



***Speech by Prime Minister António Costa at the
Plenary Session of the European Parliament
Brussels, 20 January 2021***

**Presentation of the priorities of the Portuguese
Presidency of the Council of the European Union**

TIME TO DELIVER: A FAIR, GREEN AND DIGITAL RECOVERY

Mister President of the European Parliament,
Madam President of the European Commission,
Chairs of Political Groups,
Commissioners,
Honourable Members

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Europe has been experiencing its greatest challenge since the war. In less than one year, families have been devastated by the loss of almost half a million lives and we have been drawn into a debilitating social and economic crisis in all 27 Member States.

However, this crisis has proven how important the European Union is, ensuring equal access for all European citizens to the eagerly awaited vaccination against COVID-19, in its joint and robust response to the economic and social crisis, in the assurance of financial stability.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Commission, the Parliament, the European Central Bank, the President of the European Council and the Croatian and German Presidencies for their tireless work in the European response to this dramatic crisis.

The beginning of the vaccination process, the approval of the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Next Generation EU Programme have opened the doorway to hope.

Portugal is thus taking over the Presidency of the Council at a moment that is decisive for setting in motion, implementing and putting into practice the historic decisions we have made in recent months.

This is why we have chosen the motto: TIME TO DELIVER: A FAIR, GREEN AND DIGITAL RECOVERY.

A motto that clearly summarises **the three main priorities of the Portuguese Presidency:**

- The first is the **economic and social recovery** of Europe through the twin climate and digital transitions;
- The second is **to develop the Social Pillar** of the European Union, ensuring that these twin transitions leave nobody behind;
- The third is **strengthening the strategic autonomy of a European Union open to the world.**

The first condition for recovery is the success of the vaccination process, without which it will not be possible to safely resume our normal everyday lives.

We must continue to work in coordination so that, together, we can beat the virus and re-establish full freedom of movement and all the potential of the internal market. But international solidarity is vital so that the pandemic can be eradicated from the entire world, whether in our own neighbourhood, in Africa or in Latin America.

At the same time, we must put the instruments of economic and social recovery to work.

On the one hand, we have the new **Next Generation EU.**

This is why we must conclude the processes of ratification of the Own Resources Decision in all the Member States, voting in this Parliament on the Regulation that has been approved and, finally, approving the 27 National Recovery and Resilience Plans. Because we know full well that the individual recovery of each

Member State will only become a reality, and be reinforced, through the joint recovery of the European Union.

On the other hand, we must also begin implementation of the **Programmes for the new Multiannual Financial Framework**, particularly those that, thanks to the determination of the European Parliament, benefited from an important boost, such as the Horizon Europe, EU4Health, or ERASMUS + programmes, which have so bolstered the European spirit.

Mister President,
Honourable Members,

The utmost attention which the fight against the pandemic requires of us must not allow us to neglect the strategic challenges that are still facing us.

This is why **the European recovery must be based on the twin climate and digital transitions.**

We are in the midst of a health emergency, but we still have a climate emergency to deal with. We have a planet to protect and we cannot afford to waste any more time. It is important to implement the European Green Deal. Combating climate change must be a goal that runs through all EU policies. **First of all, by approving the new Climate Law, which I assume as one of our main political objectives.** We are ready to work with you, Honourable Members, so that together we can do what remains to be done in order to obtain political agreement from this Parliament as soon as possible.

This is the decisive decade, the one that will need more effort and ambition, so that we can meet our commitment to reach carbon neutrality in 2050.

But this is also Europe's Digital decade. One day without focusing on the digital is one more day of delay in this challenging competition on a global scale, where Europe must be on the frontline.

To this end, **we will be paying particular attention to the new Digital Services Package**, recently proposed by the Commission, as a fundamental legislative instrument for the protection of individual rights and democratic sovereignty and to bring more competition to the digital market, stimulating entrepreneurship and creativity.

In short, **the recovery cannot be limited to responding to present needs with temporary fixes, but with investments and reforms that will allow us to come out of this crisis more resilient, more digital and greener.**

Mister President,

Honourable Members,

The twin climate and digital transitions are essential and exciting societal changes that must not be delayed. But they are a source of concern for many SMEs and millions of European workers. Companies are afraid they won't be competitive or that they won't be able to keep up with the modernisation effort; workers fear for the future of work, their jobs, the new ways of working, the virtualisation of hard-won rights.

Thus, in line with the European Parliament report “A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions”, our second priority is to put the EU Social Pillar into practice, as a basis for trust in the twin climate and digital transitions.

We will need:

- to reinforce skills – new skills, upskilling, reskilling – so that our citizens are players in and not victims of these transitions;
- to invest more in innovation in order to reinforce the competitiveness of our companies; and
- to reinforce social protection in order to ensure that no one is left behind.

