

On September 14, 2016 Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, delivered his second State of the European Union Speech (SOTEU) before the European Parliament (EP). The SOTEU Address, followed by a debate in the EP, is meant as an institutional occasion in which the the Commission President openly addresses the EU's past achievements and the most pressing challenges that the Union faces, and sets the EU's priorities for the year to come.

A great variety of topics

The institution of the SOTEU in 2010 can be interpreted in terms of a [top-down legitimization strategy of the EU](#). It was indeed embedded within the overall Lisbon strategy directed at providing more democracy and transparency in the EU, as a way to overcome what some commentators have described as [a lack of "communicative discourse" within the EU](#). The choice of the name itself, recalling the traditional State of the Union Address held yearly since 1790 by US Presidents, suggests that the SOTEU was aimed at providing a symbolically significant setting for communication.

The SOTEU 2016 confirms Juncker's 2015 choice to move away from the centrality of the "Economic space" visible in Barroso's speeches, in which this category was among the most prominent, if not the predominant one.

Juncker himself, however, in his latest speech, highlighted a prominent difference between the EU and the US settings:

This is not the United States of America, where the President gives a State of the Union speech to both Houses of Congress, and millions of citizens follow his every word, live on television. In comparison to this, our State of the Union moment here in Europe shows very visibly the incomplete nature of our Union. I am speaking today in front of the European Parliament. And separately, on Friday, I will meet with the national leaders in Bratislava.

The SOTEU 2016 addressed a great variety of topics, and introduces the EU’s top priorities: investing in young people, job-seekers, and new businesses; investing in a development plan for Africa, aimed also at alleviating the causes of the economic immigrants influx; investing in connectivity, digital jobs and free wireless access in main public centres; investing in security through the institution of a European Border and Coast Guard; supporting artists, journalists and authors, as the core part of our European culture. Table 1 compares the latest SOTEU’s contents with that of previous speeches.

SOTEU	Main topics
Barroso 2010 <i>Untitled</i>	Common response to the crisis: modernize EU social market economy Priorities: growth to promote freedom, security and justice
Barroso 2011 <i>“European Renewal”</i>	Economic crisis: restoring confidence Priorities: stability; responsibility/discipline; growth Target: irresponsible MSs
Barroso 2012 <i>Untitled</i>	Political union (Federation) as a means to Economic Union Priorities: Economic, social and political crisis Target: unreliable MSs; populism
Barroso 2013 <i>Untitled</i>	Economic crisis: positive signals, more to be done Priorities: growth as a means to employment Target: general detractors
Juncker 2015 <i>“Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity”</i>	Common solutions to refugee crisis and Greece Priorities: solidarity; social values and rights as means to economic growth; political role of EU institutions Target: Un-European Union?; general detractors
Juncker 2016 <i>“Towards a better Europe - a Europe that protects, empowers and defends”</i>	Overcoming fragmentation Priorities: preserving the European way of life; employment and social equality; growth Target: MSs; national governments

Table 1: The six SOTEU speeches (2010-2016)

Source: Updated from [Pansardi and Battezzarri \(2016\)](#)

Continuity, but with greater pragmatism

In terms of language, the speech resembles the one pronounced by Juncker in 2015, which marked [discontinuity with those delivered by former President Barroso in previous years](#).

Whereas Barroso’s speeches relied greatly on technical-bureaucratic language, Juncker employs a plainer language, which seems directed to a more general audience. Moreover, the 2016 speech resembles the previous one in seeking to establish an emotional connection between the speaker and his audience—although it does so in a visibly less systematic way. The only evident [mythopoietic narrative](#) concerns the call for more transnational solidarity:

Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together. [...] I am convinced much more solidarity is needed. But I also know that solidarity must be given voluntarily. It must come from the heart. It cannot be forced. We often show solidarity most readily when faced with emergencies. When the Portuguese hills were burning, Italian planes doused the flames. When floods cut off the power in Romania, Swedish generators turned the lights back on. When thousands of refugees arrived on Greek shores, Slovakian tents provided shelter.

Overall, the SOTEU 2016 seems to show a more pragmatic stance than its predecessor, [in which a strong and diffused legitimizing narrative was presented in relation to the call for solidarity in managing the refugee crisis](#). A qualitative content analysis of the speeches, applying the methodology expounded in [Pansardi and Battezzorri \(2016\)](#), confirms this assumption. The higher pragmatic content of the SOTEU 2016 in comparison to the previous year is demonstrated by the higher rate of references to the “goals and consequences” of EU action, as shown in Figure 1.

