

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

*Strasbourg, 17 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 five years and define our place in the world for the next fifty. 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 Two, 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 300 billion euros 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 are 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.

Honourable Members,

We must give Ukraine everything it needs to resist and prevail. This implies making fundamental choices for our future. For the first time in decades our freedom is under threat. It is our responsibility

to do all that is necessary to protect our European citizens. Protecting Europe is Europe's duty. I believe now is therefore the time to build a true European Defence Union. Yes, I know there are some who are perhaps uncomfortable with the idea. But what we should be uncomfortable about are the threats to our security. Let us be clear: Member States will retain responsibility for their national security and their armies. And NATO will remain the pillar of our collective defence. But we all know very well that our spending on defence is too low and ineffective. Our foreign spending is too great. We must therefore create a single market for defence. We must invest more in high-end defence capabilities. In other words, Europe must continue along the path laid down by the Versailles Declaration. We need to invest more. We need to invest together. And we must set up common European projects. For example, a comprehensive aerial defence system – a European Air Shield, not only to protect our airspace but as a strong symbol of European unity in defence matters.

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 Coast Guards 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 200 million euros 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.

Honourable Members,

Europe offers a unique quality of life. From comprehensive social security to first-class regional food products. Rapeseed fields, vineyards and fruit orchards not only mean good food and drink. They are also part of our homeland. And that is why the future of agriculture is such an important and sensitive issue for us in Europe. We must overcome differences and develop good solutions together with all stakeholders. That is why I launched the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of Agriculture in Europe. It brings farmers, environmental groups and experts from across the food chain to the table. I have promised to listen to them carefully and to learn from them. And I shall do so. I will take on board good recommendations and present a new European strategy for our agriculture and the food sector. I will make sure that farmers receive a fair income. No one should be forced to sell good food below production costs. We must strengthen the position of our farmers in the food industry value chain. And we need smarter incentives and more innovation and access to capital. Anyone who manages nature and biodiversity in a sustainable way and helps to balance the carbon budget must be properly rewarded. Our farmers shape our landscapes. They shape the face of Europe. They are part of our culture. They provide food security. And we are proud of them.

That is why we must work together to tackle the problems bearing down on them. They feel climate change. Every year they are more and more affected by extreme weather and water scarcity. Temperatures in Europe are rising twice as fast as the global average. We are already seeing the devastating effects on fields and in forests. The face of our rural communities is changing. We must do more to ensure that our farmers are better prepared for what climate change holds in store for us. That is why I will present a plan for agriculture to address the need to adapt to climate change and, in parallel, a strategy for sustainable management of the precious resource of water. Not only our food

security depends on it, but also our overall competitiveness.

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?

Honourable Members,

Democracy is our common treasure. It is the forum in which our differences and disagreements can be voiced. And it is as vital as it is fragile. For a very long time, we took it for granted. **We became democrats of comfort.** But today our democracies are under threat. For more than 2 years, Russia has been relentlessly waging war on European soil, in Ukraine. Throughout the EU and within our institutions, our services and journalists – whose work I wish to commend here – have been uncovering cases of spying, cyber-attacks, corruption and disinformation by foreign actors, in particular the Russians and Chinese. The threat level and the level of hybrid attacks have not been so high for decades. At the Commission, we are very much aware of this and have been taking responsible action for several years. A major analysis has been conducted and the first effective tools have been rolled out, in close cooperation with Member States. But we must go further. We must prevent hostile foreign actors from interfering in our democratic processes, undermining them and, ultimately, destroying them. To do this, we must take strong measures at European level.

If you lend me your confidence today, the Commission will propose a European Democracy Shield. The EU needs its own dedicated structure for countering foreign information manipulation and interference. It will pool all expertise and link up and coordinate with existing national agencies. Intelligence and detection capabilities must be bolstered, together with the ability to act and impose sanctions. The Shield will take into account recommendations from the work of the special committees on foreign interference, to better protect our democracies. There is an urgent need to provide the European Union with powerful cyber-defence tools, to impose transparency on foreign funding of our public life as a common rule, but also to guarantee a reliable information framework. For this, the EU must support an independent press, continue to ensure rules are observed by digital giants, and further encourage media literacy programmes. European democracy must be more participative, more vibrant. Civil society must be better supported and defended. I know I can count on your support to realise this major plan to defend European democracy.

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 is 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!