Speech by President von der Leyen on the Recovery Plan and Resilience at the Fundação Champalimaud

Lisbon, 29 September 2020

Prime Minister Costa,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to start by thanking António and the city of Lisbon for your famous Portuguese hospitality. I am delighted to be here on one of my first trips since the beginning of the pandemic. This is a fitting place to talk about the future. I say that because I believe the past and the present of Lisbon and Portugal can be the guide for our future.

For centuries, the people of Portugal have influenced Europe in many ways – intellectually, culturally, politically. I think of the enchanting landscapes and mountains of Sintra inspired some of the world’s great minds and artists, from Lord Byron to Richard Strauss. I also think of the vibrant Portugal of today – full of sporting heroes, young tech talent, clean energy and a perfect mix of tradition and modernity. Or the leading role Portugal plays in Europe and the world – at the helm of the biggest European and global institutions.

And I also think of how the people of Portugal responded with humility, responsibility and solidarity when the pandemic hit Europe. I could mention, for example, the online platform – called Host a Hero – which allowed people to give health workers from Porto to Lisbon a spare room or apartment so they could rest and keep their families safe. Or I could mention the historic decision by the government to grant temporary citizenship rights to migrants and asylum seekers so they could access social security or health care.

From personal stories of sacrifice to the millions of people who downloaded contact tracing apps, – Portugal showed the best of itself and the best of Europe. The pandemic is not over yet – and there is still a lot of work for all of us to do.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Lisbon, the city we are in today, is a living example of renewal and recovery. The devastating earthquake in this very spot 265 years ago was a human tragedy. It was a disaster and came at a time of great change and progress for Europe. Traditions and institutions were being challenged, intellectual freedom was blossoming and rivalries between nations were on the rise.

The parallels to today’s latest disaster may not be perfect but history does have a habit of rhyming. I say this because even before the pandemic struck, Europe was already going through a period of profound and rapid change – from digitalisation to decarbonisation to global fragmentation. And the need for us to get back to our feet today and build a better way of doing things is just as important as it was in the 18th century. The point is we can learn from Lisbon how to build back better. How to remodel our societies to harness change and progress. You see this with your own eyes when you admire Praça do Comércio – a living monument of renewal.

Of course, times are different and we must do things differently in today’s world. And in this spirit, I very much welcome the preparation and cooperation on the Portuguese recovery and resilience plan which will be presented to the European Commission in the next few weeks. I understand that the priorities and ambitions mirror those of NextGenerationEU, the EU’s own Recovery Plan for reforms and investment. And I want to thank Prime Minister Costa for his support in brokering this historic agreement last July.

NextGenerationEU allows the Commission to raise EUR 750 billion today to invest in a stronger future tomorrow. This is an urgent and exceptional necessity for an urgent and exceptional situation. We need to repair our social fabric – and on this, I very much look forward to the next year’s Social Summit organised by the Portuguese Presidency.

We need to protect our Single Market, which brings so many benefits to this country and all other Member States. And while we do this, we need to press fast-forward towards a fair, green, digital
and resilient future. I know these will be priorities for the Portuguese recovery and resilience plan – and they are certainly priorities for NextGenerationEU. And once again, Portugal is not only well placed to make the most of NextGenerationEU, but it can provide a blueprint for others.

For example, NextGenerationEU will place a strong emphasis on reforms. And Portugal has a lot of experience in doing this from the very difficult reforms of the past, – to more recent reforms in areas going from lifelong learning, to the healthcare sector, to tackling labour market segmentation, much needed reforms that need to be completed. There is of course more to do and the Commission stands ready to support those efforts in every way it can – from structural funds to the Recovery Plan.

The second part of NextGenerationEU is investment in the economy and society of tomorrow. And here Portugal also has a headstart – especially when it comes to the twin green and digital transition. In fact, Portugal is already a digital leader in many areas and is catching up fast in others. Every year, Lisbon hosts 80,000 of the world’s most renowned tech professionals at the Web Summit. As every other major event, this year’s Web Summit will be virtual, but Lisbon remains the spiritual capital of the tech scene.

The fact that so many digital nomads come to work here in start-ups and tech companies not only reflects the high quality internet in Lisbon. But it is also because of the talent drawn here from across the world – and the quality of training from specialised universities in Bragança, Porto or here in Lisbon. This bodes well for Portugal and Europe’s Digital Decade ahead.

But to build on this, we need to invest now, for example on skills, data, artificial intelligence, 5G infrastructure. And we need to ensure the high-speed internet of Lisbon is available in rural areas like Marvão or Monsaraz. This is an example of how NextGenerationEU can help build a better world to live in.

And nowhere is this more important for Portugal, Europe and the world than when it comes to our environment. Portugal is on the frontline in the fight against climate change. This country is – sadly – used to forest fires. It has been for many years. But the difference is now the frequency and the intensity of them.

There is an urgent need to act – and the pandemic has only made that more urgent. But there is also an opportunity that goes with it for Portugal and all those who invest in the green transition today. This is what the European Green Deal is all about. It is our blueprint for the transformation our economy and society needs for the good of the planet, for the good of people, and for the good of our long-term prosperity. The core ambition is for Europe to be a climate neutral continent by 2050. This is an ambitious long-term goal that needs short-term action. This is why, earlier this month, the Commission announced a new target for emission reductions of at least 55% by 2030.

This will help give the certainty and direction that investors and entrepreneurs need – here in Portugal and across Europe. With NextGenerationEU, we now have the resources to support that. From investing in high-speed train connections to building renovations or clean mobility, NextGenerationEU will invest in projects that make the biggest difference for each country.

Portugal is already a frontrunner in the transition towards cleaner energy. You started your clean transition back in 2005 and more than half of Portugal’s electricity needs are now met by renewable energy. This is thanks to strong government and private sector support for wind, tidal, solar and other forms of renewables. NextGenerationEU is an opportunity to strengthen that leadership – and invest in research and innovation that this country is famous for.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is what NextGenerationEU is all about. It gives us the chance to not only repair and recover from the crisis but to shape a better way of living for us all. Portugal will be a strong beneficiary of NextGenerationEU. It will help boost the economy that had recovered so well from the last crisis thanks to the hard work and sacrifice of the Portuguese people. This progress cannot be jeopardised.

And it will create jobs by anchoring the recovery in the green and digital economy of tomorrow. In doing so, we will ensure that no one is left behind. This must be a fair, social and people first recovery. And this is why, when people started losing their jobs, we created the first European scheme for short-time work, called SURE. The idea is simple. If there are no orders and companies run out of work, they do not need to let their workers go. Thanks to SURE, they can continue to employ them to keep skills, experience and knowledge in the company. And crucially, to keep people in jobs.

SURE is a shield for workers, jobs and businesses. This is real European solidarity in action. And I am glad that Portugal is one of the countries that will receive support from SURE. And it reflects the need to strengthen Europe’s social dimension and protect the dignity of work.
This is why we will soon come forward with an Action Plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. And I count on the Portuguese Presidency knowing that this will be one of your main priorities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The period we are living in is a difficult one for all. And that is no different here in Portugal. The people of this country have shown tremendous responsibility and resilience in the way they have come together to fight this virus. But like everywhere else, they are tired of this fight and they want to move on.

Portugal is a country of great explorers – pioneers who never feared to venture into the unknown. A country that has always sailed in uncharted waters – ‘por mares nunca antes navegados’ – to quote the great Luis de Camões. So I can think of no better country to guide us through the storm and to set sail for our future. And I look forward to doing just that with you, António and the Portuguese Presidency next year.

Obrigada.

Viva a Europa.