

## THE STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS - A USEFUL EU COMMUNICATION ENDEAVOUR UNDER AMERICAN INSPIRATION?

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*Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the effectiveness of the annual State of the Union Address, uttered by the President of the European Commission as of 2010, whose purpose is to render the politics of the EU more comprehensible in the eyes of European citizens. This means of communication, stipulated by the Treaty of Lisbon, has undoubtedly been inspired by the traditional US State of the Union Address, albeit the nature of the relations the EU has with its citizens is still fairly dissimilar to the one engendered by the US Constitution and furthered through a considerable tradition. Nevertheless, it becomes interesting to assess the extent to which this communication tool adds weight to the EU's persistent attempts to diminish the so-called "democratic deficit" it suffers from and to its struggle for more transparency amid increasing Eurosceptical feelings.*

*Keywords: State of the Union Address, European Commission, economic crisis, political union, European Parliament.*

### **Background - the American State of the Union Address**

There is little doubt as to the fact that the State of the Union Address uttered by the President of the European Commission stems from the long-lasting US tradition in this regard. Hence, in order to fully comprehend the reasons why such a measure was taken within the Community framework, as well as its usefulness, it is important to start this research from the importance of the abovementioned endeavour in America. Only then will we be able to draw pertinent parallels and evaluate the extent to which the EU approach in terms of conceiving this address is in keeping with the American model of democratic communication, if this is even desirable in the clearly different background of the current European integration, compared to the EU's ally from across the Atlantic.

The name "State of the Union Address" was coined by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who first utilised it in 1934<sup>1</sup>, even though it would be another decade before it became the generally used term across the United States. Before this date, the address was formally known as "the President's Annual Message to Congress", a much more impersonal phrase.<sup>2</sup>

Some additional historical data will shed light on the significance of the State of the Union Address for American democracy and its manner of perceiving political communication at an institutional level, as well as with citizens. To begin with, the address is delivered without exception by the President of the United States, before a joint session of Congress, with the purpose of presenting the major topics that interest the American nation, whether they pertain to domestic or foreign politics. This is usually accompanied by major guidelines meant to regulate such politics, or priorities the administration wishes to follow during the course of that particular year. The achievements of the executive are equally outlined, which usually renders the tone of the speech positive. The custom requires that this event should occur once a year, albeit in theory, if circumstances called for it, the President

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Cox, Timothy J. Lynch, Nicolas Bouchet, *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion: From Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama*, Routledge, 2013, pp. 71-72.

<sup>2</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, *Inventing the Job of President: Leadership Style from George Washington to Andrew Jackson*, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 42.

could ask to exert his constitutional right to present his speech at any given time, since Art. II from Section 3 of the federal Constitution states, referring to the President, that *He shall from time to time give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.*<sup>3</sup>

This is one first element which is worthy of being taken into account in our comparative research, namely the legal stipulations whose proper interpretation engendered a political practice which, in time, became deeply rooted in the US political culture. In fact, it was George Washington himself who initiated the practice, although Thomas Jefferson disagreed with the proposal, claiming that it was somewhat similar to the English monarch's address. This is the reason why it would be more than a century, more precisely 1913, before another US President was to utter the State of the Union Address in person, before Congress, instead of sending it solely in a written format. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the methods of presenting the address oscillated between the written and the oral format, but the latter gained momentum in the past decades, amid the accelerated pace of development of mass media. For example, President Coolidge's 1923 address was the first one in history to be broadcast on the radio, whilst President's Truman address from 1947 was the first which was broadcast on television.<sup>4</sup> Fifty years later, President Clinton's State of the Union Address was made available in real time on the Internet.

Given the interest of the press in this major political event and, thus, the significant media coverage received not only in the US, but also in many other countries around the globe, the State of the Union Address gradually became a complex communication tool. In fact, from an institutional instrument, enabling the executive to inform the legislative on its priorities and specific challenges, the address turned into a public speech, targeting citizens and not only political decision makers. This is why the oral form of delivery is now preferred to the written one, much more common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century - before the arrival of real-time media coverage - albeit if one interprets the aforementioned constitutional text, the channel of communication is to be chosen by the President. Hence, it should come as no surprise that it is a means of gaining popular support, which is another aspect that should be analysed later in our research, when drawing parallels with the situation within the EU.

The time when the speech occurs is equally significant, namely either the first, or the second month of each year (since 1934), which enables the head of state to present his set of priorities at a moment perceived as a new beginning, with undeniable psychological effects on the masses. The live broadcast of the address usually occurs in the afternoon or evening, as late as 9 PM, according to the Eastern Time Zone, thus maximising the citizens' access to it.<sup>5</sup> It is customary for its duration to exceed one hour, but this is also because members of the Congress and other guests frequently applaud when they agree with the ideas presented by the President. Such traditions and procedural aspects are also worthy of being considered in a comparative endeavour with the EU State of the Union Address.

