

The State of the Union (SoU) address is a speech delivered each year, in September, by the President of the Commission before the European Parliament in plenary session. It was introduced by the 2010 Framework Agreement on the Relations between the European Parliament and the Commissions as a way to foster more transparency and democracy in the EU political process. In the speech, the Commission president is called to present the priorities of the Union for the year to come, discuss the achievements of the previous years and to address the most pressing challenges facing the EU. The SoU represents, in sum, a moment of public reflection on the priorities, identity and future of the European Union.

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The need for more open settings of communication among EU institutions and between EU institutions and the general public has been highlighted by several scholars and commentators. According to [Vivien Schmidt](#), for instance, the decision-making structure of the Union often results in a lot of doing that is, however, not accompanied by a comparable amount of saying, namely communication and public justification of the decisions made. The discourse of EU political leaders is, Schmidt continues, often only coordinative, that is held among political actors bargaining and negotiating on policies and decisions. Much less is seen in terms of communicative discourse, in which ideas and decisions are explained by the leaders to the public. This lack of saying creates in turn a lack of being (i.e. a sense of European identity):

The lack of communication about EU activity naturally has had an impact on legitimacy, since saying needs to be added to the processes of doing in order to ensure that the actions of the EU are not just acceptable but also accepted.

Juncker and Barroso's discourse

It is too early to say whether the establishment of the State of the Union address will be able to effectively promote communication and identity creation in the European polity. However,

an analysis of the SoU speech delivered by President Jean-Claude Juncker on 9th September 2015, and of the main differences between Juncker's speech and those of his predecessor Barroso, reveals some promising steps in this direction.

Since the introduction of the SoU, five such addresses have been delivered: four by Barroso (2010; 2011; 2012; 2013) and one by Juncker (2015). Expectedly the predominant topic throughout the five speeches is the analysis and the evaluation of possible solutions to the "social, economic, and political crisis" (SoU 2012) affecting the EU. Along with hindering the pursuit of the EU's main economic goals ("growth" and "competiveness") and deepening social problems ("diffused poverty", "unemployment"), the crisis is described in the speeches as producing and exacerbating political problems concerning the future of the EU, such as a generalized mistrust in the EU institutions (SoU 2011; 2012), the rise of populist and nationalist movements all over Europe (SoU 2011; 2012; 2015), and the erratic and often unreliable behaviour of certain member states vis-à-vis decisions made at the EU level (SoU 2011; 2012). All speeches dwell on the problematic political dimension of the crisis, which has had repercussions on the unity of the continent and given rise to what [Maurizio Ferrera](#) has recently described as processes of "de-conciliation" in EU politics and political economy.

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These similarities in content notwithstanding, Juncker's speech departs from his predecessor's in its substance as well as its argumentative strategy. The main topic addressed in Juncker's speech is the refugee crisis, to which Juncker devotes almost the entire first half of his address. Other topics include the agreement on the Greek bailout, the UK position within the Union, and issues of international politics, with particular reference to Ukraine.

A first important element of discontinuity emerging in Juncker's speech is the latter's language and tone. Whereas Barroso's speeches frequently used technical-bureaucratic language—including, for instance, names or even just acronyms of specific financial proposals and plans—and gave, generally, hardly any space to rhetorical figures and

emotions, Juncker's speech makes only limited reference to the details of EU legislations. All in all, Barroso's speeches give the impression of being especially aimed at an audience of insiders like public officials and functionaries. Juncker's speech, by contrast, seems to be directed—or at least accessible—to a more general audience. Moreover, Juncker's tone in some of the speech's passages presents highly emotional traits:

I do not want, Mr. President, to create any illusions that the refugee crisis will be over any time soon. It will not. And we have to know that. But pushing back boats from piers, setting fire to refugee camps, or turning a blind eye to poor and helpless people: that is not Europe. Europe that is the baker in Kos who gives away his bread to hungry and weary souls. Europe is the students in Munich and in Passau who bring clothes for the new arrivals at the train station. That's those at the Munich rail station applauding and welcoming refugees. The Europe I want to live in is illustrated by those who are helping. The Europe I don't want to live in is a Europe refusing those who are in need.

Values vs. effectiveness

The above quote exemplifies also a second aspect of discontinuity between Barroso's and Juncker's speeches. Striking in Juncker's speech is his insistence on defining "Europe" in terms of European values, as a way to provide clear boundaries between what Europe is and what it is not; to provide, in other words, a sense of European identity to which citizens may relate. This aspect recognizable also in Juncker's references to the European common history and memory, to the recognition of the common experience of the European peoples and to the extensive references to the continent's political community ("European peoples", "European citizens", "European voters") as the source of EU power and legitimacy. Granted, some references to the political community can be found in Barroso's speeches too. In this case, however, European citizens and electors are described less as the source of the EU power than as "beneficiaries" of EU decisions. The legitimacy of the EU is thus upheld, in Barroso's case, in terms of the EU's capacity to produce "good decisions" for its citizens, resembling what [Fritz Scharpf](#) has described as "output" legitimacy.

A third final element of discontinuity concerns Juncker's choice to "bring politics back in" the EU's public discourse. Whereas Barroso's speeches resemble the European Commission's general communicative mode, [described by Schmidt](#) as depoliticizing language and presenting initiatives with "neutral" and "reasonable" arguments, Juncker's speech includes political arguments as the core of its communicative strategy both explicitly and implicitly. For one thing, Juncker openly refers to the centrality of politics by recalling his own electoral

Juncker's State of the Union: towards more communicative discourse in the EU?

By Pamela Pansardi

mandate. For another, he presents the EU's current problems as needing a political rather than technical or bureaucratic solution. Even when not explicitly stated, politics is clearly present in Juncker's recognition of the existence of conflict among different positions on how to solve the Union's problems. Unlike Barroso's discursive strategy, which aims at "neutralizing" conflicts by means of technical language and economic arguments, Juncker acknowledges conflicts and describes their solution as a matter of political choice and political responsibility.

Juncker's State of the Union Speech can, in sum, be described as moving towards a more direct style of communication between EU institutions and the European citizens, in a way consistent with Schmidt's call for more communicative—as opposed to coordinative—discourse within the EU. Whether such new communicative approach is due to Juncker's personal choices, his political background or the new, more democratic procedures with which this Commission president was selected, the turn is certainly to be welcomed as a first step in a broader change in the EU's way of communicating that is long overdue.

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