



Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the European Semester Conference - Inter-parliamentary Conference

Brussels, 22 February 2021

Grazie Presidente.

President Ferro Rodrigues,

Honourable Members of the European Parliament and of the national parliaments,

Your presence today testifies a very simple fact: Our Recovery Plan, NextGenerationEU, belongs to all Europeans. We crafted it here in Brussels with one objective in mind. All European countries should have the resources to lift their people out of this crisis – and particularly those countries that have been hit the hardest. All Europeans must be given a chance to recover from the corona crisis.

And this is why Europe will raise EUR 750 billion, and distribute these resources to all Member States. It is kind of a helping hand from Europe to all Europeans. And I am glad that, recently, the European Parliament has approved our Recovery and Resilience Facility by an overwhelming majority. Over 80% of the House has supported our proposal. Today, Europe is united in the fight against COVID-19. But this shows: We remain united in recovery.

Now it is up to every country in our Union to make good use of this opportunity made in Europe. Seven European countries, including Portugal, have already ratified the Own Resources Decision – that is how we will fund NextGenerationEU. And I encourage all of you to do the same, as a matter of urgency. Because only with a ratified Own Resources Decision can we put fuel in the recovery. And the people of Europe cannot wait. Our collective future is now entirely in your hands – the hands of the parliaments in Europe.

The next step will be to bring NextGenerationEU into life in each of your countries. Europe is providing every Member State with a unique opportunity to kind of restart its economy. It is up to you to seize this opportunity. And you have just heard from António Guterres: The recovery is not about turning the clocks back to a year ago. This is the time to 'build forward better', as he said. And with NextGenerationEU, we can shape a better economy for Europe. Of course, our most urgent task is to help healthy businesses pull through the crisis, and create new jobs. But as we do so, we should also aim at making Europe greener, more digital and more inclusive.

And today I would like to give you three examples of what NextGenerationEU can do in your countries. First, NextGenerationEU can cut our CO2 emissions while creating jobs already in the short term. And let me show you how, with a very basic example: The construction sector was hit very hard by the lockdowns, and it has not fully recovered yet. NextGenerationEU can help fixing this. Over half of residential buildings in Europe are more than 50 years old. Millions of Europeans are used to drafty windows and old boilers. This is not just uncomfortable in cold times. It is a massive waste of energy.

With NextGenerationEU, we would like to launch a renovation wave of residential buildings all across Europe. And this will cut our emissions, make our homes more comfortable, and breathe new life in the construction sector. Is this the right solution for your country or your region? Only you can tell us. You know best what kind of green investment your country needs most. Be it from energy infrastructure and hydrogen valleys, to the restoration, perhaps, of forests and biodiversity. So national recovery plans represent the opportunity to make your country greener while lifting up the economy.

The second example: NextGenerationEU can and should start off a Digital Decade for Europe. This is of course about building the infrastructure our businesses are longing for – from 5G and 6G to safe data spaces. But this is also, and I would say crucially, about our most important asset – and that is people. During the pandemic, businesses of all kinds have digitalised their operations like never before. Some simply started, for example, selling their products online. Many others invested in new software or new applications of artificial intelligence.

Not all workers and businesses are keeping pace with such rapid innovation. NextGenerationEU has

something for them, too. It can finance digital education for workers who see their workplace changing before their eyes. For those who have lost their jobs, and need to learn new skills for example, NextGenerationEU is there too. But also for teachers or other public sector workers, for example. It can help business owners, who are not digital natives, to find the digital solutions they need in a changing world. And here again, every European country has specific needs. From networks to e-government, from innovation hubs to perhaps digitalising your schools. This is the moment for each Member State to chart its own path into Europe's Digital Decade.

And last but not least, we must make sure that all Europeans get a fair chance to move out of the crisis. Some have described the pandemic as the 'great equaliser'. This is so untrue. And the other speakers mentioned it: Women lost their jobs more easily than men. Young people looking for their first job were too often discouraged. The coming months will be crucial to address these rising inequalities and build a fairer economy for the future. And since the start of the pandemic, Europe has already taken action.

We reinforced for example the Youth Guarantee, so that all Europeans under the age of 30, who come out of education or lose their job, can get a new opportunity within four months. Or we launched a Pact for Skills, to give workers the skills they need in an evolving labour market. And more proposals will come in early March, when we will present our action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, ahead of the Social Summit in Porto. And again, NextGenerationEU will bring fresh resources to invest in skills, in equal opportunities for women and for the younger generations. This is the moment to bring the social dimension into the recovery.

These are the goals we have agreed together, with the 27 governments and the European Parliament. A green recovery. A digital recovery. A fair recovery for all. This is the only path towards a resilient recovery. A recovery that can stand the test of time. In the coming months, every country will have to come up with the best projects and reforms, to make the most out of NextGenerationEU. We encourage national parliaments to contribute to this process. The resources will come from Europe, but the ideas must come from every country. We need your scrutiny and your commitment, to turn European investment into local growth.

The European Parliament will be involved every step of the way. Every national plan will be transmitted to the European Parliament. The Commission will listen to your views in regular dialogues, and we will take them into account in assessing the plans. It is a matter of transparency. Because NextGenerationEU belongs to all Europeans.

I know it may sound strange to talk about recovery as the pandemic still rages on. These are difficult weeks in Portugal, and in other places across our continent. Today we are not yet where we would like to be in combating the virus. We have to find rapid responses for example to the rising threat of variants. This is the reason why the Commission launched the HERA Incubator last week. That is a public-private cooperation of science, the health sector, authorities like the EMA and industry. To screen for variants, if necessary to adapt the vaccines, then to steer clinical trials in Europe and most important to manufacture existing and new vaccines at scale – mass manufacturing.

I have no doubt that Europe will recover. All countries, big and small, at the four corners of our continent will recover from this health crisis together. And when all 27 will have ratified the Own Resources Decision, kind of new oxygen will flow into our economy. NextGenerationEU is for all of Europe. And all of Europe will share in its success. In every capital, in every government and parliament across our continent. In other words: Europe needs all of you, all of us. Europe will be what we want it to be. So let us all get to work.

Thank you for listening to me.

And long live Europe.

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