

...and a happy New Year! Christmas and New Year's addresses by European heads of state

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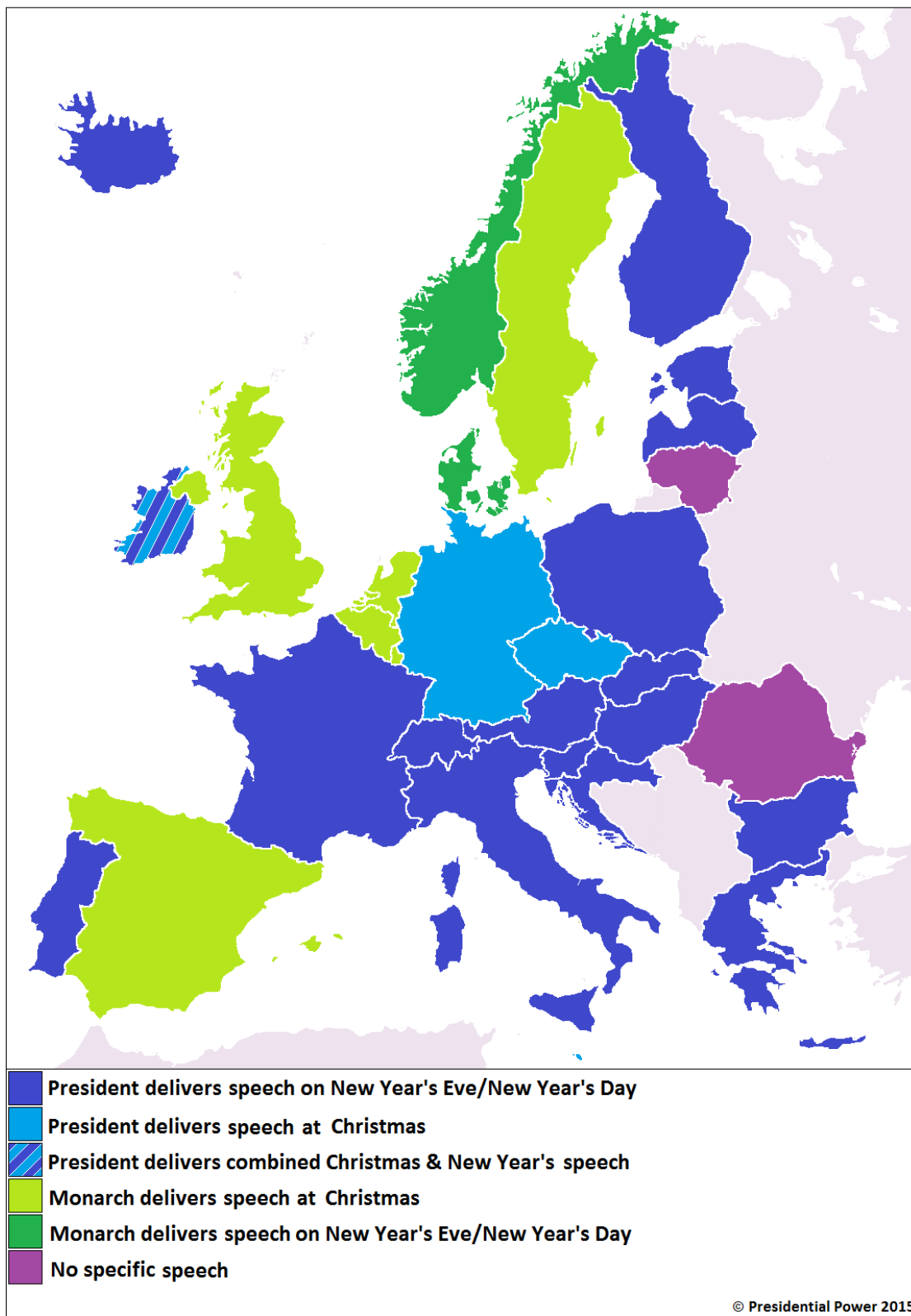
Every year millions of Britons gather in front of their 'tellies' to watch the Queen's annual Christmas message. This year, over 7.8m viewers saw and heard her speak on the topic of reconciliation in the light of the WW I centenary and were delighted by references to her visit to the set of 'Games of Thrones', making it the UK's Christmas TV highlight (it attracted 1.5m more viewers than the 'Doctor Who' Christmas special and 2m more viewers than the Christmas episode of the period drama 'Downtown Abbey'). Given that this blog deals with presidents, i.e. non-hereditary heads of state, writing about the Queen's Christmas message might be peculiar for some readers. Nevertheless, the tradition of addressing the nation has – in the European context – first been documented for monarchs, with presidents continuing this tradition.