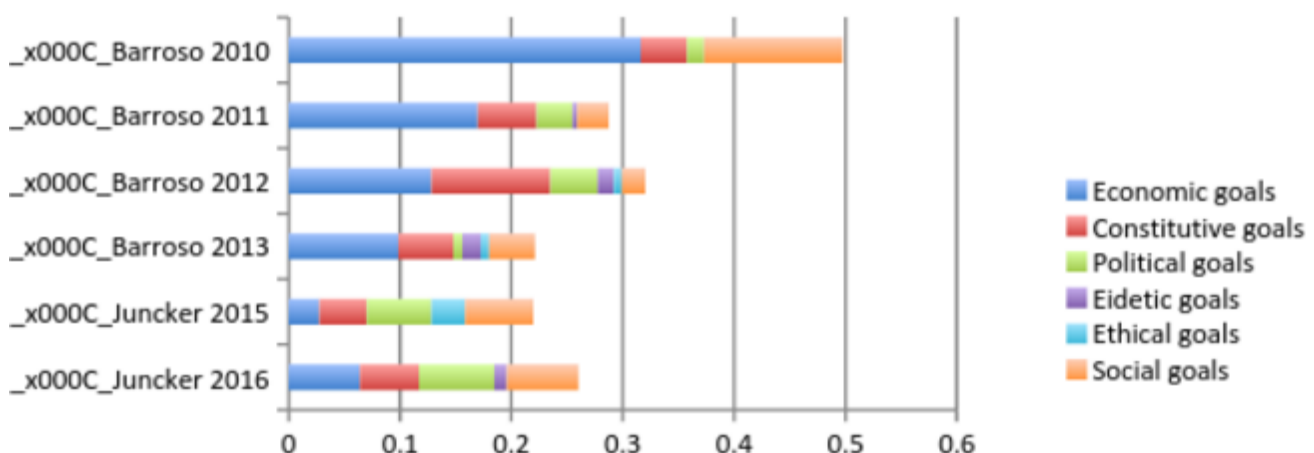


Figure 1: Goals and consequences of EU political action in the SOTEU speeches (2010-2016)

Source: Updated from [Pansardi and Battezzorri \(2016\)](#)

The general content of SOTEU 2016 (Figure 2), moreover, is characterized by a predominance of references to the “EU political space”, which covers 47.15% of the total of the coded references—with 8.3% belonging to the sub-category of “Negative evaluation of the EU polity, leaders, institution” and 6.79% to that of “Political goals and consequences”—and to the “Intellectual space” (22.63%). Predominant in this latter category is the reference to “Values” (19.61%—see Figure 3), which covers almost the total of it, with the remaining part evenly split between the sub-categories of “Eidetic goals” (1.13%) and “Ethical goals” (1.51%). The SOTEU 2016, in sum, confirms Juncker’s 2015 choice to move away from the centrality of the “Economic space” visible in Barroso’s speeches, in which this category was among the most prominent, if not the predominant one.

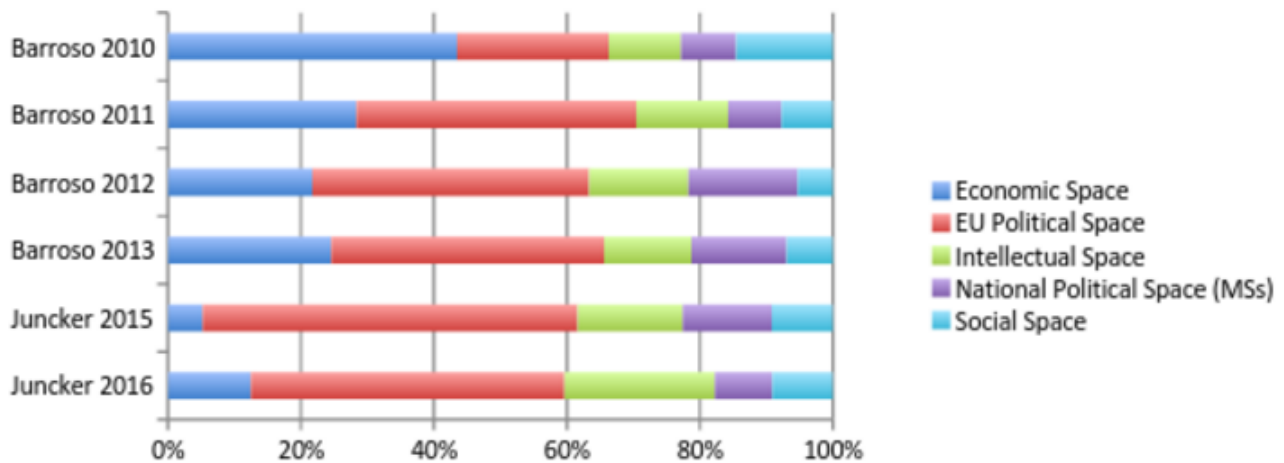


Figure 2: Frequency of references to the five spaces, SOTEU speeches (2010-2016)

