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Dar L-Ewropa, St. Paul's Street, Valletta,
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ADDRESS

Statement by

The Hon. Dr. Tonio Borg
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

From the land of paella and wine to the capital of beer and chocolates – in gourmet terms we are definitely in fine company. The first trio presidency of its kind is definitely a success in the culinary department!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again it is a pleasure for me to address you here today, this time on the Belgian part of the trio Presidency which has defined the putting into force of the Lisbon Treaty. As with any good chocolate, it is the centre that is often the most anticipated and that which provides us with the most surprises.

Prime Minister Yves Leterme told us not to expect any surprises, just hard work and a solid Presidency looking to do its share in the implementation of an ambitious 18 month programme set out by the Spanish Presidency six months

ago. Indeed, I have no doubt that this Presidency will deliver, not only on a European front but also on a political front.

If we take a quick look at the proposed plan for the Belgian Presidency one instantly realises that it seeks to play a dual role. On the one hand it takes stock of the current global economic scenario with a recession not all of us have been able to crawl out of and increasing worries regarding a double-dip recession. On the other hand it looks forward to working with the Lisbon Treaty to expand Europe's international role as well as consolidate its position.

Of note is the importance the Belgians are giving to the implementation of the EU 2020 strategy. Without a doubt this recession has shown where our weakest links lie. The time has come for us to take concerted action to safeguard our future generations. We are the agents of change and therefore we have to take some tough decisions to ensure a stronger Europe. Where we will be in 2020 will depend on us. Action needs to be taken today.

The reasons are simple. 2009 saw the economies of the EU shrink by 4%; industrial production by 20%; unemployment stood at nearly 30 million with over 21% of youth unemployed. Europe's growth potential has been halved by the crisis and our productivity is lagging behind the rest of the world. The crisis in Greece was yet another wake up call. Will Europe learn from this and take the tough decisions that are needed to build stronger European foundations for our economies?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The time has surely come for Europe to adopt a comprehensive strategy to ensure positive growth and prevent a loss of a generation of wealth. There is no doubt that we are lagging behind India and China when it comes to growth. Despite the tight situation that we find ourselves in, Europe needs to realise that the world is not waiting for us. Global competition is fierce and our share of global exports is declining. Lessons have to be learnt and quick. The stakes are too high and more coordination amongst us is crucial.

Building on our strengths whilst taking stock of our weaknesses is what this strategy is all about. Malta welcomes this strategy and views it as an extension of our own Vision 2015. Our strategy for reform has forced us to take some tough and unpopular decisions which are slowly but surely paying off. We will no doubt join forces with our European counterparts to work together to create a Europe of sustainable growth and jobs. Our unique qualities as a Union of democratic states should never be underestimated. The solidarity shown with Greece over the last few months bears witness to a deeper Union based not solely on economics but also on a conscientious realisation that our interdependence means that none of us can be allowed to fall by the wayside.

Another aspect that emerges from the 2020 Strategy and is being given high importance by the Belgian Presidency is the fight for a clean environment. Economic growth is of the essence but not at the expense of the environment.

The catastrophe that has unfolded in the Gulf of Mexico over the last few months is testimony to this important principle. This, together with the drive against climate change will be a permanent feature of any European Presidency. On our end we recognise the necessity for combating climate change and increasing Europe's competitiveness through clean and efficient energy supplies.

There is no doubt that this Presidency, as with the previous one, will go down in European history as the first of the Lisbon Presidencies. As with anything that goes first, it should set standards and must set the pace. The Spanish have set the scene and it is now up to the Belgians to work within the Lisbon framework and make it function in the way it was designed to. Flawless it is not but it does take stock of Europe's new reality – larger and more diverse facing an increase in economic and environmental challenges. Who would have predicted six months ago at the start of the Spanish Presidency that Europe would be hijacked by the eruption of a volcano? And yet it was! As a country that relies heavily on tourism and as an island reliant on air transport, the volcanic ash incident was a reminder of our vulnerability when nature sounds its voice.

Nature is not the only one to sound its voice. Europe has been and will continue sounding its voice on an international stage. The Lisbon Treaty has ensured that Europe is given the necessary tools to become a bigger and more effective player on the international stage. Speaking with one voice has never been easy for the EU. The emergence of a consensus on a variety of issues is difficult to hammer out but not impossible. Today, with the assistance of the Permanent President

and the High Representative on Foreign Affairs a new European reality is taking shape. This Presidency will continue where Spain left off. What role for these two positions in Europe? How effective will we be?

This Presidency will see the recruitment of personnel for the European External Action Service – nothing short of a milestone in the historical evolution of the Union. Its relevance to all Member States will depend greatly on whether or not smaller states will be allocated any significant number of places within the service. As Malta, we do not expect to be over-represented but would like to ensure that we are represented properly to do a job and not merely as a statistical assurance. For Malta to feel part of the process, we must not be sidelined. Considering our low representation (and that of other new MS) in the Commission and Council bodies, we expect that this anomaly can be redressed and this under representation should be taken into account.

On a final note I wish to refer to the Belgian Presidency's plans for the implementation of the Stockholm Programme and the creation of a common European Asylum policy. The solidarity that was shown with Greece to prevent its economic meltdown needs to be shown with states like Malta and Italy when dealing with immigration. Arrivals this year have been less than last year for this time of year. This, however, does not mean that the responsibilities for catering and housing the thousands of immigrants in Malta have decreased. On the contrary, arrival numbers cannot be taken out of context and need to be seen within the larger picture of all those who have arrived over the last few years.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is much to say regarding the Belgian Presidency and by not mentioning it I have by no means undervalued its importance. The next six months will be interesting from Malta's perspective and we are keen to assist the Presidency in any way necessary. Whilst wishing the Presidency good luck with the next few months, we pledge our support to your programme and will no doubt have plenty of time to work within it.

Thank you