

European Union

Dutch Presidency

Address by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende at the European Parliament: Looking back briefly on the Dutch Presidency of the European Union, July-December 2004
December 21, 2004

The EU of the future

The Dutch Presidency of the EU during the second half of 2004 has above all been 'the Presidency of the enlarged Union' – the first complete Presidency of a Union of 25 states. New ways of working were introduced in keeping with the new circumstances, which are out of the ordinary: a newly elected European Parliament and a new European Commission taking office. The signing of the Constitutional Treaty in Rome was an important precondition for the smooth integration of the new Member States into the EU decision-making process. The Netherlands has endeavoured to ensure that negotiations on what are often difficult issues run smoothly and so prepare the way for the incoming Luxembourg Presidency. Examples include the multi-annual budget, the Lisbon agenda and terrorism. A number of specific results have also been achieved during the Dutch Presidency. The main items are summarised below.

Enlargement

The Presidency realized the completion of the negotiations with Romania and Bulgaria. At the General Affairs and External Relations Council of April 2005, accession treaties can be signed with these two countries. Accession negotiations with Croatia can commence in March 2005, provided that Croatia cooperates fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

The decision on the start of accession negotiations with Turkey needed close attention. The Presidency did everything it could to ensure a durable decision that meets the expectations and wishes of the various parties. The 25 heads of government reached agreement to start accession negotiations with Turkey on 3 October 2005. The goal of these negotiations, of which the outcome is not guaranteed beforehand, is full membership of the EU. In any case, Turkey will be anchored in European structures. Concerning Cyprus, it was agreed that Turkey will declare it will sign the Protocol extending the Ankara agreement to all 25 Member States before 3 October 2005, when the accession negotiations will start.

The idea of Europe

The Netherlands has left its specific mark on this Presidency by drawing attention within the EU to the foundations of European integration. 'Thinkers and doers' met

to consider what values unite us, how these values can be strengthened and what leads they provide for future policy. This also illustrates the importance the Dutch Presidency has attached to communicating the EU to citizens. A ministerial meeting on the search for new ways of improving communication with citizens took place, as did a European TV debate on specific topics of current interest that will be broadcast in several EU countries. This initial exchange of ideas has provided sufficient material that can be taken further by future presidencies. The cultural programme Thinking forward and Rem Koolhaas's exhibition The image of Europe were the Presidency's contributions to the cultural dimension of the EU.

Results in the field of freedom, security and justice

- Agreement has been reached on the 'Hague Programme', which lays down the lines of a strategy for making the Union more secure over the next five years. Priority will be given to the fight against terrorism, but the programme will also cover other important themes such as exchange of information, closer cooperation in the field of justice and cooperation in the field of civil law. Efforts will also be made to achieve a common asylum system by 2010, illegal immigration will be tackled and a European agency will be set up to increase the security of the EU's external borders. Allowing the Member States to take decisions by qualified majority vote rather than unanimously will make asylum and migration policy more effective. Another important item is the agreement in principle on a new drug strategy for 2005-2012, which will allow a balanced, integrated approach to the problem of drugs and at the same time protect public health and public safety more effectively.
- Integration has been placed on the European agenda. Agreement has been reached on a European framework for integration based on eleven common principles. There has already been a first ministerial conference on this topic.
- Agreement has been reached on the protection of refugees in their regions of origin. The Commission will launch a number of pilot projects in 2005.
- The European Council has adopted an action plan to adapt and tighten up measures to combat terrorism. A central unit will be set up to produce European threat analyses on the basis of information from national intelligence services, passports will be made more secure by the inclusion of biometric features and there will be better and faster exchange of data from criminal records. There will also be closer checks on cash entering and leaving the EU. The campaign against the financing of terrorism will be given new impetus through the directive on money laundering and the financing of terrorism.

