European Commission - Speech
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2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen

Strasbourg, 15 September 2021



The original version of the speech is available here.

STRENGTHENING THE SOUL OF OUR UNION

Introduction

Mr President,
Honourable Members,

Many are the people who feel their lives have been on pause while the world has been on fast forward.

The speed of events and the enormity of the challenges are sometimes difficult to grasp.

This has also been a time of soul-searching. From people reassessing their own lives to wider debates on sharing vaccines and on shared values.

But as I look back on this past year, if I look at the state of the Union today, I see a strong soul in everything that we do.

It was Robert Schuman who said: Europe *needs a soul, an ideal, and the political will to serve this ideal.*

Europe has brought those words to life in the last twelve months.

In the biggest global health crisis for a century, we chose to go it together so that every part of Europe got the same access to a life-saving vaccine.

In the deepest global economic crisis for decades, we chose to go it together with NextGenerationEU.

And in the gravest planetary crisis of all time, again we chose to go it together with the European Green Deal.

We did that together as Commission, as Parliament, as 27 Member States. As one Europe. And we can be proud of it.

But corona times are not over.

There is still much grief in our society as the pandemic lingers. There are hearts we can never mend, life stories we can never finish and time we can never give back to our young. We face new and enduring challenges in a world recovering – and fracturing – unevenly.

So there is no question: the next year will be yet another test of character.

But I believe that it is when you are tested that your spirit – your soul - truly shines through.

As I look across our Union, I know that Europe will pass that test.

And what gives me that confidence is the inspiration we can draw from Europe's young people.

Because our youth put meaning into empathy and solidarity.
They believe we have a responsibility towards the planet.

And while they are anxious about the future, they are determined to make it better.

Our Union will be stronger if it is more like our next generation: reflective, determined and caring. Grounded in values and bold in action.

This spirit will be more important than ever over the next twelve months. This is the message in the Letter of Intent I sent this morning to President Sassoli and Prime Minister Janša to outline our priorities for the year ahead.

A EUROPE UNITED THROUGH ADVERSITY AND RECOVERY

Honourable Members,

A year is a long time in a pandemic.

When I stood in front of you 12 months ago, I did not know when – or even if – we would have a safe and effective vaccine against COVID-19.

But today, and against all critics, Europe is among the world leaders.

More than 70 per cent of adults in the EU are fully vaccinated. We were the only ones to share half of our vaccine production with the rest of the world. We delivered more than 700 million doses to the European people, and we delivered more than another 700 million doses to the rest of the world, to more than 130 countries.

We are the only region in the world to achieve that.

A pandemic is a marathon, not a sprint.

We followed the science.
We delivered to Europe. We delivered to the world.
We did it the right way, because we did it the *European* way. And it worked!

But while we have every reason to be confident, we have no reason to be complacent.

Our first – and most urgent – priority is to speed up global vaccination.

With less than 1% of global doses administered in low-income countries, the scale of injustice and the level of urgency are obvious. This is one of the great geopolitical issues of our time.

Team Europe is investing one billion Euro to ramp up mRNA production capacity in Africa. We have already committed to share 250 million doses.

I can announce today that the Commission will add a new donation of another 200 million doses by the middle of next year.

This is an investment in solidarity – but also in global health.

The second priority is to continue our efforts here in Europe.

We see worrisome divergences in vaccination rates in our Union.

So we need to keep up the momentum.

And Europe is ready. We have 1.8 billion additional doses secured. This is enough for us and our neighbourhood when booster shots are needed. Let's do everything possible to ensure that this does not turn into a pandemic of the unvaccinated.

The final priority is to strengthen our pandemic preparedness.

Last year, I said it was time to build a European Health Union. **Today we are delivering. With our proposal we get the HERA authority up and running.**

This will be a huge asset to deal with future health threats earlier and better.

We have the innovation and scientific capacity, the private sector knowledge, we have competent national authorities. And now we need to bring all of that together, including massive funding.

So I am proposing **a new health preparedness and resilience mission for the whole of the EU**. And it should be backed up by Team Europe investment of EUR 50 billion by 2027.

