

# From Fragile Continent to Vital Union

## President von der Leyen and the State of the European Union

Alexander Conway

02 October 2020



### Introduction

European Commission President von der Leyen gave her first State of the European (SOTEU) address to a socially distanced European Parliament plenary on 16 September 2020. The State of the Union address is an opportunity for the President of the Commission to lay out their vision and legislative agenda for the upcoming year and, in President von der Leyen's case, for the European Union after the COVID-19 crisis is over. The speech focused on plans to reinforce and expand the EU's health competencies through a proposed "EU Health Union", and also underscored the importance of the Union's Green Deal and 'Digital Decade' policies and the success of the EU's economic recovery programme and climate ambitions. President von der Leyen also presented a more assertive image of the EU as a global actor better able to protect and promote the interests of the Union. The speech concluded noting the pressing need for migration reform, and a general defence of the rule of law in the European Union, while not naming any Member States which may have violated it.

This brief examines the major issues Commission President von der Leyen outlined

in her inaugural State of the Union address to the European Parliament on 16 September 2020. It also analyses the options arising from her speech and their potential implications for the EU and for Ireland. The first section provides general comments and observations about the broader content and direction of the speech, including topics which were notable by their absence, such as **defence policy and agriculture**, followed by the key subject areas covered in the address. The brief ends with a short conclusion of the general themes of the speech and the key forthcoming developments giving more policy details and meetings which will determine the ultimate, shape, size and success of President von der Leyen's vision.

### General Comments & Observations

Notable about the speech, apart from its length (over 1 ¼ hours), was the emphasis on both the current fragility of Europe and the need for stability and security. The State of the Union address is not present in the Lisbon Treaty, but rather the result of inter-institutional agreements between the European Commission and European Parliament since 2010. It aims to increase

both the **public profile and legitimacy of the EU** as well as provide an account of the past year and a vision for the Union's future trajectory. President von der Leyen's use of clear, accessible language and emotive imagery of solidarity, support and protection also underlined the "presidential" aspect of the address and an effort to make the EU more comprehensible and less remote to its citizens.

Compared to von der Leyen's previous speech to the European Parliament at her inauguration as President of the Commission on 16 July 2019, the SOTEU speech is less explicitly political, with no mention of the "geopolitical commission", instead more concerned with internal issues like the **economic recovery** which, combined with **COVID-19**, was the guiding thread of the speech. A broader background to the speech is the present inter-institutional balances within the EU, in particular the challenge posed to the Commission by an increasingly intergovernmentalist approach to the Union, as demonstrated by the dominance of the European Council in agreeing the Union's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Next Generation EU Recovery Fund in July 2020.

Part of this challenge is the call by President von der Leyen for the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe to discuss the formal transfer of competency of **health policy** from the Member States to the Union as well as her call for **qualified majority voting** in the EU Council on human rights violations and sanctions. Striking a balance between divergent Member State positions on issues like Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean can also be seen as the Commission carving out a role as an "honest broker" between France,

Germany, Greece, Cyprus and Turkey and endeavouring to expand its influence.

The context of the speech is also interesting, coming during the German Council Presidency and with a view to the upcoming French presidency in January-June 2022; Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister for Foreign Affairs, speaking with his German counterpart Heiko Maas recently, explicitly linked together France and Germany's respective presidencies as part of a greater overall project.<sup>1</sup> This resurgent Franco-German engine in driving forward EU developments exposes a tension between the Member States and the Commission in setting the EU's broader agenda.

President von der Leyen's explicit call for the European Parliament to reverse the cuts to the Commission's MFF and Recovery Fund proposals fits into the broader institutional balance between the Commission, Council and Parliament as part of the ongoing trilogue negotiations which centred around agreeing on the new MFF. However, given the pressing time constraints of needing to ratify the Recovery Fund instrument in accordance with all 27 Member States' respective constitutional requirements<sup>2</sup> and the potential political costs of a failure to agree on the MFF, reopening MFF discussions seems unlikely. This process can begin if the Council of the European Union agrees to adopt the Own Resources Decision at the **22 September General Affairs Council meeting**.<sup>3</sup> The lack of movement in the 18 September 2020 trilogue meeting between the Council, Commission and Parliament indicates the unwillingness of Member States to increase the budget and the determination of Parliamentary representatives to redress the cuts made in July's European Council agreement.<sup>4</sup> This was followed by another unsuccessful meeting on 21 September 2020

