



Statement at the European Parliament Plenary by President Ursula von der Leyen, candidate for a second mandate 2024-2029

Strasbourg, 18 July 2024

“Check against delivery”

Dear President Metsola, dear Roberta,

Let me first congratulate you from the bottom of my heart for your re-nomination. Your success is a mirror of the outstanding work you have been doing in this House of European Democracy.

Honourable Members,

It is now five years since I first came to ask for your confidence. Five years like no other in our Union's history. I will always remember the spine-tingling moments we shared together in this hemicycle. From standing in front of you, asking for your confidence five years ago to proposing NextGenerationEU. From the appearances of President Zelenskyy when even the translators could not hold back their tears to the empty chair poignantly left out for Alexei Navalny as his daughter spoke on his behalf. From the moments of silence for those we lost in the pandemic to the moments of song for the Ode to Joy or Auld Lang Syne. And I will never forget the last words of David Sassoli calling for a more united Europe. This Parliament understands the weight of this moment's history.

Honourable Members,

Choices are the hinges of destiny. And in a world full of adversity, Europe's destiny hinges on what we do next. Despite the momentous things we have done and overcome, Europe now faces a clear choice. A choice which will shape our work for 5 years and define our place in the world for the next 50. The choice comes down to whether we will be shaped by events and the world around us or whether we will come together and build our future for ourselves. And that choice is ours. Europe cannot control dictators and demagogues across the world, but it can choose to protect its own democracy. Europe cannot determine elections across the world, but it can choose to invest in the security and defence of its own continent. Europe cannot stop change, but it can choose to embrace it by investing in a new age of prosperity and improving our quality of life.

But, Honourable Members, for us to choose the Europe of tomorrow, we must acknowledge how people feel today. We are in a period of deep anxiety and uncertainty for Europeans. Families are feeling the pain from the cost of living and housing. Young people are concerned about the planet, their future and the prospect of war. Companies and farmers are feeling squeezed. All of this is a symptom of a world in which everything is weaponised and contested. Where there is a clear attempt to divide and polarise our societies. I am deeply concerned about these trends. But I am convinced that Europe – a strong Europe – can rise to the challenge. And this is why I am asking for your confidence today. Because, just like you, I came into politics to make a difference for all of society to deliver for the generation of my children and grandchildren. Like those who came before us did. I am convinced that the version of Europe since the end of World War II, with all of its imperfections and inequalities, is still the best version in history. I will never stand by and watch it be torn apart from the inside or the outside. I will never let the extreme polarisation of our societies become accepted. And I will never accept that demagogues and extremists destroy our European way of life. And I stand here today ready to lead this fight with all of the democratic forces here in this House.

Honourable Members,

This is the vision I have set out in my Political Guidelines. A vision of a stronger Europe that delivers prosperity, that protects people and that defends democracy. A stronger Europe that delivers social fairness and supports people. A stronger Europe that implements what it agrees in a fair way. And that sticks to the targets of the European Green Deal with pragmatism, technology-neutrality and innovation. I have listened carefully to the democratic forces in this Parliament and I am convinced that these Guidelines reflect how much we have in common, despite the differences that are healthy in any democracy.

Honourable Members,

Our first priority will be prosperity and competitiveness. In the last five years, we have weathered the fiercest storm in our Union's economic history. We have emerged stronger from the shock of lockdowns, and we have overcome an unprecedented energy crisis. We did this together, and I believe we can be proud of it. But we also know that our competitiveness needs a major boost. The fundamentals of the global economy are changing. Those who stand still will fall behind. Those who are not competitive will be dependent. The race is on and I want Europe to switch gear. And this starts with making business easier and faster. We need to deepen our Single Market across the board. We need less reporting, less bureaucracy, and more trust, better enforcement and faster permitting. And I will ensure that we are accountable for this. Because only what gets measured gets done. Therefore, I will task each Commissioner to deep dive in their portfolio, and to deliver concretely on burden reduction. And I will appoint a Vice-President to coordinate this work and to report on progress to this House once a year. I will also introduce a revamped SME and competitiveness check as part of our Better Regulation toolbox. We all know there is no Europe without SMEs. They are the heart of our economy. Therefore, let us get rid of the burdensome micromanagement, and give them more trust and better incentives.

