President of the European Parliament, President of the European Commission, Distinguished leaders of the political groups, Members of the European Parliament. Today as Taoiseach I’m honoured to attend the European Parliament and present the priorities of the Irish Presidency.

This is Ireland’s Seventh Presidency, begun on the 40th anniversary of our joining what was then the European Community.

The Irish people made a good decision - in those 40 years we have travelled well and far, we have never looked back. But our Atlantic island has long been at the ‘heart’ of Europe.

In the sixth and seventh Centuries our monks, Columbanus and Killian among their number, left in their small boats to bring the light of learning to the European mind.

Today Ireland keeps that faith with our continent, with our Union of peoples.

We keep faith because of our particular idea of Europe. An idea that says despite our national differences as a people we dwell best and deepest always in the shelter, never in the shadow of the other.

We must work hard and together to renovate, to restore and to renew our Union.

It is in that spirit of doing - that spirit of renewing - that Ireland assumes and with some pride and honour this its seventh Presidency.

**Ireland and Europe**

In those 40 years just as our Union has been transformed so too membership of the EU transformed Ireland.

In 1973 our exports primarily agricultural went primarily to Britain.

Today Irish companies export high-tech goods and services across Europe and around the world. We also host over 1,000 foreign companies critical to our capacity to recover and to strengthen our economy.

It was in November 2010 that Ireland entered an EU-IMF support-programme.

Our proud people continue to labour under the weight of bank-related debt. Austerity has brought pain and suffering to many families, many homes. But the Irish people have borne that weight, that pain with remarkable courage and patience and quiet dignity.

And it is that story, those qualities and the deeper authentic elements of Ireland such as respect, vision, compassion, loyalty I bring here today. And because of our people, their qualities I am happy to say that Ireland is taking steps on the road to recovery.

We’ve honoured all our EU-IMF commitments through eight Troika analyses.

Last year our economy started to grow again our exports climbed to record-levels. We’re bringing government spending under control.

Internationally investors are showing new confidence in Ireland. The result seen in lower yields on Irish government bonds. Recent bond sales show the market confidence that once ebbed is now returning.
As a nation we are determined to exit the EU-IMF Programme before the end of this year.

We face many challenges up ahead and our economy is still fragile, but I firmly believe that 2013 can be the year in which Ireland will exit its Programme and show leadership to Europe.

But Europe too needs to steady itself after this crisis driven period, and return to stability. That is why Ireland’s Presidency will be all about Stability, Jobs, Growth.

**The Irish Way**

In our previous Presidencies we focused on results. Now we will do so again. We will work very closely with you, the elected members of the peoples of Europe here in the Parliament, whose increased importance and growing influence puts you at the very heart of the Union’s business.

We have worked hard in preparing for this Presidency. We have re-invested in our European relationships. And because we have, the depth of our relationship the breadth of our understanding have never been deeper or greater.

We are taking those better relations to our people. Our citizens need to know and they need to see that we are working to restore their confidence and trust not alone in the national parliaments but equally and critically in the democratic ideal of the European Union itself. It is important that people understand and feel that returning confidence.

**Europe is Complex**

Certainly ‘Europe’ can be a difficult concept. Some wish that ‘Europe’ were simpler, less complex, less institutionalised. But as someone who is passionate about Europe I am convinced that our European people can be both inspired and motivated about what we actually do in Europe and indeed in what can achieve.

All across our Union, our people need jobs.

They look to us - to ‘Europe’ for support. From the Atlantic to the Urals our people want and need security. The security that will allow them to live better, safer, richer lives.

Our Union is unique in its success in responding to these issues. It inspires others in their capacity to do likewise. Our ability to work together and commit to achieving results is what matters to our citizens.

In this Year of the Citizen, we must be ready to argue the very “Why?” of Europe.

And yes, I agree with those who might say that our response is sometimes not sufficiently clear.

But what we have done well together has been outstanding. From the wreckage of war we created a peaceful, united, democratic Union of peoples and we did all of this within a heartbeat ‘of the possibility….. of there being no Europe at all’.
Peace
The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Europe last year recognised that achievement.

Ireland knows in its own way the pain and suffering of violence.

We have also been lucky enough to see what dialogue and understanding between communities can yield: the historic reconciliation of two communities and the peace agreement on our island.

The last weeks have seen attempts by some to threaten the very hard-won peace. But be assured small groups of disparate, unrepresentative, trouble-makers will never succeed in bringing Northern Ireland and its peoples back to that dark place.

Today I pay tribute to the EU for its long and unswerving support for the peace process over the years. I pay tribute especially to this Parliament for the faith you kept with all who wanted and worked for peace on our island.

That support fortifies our resolve to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland can look forward to an end to this disruption of their much-valued peaceful stability.

Stability, Jobs and Growth
Mr. President, as we know, as we see the current economic crisis is impacting deeply on our people.

In some countries, including Ireland, that impact is even more severe.

The deepest hurt is that of unemployment. Facing a day with no work to go to. Particularly for our young people. Their confidence corroded. But worse their hopes eroded.

No unemployment figure is acceptable. However, we cannot and will not as democrats allow a generation to grow up believing that their political leaders have failed to give them a reasonable chance in life. Because it is they who are democracy’s future, our future, Europe’s future.

