

WHAT VON DER LEYEN'S STATE OF THE UNION TELLS US ABOUT POWER IN THE EU

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Ursula von der Leyen's 2026 [State of the European Union](#) (SOTEU) speech generated considerable attention. Much has already been written about it, but with a little distance, one feature stands out: the proposals that attracted the most attention were those where the Commission's institutional role is least clear.

This points to a broader question about the nature of the SOTEU itself. Though modelled on the American practice, it is quite different. The European Union (EU) has no President. The EU is a union of states and citizens, built around various sources of legitimacy and centres of political authority. The Commission President is a major player in this system, but only one among many.

Where the Commission has powers of (legislative) initiative, its President can confidently announce forthcoming proposals. Von der Leyen did so abundantly, ranging from artificial intelligence (AI) to banking and housing. But she cannot promise the outcome: the Council and the European Parliament (EP) have the final say on legislation. This helps explain why parts of the speech read more like a catalogue of initiatives than a single political programme.

However, the more interesting parts of the speech ventured beyond this traditional Commission role: on Canada, European security, and the future political architecture of Europe. It is here that the speech tells us something important about both the ambitions and limits of today's Commission Presidency.

Let us look first at the areas where the Commission has an undisputed role and can, indeed must, make proposals.

Trade: Here the Commission is in the driving seat towards an ambitious agenda. This year alone, it has achieved breakthroughs

with India, Mercosur, Mexico, Australia, and Indonesia, as the President pointed out. Yet, on trade, too, the Council and the EP must agree, and often Member States must ratify the outcome. Significantly, some EU members have still not ratified the agreement with Canada, signed in 2017. While there is provisional application for substantial parts, the full entry into force awaits completion of national ratification.

The President made a strong appeal to address the massive deficit the EU has with China (one billion euros a day!), which has "reached a tipping point." This is an indication that the EU may become more forceful in using autonomous measures to fight unfair competition.

Financing: This is a major constraint on the ambitions set out in the speech. The negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework are entering a decisive phase. President von der Leyen referred to new own resources but avoided the still more divisive question of further common borrowing, understandably, given the divisions among Member States. Yet the underlying problem remains: a budget of around 1% of EU gross national income cannot by itself finance all the new demands of the Union. This leaves three broad avenues: the level of the EU budget, possible new common borrowing, and much greater mobilisation of private European capital. Hence the importance of finally completing the Capital Markets Union.

Gold-plating: This is the procedure whereby Member States transpose EU directives into national law but with additional national requirements. It is a practice that defeats the very purpose of EU legislation. President von der Leyen rightly took the Member States to task on this issue.

One more general remark concerning the respect for the letter and spirit of EU

legislation. Under von der Leyen's Presidency, the number of infringement procedures has dramatically dropped. There are signs that the Commission is reviewing things; it would have been good to say so publicly. The Commission has a key role in ensuring that the Member States do not undermine the Single Market.

AI: Here the gap with the Americans and Chinese is such that catching up seems impossible. In this context, the President made an interesting point: "But while Europe may not win the race to build frontier models, it could still win economically by becoming exceptionally good at deploying AI and using the wealth of high-quality data across Europe for that purpose."

Large-scale AI deployment requires data centres, electricity, and grids. The ambition to accelerate AI adoption sits alongside another European challenge: producing vastly more affordable low-carbon electricity. The two agendas go together. The President's call for doubling the share of electricity by 2040 is a response to the growing demand but could have been more forceful on the delicate question of sustainability.

Let us now turn to the parts of the speech that have led to a flurry of comments. These are areas where the Commission - of course - has a voice in the debate, but its voice carries less institutional weight. Here, big public announcements must be carefully calibrated if they are to bring results.

Associate membership for Canada: The President was very much in her role when she said that the EU should move from the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada to an Alliance for the Future to create a common prosperity and economic security space. The other institutions certainly agree with this.

The surprise came when she said: "I would like

to work with you on opening the door for Canada to be the first associate member of the EU." Here, the difficulty is threefold. First, creating a new category of association with the Union is not something the Commission President can do by declaration. It requires the involvement of the Member States and other institutions, and the reactions after the speech seem to indicate that there was no prior consultation on this proposal. Second, at present, there is no such status as "associate member" of the EU. Third, inventing one for Canada inevitably raises questions about the EU's relationship with European non-members, including the candidate countries.

The President stated that "the new alliance with Canada is not directed against anybody." Interestingly, the speech did not at all refer to the American President nor the United States. My initial reaction was to see this as another example of the reluctance of European leaders to speak openly about the deterioration of the transatlantic relationship. But one may also look at this differently: sometimes silence says more than words. The conspicuous absence of the United States in the speech was the statement.

A European Security Council: The President proposed a new leaders' format focused on the security of our continent, with partners like Canada, Norway, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and others involved. How would it function, and with what mandate? There has been an ongoing debate around this concept, but no clarity on what exactly it would entail. If it is a decision-making body, fundamental questions of membership, competence and legitimacy arise. If it is a forum for strategic consultation, the question arises as to how it would differ from the European Political Community or the smaller informal groupings that already exist. It would make more sense to first establish the outlines at the EU level before inviting outside partners to participate

A new Congress of Europe: "I announce that we will launch a new Congress of Europe," von der Leyen declared. But who exactly is "we"? A Congress involving whom, convened by whom, and with what purpose? A grand political initiative of this kind can acquire momentum if the Member States, EP, and the wider European political community take ownership of it. Announced prematurely from the Commission podium, however, it risks becoming another attractive label in search of political content.

Finally, a word on the various personal stories and the invitation of special guests to the SOTEU. This approach makes it possible to address emotions and sound less technocratic. The President used it quite skilfully; each time with a message: the ICEYE initiative by young investors (we can do it), the firefighter who gave his life (solidarity and sacrifice), the Ukrainian girl wounded by shrapnel (resilience and courage); the suicide of a young girl, a victim of online bullying (a call to act and adopt new rules).

The use of these stories illustrates how the SOTEU has evolved over time. It is no longer simply an account of the Commission's legislative programme. It has become an attempt by the Commission President to speak politically for Europe.

That is both understandable and revealing. Europe needs political leadership, more than ever. But its institutional architecture has not changed: the Commission President is not the President of Europe. The most striking parts of this year's speech were also the most problematic ones: the moments when political ambition ran ahead of institutional authority.

This does not necessarily make the ideas wrong. A special relationship with Canada, a European Security Council, and a new debate about Europe's future are all worth pursuing. But bold ideas acquire force only when the key players in the EU take ownership of them. Announcing them is the easy part. Building the political coalition that can turn them into European policy is the real test.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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