



On 1 January 2021, Portugal took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from Germany.

In this edition of CEPI Meets, we ask Telmo Baltazar, Communication Coordinator of the Portuguese Permanent Representation to the European Union, about the plans and priorities that the Portuguese Presidency is working on this semester. Among these priorities are Europe's recovery, leveraged by the Green and Digital Transitions, and the implementation of the Social Pillar of the European Union.

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(CEPI) - Portugal recently took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. What would you consider to be the Union's biggest challenges for the Presidency to deal with in the next six months?

(Mr BALTAZAR) - What will keep us busy is, of course, dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and its different manifestations. We need to consider what we can do together at EU-level with all the Member States and what instruments we need to agree on in order to manage the different aspects of the pandemic, such as tests, border controls, and requirements for essential workers. We have common borders and need common solutions to manage these aspects for both the internal as well as the external borders of the EU. We need to make sure that both public interests, most importantly health, as well as single market needs are met.

(CEPI) - The Presidency's motto is: 'Time to deliver: a fair, green and digital recovery'. What would you consider the most important lessons we learned from the COVID-19 crisis and in what way will they be valuable for the future of Europe?

(Mr BALTAZAR) - There are three things that we have learned. The first is that even those that are big in Europe are very small when it comes to dealing with big challenges such as a pandemic. It requires common solutions. None of us would have been able to, for instance, deliver a vaccine within ten months by themselves. The second thing is that we should probably have been better prepared to respond more quickly and more together to issues such as protocols for crossing borders, testing, and such. The third thing is often overlooked. We had an economic contraction. However, our common currency has helped to cushion the impact unlike in previous financial crises. The crisis would have been much worse without the ECB and the current financial system.

(CEPI) - Energy and sustainability are among CEPI's policy priorities. What policy developments/progress would you expect in light of the Union's ambitions regarding climate change and the Green Deal?

(Mr BALTAZAR) - At the moment, we are trying to get an agreement on the European Climate Law. This law will make us legally liable to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. Furthermore, we want to make real estate developers and people involved in building and renovation of houses to have a clear understanding of the fact that their activity is essential for us as a Union to meet our climate neutrality goals and our Paris Agreement goals. If we are able, during the Portuguese Presidency, to agree on the European Climate Law, we would set the foundations for all different kinds of smaller policies, such as energy efficiency, renewable energy, efficiency of buildings, renovation, or even the new European Bauhaus, as an instrument that would help us as a collective to reach European climate neutrality by 2050.

(CEPI) - Digitalisation was named as one of the top priorities by the Portuguese Presidency, and it is also one of CEPI's main priorities for the years to come. Regarding the internal market and the real estate sector in particular, what digital developments would you expect and how could these improve the functioning of the market?

(Mr BALTAZAR) - To help the EU in its transition towards a more green and digital economy, we are following three different strands. The first strand is legislation. The Presidency is currently setting up a round of exploratory talks with the other Member States, on the proposals by the Commission. The current situation does not allow for face-to-face meetings, and online meetings are not the same. Therefore, having an agreement at the end of our semester is possibly too ambitious. The second dimension is that of dealing with the necessary frameworks for cybersecurity and the so called Charter of Digital Rights. What we want to create by the end of the Portuguese Presidency, is a charter so that all users have a series of digital rights towards companies. The third dimension, which is rarely spoken of, is that of infrastructure. We are focusing on the improvement of telecom infrastructure for better connectivity throughout Europe, as well as outside of the continent. We are, for example, developing the EllaLink, the first underwater high speed cable that runs between Europe and South America.