



**Presentation of Belgium's Priorities for the Presidency
of the Council of the European Union**

17th January, 10 am, Leinster House

Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

Distinguished Senators and TD's, dear friends,

Madainn mhath,

As Ambassador of Belgium, it is an honor to present today in this Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, the priorities my country will champion during its presidency of the Council of the European Union. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

Let me from the outset thank the past Spanish Presidency for the hard work and the many successes.

As you know, we Belgians have the EU in our DNA. As one of the "founding fathers", Belgium epitomizes what the EU is all about: diversity and dynamism. Welcoming so many European institutions, my country's capital Brussels is the beating heart of European decision-making.

We were there from the start, we even held the first ever presidency of the council in 1958 and we just started our... 13th! With our experience comes enthusiasm, responsibility but, above all, humility. A presidency is a "*honest broker*" that helps to determine what is feasible and where compromises are possible. And trust me, Belgium knows about compromises. If you think that the European institutions are complicated, try the Belgians ones...

This presidency comes at a moment when the European Union stands at a crossroads, dealing with the consequences of the Russian illegal aggression in Ukraine, the pandemic, the energy crisis, disinformation, extreme climate events, and a renewed conflict in the Middle East.

As European Union, we have a responsibility to deliver. Towards our citizens, our partners and allies. Belgium is determined to make its presidency a collective success: for Belgium, for Europe, for our citizens and for the EU's place in the world.

As the last Presidency of the current European Commission's term of office, we will be operating in a special context and pursuing a twofold objective: Firstly, we want to finalise as much of the legislative work as possible. Secondly, we will do our utmost to contribute laying the foundations for the future of Europe and its institutions.

Protect, Strengthen, Prepare . That is going to be our motto during these 6 months.

Protect for “protecting our people”. It means ensuring the security and the well-being of our citizens, protecting our borders, strengthening our social and health agenda, preserving Europe’s unity in protecting and supporting Ukraine.

Strengthen for “strengthening our economy”: We need to enhance the EU’s competitiveness on the world stage and at the same time deliver on the green and digital agenda and the just transition

And finally we ne need to **prepare**, prepare for the upcoming expansions of the EU and for future challenges.

Protect, Strengthen, Prepare

It concisely and powerfully encapsulates the six key themes of this 13th mandate.

1) Defending rule of law, democracy, and unity

Defending these principles will be an essential element in the work of our presidency. As such we are looking to improve the efficiency and sustainability of the existing instruments like the annual RoL Dialogue, art. 7 procedure and the conditionality mechanism and to work on new ones like the creation of an EU Ethics body and the Defence of Democracy Package.

Enlarging our Union must make us all stronger. The Belgian Presidency is therefore committed to support candidate countries in their efforts to join our Union. At the same time, it will be crucial to prepare the Union’s policies, resources, and decision-making structures in view of future accessions.

2) Strengthening our competitiveness

The Belgian presidency wants our businesses to remain innovative and resilient, to be competitive on the international stage and to operate fairly in the internal market. A coherent, predictable and simplified regulatory framework is therefore key.

The Belgian Presidency will work to strengthen the EU's internal market and industrial future whilst focusing specifically on:

- SMEs and the reduction of unnecessary administrative burdens;
- ensuring a level playing field, including through the implementation of agreed and enforced state aid rules;
- Maintaining the drive towards a strong, resilient, and inclusive green and digital transition;
- Discussing the future challenges for EU’s internal market presented by the Letta Report, the White Paper by Commissioner Breton and the Draghi report

The Belgian Presidency will continue the work to complete the capital markets union and the energy union. Particular attention will be given to the Net-Zero Industry Act, as well as to the modernised rules on economic governance.

3) Pursuing a green and just transition

To address the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, the Belgian Presidency underscores the importance of a decisive and holistic action. Geopolitical and extreme climate events have furthermore highlighted the need for an accelerated and inclusive energy transition.