Honourable Members,

Let me give you some figures. To start: in the first half of this year, 50% of our electricity generation came from renewables – home-grown and clean. Investments in clean technologies in Europe have more than tripled in this mandate. We attract more investments in clean hydrogen than the US and China combined. Finally, in the last years, we have concluded with global partners 35 new agreements on clean tech, hydrogen and critical raw materials. This is the European Green Deal in action. So I want to be clear. We will stay the course on our new growth strategy and the goals we set for 2030 and 2050. Our focus now will be on implementation and investment to make it happen on the ground. This is why I will put forward a new Clean Industrial Deal in the first 100 days. It will channel investment in infrastructure and industry, in particular for energy-intensive sectors. This will help create lead markets in everything from clean steel to clean tech and it will speed up planning, tendering, and permitting. We must be faster and simpler. Because Europe is decarbonising and industrialising at the same time. Our companies need predictability, for their investments and innovation. And yes, they can rely on us. In this logic, we will enshrine our 90% target for 2040 in our European Climate Law. Our companies need to plan their investments for the coming decade already today. And this is not only about business. For our young people, 2030, 2040, 2050 is around the corner. They know that we have to reconcile climate protection with a prosperous economy. And they would never forgive us if we do not rise to the challenge. So, this is not only a matter of competitiveness, but also a matter of intergenerational fairness. The young people deserve it.

The new Clean Industrial Deal will also help bring down energy bills. We all know that structurally high energy prices hamper our competitiveness. And high energy bills are a major driver of energy poverty for people. I have not forgotten how Putin blackmailed us by cutting us off from Russian fossil fuels. But we withstood together. We invested massively in homegrown cheap renewables. And this enabled us to break free from dirty Russian fossil fuels. Therefore, together, we will ensure that the era of dependency on Russian fossil fuels is over. Once and for all.

Honourable Members,

Europe needs more investment from farming to industry, from digital to strategic technologies but also more investment in people and their skills. This mandate has to be the time of investment. This starts with completing our Capital Markets Union and mobilising more private financing. Every year EUR 300 billion of European families' savings go from Europe to foreign markets, because our capital market is too fragmented. And then this money is often used to buy innovative European companies from abroad. This has to change. We need to leverage this enormous wealth to create growth here in Europe. This is why we will propose a European Savings and Investments Union. European start-ups should not need to look at the US or Asia to finance their expansion. They must find what they need to grow right here in Europe. We need a deep and liquid capital market. And we need a competition policy that supports companies to scale up. Europe must be the home of opportunity and innovation.

Honourable Members,

To unleash private investment, we also need public funding. Yes, we have the resources in NextGenerationEU and the current budget. But this will come to an end within the next few years. While our investment needs will not. We need more investment capacity. Our new budget will be reinforced. It must be more focused on policies, simpler for Member States and more impactful, so that we use its power to leverage more private and public financing. And I will propose a new European Competitiveness Fund. It will be focused on common and cross-border European projects that will drive competitiveness and innovation – notably to support the Clean Industrial Deal. It will ensure that we develop strategic tech and manufacture it here, in Europe. So, from AI to clean tech,

the future of our prosperity must be made in Europe.

