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EU's chief executive warns against 'pandemic of the unvaccinated'

Yves Herman & Jan Strupczewski / Reuters

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EU chief executive Ursula von der Leyen (Photo by Reuters)

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STRASBOURG, France (Sept 15): The pace of vaccination against Covid-19 must be quickened to avert "a pandemic of the unvaccinated", the European Union's chief executive said on Wednesday, also urging countries around the globe to step up the fight against climate change.

Ursula von der Leyen's second 'state of the union' address as European Commission president comes after two years that have tested the bloc's resilience, with the coronavirus pandemic, a related sharp economic downturn, and strains over Brexit and the rule of law in eastern member states.

In a broad-brush speech setting out the bloc's priorities for the year ahead, von der Leyen also listed ambitious goals, including technological independence for the EU, but warned that "the next year will be another test of character".



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Announcing a new donation of another 200 million vaccine doses by the middle of next year for third countries — on top of a previous commitment for 250 million jabs — von der Leyen said she was worried by the varying vaccination rates within the EU.

"Let's do everything possible (so) that this does not turn into a pandemic of the unvaccinated," she told EU lawmakers in Strasbourg, France.

Nineteen EU economies will regain their pre-pandemic size this year, with the others following next year, she said.

'Closing the climate finance gap'

The former German defence minister has put tackling climate change at the top of her agenda, with bold steps for the EU to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, along with a digital transformation of its economy.

Von der Leyen pledged to increase financial support to help poorer countries fight climate change and adapt to its impacts by an additional 4 billion euros until 2027, and called on the United States to likewise do more.

"But we expect the United States and our partners to step up too. This is vital, because closing the climate finance gap together, the US and the European Union, would be such a strong signal for global climate leadership," she said.

Climate finance is expected to be a decisive issue at the United Nations' COP26 summit in November, where world leaders will attempt to unlock commitments to cut emissions faster and stave off catastrophic climate change.

Call to bolster defence



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of Afghanistan.

Von der Leyen said the EU should be able to intervene militarily without the help of the United States but has lacked the political will to do so.

"The more fundamental issue is, why has this not worked in the past. You can have the most advanced forces in the world but if you are never prepared to use them, what use are they?" she said. "What has held us back until now is not just shortfalls of capacity, it is a lack of political will."

Wearing a mask emblazoned with the EU flag's circle of 12 gold stars, von der Leyen greeted lawmakers at the assembly with fist bumps ahead of her speech.

The first female president of the EU's executive, she promised a new legal act to combat violence against women in the bloc and new legal protection to strengthen journalists' safety.

Her objective, von der Leyen said, is "a union that is both beautifully unique and uniquely beautiful".

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