Chairperson, thank you for your introduction, and I would like to thank the Speaker and the Assembly Commission for facilitating this event in Parliament Buildings today. Thank you to all of you for coming along.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to be here today. I will keep my comments fairly short, to leave us plenty of time for questions and discussion - in my experience that is by far the most interesting part of this kind of event!

We are nearly half way through Ireland’s seventh EU Presidency, exactly 40 years after Ireland and the UK first joined the EU. I am here in Belfast today as part of our ongoing Presidency cooperation with Northern Ireland. The Presidency is an opportunity for us to work together, as close neighbours. We have strong common interests across the European agenda, and we have the chance to make real progress on them.

This Irish Presidency comes at a challenging time, as we seek to recover from the global economic crisis. As a recovery country, Ireland is uniquely well-placed to drive recovery in Europe. We set ourselves some stretching targets at the start of our Presidency. We have set out three key areas where we aim to make a difference: sustainable economic recovery, investment in job-friendly growth, and a closer engagement with Europe’s international trading partners.
These are ambitious aims. We can only achieve them by pushing for tangible results, in those areas where progress will make a real difference. We aim to build on the reputation we have built in previous Irish Presidencies: as an impartial honest broker, business-like, realistic, with a firm focus on results.

We are now ten weeks in, with sixteen weeks still to go. So how are we doing? I would say: so far, so good.

We can already point to some significant results. As Presidency we were closely involved with President Van Rompuy in his efforts to agree the EU’s budget for the next seven years: the Multiannual Financial Framework. The EU absolutely needed this agreement to underpin our pursuit of stability, jobs and growth. Negotiations were difficult, but the agreement reached at the European Council last month is a compromise that broadly satisfies all Member States, and has boosted the credibility of the EU at a critical time. We believe the budget is focussed on the right issues: tackling youth unemployment, boosting key growth areas such as research and innovation, maintaining solidarity with less developed Member States and regions.

We were particularly pleased that €150 million have been set aside for the PEACE IV programme here in Northern Ireland and in our border counties. The PEACE programme has reinforced progress towards a peaceful stable society through projects which help reconcile communities and contribute towards a shared society for everyone, and we are delighted that that work is set to continue.

But we are not there yet on the MFF. The European Parliament must now agree to the deal, and pass almost 70 pieces of legislation to put it into effect. It falls to us as Presidency to take this forward with the Parliament. We are under no illusions that this will be easy: the Parliament have made clear that their agreement can’t be taken for granted. But I am confident that, with good will
on all sides, we can achieve this before the end of our Presidency. Timely implementation of the MFF is absolutely critical to underpin recovery across the EU.

Last week, Ireland led a tense all-night negotiation on the Common Fisheries Policy, and brokered political agreement on the introduction of a Europe-wide ban on discarding unwanted fish. This is a huge stride towards our aim to achieve agreement on a reformed CFP before the end of our Presidency. We are also making good progress on reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. And we have led the urgent work to address the horsemeat scandal, to restore consumer confidence that the food we eat is what it says on the packet.

We are placing a special focus on the EU-US trade relationship – we believe our relationship with the US positions us uniquely well to get negotiations started on a new comprehensive EU-US Free Trade and Investment Agreement. With potential benefits of €150 billion, and the possibility of adding 2% to Europe’s growth rate, this agreement is a prize worth fighting for. We have already made good progress. We are also prioritising trade negotiations with the rapidly developing economies in Asia.

We have notched up other successes:

the signature of a Unified Patent Court Agreement to provide Small and Medium Enterprises and other business with a central one-stop shop for registering and protecting patents. This will also help to underpin innovation across Europe.

productive discussion of reform of data protection to increase individuals’ control over their personal information. This will boost confidence and trust in the digital economy and stimulate growth.
agreement on some measures to restore economic stability, without which there cannot be sustainable growth.

But there is still a huge amount to do. And in a Presidency which will include over 1600 meetings, including 200 in Ireland, there will be plenty of opportunities to deliver the results we need, from Banking Union to climate change, from research and innovation to green growth.

I don’t need to tell this audience that unacceptably high youth unemployment is one of the greatest blights on our continent. We cannot afford to fail in our responsibility to Europe’s young people: we must act now to ensure that they can achieve their full potential. If we do not, the consequences for our communities and societies will be dire. Any sustainable economic recovery must have our young people as its engine.

So we were delighted that the MFF agreement includes €6 billion for a new Youth Employment Initiative. And last week’s political agreement on the Youth Guarantee is a real achievement of the Irish Presidency. This aims to ensure that young people who are not working or studying receive an offer of employment, continuing education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship. Successfully implemented, the Youth Guarantee will increase the employment rate, reduce early school leaving, and help lift young people out of poverty and social exclusion.

Ireland as Presidency is also placing a strong emphasis on education, training and skills. Last month’s Ministerial meeting in Dublin had a useful discussion of ICT up-skilling for workers across the EU. We are making good progress in our discussions with Parliament on the Erasmus for All Regulation, which brings together into a coherent package current EU schemes for education,
training, youth and sport. We aim to reach agreement on this by the end of our Presidency.

In January, the Irish Education Minister Ruairi Quinn and the European Commissioner launched a new university ranking system, to give students, businesses and governments better ways to judge the performance of higher education institutions. The new U-Multirank system will measure performance in research, quality of teaching and learning, international orientation, knowledge transfer to businesses, and contribution to regional growth.

For the first time, Minister Quinn also held a Presidency event to address lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in education: a conference on homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools across the EU. And he opened jointly with Northern Ireland Minister O’Dowd a Presidency conference on the role of teacher educators in the EU.

2013 is designated as the European Year of Citizens. The aim is to spark a debate about what it means to be part of the European Union, encouraging our citizens to think about their relationship with the EU, and about the future direction of the Union. For Ireland, for example, EU membership has made us a more outward-looking and confident country. It has helped to deliver peace and prosperity, and supported the transformation of relations within this island.

The Year of Citizens is also intended to raise awareness of the rights and benefits we enjoy as citizens of the European Union, and how we can get the most benefit from them.

These rights protect us in the workplace, they ensure equality between men and women and freedom from discrimination, they protect us as consumers. These are rights which would have been inconceivable to past generations. Our right to move and reside freely in other EU countries opens up a world of possibilities to our citizens, particularly young people.
We also want to encourage people to think about their relationship with the EU, and the future direction they want the Union to take.

After all, the EU’s decisions are taken by the political leaders of Member States, and by Members of the European Parliament. Both these decision-making groups are chosen directly by our voters, in national and European elections. So the future of the EU is in the hands of the EU’s citizens, and we all have a responsibility to make informed choices when we vote.

Ireland believes that active engagement between civil society, NGOs and Government is necessary for a healthy and functioning democracy, at local, national and European level. In drafting our Presidency programme we sought to place people at the centre of everything we are doing. So we are delighted that the European Year of Citizens coincides with our Presidency. The Taoiseach launched the Year of Citizens with President Barroso in Dublin in January, and I then co-chaired with Commissioner Reding the first in a series of citizens’ debates on the EU, with 200 participants. Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore took part in a second citizens’ debate in Cork last month, and more are planned for the rest of this year.

This year is a time for citizens to make their voices heard. Today I want to hear your perspective, as young Europeans. I’m here to listen to the issues which you want to raise. So let’s get on with the debate!