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COMMENTARY

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Mirror, Bridge, or Stage?
The 2025 SOTEU and EU Institutional Change

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Summary

This commentary analyses the 2025 State of the Union Address (SOTEU), exploring its role as a hybrid ritual that oscillates between transparency and the consolidation of the European Commission's power. Ursula von der Leyen portrayed the EU as a defender of values and promoted strategic autonomy, emphasising combative language and the centralisation of competences. Yet the speech offered few concrete solutions to citizens' everyday problems, reinforcing perceptions of the Union as an elite project.

Key Points

- The 2025 SOTEU presents the EU as a geopolitical actor, emphasising the defence of values and the pursuit of strategic autonomy.
- The Commission President uses this platform to bolster her own role, turning the SOTEU into a tool of presidentialisation and power centralisation.
- The absence of concrete proposals on inflation, housing, or energy highlights a gap between EU discourse and citizens' needs, potentially fuelling Euroscepticism.

Introduction

Since 2010, the State of the Union Address (SOTEU) has been a fixed feature of the European political calendar. It emerged from a framework agreement between the European Parliament and the European Commission, designed to enhance transparency and dialogue between the institutions. What began as a technical procedure quickly evolved into a significant political moment. Inspired by the American State of the Union, it seeks to provide the European Union with its own ritual — one symbolising cohesion, direction, and the executive's capacity to act in the common interest. Unlike its U.S. counterpart, which is grounded in constitutional provisions and a direct mandate, the European SOTEU remains more of a borrowed symbol than a deeply rooted tradition.

This year's address again emphasised themes of struggle and threat, called for strategic autonomy, affirmed solidarity with Ukraine, and presented the EU as a defender of civilisational values. Yet alongside these broad visions, there were only limited, concrete proposals on issues most pressing to citizens: rising prices, inflation, and a shortage of affordable housing. The speech also delineated clear boundaries around what counts as "legitimate" European politics by stressing cooperation solely with pro-European democratic forces, thereby indirectly excluding parts of the political spectrum holding more critical or Eurosceptic views.

This raises a crucial question: does the SOTEU truly bring the EU closer to its citizens, or does it serve primarily as political theatre and a tool for concentrating power in the hands of the Commission? A key issue is what this address means for the institutional development of the European Union. Does it pave the way for greater parliamentarisation, or is it rather evidence of the Commission's gradual presidentialisation? Is it a bridge between citizens and institutions, or a mirror in which the EU seeks to see itself as it wishes to be perceived? The answers to these questions will determine whether the SOTEU becomes a pillar of European democracy or remains political theatre without a real audience.

Legal Basis and Institutional Framework

The State of the Union Address entered European institutional practice only in 2010, when it was introduced by the Framework Agreement on Relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission (Framework Agreement, 2010). Adopted after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, this document aimed to strengthen the transparency of legislative planning and to embed political dialogue between the two institutions. Since then, the address has become part of the annual legislative cycle: on its basis, the Commission President, together with the Vice-President responsible for interinstitutional relations, submits the so-called letter of intent, which subsequently informs the Commission Work Programme (CWP) and the joint declaration of the EU's three main institutions on annual priorities (Kassim, 2020).

The legal framework for the Commission's role derives from Article 17 TEU, which assigns it both initiatory and executive functions, and from Articles 230 and 234 TFEU, which regulate the Commission's accountability to the Parliament. In this sense, the SOTEU can be understood as an ex-ante accountability instrument, complementing traditional mechanisms of parliamentary oversight such as questions, inquiry committees, or—in extreme cases—a vote of no confidence (Olsson & Hammargård, 2016). From its origins as an interinstitutional procedure, it has gradually evolved into an annual political ritual, reflecting the shift from a purely technocratic to a distinctly political conception of the European Commission (Pansardi & Tortola, 2022).

Unconstitutional or Constitutional Moment?

From the perspective of institutional and constitutional theory, the State of the Union Address represents a typical "unconstitutional constitutional moment" (Vauchez, 2025). Although it is not enshrined in the EU's primary law, it functions as a symbolic ritual that annually renders the Union's power structure visible and shapes perceptions of the Commission's role. At the same time, this ritual exposes tensions between two opposing tendencies: on the one hand, it strengthens the parliamentarisation of the European system, as the Commission President speaks directly before the European Parliament and submits to its debate (Pansardi & Battegazzorre, 2018); on the other, it fosters presidentialisation, concentrating attention and authority in the hands of a single individual and thereby weakening the Commission's traditional collegiality (Bauer, Connolly & Kassim, 2023).