Results in the field of strengthening the European economy

- Heads of government have had informal discussions on socioeconomic reforms on the basis of the Kok Report. The report will serve as a guide for negotiations between the Member States when the Lisbon Strategy is evaluated in early 2005. The report treats the environment as an economic opportunity, thereby acknowledging the positive contribution that environmentally efficient innovations are making to the European economy.
- Agreement has been reached on a list of 15 items of EU legislation that will be simplified in order to reduce the administrative burden in Europe.
- Agreement has been reached on the need to devise a common EU methodology for measuring the administrative burden. This method of measuring the cost of European legislation to business will ensure that more explicit account is taken of this cost when new legislation is being developed.
- Agreement has been reached on the framework for the final WTO Doha Round negotiations on trade liberalisation, in which the EU has played an important part.
- In the fiscal field, an important agreement has been reached on the merger directive, which will remove a number of fiscal obstacles to international mergers, takeovers and reorganisations in the EU. Political agreement has also been reached on the capital requirements directive and the auditing directive, thereby virtually concluding the EU action plan to promote an internal market for financial services.

Results in the field of the EU multi-annual budget (agenda 2007)/finances

- The positions of the Member States have been charted using the building-block method, providing a clearer picture of countries' views on the Commission's main policy proposals. This method will provide a more explicit link between policy and finances, forcing countries to be clearer in their choices and priorities. The Union will proceed further with this under the Luxembourg Presidency.
- With the discussion on principles and guidelines as well as an inventory of the positions on budgetary options for the various policy areas, the Dutch Presidency has established a solid basis for political agreement on the new Financial Perspectives.

Results in the field of external relations

- The EU's closer relations with Asia are apparent from the EU-India Summit as well as the successful ASEM Summit in Hanoi. Here the EU showed that it is possible to combine a critical policy on Burma with intensive dialogue with Asian countries. The EU-China Summit also proceeded satisfactorily,

with among other things a decision by the EU that there is political will to work towards ending the arms embargo but that the actual ending of the embargo will be preceded by a number of things such as an improved EU code of conduct for arms exports and improvements in the field of human rights.

- During the Dutch Presidency the EU has adopted a successful, country-specific approach to the wider Middle East and the Mediterranean countries. Examples include the adoption of action plans for a number of Mediterranean countries as part of the EU's neighbourhood policy, an extensive package of support measures for the Iraqi government and a carrot-and-stick approach to Iran, as a result of which that country has suspended its enrichment activities.
- In recent months the EU has shown that it is willing and able to intervene actively in current developments in crisis areas. This has been evident in the Middle East, where the peace process has been cautiously revived; Palestinian and Israeli leaders shook hands at the ministerial Euromed meeting in The Hague. To help the peace progress along, the EU has formulated a number of specific short-term goals. Under the Dutch Presidency the EU has also played a mediating role and helped avert a major political crisis in Ukraine.
- The Dutch Presidency has paid close attention to Africa, especially the deteriorating situation in Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire and the Great Lakes region. The EU is providing active support for the African Union mission in Sudan (Darfur) in the form of personnel and resources. Dialogue between the EU and ECOWAS, SADC and the African Union has been stepped up.
- Under the Dutch Presidency the EU has decided that agreements will be reached in April 2005 on new ODA objectives for 2009-2010, as part of the preparations for the UN summit. The summit (to be held in September 2005) will take stock of the progress made in attaining the Millennium Development Goals. The EU has also reached agreement on strengthening its coherence policy and has reaffirmed its commitment to implement the Cairo agenda (on reproductive health and rights) and to combat HIV/AIDS.
- At the initiative of the Dutch Presidency, High Representative Javier Solana has decided to appoint a Personal Representative for human rights.

Results in the field of Defence

- Member states have decided to strengthen the EU's military and civilian capabilities so that it can engage in crisis management outside its borders in accordance with its security strategy. During the military capabilities commitment conference, member states decided to set up a total of 13 battle groups. This number is more than sufficient to enable the EU to carry out at least one battle group operation in 2005 and 2006, and two battle group operations after 2007, perhaps concurrently.

