



PROGRAMME

Belgian Presidency of the Council
of the European Union

First half of 2024



**PROTECT,
STRENGTHEN,
PREPARE**



Belgium assumes the rotating Presidency for the thirteenth time, 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.

The Belgian Presidency will work towards better protecting European citizens, strengthening our cooperation, and preparing our shared future. It will focus on six thematic areas, and will provide particular attention to maintaining our unwavering support to Ukraine.

As the current institutional cycle concludes, the Presidency will support a seamless transition to the next one. It will support the adoption of the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 and prepare discussions on the future of the European Union.

1 DEFENDING RULE OF LAW, DEMOCRACY, AND UNITY

The European Union is based on the respect for fundamental rights, the rule of law and democratic values, paving the way for cohesion, the protection of individual freedoms, equality and non-discrimination, and our citizens' well-being. Defending the principles of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights will be an essential element in the work of the Belgian Presidency of the Council.

The Presidency will strengthen the empowerment and inclusion of citizens, with a special focus on youth participation, as well as work on the European education area, quality of education, life-long learning, mobility and sport. It will promote democratic values by reinforcing media freedom and pluralism, stimulating the digital transformation of the cultural and creative sectors, and exploring the links between culture, heritage and European identity. In this regard, working together at different levels of government will enable us to respond effectively to a diverse range of needs and challenges, while respecting the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

Enlarging our Union must make us all stronger. The 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

In light of evolving geopolitical realities and the rapid development of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, the EU must prioritise its long-term competitiveness and industrial policies. The EU must ensure a level playing field for businesses, especially SMEs, enabling them to compete fairly both within Europe and on the global stage. A coherent, predictable and simplified regulatory framework is key. The EU must lead the way in creating a sustainable, innovative, and resilient digital ecosystem that empowers citizens and benefits businesses.

The Belgian Presidency will work to strengthen the EU's internal market and industrial future and continue the work to complete the capital markets union and the energy union. Particular attention will be given to enhancing our economic security, reducing harmful dependencies, and promoting our technological leadership in critical sectors.

The Presidency aims to enhance the role of research, development, and innovation to become a frontrunner in developing and commercialising tailored solutions that boost key EU value chains' resilience and competitiveness. It will work towards a labour market shaped for the future that enhances employment rates and stimulates growth. It will underscore the significance of both public and private investments. It will also underscore the significance of cohesion policy as an essential long-term investment instrument, as a catalyst for transformation and convergence, and as cement for the European Union. It will pay specific attention to our food production autonomy. The Presidency will focus on coherence between the EU's internal and external policies.

3 PURSUING A GREEN AND JUST TRANSITION

The EU's ambitious transition agenda is driven by the urgent need to address the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. The Belgian Presidency underscores the importance of decisive and holistic action, leaving no one behind.

Carrying on with the Green Deal, the Presidency will place the energy and climate transition at the heart of its priorities. To reduce vulnerabilities to climate change, the Presidency will strive to enhance the Union's circular economy and adaptive and preparedness capacities. It will also promote sustainable water management.

Geopolitical and extreme climate events have highlighted the need for an accelerated and inclusive energy transition. This transition should deliver affordable energy to citizens and companies, ensure strong and reliable security of supply, and contribute to the objective of climate neutrality. The EU must fully leverage

its energy efficiency potential across the entire economy and rapidly advance the development of renewable and low-carbon energy sources and carriers. Increased investments to deliver a flexible, integrated European energy network are essential to this end.

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.

The Presidency will seek to strengthen social dialogue at all levels, promote fair labour mobility, mental health at work as well as access to sustainable social protection. It aims to strengthen the social dimension of the European semester - with particular attention to the first implementation of the Social Convergence Framework and the potential of social investments - and to promote a framework conducive to the development of the social economy. The Presidency will also advocate for increased political actions in order to guarantee access to decent and affordable housing for all.

Furthermore, the Presidency will support the evaluation of the EU's crisis preparedness, strengthen the security of medicines supply, and develop a strategy to boost the EU's health and care workforce. To improve citizens' access to affordable medicines, the Presidency will work to better address unmet medical needs.

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. It will also offer a common and fast reaction to migration crises and improve legal pathways to the EU.

The Presidency will work to strengthen the external dimension of migration and asylum, especially by working closely with our African partners, as part of our broader effort to continue to develop a mutually beneficial partnership between our two continents, 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 bolstering the EU's resilience to crises and to new and hybrid challenges.

Safeguarding our citizens 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 Industrial Strategy.

6 PROMOTING A GLOBAL EUROPE

The multilateral system and the rules-based international order face increasing strain from geopolitical confrontation, including the return of open war on the European continent. To adapt to this reality, the Presidency will vigorously pursue the efforts made by the EU to strengthen its resilience and autonomy and defend its interests and values.

In this more assertive approach, the Presidency will also emphasise that openness, dialogue, and cooperation are at the heart of the EU's conception of its interests. To achieve its foreign policy goals, the EU must fully mobilise its economic, security and defence capabilities, as well as its development and humanitarian assistance capacity. This includes an ambitious and balanced trade policy that is open, sustainable and assertive. This will require a reinforced rules-based multilateral trading system. In line with the 2030 Agenda, the Presidency will promote health care system strengthening as a basis to reach universal health coverage, while ensuring equitable access to innovative, resilient, sustainable, and high-quality health care services and products for all.

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GENERAL AFFAIRS

The Belgian Presidency is committed to protecting democracy, strengthening the rule of law and promoting free and fair European elections in order to buttress the foundations of our Union. These values foster citizens' trust in the EU and form the cornerstone of the deep-rooted legal and economic cooperation within the European Union.

The Presidency will take forward the ongoing work on enlargement. In May, the EU will celebrate the 20th anniversary of its largest enlargement, a milestone for continent-wide unity and prosperity.

The Belgian Presidency will also stimulate reflections on the next Strategic Agenda as well as on the Future of Europe.

The General Affairs Council will continue to play its role of overall coordination of policies, institutional and administrative questions. It will tackle a range of horizontal issues, such as the Multiannual Financial Framework, crisis management, hybrid threats, demography as well as transparency and ethics. Finally, it will fully play its role in preparing the European Council.

STRENGTHENING THE RULE OF LAW AND PROTECTING FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The Belgian Presidency underlines the paramount importance of upholding the fundamental values set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union. In particular, the rule of law forms the bedrock of democratic societies, upholding justice, equality, economic stability, and accountability of those in authority.

The Presidency is committed to promoting and reinforcing the existing mechanisms in place. As such, it will follow up on the evaluation of the rule of law dialogue in the Council, proceed with the ongoing Article 7 procedures in the form of hearings, as well as follow up on the developments in the context of the general regime of conditionality to protect the EU budget under the purview of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council.

Furthermore, the rule of law, in the context of enlargement, will also be a central topic during the informal meeting of European Affairs ministers. The Belgian Presidency will pay attention to the upcoming Court of Auditors report on the effective application of the EU's conditionality mechanism.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

The 2024 European Parliament elections will take place on 6-9 June during the Belgian Presidency. Free and fair elections as well as access to trustworthy information are essential for our citizens to decide on the future European Union they want to live in. Therefore, the Presidency will continue to deliver on the various initiatives of the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and initiate the work on the Defence of Democracy package to enhance the EU's democratic resilience.

To protect the integrity of these elections and enhance our democratic resilience against hybrid campaigns, the Belgian Presidency will use the relevant instruments, developed under the Strategic Compass, like the Hybrid and Foreign Information Manipulation Interference (FIMI)- toolboxes. Cooperation among all relevant stakeholders is needed to bolster the EU's preparedness and response capacity.

TRANSPARENCY AND INTEGRITY

The Belgian Presidency will continue the work on transparency and integrity in the EU institutions and bodies. It will follow-up on the proposal for an agreement to establish an interinstitutional ethics body.

CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION

The Conference on the Future of Europe has demonstrated that participatory processes can add value to the collective work of the institutions. The Belgian Presidency will host its own citizen panels, fostering EU-citizen engagement and democratic principles. Additional participatory initiatives will unfold across Belgium, amplifying democratic discourse and inclusiveness.

DEMOGRAPHY

The Presidency will take forward discussions on the demography toolbox to tackle challenges, such as an ageing population, and in particular their impact on Europe's competitiveness.

MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

Regarding the mid-term review of the functioning of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the Belgian Presidency will closely follow up on the achievements under the Spanish Presidency to ensure that the EU budget and its related instruments continue to meet the interests of our Union.

RELATIONS WITH NON-EU WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

The Presidency will work on the correct and timely implementation of all existing agreements between the EU and the UK, aiming to deepen the relationship. The UK remains an indispensable partner for the EU.

The Presidency will follow up on the ongoing talks with Switzerland with a view to reaching a new framework for relations between the EU and Switzerland.

The Presidency will work towards a timely conclusion of the association agreements between the EU and Andorra and San Marino.

The Presidency looks forward to further strengthening cooperation within the EEA and to celebrating the 30th anniversary of the entry into force of the EEA agreement.

ENHANCING CRISIS PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

The Presidency will continue the process of evaluating and improving the Council's role in EU crisis management, guided by the roadmap on strengthening crisis anticipation, preparedness and response in the Council. The Presidency will take into account the outcome of the ongoing discussions regarding the creation of a permanent working party on preparedness, response capability and resilience for future crises.

STRATEGIC AGENDA 2024-2029 AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

The Belgian Presidency will ensure a smooth transition to the next institutional cycle. It will help prepare the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, in close cooperation with the President of the European Council.

With a time perspective and policy scope that goes beyond the Strategic Agenda, the Presidency will engage Member States and institutions in further reflections on the Future of Europe, building on ongoing discussions in the General Affairs Council and the European Council. These reflections aim to ensure that the EU strengthens its capacity to act within and outside the Union, also in the long term. The EU will have to review and, where needed, reform its policies, institutional mechanisms, and budgetary procedures to ensure its ability to serve and protect its citizens.

