



EU Commission President's State of the Union Address 2016: A Review

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The State of the Union Address, a speech delivered by the President of the European Commission (EC) before the European parliamentary plenary session every year in the first part-session of September takes stock of the current year and sets out priorities or agenda of action for the following years. The 2016 address delivered on September 14 was the European Commission's contribution to the informal meeting of the 27 EU leaders in Bratislava which was held on 16 September 2016. This was also the first State of the Union Address after the Brexit referendum.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the current EC President, 'realistically' began his address by recognising that the European Union (EU) was, at least in part, facing 'an existential crisis' and dealing with problems ranging from high unemployment and social inequality, to public debt, to the huge challenge of integrating refugees. The Brexit issue did not find much space in his address, where he only remarked that Europe today is 'faced with the unhappy prospect of a member leaving our ranks'. Though the leaders voiced 'regret' at the decision of Britain to leave the EU earlier on several occasions, yet Juncker emphasised that the Union was not 'at risk' from that.¹ A positive agenda of concrete European actions was proposed for the next twelve months. This agenda included proposed actions for protection of Europe, preservation of the European way of life, empowerment and defence of its citizens.

A comparative chart of the State of the Union Addresses of 2016, 2013 and 2015 (there was no State of the Union Address in 2014 due to EU parliamentary elections) below will help to comprehend the main issues highlighted, positions taken by the EU Presidents and specific actions which were proposed/are proposed to be taken after every Address.

Table 1: Comparative Chart of the three Addresses of 2013, 2015 and 2016

	2013 (Speech by Jose Manuel Durao Barroso)	2015 (Speech by Jean Claude Juncker)	2016 (Speech by Jean Claude Juncker)
Theme	--	“Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity”	“Towards a better Europe – a Europe that protects, empowers and defends”
Main Issues	To generate employment, focus was on implementation of the decisions on youth employment and financing of the real economy.	The refugee crisis was recognised as the first priority amongst issues. The EU President urged Europeans to give refuge to the people seeking it and comply with the fundamental right to asylum.	The need for a permanent defence structure so as to have a single headquarters for EU civilian and military missions.
	Priority was laid on economic growth for which implementation of Horizon 2020 in the discussions on the EU budget was made.	To solve the Greek crisis the EC supported reforms and development of a Greek strategy which is Greek owned and Greek led.	Preservation of European values like peace, free movement of workers, against death penalty and open trade with neighbours was emphasised.
		To construct a fair deal for Britain, the necessity of the EU to adapt and change in view of the major challenges faced was recognised.	To create empowerment of citizens, the Commission proposed to create a legal framework that attracts and enables investments in connectivity.
		To develop a united foreign policy towards Ukraine	Since solidarity is the glue that binds the Union together, therefore the EU President urged to show solidarity to people in need.
		To adopt an ambitious, robust and binding global climate deal.	To ensure EU responsibility, the EC called on all EU institutions and member states to take responsibility.

<p>Positions taken by EC Presidents on economic growth, refugee crisis, state of the Union and foreign policy.</p>	<p>Barroso remarked that economic efforts since 2012 had started to convince EU citizens that economy was reviving.</p>	<p>Juncker said that Stability Support Programme was not just for Greece, but for the entire Euro area. Economic recovery, according to him, was hampered by global uncertainties.</p>	<p>Juncker commented that the European Central bank's monetary policy has helped the Union to recover from the monetary crisis.</p>
	<p>The President admitted that the efforts to overcome the economic crisis had 'overshadowed everything else'.</p>	<p>There was need for value-based and consensual approach towards the refugee policy.</p>	<p>Juncker emphasised on the need to display solidarity towards refugees.</p>
	<p>On the 'unity' within the EU, Barroso urged members to 'improve' the Union, if they didn't like it, however only without creating discriminations.</p>	<p>On the state of the Union, Juncker commented that "There is not enough Europe in this Union. And there is not enough Union in this Union." The need to change this was required.</p>	<p>In the very beginning of the address, Juncker said that "Our European Union is, at least in part, in an existential crisis".</p>
	<p>On Eastern Partnership, the President outlined the necessity of preserving the sovereignty of countries. Regarding Syria, necessity to come to a political solution for lasting peace was brought forward.</p>	<p>More Europe and more Union in EU's foreign policy was recognised, specially towards Ukraine. Juncker clearly sent out a message to Moscow that the security and borders of the EU member states are untouchable.</p>	<p>To deal with the 'increasingly dangerous neighbourhood', importance was paid on strengthening the defence policy. Through the European Strategy for Syria, Juncker stressed on rebuilding a peaceful Syrian nation and a pluralistic, tolerant civil society in Syria.</p>
<p>Specific actions proposed to be taken</p>	<p>To deepen the economic and monetary union and adopt the Single Resolution Mechanism.</p>	<p>To ensure commitment towards relocation of refugees, the EC proposed for a second emergency mechanism to relocate further 120,000 refugees from Italy, Greece and Hungary.</p>	<p>To defend borders and ensure security, a new European Border and Coast Guard is now being formalised by Parliament and Council.</p>
	<p>Necessity of speeding up the pace of structural reforms in order to avoid a jobless recovery.</p>	<p>In order for member states to fast track asylum procedures for nationals of countries that are presumed safe to live in, a preparation of a common EU list of safe countries of origin was to be prepared.</p>	<p>To keep track of the people who wish to travel to Europe, a European Travel Information System is proposed to be established by November.</p>

