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Knowing your audience: the State of the Union and its discontents

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Introduction

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen delivered the annual [State of the Union](#) speech (SOTEU) on 16 September 2026. It was the kind of characteristically restrained public communication one is accustomed to from technocratic EU institutions, but the question of whether it was able to inspire confidence at a difficult time for the continent is certainly open.

The two authors came away with different and at times orthogonal perspectives. One reading is that the speech was somewhat disordered: a worthwhile effort to name Europe's problems that crumbled under the collective weight of individual challenges. A more generous reading is that the breadth of the speech speaks to the nature of the EU as an ambitious democratic workhorse of an institution, perhaps the last of its kind.

Yet the authors are in agreement that the EU has also made great strides in important areas during the past year. While the US significantly cut aid to Ukraine, [Europe stepped in](#) and proved that it could, at least for the time being, provide sufficient support. 2025–26 also saw the EU sign a key Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with [Mercosur](#) and conclude FTA negotiations with [India](#), adding true heft to its self-perception as a major trading bloc. On technology, the EU's regulation-first stance was also partially vindicated in the days leading up to the speech, as talks of a looming AI-led catastrophe broke containment in Silicon Valley.

All these factors should have made the 16 September address one of quiet celebration, with the EU asserting itself as a committed, serious and visionary partner for every entity seeking to defend a rules-based world order. The question of whether or not the Commission President truly achieved this has divided the authors, and so it is worth critically examining the scope of the address.

The SOTEU as an institution

One could argue that Commission President von der Leyen delivered an address of the kind that leaves its audience with more questions than answers. The budgetary elephant in the room was not adequately addressed, and a series of promises could soon create more headaches for an EU that is struggling to deliver.

Taking the Commission President at her word, one might paint a different picture. She is, after all, correct in her assessment that a series of crises plaguing the EU Member States require an array of increasingly difficult responses. Where her speech fell short in articulating exactly what the EU is capable of, this was partially an issue of timing: negotiations with China, extraordinarily difficult ones at that, are ongoing, and there is little appetite for yet another declaration of a trade war in 2026; similarly, on the AI front, calls for a "[pacing of the frontier](#)" began only days before her speech, and it remains unclear what the future holds; on housing, the Commission had just tabled a proposal a week earlier – not exactly the time for victory declarations.

In some ways, this is also precisely what is to be expected from the SOTEU as an institution. The practice is relatively new, established by the [2010 Framework Agreement between the European Parliament and the European Commission](#), which stipulates:

“Each year in 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.”

It is thus no coincidence that this instrument is described as an instrument of “[ex-ante accountability](#)”, meant to inspire debate in the European Parliament and set the agenda for the coming year. To a lesser extent, it is also supposed to [detail the achievements of the past year](#) – of which there were many – something that was notably absent this time around. There is therefore a conceptual problem: although the SOTEU is modelled after its long-established American counterpart, Commission President von der Leyen cannot lay claim on the same kind of executive authority that a US President might command.

There is good reason, then, to view the SOTEU as a political pulse-check, rather than a series of policy announcements. Even so, this exercise of “self-diagnosis” is worth scrutinising, and perhaps even criticising for its inability to energise an uninspired policy audience that wishes for a clearer path forward.

Who is the SOTEU for?

The SOTEU is not intended solely for the ears of eager policymakers and EU-bubble lobbyists; if that were the case, it would certainly not be televised, nor would it contain frequent interruptions to showcase the achievements, trials and tribulations of average EU citizens. But in practice, it is only a select few individuals who tune in.

A more critical appraisal might then instead focus on the question of who this address is truly for. In an interesting nod to the EU’s all-pervasive, if often invisible, impact on daily life, the speech could be described as suitably maximalist – covering topics from climate change to energy, from trade to AI, to conflicts in Ukraine and in the Middle East. This kind of speech, shaped by the myriad interest groups all competing for a handful of words in the Commission President’s address, potentially betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the SOTEU’s core audience.

The SOTEU is, in truth, followed by a tiny minority of the EU’s 450 million inhabitants, mostly those familiar with its workings and how its impact remains diffuse by design, relying on its Member States to keep everything functioning smoothly for individual citizens. By overlooking its core audience, the address failed in its core duty of giving a clear direction to the policymakers and thinkers critical to keeping the EU relevant in today’s world. The absence of strong European instincts among Member State leaders, who at times see the EU’s influence [as a hindrance](#), places an even greater burden on the Commission President to deliver an inspiring speech.