1 <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/our-ministers/jean-yves-le-drian/speeches/article/seminar-of-the-french-ambassadors-posted-to-the-european-space-speech-by-mr>

2 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf> p.63

3 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2020/09/22/>

4 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/no-progress-on-eus-long-term-budget-negotiations/>

between Chancellor Merkel representing the Council and President Sassoli of the European Parliament, hosted by Commission President von der Leyen.<sup>5</sup> Since this meeting, issues around tying EU fund provision to respect for the rule of law has emerged as a key sticking point in negotiations between Member States and the Parliament, which the German Council Presidency has tried to overcome with a forthcoming proposal making access to EU funds conditional on adherence to the rule of law.<sup>6</sup>

The theme “**Global Europe**” was woven throughout the speech, with a particular emphasis on the EU’s capacity to **set norms and standards**, and its importance for ensuring **European sovereignty**, building on the success of the GDPR data protection rules. It is also visible in the strong focus on developing European capacities for **self-sufficiency in energy** production and key technologies like microprocessors and supercomputing.

**Foreign policy** was a significant element of the speech, with President von der Leyen calling for the introduction of qualified majority voting in the Council of the European Union for sanctions and human rights abuses, to prevent the Union being impeded by Member State vetoes. This feeds into a more **geostrategic foreign policy** perspective and a potentially muscular response by the EU in demanding reciprocity from international partners, such as China, Russia and Turkey. This was evidenced by the call for an EU Magnitsky Act (to introduce targeted severe sanctions) to leverage the Union’s considerable economic heft. **The Navalny affair** has transformed the issue of **Nord Stream 2**, a gas pipeline between Russia and Germany, into a

potentially broader EU issue and could expose fissures between those Member States in the East which oppose the project and place Germany’s EU Presidency under considerable strain.

President von der Leyen also called for the EU to play a central role in reforming key multilateral fora such as the WHO and WTO and to lead coalitions of willing and ambitious partnerships to set international norms and standards, following a minilateral<sup>7</sup> strategy of **working with like-minded partners**, and ignoring those who would block developments.

Another notable aspect of the speech was the number of **topics which were not mentioned**:

- Despite references to the ongoing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean between Greece, Cyprus and Turkey, as well as the broader contexts of NATO, Brexit and Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine, there was **no mention of EU defence** coordination or cooperation such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) or Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). This is perhaps unsurprising considering defence is ranked 14th out of 20 for European policy priorities and does not feature as a key German Presidential priority,<sup>8</sup> despite Dr. von der Leyen previously being the German defence minister.<sup>9</sup>
- There were no direct references to the potential expansion of the **EU’s own resources**, to include a tax on non-recyclable plastics, a levy on financial transactions and the revenues from a carbon border adjustment mechanism, or the increased capacity which they would give the Union in financing its policies. This is perhaps due

5 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/read\\_20\\_1721](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/read_20_1721)

6 <https://euobserver.com/political/149565>

7 <https://minilateralism.com/>

8 [https://public.tableau.com/shared/5CDK8QOW?:display\\_count=y&:origin=viz\\_share\\_link&:embed=y](https://public.tableau.com/shared/5CDK8QOW?:display_count=y&:origin=viz_share_link&:embed=y)

9 [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_beware\\_of\\_mission\\_accomplished\\_syndrome\\_germany\\_and\\_european\\_def](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_beware_of_mission_accomplished_syndrome_germany_and_european_def)

to the political sensitivity of an increasingly powerful EU from the perspective of Member States.

- There was only a single mention of **agriculture**, although the Commission's Farm to Fork strategy still forms a key part of achieving the goals of the European Green Deal and achieving CAP reform remains a central plank of the German Presidential priorities.<sup>10</sup> While farming practices are crucial in achieving EU food security and carbon sequestration, President von der Leyen also omitted the farming sector in her previous address to the European Parliament in July 2019.<sup>11</sup> Considering the considerable economic production and environmental impact of agriculture in Ireland, CAP reform is a critical issue for the Irish government and people.

- Even though there was a strong focus on Europe's Digital Decade, the Commission's signature **Digital Services Act**, which aims to regulate Big Tech firm, clarify their publishing obligations and prevent monopoly behaviour was not mentioned. The now moribund **Privacy Shield** arrangement with the US, even with a focus on data as a key commercial resource, also did not feature in the speech.

