



# STATE OF THE UNION COMMENTARY: FROM POLITICAL TO INDISPENSABLE COMMISSION?



By Alexander Mattelaer (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/alexander-mattelaer/>)  
(12 September 2018)

In Commentaries ([http://www.egmontinstitute.be/publication\\_parent/commentaries/](http://www.egmontinstitute.be/publication_parent/commentaries/))

EU institutional affairs (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/eu-institutional-affairs/>),

European Affairs (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/european-affairs/>),

Internal EU policies (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/internal-eu-policies/>)

Earlier today, European Commission president Jean Claude Juncker delivered his fourth and final State of the Union ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-speech\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-speech_en_0.pdf)) in the European Parliament. Somewhat contrary to previous editions, Juncker delivered a highly personal speech, calling on European citizens to take charge of their own fate. Four years into the legislative term, the achievements of this much-vaunted 'political

Commission' fall short of much that the high-winded rhetoric of previous editions had suggested. We use cookies to ensure that we give you the best experience on our website. If you continue to use this site we will assume that you are happy with it.

Yet at the same time, this State of the Union address offered a timely reminder about the importance of strong democratic institutions, and the indispensable role played by the European Commission.

*(Photo credit: European Commission, 2018)*

\*\*\*\*\*

## STATE OF THE UNION COMMENTARY: FROM POLITICAL TO INDISPENSABLE COMMISSION?

Earlier today, European Commission president Jean Claude Juncker delivered his fourth and final State of the Union ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-speech\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-speech_en_0.pdf)) in the European Parliament. Somewhat contrary to previous editions, Juncker delivered a highly personal speech, calling on European citizens to take charge of their own fate. Four years into the legislative term, the achievements of this much-vaunted 'political Commission' fall short of much that the high-winded rhetoric of previous editions had suggested. Yet at the same time, this State of the Union address offered a timely reminder about the importance of strong democratic institutions, and the indispensable role played by the European Commission.

When the president of the European Commission starts by referring to 1913 – a year when all was well – it is hard to miss the profound concern about the state of the world. Contrary to the rosy optimism of last year's 'wind in our sails' speech, the urgency in Juncker's exhortation to buckle up was unmistakable. The ambition to broker an agreement on the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework and to ratify the EU-Japan partnership agreement before May 2019 spoke volumes. Juncker also flagged the importance of the European Defence Fund and the corresponding ambition 'to increase defence spending by a factor of twenty'. By itself, the Fund cannot make up for low levels of defence investment at the level of Member States, but it can leverage the benefits of scale brought about by European collaboration. In this sense, Juncker's call to embrace European sovereignty was not about replacing the sovereign responsibilities of the Member States or confronting the world alone, but rather about increasing Europeans' ability to act in an increasingly volatile environment.

Even as Juncker sought to avoid listing the achievements of the past years, his remarks about trade, the international role of the Euro and the partnership between Europe and Africa could not help but draw attention to the critical role the Commission plays in promoting the common European interest. After having travelled to Beijing, Tokyo and Washington – the order cannot have been a coincidence – the Commission president could claim that European unity breeds strength. The latter is not only a prerequisite to defend legitimate interests, but also to promote the values that European citizens hold dear. This also relates to the proposed strengthening of

the common currency. The deepening of economic and monetary union is not an objective by itself, but rather a means for Europeans to be able to hold their ground when international tensions about currency management are set to intensify. Similarly, the proposal to build an economic partnership between the African and European continents represents a good example of the type of long-term planning that only the European Commission can provide. Without the structural development of African economies, migratory pressures are set to persist, which would in turn dislocate political stability in Europe.

The ongoing recalibration of the European political landscape may well prove to be the determining factor shaping the electoral dynamics in 2019. The popular contestation that has emerged about pan-European topics such as migration or austerity helps cementing the importance of the European political arena. Yet will the electoral campaign in the months ahead boil down to a fully-fledged confrontation between progressive globalists and reactionary nationalists, or will the European multi-party system survive? The former scenario would perhaps come to resemble the 2016 US presidential campaign, whereas the latter would preserve the traditions of European political diversity and compromise. In his speech, Juncker painted a stark opposition between patriotism and nationalism, while simultaneously calling for the revival of 'the lost art of compromise'. This delicate balancing act can only be maintained by relying on respect for the rule-of-law as a constitutional principle. Within the legal framework of the Union, democratic choices need to be respected and implemented, but beyond lies the abyss.

The 2018 State of the Union may not go into the history books as the decisive turning point in today's key policy debates. The prospect of political renewal in 2019 and beyond offers greater potential in this regard. Yet as a valedictory message from someone who has invested so much into the European political arena, it is hard to ignore the grave warning that not much can be taken for granted. Individually, EU Member States remain highly vulnerable to the seismic cracks that are opening in the structure of the international system, yet collectively they can aspire to be more than an object of history. Simultaneously, the threat of democratic decay from within – perhaps encouraged from the outside – cannot be dismissed. In this respect, vibrant institutions matter as much as elections do. This speech did not so much describe a troubling state of affairs, as it invited the audience to ponder its consequences.

*Prof Dr Alexander Mattelaer is director of European Affairs at Egmont – the Royal Institute for International Relations. He teaches at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and at the College of Europe.*


## EGMONT


Royal Institute for International Relations  
Rue des Petits Carmes 24A  
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

## POSTAL ADDRESS

Rue des Petits Carmes 15  
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

## CONTACT

 +32 (0) 2 223 41 14

 [info@egmontinstitute.be](mailto:info@egmontinstitute.be) (mailto:info@egmontinstitute.be)