The central event of our Presidency will be the Social Summit, which will take place in Porto in May, with social partners, civil society, presidents of institutions and Member States.

The main objective of the Summit is **to give a strong political impetus to the Action Plan, which the Commission will be presenting** in March and which makes the desire expressed by our citizens to put into practice the 20 General Principles proclaimed in Gothenburg.

Here too, there is no time to lose. Here too, the time has come to deliver. The development of the Social Pillar is fundamental for assuring Europeans that the changes we are going through are not a threat, but rather an opportunity.

The populism undermining our democracies feeds on fear. Putting the Social Pillar into practice is therefore the best vaccine against inequality, fear and populism.

Finally, as I said, our **third priority** will be to **strengthen the strategic autonomy of a European Union open to the world.**

As this pandemic has shown, Europe cannot afford to be completely dependent on the external supply of essential goods, nor on such lengthy value chains, which carry a high risk of being interrupted.

We must therefore strengthen our strategic autonomy. This is a very demanding debate because it involves industrial policy, competition policy and trade policy at the same time.

But neither **should this mean a protectionist drift or self-serving promotion of “European champions”**, throwing away the huge competitive advantage of an economy based on the versatility of our SMEs and the R&D&I system, which it is important to coordinate, develop and integrate into global value chains, as we hope the updating of the Industrial Strategy to be presented by the Commission will foster.

Finally, **strengthening the strategic economy of a Europe that is a global player**, cherishing, as our citizens ask us to, the social and environmental standards that set us apart and make us proud.

From the outset, naturally, we want to continue to reinforce our **neighbourhood partnerships**, to the East and to the South, our **strategic partnership with Africa**, our partnership with the United Kingdom and our transatlantic relations with the USA and **Latin America**.

Obviously, the **United Kingdom**, our new neighbour and old ally, deserves special attention and it will continue to be an important partner of the European Union. We are looking forward to the European Parliament giving its consent to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement reached on Christmas Eve and we will continue to work towards the establishment of a comprehensive framework for our future relationship.

And on this day when President Joe Biden takes office, I cannot but wish him every success in his mandate and refer to the need for us to relaunch our relations with the **USA**, particularly in the areas of climate, the fight against COVID-19, the defence of multilateralism, security and trade, as well as digital.

The main milestone for our Presidency in terms of the Indo-Pacific area will be the promotion of a closer, more strategic partnership between the two largest democracies in the world, the European Union and India. We will be hosting an **EU-India Summit** in Porto in May, focusing on cooperation in the digital, trade and investment, pharmaceutical products, science and space areas.

Let me say one final word on a central issue in Europe's relationship with the world: migration.

We are aware of the different sensitivities involved. Migration has been a reality as long as there have been human beings on the planet. And so it will continue, for as long as human beings can survive. It is also undeniable that its management requires European joint action. We must, therefore, **continue to work on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum**, attempting to find the right balance between the internal and external dimensions, without forgetting legal migration, of course.

Mister President,
Honourable Members,

It's time to deliver on the vaccination process.

It's time to deliver on economic and social recovery.

It's time to deliver in order to develop the Social Pillar.

It's time to deliver in order to strengthen the strategic autonomy of a European Union open to the world.

But it's also time to deliver on the future of Europe.

Sharing a common home, sharing the same values does not mean relinquishing our own identity or renouncing the freedom of each and every one of us to make our own choices. The future of Europe is not compatible with one single mindset, whatever it may be.

Today, there are different visions of the European Union that we are and that we want to be, which we must not ignore, but embrace, straightforwardly and without drama, living up to the motto of a Europe "United in diversity".

This is why we need the **Conference on the Future of Europe**, as a forum for debate between the Member States and with our citizens about what we want to build together as our European Union in the future.

The Conference must focus on the anxieties and concerns of our citizens and not on institutional issues.

The Conference must be geared towards the policies and the common responses to the strategic challenges we have to face in a world that is increasingly less Eurocentric.

As Presidency of the Council, we will do everything we can to ensure that the Conference will get underway as soon as possible, so that we can have an open and enlightening debate with wide participation.

Mister President,
Honourable Members,

These were the values that brought Portugal into Europe.

It was our desire to consolidate our regained democracy, to be able to share a common area of freedom, of security, of peace and of prosperity, after 48 years of dictatorship, the longest in Europe in the 20th century. Indeed, this is why we know full well that respect for the Rule of Law is a necessary condition for belonging to the European Union and, under the scope of our Presidency of the Council, we will continue to work on the processes already underway in this area.

We are facing major challenges. But based on the work done by the Commission, by the Parliament and by the Council, I believe that we are all now better prepared to overcome the pandemic, get past this unprecedented crisis and build a better future together.

This is why we have taken up this Presidency with a very clear motto: **time to deliver: a fair, green and digital recovery.**

Thank you very much.