- References to ensuring the **EU's self-reliance** for key industrial sectors were present throughout the speech, even if there was no direct reference to the term "European sovereignty". The EU's Raw Materials Alliance,<sup>12</sup> an initiative to secure critical primary materials to facilitate the EU's digital and environmental goals, was not mentioned, nor was the upcoming Commission's Chemicals Strategy with a focus on recycling and supporting the

proposed Circular Economy model.

- While President von der Leyen was consciously attempting to court the favour of the European Parliament and preserve the inter-institutional balance of the EU in the face of renewed Franco-German dynamism and the primacy of the European Council, there were no references to potentially expanding the powers of the Parliament such as **extending the right of initiative** or electoral reform.

- There was little about the future of the **EU's fiscal and economic policies** after the COVID-19 pandemic and associated crisis have abated. This was perhaps a missed opportunity for the Commission to steer the general direction of the EU, although the strategic guidance for the **Recovery and Resilience Facility** will effectively supersede the **European Semester** process as the central economic steering document and opens up the debate between the Commission and Member States in determining and coordinating economic policies.<sup>13</sup>

## Major Themes

### Health Policy

Under the aegis of an EU which protects lives and livelihoods, President von der Leyen underscored the **EU4Health policy**,<sup>14</sup> the EU's COVID-19 response, in successfully protecting lives and facilitating Europe's response to the pandemic through securing key medical supplies. This is reinforced by her call for a strengthened **European Health Union** to build capacities to better address cross-border challenges. This could have serious ramifications, as health is predominantly a Member State competency, with the Union

10 <https://www.eu2020.de/blob/2360248/e0312c50f910931819ab67f630d15b2f/06-30-pdf-programm-en-data.pdf> p.16

11 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/farmers-lament-lack-of-support-from-commission-chief-as-brex-it-looms/>

12 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_20\\_1543](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_1543)

13 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1658](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1658)

14 [https://ec.europa.eu/health/funding/eu4health\\_en#](https://ec.europa.eu/health/funding/eu4health_en#)

coordinating and supporting their efforts.<sup>15</sup>  
<sup>16</sup> It could also possibly encroach on Member States' provision of public goods and services. An EU Health Union would add a third pillar to the current digital and environmentally driven economic recovery programme and significantly expand the realm of the Union's influence and impact.

**Reinforcing and empowering the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) and establishing a European Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA)** also point towards increased efforts by the European Commission for greater control and influence over European health policy. The sole reference to the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe during von der Leyen's speech was the reference to discussion of formally transferring health competencies from Member States to the Commission. A provisional **Global Health Summit** in Italy in conjunction with the Italian government in 2021 can also be seen an effort by the EU to position itself as a **global leader on health policy**, complementing the EU's "vaccine diplomacy" with €400m for a COVID-19 vaccine via the COVAX facility for both the EU and other states which need it but are unable to afford it, and President von der Leyen's goal for the EU to lead on **reform of the WHO**.

### Economic Policy

Thanks in part to the robust social protections like the **SURE programme**, the EU was better able to weather the impacts of COVID-19 than other economies, but many workers in the EU remain in precarious situations. President von der Leyen announced that the Commission would introduce a framework for Member States to introduce **minimum wages**. EU intervention into domestic social

or employment policy would likely be strongly resisted by Member States. Instead, the Commission is seeking to **coordinate** across the Union and ensure that collective bargaining over wages between employers and unions are in place across the Union, that the criteria for doing so is clear and unambiguous and to minimise distortions to the Single Market through wage dumping activities.

The use of the **general escape clause** and lifting of budgetary and fiscal rules by the Commission enabled Member States to protect domestic industries, supported by the ECB through its Pandemic Emergency Purchase programme. President von der Leyen underlined the need to continue this policy until the crisis is over, but did not mention what future economic and fiscal policy in the Union would look like.

**Completing the Banking Union and Capital Markets Union** are central to the Union's economic recovery programme and industrial strategy according to Dr. von der Leyen in terms of minimising the risk of bank contagion spill over, ensuring that sufficient private funds are available to encourage investment, promoting the euro as an internationally attractive and competitive currency, and completing the Single Market by restoring the full freedom of movement for people, goods, services and capital. These policy areas will fall under the remit of Irish Commissioner designate Mairead McGuinness, with support from Paschal Donohoe, President of the Eurogroup.

### Climate (European Green Deal)

**The European Green deal** is key for the EU's economic recovery and future goals, with an ambitious 2030 target of reducing emission by at least 55% across all sectors compared to 1990, and being carbon neutral by 2050.

