaty of Lisbon came into force, the result of many years of discussion, negotiation, debate, renegotiation and finally ratification.

It is still too early to make an evaluation of how it is functioning -- many years of experience will be necessary before such a judgement can be made.

What we can safely say, is that the Treaty of Lisbon is an evolution rather than a revolution, but one that should make the operation of the EU both more democratic and more effective.

It is more democratic because of the enhanced role for both national parliaments and the European Parliament in its functioning. Virtually no legislation nor international agreement can enter into force without European Parliamentary approval. The election of the President of the Commission will depend on parliamentary majorities. Indeed, the Parliament is the great winner with this new set-up. I am sure this fact has not gone unnoticed during the past days of your meetings, because more power for the Parliament means also more influence for those who can speak on behalf of the citizens...

It is more democratic, also because we have entrenched fundamental rights, such that any decision of the Union and indeed the whole field of European law can be subject to judicial review to ensure that it respects our Charter of Rights.

More efficient, because we have improved our structures and our institutional framework.

In the field of external representation, we have created a unified external representative in the form of Lady Ashton, where once the Union was represented separately and confusingly by two different representatives. We are also establishing a single external action service, where once we had separate networks based on the Commission's external offices on the one hand and the embassies of the member state holding the Council Presidency on the other. This element is of direct interest for foundations working in the field of external relations and especially development. You will have to discover the new channels to have your voice heard – but so do we!

The European Council of Heads of State and Government has been reorganised and charged with defining the general political directions and priorities of the Union. In order to better perform this strategic function, the foreign ministers normally no longer participate in its meetings, meaning that there is a more collegial atmosphere, as well as a more manageable size. These and other changes should help the European Council to perform its task is better, to the benefit of the European Union as a whole.

I could say more about my own experiences of the past months in this new institutional environment. Very striking have been the gaps and uncertainties which we discovered between the formal rules and the practical realities – another situation with which many of you are no doubt familiar!

However, before I conclude, let me come to the second issue of my talk, the role foundations can play within (and thanks to) the European Union.

We need strong institutions, certainly in a stormy period of rising individualism and populism. We also need a strong civil society to strengthen social coherence in a period of changes. Let me stress this again.

"Change" can be an objective, but "change" can also be dictated from the outside. We constantly have to adapt ourselves to a new world. But we also have to ensure stability in our societies. Organisations and structures are indispensable actors between the state and the individuals. A democracy cannot live and prosper without that feeling of "togetherness" and "belonging to something". That is why your foundations are important, both on a national and on a European level.

I value the social contribution of foundations highly. Both your work within the Member States, and your work in bringing the citizens of different Member States together. Both are important!

I do not underestimate a foundation which operates only in one village, for one school, for one hospital, far away in Portugal or Finland. It is great if there are contacts with other nationalities, but in my view this is no requirement to pass the test of being a "good" European. **The "Europe" I cherish does not only exist in cross-border projects.** The Union is about 500 million people living in 27 democracies. The European public good cannot flourish without vibrant cities, without lively villages, without well-functioning Member-States. And I think that in the Union we are all more and more aware of this inter-connexion.

Let's take the example of the new European Strategy for Jobs and Growth, or Europe 2020. In exactly two weeks time, the European Council will decide on that. It is a Commission proposal, containing our new strategy for economic growth. It should enable us to come out of the crisis and to equip Europe for the global economic competition.

In our economic strategy, we do not forget our European values.

Let me just mention the five key targets which will determine our action. They are: R & D Investment, Education, Employment, Climate, and Social Inclusion. They are just as much about growth as about the general interest. This means that they include objectives many of you are active in.

The European Council will decide on quantifiable headline goals for the EU as a whole; these will then be translated into national goals. Past experience has learnt that it is the best way to get results. It is not enough to say – as we did in the past – we need an investment in R & D of 3 percent GDP in the EU; we can only reach that goal if each country states what it will do, if each can be held accountable, for instance within the European Council. For all these issues, we need to go from intentions on paper to a real life commitment.

This is where you come in. Foundations can play a role in all or most of these fields, as an extra link between the citizens and the Union.

- Private nonprofit R & D organisations will help the Union to become more innovative, to have better scientific research;
- Foundations running schools and universities play an essential role in the goals of reducing the share of early school leavers and increasing the share of people with a university education;
- Organisations enhancing awareness of climate change, of the environment, of new types of energy, they can all help to push countries towards the goal of nature conservation and of CO2-reduction. In this field as in others, if the governments do not act fast enough, public opinion becomes even more important.

Moreover, we are also aware of the sheer economic importance of European foundations, in terms of employment (up to 1 million people!) and output.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me come to a legal and political issue close to your heart – or at least to that of some of you. Since foundations do so much work to enhance the public good, they are entitled to ask at some point: what does our political system for us?

In your case, per definition, politicians should only create the conditions.

The European Foundation Centre has strongly made the case for a “European Foundation Statute”: one legal framework for public benefit foundations in 27 Member-States. This would reduce cross-border barriers and stimulate foundation activities more generally. It is a sensible idea.

In European politics, however, ideas need time; even sensible ideas, and sometimes especially sensible ideas!

If I am well-informed, the plan for a European Foundation Statute is now in the first phase, even before a Commission proposal. You would therefore probably need at least two more years before the Foundation Statute becomes law, by a decision of the Parliament and the Council of ministers (*not* the European Council!). People in the Council are waiting with impatience on the proposal. It may take more time. In Europe, one needs patience. But the strength of foundations is that they have time, so I hope you will ultimately succeed in this endeavour.

Let me conclude. I should like to congratulate you on the important work you do. You constitute a vital link between the European citizens and the work of the Union, you are a symbol and a guarantee of our European way of life, Therefore, I am proud that we have this Foundation Week in Brussels, and I wish you a fruitful discussion in the day and a half ahead.

Thank you.