To make sure that no virus will ever turn a local epidemic into a global pandemic. There is no better return on investment than that.

Honourable Members,

The work on the European Health Union is a big step forward. And I want to thank this House for your support.

We have shown that when we act together, we are able to act fast.

Take the EU digital certificate:

Today more than 400 million certificates have been generated across Europe. 42 countries in 4 continents are plugged in.

We proposed it in March.

You pushed it!
Three months later it was up and running.

Thanks to this joint effort, while the rest of the world talked about it, Europe just did it.

We did a lot of things right. We moved fast to create SURE. This supported over 31 million workers and 2.5 million companies across Europe.

We learned the lessons from the past when we were too divided and too delayed.

And the difference is stark: last time it took 8 years for the Eurozone GDP to get back to pre-crisis levels.

This time we expect 19 countries to be at pre-pandemic levels this year with the rest following next. **Growth in the euro area outpaced both the US and China in the last quarter.**

But this is only the beginning. And the lessons from the financial crisis should serve as a cautionary tale. At that time, Europe declared victory too soon and we paid the price for that. And we will not repeat the same mistake.

The good news is that with NextGenerationEU we will now invest in both *short-term* recovery and *long-term* prosperity.

We will address structural issues in our economy: from labour market reforms in Spain, to pension reforms in Slovenia or tax reform in Austria.

In an unprecedented manner, we will invest in 5G and fibre. But equally important is the investment in digital skills. This task needs leaders' attention and a structured dialogue at top-level.

Our response provides a clear direction to markets and investors alike.

But, as we look ahead, we also need to reflect on how the crisis has affected the shape of our economy – from increased debt, to uneven impact on different sectors, or new ways of working.

To do that, the Commission will relaunch the discussion on the Economic Governance Review in the coming weeks. The aim is to build a consensus on the way forward well in time for 2023.

Honourable Members,

We will soon celebrate 30 years of the Single Market. For 30 years it has been the great enabler of progress and prosperity in Europe.

At the outset of the pandemic, we defended it against the pressures of erosion and fragmentation. For our recovery, the Single Market is the driver of good jobs and competitiveness.

That is particularly important in the digital single market.

We have made ambitious proposals in the last year.

To contain the gatekeeper power of major platforms;

To underpin the democratic responsibility of those platforms;

To foster innovation;

To channel the power of artificial intelligence.

Digital is the make-or-break issue. And Member States share that view. Digital spending in NextGenerationEU will even overshoot the 20% target.

That reflects the importance of investing in our European tech sovereignty. We have to double down to shape our digital transformation according to our own rules and values.

Allow me to focus on semi-conductors, those tiny chips that make everything work: from smartphones and electric scooters to trains or entire smart factories.

There is no digital without chips. And while we speak, whole production lines are already working at reduced speed - despite growing demand - because of a shortage of semi-conductors.

But while global demand has exploded, Europe's share across the entire value chain, from design to manufacturing capacity has shrunk. We depend on state-of-the-art chips manufactured in Asia.

So this is not just a matter of our competitiveness. This is also a matter of tech sovereignty. So let's put all of our focus on it.

We will present a new European Chips Act. We need to link together our world-class research, design and testing capacities. We need to coordinate EU and national investment along the value chain.

The aim is to jointly create a state-of-the-art European chip ecosystem, including production. That ensures our security of supply and will develop new markets for ground-breaking European tech.

Yes, this is a daunting task. And I know that some claim it cannot be done.

But they said the same thing about Galileo 20 years ago.

And look what happened. We got our act together. Today European satellites provide the navigation system for more than 2 billion smartphones worldwide. We are world leaders. **So let's be bold again, this time with semi-conductors.**

Honourable Members,

The pandemic has left deep scars that have also left their mark on our social market economy.

For nights on end, we all stood at our windows and doors to applaud critical workers. We felt how much we relied on all those women and men who work for lower wages, fewer protections and less security.

The applause may have faded away but the strength of feeling cannot.

This is why the implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** is so important – to ensure decent jobs, fairer working conditions, better healthcare and better balance in people's lives.