<sup>15</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008E168>

<sup>16</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013D1082>

President von der Leyen noted that all climate and energy legislation will be reviewed by Q1 2021 in order to be “fit for 55”. She said that together in Europe “We can do it” emulating Angela Merkel’s comment during the migration crisis “*Wir schaffen das*”, and setting out the EU’s stall as **a global leader on climate policy**. This will be achieved through revisions to renewable energy, energy efficiency, emissions trading schemes through a carbon border adjustment mechanism and the energy taxation directive. Thirty-seven percent of the Next Generation EU funds will be allocated to Green Deal projects, and 30% of these funds will be raised through the issuance of green bonds by the European Commission.

In addition to these policy proposals, President von der Leyen underscored the role of the Just Transition Fund in ensuring no regions were left behind and the establishment of a “European Bauhaus” to combine the renovation wave project of retrofitting buildings (36% of all emissions and 40% of all energy use) to be more energy efficient with an EU wide cultural and artistic movement to give them a distinctive signature look and feel. These policies also complement European sovereignty through reducing energy import dependency and a focus on creating clean energy sources, such as hydrogen valleys, to power heavy industries like steel manufacturing. It would give European firms a competitive advantage as well as leveraging the common commercial policy in conjunction with the proposed carbon border adjustment mechanism, which would levy taxes on imported goods according to their carbon footprints.

## EU’s Digital Decade

President von der Leyen highlighted three areas of digital policy which have become increasingly relevant in the context of the impacts of COVID-19: **data, artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure**. Twenty percent of the Next Generation EU funds has been allocated for these digital endeavours. Although as previously noted, President von der Leyen did not mention either the Digital Services Act, which attempts to address the challenges posed by the platform economy, or efforts to replace the Privacy Shield agreement which regulated data transfers between the EU and the US. The so called “Brussels’ Effect” - the regulatory power of the EU to set standards for the world - was underscored here, and the EU will have to move quickly to set digital standards, or have them set by other actors (namely China and the US).

President von der Leyen called for **common data spaces** across the Union for industrial data, such as in **energy or the healthcare** sector under an EU cloud, based on the GaiaX service, signalled in the February 2020 European Data Strategy communication.<sup>17</sup> With regard to artificial intelligence (AI), President von der Leyen has proposed a new law for greater transparency in **regulating algorithms** for 2021 and a secure pan-European “e-identity” valid across the Union for all citizens, with a formal request from EU leaders expected by the end of September 2020.<sup>18</sup>

An ongoing public consultation on the provision of State aid for **rural broadband** will conclude in 2021 and formed the third plank of Dr. von der Leyen’s section on digital infrastructure, highlighting the increased importance of high quality equipment in order to access and take

---

17 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-data-strategy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-data-strategy_en)

18 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/von-der-leyen-charts-europes-digital-decade-evades-platform-economy-challenge/>

part in the increasingly digital and remote conditions created by COVID-19. The allocation of €8bn for European supercomputing facilities and supporting the manufacture of European microprocessors fits into the drive for European digital and technological sovereignty and reducing reliance on external partners for critical products and resources. This is likely to be strongly backed by the German Presidency as many of the EU's existing supercomputing facilities are based in Germany.<sup>19</sup>

## Global Europe

President von der Leyen deliberately positioned the EU as strong voice in upholding the **rules-based multilateral world order**, with coded criticism of those who withdraw from the world, like the US, and those who are actively destabilising it, like Russia. The speech established the EU as a key actor in reforming dysfunctional international fora such as the WHO and WTO, and made the point that many of the world's problems can only be solved through collective action, as evidenced by COVID-19 where "none of us will be safe until all of us are safe". This is further backed up by the EU's vaccine diplomacy and €400m funding for the COVAX facility for a vaccine for the EU and other countries who need it.

The call for the EU's foreign policy to **move from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV)** on issues of human rights and sanctions is a challenge to Member States potentially obstructing progress on certain issues, such as Greece on Belarus. This, and the adoption of an EU Magnitsky Act, would give governments the power to impose sanctions on those involved in the worst human rights abuses around the world. The resolution passed in March 2019 in the European Parliament for a European

Magnitsky Act would both reinforce the EU's ability to act more effectively on the global stage and empower the Union's institutions at the potential expense of its members. This is particularly pertinent with reference to Russia and to Turkey where concerted action has been blocked by particular Member States, whom President von der Leyen effectively chided in her speech. She called for a more courageous foreign policy, with specific comments aimed towards those advocating for closer ties with Russia (French President Macron) and those who believe a "pipeline" will change or improve EU-Russia relations (German Chancellor Merkel).

President von der Leyen expressed the EU's full support for the people of **Belarus** and indicated that sanctions on members of the regime were forthcoming. The line on **Turkey** was clear, stating that the EU would stand behind Cyprus and Greece in any dispute while remaining open to talks in good faith with Ankara. Dr. von der Leyen struck a more conciliatory tone regarding **the US**, stating the EU was ready to rebuild the transatlantic alliance and discuss trade, technological and taxation, irrespective of who wins the US presidential election in November 2020. Following the relatively inconclusive summit between the **EU and China** on 14 September 2020,<sup>20</sup> President von der Leyen called for a more robust approach to China, calling out abuses in Hong Kong and Xinjiang as well as unfair state aid and insufficient market access for EU firms in China.

**Brexit** was a minor feature of the speech, though Dr. von der Leyen referenced Margaret Thatcher both in terms of the sanctity of honouring agreements once made and also harkening back to the vision of the EU and Single Market as a force which unites and

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/new-eu-regulation-on-high-performance-computers-expected-in-the-coming-days/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2020/09/14/>

brings together different parties for mutual gain.

President von der Leyen highlighted the growing importance of **Africa** for the EU, calling the African Union a “natural partner” and noting the shared obligations and opportunities in the relationship, though there was little detail on this particular point.

There was no mention of the term “enlargement”, but the speech did stress that the future of the **Western Balkans** was in Europe rather than as a stopover on the Silk Road, perhaps reflecting growing unease over Chinese and Russian influence in the region. An updated enlargement package on the region is expected in October 2020, and will provide updates on the progress of talks with Albania and North Macedonia.<sup>21</sup> This mirrored commitments for greater economic investment in the Eastern and Southern Partnership countries.

Achieving a “**just**” **globalisation** and harnessing the economic clout of the EU was another aspect of Europe’s global influence highlighted by President von der Leyen, which can be seen in the increased incorporation of **environmental and ethical standards in the trade deals** the EU forges with partners as well as the proposed **carbon border adjustment mechanism** and potential taxation of **digital companies operating in the Single Market**.

This approach also feeds into the “**high ambition coalitions**” of **like-minded partners** working together with the EU to achieve common goals, effectively bypassing less cooperative actors and establishing the

Union as a pole apart from either the US or China. A clear example of this is the EU’s commitment to **achieving a consensus in the OECD or G20** on a sustainable and **fair digital taxation policy**, but President von der Leyen underscored the EU’s willingness to act unilaterally **by mid-2021** if these efforts are blocked, which could have serious economic ramifications for Ireland.

## Migration Reform

In the aftermath of the devastating fire at the Moria refugee camp in Greece, migration is again squarely on the EU agenda, dovetailing neatly with a key German presidential priority,<sup>22</sup> with a **new migration pact** on 23 September 2020 to **replace the current Dublin Regulation**. President von der Leyen stressed the moral imperative of reforming the current policy and of saving lives, she also neatly showcased several refugees who have successfully integrated into European societies such as Suaad Alshleh, a Syrian refugee, who has recently won a scholarship to study medicine at Royal College of Surgeons Ireland.<sup>23</sup> The new policy will likely stress the need for an equitable system and for Member States to share the burdens of costs, accommodating and integrating migrants fairly between them. Discussions of the forthcoming proposal at the **8-9 October 2020 Justice and Home Affairs Council** are likely to be politically sensitive and may depend upon the MFF and Recovery Fund issues being settled first.<sup>24</sup> Any reform will likely involve Ireland taking in significantly more refugees and may spur reforms to existing immigration, asylum seekers’ conditions and Direct Provision policies.

21 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/enlargement-package-postponed-until-autumn-negotiation-framework-to-go-ahead-in-june/>

22 <https://www.eu2020.de/blob/2360248/e0312c50f910931819ab67f630d15b2f/06-30-pdf-programm-en-data.pdf> pp.19-20

23 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/my-parents-are-super-proud-dublin-based-student-name-dropped-by-von-der-leyen-1.4356564>

24 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar%3Af1ebd6bf-a0d3-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1.0006.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar%3Af1ebd6bf-a0d3-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1.0006.02/DOC_1&format=PDF) p.2



