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OPINION

What von der Leyen's 'State of Union' didn't mention

By **ALVARO OLEART & TOM THEUNS**

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Unsurprisingly, the [State of the Union speech](#) by EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen opened with reflections on the brutal invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

Rightly, powerfully, and with Olena Zelenska as a guest of honour in the European Parliament, von der Leyen said that the war against Ukraine was a war on European values, a war on our collective future.

About "democracy against autocracy."

But von der Leyen barely noticed that European democracy is under attack not only from external threats, but also from within. Two leading autocratisers worldwide [are EU member states](#).

Even when she spoke of "autocracy's Trojan horses" attacking European democracy "from within", it remained

ambiguous who she was referring to.

And clarity here is vital. Viktor Orbán has [dismantled democracy in Hungary](#), yet [continues to participate](#) as an equal in the European Council.

The independence of the Polish judiciary has been under [relentless attack from Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice-led government](#).

Italy stands on the verge of [electing a neo-fascist to government](#) and potentially as prime minister.

The [Trumpian Sweden Democrats](#) are the second largest party in Sweden and have now [become a governing party](#).

Even though president von der Leyen committed abstractly to fighting for democracy in Europe "every single day", her Commission's fight remains amorphous and misguided. When she did briefly mention problems with existing EU member states she firmly avoided the term "democracy", speaking about the "rule of law" and protecting the EU budget from "corruption".

We are disappointed at this impoverished conception of democracy, but not surprised.

Deep-dive on 'democracy'

In our research, we [examined over 100 recent speeches](#) by members of the European Commission. We found over and over again that EU commissioners and the commission presidents prioritised a legalistic and technocratic conception of democracy: 'Democracy without politics'.

But democracy is much more than the rule of law and the separation of powers. Democracy is a normative and political response to political pluralism.

It is about real alternative visions of society competing in a healthy public sphere.

That is why it is disturbing to see the independent media [stifled in Hungary](#), or to see Polish academics [harassed in court](#) for criticising the government.

While it is important for von der Leyen to speak out against attacks on the rule of law, it is not enough. Of course the rule of law is crucial for democracy. But we need to think more broadly than judicial independence or the separation of powers — what we are experiencing is the dismantling of the democratic public sphere in several EU member states.

It is an autocracy crisis.

In face of this autocracy crisis, the European Commission needs to urgently use all the tools it has at its disposal to support pluralist democracy.

A first step is bringing far more infringement cases against autocratising member states, pushing for harsh penalties. The commission should also make [all EU funding conditional](#) on democratic government, not only when the EU budget is directly threatened.

But that is not enough.

The commission has proven again and again it is toothless and conciliatory in the face of the autocratisation in EU member states.

Von der Leyen's State of the Union speech is just the most recent example of turning a blind eye to the EU's own budding autocrats and the EU's democratic deficit more broadly.

The most innovative element in this regard was her announcement that "the Citizens' Panels that were central

to the conference [on the Future of Europe] will now become a regular feature of our democratic life".

However, it remains unclear how the citizen panels, which had no resonance whatsoever across the European public spheres, will meaningfully address the autocracy crisis or contribute to democratising the EU.

If we really want to protect pluralist democracy in Europe we need to think of how all actors in the European political space can step up. We need a general mobilisation to defend civil society and the public sphere.

Political parties, Eurogroups, member states, NGOs and trade unions should all play a part in supporting [pro-democratic actors in Hungary, Poland](#) and across all EU member states.

Rather than waiting on EU Commission leadership that may never come, they should be asking what they can do now. How they can help defend the free media. How they can empower progressive civil society actors against authoritarians.

Budding autocrats will frame such activities as illegitimate interference in their domestic affairs. But there is no requirement of neutrality here! European integration means that the civic freedom of each and every EU citizen is tied together. Paraphrasing Martin Luther King, autocracy anywhere in the EU is a threat to democracy across the EU.

The focus in the State of the Union speech on the Russian invasion of Ukraine was right, and Von der Leyen's rhetoric there was strong. But war in Europe must not distract us from the autocracy crisis in the EU. We need to put pluralist democratic politics at the centre.



AUTHOR BIO