If the pandemic taught us one thing, it is that time is precious. And caring for someone you love is the most precious time of all.

We will come forward with a new European Care Strategy to support men and women in finding the best care and the best life balance for them.

But social fairness is not just a question of time. It is also a question of fair taxation.

In our social market economy, it is good for companies to make profits. And they make profits thanks to the quality of our infrastructure, social security and education systems. So the very least we can expect is that they pay their fair share.

This is why we will continue to crack down on tax avoidance and evasion.
We will put forward a new initiative to address those hiding profits behind shell entities.
And we will do everything in our power to seal the historic global deal on minimum taxation.

Asking big companies to pay the right amount of tax is not only a question of public finances, but above all a question of basic fairness.

Honourable Members,

We have all benefited from the principles of our European social market economy – and we must

make sure that the next generation can do so to build their future.

This is our most educated, talented and motivated generation. And it has missed out on so much to keep others safe.

Being young is normally a time of discovery, of creating new experiences. A time to meet lifelong friends, to find your own path. And what did we ask this generation to do? To keep their social distance, to stay locked down and to do school from home. For more than a year.

This is why everything that we do – from the European Green Deal to NextGenerationEU – is about protecting their future.

That is also why NextGenerationEU must be funded by the **new own resources** that we are working on.

But we must also caution against creating new divides. **Because Europe needs all of its youth.**

We must step up our support to those who fall into the gaps – those not in any kind of employment, education or training.

For them, we will put in place a new programme, ALMA.

ALMA will help these young Europeans to find temporary work experience in another Member State.

Because they too deserve an experience like Erasmus. To gain skills, to create bonds and help forge their own European identity.

But if we are to shape our Union in their mould, young people must be able to shape Europe's future. Our Union needs a soul and a vision they can connect to.

Or as Jacques Delors asked*: How can we ever build Europe if young people do not see it as a collective project and a vision of their own future?*

This is why we will propose to make 2022 the Year of European Youth. A year dedicated to empowering those who have dedicated so much to others.

And it is why we will make sure that young people can help lead the debate in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

This is their future and this must be their Conference too.

And as we said when we took office, the Commission will be ready to follow up on what is agreed by the Conference.

A EUROPE UNITED IN RESPONSIBILITY

Honourable Members,

This is a generation with a conscience. They are pushing us to go further and faster to tackle the climate crisis.

And events of the summer only served to explain why. We saw floods in Belgium and Germany. And wildfires burning from the Greek islands to the hills in France.

And if we don't believe our own eyes, we only have to follow the science.

The UN recently published the IPCC report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It is the authority on the *science* of climate change.

The report leaves no doubt. Climate change is man-made. But since it is man-made, we can do something about it.

As I heard it said recently: **It's warming. It's us. We're sure. It's bad. But we can fix it.**

And change is already happening.

More electric vehicles than diesel cars were registered in Germany in the first half of this year. Poland is now the EU's largest exporter of car batteries and electric buses. Or take the **New European Bauhaus** that led to an explosion of creativity of architects, designers, engineers across our Union.

So clearly something is on the move.

And this is what the European Green Deal is all about.

In my speech last year, I announced our target of at least 55% emission reduction by 2030. Since then we have together turned our climate goals into legal obligations.
And we are the first major economy to present comprehensive legislation in order to get it done.

You have seen the complexity of the detail. But the goal is simple. We will put a price on pollution. We will clean the energy we use. We will have smarter cars and cleaner airplanes.

And we will make sure that higher climate ambition comes with more social ambition. **This must be a fair green transition. This is why we proposed a new Social Climate Fund** to tackle the energy poverty that already 34 million Europeans suffer from.

I count on both Parliament and Member States to keep the package and to keep the ambition together.

When it comes to climate change and the nature crisis, **Europe can do a lot.** And it will support others. I am proud to **announce today that the EU will double its external funding for biodiversity**, in particular for the most vulnerable countries**.**

But Europe cannot do it alone.

The COP26 in Glasgow will be a moment of truth for the global community.