- A package of agreements has been drawn up to strengthen EU military capabilities and improve the coordination of strategic transport. The member states have also committed themselves to intensifying international military cooperation. The remaining military deficiencies are being eliminated: not only has the initial operational capacity of the EU battle groups been covered, but promises have been made for full operational capacity after 2007.
- It has been decided to broaden the civilian expertise available to the EU. EU member states have undertaken to achieve the headline goal 2010 and develop the capabilities needed for the EU to handle future tasks and challenges. Next year a requirements catalogue will be drawn up, bringing the military requirements of the European Security and Defence Policy up to date. It has also been confirmed that standards and criteria will be developed to enable progress with quality improvement to be measured.

Results in the field of Agriculture and Fisheries

- Under the Dutch Presidency, agreement has been reached on legislation concerning animal welfare during transport.
- In the veterinary field, the Netherlands, as holder of the EU Presidency, together with the Commission, signed a veterinary memorandum with the Russian Federation, thereby averting the threat of the Russian borders being closed to animal products.
- The Presidency and the Commission held a conference on sustainable agriculture, social conditions and socially responsible animal disease control.

Results in the field of Education, Youth and Culture

- The theme of citizenship and education has been put on the European agenda. Member states have accepted the obligation to strengthen vocational education.
- A working plan on culture has been adopted. Member states have committed themselves for the first time to a clear and results-based multiyear agenda. The plan focuses, among other things, on the economic importance of creativity and the mobility of museum collections and artists.
- In the research field, the main features of the Seventh Framework Programme have been adopted; it is due to begin in 2005. The member states have asked the Commission to elaborate the programme, to continue European cooperation projects, take European technological initiatives, encourage excellent fundamental research at European level and coordinate national research programmes.

Results in the field of Environment

- Under the Dutch Presidency, the EU has reached political agreements on managing mining waste to prevent environmental disasters and on limiting the emission of fluoridised greenhouse gases. An agreement is being prepared for the 20 December environment council on the EU's accession to the Aarhus Convention (public access to information on environmental issues) and on legislation on battery recycling.
- On the initiative of the Dutch Presidency, EU member states have expressed political support for sustainable mobility. This means that decision-making on measures to make road traffic cleaner, quieter and more economical is being expedited.
- The EU has decided to tackle flood protection on a European scale.

Results in the field of Transport

- Under the Dutch Presidency, the competitive position of short sea shipping has been strengthened by agreements to promote coastal navigation (e.g. reducing the administrative burden). To optimise cooperation in inland navigation, a general position has been reached on harmonising river information services, a package of information services and agreements, along with a partial political agreement on technical regulations for inland vessels.
- Under the Dutch Presidency, progress has been achieved on making the European aviation industry stronger and more competitive (e.g. a political agreement on harmonising technical standards and administrative procedures in the field of civil aviation and a general approach to harmonising the training and mobility of air traffic controllers).
- The EU has agreed in principle to amend the driving licence directive. This will gradually put an end to the current situation where many driving licence models coexist in the EU. This will make licences easier to check and reduce the risk of fraud.

Results in the field of Employment, Social Policy and Public Health

- The EU has outlined the new European social policy agenda so as to give greater prominence to the Lisbon objectives. For instance, priority will be given to helping people find work (e.g. through changes to the social security system) and to making labour markets more flexible.
- Under the Dutch Presidency, agreement has been reached on the directive on the equal treatment of men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services. The main point in the directive is equal treatment by insurance companies in respect of premiums and payments.

- Also important for European employees is the fact that agreement has been reached on the directive on optical radiation; this protects employees against the harmful effects of radiation, including solar, infrared and laser radiation.
- EU member states have agreed to exchange best practices for the reform of health care systems in Europe.
- A joint conference of agriculture and health ministers decided to introduce central coordination of measures to tackle infectious human and veterinary diseases in order to reduce the risk of infection from animals to humans.