ENLARGEMENT

The 1st of May 2024 will mark the 20th anniversary of the EU's largest single enlargement. This milestone underscores the remarkable progress of integration, demonstrating the successful journey of the EU in bringing na-

tions together for a more united and prosperous future.

The Belgian Presidency will monitor the ongoing processes with all relevant countries, in line with the existing methodology, the merits-based approach, and the progress of each candidate in fulfilling the accession criteria. It will encourage their EU integration by promoting necessary and transformative reforms in key areas, in particular the rule of law, democratic institutions, media freedom and fundamental rights.

In parallel, the Presidency will place a particular focus on the EU's capacity to integrate new members and advance the reflection on the internal reforms required for a successful future enlargement.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL COHESION

Cohesion policy is an essential long-term investment instrument for strengthening the EU's economic, social and territorial convergence and for achieving major EU objectives such as energy and industrial autonomy, adaptation to climate change, and the digital transition. Cohesion policy addresses the EU's societal challenges at the closest level to citizens and enterprises. The Belgian Presidency will emphasize the role of Cohesion policy as a driver of transformation, investment, convergence and as a cement for the European Union.

During its term, the Belgian Presidency will lead political debates on the future of Cohesion policy after 2027. The Presidency will prepare Council conclusions on the matter building on the 9th report on the Cohesion policy that will be presented by the Commission. In addition, the Presidency will organise discussions on the follow-up to the Commission's amended legislative proposal on resolving obstacles to cross-border cooperation.

The Presidency will focus on combatting land artificialisation, urban sprawl and soil sealing. Additionally, the Presidency will contribute to the mid-term review of the Territorial Agenda 2030, which aims to promote territorial cohesion in Europe.

The Belgian Presidency will also launch a re-

flection on the future of the EU Urban Policy and the challenges that cities are facing, in line with the New Leipzig Charter and the Urban Agenda.

Finally, the energy crisis has further highlighted the precarious situation faced by vulnerable households. Given the EU's and Member States' commitment to guaranteeing access to decent and affordable housing for all, in accordance with fundamental rights, the Presidency plans to bring this issue to the forefront of the European agenda. It will advocate for increased political action and coordination initiatives.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

In an ever more interconnected world, humanity faces global challenges that require global solutions. Yet, the world is also more insecure than it has been in decades. The multilateral system and the rules-based international order face increasing strain from geopolitical confrontation and transnational security threats, including the return of open war on the European continent.

To adapt to this reality, the Belgian Presidency will vigorously pursue the efforts made by the EU to strengthen its resilience and autonomy and defend its interests. In this more assertive approach, the Presidency will also emphasise that openness, dialogue and cooperation are at the heart of the EU's conception of its interests. The Belgian Presidency will work to ensure that the EU remains a major voice for multilateral cooperation, while promoting peace and security, protecting our global commons, and defending human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

A primary focus of the Presidency will be providing unwavering political, economic, military, humanitarian, and legal support to Ukraine.

To achieve its foreign policy goals, the EU must fully mobilise its economic, security and defence capabilities, as well as its development and humanitarian assistance capacity. This includes an ambitious and balanced trade policy and the reinforcement of the rules-based multilateral trading system.

In the area of development, the Presidency will further support the sustainable development of communities and their infrastructure and work towards health as a basic right. To do so, it will work to strengthen health systems, ensure equitable and high quality health services and products for all, and advance the EU Global Health Strategy.

In the field of security and defence, the Presidency will continue operationalising the Strategic Compass and bolstering the EU's resilience to new and hybrid challenges. It will focus its efforts on reinforcing the technological and industrial base to ensure security of supply in terms of military capabilities.

The Belgian Presidency will fully play its role in supporting the President of the European Council, the High Representative and the EEAS, in close coordination with the Commission, and promote a 'Team Europe' approach.

Finally, the Presidency will facilitate a broader discussion on the future of EU foreign, development, trade, security and defence policy to help shape the post-2024 Strategic Agenda.

DEFENDING UKRAINE

Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine is the most serious threat to peace on the European continent in decades. The Belgian Presidency will advocate for a sustained, active and united EU policy to counter this aggression and stand by Ukraine in its efforts to build international support towards conflict resolution.

This will involve exerting pressure on Russia, Belarus and other responsible parties through sanctions and demands for accountability, as well as providing Ukraine with sustained political, economic, military, humanitarian and legal support. A crucial priority will be to work on the EU's security commitments, in support of the High Representative's efforts, and towards proper donor coordination for the reconstruction and modernisation of Ukraine. The EU has a significant role to play in these respects, as both international coordination and security remain key factors in Ukraine's reconstruction and economic recovery.

The Presidency will further support relevant international judicial mechanisms in enforcing international law, fighting impunity, and protecting the rights of children. Moreover, sustained EU initiatives will be necessary to address the worldwide consequences of the war, including food insecurity, and to secure enduring global backing for the EU's efforts in this regard. To that end, the Presidency will help maintain the Union's clear voice and robust support for Ukraine on the global scene, including at the United Nations (UN).

Moreover, the Presidency will continue the Council's work on frozen assets and the efforts and on updating relevant sanctions regimes, ensuring coherent implementation, countering circumvention, and shaping new measures if required. The overarching priority will be to improve cooperation between all actors, ensure the measures' effectiveness, and address legal and humanitarian concerns.

EUROPE'S NEIGHBOURS

Europe's direct neighbourhood will remain a major focus of the EU's foreign policy. The Presidency will continue to support EU neighbours in tackling the challenges they face, such as the impact of Russia's aggres-

sion, energy security, irregular migration flows, transnational organised crime and various economic difficulties. It will work to make full use of the EU's new relationship with the United Kingdom, as well as partnerships with the European Economic Area, Switzerland, the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and the Southern Neighbourhood, with due attention to the specific situations and concerns of each region. The Presidency will also support the European Political Community as a forum for continent-wide high-level dialogue between EU members and their neighbours on European security and stability.

TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

The Presidency will promote close cooperation between the EU and like-minded partners in foreign policy. It will champion a mutually beneficial partnership with the United States and Canada in defence, security and energy, as well as on environmental, economic and societal issues, with a particular focus on defending the rules-based international order, democracy and human rights. The Presidency will also promote collaboration within the EU-NATO framework and the Trade and Technology Council.

AFRICA

Africa and Europe are key partners, with a shared history and future, as demonstrated on the occasion of the 6th EU-AU Summit in 2022. In line with commitments made at the Summit, the Presidency will work to intensify cooperation with the African Union, regional organisations and individual countries. It will foster a joint approach to shared opportunities and challenges, including human and economic development, climate change, food security, health, energy, as well as hybrid and security threats.

In this regard, the Presidency will work with the EU institutions to utilise all tools at their disposal and build on existing strategies and instruments, including the Global Gateway strategy and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). In the field of peace and security, the Presidency will make use of the European

Peace Facility (EPF) as well as of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, and build on specific regional EU Strategies, including those on the Great Lakes, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, while working to adapt EU actions to changing environments as needed. The Belgian Presidency will also support efforts to improve EU strategic communications, both to showcase the added value of the EU's strategic partnership with Africa, and to better adjust to our African partners' needs and views.

ASIA, INDO-PACIFIC, LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

In these vital regions, the Belgian Presidency will strive to develop new ties and strengthen existing relations with key EU partners.

In Asia and the Indo-Pacific, the Belgian Presidency will build on the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and the outcomes of prior EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forums. It will also support the development of connectivity between our two regions. The next EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in Brussels will provide an opportunity to do so.

In relation to China, the Presidency will endeavour to develop a coherent and consensual EU policy, guided by the EU's multi-faceted approach. This encompasses lasting engagement and cooperation to address common challenges, as well as reducing Europe's strategic dependencies, defending its economic interests and continued attention to the human rights situation.

The Presidency will also support enhanced engagement with India, as set out in the common Roadmap to 2025.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the Presidency will work to maintain the pace of the EU's rapprochement with the region, as set forth by the Council conclusions on relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean. Specific attention will be paid to the objectives set at the 2023 Brussels EU-CELAC Summit and contained in its joint declaration. In addition and in particular, the Presidency will support joint efforts to combat drug trafficking and related crime.

MIDDLE EAST AND GULF COUNTRIES

To contribute to peace, security and stability in the Middle East and the Gulf region, the Presidency will enhance EU engagement by further exploring and developing key regional and bilateral partnerships.

The recent explosion of violence in Israel and Palestine is a harrowing reminder of the urgent need to work on the resolution of conflicts that have long eluded peaceful solutions. The immediate priority will be to bring about a cessation of hostilities, respond to immediate humanitarian needs, and address the direct aftermath of the events in Gaza. Further, the Presidency will work to build consensus within the EU, in the region, and beyond, to take steps toward reviving a political process, with the ultimate aim of promoting a negotiated two-state solution.

GLOBAL GATEWAY

Through the Global Gateway strategy, the EU aims to support its partners in their development, upholding its fundamental values and high standards as well as establishing mutually beneficial relations between equal partners. The Belgian Presidency will support the integration of this strategy into all aspects of EU external relations, adopting a 'Team Europe' approach and fully mobilising all relevant actors, ranging from the sectors of health and education to industry and the private sector at large, including SMEs. Following the 2-year anniversary of Global Gateway, the Presidency will hold a Council stocktaking exercise on the design and implementation of the strategy. The Presidency will continue to ensure that environmental, social sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals remain at the heart of Council deliberations on this strategy.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES

The Belgian Presidency will address other global challenges, with a particular focus on climate change, and will play an active role in advancing EU climate diplomacy. It will work to strengthen the EU's resilience and advance the development of EU policies related to cyber, hybrid and digital issues. The Presidency

will also tackle complex issues spanning multiple Council configurations, including energy security, migration, health and pandemic preparedness, as well as all forms of terrorism, radicalisation and violent extremism. In that regard, it will further develop restrictive measures to combat terrorism.