Major economies – from the US to Japan – have set ambitions for climate neutrality in 2050 or shortly after. These need now to be backed up by concrete plans in time for Glasgow. Because current commitments for 2030 will not keep global warming to 1.5°C within reach.

Every country has a responsibility!

The goals that President Xi has set for China are encouraging. But we call for that same leadership on setting out how China will get there. The world would be relieved if they showed they could peak emissions by mid-decade - and move away from coal at home and abroad.

But while every country has a responsibility, major economies do have a special duty to the *least* developed and *most* vulnerable countries. **Climate finance** is essential for them - both for mitigation and adaptation.

In Mexico and in Paris, the major economies committed to provide 100 billion dollars a year until 2025 to the least developed and most vulnerable countries.

We deliver on our commitment. **Team Europe contributes 25 billion dollars per year.** But others still leave a gaping hole towards reaching the global target.

Closing that gap will increase the chance of success at Glasgow.

My message today is that Europe is ready to do more. **We will now propose an additional 4 billion euro for climate finance until 2027.** But we expect the United States and our partners to step up too.

Closing the climate finance gap together – the US and the EU – would be a strong signal for global climate leadership. It is time to deliver.

Honourable Members,

This climate and economic leadership is central to Europe's global and security objectives.

It also reflects a wider shift in world affairs at a time of transition towards a new international order.

We are entering a **new era of hyper-competitiveness**.

An era in which some stop at nothing to gain influence: from vaccine promises and high-interest loans, to missiles and misinformation.

An era of regional rivalries and major powers refocusing their attention towards each other.

Recent events in Afghanistan are not the cause of this change – but they are a symptom of it.

And first and foremost, I want to be clear. **We stand by the Afghan people**. The women and children, prosecutors, journalists and human rights defenders.

I think in particular of women judges who are now in hiding from the men they jailed. They have been put at risk for their contribution to justice and the rule of law. We must support them and we will coordinate all efforts with Member States to bring them to safety.

And we must continue supporting all Afghans in the country and in neighbouring countries. We must do everything to avert the real risk of a major famine and humanitarian disaster. And we will do our part. We will increase again humanitarian aid for Afghanistan by 100 million euro.

This will be part of a new, wider **Afghan Support Package** that we will present in the next weeks to combine all of our efforts.

Honourable Members,

Witnessing events unfold in Afghanistan was profoundly painful for all the families of fallen servicemen and servicewomen.

We bow to the sacrifice of those soldiers, diplomats and aid workers who laid down their lives.

To make sure that their service will never be in vain, we have to reflect on how this mission could end so abruptly.

There are deeply troubling questions that allies will have to tackle within NATO.

But there is simply no security and defence issue where *less* cooperation is the answer. We need to invest in our joint partnership and to draw on each side's unique strength.

This is why we are working with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on a new EU-NATO Joint Declaration to be presented before the end of the year.

But this is only one part of the equation.

Europe can – and clearly should – be able and willing to do more on its own. But if we are to do more, we first need to explain why. I see three broad categories.

First, we need to provide stability in our neighbourhood and across different regions.

We are connected to the world by narrow straits, stormy seas and vast land borders. Because of that geography, Europe knows better than anyone that if you don't deal in time with the crisis abroad, the crisis comes to you.

Secondly, the nature of the threats we face is evolving rapidly: from hybrid or cyber-attacks to the growing arms race in space.

Disruptive technology has been a great equaliser in the way power can be used today by rogue states or non-state groups.

You no longer need armies and missiles to cause mass damage. You can paralyse industrial plants, city administrations and hospitals – all you need is your laptop. You can disrupt entire elections with a smartphone and an internet connection.

The third reason is that the European Union is a unique security provider. There will be missions where NATO or the UN will not be present, but where the EU should be.

On the ground, our soldiers work side-by-side with police officers, lawyers and doctors, with humanitarian workers and human rights defenders, with teachers and engineers.

We can combine military and civilian, along with diplomacy and development – and we have a long history in building and protecting peace.

The good news is that over the past years, we have started to develop a European defence ecosystem.

But what we need is the European Defence Union.

