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'Self-criticism would have been important'

Commission President der Leyen glossed over the EU's problems in her State of the Union speech, says Renate Tenbusch

Read this interview in German.

The overarching theme of Ursula von der Leyens' State of the Union address was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on health, the economy and, above all, on European cohesion. Von der Leyen seemed to want to draw a line under the initial lack of European solidarity and the sometimes toxic negotiations on the recovery fund. Was she successful in doing so?

"Silence speaks a thousand words": If problems and differences are ignored by silence or glossed over by diplomatic phrases, they won't just disappear, but come up again elsewhere. The long-standing differences and lack of solidarity between EU member states, which have been laid bare in the debates on the Recovery Fund, have not been overcome despite the agreement on what has repeatedly been described as the historic recovery package consisting of "Next Generation EU" and the EU budget. We are currently experiencing this again with the disaster in the Moria refugee camp. Here, the EU and individual member states are violating human rights, which are enshrined in the EU Charter. Just as they have been doing for an intolerable length of time in the (non-)rescue of refugees in the Mediterranean.

European solidarity did also not come about automatically at the outbreak of the pandemic, but only when it became clear that going it alone and isolating oneself, for example by closing national borders, aggravated the economic and health problems in individual member states and in Europe as a whole. As far as the question of the distribution of refugees in solidarity is concerned, countries such as Hungary and Poland but also Austria continue to see their national interests protected by isolation and not by solidarity.

It's therefore interesting to see what the announced migration and asylum pact will look like in detail and how it will alleviate the lack of solidarity in the migration issue. In her speech, von der Leyen wisely did not mention any details of the pact. Presumably, in order not to risk the expected toxic backlashes again. But the heavily burdened Greek population and the refugees need solidarity in the form of concrete help right now.

In her speech, von der Leyen spoke of a Europe that offers "protection", "stability" and "opportunity". At the same time, the EU is probably in the worst recession in its history. Can the "quantum leap" that the EU has made with the Recovery Fund and the EU budget really cushion the social and economic effects sufficiently?

The economic, health and social scale of the crisis, which has not been overcome, cannot yet be predicted. Whether the financial resources contained in the overall package are sufficient to tackle the social and economic dislocations also ultimately depends on how countries use them. Ursula von der Leyen has repeatedly emphasised that the comprehensive protection of people should be at the forefront of all efforts – including the Green Deal, whose objectives the Recovery Plan is based on, according to the Commission.

The criteria and the review or sanction mechanisms available to the Commission and the Parliament are therefore important in order to check the use of the funds in the member states. Only this way, it can ensure that all economic and socio-ecological aspects that guarantee stability and equal opportunities are also taken into account and implemented accordingly. The implementation plans are currently being worked on in the member states.

Incidentally, the Parliament has not yet approved the recovery package and the multiannual financial framework adopted by the Council. The progressive representatives in Parliament are calling above all for a rule-of-law mechanism that links payments to the member states to respect for democratic rights and values. MEPs also criticise the cuts in the multiannual financial framework, which were made mainly in the important areas of health, education, research and innovation. They also call for clear indications on how to raise own resources for the EU. But it is and remains primarily the rule of law issue that continues to have a major explosive potential for unity in the Union.

Ursula von der Leyen made almost no mention of a subject that was on the agenda of former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's speeches: the fate of European youth. The latest figures on youth unemployment in countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain and even

Sweden are between 25 and 40 per cent. Can Europe's "unique social market economy", as von der Leyen put it, actually cope with this political scandal?

If one looks at the social implications and looks back at the experience of the last crisis, it is clear that before the corona crisis, due to a slow economic recovery, the general unemployment figures in the EU did indeed continue to fall. However, youth unemployment and NEET rates remained high. Nor has the at-risk-of-poverty rate fallen significantly. Opportunities and equitable redistribution are thus lagging behind the economic recovery since the last crisis.

Von der Leyen has already launched the SURE instrument to protect against general unemployment. In the long term, this is to be turned into an unemployment reinsurance. In the other areas – youth, NEET, risk of poverty – the announced instruments are less concrete, or their impact is not yet clear. For the new edition of the youth guarantee, the eligibility age will be raised from 25 to 29 years. The mentioned draft law introducing a framework agreement for a European minimum wage is intended to help combat the risk of poverty and prevent wage dumping. However, this project is also highly controversial and implementation is difficult, as the two consultation phases have shown so far.

Nevertheless, the reconstruction pact, in conjunction with this year's financial aid at EU and national level and the multiannual financial framework, is in its overall dimension an extraordinary economic stimulus package. This was not the case in 2008 during the economic and financial crisis. And the fact that France and Germany, through their joint initiative, made this historic agreement possible gives hope for cohesion in the Union. Crises, as the Brexit drama also shows, bring the Union together.

As expected, von der Leyen announced stronger climate ambitions, with a higher emission reduction target of 55 per cent by 2030. For this to be a "just transition", as Iratxe Garcia Perez emphasised, there must also be social mechanisms. Did von der Leyen convince on the social front?

Von der Leyen has set a framework. In 10 years, greenhouse gas emissions are to be reduced by 55 per cent. Parliament's Environment Committee has called for a reduction target of 60 per cent and refers to scientific studies which confirm that an EU climate target for 2030 beyond 55 per cent is also feasible. In the opinion of the progressive forces in Parliament in particular, the target could have been even more ambitious.