President von der Leyen's projection as a presidential authority also sharpens concerns over increasing centralisation of power during her two terms, with other Commissioners and their cabinets repeatedly complaining about insufficient access. The [seemingly unplanned proposal](#) of Associate Membership to Canada may have inadvertently provided a window into this growing centralisation.

Canada and the future of trade

On the policy front, the address similarly lends itself to some healthy scepticism. The biggest announcement of the speech was unequivocally the EU's intention to welcome Canada as its first-ever Associate Member. This is a mutually beneficial move, and a declaration by two economic powerhouses that the US cannot bully sovereign actors into submission, either economically or militarily.

The traumatic experience of dealing with a belligerent Trump administration has shaken both the Europeans and the Canadians to a degree that is perhaps lost in the constant flurry of news updates. Yet, it is important to recall that as soon as January 2026, Danish soldiers were [stationed in Greenland](#) and actively prepared to fend off an American invasion; these are deep wounds that will take years to heal. For the Canadians, who have had to contend with their own share of aggressive rhetoric, the [latest bout of trade wars](#) only served to drive them [closer to the EU](#).

It is tempting to rationalise the actions of the Trump administration as calibrated attacks that will one day yield benefits for the American public – which is how the latest [Greenland deal](#) is being interpreted in the American President's circles – but the lesson here is evidently different: both Canada and the EU presume that, despite the challenges ahead, there will be significantly more political stability, and appetite for consensus-building on each of the two sides, as compared to the US. And this logic similarly extends to the partners that the EU is approaching on the global stage, including, of course, India.

Though one might fear a world of autarky and lack of cooperation, it is increasingly evident that there are trade relations that will withstand the test of the flailing hegemon. And though partners like India may not receive similar “Associate Member” offers in the foreseeable future, the EU is signalling that these are not temporary measures.

A more cynical read, however, might be that floating an “Associate Membership” when the *EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement* (CETA) remains unratified by 10 countries perfectly encapsulates the EU's tendency to announce, rather than to act. This kind of criticism is applicable to other areas as well, including the EU–India FTA. For a trade deal over two decades in the making, and one that potentially could change the EU's ability to exert influence in the Indo-Pacific, it is unfortunate that the deal with India was only mentioned only once – in passing, at that. No mention was made of [Prime Minister Modi's forthcoming visit](#) to formalise the agreement, nor did the audience get the sense that there are trusted partners the EU can rely on in this world.

As such, this speech was a missed opportunity for the EU to build confidence among its partners by presenting these deals as major achievements, or otherwise showing excitement for growth and progress to come. Instead, through hedging language and omissions of its successes and partnerships, the President might have inadvertently revealed a dangerous truism: the EU sees its influence in the world as being on the wane, despite its efforts to the contrary.

AI and the climate: “tipping points of our time”

President von der Leyen had a chance to do a victory lap; for years now, the EU has been criticised for regulating AI too fast, for missing out on the benefits of the massive (infrastructure) rollout. Yet she was notably restrained in her assessment in this regard, while acknowledging that AI is one of the two “tipping points of our time” – along with climate change.

Over the last few months, as [incident](#) after [incident](#) has proven just how dangerous it can be to let the frontier labs decide where the limits lie, calls for AI safety have only become louder. The Commission President has taken this new order to heart and one can be reasonably confident that there will be significant movement on this front. More importantly, President von der Leyen is not throwing in the towel; she is not calling for a complete halt to frontier model progress. Instead, she wishes for Europe to increase its computing capacity and for new mechanisms to channel capital into AI companies.

Though this is the right instinct for an EU that has [stopped innovating](#), it is worth noting that the frontier AI labs have been explicit in naming the perception that they are in a race as the primary cause for their conduct. EU leaders would do well to support a slowdown of AI development at this particular moment in time. To her credit, the President seems to have endorsed this idea, but the institutional ramifications are still unclear.

Despite the President’s careful navigation of the first tipping point, it is noteworthy that she largely failed to deliver on the second one. The rhetoric around climate change was disappointing, and much more compressed in its ambition. As many have [pointed out](#), the EU’s rapid move to increase defence spending – now coupled with the President’s insistence that AI is on par with climate change as a defining question of our time – can only lead to one question: why is there no comparable funding for the fight against climate change?

