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OPENING SPEECH

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For the second time since accession in 1986, Portugal will take over the Presidency of the European Union, this time in the first half of the year in which the current century and the current millennium come to a close. The issues that the Portuguese Presidency will be called upon to tackle may be of crucial importance to further the development of the European Union.

Pending final decisions to be made during the forthcoming European Council in Helsinki, the Portuguese presidency will be involved in accession negotiations with new candidate members in central and eastern Europe, and it will have to deal with the difficult problem of unemployment in many the Union's current members. In the external realm, the presidency will be managing relations with areas of the world of particular interest to the .European Union, especially Africa. Most of all, it will face the task of putting into effect a mix of well-established and fairly new policy instruments in order that a truly common foreign and security policy with a defence component comes into being, while addressing the institutional reform called for by both enlargement and the materialisation of CFSP.

The somewhat hesitant progress of the European Union towards active and full political integration so far calls for the federal process, which has already reached a decisively important stage with the adoption of the single currency, to be stepped up. New steps forward are needed to adapt the structure and make the decision-making process more effective, so that the European Union gains a distinctive political shape and is able to play a strategic role in the present world stage.

The fact that it is considered to be one of the smaller or medium-sized member countries of the Union confers upon Portugal a heavier responsibility in what concerns tackling the challenges that lie ahead which adds to its share as any ordinary member of the Union. A significant contribution on the part of Portugal towards tackling those pressing issues would disprove the argument according to which the impetus required for decisive steps towards political integration will inevitably have to come from within the group of larger member countries.

As far as institutional reform is concerned, one of the most pressing and important issues is to extend the use of qualified majority voting. In case the current and in my view unfortunate scheme of vote weighting is in fact revised, this should be done in such a way that the added votes of the so-called larger states will still be short of a majority. In other words, only with some of the smaller states included should a majority be considered a valid voting majority.

In the domestic sphere, the coming presidency should provide an occasion for a clearer understanding on the part of the Portuguese public of the real significance of being a part of the European project, and the full range of implications of EU membership for Portugal. Portugal's accession to the Treaty of Rome was not preceded either by a referendum or a wide-range, in-depth discussion in Parliament. The reasons why Portugal should join the Union were essentially, at the time, the need to consolidate the then newly established democratic regime and to bring about economic and social development. These were perfectly good reasons, which the Portuguese in general easily understood and accepted. It was far less clear at the time, and to some extent remains obscure even to the more alert or informed opinion, that as it solemnly signed the Treaty of Rome, notwithstanding the domestic motivations referred above, Portugal indeed became a part of a project of political integration, and joined a federal system composed of European countries and governed by a supranational structure, built on a step-by-step basis through consensus among its members. This supranational structure, which has made considerable progress so far notably with the single currency, is in the process of generating higher levels of political integration as CFSP actually materialises. Portugal, who voluntarily joined the EU process which was already set in motion, has committed itself to a duty of solidarity with the Union the full implications of which are all but clearly understood by most Portuguese.

The presidency should therefore be taken as a prime occasion to explain to the Portuguese public the whole range of consequences of the fact that Portugal is fully engaged in building, through consensus, the European federation – whatever its precise shape will be in the future.