In the last weeks, there have been many discussions on expeditionary forces. On what type and how many we need: battlegroups or EU entry forces.

This is no doubt part of the debate – and I believe it will be part of the solution.

But the more fundamental issue is why this has not worked in the past.

You can have the most advanced forces in the world – but if you are never prepared to use them - of what use are they?

What has held us back until now is not just a shortfall of capacity – it is the lack of political will.

And if we develop this political will, there is a lot that we can do at EU level.

Allow me to give you three concrete examples:

First, we need to build the foundation for collective decision-making – this is what I call situational awareness.

We fall short if Member States active in the same region, do not share their information on the European level. It is vital that we improve intelligence cooperation.

But this is not just about intelligence in the narrow sense.

It is about bringing together the knowledge from all services and all sources. From space to police trainers, from open source to development agencies. Their work gives us a unique scope and depth of knowledge.

It is out there!

But we can only use that, to make informed decisions if we have the full picture. And this is currently not the case. We have the knowledge, but it is disjoined. Information is fragmented.

This is why the EU could consider its own Joint Situational Awareness Centre to fuse all the different pieces of information.

And to be better prepared, to be fully informed and to be able to decide.

Secondly, we need to improve interoperability. This is why we are already investing in common European platforms, from fighter jets, to drones and cyber.

But we have to keep thinking of new ways to use all possible synergies. One example could be to consider waiving VAT when buying defence equipment developed and produced in Europe.

This would not only increase our interoperability, but also decrease our dependencies of today.

Third, we cannot talk about defence without talking about cyber. If everything is connected, everything can be hacked. Given that resources are scarce, we have to bundle our forces. And we should not just be satisfied to address the cyber threat, but also strive to become a leader in cyber security.

It should be here in Europe where cyber defence tools are developed. This is why we need a **European Cyber Defence Policy**, including legislation on common standards under a **new European Cyber Resilience Act**.

So, we can do a lot at EU level. But Member States need to do more too.

This starts with a common assessment of the threats we face and a common approach to dealing with them. The upcoming **Strategic Compass** is a key process of this discussion.

And we need to decide how we can use all of the possibilities that are already in the Treaty.

This is why, under the French Presidency, President Macron and I will convene a **Summit on European defence**.

It is time for Europe to step up to the next level.

Honourable Members,

In a more contested world, protecting your interests is not only about defending yourself.

It is about forging strong and reliable partnerships. This is not a luxury – it is essential for our future stability, security and prosperity.

This work starts by deepening our partnership with our closest allies.

With the US we will develop our new agenda for global change – from the new **Trade and Technology Council** to health security and sustainability.

The EU and the US will always be stronger – together.

The same is true of our neighbours in the **Western Balkans**.

Before the end of the month, I will travel to the region to send a strong signal of our commitment to the accession process. **We owe it to all those young people who believe in a European future.**

This is why we are ramping up our support through our new investment and economic plan, worth around a third of the region's GDP. Because an investment in the future of the Western Balkans is an

investment in the future of the EU.

And we will also continue investing in our partnerships across our neighbourhood – from stepping up our engagement in the Eastern Partnership to implementing the new Agenda for the Mediterranean and continuing to work on the different aspects of our relationship with Turkey.

Honourable Members,

If Europe is to become a more active global player, it also needs to focus on the next generation of partnerships.

In this spirit, **today's new EU - Indo-Pacific strategy is a milestone.** It reflects the growing importance of the region to our prosperity and security. But also the fact that autocratic regimes use it to try to expand their influence.

Europe needs to be more present and more active in the region.

So we will work together to deepen trade links, strengthen global supply chains and develop new investment projects on green and digital technologies.

This is a template for how Europe can redesign its model to connect the world.

We are good at financing roads. But it does not make sense for Europe to build a perfect road between a Chinese-owned copper mine and a Chinese-owned harbour.

We have to get smarter when it comes to these kinds of investments.

This is why we will soon present our new connectivity strategy called Global Gateway.

We will build **Global Gateway partnerships** with countries around the world. We want investments in quality infrastructure, connecting goods, people and services around the world.