To conclude on this first section of our research, whose goal has been that of presenting the main source of inspiration of the newly-created EU State of the Union Address,

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<sup>3</sup> Colleen J. Shogan, *President's State of the Union Address: Tradition, Function, and Policy Implications*, DIANE Publishing, 2011, pp. 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Brad Kalbfeld, *Associated Press Broadcast News Handbook*, McGraw-Hill Education, 2001, p. 124.

it becomes apparent that the American practice in this regard benefits from an impressive tradition and, consequently, it is a major political endeavour. From the Monroe Doctrine to the War on Terror, all major American courses in international politics have found a powerful echo in such addresses, which are basically the most significant communication tools implicating, on the one hand, the President of the United States and, on the other hand, Congress and the people who have elected it. This is one explanation as to why, not only in America, at lower administrative levels, but in many other places, the abovementioned practice has been copied and tailored according to the type of message delivered.

### **The State of the Union Address in the European Union: origins and purpose**

Following in the footsteps of the much longer American democratic practice of uttering a State of the Union Address, the European Union has resorted to an imitation of the latter, albeit we somewhat dispute the name chosen for this endeavour. Prior to elaborating on this consideration, it becomes important to provide a series of details pertaining to the origins and goals behind this fairly recent initiative of the European Commission. Hence, a definition of the EU State of the Union Address would encompass the fact that it is an annual speech uttered by the President of the Commission, before the plenary session of the only directly elected institution of the EU, namely the European Parliament. So far, only President José Manuel Barroso has delivered the address, always in the month of September, given the fact that the first time this occurred was in 2010 and Barroso's two consecutive mandates stretch between 2004 and 2014.<sup>6</sup>

From a purely institutional point of view, the President of the Commission does have sufficient power of representation so as to address Parliament, in an interesting synergy between the two principal supranational institutions of the Community. This act also symbolises the complexity of the decision making process within the Union, where the institutions which concern us at this time, the Commission and Parliament, act as two of the most prominent factors in the so-called decision making triangle - completed by the intergovernmental Council of the European Union.

The legal basis for the State of the Union Address is laid by the most recent institutional Treaty, namely the Treaty of Lisbon, whose spirit appears to direct the European Union towards more transparency and democratic accountability. In fact, the idea of rendering the Union closer to its citizens by means of communication tools and extra visibility is reinforced by this document through a welcome variety of measures, ranging from the public character of Council meetings to this peculiar way of assessing the current state of affairs in the Community, to which we dedicate this research. To elaborate on the purpose of the State of the Union Address, it is obvious that its character is to some extent political, as part of the message aims to shed light on the situation of the political life within the Union, one which is often incomprehensible to citizens. Amid growing accusations of lack of transparency, democratic deficit and the rise of Eurosceptical currents across the EU, this is a useful component of the address. Furthermore, a positive democratic element in this regard is the subsequent debate hosted by the European Parliament, on the State of the Union Address,

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<sup>6</sup> Duncan Watts, *The European Union*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 79.

which enables political groups, as well as individual MPs, to perform an analysis of the document, raise additional questions and point out the insufficiencies.

As in the case of every democratic endeavour, the first time it occurs usually leaves a deep imprint on the practice, which is why it is important to direct our attention to the State of the Union Address uttered on 7 September 2010 by Barroso. Its intended purpose was to propose a strategic programme for the following year, on behalf of the European Commission, whilst dedicating numerous significant paragraphs to the future of the Union itself and that of its citizens. *My message to each and every European is that you can trust the European Union to do what it takes to secure your future*<sup>7</sup>, read a key sentence from the document, amid a period in which the trust of the European citizens in the Union was badly shaken because of the effects of the crisis, manifesting themselves in a worse manner than predicted. Hence, it should come as no surprise that economic topics lay at the core of the address, depicted in a fairly positive note, one which acknowledged the improvement of the EU's situation in this respect. Discrepancies amongst member states were not left behind, and economic indicators were treated as general landmarks in the assessment of the state of affairs within the European Union's economy. One of the leitmotifs of the address was the persistent problem of unemployment, which was presented as having stalled, albeit not decreased.<sup>8</sup>

What is particularly interesting to notice is that the economic downturn affecting the Union was once again paramount in deciding on the predominant topic shaping the following State of the Union Address, pronounced on 28 September 2011. Set against the background of the bleak picture painted by the Greek sovereign debt crisis<sup>9</sup> and the overall economic situation of EU-27, Barroso called for two significant economic measures to be taken within the Community. The former referred to the creation of a Eurozone bond, while the latter took the form of a message sent to the G20 leaders, in support of a global financial transaction tax, meant to help in the fight against worldwide poverty.<sup>10</sup> Under the title *European Renewal* - an audacious name for a predominantly economic-based address - the 2011 speech dealt with multiple facets of the crisis: *This is a financial, economic and social crisis. I believe we can say that the sovereign debt crisis today is, above all, a crisis of political confidence*, claimed President Barroso.

