

Speech by Vice-President Ansip at the European Parliament plenary session for the debate on the Future of Europe with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas

President Tajani,

Prime Minister Jüri Ratas,

Members of the European Parliament,

Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will today speak on behalf of the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker. I hope that you understand that if I did not speak on behalf of Jean-Claude Juncker, I would be more moderate in praising Estonia's success, but I do speak on behalf of President Juncker.

Speaking on behalf of President Juncker, let me start by thanking the Prime Minister for taking part in this debate and for his vision on the future of our Union.

As you know, this is a special year for Estonia. In February, we marked 100 years since independence.

Today, Estonia is a modern country flourishing at the heart of Europe.

It may be one of the smaller Member States, but it is an example for others to follow.

Estonia always fights to take its rightful place at the heart of our European Union – whether on Schengen, the euro or on defence.

It always seeks compromise and works for unity. We saw this repeatedly during the first ever Estonian EU Presidency last year.

All of this shows that Estonia will continue to be a leader in the European Union in the future.

Nowhere is this more important than when it comes to making our people safe.

Defence and security are not abstract terms for Estonians. They are a daily and visible pre-occupation.

This is why we have invested so much into the EU's partnership with NATO, which remains the cornerstone of our defence. Estonia knows first-hand the true value of this partnership. As I speak, Estonian troops are in Afghanistan, Mali, Kosovo, Lebanon and other countries – while the presence of NATO forces in Estonia continues to give us peace of mind.

Estonia is also leading the way through its participation in Permanent Structured Cooperation. Its planned project with Finland, Latvia and others to develop unmanned land systems is a perfect example of how we can achieve more by working together and how we can bring digital solutions to the battlefield to save lives.

And we need to back this up with the resources to match.

As part of our proposals for a new long-term European budget, we have designated EUR 13 billion for the European Defence Fund. I know we can rely on Estonia's full support for these proposals.

All of our proposals for the new Multiannual Financial Framework focus on areas where we can achieve more together to build a stronger Europe.

We have seen the potential of targeted investment.

Rail Baltica is a good example. This project connects Europeans and creates new opportunities for people and businesses from Helsinki to Tallinn, through Riga and Vilnius, and eventually to Warsaw.

This is the largest infrastructure project in the Baltics: EUR 5 billion invested into the region. These projects cannot happen overnight or within one financial period.

In that spirit, we have proposed to increase the funding for the Connecting Europe facility by 24% to focus on transport, digital and energy infrastructure. This will allow major projects to become a reality – such as the synchronisation of the Baltic countries' electricity systems, or the Baltic Connector gas pipeline between Finland and Estonia.

The same applies to digital, which is in the DNA of Estonia. It now needs to become part of Europe's too: in digital infrastructure, e-government and digital skills. This is what the EU leaders endorsed at the Tallinn Digital Summit.

This is why we are fully focused on building a true Digital Single Market.

I rely on the support of this House, as well as on the Council, to agree on the remaining proposals as quickly as possible.

We need them urgently to build Europe's digital future.

The European Commission has proposed a new Digital Europe Programme worth EUR 9 billion to support Europe's digital transformation. This will be especially important when it comes to implementing the Tallinn Declaration on e-government.

All of this shows the importance of agreeing on the new long-term budget as quickly as possible. As President Juncker said in this very room only a few weeks ago, there would be no better message, no greater symbol to show Europeans that their Union will invest in the future and take its destiny into its own hands.

Honourable Members, Prime Minister,

Only a strong and united Europe can protect our citizens, make the most of the new digital world and create new opportunities for its people and businesses alike.

But to do so, we will have to work together and work for compromise. We will probably have to do less, be more focused on the things that matter and do things more efficiently.

As ever, Estonia is showing the way. The motto for its Presidency – Unity through Balance – shows us the way forward for our European Union. It is time to take it.

Thank you.