Mr. President, what matters most to our young people leaving school and university? The chance of work. The dignity of a job. This is the challenge of our generation.

There is no simple solution to this problem, but it is a challenge we must meet head on. We will prioritise the Youth Employment Package including the Youth Guarantee.

Completing the Single Market, removing barriers to business, increasing trading opportunities and improving competitiveness are all critical in improving the environment for jobs.

The next phase of Europe’s recovery will involve untapping the full potential of the Single Market. We will be ambitious for progress on the Professional Qualifications Directive, on the Posting of Workers Directive and on pensions portability.

The Public Procurement package also has the potential to contribute significantly to the marketplace for our SMEs.

We also must reflect the way we live now thanks to technology in a Digital Single Market. So we will want to see and will prioritise progress on e-signatures, high speed broadband, collective rights management, and data protection.
The Union needs a stable basis for its challenging work. We need adequate multi-annual financing. The MFF is a priority which I have discussed with both President Schulz and the Conference of Presidents. The European Council has made considerable progress in narrowing the very large differences between Member States. But more work and negotiation is needed, and soon.

I will spare no effort in working with President Van Rompuy with the aim of securing agreement on the MFF at the European Council. As Presidency, we will discuss it with you in the Parliament. You are critical partners on this. We cannot do this without you. That authority was enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty.

I believe it is very much in our, and in Europe’s interests, that we reach early agreement. After that, we will work with Parliament to advance across the range of instruments so that there can be a stable basis for the Union’s programmes by the end of 2013. Important work on CAP and CFP reform, Horizon 2020 and on structural funds need early attention. We owe that to our citizens.

Difficult times require difficult choices of us all. A fair agreement, even if imperfect, will allow us to move forward.

Stability: economic governance and banking
Stability is needed, above all in the financial sector and the area of economic governance. Parliament and Council must agree the Two-pack very soon.

The European Semester Process is a real step forward in how we govern our economies. But you have pointed to shortcomings in terms of democratic accountability of the system; we are ready to contribute to such a discussion in the coming months.

In June, the Euro area Heads of State and Government determined to sever the toxic link between banking and sovereign debt as well as improving the sustainability of Ireland’s adjustment programme. We are determined to see these decisions implemented. We will work to achieve a real Banking Union. This must be among the Union’s top priorities, including early adoption of the Single Supervisory Mechanism and the other elements of Banking Union.

We look forward to agreement with Parliament on CRD IV also, where we have made good progress.

Foreign Policy
Mr. President, our world is now smaller than ever, making Europe’s role and Europe’s responsibility more important than ever before.

The Irish people’s commitment to human rights and international aid is exemplary. At almost any field clinic, any food depot in the sometimes-forgotten parts of our world you will hear an Irish voice - get the Irish view.

We will use the Presidency to strengthen the Union’s approach to fighting global poverty and hunger.

We will work closely in support of the efforts of the High Representative / Vice President Ashton to
strengthen the role of the European Union in bringing peace to troubled regions such as Syria, Iran, Mali and Somalia.

**Trade**
We see real potential to increase Europe’s trade with strategic partners. We have high hopes for the opening of Free Trade Agreement negotiations with the US. We believe the time is right to do so. Important negotiations where we will work for progress in the coming period include Japan, India, Canada and the countries of ASEAN region.

We are under no illusions that this will be easy: many sensitive issues arise. But because we know the benefits of what we have forged among ourselves in our Single Market, we must try to seize the potential benefits of increasing trade with other global players. The prize of success here is enormous in the scale of jobs that can be created.

**Enlargement**
Mr. President, one of the most important days in the EU’s long and proud history was May 1st 2004 when Ireland’s Presidency welcomed ten new Member States of the European Union.

This Presidency will also prioritise a credible enlargement policy.

We look forward to greeting the Croatian people as Members on 1 July.

For those countries in negotiations, each at a different stage, we will work to advance the process with Iceland, Turkey, and Montenegro. Important decisions may also be possible on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo during Ireland’s term.

Mr. President, the crisis of jobs and the European economy so preoccupies us that there is a risk we lose sight of what we hold, what we have achieved.

Europe remains among the best places to live not just economically, but culturally and socially. Above all because we have peace, a precious peace, we committed to and made together. No wonder so many countries aspire to join us to become part of our European family.

I believe that in 2012 we saw the passing of possibly the worst of the economic crisis – the fear that the euro itself might not survive was confronted and dispelled emphatically and we now move onto the challenges of the recovery of Europe.

I know this does not console our citizens, our families who have lost jobs, who don’t need to read about the Crisis - they live it every day.

They and their experience strengthen our resolve. And it is for their sake that we push on and harder with actions to bring stability, new jobs, new growth to the Union and re-install hope and confidence in our people’s lives.

Mr President, our European Union is not some exclusive distant pavilion. Our Union is a family - at times boisterous, anxious, fretful, joyful, always compassionate, always faithful.

So Ireland’s Presidency will be about our European family.

Today and for the next six months for Ireland’s part we will give all our heart to solving some of
Europe’s challenges.

I believe we can do no less. For this is the outstanding task of our generation, the ultimate challenge of politics for those entrusted with the democratic responsibility of leadership.

Let us together resolve that in this task we will not fail.