Queen Elizabeth's (left) Royal Christmas Message is one the most watched Christmas addresses by a head of state worldwide; German president Gauck (right) is one of only three presidents in Europe to deliver his holiday address on Christmas Day.

British monarchs have only addressed the nation at Christmas since 1932 (on proposal of the BBC's founding director). Earlier examples of public addresses to the nation on the occasion of Christmas or the New Year have been documented for Kings of Denmark and the German Emperor since the late 19th century. Starting with general well-wishes for the New Year and/or Christmas, holiday addresses have now developed into more elaborate speeches which are designed to reach a wide audience. Apart from general remarks about the holiday season and a short review of the last year, heads of state also often highlight specific themes in their message. Thereby, the degree to which the content is 'political' tends to vary with the constitutional position of the head of state. In the European monarchies the content is often coordinated with the government (although much this process – like so many interactions between constitutional monarchs and elected representatives – remains shrouded in secrecy) and themes or highlights tend to be rather uncontroversial. Likewise, indirectly elected presidents – with some exceptions – only rarely include strong political statements or use speeches to express entirely new opinions. In Switzerland, New Year's Day coincides with the inauguration of a new Federal President (the head of the collegial executive), so that the president's New Year's Address is simultaneously an inaugural address and does not necessarily follow this pattern. Popularly elected presidents are generally more likely to use

this annual tradition to talk about (specific) policy. For instance, French president Francois Hollande spoke about economic reforms (several of which take effect 1 January 2015) and Cypriot president Nikos Anastasiadis outlined plans for modernisation of the state.

Christmas and New Year's Addresses by European Heads of State



Apart from this divide, a less relevant albeit interesting division between presidents and monarchs appears in Europe. Apart from Germany, the Czech Republic and Malta, presidents address the nation on New Year's Eve/New Year's Day (the Irish president provides a combined message), while the majority of monarchs (with Norway, Denmark and Monaco being the exception) deliver their message on Christmas Day. Hereby, it needs to be noted that German presidents until 1970 delivered their speech on New Year's Day (which means they switched with the Chancellor). Czech presidents also gave New Year's addresses until president Zeman returned to the pre-1949 tradition of delivering his speech at Christmas after his inauguration in 2013. I have tried to find reasons for the divide between presidents and monarchs, yet have not found any palpable evidence. Monarchs' tendency to deliver Christmas messages might be related to their role in national churches (although this does not explain the Danish and Norwegian exceptions). Presidents on the other hand, deliver messages on the relatively world-view-'neutral' New Year's Eve/Day. In Central and Eastern Europe, Communist leaders naturally avoided giving speeches on or related to Christmas Day. After the fall of Communism, this tradition was retained by the new democratic leaders. The Lithuanian and Romanian president form the general exception from all other European heads of state. While both issue short press statements to wish their citizens a happy Christmas and New Year, neither gives a specific speech. The Prince of Liechtenstein does not even that.

Although Christmas and New Year's messages rarely belong to the most important political speeches in European democracies. Nevertheless, they reflect – although in varying degrees – not only the institutional arrangements of European democracies. Furthermore, they shed light on how political traditions develop (be it formally or informally) and can carry on from one regime to another (monarchy to republic; autocracy to democracy).