Within the broader framework of multilevel governance, the address can be compared to U.S. governors' annual reports or to programmatic statements delivered by governments in federal systems, where similar rituals connect constitutional institutions, legitimise executive authority, and define the legislative cycle.

The Democratic Dimension of the State of the Union Address

From a democratic-theoretical perspective, the State of the Union Address is closely linked to the question of the European Union's so-called democratic deficit (Habermas, cited in Kyriazi, 2025). Unlike in the United States, where the President holds a direct mandate from the electorate, the President of the European Commission derives legitimacy only indirectly — from nomination by the European Council and subsequent election by the European Parliament. Addressing the Parliament's plenary therefore represents an attempt to build additional legitimacy through public communication and open debate.

In terms of accountability, the SOTEU functions primarily as an ex-ante mechanism: the Commission President presents intentions and priorities before formally submitting legislation, allowing both Parliament and the public to comment before proposals become institutionalised. Unlike ex-post accountability, which evaluates policies after their implementation, this is a prospective instrument of oversight — political rather than legal in nature (Pansardi & Battegazzorre, 2016).

In this sense, the SOTEU has an ambivalent impact on the relationship between citizens and institutions: on the one hand, it can strengthen feelings of connection and transparency; on the other, its resonance largely remains confined to institutional spheres and media elites. Rather than genuinely bridging the gap between citizens and the Union, it risks reproducing the existing distance (Nielsen, 2024).

Communication Dimension

The State of the Union Address is, above all, a tool of political communication in which agenda-setting, rhetorical strategy, and symbolic staging converge (Molnár, 2023). In it, the Commission President not only outlines legislative priorities but, through framing, also constructs an image of the European Union — sometimes as a geopolitical actor, at other times as a community of values or an economic project. This process bears the hallmarks of performance politics: it is not only the substance but also the form of the speech that stages the Commission's authority and symbolically affirms its position within the institutional order.

In this respect, the SOTEU is closely linked to theories of presidentialisation: here, the Commission President appears as a personalised leader, with styles ranging from Barroso's technocratic neutrality, through Juncker's charismatic delivery, to Ursula von der Leyen's geopolitically framed leadership (Olsson & Hammargård, 2016). The platform enables the display of either charisma or, conversely, technocratic expertise.

On a discursive level, the address can be understood as a constitutive speech act — a statement that not only describes reality but also helps shape it. Metaphors and narratives (e.g., Europe as a family of nations, a fortress, or a ship sailing through a storm) influence Europe's self-understanding and identity, contributing to how both citizens and political elites grasp the very nature of European integration (Pansardi & Tortola, 2022).

Comparing the State of the Union in the EU and the U.S.

Compared with the American State of the Union, the European Address differs fundamentally in its very foundations. While in the United States the obligation is enshrined in the Constitution (Art. II, Sec. 3) and carried out by a President holding a direct mandate, in the European Union the SOTEU stems from an interinstitutional agreement, and the Commission President derives their mandate only indirectly — through nomination by the European Council and subsequent election by Parliament.

The U.S. Address is also closely tied to political conflict, as it is always followed by an official opposition response, underlining the presidential nature of the system. By contrast, the European speech unfolds in a pluralistic Parliament, where political groups react in a joint debate rather than through a single, unified rebuttal.

Another key difference lies in the audience: the U.S. President speaks to a broad public via mass media, whereas the European Address is primarily aimed at a parliamentary and institutional audience, with a far more limited media reach. Still, parallels can be found in other systems — for example, the German government's policy statement before the Bundestag, Canada's Speech from the Throne delivered by the Governor General at the start of a legislative session, or the UN General Assembly's annual general debate, where member-state leaders present their priorities.

These analogies suggest that the SOTEU belongs to a broader category of ritual executive speeches that legitimise authority and frame the political cycle, even if its effectiveness and societal resonance remain much more constrained in the European context (Kyriazi, 2025).

Normative and Critical Perspectives on the State of the Union Address (SOTEU)

From a normative perspective, the State of the Union Address can be seen as a test of the European Union's capacity to create a transnational public sphere. In the spirit of Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy, the SOTEU should open space for rational public debate and strengthen communicative legitimacy between citizens and institutions (Habermas, cited in Kyriazi, 2025). In practice, however, this ideal is constrained by its limited media reach and its weak capacity to connect Brussels-based institutions with European civil society.

Post-structuralist approaches emphasise that the SOTEU functions less as a platform for deliberation than as a mechanism of power: through language and symbolism, it legitimises integration, redefines the boundaries of the political space, and presents the Commission as the "natural" centre of European decision-making. Critiques from a post-democratic perspective further question whether the address

is merely an empty ritual that obscures the fact that key decisions are often made in informal European Council negotiations or within technocratic structures.

In this sense, the SOTEU has an ambivalent character. On the one hand, it can offer an opportunity for transparent and public deliberation; on the other, it risks becoming a mere illusion of participation, reproducing rather than overcoming the democratic deficit (Molnár, 2023; Cachia, 2023).

Review of the 2025 State of the Union Address

Discursive Frameworks

In line with Fairclough's theory of critical discourse analysis, language in the Address does not merely reflect reality but actively shapes it (Fairclough, 1995). Ursula von der Leyen adopts a "struggle" frame: she repeatedly employs war metaphors ("battlelines are drawn," "fight for freedom") and casts the EU as a defender of civilisational values. This discourse is not only mobilising but also normative — it defines who belongs to "us" (pro-European, democratic forces) and who stands outside (Russia, Hamas, extremists, migrants, Eurosceptics).

The most striking feature of the speech is its framing of Europe through the lens of conflict and threat. Von der Leyen repeatedly speaks of a "fight," "battlelines," or "struggle," constructing an image of a Union surrounded by enemies and compelled to defend its values. This language shifts the EU away from its traditional peace narrative towards a more militarised self-image. Closely related is a clear dualism: Europe embodies freedom, democracy, and values, while Russia, Hamas, or "extremists" represent danger. Such dichotomies strengthen European identity but at the same time flatten nuance and complicate the search for more balanced solutions. As Laclau reminds us, political discourse always creates chains of equivalence and opposition. Here, opposition is directed not only at external threats but also at internal critics, implicitly portrayed as endangering democracy.

Another key frame is "strategic autonomy" — the effort to secure independence in defence, energy, and technology. This discourse of self-reliance legitimises extensive Commission intervention even in areas traditionally under the competence of member states, thus pushing the boundaries of European integration.

The Address also shows a tendency towards exclusion. Migration is presented mainly as a problem or threat, rather than as an opportunity. Von der Leyen emphasises the need for return policies and action against smugglers, narrowing the space for humanitarian and integration-oriented approaches. Similarly, internal critics of the EU are framed as illegitimate: the Commission declares cooperation only with "pro-European democratic forces," thereby implicitly delegitimising Eurosceptic currents — including those that have long highlighted challenges linked to irregular migration.

Rhetorical Devices

From the perspective of rhetorical analysis — particularly Aristotle's triad of ethos, pathos and logos — it is evident that the speaker weaves together emotional appeal, authoritative self-presentation, and arguments supported by data. Pathos is clearly dominant: especially emotional are the story of the Ukrainian boy Sasha and his grandmother, the description of suffering in Gaza, and the praise of the heroism of Greek firefighters. These images are designed to draw in the audience and make geopolitical conflicts personally tangible.

The speaker strengthens her ethos by foregrounding elements of her own identity — as a mother and grandmother ("as a mother of seven, and a grandmother of four") or as a physician ("as a medical

doctor by training"). Through this self-presentation, she positions herself as someone who combines expertise, authority and humanity. Ethos thus serves to legitimise not only the content of the Address but also the role of the Commission as an institution.

Logos is conveyed through the frequent use of numbers and facts: the scale of aid to Ukraine, percentage increases in housing prices, or the number of drones. This rational component lends the speech weight and a semblance of objectivity. Yet logos is selective — it highlights data that support the narrative of "Europe's independence," while leaving other aspects in the background.

Critical Aspects

The Address is rhetorically powerful yet also problematic. First, it reveals a normalisation of militarisation: the European Union is portrayed as a military actor, in contrast to its original peace-oriented identity and the post-war legacy of its founding fathers. The language of the speech shifts the European Commission towards the role of a geopolitical player, even though, under the Lisbon Treaty, defence and security remain primarily the responsibility of the member states. This "competence drift" is obscured by combative rhetoric suggesting that the centralisation of power in Brussels is a necessary condition for survival.

Another troubling element is selective moralisation: while humanitarian language is used in reference to Ukraine or Palestine, a restrictive discourse dominates the discussion of migration. Such a moralising frame sustains a dichotomy between a "good Europe" and "bad enemies," suppressing nuance and marginalising legitimate critical voices within the EU.

Technocratic elitism also comes to the fore. The blend of pathos and technical detail reinforces the impression that the European Union presents itself as an elite that knows better than its citizens. As a result, the speech becomes more of a performative act of consolidating power than an open political debate. Finally, the democratic deficit is evident: the emphasis on a "pro-European majority" implicitly delegitimises parts of the political spectrum, potentially undermining pluralism and deepening citizens' sense of alienation.

Discussion

Ursula von der Leyen's Address is not merely a political message but a performative act that actively shapes reality. The Commission's language casts the EU as a geopolitical actor and conveys a sense of urgency that "time is running out." The rhetoric of struggle and threat mobilises audiences while simultaneously legitimising a shift of competences towards the European Commission, without a clearly articulated democratic mandate. This discourse has ambivalent implications: on the one hand, it can strengthen cohesion and provide the EU with a clear identity in turbulent times; on the other, it risks fostering the militarisation of the European project and undermining its original peace-oriented ethos. At the same time, it enhances the role of the Commission in areas where member states should arguably retain primary authority.

From a Eurosceptic perspective, one might argue that the speech overlooks the everyday concerns of citizens. While the Commission President speaks of a "European moment of independence," people in member states face high housing costs, rising energy prices, and job-market uncertainty. Although the speech mentions these issues, it frames them mainly as part of a broader geopolitical narrative rather than as concrete challenges the EU should address in practical terms. This reinforces the image of the Union as an elite-driven project, distancing itself from citizens and prioritising self-presentation over functional policymaking.

A key question remains: to what extent does this language truly reflect Europeans' preferences? If EU discourse drifts too far from citizens' daily experiences, it risks fuelling further Euroscepticism rather than strengthening legitimacy. In the short term, such an approach may consolidate European identity, but in the longer run it threatens to deepen public distrust and undermine the legitimacy of the entire integration project.

Conclusion

The analysis of the 2025 State of the Union Address shows that this annual act is more than a well-established tradition. It has evolved into a hybrid phenomenon, combining elements of a constitutional ritual, an agenda-setting tool, and a platform for the presidentialisation of the European Commission. The historical and legal context demonstrates that, although the SOTEU is not rooted in primary law, it has become a fixed part of the annual legislative cycle and makes visible the tension between parliamentarisation and presidentialisation within the EU's institutional balance.

Although the Address is presented as a means of transparency and accountability, its real function often lies in reinforcing centralising tendencies. The Commission President does not merely act as a coordinator of executive activities but positions herself as a "European president," despite lacking a direct mandate from citizens. This shift reflects a broader trend of concentrating power in an unelected body, potentially undermining the role of member states and their democratically elected representatives.

The content of the speech is marked by an emphasis on grand strategies and frameworks, while concrete solutions to everyday problems remain largely in the background. Instead of directly tackling inflation, high living costs or unaffordable housing, the Commission proposes new funds, budgets and programmes that often appear remote and abstract to citizens. This deepens the perception that decisions in Brussels are made "about people without them." At the same time, the Address serves as an instrument of politicisation and "back-door federalisation," as von der Leyen uses this platform to advance policies and competences that frequently go beyond those formally entrusted to the Commission.

From a democratic perspective, the SOTEU has an ambivalent character. On the one hand, it can enhance the Union's visibility and offer a cohesive identity in turbulent times; on the other, it shifts the institutional balance towards presidentialisation and centralisation of power, thereby masking rather than addressing the structural shortcomings of European integration. Instead of genuine communication with citizens, it often becomes a technocratic-political performance aimed mainly at a Brussels audience.

The result is a paradox: a Union striving to mirror the legitimacy of democratic states relies on a ritual that conceals rather than remedies its democratic deficit. Looking ahead, the key question is whether the SOTEU will evolve into a vehicle for genuine accountability and public debate or remain a post-democratic staging of power legitimation. If the gap between "Brussels" and its citizens continues to widen, the Address risks becoming not a tool of integration but a symbol of growing mistrust towards the European project.

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