The President’s named measures are focused on resilience, insurance, preparedness, and adaptation, signalling that the EU could quietly be transitioning into a more defensive approach, preparing to live with the consequences of the climate catastrophe. The powerful imagery presented by the President – of how Europe’s rivers such as the Danube are drying up and how the EU requires more preparedness to fight forest fires – then naturally falls flat.

The planned [Integrated Framework for European Climate Resilience and Risk Management](#), due next month, also displays similar short-sightedness in promising to identify and protect 100 of Europe’s most vulnerable areas. Beyond the dystopian sight of EU members horse-trading with one another to have their landscapes included on this list for extra EU protection, the idea betrays a clear misunderstanding of interdependence in biological ecosystems. Rather than

treating the symptoms of 100 vulnerable areas, the EU would do well to simply respect the interconnectedness of biological forces, and seek out tough conversations on the ripple effect of environmental changes, which transcend geography as borne out by the recent changes in El Niño.

The President spoke of two tipping points requiring vastly different kinds of responses. If one tipping point requires a complete halt and the other an acceleration of efforts, it can sometimes feel as if the two were not properly labelled.

What this speech was really about: the security threat

Ultimately, the SOTEU in 2026 had one central theme: security and the safety of Europe. The EU is struggling to define what counts as “hybrid” when it comes to its confrontation with Russia, as incidents such as the [recent attempted attack in Leipzig](#) seem to do away with toeing the line. The Commission President noted that “[hybrid threats facing Europe are less and less hybrid and less and less threats](#)”, as [drones invade European airspace](#) weekly, and critical infrastructure is constantly under threat. For many in Europe, the [moment they had feared has come](#), and the continent is engaged in a battle for its very soul.

Of all the initiatives mentioned, one can be confident that the array of security-focused measures, like the new [European Security Council](#), is the likeliest to receive the attention and funding they deserve. The focus on strategic enablers like air and missile defence, air-to-air refuelling, and space/cyber capabilities only proves that these are well-thought-out proposals with concrete ideas behind them. In contrast to the nebulous idea that “one should do something about the climate or AI”, the Europeans have begun actively preparing themselves for a [potential Russian incursion](#) into their territory; they have something to measure progress against, even if it is in the form of war-games. The language employed by the Commission President, as well as other European leaders as of late, reflects precisely this kind of concrete planning.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the EU sees itself as a project of peace, and consequently employs highly technical language, focusing on institutions and policies that aim to keep the continent as far away as possible from war. The President’s insistence that the EU develop a “[counter-hybrid playbook](#)” to address incidents that do not meet the threshold for conventional armed aggression is, on the one hand exactly the kind of language that many expected on other issues, and on the other hand the sort of classification that will provide the EU with enough leeway before it has to utter only the latter part in “hybrid war”.

What the speech means for the EU–India relationship

For a country that has just concluded negotiations on a major Free Trade Agreement with the EU, and one that received a single mention throughout the speech, there is admittedly little to go off of in assessing the implications for the EU–India relationship. But India’s absence should not be interpreted as a lack of importance or relevance to the European project. Unlike other

partners or adversaries that feature heavily in the EU's current story of itself, India enjoys the privilege of being a trusted non-controversial partner.

What is important for India in this context is that the EU once more signalled that it takes its own security seriously, and that it is seeking partners across the world who can assist the Member States in thinking through the unique challenges it is facing. This is an opportunity for the two sides to come closer together, building trust around a shared need for stability in the world.

But it is also an opportunity for India to see the glaring gaps in Europe's response to the crises of our time, and continue to provide opportunities for collaboration where European ambition falls short, such as in the fight against climate change. A true partnership, in this sense, is one where both sides offer a working vision of the future based on their respective strengths, saving one another from the kind of solipsistic, short-term thinking that plagues much of the world today.

And so, it is perhaps useful to once more ask oneself the question of who this speech was truly for. For perhaps the most important audience member of this speech was not in the European Parliament; they were likely not even on the European continent; they were not flicking through the channels on Chinese or American television; instead, maybe they sat in an office cubicle in Delhi or Mumbai, seeking clarity on how to advance one of the most important relationships in 21st-century international relations.

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