

Opening keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the Antwerp European Industry Summit

Antwerp, 11 February 2026

“Check against delivery”

Thank you, Dr. Kadri and Dr. Kamieth,

Prime Minister De Wever,

Chancellor Stocker,

Prime Minister Schoof,

Minister-President Diependaele,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is good to be back with you for the third time – here at the European Industry Summit. Last year, at the beginning of the new mandate, I came to share our agenda. It is shaped by the Draghi and Letta report. One core element is the Clean Industrial Deal, our joint plan for decarbonisation and competitiveness. The year since, we have rolled up our sleeves, and the results are starting to show. So let me begin with some good news. We more than doubled investments in industrial transitions – from EUR 52 billion in 2024 to EUR 115 billion in 2025. We already made proposals to cut administrative costs for companies by EUR 15 billion every year. We launched a EUR-1.8-billion Battery Booster, to scale up European battery manufacturing. We concluded new trade deals and approved 60 new projects for critical raw materials – to ensure secure supply for European industry. These are just a few examples. More is on the way. You demanded real change, And Europe is changing.

We must go faster, because I know that the global pressure on you is growing even more. We have all seen the news coming from here in Antwerp and elsewhere in Europe. Whenever I hear about an investment leaving Europe, or about a factory at risk of closing, my first thought goes to the workers and families, who might lose a vital source of income. But I also think about what this means for Europe as a whole. Your industry is the industry of industries. The energy, the steel, the chemicals you produce – underpin entire value chains. The technologies you develop are vital to Europe’s independence. So together we must secure your future in our continent.

And Europe has a lot to offer. We remain frontrunners in many areas of the clean transition. We have built world-class value chains in clean energy, pharmaceuticals, advanced manufacturing, and so much more. But competition is intensifying, and so is unfair competition. We see massive subsidies, state-backed overcapacity and market distortions. This makes it increasingly difficult for European industry to compete on a level playing field. China now exports almost twice as much clean tech as we do. This is not just a trade statistic. It is a signal of where industrial capacity is concentrating and of how quickly global market positions can shift. So the urgency could not be greater. We are fighting for our place in the new global economy, and this means together we must make a strong business case for you to choose Europe. Because let me be clear: your future belongs in Europe.

So how are we strengthening the business case for Europe? You need speed, scale, power and new markets to compete in an unrelenting world. Speed – to expand production and grow. Scale – to

mobilise more investment and attract capital. And power – that is, abundant and affordable energy. And we need new markets to strengthen and de-risk our supply chains. These are the priorities I would like to focus on today.

Let me start with speed and new markets. In 2025 we concluded trade agreements with Mexico, Indonesia and Switzerland. And it has been an even faster start to this year. Last month, I signed our trade agreement with Mercosur – a breakthrough after 25 years of negotiations. And two weeks ago, I was in India to sign the largest free trade agreement ever. The mother of all deals; a market of two billion people, 25% of global GDP. It grants Europe unique access to the fastest growing large economy – a clear ‘first mover’ advantage for our businesses. These deals will open new export markets for you and secure your supply of critical minerals. These are benefits you will feel in your supply chains – and on your balance sheets.

But we have also to speed up at home. In a global race, delay means lost investments. Today, it can take longer to permit a new factory than to build it. Energy projects can wait years for approvals, even when financing is ready. This must change, and we have started to change it. For instance, our Wind Package is cutting permitting times by two thirds. We are making grid connections faster – addressing a critical bottleneck for many of you. And we are making business easier and faster across the board. As you know, we have set the target to cut red tape in this mandate by EUR 37 billion, that is 25% on the European level. Ten omnibuses are on their way; they are worth EUR 15 billion of cuts of red tape. So far so good, but I am not satisfied with their speed. Of the ten omnibuses we proposed last year, only three have reached their destination. For the other seven omnibuses, we count on the European Parliament and Member States to share the same sense of urgency. And the work on European level will go on, but we must also look at the national level. There is too much gold-plating – that is the extra layers of national legislation that just make your life harder and create new barriers in our Single Market. Let me give an example: A truck in Belgium can weigh up to 44 tonnes. But if you cross the border with France, it can only carry up to 40 tonnes. In June 2023, we proposed legislation to harmonize this. Almost two years later, this is still under discussion by the co-legislators. Another example: Shipping waste from one Member State to another should be efficient, easy and quick. But different national practices make it extremely complex. Some Member States, for instance, only accept correspondence by fax. It can take several months for traders to get green light from the authorities depending on the different rules of different Member States. So if we are serious about simplification, we must crackdown on gold-plating and fragmentation. It is time for a deep regulatory housecleaning – at all levels.