As such, the Presidency will strive to enhance the Union's circular economy. It will work towards a just energy transition and focus on the development of renewable and low-carbon energy sources and carriers.

We are committed to finalise important legislative files from the Fit for 55 Package such as the CO2 standards for Heavy Duty Vehicles, , the Air Quality Directive, and Packaging Waste Directive.

4) Reinforcing our social and health agenda

Building on the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Belgian Presidency aims to equip the EU with an ambitious social agenda to foster a European society that is more inclusive, gender-equal and fair for all. We will therefore organize together with the European Commission a Social Partner Summit in Brussels in march.

The Presidency will seek to strengthen social dialogue at all levels and the social dimension of the European semester. It will also promote fair labour mobility, mental health at work and access to sustainable social protection . The Presidency will also advocate for increased political actions in order to guarantee access to decent and affordable housing for all.

Furthermore, the Presidency wants to make the Health Union stronger. A topic that has become more important since the pandemic. Particular attention will be given to the EU's crisis preparedness, the security of medicines supply, and a strategy to boost the EU's health and care workforce.

5) Protecting people and borders

The Presidency aims to address all remaining legislative files associated with the new European pact on migration and asylum. The Pact will reinforce trust between Member States in a spirit of responsibility and solidarity, bring legal clarity to people arriving in the EU, and ensure EU citizens of the humane and effective management of migration, in line with our values and international law. The Presidency will work to strengthen the external dimension of migration and asylum, especially by working closely with our African partners in the framework of a mutually beneficial partnership in full respect of international law.

The Presidency will pay particular attention to the fight against organised crime, preventing and tackling terrorism and violent extremism, and bolster the EU's resilience to crises and to new and hybrid challenges.

Safeguarding our citizens also necessitates discussions on the future of European security and defence, moving towards a more integrated Union approach. The focus will be on

strengthening the European defence technological and industrial base, including by exploring the possibility of developing a European Defence Industry Strategy.

6) Promoting a global Europe

To adapt to the new geopolitical reality, the Presidency will vigorously pursue the efforts made by the EU to strengthen its resilience and autonomy and defend its interests and values.

This includes steadfast support to Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression, as well as in its reconstruction and economic recovery, for as long as it takes.

We will keep closely following the situation in the Middle East, with specific concern regarding harm to civilians on both sides, while emphasising the need to respect international humanitarian law, respond to immediate humanitarian needs, and revive the political process towards a negotiated peace.

The Belgian Presidency will also follow up on the Joint Communication on a “Strengthened Partnership with Africa”, which is expected in the second half of our term.

As regards trade policy, we will work to strengthen the rules-based multilateral trading system and we will focus on the full and effective implementation of EU trade agreements, including those with New Zealand and Chile.

The overall objective is to increase the EU’s open strategic autonomy and economic security.

We will also continue to implement infrastructure projects under Global Gateway, and strengthen the Team Europe approach in the international partnerships of the EU and its Member States.

Conclusion:

To conclude, distinguished senators and TD’s, allow me to go back to basics.

To prepare this speech, I’ve looked back at the origins of our union. I recommend rereading the preamble to the Treaty of Rome to anyone who questions the legitimacy of Europe or wants to reduce it to a soulless bureaucracy.

In this text, there is no mention of the word “governments” but the word peoples appears three times! It is an economic treaty and yet we find the words freedom and peace. And, above all, it contains the word that perhaps best sums up the European project: an ideal.

With its ambitious program, Belgium is determined to continue the quest for this ideal, which in many ways has become a reality and is much admired by the rest of the world.

As my Prime Minister Alexander De Croo reminded us in his presentation:

“The expectations of over 440 million citizens are high. They are looking for certainty and a perspective and for that certainty and that perspective, they are looking at the EU. It is up to us to respond to those very legitimate expectations”.

Delivery will be our goal.

Thank you

Go raibh maith agat