We will take a values-based approach, offering transparency and good governance to our partners.

We want to create links and not dependencies!

And we know how this can work. Since the summer, a new underwater fibre optic cable has connected Brazil to Portugal.

We will invest with Africa to create a market for green hydrogen that connects the two shores of the Mediterranean.

We need a Team Europe approach to make Global Gateway happen. We will connect institutions and investment, banks and the business community. And we will make this a priority for regional summits – starting with the next EU-Africa Summit in February.

We want to turn Global Gateway into a trusted brand around the world.

And let me be very clear: doing business around the world, global trade – all that is good and necessary. But this can never be done at the expense of people's dignity and freedom.

There are 25 million people out there, who are threatened or coerced into forced labour. We can never accept that they are forced to make products – and that these products then end up for sale in shops here in Europe.

So we will propose a ban on products in our market that have been made by forced labour.

Human rights are not for sale – at any price.

A EUROPE UNITED IN FREEDOM AND DIVERSITY

And, Honourable Members, human beings are not bargaining chips.

Look at what happened at our borders with Belarus. The regime in Minsk has instrumentalised human beings. They have put people on planes and literally pushed them towards Europe's borders.

This can never be tolerated.

And the quick European reaction shows that. **And rest assured, we will continue to stand together with Lithuania, Latvia and Poland.**

And, let's call it what it is: this is a hybrid attack to destabilise Europe.

Honourable Members,

These are not isolated events. We saw similar incidents at other borders. And we can expect to see it again**.** This is why, as part of our work on Schengen, we will set out new ways to respond to such aggression and ensure unity in protecting our external borders.

But as long as we do not find common ground on how to manage migration, our opponents will continue to target that.

Meanwhile, human traffickers continue to exploit people through deadly routes across the Mediterranean.

These events show us that every country has a stake in building a European migration system.

The **New Pact on Migration and Asylum** gives us everything we need to manage the different types of situations we face.

All the elements are there. This is a balanced and humane system that works for all Member States - *in all circumstances*. We know that we can find common ground.

But in the year since the Commission presented the Pact, progress has been painfully slow.

I think, this is the moment now for a *European* migration management policy. So I urge you, in this House and in Member States, to speed up the process.

This ultimately comes down to a question of trust. Trust between Member States. Trust for Europeans that migration can be managed. Trust that Europe will always live up to its enduring duty to the most vulnerable and most in need.

There are many strongly held views on migration in Europe but I believe the common ground is not so far away.

Because if you ask most Europeans, they would agree that we should act to curb irregular migration but also act to provide a refuge for those forced to flee.

They would agree that we should return those who have no right to stay. But that we should welcome those who come here legally and make such a vital contribution to our society and economy.

And we should *all* agree that the topic of migration should never be used to divide.

I am convinced that there is a way that Europe can build trust amongst us when it comes to migration.

Honourable Members,

Societies that build on **democracy and common values** stand on stable ground.

They have trust in people.

This is how new ideas are formed, how change happens, how injustices are overcome.

Trust in these common values brought our founders together, after World War Two.

And it is these same values that united the freedom fighters who tore down the Iron Curtain over 30 years ago.

They wanted democracy.
They wanted the freedom to choose their government.
They wanted the rule of law and for everyone to be equal before the law.
They wanted freedom of speech and independent media. To no longer be spied on by their governments.
They wanted to combat corruption. And the freedom to be different from the majority.

Or, as former Czech President Václav Havel put it, they wanted all those "great European values". These values come from the cultural, religious and humanist heritage of Europe.

They are part of our soul, part of what defines us today.

These values are now enshrined in our European treaties. This is what we all signed up to when we

became part of this Union as free and sovereign countries.

We are determined to defend these values. And we will never waver in that determination.

Our values are guaranteed by our legal order and safeguarded by the judgments of the **European Court of Justice**. These judgments are binding. We make sure that they are respected. And we do so in every Member State of our Union.

Because protecting the rule of law is not just a noble goal. Protecting the rule of law is also hard work and a constant struggle for improvement.

Our **Rule of Law reports** are part of this process, with for example justice reforms in Malta or corruption inquiries in Slovakia.