This is also true when it comes to the European Single Market, our greatest economic asset. Here, we are leaving too much potential on the table. Barriers inside Europe hurt us more than tariffs from outside. We must therefore complete the Single Market if Europe wants to stay competitive in a world of giants. That is why we will propose, next month, the 28th regime. The aim is to create a new truly European company structure, we call it EU Inc. A single and simple set of rules that will apply seamlessly all over our Union, so that business can operate across Member States much more easily. Our entrepreneurs will be able to register a company in any Member State within 48 hours – fully online. EU Inc will ease access to finance in the start-up and scale-up phases, enable smooth cross-border operations and allow rapid wind-down – if a company fails. This is the speed we need, and this is ‘Europe made easy’.

But as we simplify rules and speed up permitting, we must also accelerate the uptake of your clean products in Europe. Only a surge in demand will make a clear case for investment. This is why creating lead markets is so important. And public procurement is a powerful lever. It amounts to 14% of our GDP. This is massive financial firepower – controlled by European governments. Too often, our public buyers have to take the subsidized foreign products, instead of the high-quality European alternatives. That is homegrown value we are leaving on the table. This will be a central focus of the Industrial Accelerator Act that we are putting forward later this month. We will introduce specific EU content requirements for strategic sectors. This also includes low-carbon requirements in public procurement. And of course, this will be based on rigorous economic analysis. It will create a stable demand for your industries, and it will kick off a virtuous cycle of growth. So let us direct more European money to our European industries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This leads to my second point – about scaling up investment. You urgently need better access to low-cost capital. The structural solution to this is to build a deep and liquid capital market. This is the essence of our proposal for a Savings and Investments Union. But as global competition intensifies, public investments are also vital to catalyse private money. So let me focus on this. Last year, I came to Antwerp with a promise. I said we would change our rules for State Aid to your sectors, to make it faster and more predictable. This is exactly what we have done. And in response, Member States have already mobilised more than EUR 21 billion in State Aid to clean industrial projects.

The next step is to channel more resources from our Emissions Trading System into your industries. ETS brings clear benefits. Since it was introduced in 2005, emissions dropped by 39%, while the economy in sectors covered by ETS has grown by 71%. This shows that decarbonisation and competitiveness can go hand in hand, And revenues of ETS of over EUR 260 billion were generated. On the European level, 100% of these revenues were re-invested in innovation. The EUR-100-billion Industrial Decarbonisation Bank is a good example. Next week, we are concluding the first pilot auction worth EUR 1 billion. It will finance the decarbonisation of how you fire furnaces, melt metals or mix chemicals. And more support to your industries will be available once the Bank is operational.

But Member States invest less than 5% of ETS revenues in industrial decarbonisation. I believe it is high time, that Member States step up and match our level of support. Channelling more ETS revenues back to industry will therefore be a core focus of the upcoming reform of the Emissions Trading System. Because these resources come from the industry and they must be reinvested in the industry.

My third and final point is reliable, affordable energy. This is central to making the business case for Europe, especially for the energy-intensive sectors. Prices are still too high and too volatile. We know the reason for this: gas drives prices up, renewables and nuclear drive prices down. The good news is we are well positioned to lower costs. In 2025, for the first time ever, we produced more electricity from solar and wind than from all fossil fuels. Our battery storage capacity has more than doubled in the past two years. And in the past two years, nuclear – our largest single energy source – increased. But more is needed to stabilise and lower prices. The next few years are crucial. Gas prices are expected to go down in the next three-four years. We should use this time to invest in a low-carbon energy system, that will protect us when fossil fuel prices go up again. For that, we need the infrastructure for a true Energy Union. Price spikes in one country could often be avoided if cheaper energy could flow

across the border. We have a blueprint to address this, the European Grids Package. As part of it, we are fast-tracking the construction of Energy Highways across Europe. We started last month, with an agreement on the Bornholm Energy Island. It will connect offshore wind from the Baltic Sea to the Danish and German national grids. So it will transform the Baltic wind from a national resource into shared European power. We will tackle all bottlenecks – one by one. The goal is simple. Clean energy must flow freely all across our Union so that cheap energy can flow where it is needed, when it is needed.

In addition, we must drastically modernise our energy taxation. While energy costs are going down, national taxes on energy are going up. And the taxes that industry pays on electricity are 15 times higher than taxes on gas. This is just wrong. So we are working with national governments to reduce the tax burden and bring prices down.

Finally, we must make greater use of power-purchase agreements and contracts for difference. We need them in all Member States, and not only for large companies. Because locking in energy prices protects you from volatility and lets you plan for the long-term.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We need everyone in our Union to help move them forward. Our proposals are on the table. We need national governments and the European Parliament to play their part. And we need you, the business and trade union leaders, to keep advocating for bold action. This summit is about listening to your priorities, your proposals. And tomorrow, at the informal meeting of the European Council, I will discuss with leaders how to match the pace you need. It is time to further accelerate. So that you can invest in your future right here in Europe.

Thank you for having me again, and long live Europe.