Further solutions envisaged by the European leader included a more active role played by the banking sector for the good of society, whilst the ending note was particularly important, as it once again stressed the need for more integration. As it can be interpreted from the last statement of the 2011 address, which reads *The reality today is that intergovernmental cooperation is not enough to get Europe out of this crisis, nor to provide a future for Europe*<sup>11</sup>, it becomes apparent that the long-term solution to the crisis foreseen by the President of the Commission took the form of political union. Another important aspect in this regard is the fact that the Commission's President took advantage of this quite visible

<sup>7</sup> State of the Union address 2010, European Commission - SPEECH/10/411, 7 September 2010, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 2, 4.

<sup>9</sup> See, for further details: Adrian-Gabriel Corpădean, "What Happened to the "Greek Miracle"?", in *Modelling the New Europe*, Faculty of European Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, no. 3, 2012, pp. 38-48.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Borchard, "The Germans and the Crisis: which perceptions?", in *Schuman Report on Europe: State of the Union 2011*, Springer, 2011, pp. 44-45.

<sup>11</sup> European renewal – State of the Union Address 2011, European Parliament, SPEECH/11/607, 28 September 2011, p. 11.

political tool which came to be the annual State of the Union Address in order to reinforce the role of his institution, to the detriment of the voice of member states. To be more concrete, his message pertaining to the potential solutions to the economic downturn was clearly opposed to the plans envisaged by Germany and France in preparation for an intergovernmental economic government system for the Eurozone. In so doing, José Manuel Barroso advocated in favour of more action taken by the Commission with regard to economic measures within the common currency area, thus adding weight to the role of the institution he represents in the aforementioned process. *For the euro area to be credible – and this not only the message of the federalists, this is the message of the markets – we need a truly Community approach. We need to really integrate the euro area, we need to complete the monetary union with real economic union*<sup>12</sup> - the appeal urging more community action and not collaboration initiatives supported by some member states is the most powerful closing argument of the 2011 State of the Union Address.

Moving along the timeline, we encounter on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2012 the third State of the Union Address delivered by Barroso, which enables us to draw an important conclusion, namely that the speeches have been more powerful year after year, as their media coverage and citizen interest have equally grown. The most striking message presented by the speaker in his 2012 address referred to federalism, as a solution for European integration in the foreseeable future. While this is by no means a new topic in Barroso's rhetoric, his call in Parliament for more Europe, or, in other words, the deepening of economic and monetary union, as a further step to the EU becoming a federation of nation states, was indeed remarkable.<sup>13</sup>

In order to achieve such major change, the speaker called for a principle he referred to as *new thinking* within the Union, an ideal whose purpose would be to enable the Union to progress towards greater unity. This is meant to foster its resistance before the ever more challenging effects of globalisation, in a permanent struggle for maintaining sovereignty at a global scale. *Globalisation demands more European unity. More unity demands more integration. More integration demands more democracy*<sup>14</sup> - here is how President Barroso, in a syllogistic structure, upheld the urgent need for deeper integration, which should take the form of a political union.

As previously upheld, the economic solutions to the crisis were not to be left behind in the speech, as Barroso voiced the will of the European Commission to implement a common supervision mechanism of banks inside the Eurozone. Such a practice would enable the system to progress towards yet another type of union, namely that of the ever challenging banking sector. From an institutional standpoint, it is the European Central Bank that should be endowed with clear-cut supervisory attributes, thus allowing it to exert a form of control over the banking sector across the Union, so as to protect citizens and the banks themselves against the threat of failure.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Damian Chalmers, "European Restatements of Sovereignty", in Richard Rawlings, Peter Leyland, Alison Young (eds.), *Sovereignty and the Law: Domestic, European and International Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 186-187.

<sup>14</sup> State of the Union address 2012, European Commission, SPEECH/12/596, 12 September 2012, p. 3.



The economic and political dimensions were not the only ones to be included in the fairly comprehensive 2012 State of the Union Address, as President Barroso also turned his attention to a series of other prominent topics on the European agenda. Amongst these, he presented the opportunity of creating a European public space, in the interest of civil society organisations and NGOs, as well as that of gaining better access, via modern means of communication and information, to EU data in real time.<sup>15</sup> Another point of interest for citizens, which José Manuel Barroso deemed important enough as to mention two years prior to its development, was the fate of the upcoming elections for the European Parliament. Acknowledging the importance of this supranational institution, he emphasised the need to hold genuine debates on European topics around this electoral event. In keeping with this message and the provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon, which call for the nomination of the future President of the Commission by the political group holding the largest number of seats in the European Parliament, Barroso urged all major political entities in Parliament to appoint potential candidates for this prominent position.