And from 2022, our Rule of Law reports will come with specific recommendations to Member States.

Nevertheless, there are worrying developments in certain Member States. **Let me be clear: dialogue always comes first. But dialogue is not an end in itself, it should lead to results**.

This is why we take a dual approach of dialogue *and* decisive action. This is what we did last week. And this is what we will continue to do.

Because people must be able to rely on the right to an independent judiciary. The right to be treated equally before the law. Everywhere in Europe. Whether you belong to a majority or a minority.

Honourable Members,

The European budget is the future of our Union cast in figures.

That is why it must be protected. We need to ensure that every euro and every cent is spent for its proper purpose and in line with rule of law principles.

Investments that enable our children to have a better future must not be allowed to seep away into dark channels.

Corruption is not just taxpayer money stolen. It is investors scared off, big favours bought by big money and democracy undermined by the powerful.

When it comes to protecting our budget, we will pursue every case, with everything in our power.

Honourable Members,

Defending our values is also defending freedom. Freedom to be who you are, freedom to say what's on your mind, freedom to love whoever you want.

But freedom also means freedom from fear. And during the pandemic, too many women were deprived of that freedom. It was an acutely terrifying time for those with nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape from their abusers. We need to shed light on this darkness, we need to show ways out of the pain. **Their abusers must be brought to justice**.

And those women must have their freedom and their self-determination back.

This is why **by the end of year, we will propose a law to combat violence against women** – from prevention to protection and effective prosecution, online and offline.

It is about defending the dignity of each individual. It is about justice. Because this is the soul of Europe. And we must make it even stronger.

Honourable members,

Allow me to finish with one of the freedoms that gives voice to all other freedoms – **media freedom**.

Journalists are being targeted simply for doing their job. Some have been threatened, some beaten and, tragically, some murdered. Right here, in our European Union.

Let me mention some of their names: Daphné Caruana Galizia. Ján Kuciak. Peter de Vries.

The details of their stories may be different but what they have in common is that they all fought

and died for our right to be informed.

Information is a public good. We must protect those who create transparency – the journalists. That is why today we have put forward a recommendation to give journalists better protection.

And we need to stop those who threaten media freedom. Media companies cannot be treated as just another business. Their independence is essential. Europe needs a law that safeguards this independence – and the Commission will deliver a **Media Freedom Act** in the next year.

Defending media freedom means defending our democracy.

Conclusion

Honourable Members,

Strengthening Schuman's European ideal that I invoked earlier is a continuous work.

And we should not hide away from our inconsistencies and imperfections.

But imperfect as it might be, our Union is both beautifully unique and uniquely beautiful.

It is a Union where we strengthen our *individual liberty* through the *strength of our community*.

A Union shaped as much by our *shared* history and values as by our *different* cultures and perspectives.

A Union with a soul.

Trying to find the right words to capture the essence of this feeling is not easy. But it is easier when you borrow them from someone who inspires you. And this is why I have invited a guest of honour to be with us today.

Many of you might know her – **a gold medallist from Italy** who captured my heart this summer.

But what you might not know is that only in April, she was told her life was in peril. She went through surgery, she fought back, she recovered.

And only 119 days after she left the hospital, she won Paralympic gold. Honourable Members, please join me in welcoming **Beatrice Vio.** Bebe has overcome so much, so young.

Her story is one of *rising against all odds.* Of succeeding thanks to talent, tenacity and unrelenting positivity. She is in the image of her generation: a leader and an advocate for the causes she believes in.

And she has managed to achieve all of that by living up to her belief that - *if it seems impossible* – then it can be done. *Se sembra impossibile, allora si può fare.*

This was the spirit of Europe's founders and this is the **spirit of Europe's next generation**. So let's be inspired by Bebe and by all the young people who change our perception of the possible.

Who show us that you can be what you want to be. And that you can *achieve* whatever you *believe*.

Honourable Members:

This is the *soul* of Europe.

This is the *future* of Europe.

Let's make it stronger together.

Viva l'Europa.

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State of the Union Address 2021 by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission