

COMMENTARIES

State of the Union Speech
2021



Michal Hrubý: All eyes on science. The EU Green Deal ambitions must become a global obligation to tackle the man-made climate change

The message of science on climate change is straightforward – it is warming, and mankind can be blamed for it. The State of the Union address confirmed the high ambitions of the EU to tackle climate change. However, as Ursula von der Leyen highlighted, such battle will not be won without global and fair cooperation. While the climate goals of global economies such as US, Japan or China are set, the clear plans to achieve these are said to be missing. And the current commitments for 2030 are not ambitious enough to keep global warming to 1.5°C.

The climate goal must be, however, aligned with the socially fair and socially sustainable transition. Such simultaneous and interconnected paths might be considered the most important in the eyes of public. Therefore, the EU proposed a new Social Climate Fund to tackle the energy poverty, and, moreover, the EU will propose an additional 4 billion euro for climate finance until 2027 and double its external funding for biodiversity. The least developed and most vulnerable countries were assured not to be left behind. The global climate aim is clearly set now and specific plans are expected at the COP26 conference.

Tom Baker: State of the EU 2021 Trade: Digital at the centre

There was little mentioned on the trade front in this year's address which is perhaps an interesting observation in and of itself and reflects the Commission's desire to highlight more pertinent issues. At home, the President highlighted the Single Market as key to Europe's pandemic recovery. A movement toward a "digital single market" would be a driver of good jobs and competitiveness.

On the international front, von der Leyen pointed out the need for greater investment in Africa to create a green hydrogen market. Such a measure would help address the carbon intensive nature of the African continent, with whom the EU trades substantially. Moreover, the President reiterated the necessity and positive aspects of global trade. This point was made as a caveat before emphasising how international trade can never be done at the expense of human rights, citing forced labour as a problem in which the EU will seek to address via its trade craft. To address this issue, the President said the Commission will propose a ban on the sale of goods that are the product of forced labour. While not explicitly mentioning those who use forced labour, it is possible the President was implying China and their treatment of the Uyghurs. This issue has been the central holdup of the EU-China Investment Deal.



Christian Kvorning Lassen: The EU has delivered on an unprecedented scale in the fight against COVID-19, yet there is still a long way to go

One year ago, during Ursula von der Leyen's last State of the European Union, there were no vaccines, nor certainty whether eventual vaccines would be efficient. Today, 70 percent of all adults in the EU are vaccinated, making EU the undisputed world leader in vaccinations. The magnitude of this achievement cannot be overstated. However, with less than 1% of global vaccinations happening in low-income countries, the pandemic is still raging on at full strength. While Europe is committing some resources to help vaccinate Africa, the efficiency hereof is dubious; there are large discrepancies in vaccinations within the EU itself, with some countries, such as the Czech Republic, lagging behind others due to distrust, disinformation and lack of infrastructure to support vaccination campaigns. The pandemic highlights both the need for EU leadership towards global challenges, but also its leadership in promoting a more equitable and fair world for developing countries.

Danielle Piatkiewicz: Security and Global Engagement

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen gave an impassioned plea to Member States during her annual State of the European Union, for Europe to be a stronger global player especially in times of great power competition and hyper-competitiveness.

She stressed that we now live in "an era of regional rivalries and major powers refocusing their attention towards each other" and reflected on the recent events in Afghanistan and provided an outline on how the EU should support and be more active in preventing future crisis's occurring again.

Calling for closer EU and NATO cooperation, the need to invest more in the joint-partnership was a key theme and will be bolstered by the new EU-NATO Joint Declaration at end of the year. However, Von der Leyen stated that the EU needs to do more in ensuring its own security and defense posture. Outlining three areas including providing stability in EU's neighborhood and across different regions, understanding the nature of the emerging threats including hybrid, cyber-attacks to the growing arms race in space and thirdly, coming to terms that the EU needs to capitalize on its position as a "unique security provider" with a strong military and civilian presence and step into missions where NATO or the UN will not be present.

Von der Leyen touched upon the ongoing debate around building a European Defense Union calling for political will in building the foundation for collective decision-making, improving interoperability, and building up our cyber defenses which will be developed in the Strategic Compass next year. She called for forging strong and reliable partnerships with longtime partners the United States, but also strengthen relations with fellow democratic allies in the Indo-Pacific to counter



competitors like China. Bolstering relations with neighbors in the Western Balkans, to stepping up engagement in the Eastern Partnership, Mediterranean and continuing to work on the different aspects of our relationship with Turkey – the EU is poised to take on a stronger regional approach to ensuring its future stability, security, and prosperity.

As stated by von der Leyen, “it is time for Europe to step up to the next level”.

Vít Havelka: Digital autonomy at the forefront

The 2021 State of the European Union speech was marked by reviewing the last year in which the EU and the rest of the world endured yet another stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as future steps to be taken so that the Union becomes even more resilient and cohesive. On top of that, the President of the Commission introduced new initiatives in the realm of digitalization and protection of the European values.

First, the Single Market legislation should focus more on the digital transformation, allowing the Union to progress in implementing new technologies and securing basic rights which might be threatened by the forthcoming technological advancement. Part of this scheme is the promotion of the European technological autonomy – securing product chains and speeding up tech development in the EU. In addition to DMA and DSA, the Commission will propose a new strategy that should secure semiconductor development and production on the Unions soil.

The same also applies to cyber security, which becomes even more important in a highly digitalized world. Sharing intelligence information and developing a common framework for cyber security standards should be a hallmark of the Union’s digital effort.

Jana Juzová: Union of values. Going back to the roots

Von der Leyen delivered a powerful speech on European values and reminded of their roots in the ideas of the Union’s founding fathers and fighters against the communist regimes. She emphasised the core values the EU is built upon – democracy, freedom, rule of law and equality of all citizens in the view of law. Interestingly, von der Leyen mentioned that these values come not only from cultural and religious but also humanist heritage of Europe. She stressed that these values, being part of the Treaties, are to be held and

guaranteed by all EU member states, safeguarded by the European Court of Justice. Von der Leyen promised specific recommendations to member states provided in the Rule of Law reports but also showed resolution in calling for decisive actions against these violations. In particular, her focus was both on the importance and fragility of the freedom of speech and independent media, being under attack in some European states. Her Commission plans to deliver a Media Freedom Act in the next year, safeguarding the independence of media



in all member states. With focus on the negative impact of the pandemic on women rights, she promised a proposal on a law to combat violence against women by the end of the year.

Katharine Klačanský: Beyond the Green Deal - assurances of enlarging green trade partnerships

President Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union made it clear that Europe is more than a global actor, but a world leader as trade partner, beginning with clean energy infrastructure and accessibility. President von der Leyen is moving beyond the Green Deal with the new Social Climate Fund to make clean energy accessible for all its citizenships and stated to "clean the energy we use... and have smarter cars and cleaner airplanes." This will stem from a number of investments into quality infrastructure and a new energy market for green hydrogen connectivity with the announcement of the "Global Gateway Initiative on Connectivity. For one, creating strategic "links and not dependencies" will be the key to meeting climate target ambitions whilst investing into new sources of energy such as green hydrogen.

as a "trusted brand around the world" – in recognition that in the era of ever-increasing connectivity, as exemplified also by China's Belt and Road Initiative, the EU must be at the forefront of this global frontier. A priority, she added, would be for the EU to discuss connectivity projects with Africa during a

regional summit in February. The future for Europe is one of new partnerships revolving around greening, and open possibilities.