Honourable Members,

We must also invest more in our security and defence. Russia is still on the offensive in East Ukraine. They are banking on a war of attrition on making the next winter even harsher than the last. Russia is banking on Europe and the West going soft. And some, in Europe, are playing along. Two weeks ago, an EU Prime Minister went to Moscow. This so-called peace mission was nothing but an appeasement mission. Only two days later, Putin's jets aimed their missiles at a children's hospital and maternity ward in Kyiv. We all saw the images of children covered in blood, and mothers trying to bring young cancer patients to safety. That strike was not a mistake. It was a message. A chilling message from the Kremlin to all of us. So, Honourable Members, our answer has to be just as clear. No one wants peace more than the people of Ukraine. A just and lasting peace. For a free and independent country. And Europe will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Mesdames et Messieurs les Députés,

Nous devons donner à l'Ukraine tout ce dont elle a besoin pour résister et vaincre. Cela implique des choix fondamentaux pour notre avenir. Pour la première fois depuis des décennies, notre liberté est en danger. Nous sommes responsables pour faire tout ce qui est nécessaire pour protéger nos citoyens européens. Protéger l'Europe c'est le devoir de l'Europe. Alors je pense qu'il est temps de construire une véritable Union européenne de la défense. Oui, je sais, que certains ne sont peut-être pas à l'aise avec cette idée. Mais ce qui devrait nous mettre mal à l'aise ce sont les menaces qui pèsent sur notre sécurité. Soyons clairs : Les États membres restent responsables pour leur sécurité nationale et pour leurs armées. Et l'OTAN reste le pilier de notre défense collective. Mais nous le savons tous : Nos dépenses de défense sont trop faibles et inefficaces. Nous dépensons trop à l'étranger. Et nous devons donc créer un marché unique de la défense. Nous devons investir plus dans les capacités de défense haut de gamme. C'est-à-dire, l'Europe doit avancer sur la voie tracée par la Déclaration de Versailles. Nous devons investir plus. Nous devons investir ensemble. Et nous devons créer des projets européens communs. Par exemple un système complet de défense aérienne – « a European Air Shield ». Non seulement pour protéger notre espace aérien. Mais aussi comme symbole fort de l'unité de l'Europe en matière de défense.

Honourable Members,

Security is not only about external threats. Cyber and hybrid threats are growing. Organised criminal networks are infiltrating our economy; most of them use corruption. They are causing fear and innocent people's death with their brutal violence. They earn enormous amounts of money from drug trafficking, ransomware, fraud, trafficking in human beings and they are not limited by national borders. It is necessary that we respond to this growing threat on a European level. We must make sure that police can work across Europe without borders. This is why I will propose to double Europol's staff and strengthen its mandate. I want Europol to become a truly operational police agency.

And we must also do more to secure our external borders. Our Eastern Border in particular has become a target for hybrid attacks and provocations. Russia is luring migrants from Yemen up north and pushing them deliberately against the Finnish border. We should always keep in mind that a Member State's border is a European border. And we will do everything we can to make them stronger. This is part of the reason why we must strengthen Frontex. To make it more effective, while fully respecting fundamental rights, I will propose to triple the number of European border and coastguards to 30,000.

More secure borders will also help us to manage migration in a more structured and fair way. The Migration and Asylum Pact is a huge step forward. We put solidarity at the heart of our common response. Migration challenges need a European response with a fair and firm approach based on our values. Always remembering that migrants are human beings like you and me. And all of us, we are protected by human rights. Many pessimists thought that migration was too divisive to agree on. But we proved them wrong. Together we made it. And we have emerged stronger from it. Now, we must collectively focus on implementation and on supporting Member States in making it a reality on the ground. And there will be more to do. We need a common approach on returns, to make them more effective and dignified. And we need to develop our comprehensive partnerships, in particular across our Southern neighbourhood. The Mediterranean region should get undivided attention. This is why I will appoint a Commissioner for the region, and propose a new Agenda for the Mediterranean together with Kaja Kallas. Because the future of the two Mediterranean shores is one and the same.

Honourable Members,

Our neighbourhood is home to our future. Inviting countries into our Union is a moral, a historical and a political responsibility. It is an enormous geostrategic responsibility for Europe. Because in today's world a larger Union will be a stronger Union. It will strengthen our voice in the world. It will help reduce our dependencies. And it will ensure that democracy, prosperity and stability spread across Europe. We will support candidates, by working on investment and reforms and integrating them where we can into our legal frameworks. Accession will always be a merit-based process. And we will ensure that all countries are ready, before joining. But completing our Union is also in our core interest. And it will be a core priority for my Commission. History is calling once again. The Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have made their free choice. They have chosen freedom over oppression. They have chosen democracy over dependency. And some of them are paying a high price for this choice. So we must make our choice, and show steadfast commitment. Their future will be free and prosperous, inside our Union.

