

FEDERAL CHANCELLOR DR MERKEL: I, too, would like to start by saying thank you. Thank you to Charles Michel who I really have been working with almost every day and to Ursula von der Leyen. I believe we were a good team to tackle the big tasks we had on the agenda during the German Presidency of the Council. I would also like to thank the staff, the Secretary-General, the Secretary-General of the Commission and many others. And, although it is perhaps a little unconventional, I would also like to thank our German Permanent Representative here who has led many COREPER meetings. After all, the Permanent Representatives, along with the President of the Council and the members of the Commission, are almost the only ones actually in Brussels at the current time. A lot of other business had to be conducted via video conferences.

A lot had built up for the last European Council and I am very relieved, indeed it is a load off my mind, that we really did manage to pull together to transfer the budget and the Recovery Fund along with the conditionality mechanism to the Parliament. It was a huge amount of work. But we are all seeing how the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is reining us in and how necessary it was to provide security for EU finances and also send a signal of cooperation. It's clear that this was not particularly straightforward but that all goes back a long way, starting from ideas from the Commission, a Franco-German proposal, a draft, lengthy discussions in July and one of the longest European Councils in the history of the institution, which, incidentally, was invented or founded 46 years ago yesterday by the great European Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, as Charles Michel pointed out once again yesterday. We will now have to work on properly implementing the Own Resources decisions in national parliaments to ensure the finances can be operationalised very quickly; that is now the key task. We are certainly going to need money - to invest in the future.

So it was fitting that our second major topic was the question of our commitments on the climate. The Green Deal is a key project. We do not want just any old economic stimulus programme but one that paves our way to the future. The Commission is paying keen attention here, and will also be doing so when we shortly present our national programmes. The fact that we were able to commit to the joint European reduction target of 55% by 2030 so to speak on the eve of the UN Summit is something I consider to be a very, very important outcome. It was worth missing a night's sleep over. I do not want to imagine what would have happened if we had not managed to achieve such a result.

Part of the German Presidency is that we would have hoped to make relations with Turkey more constructive. Unfortunately, there are a number of situations in the southern Mediterranean, in the south-eastern Mediterranean, where we unfortunately have to say that we need to undertake further listings due to what we consider illegal drilling. Nevertheless, we keep reaching out our hand to Turkey and say: we want to work on a constructive agenda. From the point of view of the German Presidency of the Council, that was admittedly somewhat disappointing; we had planned to achieve more here. I want to say that clearly here.

So we have left a bit of work for our Portuguese successors to do and I of course wish António Costa all the very best. I can tell you that this Presidency of the Council is one we enjoyed although much of what we had planned of course couldn't actually happen. We would have been delighted to welcome the Heads of State and Government and the Chinese President to an EU-China summit in Germany and

plenty of other things were also planned. But that isn't to say that we had nothing to do; we had a lot of work with corona.

So, as I draw to a close, I would like to thank Ursula von der Leyen who has so to speak put back on track a very disparate group of Heads of State and Government who were heading in various directions in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic so that the stamp of the European Union, coordinated action, is now very much more visible. One example is our coordination on vaccines - but not just that. After these six months, I am convinced that we should work on a European health union as a hallmark on other important topics.

That is what I wanted to say.