Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking the IIEA for the kind invitation to address you here today.

The mid-point of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which passed last week, provides me with a welcome opportunity to review the progress that we have made in reaching the objectives set out in the Irish Presidency programme, and managing the EU work agenda.

More importantly, the half-way mark also provides the Government with an opportunity to assess the challenges that remain and to decide on how the next 13 weeks of the Presidency can be best used to deliver on our core objectives of promoting stability, job creation and growth in Europe.

The Government is broadly satisfied with the progress that Ireland has made as Presidency, but we do not underestimate the challenges that remain over the coming months. We remain firmly committed to ensuring that our seventh Presidency leaves a positive, strong and lasting legacy both for the EU and for Ireland.

Since entering office, the Government has worked intensively to ensure that Ireland was ready to hit the ground running when it took over the Presidency on 1 January.

While we are now formally half way through the Presidency, the Irish administration has been working on Presidency-related issues for much of 2012.

The pace and volume of work required a strong investment in time and resources and preparation especially by Ministers leading Councils and civil servants chairing Council Working Groups.

Over the past year, we placed a strong emphasis on building close working contacts with the key institutions, particularly the European Parliament, given its enhanced role in the EU legislative and budgetary process.
This means that we were able to engage in negotiations with the Parliament and the other institutions from the very start of the Presidency and the working relations which we developed last year continue to serve us well as we work to fulfil our common objectives.

Before setting out our key objectives so far, I would like to stress the importance of this Presidency to Ireland.

The objectives of the Presidency programme and the Programme for Government dovetail. Making progress on delivering stability, jobs and growth is critical for our own long-term national interest, as well as for Europe.

The Government is also working to ensure that the results of the Presidency and the way in which Ireland manages its term in office contributes to rebuilding our reputation internationally as a competent and effective international actor.

We also intend using the contacts and relationships built during the Presidency over the longer-term to maintain a strong engagement in EU affairs.

Ireland sees its future at the heart of a strengthened EU and the Presidency has given us the opportunity to re-establish ourselves as a constructive and active participant at the EU table. Since the Presidency started, Ireland has held 25 formal and informal Council meetings, chaired by Government Ministers. There have been two European Councils so far, including the critical meeting on the EU’s future budget that took place in February.

Irish officials have chaired more than a thousand Working Party meetings since January all of which have been aimed at driving the EU work agenda forward with a strong emphasis on proposals to support growth and jobs.

The results achieved by the Presidency to date are based on hard work, patience and carefully negotiated compromises which is the essence of what the EU is about.

As Presidency we are working to ensure that all voices are heard, from the programme of citizen dialogues which we are running, to our Ministers listening to the views and concerns of MEPs and other Member States.

I will give an illustrative list of key decisions reached under the Irish Presidency during its first three months in office. They include the EU’s future budget, the Youth Guarantee, economic governance measures, Banking Union legislation, and the Common Agricultural Policy reform package and dozens of other important pieces of legislation.

We are determined to drive growth and jobs in Europe, but the foundations on which economic recovery are built must be stable. As Presidency, we are working hard to take fundamental and long-term decisions that will restore confidence to public finances in Member States and to the European banking sector.
In February, the Irish Presidency helped to broker an agreement with the European Parliament on the “Two Pack” of economic governance legislation, designed to improve budgetary and economic coordination among Euro area members.

The “Two Pack” is a key piece of the Euro area's economic architecture and will further contribute to financial and economic stability.

During the first half of the Presidency, we also implemented the European Semester, based on a roadmap of actions that we developed in late 2012.

The Semester process aims to promote stronger economic and fiscal coordination and ensure that Member States undertake the necessary reforms to restore fiscal health, to strengthen budgetary discipline and to deliver smart and sustainable jobs and growth within the Europe 2020 framework.

Following discussions at the March European Council we concluded the first part of this process. Member States are now preparing their national reform and jobs plans, the review of which will inform clear country specific orientations to be agreed at the final European Council of the Presidency which takes place in June.

Making progress on restoring health to the banking sector is another key challenge. The proposals that make up the EU’s Banking Union package are a major priority for Ireland’s Presidency and are designed to prevent a recurrence of the problems that have blighted the banking sector in several Member States in recent years.

We are pleased to have reached agreement in recent weeks with the European Parliament on the Capital Requirements Directive which will ensure that European banks hold enough good quality capital to withstand possible economic and financial shocks.

The Directive will also enforce greater transparency and discourage excessive risk-taking including through restrictions on bankers’ pay. Finance Ministers signalled their broad political agreement to this deal at the beginning of March.

Work is also progressing well on the Single Supervisory Mechanism which is the core element of the Banking Union and a vital step in breaking the link between the banks and the sovereigns. With these proposals coming over the line, we will now focus efforts during the remainder of the Presidency on making progress on the Bank Resolution and Recovery Directive and other legislation in the financial services sector.

The EU needs to ensure that it provides the greatest support possible to foster economic recovery across Europe, including by reducing regional disparities and tackling unemployment black spots.

The agreement reached at the February European Council on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the EU’s budget for 2014-2020, is a key element in contributing to Europe’s economic recovery, and to future growth and to social cohesion.
The supports in the budget in areas such as Cohesion and Regional Funding can make a real and positive difference to economic recovery and job creation in communities in every Member State.

