

Juncker's State of the Union: Europe must say no to nationalism, yes to patriotism

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News

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has told MEPs that an unstable world needs a “strong, united Europe.”



Jean-Claude Juncker delivers his State of the Union speech | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

In a wide-ranging State of the Union address on Wednesday, he conceded that while the EU was “imperfect”, efforts were being taken to ensure it “becomes a bit more perfect every day.”

Juncker gave his fourth and last State of the Union speech in a plenary session in Strasbourg.

He outlined the impact of the Commission’s work in its 10 priority areas and what it intends to achieve in the run-up to the European elections in May.

On Brexit, he said he supported the UK being granted “free trade area” status with the EU. He also announced several new legislative measures, including plans to help tackle migration to Europe with more border controls.

He also called for radical changes to the voting system used at EU level, a proposal that was greeted by Parliament’s President Antonio Tajani and ALDE group leader Guy Verhofstadt.

With MEPs set to vote later on Wednesday on possible action against Hungary, he also said that “Article 7 must be applied whenever the rule of law is threatened. Respecting the rule of law is not an option but an obligation.”

Opening his hour-long speech, he told deputies, “You cannot bring about a sea change in the five years of a Commission’s mandate.

“So this today is not a stock take and our work will continue in the coming months to ensure that our imperfect EU becomes a bit more perfect every day. We still have things to do.”

Juncker said, “The EU is a guarantor of peace. Let’s be happy that we live in a continent that enjoys peace, thanks to the EU.”

“Article 7 must be applied whenever the rule of law is threatened. Respecting the rule of law is not an option but an obligation”

To loud applause, he added, “So, let us show more respect to the EU and decry the kneejerk nationalism that seeks scapegoats for things that go wrong.”

He asked, “What is the state of the Union today?”, adding, “Well, Europe has got past the financial crisis, we have had 12 million jobs created since 2014, more than Belgium’s population, and after several painful years Greece is back on its feet.

“Europe has also reasserted its trade position and is a global trade power.”

This showed that “when we are united, we Europeans are a force to be reckoned with.”

On climate action, he said, “We want to leave the planet a cleaner place and that is why we have signed up to the Paris agreement.

“The terrible climatic events this summer have brought home the importance of this. You may choose to ignore the climate challenge and look the other way but the clock is ticking and the world is a more volatile place so we cannot stop these efforts.”

On foreign policy he said the current situation in Syria should be a cause of great concern “and we cannot remain silent. The Syrian conflict shows how the international order has increasingly been called into question.”

“The EU is a guarantor of peace. Let’s be happy that we live in a continent that enjoys peace, thanks to the EU”

He hoped the new European defence union will become fully operational but added, “We are not trying to militarise the EU, but we do seek greater independence because only a stronger EU will be

able to defend the continent.”

To more applause, he added, “European sovereignty derives from the national sovereignty of member states. Europe will never be directed against others or become a fortress, turning its back on the world. It belongs to everyone, not just the few.”

He went on, “That’s what is a stake in the 2019 European elections. We must get across to citizens that the EU can achieve results when it acts together. We must show that the EU is able to overcome differences between the east and west, north and south.

“Citizens in May will not be interested in what the Commission is proposing but, rather, that companies pay their taxes where they make their profits; what is being done on plastics.”

He used the speech to propose new measures on addressing money laundering and migration, saying that ad hoc solutions in tackling migration are “inadequate.”

He said, “What is needed is more solidarity.”

He also announced plans to increase the number of border agencies to 10,000 and open up “legal” routes for migrants into Europe. The Commission, he said, would also strengthen the euro and complete economic union.

He said Brexit “shows the need for strong leadership” and that Michel Barnier, the EU chief negotiator, “continues to work on the basis of a unanimous position.”

Three principles guide the EU’s Brexit work, he told members.

“This today is not a stock take and our work will continue in the coming months”

“First, we respect the UK decision to leave the Union although we regret it deeply. We just ask that the UK government understands that someone who leaves the Union cannot be in the same privileged position as a member and that you can no longer remain in the single market or parts of it when you leave.

“Second, we will show loyalty and solidarity to Northern Ireland that is why we want to find a creative solution to avoid a hard border. We will defend all elements of the Good Friday agreement.

“Third, after 29 March the UK will never just be a third party. The UK will always be a very close partner and neighbour in political and economic terms. We will strive for an ambitious partnership. I agree with the Chequers agreement and will be seeking a free trade area between the EU and UK.”

Juncker added, “We stand ready to work day and night to reach a deal. We owe it to our businesses and citizens that this is an orderly withdrawal. It will not be the Commission that stands in the way of this.”

He also said he was concerned about the “current tone of political discourse with some seeking to shut down debate by targeting journalists.

“Too many journalists are being attacked and even murdered. We cannot have democracy without a free press.”

Looking to the future he said the “Commission and parliaments come and go but Europe is here to

stay.”

He added, “More effort is needed to bring in east and west of Europe and put an end to the sorry sight of a divided Europe. And I would also like Europe to take better care of its social dimension.”

Turning to the 2019 elections, he said the so-called “Spitzenkandidat process should be repeated. It is a small step forward for European democracy but would be more credible one if we also had transnational lists and I hope that’s in place in the future.”

Summing up he returned to his theme about countering the threat posed by the rise of populism and nationalist politics, saying, “Let’s say no to nationalism and say yes to patriotism.”

He added, “Patriotism is a virtue. Unchecked nationalism is riddled with poison and deceit.

“Five years ago I told you that Europe is the love of my life. I love Europe and will do forever.”

Juncker, the former Luxembourg Prime Minister, was given a 30-second standing ovation at the end of his speech.

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter for the Parliament Magazine

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