Honourable Members,

Europe has a responsibility to play an active role in the world, starting in our neighbourhood and in particular in the Middle East. I want to be clear: the bloodshed in Gaza must stop now. Too many children, women and civilians have lost their lives as a result of Israel's response to Hamas' brutal terror. The people of Gaza cannot bear any more. Humanity cannot bear it. We need an immediate and enduring ceasefire. We need the release of Israeli hostages. And we need to prepare the day after. Europe must play its part. We have massively increased our humanitarian aid to almost EUR 200 million in 2024. And we will do more. We are now working on a much larger multi-year package to support an effective Palestinian Authority. The two-state solution is the best way to ensure security of both, to Israelis and Palestinians. People in the Middle East deserve peace, security and prosperity. And Europe will be at their side.

Meine Damen und Herren Abgeordnete,

Europa bietet eine einzigartige Lebensqualität. Von umfassender sozialer Sicherheit bis zu erstklassigen regionalen Lebensmitteln. Rapsfelder, Weinberge und Obstwiesen bedeuten nicht nur gutes Essen und Trinken, sondern sie sind Teil unserer Heimat. Und deshalb ist die Zukunft der Landwirtschaft ein so wichtiges und sensibles Thema für uns in Europa. Wir müssen es schaffen, Gegensätze zu überwinden und gemeinsam mit allen Beteiligten gute Lösungen zu entwickeln. Deswegen habe ich den Strategischen Dialog zur Zukunft der Landwirtschaft in Europa ins Leben gerufen. Er bringt Landwirte, Umweltgruppen und Expertinnen aus der gesamten Nahrungsmittelkette an einen Tisch. Ich habe versprochen, ihnen gut zuzuhören und von ihnen zu lernen. Und das tue ich. Ich werde gute Empfehlungen aufnehmen und eine neue europäische Strategie für unsere Landwirtschaft und den Nahrungsmittelsektor vorlegen. Ich werde mich dafür einsetzen, dass Landwirtinnen und Landwirte ein faires Einkommen haben. Niemand sollte gezwungen sein, gute Lebensmittel unter Produktionskosten zu verkaufen. Wir müssen die Position unserer Landwirtinnen und Landwirte in der Wertschöpfungskette der Ernährungswirtschaft stärken. Und wir brauchen klügere Anreize, mehr Innovation und Zugang zu Kapital. Wer nachhaltig mit Natur und Artenvielfalt umgeht und dazu beiträgt, den CO₂-Haushalt ins Lot zu bringen, der muss angemessen dafür entlohnt werden. Unsere Landwirtinnen und Landwirte prägen unsere Landschaften. Sie prägen das Gesicht Europas. Sie sind Teil unserer Kultur. Sie sorgen für Ernährungssicherheit. Und wir sind stolz auf sie.

Deshalb müssen wir gemeinsam die Probleme angehen, die auf ihnen lasten. Sie spüren den Klimawandel. Extremwetter und Wasserknappheit setzen ihnen von Jahr zu Jahr mehr zu. Europa erwärmt sich doppelt so schnell wie der globale Durchschnitt. Wir sehen die verheerenden Auswirkungen bereits auf Feldern und in Wäldern. Das Gesicht unserer ländlichen Gemeinden verändert sich. Wir müssen mehr tun, um mit der Landwirtschaft uns besser darauf vorzubereiten, was durch den Klimawandel auf uns zukommt. Deshalb werde ich einen Plan für die Landwirtschaft vorlegen, um die nötige Anpassung an den Klimawandel zu bewältigen, und parallel eine Strategie zum nachhaltigen Umgang mit der kostbaren Ressource Wasser. Nicht nur unsere Ernährungssicherheit hängt davon ab, sondern auch unsere gesamte Wettbewerbsfähigkeit.

Honourable Members,

Our quality of life and our very social fabric are unique. We made historic steps forward on our Pillar of Social Rights – from minimum wages to the first-ever Child Guarantee. During the pandemic, we saved 40 million jobs with SURE. And we can be proud of that. But many new challenges have emerged – from the impact of AI to mental health at work and new drivers of poverty. We need a

new action plan for the implementation of the Pillar. We must ensure fair transitions and good working conditions for workers and self-employed people. And crucial for that is Social Dialogue – the hallmark of our social market economy. We will therefore work to increase collective bargaining and strengthen European Social Dialogue. And we will address those issues that Europeans feel the most in their daily lives. Take housing. Europe faces a housing crisis, with people of all ages and families of all sizes affected. Prices and rents are soaring. People are struggling to find affordable homes. This is why, for the first time, I will appoint a Commissioner with direct responsibility for housing. We will develop a European Affordable Housing Plan, to look at all the drivers of the crisis and to help unlock the private and public investment needed. Typically, housing is not seen as a European issue. Some might say we should not get involved. But I want this Commission to support people where it matters the most. If it matters to Europeans, it matters to Europe.

Honourable Members,

This is how we can strengthen our society. This means ensuring that every region, in every part of Europe, is supported. No one is left behind. I am committed to a strong cohesion policy, designed together with regions and local authorities. I want Europe to be the best place to grow up in, and the best place to grow old in. We must enable young people to make the most of Europe's freedoms, from a stronger Erasmus+ to more citizen engagement. But we must also do more to protect young people. Childhood and teenage years are the time when our character is formed, our personality develops, and our brain is shaped by triggers and emotions. This is a time of amazing development but also real vulnerability. And we see more and more reporting on what some call a mental health crisis. We need to get to the bottom of this. I believe social media, and excessive screen time and addictive practices, have played their part. My heart bleeds when I read about young people harming themselves or even taking their lives because of online abuse. I think of those last moments and the pain they must have felt. I think of their parents and their friends. And this is devastating. We can never accept this in our society. We will tackle the plague of cyber-bullying. We will take action against the addictive design of some platforms. And we will convene the first-ever European-wide enquiry on the impact of social media on the wellbeing of young people. We owe it to them. And we will not rest until we have done right by them.

Honourable Members,

One of the most fundamental choices we face is what kind of society we want for our children and grandchildren. And in particular for our daughters and granddaughters. On women's rights, we have achieved together the unthinkable, thanks to the amazing solidarity in this House of European Democracy, across party lines. After ten years of struggle, we have unblocked the Women on Boards Directive. We have achieved huge progress on pay transparency – there is not the slightest reason why women should be paid less than men for the same work! But there is still so much to do. Stop the rise in violence against women. Reconcile care and career, not only for women, but women are mostly affected. Close the pay and pensions gap. It is no coincidence that poverty in old age has a female face. And there is much more to do. So let us work together to develop a Roadmap for Women's Rights. Let us keep moving forward. If not now, then when?

Mesdames et Messieurs les Députés,

La démocratie est notre trésor commun. Elle est le cadre au sein duquel nos différences et nos désaccords peuvent s'exprimer. Ce cadre est aussi vital que fragile. Très longtemps, nous l'avons considéré comme acquis. Nous sommes devenus des démocrates de confort. Mais aujourd'hui, nos démocraties sont menacées. La Russie mène une guerre sans relâche, sur le sol européen, en Ukraine, depuis plus de deux ans. Partout dans l'Union, et au sein même de nos institutions, nos services et des journalistes, dont je veux saluer ici le travail, révèlent des cas d'espionnage, de cyberattaques, de corruption, de campagne de désinformation menés par des acteurs étrangers, notamment russes et chinois. Jamais depuis des décennies le niveau de menaces et d'attaques hybrides n'a été aussi élevé. Au sein de la Commission, nous avons pleinement conscience de cette situation et agissons en responsabilité depuis de nombreuses années. Un énorme travail d'analyse est réalisé et des premiers outils efficaces ont été mis en œuvre, en bonne coopération avec les États membres. Mais nous devons aller plus loin. Nous devons empêcher les acteurs étrangers hostiles d'interférer dans nos processus démocratiques, de les miner et enfin, de les détruire. Pour cela, nous devons prendre des mesures fortes au niveau européen.