## Rule of Law & Discrimination

The speech contained strong language on respect for the rule of law as “non-negotiable”, President von der Leyen’s declarations on the rule of law were discreet, and did not name those countries principally concerned: Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Bulgaria. The issue was a key stumbling block at the July budget negotiations which remain at an impasse, although the Commission will be releasing its first **annual rule of law report** by the **end of September 2020**. No “further” backsliding implies that backsliding which has already occurred will not be included, as the rule of law report is merely a “preventative” tool, and budgetary payments will be conditional on avoiding fraud, corruption and conflicts of interest, while ignoring adherence to respect for the European Union’s values.<sup>25</sup> The latter was a key demand from the EPP, S&D, Renew Europe and Greens in the European Parliament<sup>26</sup> and the members of the “Frugal Four” in the European Council (Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark).<sup>27</sup> This endeavour is in stark contrast to the potential opening of infringement procedures against Cyprus<sup>28</sup> and Malta for the sale of EU passports.

In conclusion, President von der Leyen recalled the legacy of John Hume and proposed constructing a truly **anti-racist Union**, condemning discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation or religious beliefs, creating the post of an anti-racism coordinator in the Commission and adding hate crimes to the list of EU crimes. Poland’s attitude to LGBTQI+ rights received a veiled critique and President von der Leyen insisted that anti-LGBTQI+ zones had no place in the Union and called for family relations to be recognised

equally across the EU.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

President von der Leyen has been generally successful in setting out her vision for the future of the EU and focussed on **addressing Europe’s current fragility** and preparing it for an increasingly uncertain future through **two key lenses**. First **greater strategic autonomy at home** with the European Green Deal providing the economic recovery blueprint and the Europe’s Digital Decade reducing EU reliance on external actors for critical materials and technologies. Second **a more global Europe better able to assert itself** vis-à-vis external actors by harnessing its economic might to lead, persuade, and, if necessary, coerce, through a move to qualified majority voting for sanctions and human rights violations.

The detailed policy content of President von der Leyen’s proposals are set to be published following the speech, including: the European Commission’s Anti-Racism Action Plan (18 September 2020), a supercomputing regulation (18 September 2020), the first annual rule of law report (end of September 2020), a new migration reform proposal (23 September 2020), the Digital Services Act in the European Parliament (28 September and 14 October 2020), an EU Chemicals Strategy as part of the Circular Economy (October 2020). The key meetings will be; the European General Affairs Council 22 September 2020 to discuss the MFF and the national ratifications of the Recovery Programme instrument, the European Council meeting 24-25 September 2020 (which was delayed until 1-2 October), focused on the EU’s foreign policy which

25 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu\\_2012/art\\_2/oj](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2012/art_2/oj)

26 <https://twitter.com/TheProgressives/status/1298605687967285249>

27 [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_frugal\\_blues\\_an\\_underappreciated\\_threat\\_to\\_the\\_european\\_proj](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_frugal_blues_an_underappreciated_threat_to_the_european_proj)

28 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/eu-justice-chief-mulls-legal-action-cyprus-golden-passports-200827130814699.html>

will address the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and Brexit. Ongoing discussions between Chancellor Merkel representing the Council and European Parliament President Sassoli on 21 September 2020, to break the deadlock between the Parliament and Council over the final size of the MFF have been inconclusive, and are being discussed at the special European Council summit on 1-2 October 2020. The shape, scale and success of President von der Leyen's vision will largely depend on the outcome of these negotiations between Member States and the European Parliament on the MFF and expose just how fragile or vital this Union really is.

The Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) is Ireland's leading international affairs think tank. Founded in 1991, its mission is to foster and shape political, policy and public discourse in order to broaden awareness of international and European issues in Ireland and contribute to more informed strategic decisions by political, business and civil society leaders.

The IIEA is independent of government and all political parties and is a not-for profit organisation with charitable status. In January 2017, the Global Go To Think Tank Index ranked the IIEA as Ireland's top think tank.

© Institute of International and European Affairs, September 2020

Creative Commons License

This is a human-readable summary of (and not a substitute for) the license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike/4.0/> 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

You are free to:

- Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt - remix, transform, and build upon the material
- The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

**Attribution** — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

**NonCommercial** — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

**ShareAlike** — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

**No additional restrictions** — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union



**The Institute of International and European Affairs,**

8 North Great Georges Street, Dublin 1, Ireland

T: +353-1-8746756 F: +353-1-8786880

E: [reception@iiea.com](mailto:reception@iiea.com) W: [www.iiea.com](http://www.iiea.com)