As usual, citizens were presented with the opportunity to interact with the President of the Commission, no later than one week upon the delivery of the 2012 State of the Union Address, by means of EUtube, a useful visual channel of public communication and inquiry.<sup>16</sup>

In order to complete our descriptive view of the State of the Union Addresses to date, prior to resorting to a brief comparative analysis of the latter, it is our intention to outline the main points of interest occurring in the most recent speech of this kind, namely the 2013 Address. The event came five years after the zenith of the latest economic crisis to hit the Union, which enabled Barroso to approach it as a review of the most significant measures that had been taken to combat the effects of the downturn. The Commission's President urged *all those that care about Europe, whatever their political or ideological position, wherever they come from, to speak up for Europe*<sup>17</sup>, in a welcome appeal to solidarity, so that the efforts made by EU citizens would not be in vain. Basing his findings on statistical data, the President expressed his confidence in the recovery of the Union, while pointing at the persistent problem of unemployment. In his own words: *For Europe, recovery is within sight. Of course, we need to be vigilant. But it does prove we are on the right track. This should push us to keep up our efforts. We owe it to those for whom the recovery is not yet within reach, to those who do not yet profit from positive developments. We owe it to our 26 million unemployed.*<sup>18</sup>

Following in his own footsteps, Barroso once again called for more European integration, as well as a deeper economic and monetary union, by stating: *In our world of geo-economic and geopolitical tectonic changes, I believe that only together, as the European Union, we can give our citizens what they aspire: that in the age of globalisation our values, our interests, our prosperity continue to be protected and promoted.*<sup>19</sup> Pursuing a skilful manner of addressing his audience, encountered in every State of the Union Address, he did

<sup>15</sup> See: Cristiano Bee, Emanuela Bozzini, *Mapping the European Public Sphere: Institutions, Media and Civil Society*, Ashgate Publishing, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> For more details on the electronic platform, see: Sigrid Baringhorst, Veronika Kneip, Johanna Niesyto, *Political Campaigning on the Web*, Transcript Verlag, 2009, p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> State of the Union address 2013, European Commission, SPEECH/13/684, 11 September 2013, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

not refrain from mentioning the challenges presented by an ever more unpredictable globalised world, which prompted the European Union, on the one hand, to adjust to this phenomenon, and on the other hand to maintain its essence, given by its specific identity. Amid serious challenges posed before democratic institutions worldwide, the European Union has to resist and show potential for change. This key idea is expressed by President Barroso by means of an apparently rhetorical question, as follows: *Do we want to improve Europe, or give it up?* A sense of responsibility is conveyed by such interrogations, all the more because he opts to provide a straightforward answer to it, namely: *My answer is clear: ‘Engage! If you don’t like Europe as it is: improve it! As any human endeavour, the EU is not perfect. Controversies about the division of labour between the national and European levels will never be conclusively ended. Not everything needs a solution at European level. Europe must focus on where it can add most value. It does not have to meddle where this is not the case. The EU needs to be big on big things and smaller on smaller things.’*<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusions

By analysing the State of the Union Addresses that the President of the European Commission has so far delivered before Parliament, it becomes apparent that this American-inspired tool has the merit of adding more communication to the democratic institutional processes of the Community. Albeit very different in terms of context and authority from its American counterpart, the speech can turn into a traditional landmark meant to assess the most stringent needs of the Union for the year to follow, in light of the specific challenges and objectives tackled by the Commission. What better place to engage in such a debate than the 751-strong European Parliament, a forum including both supporters and detractors of the Commission’s President, much like in the case of the US Congress, with respect to the American President?

As far as the most prominent topics are concerned, it appears that the core of the address is in keeping with the prerogatives of the Union’s institutions, chiefly focusing on economic matters. Needless to say, we have yet to analyse a State of the Union Address which detaches its thread from the topic of the crisis the European Union has gone through, but it remains to a large extent certain that the importance given to economic subjects will endure. Last but not least, one merit of this address is the emphasis it places on the need for further integration, by restating the ultimate goal of modern European construction, i.e. a form of political union, perhaps leaning on the principles of federalism, one that brings “more Europe” to the process.

As a welcome perspective for future research, it will be useful to resort to similar qualitative analyses, chiefly oriented towards speech and document interpretation, in order to notice the elements of continuity and discontinuity in future EU State of the Union Addresses, for instance under the leadership of a new Commission President, as of the end of 2014. The degree to which this tool contributes to the decrease in the feeling of democratic deficit and even that of Euroscepticism, albeit not particularly visible at this time, is equally worthy of being analysed in the years to come.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

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