	Extension of single market for telecoms, communications, energy, finance and e-commerce.	Establishment of Permanent Relocation Mechanism and a plan of introducing a legal migration package by early 2016 were proposed.	Reinforcement of Europol will be done to promote information and intelligence exchange.
	In order to create a strong industrial base, further proposals for mobilizing support for an industrial policy fit for 21 st century were made.	An emergency trust fund from the common financial means to address the crises in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, the Horn of Africa and the North of Africa was proposed.	The need to develop negotiations towards a settlement in Syria has led to the requirement of proposing a European Strategy for Syria.
	To fight climate change, the EC proposed to come out with a plan for energy and climate framework up to 2030.	To deal with the Greek crisis the EC put forward a proposal to limit national co-financing in Greece and to frontload funding for investment projects short of liquidity.	To create a pool of resources to strengthen European defence and to encourage research and innovation, establishment of a European Defence Fund was proposed.
	To complement economic unity, strengthening of the social dimension of the economic and monetary union is also important as it fosters European responsibility and solidarity.	Recreate a process of convergence, both between member states and within societies, with productivity, job creation and social fairness at its core to overcome the economic crisis.	A proposal for the reform of European telecommunications market was also laid out.
		To make tax avoidance more difficult, work on a Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base must be enhanced.	To make financial systems more resilient, work on the Capital Market Union needs acceleration.
			Establishment of a European Solidarity Corps to arrange volunteers to help people in crisis situations.

Sources: State of the Union Addresses 2013, 2015 and 2016.

Remarks: The State of the Union Address 2016 very appropriately took stock of the current situation in Europe. The problems and the challenges faced were outlined clearly as was the need to fix them. The need for more ‘unity’ within the EU was highlighted as the EC President subtly

mentioned about ‘the unhappy prospect of a member leaving us’.ⁱⁱ Though the Address refrained from dwelling on the Brexit issue, yet the message was implicitly stated that cooperation and consensus are important ingredients for the Union to progress. The issues recognised in 2013 namely unemployment and growth and the problem of managing the refugee crisis as identified in 2015 address, still exist in the EU as Juncker in his Address of 2016 remarked, “From high unemployment and social inequality, to mountains of public debt, to the challenge of integrating refugees, to the very real threats to our security at home and abroad – every one of Europe’s Member States has been affected by the continuing crisis of our times.”ⁱⁱⁱ

A look at the estimates by Eurostat, the Directorate-General of the European Commission, for unemployment, shows that 20.973 million people in the EU-28 were unemployed in August 2016. Though compared with August 2015, unemployment fell by 1,587,000, yet at the same time unemployment rate increased in countries like Estonia (from 5.3 per cent to 6.8 per cent between July 2015 and July 2016), Austria (from 5.7 per cent to 6.2 per cent) and Belgium (8.0 per cent to 8.2 per cent).^{iv} This might be an indication for the need of a sustainable employment policy in the Union. Besides, a Eurobarometer survey (July 2016) revealed that unemployment in the EU remains at above 8 per cent and about 77 per cent of Europeans want the EU to do more to tackle the issue and 69 per cent of people feel current efforts of the EU on this issue are insufficient.^v

The refugee crisis in the EU found mention only in the 2015 Address as in 2013, Jose Manuel Barroso had admitted that “It is only natural that, over the last few years, our efforts to overcome the economic crisis have overshadowed everything else”.^{vi} It is however purposeful to remember that illegal border-crossings along the EU’s external borders sharply increased between 2012 and 2013, from approximately 72, 500 to 107, 000, which represents an annual increase of 48%.^{vii} Most detections of illegal border-crossing were of Syrians, Eritreans, Afghans and Albanians, who together accounted for 52% of total detections (or 55,400). The Frontex Risk Analysis Network (FRAN) data for 2013 also estimated that the number of asylum applications submitted in the EU had continued to increase.^{viii} Despite the rise in illegal border-crossings and number of asylum applications, the 2013 address found hardly any mention of the refugee issue which soon took the form of a crisis in 2015.^{ix}

The 2015 State of the Union Address had emphatically stated that there was need for a more united refugee policy in harmony with European values. In the same year, the asylum policy claimed precision in terms of creating a coherent system for all member states by adding new perspectives.^x To meet the new mood of concern around migration and accentuating the importance of European ‘solidarity’, Juncker proposed setting up a European Solidarity Corps in 2016, where young people across the EU would be able to volunteer their help to respond to crisis situations.^{xi}

The 2016 address approached the issue of addressing the external borders of the EU in a strong light. Juncker’s most recent address assured that the European Border and Coast Guard

would help to keep a track of people crossing the borders. There were also some other new measures which were introduced like proposal for a European Travel Information System and the need to reinforce the Europol to emphasise information and intelligence exchanges. Besides, the 2016 address emphasised that soft power alone was not enough to deal with the ‘increasingly dangerous neighbourhood’. Therefore, the propositions for the creation of a permanent military structure for the Union and establishment of a European Defence Fund were made. The management of external borders of the EU has captured the attention of the EU leaders in view of the increase in the number of terrorist attacks in member states like Brussels, France and Germany in the recent past.

The objective of deepening the economic and monetary union is still to be achieved as Juncker in the 2016 address stressed speeding up the work on the Capital Markets Union.^{xii} The Commission also promised to put forward a concrete roadmap to achieve this goal. A similar objective was set out in the 2015 address as the need for convergence between member states and within societies to ensure productivity, job creation and social fairness was identified. In a similar vein, the EC President Barroso in his speech in 2013 had outlined the necessity of intensifying financial integrity through adoption of the Single Resolution Mechanism and delivering the Banking Union.^{xiii} As observed, strengthening the economic and monetary union has still not been advanced even after the proposal of concrete measures since 2013.

On climate change and environment, the only significant point that was stated by the EC President in 2016 was his request to all member states to accelerate the ratification of the Paris Climate Conference (COP21) signed in December 2015. In comparison, both the Addresses of 2013 and 2015 had devoted more space and attention to the role of EU in the fight against climate change.

The State of the Union had chosen an appropriate theme in 2016, titled ‘Towards a better Europe – a Europe that protects, empowers and defends’. A detailed emphasis was given towards the protection of ‘European’ values like peace, freedom, democracy and the rule of law, empowering citizens through creation of a legal framework that enables investments in connectivity, and necessity of a permanent defence structure. There were some new additions to the State of the Union Address 2016 like free wireless internet access, overhaul of Europe’s copyright rules, launching of an investment plan for Africa and the Neighbourhood, proposal to set up a common European Data Protection Regulation and single headquarters for carrying out civilian and military operations. The Address represents reality and the challenges faced by the EU today, and has a positive message for its 27 member states. Whether national governments would consensually work towards the vision presented by Juncker, amidst uncertainties like financial oscillations, threat of terrorist attacks and Euroscepticism appears though to be only an optimistic thought for now.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

ⁱ Soon after announcement of results of the referendum, the EU leaders in a joint statement expressed their 'deep regret' at the decision, however stating that the process of leaving the Union should be done 'as quickly as possible'. (EU leaders express regret at Brexit, *Pan European Networks*, June 29, 2016, <http://www.paneuropeannetworks.com/government/eu-leaders-express-regret-at-brexit/> accessed on September 23, 2016).

ⁱⁱ Juncker, Jean Claude, "State of the Union 2016: Towards a better Europe – a Europe that protects, empowers and defends", *European Commission*, Strasbourg, September 14, 2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-3043_en.htm accessed on September 21, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 1

^{iv} "Unemployment Statistics", Eurostat, August 31, 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics accessed on September 22, 2016.

^v "Unemployment: three in four Europeans want EU to do more to create jobs", *European Parliament News*, July 22, 2016, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/20160707STO36201/unemployment-three-in-four-europeans-want-eu-to-do-more-to-create-jobs> accessed on September 22, 2016.

^{vi} Barroso, Jose Manuel Durao, State of the Union 2013, *European Commission*, Strasbourg, September 11, 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-684_en.htm accessed on September 22, 2016.

^{vii} "Annual Risk Analysis 2014", Frontex, Warsaw, May 2014,

http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2014.pdf#page=9 accessed October 4, 2016.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} UNHCR figures show over 1 million refugees and migrants reached Europe by sea in 2015, with almost 4000 feared drowned.

^x "A Common European Asylum System", *European Commission*, n.d., http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/docs/ceas-fact-sheets/ceas_factsheet_en.pdf accessed on September 23, 2016, p.4.

^{xi} *Op. Cit.* No. 2.

^{xii} The Capital Market Union adopted an action plan on September 30, 2015 setting out a list of key measures to achieve a true single market for capital in Europe.

^{xiii} The Single Resolution Mechanism became operational on 31 December, 2015. It implements the EU-wide Bank Recovery and Resolution Directive (BRRD) in the euro area.