By social mechanisms we mean above all the "Just Transition Fund",

which is intended to ensure a fair transition, especially for the regions particularly affected by structural changes (for example, the coal regions in Poland and Germany) and for workers in the industrial sectors (mining, automotive industry). To this end, the Commission had intended to increase the fund from €7.5bn to €40bn under the corona aid scheme. However, during the extremely difficult negotiations between the heads of government in July, this was cut back to €17.5bn. The Commission President did not comment on this either in her speech. The cuts will have a particular impact on people in structurally weak regions and less socially mobile workers and thus on people whom von der Leyen repeatedly puts at the centre of all efforts in her speech.

Another critical point in this context is that there is always talk of shaping and financially supporting the transition to a new ecological and climate-friendly economy, but never of how these supposedly "many new" jobs will actually be shaped at the end of this ecological and digital transformation – and thus how the work of the future will look like. The question of how to provide an income for people who cannot be transitioned into this "new beautiful world" is also left out. Here too, as on all other points, the look into the future in the Commission President's speech gives no clues and certainly no details.

The most promising foreign policy announcement was probably the Commission's proposal for an "EU Magnitsky Act" with qualified majority voting. In the volatile world we live in, is it more likely that this will now be put into practice?

Here, the Commission President responded directly to a request from Parliament. The Magnitsky Act, signed by President Obama in the US in 2012, empowers the US administration to personally punish all human rights violators worldwide, freeze their assets and deny them entry to the US. Apart from the fact that the European Council has to adopt such a law unanimously and that there is general disagreement between the member states on how to deal with human rights violations in Russia or China, the undertaking, although correct in its approach, is problematic. Also at this stage with regard to human rights violations within the EU – in countries such as Poland, Hungary and in connection with the refugee crisis on the EU's borders, in the Mediterranean and in the camps in Greece.

It would, however, be an important instrument that would strengthen the EU's position on foreign policy, which is so often called for, and the assertion of its own values on a global level. Von der Leyen placed the announcement in the context of events in Hong Kong and Belarus, where the EU is clearly on the side of the democracy movements – but to no effect. In the case of the Chinese

government's repression of the Uighurs, the EU is also repeatedly criticised, including from within its own ranks, for not taking a clear stance. In order to strengthen the EU's effectiveness in foreign policy, and to do justice to its own claim to a "geopolitical Commission", von der Leyen calls on the member states to deviate from the general principle of unanimity in foreign policy matters. But here, too, she remained cautious and limited her demand to the two areas mentioned above.

The Socialist Group and also High Representative Borrell have long and repeatedly called for the introduction of qualified majority voting on foreign policy issues to speed up decision-making and to prevent recurring situations where a member state blocks an agreement.

The EU has had many issues of the rule of law in its recent past, particularly in Poland and Hungary. Was von der Leyen strong enough on the need to uphold the rule of law?

The Commission President did not dare make clear statements on the issue, which is so important for the credibility and democratic cohesion of the EU. Instead, she was content with more general diplomatic statements such as: "The Commission attaches the highest importance to the rule of law. This is why we will ensure that money from our budget and NextGenerationEU is protected against any kind of fraud, corruption and conflict of interest. This is non-negotiable."

This angered in particular those parliamentarians who are strongly committed to the enforcement of the rule of law and the introduction of a mechanism within the EU budget that clearly links the allocation of EU funds to respect for the rule of law. The social-democratic MEP Katharina Barley tweeted: "...in the context of the rule of law, she spoke at length about 'respect for differences'. That's a kowtow to Orban and his cohorts."

Others called for clear mention of "horse and rider" in this context. Here, the vague and rather presidential tenor of the whole speech was most evident. Yet it is precisely at this point that a clear analysis and self-criticism would have been important in order to underpin one's own credibility as a union of values and a stronghold of democracy, both internally and externally.

Von der Leyen had clear words on China, Turkey and Russia. Did the "geopolitical Commission" that von der Leyen invoked at the beginning of her term of office come into play here?

In the case of China, but also with regard to current relations with the US and UK, von der Leyen did indeed not shy away from clear words.

She described China as a negotiating partner, economic competitor and systemic rival. With regard to the US and UK, she made it clear that things are not going well as they are at the moment and that relations need to be put on a new footing.

To those who call for closer relations with Russia and support the Nordstream 2 project, she responded: "To those that advocate closer ties with Russia, I say that the poisoning of Alexei Navalny with an advanced chemical agent is not a one off. We have seen the pattern in Georgia and Ukraine, Syria and Salisbury – and in election meddling around the world. This pattern is not changing – and no pipeline will change that."

Other European partners were only briefly mentioned, such as the Commission's new strategic partnership with Africa – which von der Leyen considered a priority when she took office. Does this signal a shift in foreign policy priorities?

The fact that Africa, after having been a central topic of the German Presidency at the end of last year, is once again receding into the background became clear immediately after the outbreak of the corona crisis. The fact that the EU-AU summit planned for the end of the year is now also likely to be postponed, albeit due to corona, clearly shows that Africa and thus the strategic partnership and also the Cotonou Agreement, in which Africa has a prominent role within the group of ACP states, is not a priority on the EU agenda.

Von der Leyen mentions Africa in the context of the eastern and southern neighbourhood and leaves it at rather general statements. The fact that it is "a partnership on an equal footing, in which both sides have advantages and obligations" is a phrase that is not reflected in the policy towards the AU and the African states.

The fact that China and Russia, but also Turkey, have long since taken up their stakes on the African continent, and that the African states are in part quite critical of this, is repeatedly stated at the European level. But there are no real consequences at the action level. This is not new, but it does not make things any better.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



Renate Tenbusch
Brussels

Renate Tenbusch is the director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's EU Office in Brussels. Previously, she headed the foundation's offices in Johannesburg, South Africa, and New Delhi, India.

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