In all foreign policy efforts, the Presidency will support the EU's ability to shape world affairs and tackle global challenges, including and especially within the multilateral and UN systems. Fundamental values defended by the EU, such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, gender equality, respect for diversity and inclusion, accountability and the fight against impunity, will remain at the core of this approach. In particular, the Presidency will work to further implement the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agendas, including through the Presidency's coordinating role among EU Member States in multilateral forums.

STRENGTHENING DECISION-MAKING

To boost the EU's resistance and resilience to international challenges, the Presidency will foster further discussions within the Council on the EU's foreign policy toolbox. These discussions will cover decision-making mechanisms, security and defence cooperation, crisis management, trade instruments, and sanctions policy. The Presidency will also work towards strengthening the EU's CSDP instruments, further implementing the Strategic Compass and the Civilian CSDP Compact. In addition, the Presidency will promote increased practical cooperation among Member States on consular crisis management for the benefit of citizens in need.

Given the purposeful steps taken by the EU to continue its enlargement, it has a responsibility to rethink its decision-making and enhance its ability to speak with one voice. The Belgian Presidency is ready to facilitate an open discussion on Qualified Majority Voting in the Common Foreign and Security Policy, taking into account the need to build confidence while balancing all Member States' core interests with the EU's need for a capacity to act decisively. In that context, the Presidency will work to further implement the

recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

PARTNERS IN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

In light of rising global instability and inequality, the EU's contribution to global human development, in line with Agenda 2030, is more important than ever. During its term, the Belgian Presidency will work to consolidate the EU's position as a reliable development actor, invariably upholding a high level of engagement towards our partners, particularly in Africa, as well as towards fragile and Least Developed countries. The EU's support to Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery will also remain high on the agenda.

The Presidency will focus on health as a right, including upholding sexual and reproductive health and rights. It will steer the work of the Council to ensure equitable access to affordable, available and accessible health services and products for all, following a triple A approach. Building on the 2022 EU-AU Summit, the Presidency will prioritise African health sovereignty. Special attention will be devoted to improving access to healthcare by strengthening public health systems and local manufacturing capacities, as well as ensuring a more effective response to future health emergencies.

Building on the political momentum to ensure Health for All, the Presidency will continue the Council's efforts on the EU Global Health Strategy, working to uphold a broad consensus between Member States. As the pandemic has shown, international and multilateral cooperation on health is vital. Strategic partnerships on an equal footing will be key to effecting change. In that context, the Presidency will organise a high-level event with the African Union and African partners to take stock of the investment package on health in Africa, and will explore avenues to strengthen the EU-Africa partnership on health.

The Presidency will also work to streamline the EU's engagement with multilateral development banks and consolidate the EU's position on their reform to make them fit for purpose and ensure their agility in fragile contexts.

To evaluate and improve the effectiveness and inclusiveness of EU development cooperation, the Presidency will support the Commission's work on optimising its instruments, presenting mid-term evaluation and review of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) as well as of the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD+). Special attention will be devoted to the social dimension and gender objectives of the NDICI. The Presidency will also drive progress on new and existing Global Gateway flagships and strengthen the Team Europe approach, emphasising reliability and true partnerships.

On the humanitarian front, the Belgian Presidency will advance the EU's leading role in humanitarian aid, while promoting EU solidarity and a Team Europe approach. The Presidency will continue to address the humanitarian funding gap by advocating for high-quality and flexible funding and drawing attention to underfunded and forgotten crises. The Presidency will continue to put affected people and local responders at the centre of EU humanitarian action, focusing on protection as well as preservation of the humanitarian space, in line with humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law.

TRADE FOR A PROSPEROUS & RESILIENT EU IN A FAIRER WORLD

In today's increasingly challenging international and economic environment, EU trade policy plays a vital role in the EU's open strategic autonomy by strengthening the Union's resilience and competitiveness, ensuring a level playing field and addressing trade barriers. To support these objectives, the Belgian Presidency will promote diversification of EU exports and supply chains. Special emphasis will be placed on securing access to critical raw materials and innovative technologies, which are essential to the twin transition and crucial for our open strategic autonomy.

Trade also strengthens the EU's ties with the rest of the world. The Presidency will therefore promote an ambitious and balanced bilateral trade agenda that is open, sustainable and assertive, in line with EU values and coherent with other EU policies. The Presidency

will actively support further initiatives and negotiations aimed at enhancing relations with transatlantic partners, the Indo-Pacific region, Africa, and Latin America.

In addition, the Presidency will monitor and take forward legislative files relating to trade instruments or their review, including as regards the screening of foreign direct investments (FDI) and the implementation of the Economic Security Strategy as a whole.

Due attention will also be paid to the full and effective implementation of trade agreements, with the aim of boosting economic growth, job creation and sustainable development, thereby contributing to the prosperity of EU citizens and of our trading partners. SMEs, trade and sustainable development, digital trade and standard-setting will be key areas of focus in this regard.

The effectiveness of trade policy depends on its alignment with numerous other EU policies. The Presidency will therefore work to reinforce coherence, information-sharing and coordination between different EU policies and Council configurations. Within this effort, a particular focus will be placed on both the geostrategic and development dimensions of trade policy.

To further include developing countries in international trade, the Belgian Presidency will work to fully implement the extended Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) and continue the discussions on the next GSP Regulation. The Presidency will also consider making use of other relevant instruments as part of this approach, including economic partnership agreements and sustainable investment facilitation agreements.

The Belgian Presidency will also finalise EU preparation and coordination ahead of the 13th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation, which remains the cornerstone of the international rules-based trading system. The primary focus will be on the Organisation's much-needed reform, with the restoration of a fully functioning dispute settlement mechanism as a key EU priority. The Presidency will also support ongoing negotiations on digital, environmental and development-related topics.

With regard to international investment policy,

the Belgian Presidency will continue efforts to reform the investment dispute resolution system, with the ultimate aim of establishing a Multilateral Investment Court.

DEFENCE FOR A EUROPE THAT PROTECTS

In a rapidly evolving world, the European Union must be ready to address any upcoming or unforeseen threat, risk, or challenge. The EU must be empowered to safeguard its interests by acting as an effective security actor in its neighbourhood as well as in the rest of the world. The Presidency will therefore support EU initiatives for proactive engagements in a 360-degree approach, which will encompass both new and existing CSDP missions and operations.

Continued military support for Ukraine remains vital to guarantee its territorial integrity and long-term resistance and resilience. In addition, the Presidency will push for adequate EU contributions to security in other regions of the world, particularly in Africa. This will involve dedicated cooperation with key partners, including through global instruments like the EPF.

Making the Strategic Compass operational is another priority. In that regard, the Presidency will work towards the swift development of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity to reach a fully operational status by 2025, and will strive to ensure EU command and control structures are fit for purpose.

With the aim of securing the Union and building on an integrated security approach, the Belgian Presidency will support efforts to strengthen resilience to a wide range of rapidly emerging challenges and concerns. Focus areas will include cybersecurity, military mobility, space and maritime security, as well as the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. The Presidency will also drive discussions on increasing the mutual benefits of dual-use capabilities, including their societal return.

The Presidency aims to actively contribute to the EU's security and defence policy partnerships by highlighting the importance of enhanced cooperation and dialogue with like-minded partners. Building on the third Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation,

its main focus will be on military mobility, space, resilience to hybrid threats and protection of critical infrastructure.

Finally, the Presidency will stimulate discussions on the future of European security and defence with a shift towards a more integrated Union approach. This reflection will centre on optimising existing instruments, including the EPF, and implementing new tools, as required. The focus will be on strengthening the European defence technological and industrial base, including by advancing Council deliberations on the European Defence Industrial strategy.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL AFFAIRS

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and uncertainties in the international economy are severely impacting the EU's socio-economic outlook. The Belgian Presidency will foster an effective European response to the different challenges ahead of us, such as fostering the green and digital transition, and promoting the EU's open strategic autonomy and global competitiveness.

This commitment includes safeguarding the economic principles that form the backbone of the European project. To this end, the Presidency will focus on finalising the Union's economic governance review, on continued financial support to Ukraine, and on legislation governing the Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union. Moreover, the Presidency will work on narrowing the VAT gap, on EU own resources, on completing the mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and on revising legislation related to the Customs Code as well as taxation rules for cross-border teleworking.

As the Belgian Presidency will straddle the close of one European parliamentary term and the start of another, it will work to finalise major outstanding files while also stimulating discussion on the economic state of the Union and its future.

ECONOMIC AND BUDGETARY POLICY, INCLUDING THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER

The Belgian Presidency will work to ensure long-term financial support to Ukraine and its reconstruction.

Building on the EU's resilience and strong economic foundations, as underpinned by the European Semester and the Stability and Growth Pact, the Belgian Presidency will continue the work initiated under previous Presidencies on the economic governance review.

Following the progress made by the Spanish Presidency, the Belgian Presidency will guide the Council's work towards early detection and correction of economic and social imbalances, both within and among Member States.

The Presidency will also lead the Council's examination of the Commission's independent evaluation report on the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), taking into account the REPowerEU initiative. The goal will be to evaluate the extent to which objectives have been achieved, the efficiency of the RRF's resource use, and the added value of the EU approach. Under the Belgian Presidency, the Council will also continue to monitor RRF implementation, including payment requests.

Moreover, the Presidency will assess the continued relevance of financing instruments, such as NextGenerationEU (NGEU) and the European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE).

THE EU BUDGET

Recent crisis responses across EU policy fields have underscored the overall benefits of enhanced Union action and capabilities. The Belgian Presidency will facilitate the work on the legislative proposals on a new set of own resources. Simultaneously, it will finalise the mid-term review of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework under the purview of the General Affairs Council.