Source: Updated from [Pansardi and Battezzorri \(2016\)](#)

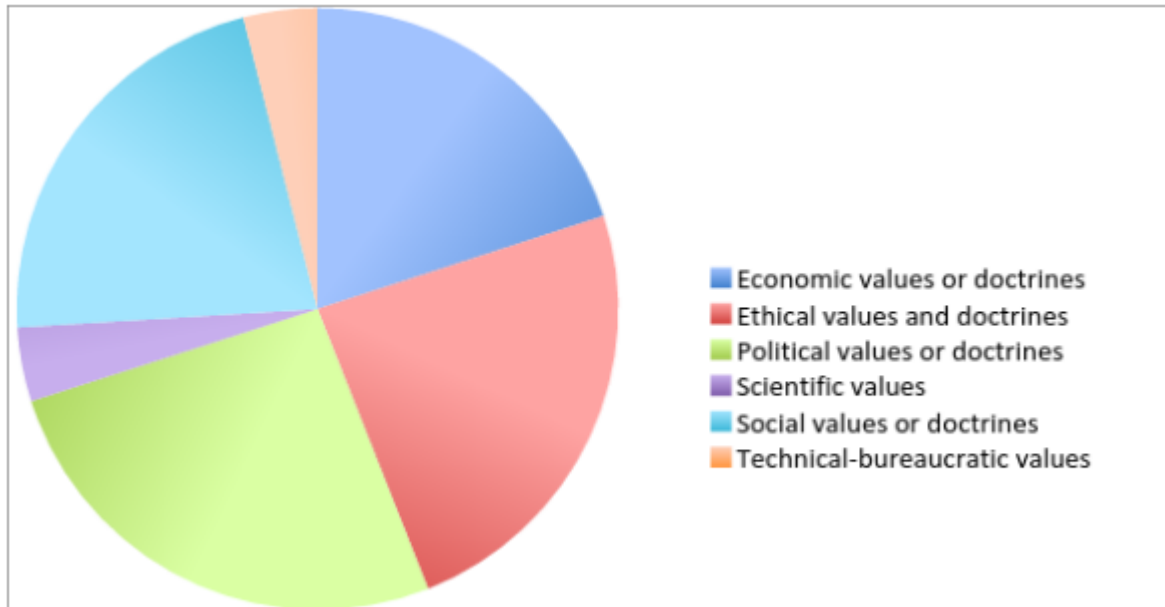


Figure 3: Frequency of references to the six values categories, SOTEU speeches (2010-2016)

Source: Updated from [Pansardi and Battezzorre \(2016\)](#)

Less rhetoric, more business

Overall, compared to the 2015 speech, Juncker's latest SOTEU was less rhetorical and heartfelt, and more clearly aimed at listing and motivating the Commission's priorities—as a way to anticipate the Commission's work programme for the coming year. The SOTEU 2016 was less emotional and more pragmatic than the previous one; it was all in all an informative speech.

it may be exactly the exacerbation of the EU political crisis and the consequent need of the Commission and its President to propose themselves as a mediators rather than leaders, to have led to a less intense, more business-like speech.

The SOTEU 2015 received mixed reviews from commentators, some of whom perceived it as [too rhetorical in pleading with Europeans to remember their history and open their hearts and doors to refugees](#). But what it is still to be fully defined is the real function of the SOTEU. The quality of a speech can only be assessed in relation to the function that it is called to perform. In the foregoing we have mentioned that the institution of the SOTEU has been explained as part of an overall top-down legitimation strategy on the part of the EU. To the

extent that this is the case, the SOTEU should indeed be more than just an informative speech: its function should also be that of making people feel that they belong together. This was the direction of last year's speech.

On the one hand, while in this year's even more dramatic setting some could have expected an even more emotional speech, it may be exactly the exacerbation of the EU political crisis (which saw its acme in the Brexit referendum), and the consequent need of the Commission and its President to propose themselves as mediators rather than leaders, to have led to a less intense, more business-like speech.

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