Ireland believes that the budget is well-focused: tackling youth unemployment, boosting key growth areas such as research and innovation and maintaining solidarity with less developed Member States and with regions which have been particularly severely affected by the economic crisis.

Securing the assent of the European Parliament to the budget will remain one of the main challenges facing the Presidency during the second half of its term in office. The Taoiseach has met the President of the European Parliament and the President of the European Commission on a number of occasions in recent months to move the process forward.

Work is also continuing in parallel with the European Commission and with Member States on the budget allocations for the many programmes supported by EU funding and on the implementing legislation that will give effect to the EU budget.

In this regard, the Presidency looks forward to discussions at the informal meeting of Finance Ministers which is taking place in Dublin this weekend to build progress.

Securing agreement on the budgetary process is critical to programmes such as CAP and CFP reform, Erasmus for All and Horizon 2020, which can make a huge impact on future economic growth and social development across the Union.

Crucially, the decision reached in February includes €6 billion for a new Youth Employment Initiative. And we were delighted to steer through political agreement in late February on the new Youth Guarantee: this will stand as one of the achievements of our Presidency.

The Guarantee aims to ensure that young people under 25 who are not working or studying receive an offer of employment, continuing education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship.

Successfully implemented, the Youth Guarantee can contribute to increasing employment, to reducing early school leaving, and to ensuring that jobless young people avoid poverty and social exclusion.

We will continue to work with vigour during the second half of our Presidency on measures that will reduce youth unemployment, including through greater access to education and training under programmes such as Erasmus for All.

The Irish Presidency is also working on a broad range of measures aimed at providing much stronger support to foster growth in the research and innovation sector, where the EU can become a future global leader.
We will be applying our own national experience of using research and innovation to underpin economic growth as we push forward the Horizon 2020 programme to make Europe a world-class research and innovation centre and boost high-potential sectors of the knowledge economy.

Researchers across Europe must be able to access funding with minimum red tape. Small and Medium Enterprises, which have great potential to generate growth and jobs, must also benefit from funding for research and innovation – which is why we are focusing as Presidency on programmes such as the Competitiveness for SMEs Programme, or COSME.

We are also working to create growth and the jobs of the future by working to advance measures under the Single Market I. The signature in February of the Unified Patent Court Agreement will provide businesses, and in particular Europe’s SMEs, with a central one-stop shop for registering and protecting patents.

Further advances in this area will deliver multiple benefits which will spur business growth and job creation, but also deliver a more competitive marketplace which benefits consumers.

Ireland, as Presidency, is also attaching strong importance to the Digital Single Market. We’ve made good progress to date on the complex data protection issue and we are working hard to make advances on other issues including e-identification.

Work is progressing well on the reform of data protection legislation, to increase individuals’ control over their personal information. This will also contribute to boosting confidence and trust in the digital economy.

While we are working on strengthening the Single Market, advancing the external trade agenda is one of the ways to bolster much-needed economic growth. For this reason, Ireland is prioritising the EU's broad trade agenda and is placing a particular emphasis on the EU-US trade relationship.

At the start of the Presidency, we set ourselves an ambitious target to agree a formal mandate for the Commission to start negotiations on a new EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Given its huge potential, it is encouraging that a real momentum to advance transatlantic trade has developed over the last two months.

We have received very positive feedback from President Obama and from our own European partners. We are hoping to make further strong progress on this at the informal Meeting of EU Trade Ministers that is taking place here in Dublin next week.

Trade negotiations with Japan also started in March and the EU is currently negotiating on trade issues also with Canada, Singapore, India, China, Thailand and ASEAN.
In the area of agricultural policy the Irish Presidency has successfully concluded a General Approach on the CAP reform package. The Council of Agriculture Ministers chaired by Ireland agreed its position on the Commission’s reform proposals.

Our objective is to secure an inter-institutional agreement by the end of June. The agreement will deal with a range of complex issues including sensitive one such as the way in which direct payments are made. Work is also moving ahead on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy.

In other policy areas such as transport, good progress is being made. The Informal Ministerial meetings on environment and energy that will be hosted the week after next in Dublin Castle by Ministers Hogan and Rabbitte will contribute to the Presidency’s ambitious agenda in these areas and will also feed into the European Council, which will place a strong focus on energy in May. On the enlargement front, the Presidency is working to ensure that we can make progress on the accession process with a number of countries.

We hope to open a Chapter with Turkey -the first in more than two and a half years- before our Presidency concludes. We are also looking forward to making similar progress with Montenegro’s accession.

With the ratification of Croatia’s Accession Treaty by Slovenia, the final Member State to do so, at the beginning of this month, Croatia will join the European Union on 1st July. The Presidency has been fully supportive of Croatia’s accession to the EU and we are particularly pleased that the ratification of the Treaty was successfully completed during our term.

The issues that I have outlined are just a small overview of the intensive work by the Irish Presidency that is underway across a range of other Council formations. I would be happy to discuss more of these issues in greater detail during Q&A.

Overall, the Presidency has already delivered a considerable and substantive programme. We are on the cusp of breakthroughs over the coming weeks in several other key areas.

We remain on track with the great majority of our policy and legislative objectives. But we are only half-way through and have a lot more work to do and a lot more to deliver. The focus across all formations remains on delivering results that contribute to our core Presidency objective of delivering stability, employment and economic growth across the EU.

I can assure you that we remain both ambitious and optimistic that working closely with partners, we can deliver real results for Europe’s citizens.

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