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Portugal and the 2021 Council Presidency: an unambitious programme?

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Abstract

Portugal will hold, for the fourth time, the Council's rotating Presidency, in a context of social and economic crisis, but also at the beginning of a renewed green and digital EU agenda. This TEPSA Brief explains the priorities of the incoming Presidency and its limitations, also comparing it to past Portuguese Presidencies.

For all the Member States, running the rotating Council Presidency of the European Union (EU) is an important moment, but its relevance is even greater when it is a small or medium-sized country in charge, as it allows that country to exercise to some extent its influence in the European agenda and gain international visibility, in a way that exceeds in general its usual ability.

Different national, European and international contexts, however, directly influence the Presidencies' priorities. Portugal, which has been an EU Member State for 35 years now, has chaired three previous Council Presidencies (1992, 2000, 2007) and, 14 years later, as part of the "GPS" trio (Germany,

Portugal and Slovenia), will hold its fourth from January to June 2021. Some of the previous Portuguese Presidencies' priorities have remained, others have evolved, and some are new.

In 1992, the Portuguese Presidency mainly concentrated on economic issues (Delors II Package); in the 2000's Presidency the Lisbon Strategy was approved, and several international summits were held for the first time (EU-Africa; EU-India; EU-China); the same summits, plus the EU-Brazil, were held again in 2007, the Lisbon Treaty was signed and 'SISoneforALL' (Portugal suggestion of expanding the Schengen borders using the old computer system) was created. In short, the previous Portuguese Presidencies started out as being primarily focused on economic issues, then progressed to a political dimension, and later to a political, institutional and external action scope.

Over the course of more than a decade, between 2007 and 2019, the exercise of the Presidency underwent some changes due to the new institutional framework, as a result of the Treaty of Lisbon, as the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy became permanent and

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took some of the responsibilities previously held by the rotating Presidency.

Taking into account the current Institutional framework in the different types of agenda-setting, in the incoming Presidency Portugal should resort mainly to agenda-structuring, especially in the areas that are encompassed by the permanent Presidencies of the Council. In turn, agenda-setting may be used within the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice. Environmental issues on the other hand can be further developed either through the agenda-setting or the agenda-structuring, depending on the degree, direction and the emphasis that is intended to be given to this matter.

Under the motto “Time to deliver: a fair, green and digital recovery”, the Portuguese Presidency's priorities in 2021 will be five:

Social Europe: guiding economic recovery, mitigating the effects of unemployment, and fighting poverty, social exclusion and inequality;

Green Europe: moving towards climate neutrality by 2050, by promoting the European Climate Pact;

Global Europe: strengthening the EU-Africa partnership, reinforcing relations with India, and giving a new impetus to transatlantic relations;

Digital Europe: committing to a decade of digital education, including implementing digital best practices in public administration, and developing the digital democracy concept;

Resilient Europe: promoting European values in the digital age, while reinforcing investment and recovering the economy, mitigating the effects of the sanitary and economic crisis.

At first sight these appear to have the typical characteristics of a Nordic country Presidency, as Portugal includes priorities in the fields of social, environmental, digital and external relations in the framework of European values. But these priorities are also in line with the “GPS” trio's 18 months programme and, more

broadly, with the EU's overarching agenda on Green Europe and Digital Europe.

A distinctive focus will be given to the European Social Model, particularly to the European Pillar of Social Rights, for which it is expected a new political impetus in the Social Summit, in May. The current economic and social crisis will worsen the internal disparities and inequalities in the EU, which accentuates the need for strengthening all available instruments for protecting jobs and social protection, for fighting poverty, and to have a better social inclusion; as well as to create new instruments, such as the proposals related to a minimum wage and unemployment reinsurance scheme. If significant advances are made to this particular, this will probably be the most distinctive mark of this Presidency.

Regarding the Green and Digital Europe's priorities these are in close connection with the Commission's agenda, namely the European Green Deal and the Sustainable Europe Investment Plan, which aim to strive for digital sovereignty, a dynamic industrial policy, to support small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups, to build more resilient infrastructure specially in the health sector, and to produce critical goods to reduce Europe's overdependency on third countries.

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The EU-Africa summit will be organised by the Portuguese Presidency in June 2021 in Brussels, at a time where probably the new Africa-EU Strategy will be launched, following the release of the “Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa” document last year. When Portugal joined the EU its close links with African, Latin America and Far East countries, was considered as an asset. Once again, Portugal will have the means and the

opportunity to further deepen and reinforce the EU-Africa relations, and to, once again, held the EU-India Summit.

As the German Presidency managed to reach the agreement regarding the next Multiannual Financial Framework and the Next Generation EU instrument – its biggest legacy – the Portuguese Presidency will start the implementation of this EUR 1.8 trillion package.

These priorities, nevertheless, do not show a refined degree of creativity to fit the country's national interests, to lead a certain agenda and to leave its signature in European politics, unlike in the two previous presidencies.

The context in which the 2021 Presidency will take place is also unique, in the midst of an evolving social and economic crisis resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, the initial implementation of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and the recovery package, and the exit of the United Kingdom from the EU, in addition to beginning relations with the new Biden administration for a possibly renewed transatlantic relationship.

Still, it will be an opportunity for the country to show, once again, its European maturity and full engagement with the European Union, its Institutions and values.

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