

Van Rompuy to Greece: `Don't blame Europe`

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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - As rebellion grows amongst MPs and ministers in Greece's ruling Pasok party, European Council President Herman Van Rompuy on a visit to Athens has told the country it should not blame the European Union for its problems as the austerity and structural changes being imposed should have been done long ago.

"[The austerity measures] are unavoidable and should have been implemented long ago. Europe is not to be blamed. On the contrary, the Union is helping to preserve Greece's future," he said in remarks made following a meeting with Prime Minister George Papandreou.

"I know that this message is not always well understood but it is the simple truth."

He also warned the Greek government that it needs to stick to its commitments to cuts and privatisation. In recent weeks, popular opposition to such measures has extended to the government, with MEPs and ministers openly criticising reforms.

"The key is to continue implementing the courageous reforms and privatisations that have been agreed in a timely and effective manner," he said. "On fiscal consolidation it is important to stick to the programme objectives."

In comments to the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, he also said that Belgium, his own country, had undergone similar structural adjustment in the late nineties, before the advent of the eurozone, and had successfully reduced its national debt.

"Some of your countrymen resist the reforms, others are anxious about the outcome. And we all understand these feelings. However, I want to share with you my confidence that it can be done," he continued.

"We in Belgium restored competitiveness by imposing wage restraint. We privatised telecoms and public banks. We asked special powers from the parliament."

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