The Presidency will also organise a conference on the future of the EU budget, as well as an expert conference on performance-informed budgeting.

TAXATION AND CUSTOMS

The EU and its Member States have committed to implementing the OECD Pillar Two by 1 January 2024, and Pillar One by 1 January 2025. In the area of direct taxation, priority will be given to measures aiming to curb tax evasion, tax avoidance, aggressive tax planning and harmful tax competition. This will involve updating the EU's list of non-cooperative jurisdictions, propelling both legislative and non-legislative initiatives to decrease compliance costs and the burden for cross-border investors, and tackling tax abuse related to withholding taxes. The Presidency welcomes the Business in Europe Framework for Income Taxation (BEFIT) package, and will explore the usefulness of more unified tax rules in other fields over the longer term, such as in relation to mobile workers. In addition, the Presidency will support the implementation of the Unshell Directive and back the Survey on the Access to Finance of Enterprises (SAFE) initiative. It will also work to ensure greater tax transparency and reinforce the exchange of relevant information within the EU, specifically regarding the good functioning of the Pillar Two Directive.

The Belgian Presidency will further emphasise action aiming to close the VAT gap, benefiting both national and EU budgets. In this context, priority will also be given to the 'VAT in the Digital Age' proposal.

Member States' customs services face multiple growing challenges and expanding tasks, including in the context of the twin green and digital transition. In light of this, the Belgian Presidency will contribute to the revision of the Union's Customs Code to better adapt it to current and future needs, and to make it more beneficial to EU Member States, to the EU as a whole and to society at large.

In addition, the Belgian Presidency will continue the review of the Energy Taxation Directive.

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND THE BANKING UNION

The first priority of the Belgian Presidency will be to finalise the legislative agenda, with an emphasis on negotiations with the European

Parliament to bolster the Capital Markets Union and the Banking Union, and to further deepen the internal market.

As regards initiatives relating to the Capital Markets Union (CMU), such as the EU retail investment strategy and the Listing Act, the Belgian Presidency aims to ensure balanced approaches that uphold strong consumer and investor protection, boost market integrity as well as the financing of the real economy, and improve SMEs' access to capital. In support of the EU's commitment to principles of transparency, integrity, sustainability, and reinforcement of the EU's open strategic autonomy, the Presidency will aim to enhance the appeal of EU clearing services, without compromising financial stability.

The Belgian Presidency will also focus on enhancing the financial literacy and inclusion of EU citizens as part of the possible future deepening of the CMU. The investment challenges ahead of us demonstrate the need for the CMU to be further consolidated, the aim being to activate private savings and encourage private investments.

In addition, the Belgian Presidency will take forward the revision of the Bank Crisis Management and Deposit Insurance (CMDI) framework. This is a key step towards furthering the Banking Union and reinforcing the banking sector's role in bolstering Europe's economic resilience and sustainability.

In the context of sustainable finance, the Presidency welcomes the Commission's plan to streamline reporting requirements for companies across various fields of EU legislation, thereby reducing the reporting burden by 25 percent. The Belgian Presidency will support efforts to enhance the workability of the EU's sustainable finance framework and ensure accessibility and consistency in its implementation. It will also aim to finalise the work on the Environmental, Social and Governance Rating Regulation.

The Presidency will also continue the fight against international and organised crime by advancing efforts to curtail money laundering and the financing of terrorism.

JUSTICE AND HOME AFFAIRS

During the Belgian Presidency, the reform of the migration and asylum system as well as a resilient Schengen zone will be key priorities.

The Presidency will focus on intensifying the EU's efforts to combat organised crime, terrorism and violent extremism, as they pose a threat to our societies and democracies.

The response to today's challenges should be based on the rule of law, the improvement and consolidation of good governance in the EU, and on upholding our shared values and fundamental rights and freedoms.

SECURITY FOR EUROPEAN CITIZENS

The Belgian Presidency takes to heart the security and well-being of EU citizens amid the evolving forms and methods of organised crime that threaten our societies. To combat these threats more effectively, the Presidency commits to enhancing our understanding of criminals' tactics, operations, and relationships.

The Presidency aims to address drug trafficking as it relates to other forms of crime, causes violence within society, and remains a major source of income for criminal organisations. Additionally, the fight against human trafficking will be a priority, with a focus on detecting and protecting victims.

It is crucial to continue the fight against the terrorist and extremist threat. The Belgian Presidency will pay particular attention to preventing and tackling terrorism and violent extremism in all its forms, as well as its latest evolutions in the online world. It will also seek to enhance operational cooperation such as the follow-up of prison leavers.

The Belgian Presidency will also seek to improve Member States' travel intelligence capabilities. The focus will be on advance passenger and passenger name records, which offer opportunities for strengthening border control and the internal security of the Union in the fight against terrorism and serious crime.

Ensuring a safe environment for children is of utmost importance. The Presidency will take forward the work on preventing and combating child sexual abuse.

The Belgian Presidency wishes to make progress in the support and protection of victims of criminal offences. It will therefore seek to agree on a general approach regarding the revision of the Victims' Rights Directive.

To safeguard our democracies from the threat of corruption and protect public trust in institutions, the Presidency will advance negotiations on the Commission's initiative to criminalise all forms of corruption.

Addressing gender-based violence and violence disproportionately affecting women is a key priority for the Belgian Presidency. It will work towards finalising the directive on combating violence against women and domes-

tic violence. The Presidency will also closely follow up on the accession of the EU to the European Convention on Human Rights.

To accommodate EU citizens living in cross-border situations, the Presidency will take forward the initiative on the recognition of parenthood between Member States.

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) plays a crucial role in ensuring a human-centred approach to technology, and its proper implementation must be upheld. The Presidency will work on additional procedural rules to resolve differences in administrative procedures and practices, and to enhance cross-border cooperation between national supervisory authorities.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

The Belgian Presidency will develop a common understanding to advance the legal integration of cross-border police cooperation, based on the evaluation of the Council recommendation adopted in June 2022. Efficient access to and use of digital data by law enforcement services is of paramount importance. The Belgian Presidency and the European Commission will co-chair the High Level Group to adopt a final report that lays the groundwork for future policy and legislative follow-up.

Recognising the significance of a well-functioning judicial system within the EU, the Presidency will prioritise several initiatives aimed at strengthening judicial cooperation. Priority will be given to the digitalisation of cross-border judicial cooperation, as this will ease access to justice, improve overall efficiency and speed, and ensure the resilience of justice systems in times of crisis. Special attention will be accorded to the enforcement of sentences in the context of the mutual recognition of judicial decisions in criminal matters. The Presidency will also seek agreement on the Regulation regarding the transfer of criminal proceedings within the EU.

In response to the multitude of risks the Union faces, the Belgian Presidency will actively support a strengthened EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Work on further reinforcing the EU's crisis management structures must be

continued, with due regard for strengthening the connection between the EU and national structures.

ASYLUM AND MIGRATION

In line with the roadmap agreed with the European Parliament, the Presidency aims to address all remaining legislative files associated with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Pact will reinforce trust between Member States in a spirit of responsibility and solidarity, bring clarity to people arriving in the EU, and ensure Europeans of the humane and effective management of migration, in line with our values and international law. It will also offer a common and fast reaction to migration crises and improve legal pathways to the EU. The Presidency will also take further discussions on return and reintegration, the future of our visa policy, legal migration, and the development of the integrated border management.

Moreover, the Belgian Presidency will strive to strengthen the EU's actions in the external dimension of migration and asylum. This entails preventing irregular departures to the Union, combatting migrant smuggling, enhancing border protection, improving the effectiveness of return readmission and reintegration, developing legal migration opportunities, and helping to address root causes of migration. Such objectives will be achieved through comprehensive, balanced, transparent and mutually beneficial collaborations with priority countries of origin and transit, all the while upholding international law and the right to seek asylum.

Evidence-based policymaking, coordination, practical cooperation, and operational convergence remain key issues in migration and asylum management, on which the Belgian Presidency will launch discussions.

The Belgian Presidency will follow-up on the Commission evaluation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA) Regulation.

THE SCHENGEN AREA

The Presidency will advance proposals that contribute to a better functioning and resilience of the Schengen area. It will seek to enhance the Schengen governance by better preparing the Schengen Council meetings. By improving the annual cycle, the Presidency will work towards addressing the identified priorities. The emphasis will lie on strengthening external border controls to increase security within the Schengen area.

ACCOUNTABILITY AMID THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

In the wake of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Belgian Presidency will work to ensure the effective accountability of persons who have committed the most serious crimes in Ukraine, including the crime of aggression.

HEALTH

Under the Belgian Presidency, health will revolve around three overarching themes: preparedness, care, and protection. The Presidency will emphasise the importance of strengthening the EU's resilience to future health threats by reinforcing crisis management, supporting healthcare systems, and improving the security of medicines supply. This way, the Belgian Presidency will put forward priorities for the next legislative term of the European Union.

PREPAREDNESS

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Presidency will concentrate on enhancing the EU's health emergency preparedness and response governance framework. Efforts will be made to enhance the EU's capacity to conduct large-scale clinical trials. A top priority for the Presidency will be negotiating the international pandemic treaty and the international health regulations, under the World Health Organisation's purview. Additionally, it will further reinforce the work on fighting antimicrobial resistance (AMR), from a 'One Health' perspective.

CARE

The Belgian Presidency will explore how the EU can strengthen and support Member States' health systems and health workforce strategies, including shortages. It will also develop proposals for a needs-driven approach for innovation and health care policy to better address unmet needs. Furthermore, efforts will be made to advance health promotion and disease prevention to enhance overall population health.

PROTECTION

The Presidency will continue the work on the revised pharmaceutical legislation to provide faster access to high-quality, safe, affordable and greener medicines in all Member States. This will also contribute to supporting innovation and boosting the EU's competitiveness and attractiveness in the pharmaceutical sector. Beyond legislative endeavours, the Presidency will seek to strengthen the EU's health security by moving forward new proposals to effectively address medicines shortages. More broadly, the Presidency will focus on enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy concerning medicines.

FINALISATION OF LEGISLATION

The Presidency will aim to finalise the EU Health Data Space (EHDS) and stands ready to complete any remaining work on the regulation on Substances of Human Origin (SOHO). Furthermore, it will seek to move forward negotiations for the pharmaceutical legislation.

HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES

Taking a cross-cutting approach, the Presidency will highlight the significance of health in all policies: among others, mental well-being at work, equitable access to health care and health products, global health and research and development for pandemic preparedness will be topics addressed in different formations of the Council under the Belgian Presidency.

EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY

In times marked by significant socio-economic disruption within the European Union, the need for a Europe that protects has never been clearer. In the field of employment and social policy, the Belgian Presidency will work towards an ambitious and future-proof social agenda. To deliver a stronger social safety net for European citizens and a labour market equipped for the future, the Presidency will seek to complete the important remaining files before the close of the current legislature. Special emphasis will be placed on socio-economic governance. Furthermore, the Presidency will devote its efforts to consolidating the European Pillar of Social Rights, setting forth a robust social agenda for 2024-2029. As ever, the aim will be to foster a European society that is more inclusive, gender-equal, and fair for all.

AN AMBITIOUS AND FORWARD-LOOKING SOCIAL AGENDA

To substantially enhance the level of social protection provided by the EU to its citizens, the Belgian Presidency will advance the work on the remaining legislative files before the conclusion of the current legislature. This includes any remaining work on the directive on improving working conditions for platform workers, the revision of the EU social security coordination regulations, the introduction of a European disability card, the Equal Treatment Directive, and the directives on standards for equality bodies.

The Belgian Presidency will also support progress on the non-legislative proposals on mental health, framework conditions for the social economy, a reinforced quality framework for traineeships, and digitalisation of social security. It will play an active role in the follow-up to the roadmap initiative on carcinogens.

Preserving workers' health and safety remains of paramount importance. Within the scope of the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027, the Belgian Presidency will focus on a more holistic approach to mental health. This approach will address workplace-related stress, burnout and other mental health issues, while also preventing and reducing risks at the workplace and supporting the post-illness return to work, including for the self-employed. Moreover, the Presidency will support the European Labour Authority (ELA) in its work to increase fairness and trust in the single market and strengthen the social dimension of the European Union. To this end, the Presidency will foster discussions aimed at evaluating the ELA and reflecting on its future development.

In addition, the Belgian Presidency will work and invest in skills and lifelong learning. As part of this ongoing effort, it will host the OECD Skills Summit and build upon the momentum generated during the European Year of Skills.

FUTURE-PROOF SOCIO-ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE

The Belgian Presidency will strive towards policy coherence and aim for an integrated

approach of economic, fiscal, environmental, employment, social and education policies. To that end, it will follow up on Council work regarding the economic governance review, the treatment of social public investment in a revisited fiscal framework, and increased visibility for the social convergence framework. Furthermore, it will work to ensure the European Semester can effectively monitor and rectify social imbalances while promoting upward convergence, multilateralism, and dialogue with vital stakeholders, including social partners. The Tripartite Social Summit to be held in March 2024 could be an opportunity to further address this question.

To ensure policies remain grounded in reality, the EU must uphold its commitment to fact-based decision-making. The Belgian Presidency will champion efforts to enhance the accuracy, reliability, and relevance of statistics in key areas such as employment and social affairs, lifelong learning, gender equality and non-discrimination, as well as the social economy.

Ensuring the welfare of Europeans, especially those in need, is fundamental to an EU that aims to deepen its connection with citizens. The Belgian Presidency will therefore contribute to the reassessment of the temporary Support instrument to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE). To further empower Europe's workforce, the Presidency will emphasise the importance of social dialogue, including through a Social Partner Summit co-organised with the Commission at Val Duchesse, almost 40 years since Jacques Delors convened the meeting that gave rise to the European social dialogue. Building on the groundwork laid by the Spanish Presidency, it will seek to bolster mechanisms for workplace democracy, and will take forward the outcomes of European social partners' discussions on teleworking and the right to disconnect in Council deliberations. It will also closely follow up the forthcoming initiative regarding the revision of the European Works Council Directive.

Moreover, the Belgian Presidency will encourage the EU to play a leading role in discussions surrounding the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) proposal for a global coalition for social justice.

A MORE INCLUSIVE, GENDER-EQUAL AND FAIR SOCIETY

As we look forward to the next Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029, a principal objective of the Belgian Presidency will be to consolidate the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Presidency will work towards an interinstitutional Declaration to be signed at La Hulpe, identify new legislative and non-legislative initiatives needed for a just, green and digital transition, and support ambitious new strategies to achieve equal opportunity, gender equality and non-discrimination. It will also push for the attainment of the Porto targets for employment, skills, and poverty reduction by 2030.

The Presidency will spearhead discussions on strengthening individual social rights, enhancing the level playing field in the single market, promoting digital inclusion, and securing fair and voluntary mobility. To prevent in-work poverty and labour market segmentation, the Council Recommendation on access to social protection emphasises the vital importance of granting all workers and self-employed individuals formal and effective access to adequate social security benefits. The Belgian Presidency will propose further initiatives within this Recommendation's scope, such as improving monitoring and better defining adequacy measurement and transparency requirements. Moreover, the Presidency will continue to push for the implementation of the Council's recommendations on adequate minimum income, the European Child Guarantee, and the efforts of the European Platform on Combating Homelessness. The Presidency will also call for an EU initiative to implement the principle of timely access to high-quality and affordable health care for all.

Building on the groundwork laid by the Spanish Presidency, the Belgian Presidency will continue to support the development of the social economy as a lever for social innovation and economic transition. As part of this endeavour, it will host a high-level conference on the implementation of the European Social Economy Action Plan.

The Belgian Presidency will facilitate discussions around the structural framework of gender equality policies, combating gender-based violence, promoting women's economic independence and empowerment,

and gender mainstreaming, including by addressing the gender gap in pensions. The Presidency will also focus on the rights of individuals with disabilities, aligning its actions with the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. It will also continue to uphold the rights of LGBTIQ+ people, as outlined in the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025. Finally, the Presidency will follow up on the implementation of the Anti-Racism Action Plans.

INTERNAL MARKET AND INDUSTRY

In light of evolving geopolitical and market realities, the EU must prioritise a rapid and fair twin transition that reshapes its economic fabric, supports open strategic autonomy, and fosters resilience to crises. The Belgian Presidency will focus on a strong, resilient, and inclusive green and digital transition, including the finalisation of related legislative packages. As European competitiveness faces increasing pressure, the EU's response must create a level playing field for businesses, especially SMEs, enabling them to compete fairly both within Europe and on the global stage. This approach should provide fresh opportunities for businesses and workers to take an active part in the green transition and digital transformation. The Belgian Presidency will also foster comprehensive, future-ready visions for the EU's internal market and industry policies.

ADVANCING THE EU'S SINGLE MARKET AND INDUSTRIAL COMPETITIVENESS

The European single market, as one of the EU's most significant achievements, has provided countless opportunities for businesses and citizens alike over the past three decades. The Belgian Presidency aims to take forward any remaining work on the single market emergency instrument (SMEI) to anticipate, prepare for and respond to the consequences of the crises for the single market.

In light of the challenges outlined above, the Belgian Presidency recognises the need to examine the functioning of the internal market and to reflect on its future direction for the period 2024-2029, as requested by the European Council in June. The Presidency intends to conduct a thorough review, leveraging the lessons learned from past crises as opportunities to benefit citizens and businesses. This review will take into account the experiences of instruments such as the Single Market Enforcement Task Force (SMET) and will consider the specific challenges and opportunities posed by the green transition, digital transformation, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Furthermore, the Belgian Presidency will finalise any remaining work on the Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence and the proposal for a Regulation on prohibiting products made with forced labour.

The Belgian Presidency is fully committed to strengthening and refining the European industrial policy, with a focus on an ecosystem and value chain approach. To that end, the Presidency will evaluate the effectiveness of instruments such as IPCEI, cluster collaboration, InvestEU and EIC, and analyse how those factors can support a more inclusive approach to SMEs. The Presidency will also identify and address any gaps in the existing toolbox to ensure a consolidated and future-proof approach that enables the EU to revitalise its productive activity and industrial base.

By promoting a sustainable and inclusive economy, the EU will be better equipped to compete effectively in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

ADVANCING OPEN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND THE TWIN TRANSITION

It is essential for the EU to develop a joint approach which ensures a fair level playing field at both European and global level. The Belgian Presidency will advance the Green Deal Industrial Plan for the Net-Zero Age (GDIP). A coherent, predictable and simplified regulatory framework, along with access to sufficient funding and support for skills development, are essential for a thriving European industry. Building on the principles of open and sustainable trade and resilient value chains, the Belgian Presidency will finalise the Net-Zero Industry Act (NZIA). These initiatives aim to reduce strategic dependencies and achieve the EU's twin transition goals.

The Belgian Presidency will focus on advancing a sustainable and circular economy. To further the green transition and to improve product circularity and energy performance, any remaining work on the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) will be finalised. The Presidency will explore the untapped potential of the bioeconomy, circular manufacturing, circular materials and material footprint reduction, as well as hydrogen and carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) in achieving a sustainable net-zero European industry.

To accelerate the digital transformation, the Presidency will draw on the experiences gained from European digital innovation hubs (EDIHs). This will support SMEs to adopt new digital technologies and enhance the digital skills of their employees.

PROMOTING SMES THROUGH POLICY INTEGRATION

More broadly, the Belgian Presidency will mainstream SMEs' interests. It will take stock of the implementation of the EU SME strategy and pay particular attention to the SME relief package. In that context, it will work on the revision of the Late Payments Directive. By supporting SMEs, the EU can promote prosperity, job creation and a more resilient and sustainable economy.

MODERNISING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY AND TECHNICAL HARMONISATION

The Belgian Presidency will work towards an IP system that provides access to critical technologies, including effective systems for issuing compulsory licences in times of crisis and increased transparency on standardised technologies. In addition, it will contribute to the modernisation of the legislative framework for intellectual property. Such efforts should also make the EU more attractive for investors while promoting research and development in innovation through cost-effective patent and supplementary certificate protection, as part of the unitary patent reform. The Belgian Presidency aims to finalise any remaining work on the modernisation of the framework on industrial design. It will facilitate the exchange of best practices among member states regarding the implementation of the copyright directive in the Digital Single Market (DSM). The Presidency will also prepare the positions of the EU and its Member States regarding the various issues being discussed within the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

It will also support the finalisation of draft regulations on the technical harmonisation of products to ensure a high level of protection for users. In that context, it will take forward the revisions of the Toy Safety Directive (TSD) and the forthcoming proposal on asbestos in buildings. In the context of the revision of the directive on pyrotechnic articles, the Presidency will inform and raise awareness on the Benelux-initiative 'PYRO-pass'.

EMPOWERING CONSUMERS

Empowering citizen-consumers is crucial to achieving a circular economy and a climate-neutral society. To that end, the Belgian Presidency will finalise the Directive on common rules promoting the repair of goods. To reduce the risk of false green claims and greenwashing, the Presidency will also finalise the framework requiring companies to substantiate their environmental claims. Furthermore, the Belgian Presidency will take forward the revision of the Travel Package Directive. Those efforts will ensure that consumers have the information and protection they

need to make informed choices and allow them to benefit from the twin transition. Complementing those initiatives with appropriate sanctions that deter businesses from violating consumer rights, the Presidency will ensure that progress is made on the revision of the Alternative Dispute Resolution Directive.

The Belgian Presidency will contribute to the transition towards digital labelling of products to promote clearer labels, reduce costs and packaging waste, facilitate management by economic operators, and digitalise the market. It will endeavour to finalise the first regulation in this field, which concerns the voluntary digital labelling of EU fertilising products.

The Presidency is also committed to safeguarding consumers by recognising the EU Member States' lottery models and their principles in Council conclusions. This commitment ensures a sustainable and socially responsible gambling framework, focused on combating fraud, protecting consumers, and supporting charitable initiatives.

To ensure that citizens and enterprises are able to benefit from a clear, coherent and high-quality European legislative framework, the Belgian Presidency intends to assess the tools for better lawmaking, making sure that they are representative, qualitative and smart.

TOURISM

In the area of tourism, the Belgian Presidency is committed to advancing the digital transformation of the tourism ecosystem, leveraging data to foster innovation and to enable more effective governance. In support of this goal, the Presidency will finalise the regulation on collecting and sharing data relating to short-term accommodation rentals.

Moreover, the Presidency is committed to realising the vision set forth in the European agenda for tourism 2030, with a specific focus on transforming the tourism ecosystem to align with the objectives of the twin transition, with a specific focus on nature tourism. Particular attention will also be accorded to the added value of business and urban tourism in developing an integrated local tourism offer. Pursuing those objectives will drive prosperity in that sector.

RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SPACE

Research and innovation play a pivotal role in achieving the overarching objectives of the EU and are essential for addressing urgent societal, global and economic challenges such as climate crisis, health, and the digital transformation. The Belgian Presidency will therefore prioritise the contribution of research and innovation as our foremost catalyst for achieving greater open strategic autonomy for Europe, while focusing on better valorisation of research results and reinforcing the role of research and innovation in society to overcome key industrial and societal challenges. The Belgian Presidency acknowledges the importance of space activities as a strategic asset, particularly in domains such as security, defense, climate change mitigation, and the empowerment of New Space actors. It will aim to advance cybersecurity and secure connectivity and to promote the safe, sustainable, and secure use of space. In dealing with these challenges, including also responsible international cooperation, the commitment to nurturing the EU's open strategic autonomy will run as a common thread.

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

The Presidency will stress the importance of research and innovation in strengthening and modernising the European industry to achieve more open strategic autonomy in health, clean-tech, food, digitalisation, disruptive and key enabling technologies (KETs) ranging from AI, advanced materials and life-science technologies. Research and innovation is crucial for the green transition and digitalisation of the European industry and substantially impacts many aspects of society.

Through Council conclusions, the Belgian Presidency will also focus on improving the valorisation of research results. This is key for reducing the innovation gap, and tailoring academic research with the needs of society, policy-makers and industries, while stimulating the EU's industrial recovery and revitalisation.

The Belgian Presidency will strive to better connect science, industry, policy, and society. This will help enhance trust and engagement in science and address key societal and environmental challenges. To this end, interdisciplinary evidence-informed policymaking and science communication are useful tools. The mission model within Horizon Europe can serve as guidance.

Furthermore, the Presidency will closely follow up on the European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, and identify opportunities to maximise the economic, scientific and societal impact of this programme as well as the EU added value, taking into account the available ex-post studies on Horizon 2020.

The Presidency will also foster international cooperation based on openness, dedicated partnerships, and common standards, while promoting a level playing field and reciprocity underpinned by fundamental principles and values in line with the Global Approach to Research and Innovation.

The Belgian Presidency will advance research and innovation in the nuclear field, focusing on finding innovative solutions for high-level radioactive waste and nuclear material testing. It will also stress the significance of the ITER project, which paves the way for tomorrow's fusion power plants. Additionally, the

Presidency will provide full support for the development of radiological and nuclear technologies in healthcare. The Strategic Agenda for Medical Ionising Radiation Applications (SAMIRA Initiative) will play a crucial role in ensuring a secure supply of radioisotopes, improving the quality and security of nuclear medical applications.

SPACE

Ensuring the cyber resilience of space infrastructure, mitigating climate change, facilitating the implementation of the EU space strategy for security and defence, and supporting new space actors will be core priorities of the Belgian Presidency.

Moreover, the Presidency will leverage the mid-term review of the EU Space Programme to evaluate the progress made and lay the groundwork for future deployment of the programme.

The Presidency will also support any action taken by the Commission to collectively enhance the resilience of space systems and services in the EU and will strive to ensure coordination between Member States.

The Belgian Presidency will further contribute to the reinforcement of EU-ESA relations and coordination, notably with a view to securing Europe's autonomous access to space, resilience of space systems and services, and guaranteeing open EU strategic autonomy.

TRANSPORT

Some of Europe's most daunting challenges intersect in the area of transport policy, including the green and digital transition, energy security, the pathway to a zero-carbon economy, and the EU's resolve to transition away from fossil fuels.

The Belgian Presidency will focus on de-carbonising the EU transport sector and promoting sustainable and active modes of transport, while ensuring decent social working conditions and preserving a level playing field with third countries.

In addition, the Presidency will pursue efforts to strengthen intra-European connectivity and bring about a robust, resilient, and future-proof European transport network.

To deal with the mobility impacts of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the Presidency will strive for better connectivity of Ukraine and Moldova with the EU. Moreover, the Belgian Presidency will work to strengthen the EU's leadership in developing safe, clean, efficient and smart transport policies, and take forward this endeavour in the next Strategic Agenda.

GREEN TRANSPORT

The EU is pursuing an ambitious environmental agenda, in line with the objectives set by the Paris Agreement and the Green Deal. With the green transition as the cornerstone of its approach to transport, the Belgian Presidency will place particular emphasis on advancing and finalising files crucial to realising the EU's ambition, such as the Greening Freight Transport Package. Specifically, the Presidency will focus on initiatives regarding the promotion of the modal shift, including active and non-motorised mobility, international rail transport, intermodal connectivity, and the reduction of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

SMART TRANSPORT

The Belgian Presidency will promote the Council's work on smart and digital mobility by taking forward initiatives aimed at the further digitalisation of Europe's transport modes and mobility systems. The aim is that the European transport sector stays ahead of the curve regarding the digital transition, while ensuring it leaves no one behind. Concerning connected, cooperative and automated mobility (CCAM) and smart shipping, the Presidency will continue knowledge exchanges at EU level, work to support innovations in the sector, and advance the work on the forthcoming proposal on river information services (RIS) for inland waterways.

SOCIAL TRANSPORT

While significant efforts will be made to implement the green and digital transition in the transport sector, the people working in the sector must not be forgotten. The Belgian Presidency will place social responsibility and the improvement of social conditions in the transport sector at the heart of its programme, by taking forward initiatives to improve working conditions for transport workers and to combat inadequate protection.

SAFE TRANSPORT

While pursuing a smarter, more sustainable and more socially resilient European transport sector safety priorities should always be taken into account. Therefore, the Belgian Presidency will take forward initiatives aimed at further strengthening the safety and efficiency of the transport sector, including the Road Safety and Maritime Safety Packages. Specifically, the Presidency will take forward the proposals on updated requirements for driving licences, and better cross-border enforcement of road traffic rules. As regards maritime safety, the Presidency will advance legislative work on flag and port state control, accident investigation, ship-source pollution, and the revision of the EMSA mandate.

Finally, the Belgian Presidency will continue to work on the revision of the Single European Sky framework.

DIGITAL, CYBER AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS

The EU must lead the way in creating a sustainable, innovative, and resilient digital ecosystem that empowers citizens and benefits businesses. The Belgian Presidency will prioritise a human-centred and sustainable approach to the digital transition, strengthening Europe's resilience to cybersecurity threats, and addressing diverse challenges in telecommunications. The aim is to foster a coherent internal and external digital policy that encourages open strategic autonomy.

STEERING THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The Belgian Presidency will uphold the EU's ambition to advance the green and digital transition, supporting efforts towards achieving climate neutrality and digital leadership. It will prioritise a human-centred approach to the digital transformation, in line with the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles. Particular attention will be given to algorithmic transparency and virtual identity protection. These principles are especially relevant in the domains of artificial intelligence and the creation of more competitive data markets. In pursuit of this goal, the Belgian Presidency will strive to finalise any remaining work on the AI Act. Digital inclusivity will be a key focus throughout the Presidency's agenda.

With the ambitious targets of the Digital Decade Policy Programme in mind, the Presidency will focus on negotiations on the Gigabit Infrastructure Act. Together with Member States and the Commission, the Presidency will reflect on and discuss the future of Europe's digital infrastructure and how to shape the development of safe networks that foster innovation and virtual worlds.

Sharing digital solutions among public administrations across the EU will accelerate the digital transformation of Europe's public sector.

Together with stakeholders, the Presidency will evaluate the Digital Europe and Horizon Europe Programmes and explore ways to improve synergies between both. The Presidency will also convene high-level experts on postal regulation to exchange views on the objectives for the upcoming reform of the Postal Services Directive and the challenges facing the postal sector.

FOSTERING CYBER RESILIENCE

To strengthen trust in the digital domain and enhance cyber resilience, the Belgian Presidency will focus on promoting a joint approach to 'active cyber protection'. This will involve bolstering proactive measures for preventing, detecting, monitoring and abating network security breaches across the Union.

The Belgian Presidency will seek to finalise any remaining work on the amendment of the Cybersecurity Act and the Cyber Resilience Act to reinforce the security of our digital society and supply chains. Additionally, it will continue to foster mutual solidarity in cyberspace. This will be based on shared responsibility and strong institutions. To achieve a strengthened cyber ecosystem, the Presidency will seek to conclude the work on the Cyber Solidarity Act.

Furthermore, in view of the new European legislature, the Belgian Presidency will conduct a review of EU cyber policy and the institutional landscape to assess the progress and identify the remaining gaps and disparities that need to be addressed.

STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The Belgian Presidency is dedicated to enhancing the EU's cyber posture, aiming for an open, free, global, stable and secure cyberspace. By mainstreaming cyber diplomacy objectives throughout the overall foreign policy, defence and development agenda, the Presidency aims to further the EU's collective capacity to prevent, defend against, and respond to malicious activities. As part of this commitment, the Presidency intends to promote closer cooperation with NATO. It will also aim to facilitate the development of an adequate framework for engaging with the private sector in cyber-related matters.

The Belgian Presidency will also promote EU digital and cyber diplomacy through dialogues, partnerships and capacity-building with non-EU countries, with a particular emphasis on Africa. It will strive for a strong European commitment to effective multilateral cooperation in relevant international organisations and forum such as the UN, the ITU and the UN's summit of the future.

Lastly, the Belgian Presidency will support strengthening the EU's digital and cyber cooperation with the United States, the United Kingdom, and other close partners. This will be facilitated through mechanisms such as trade and technology councils and cyber dialogues.

ENERGY

The effects of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on the availability of gas supplies to the EU and its impact on energy prices, coupled with the increasing occurrence of extreme weather events across Europe, have highlighted the urgent need to ensure our security of supply, the affordability and competitiveness of our economy and an accelerated energy transition to meet our sustainability and climate goals. The EU must fully leverage its energy efficiency potential across the entire economy and rapidly advance the development of renewable and low-carbon energy sources and carriers. Increased investments into an integrated and future-proof energy network is essential to this end.

The Belgian Presidency will prioritise finalising legislative initiatives, facilitate the exchange of best practices, and lay the groundwork for the future EU energy agenda.

ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE

This involves a particular emphasis on cross-border and cross-vector energy flows relying on a predictable and robust market design, as this has proven crucial in securing supplies. Transitioning to a sustainable energy system in a cost-efficient manner necessitates both existing and new infrastructures, including grid infrastructure, facilities for hydrogen import and CO₂ transport. The Belgian Presidency will assess the current European framework's effectiveness in planning, building, and financing infrastructures.

DELIVERING OFFSHORE ENERGY TO ALL

Specific attention will be given to establishing and achieving offshore renewable energy targets and developing an integrated offshore grid. In this context, the Presidency will build on existing agreements and the conclusions of the North Sea Summit II and the recently-published EU strategy on offshore renewable energy. The European sea basins will become a building block of the future European energy network. The goal is to adopt Council conclusions on integrated cross-border onshore and offshore infrastructure benefitting the whole of Europe, including landlocked countries, sharing best practices among Member States, and identifying action points for future Commission initiatives.

FACILITATING INTERNATIONAL HYDROGEN TRADE

The Belgian Presidency is committed to push the growing international trade in hydrogen, including its derivatives, and aspires to create a liquid market. To achieve this goal, the Presidency will focus on promoting a credible certification system and market platforms, ensuring transparency to trigger the needed investments and make sure the financing tools are fit for purpose. Collaboration with the European Commission on the hydrogen bank

and other EU initiatives, including a potential EU hydrogen import strategy, will be an integral part of these efforts.

BOOSTING THE RENOVATION WAVE

Moreover, recognising the substantial potential for emission reductions in the building sector, the Belgian Presidency will stimulate discussions on how to best address the remaining barriers in order to attain an effective roll-out of the renovation wave. It will organise a Renovation Week which will focus on sharing information on recent policies, exchanging best practices, and studying new technologies and innovative policy instruments. Particular attention will be given to the transition and capacity of the construction sector, circularity of building materials, financing instruments, and social and sociotechnical aspects of energy renovation.

DRIVING EUROPE'S RADIOISOTOPE EXCELLENCE

The Belgian Presidency is committed to securing the supply of medical radioisotopes and reinforcing European leadership in the production, development, and sustainable reimbursement of these materials. It will take forward the implementation of the European SAMIRA action plan and the European Commission's initiative to establish a 'European radioisotope valley initiative'. To further this objective, a stakeholder meeting will be convened to address the security of radioisotope supply.

AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES

The Belgian Presidency will promote a holistic approach to agriculture and fisheries. Ensuring food security and autonomy will be core objectives of the Presidency, as well as further enhancing the sustainability of food production and consumption. The Belgian Presidency will also pay particular attention to animal health and animal welfare, and to the need for resilient forests.

A SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT AGRI-FOOD AND FISHERIES SECTOR

The Belgian Presidency is committed to ensuring food security and autonomy within a harmonised European food policy. In that context, it will promote the reduction of the EU's dependency on third countries for certain strategic resources and ensure an efficient and effective follow-up to the implementation of the common agricultural and fisheries policies (CAP and CFP), paying attention to both the supply and demand sides. Regarding the CAP, the Belgian Presidency will initiate reflections on a future, post-2027 framework. Together with the follow-up to the annual TAC and quota negotiations concerning the fisheries sector, those policies provide an important framework for ensuring legal certainty for both farmers and fishers. The Presidency will ensure that the diversity and interests of the EU's fishery fleets are well taken into account, including in external fisheries agreements.

A vast range of activities and actors are directly or indirectly involved in the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food. With a view to a future-proof and resilient agriculture, fisheries and food sector, the Belgian Presidency will strive to tackle those challenges in a holistic manner by means of a cross-chain, cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary approach. To that end, the Presidency will ensure close monitoring of the agricultural markets and address trade-related agricultural issues, while paying particular attention to policy coherence, mainly in terms of trade, environment and climate. Among other things, circular economy and innovation, such as the introduction of new IT technologies, will play an important part in that respect. The Presidency will continue the ongoing discussions on new genomic techniques (NGT), the sustainable use of plant protection products (SUR) and the production and marketing of plant reproductive material (PRM).

Further improving the sustainability of the food system, while ensuring a high level of food safety, animal and plant health, and energy efficiency, is necessary from an economic, social and environmental perspective. The costs, benefits and risks associated with

the transition to a sustainable food system must be shared equally throughout the food chain. This should ensure that farmers and fishers are partners in the sustainability transition, are fairly compensated for their efforts and are accorded proper social recognition. The Belgian Presidency will therefore continue to strive for a level-playing field, to harmonise regulations, and to promote safety and transparency throughout the food chain, following the 'from farm to fork' principle. In that regard, the Presidency will finalise the file on breakfast directives.

Furthermore, given Belgium's proactive stance in the field of food and protein strategy, the Belgian Presidency will encourage sustainable food production by inviting Member States to share best practices from their own agribusiness complex.

In order to get consumers more involved and encourage them to make balanced food choices, the Belgian Presidency will work on the promotion of healthy food choices in schools and share experiences with diverse perspectives on a voluntary front-of-pack labelling system already introduced in some EU countries.

RESILIENT FORESTS

The Belgian Presidency will contribute to addressing the need for resilient forests and for effective and inclusive coordination of forest issues. It will initiate the work on the forest monitoring framework and continue the discussions on the instruments implementing the EU forest strategy and on production and marketing of forest reproductive material (FRM). The Presidency will also play its role in the multilateral forums, notably on the occasion of the 19th session of the UN forum on forests.

PREVENTION IN ANIMAL HEALTH AND ANIMAL WELFARE

In the year when the World Organisation for Animal Health celebrates its centenary, the Belgian Presidency will prioritise animal health and disease prevention under the umbrella of the 'One Health' initiative. Within that framework, biosecurity and vaccination

stand out as two crucial elements in preventing animal epidemics and the ensuing mass culling of animals as a means of containment. Specifically concerning vaccination, the Presidency will concentrate on rolling out vaccines against prevailing epizootic diseases and other animal diseases that significantly impact the respective sectors. Furthermore, the Presidency will also focus on the utilisation of vaccines in cattle and pay attention to shortages in the veterinary profession.

The Belgian Presidency is committed to working on the revision of animal welfare legislation. This framework should better align with rising societal expectations, ethical considerations and the latest scientific and technological advancements, while also addressing future sustainability challenges. The Presidency will advance the forthcoming proposals on animal welfare with a view to harmonising EU practices and better enforcing legislation. The welfare of companion animals will also be of utmost importance to the Belgian Presidency.

ENVIRONMENT

The EU's green transition agenda is driven by the urgent need to address the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, coupled with the necessity to achieve a fair, resilient and circular society. With these crises having underscored the importance of decisive and holistic action, the European Green Deal has placed the green transition at the heart of all EU policy proposals. In this context, the Presidency will carry on the work on the EU's Green Deal policy initiatives, ensuring that all policies are crafted and executed in line with environmental and climate objectives, all while embracing the 'One World, One Health' approach and taking forward this endeavour in the next Strategic Agenda.

PURSUIING THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL'S OBJECTIVES

The Belgian Presidency will primarily focus on concluding essential legislative files to enable the swift implementation of the objectives of the European Green Deal.

To this end, at least two files will complement the work of the Fit for 55 package, which will support the EU's efforts towards achieving climate neutrality by 2050. As such, the Presidency will finalise interinstitutional negotiations on the proposal for a Union certification framework for carbon removals and the review of CO₂ emission standards for heavy-duty vehicles.

In addition, the Belgian Presidency will advance interinstitutional negotiations on critical files, including the proposed Regulation on Packaging and Packaging Waste, the review of the Air Quality Directive and of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.

The Presidency will also continue to work on the proposed Green Claims Directive, the revision of the Waste Framework Directive concerning food waste reduction targets and textile rules, and the ongoing revision of the Regulation on End-of-Life Vehicles.

Moreover, the Presidency will make every effort to advance negotiations on the Soil Monitoring Law, pursue the sound implementation of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability, and foster discussions on some of its aspects, such as microplastics and PFAS.

DRIVING THE DEBATE ON EUROPE'S GREEN FUTURE

The Belgian Presidency will stimulate the debate on the European green agenda beyond 2024. In doing so, it will explore suitable approaches to address the climate change, circular economy, biodiversity and pollution nexus beyond 2024.

In this regard, the Presidency will facilitate the debate on the forthcoming European Commission communications on an EU climate target for 2040 and on climate-related risks, as well as on the Industrial Carbon Management Strategy and the mid-term review of the 8th Environmental Action Programme, to sti-

mulate reflection on the future of EU climate and environmental policies.

The Presidency will also strive for sustained progress in enhancing the Union's adaptive and preparedness capacities, in strengthening resilience, and in reducing vulnerability to climate change. In this regard, the Presidency will facilitate discussions about the critical role of nature, ecosystems, and nature-based solutions, including those in urban areas, in delivering benefits for climate adaptation.

Furthermore, the Belgian Presidency will foster dialogue about the future of the transition to a circular economy, including ways to enhance sustainable resource management and further reduce the material footprint of European consumption and production. This effort will need to be multifaceted, but a key aspect of it will be to establish a process to assess, consolidate and further develop its governance and monitoring systems.

ENSURING THE JUST TRANSITION

The Belgian Presidency will make every effort to build towards a just transition to a climate-neutral and resilient society, shaped by and for the benefit of citizens. For this transition to leave no one behind, it will need to ensure a high level of well-being for all, especially taking into account the needs of citizens and workers most impacted.

It will also be necessary to give special consideration to the role of SMEs in the just transition, given their importance in greening the economy.

These considerations will be at the heart of the Presidency's approach to discussions and reflections on the further implementation of the European Green Deal and the future of EU environmental and climate policy. In parallel, the Presidency will work to identify additional European policy initiatives, investments, coordination mechanisms, appropriate support measures, and tools necessary to ensure that the green transition is inherently a just transition.

PROMOTING EUROPE'S GREEN AMBITIONS ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

In international negotiations, the Belgian Presidency will strive for a high degree of ambition in addressing global and cross-cutting challenges, including at the 6th United Nations Environment Assembly. It will also work to make progress towards an ambitious, legally binding international instrument to tackle plastic pollution at the 4th Meeting of the International Negotiating Committee.

Concerning international climate policy, the Presidency will follow up on the commitments made at the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) of the UNFCCC, and particularly the outcome of the global stocktake driving the ambition cycle of the Paris Agreement. On that basis, it will start preparing for COP29 as well as for the next EU Nationally Determined Contribution, following all legal requirements as prescribed by the European Climate Law. As regards biodiversity, the Presidency will maintain the EU's high ambition in the follow-up to both the agreement on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdictions, as well as the commitments made at COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and coordinate preparations for CBD COP16. The Belgian Presidency will ensure constructive inputs within the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought in the lead up to COP16 of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The Presidency will also ensure an ambitious and constructive role in the COP Convention on Migratory Species. Finally, it will support the European Commission with the implementation of the recommendations of the Aarhus Compliance Committee.

EDUCATION, YOUTH, CULTURE AND SPORT

The Belgian Presidency plans to strengthen the European Education Area, enhance the quality of education, and promote lifelong learning. It aims to ease mobility for learners and educators across Europe and initiate discussions on the forthcoming higher education package. Digital education and teacher shortages will be addressed, while youth participation, empowerment and inclusion will be emphasised. It will review and refine youth strategies, including a Council resolution on youth work policy.

In the cultural realm, the Presidency will stimulate the digital transformation of cultural sectors and reinforce media freedom and pluralism. The role of influencers will be highlighted. In sport, the Belgian Presidency will adopt the EU Work Plan 2024-2027 and discuss the role of non-organised sport and free physical activity within a European sport model.

EDUCATION

The Belgian Presidency will work towards the achievement and further development of the European Education Area (EEA), strengthening the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. The Presidency will promote evidence-informed policy-making, practice and partnerships in the EEA. It will prepare Council conclusions on that topic with a view to enhancing the quality and equity of education and training systems.

In today's constantly changing world, which requires adaptability, creating a learning society has become more important than ever. It is crucial that citizens feel empowered and motivated to participate in lifelong learning to support their personal and professional development. Therefore, the Presidency will encourage lifelong learning and work towards improving its quality, visibility and accessibility for all.

Further efforts must be made to remove existing obstacles and barriers to all types of learning and teaching mobility, including issues relating to access, guidance, student services and recognition. In that regard, the Belgian Presidency will work on the adoption of a Council recommendation aimed at updating the current EU learning mobility framework. This will promote learning mobility as an opportunity for learners and education staff in all sectors and at all levels of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Incentives and impacts associated with student mobility in higher education in Europe will be accorded the Presidency's special attention.

Moreover, to reinforce cooperation between education institutions and foster mobility, the Belgian Presidency will initiate discussions on the forthcoming higher education package. These discussions will focus on the pathway towards joint European degrees, a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, and a European framework for attractive and sustainable careers in higher education.

To ensure qualitative, inclusive and accessible digital education, the Presidency will facilitate an exchange on Member States' needs for the successful implementation of a digital education policy and initiate a reflection on the digital education action plan's (DEAP) progress

report and priorities for 2024-2027.

The work of the Belgian Presidency also ties in with the horizontal topic of teacher careers, including shortages, an EU-wide challenge that is connected to all the actions mentioned above.

YOUTH

Under the overall priority of the trio presidency, 'WE NEED YOUTH', the Belgian Presidency will focus on the tenth cycle of the EU youth dialogue, which will revolve around the third European Youth Goal on 'Inclusive Societies'. The inclusion and participation of all young people are crucial conditions for a well-functioning society. In that regard, the Presidency intends to work on the Council conclusions on inclusive societies for young people.

The Presidency is committed to following up on the proposal on the EU Youth Test/Check, which resulted from the Conference on the Future of Europe and the legacy of the European Year of Youth. That tool evaluates the impact of new proposals on European youth to ensure that young people are considered in EU policy-making.

The Presidency also plans to adopt the Council resolution on 'youth work policy in a new Europe'. As young people's experience of youth work usually starts at local level, the focus will be on democracy, the public space, leisure time and playing, well-being, social inclusion and the societal valorisation of youth work. Ghent, as European Youth Capital in 2024, will focus its activities on youth work development.

The Presidency will also conduct mid-term evaluations on the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and reflect on Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027. It also intends to evaluate and update the European and international policy agenda on children, youth and children's rights.

Complementary to those Presidency activities, among others, an 'Agora Jeunes Citoyennes' (AJC Festival) will be organised in the context of inclusive societies. Where possible, the Presidency will respond appropriately to the European Youth Week organised by the European Commission.

CULTURE & MEDIA

The Belgian Presidency is committed to implementing the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026. As such, it aims to adopt Council conclusions on stimulating the digital transformation of the culture and creative sectors (CCS). The Presidency intends to highlight the role of heritage, culture and European identity. It will also shed light on the working conditions of artists and creative professionals.

Safeguarding and improving media freedom and pluralism in the media market are essential for the public interest and for upholding democracy. To that end, the Belgian Presidency is committed to finalising any remaining work on the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).

The role of influencers and online content creators in media and society is growing rapidly. The Belgian Presidency aims to adopt Council conclusions on the support for influencers and online content creators. The Presidency will also focus on the digital transformation of the media sector and on media innovation in the context of the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan (MAAP).

SPORT

In the field of sport, the Belgian Presidency will prepare for the adoption of a new EU Work Plan for Sport 2024-2027.

The Presidency will aim to adopt Council conclusions outlining the role of non-organised sport and free physical activity within a European sport model.

Furthermore, the Presidency plans to initiate discussions regarding participation in sport and physical activity at local level, as well as on the organisation of large-scale sport events, with the aim of developing a more human-sized approach.

Finally, the Presidency will also accord particular attention to the place of women in sport.

