

BLOG POST 10.09.2018

Five things you need to know about the “State of the Union” speech

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As Jean-Claude Juncker will deliver his final “State of the Union” speech on 12 September 2018, this is the right moment to take stock of procedural and political issues related to the speech. Valentin Kreilinger offers his five key points on #SOTEU.

1 It's not just a speech, it's a plenary debate

The speech is an opportunity for the Commission President to address the European Parliament and the wider public. He looks back on the work of the Commission over the past year and presents its priorities for next year. The speech is immediately followed by a plenary debate in the European Parliament during which the leaders of the different political groups and other MEPs take the floor.

According to the [draft agenda](#) for the plenary session on Wednesday, 12 September 2018, the speaking time for the President of the Commission (including replies) is 40 minutes. Jean-Claude Juncker has often considerably exceeded his speaking time. For the different political groups, the available time depends on their strength and amounts to 5 minutes for the Europe of Nations and Freedom group, while the European People's Party, as the largest group, receives 18 minutes. Manfred Weber, the chairman of the EPP group who has recently declared his candidacy for the post of Spitzenkandidat, will be the first parliamentarian to speak after Jean-Claude Juncker.

2 This is the 8th “State of the Union” event

The speech on the “State of the European Union” was introduced by Juncker’s predecessor, José Manuel Barroso, in 2010. It is modelled upon the “State of the Union” speech of the President of the United States, which normally takes place in late January or early February. This makes the speech a presidential element in the EU’s political system, although many Prime Ministers or Heads of State in EU Member States also hold speeches “on the state of the nation”: Jean-Claude Juncker, for example, did so when he was Prime Minister of Luxembourg. When the European Parliament is elected every five years, no such speech takes place. There was thus no speech in 2014 and there won’t be one in 2019.

3 The speech is even legally enshrined

According to the interinstitutional agreement between the Parliament and the Commission, “[i]n the first part-session of September, a State of the Union debate will be held in which the President of the Commission shall deliver an address, taking stock of the current year and looking ahead to priorities for the following years. To that end, the President of the Commission will in parallel set out in writing to Parliament the main elements guiding the preparation of the Commission Work Programme for the following year.” ([Framework Agreement](#) on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission, Annex IV, §5).

After the speech, the Commission President will send a “Letter of Intent” to the President of the European Parliament and the rotating Council Presidency (Austria). In this letter, the Commission will explain what it intends to do through legislation and other initiatives.

4 This year's speech is a milestone on the “Road to Sibiu”

Generally, the speech guides the preparation of the Commission’s Work Programme for the next year. This year, the 2019 European Parliament elections are only eight-and-a-half months away. This means that only a very limited amount of time is available to get legislative proposals adopted by the Council and the Parliament. The debate about the future of the EU is also ongoing and its leaders agreed to meet in the Romanian city of Sibiu for a major summit on 9 May 2019. This summit will take place six weeks after the scheduled date for Brexit and only two weeks before the 23-26 May European Parliament elections.

The “Roadmap for a more united, stronger and more democratic Union”, which was tabled by the European Commission at an informal dinner of Heads of State or Government in Tallinn in September 2017, is also referred to as the “Road to Sibiu”. In his “State of the Union” speech, Jean-Claude Juncker is expected to set out proposals that will have positive results for citizens by May 2019. The [Roadmap](#) states that “first decisions by unanimity on the future of Europe” should be taken at the Sibiu Summit. The plan is to adopt a declaration that contains the vision of a modern EU, relevant and appealing to citizens – and to encourage voter participation in the elections.

5 #SOTEU is usually the most-used hashtag on the day of the speech

The Commission President is not solely addressing the Members of the European Parliament, but the chamber serves a public forum from which he addresses the citizens of the entire EU. The abbreviation for “State of the European Union”, [#SOTEU](#), was a worldwide top trend last year on the day of the speech last year. From January 2017 to December 2017 around 235,000 tweets mentioned #SOTEU and the maximum number of tweets per minute was 493 tweets on 13 September 2017 at 9:42am. This indicates that the EU is able to reach citizens directly, but traditional media will also play a truly important role to cover Jean-Claude Juncker’s last “State of the Union” speech as Commission President.

Bild: European People’s Party, Jean-Claude Juncker, flickr.com, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eppofficial/13598372024/>

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