Si vous m'accordez aujourd'hui votre confiance, la Commission proposera un Bouclier Européen de la Démocratie. L'Union a besoin de sa propre structure dédiée à la lutte contre les manipulations de l'information et les ingérences étrangères. Cette structure regroupera toute l'expertise et assurera la liaison et la coordination avec les agences nationales existantes. Les capacités de renseignement, de détection, d'action, mais aussi de sanctions doivent être renforcés. Le Bouclier va prendre en compte

les recommandations émanant des travaux menés ici par les Commissions spéciales sur les ingérences étrangères, pour mieux protéger nos démocraties. Il est urgent de doter l'Union Européenne d'outils performants de cyberdéfense, d'imposer la transparence des financements étrangers de notre vie publique comme une règle commune, mais aussi de garantir un cadre informationnel fiable. Pour cela, l'Union doit soutenir le journalisme indépendant, continuer à faire respecter les règles aux géants du numérique et encourager toujours davantage les programmes d'éducation aux médias. La démocratie européenne doit être plus participative, plus vivante. La société civile mieux aidée et défendue. Je sais pouvoir compter sur votre soutien pour faire advenir ce grand plan de défense de la démocratie européenne.

Honourable Members,

But we will also step up our work on defending all parts of our democracy. We will protect our free media and civil society. The rule of law and the fight against corruption will be at the heart of our work. We will strengthen all of our tools and we will step up our enforcement. We will ensure our Rule of Law Report focuses on the Single Market dimension to help protect companies. And we will keep to a very clear principle in our budget. Respecting the rule of law is a must for EU funds. In this budget, and in the future, with the conditionality mechanism. It is non-negotiable. Because this is the core of our European way of life.

Honourable Members,

Our Union and our democracy are constant work in progress. And there is more that we can do. We need an ambitious reform agenda to ensure the functioning of a larger Union and to increase democratic legitimacy. While reforms were necessary before, with enlargement they become indispensable. We must use this as a catalyst for change in terms of our capacity to act, our policies and our budget. We will of course focus on what we can already do, of which there is a lot. But we should be more ambitious. I believe we need Treaty change where it can improve our Union. And I want to work on that with this House. And this will be part of a closer partnership between the Commission and the Parliament. I have listened to your demands and concerns. I continue to support your right of initiative and we will increase our cooperation on Article 225 Resolutions to ensure we follow up. So I am ready to work on all parts of our partnership. We need to revise the Framework Agreement to ensure more transparency, more accountability and more presence in the Parliament. When all institutions move together, Europe moves forward too.

Honourable Members,

At the start of his second mandate Jacques Delors said: « Notre Communauté est non seulement le fruit de l'histoire et de la nécessité, mais aussi de la volonté. » This is the fundamental choice that we face. History will keep knocking on Europe's door. The need for Europe will be stronger than ever. Our determination has to match it. This is what has brought our continent together. Not the inscrutable forces of fate, but the power of people striving for more. Like the three prisoners on Ventotene Island in the 40s who laid out the vision of a united continent. And the post-war generation, who built peace on coal and steel. People who stood unarmed in the face of Soviet tanks, who put carnations into rifles, and tore down a wall with their bare hands. People who still risk their life today, for this dream called Europe. Generation after generation have made Europe have chosen a strong Europe. And now that responsibility is up to us. The last five years have shown what we can do together. Let us do it again. Let us make the choice of strength. Let us make the choice of leadership. Let us make the choice of Europe.

Thank you and long live Europe.

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