

2026 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen

Short-title: 2026 State of the Union Address by the President

Teaser: President von der Leyen delivered the second State of the Union Address of the 2024-2029 Commission.

The original version of the speech is available "here."

"Check against delivery"

President Metsola,

Prime Minister Carney,

Honourable Members,

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." This is how Charles Dickens describes Europe in the days of the French revolution. And it is also a fair description of the world we live in today. The speed of change is incredible. The challenges exceptional. So if I look at Europe today, my take is this. The state of our Union is the strongest it has ever been. The state of our Union can also feel as precarious as it has ever been.

These two statements may seem incompatible. But they are both true. And they reflect these exceptional times. This complex age of great possibilities and great perils, which all countries are seeking to navigate.

In this world, Europe has chosen to forge its own path. Our work during the last years. And a stronger, independent Europe is now emerging.

This is a Europe that is securing its prosperity. One that is breaking free from our toxic dependency on Russian fossil fuels. That has become the greatest trading power on the planet. That is transforming its industrial policy while upholding our unique social model.

This is a Europe better able to defend itself than ever before. One that has radically overhauled its approach to securing our homelands. That has increased defence spending by almost 80% in the last five years alone.

This is a Europe that stands up for each other. As we are doing by standing with Ukraine as it fights for its future and for our freedom. Or when we stood up for Greenland when threatened. Or when drones, hybrid attacks or disinformation target our democracies.

All of this proves one thing. That Europe is there for Europeans. And that in the cold fragility of today's world, only Europe can provide true sovereignty to Europeans.

And therefore, Honourable Members, this is a Europe we can be so proud of.

At the same time, we all know the threats that we are facing. As old assumptions and relationships have frayed, we are now dealing with an openly hostile world. A territorial war of aggression is raging on our continent, others have erupted nearby. A fight for industrial capacities is shaping global competition. And a battle of narratives is seeking to weaken confidence in Europe, to paralyse our democracies.

But people's worries are not only linked to these big, global threats. The effect of the many crises is present for many European families, not least on the cost of living or housing. The dizzying speed of change and technology is impacting our jobs, our livelihoods and our society. And it is also having a profound effect on our democracy and our discourse.

We see this in the rise of the extreme, the decline of nuance — even in the way that we relate to each other.

These real concerns are being weaponised to drive a wedge between us. Sometimes from the outside — and too often from the inside. But our path is clear. Building an independent Europe that has the power to act. Nothing can divert us from this. Because in this world, the fate of Europe must remain in the hands of Europeans.

So our choice is clear. Do we want a strong and independent Europe that stands up for its values in this world? Or do we want to rally around our European idea that together we can decide our own destiny? Or do we let our democracies be undermined by the proxies and puppets of authoritarians?

Whether it is the ultra-nationalists or the anti-Europeans, whether it is Russian interference or disinformation. The names may be different, but their goal is the same. They despise our values, and they want to shatter our European unity. So let's not only fight back against that, but let's fight together for our European idea.

Honourable Members,

Our economy has withstood the impact of the Middle East wars better than expected. And unemployment is at near-record lows. But the pressures from higher energy prices and borrowing costs are biting for people and for business.

Clear fiscal choices will have to be made to ensure fiscal sustainability, while protecting investment. So, kickstarting Europe's economy is our number one priority.

We have a huge market, world-class industry and services, a rich pool of savings, and one of the world's leading currencies. And yet, we still fragment our capital, networks and purchasing power.

This is why when we took office, we put in place a bold plan. To build an economy where innovation and energy flows across borders. Where companies compete and grow across Europe, and savings finance our future. This is the logic of the Draghi and Letta reports. And together we are delivering.

We now have the political agreement on the One Europe, One Market Roadmap. And together, by the end of next year, we can and must complete this historic overhaul of the Single Market.

In today's economy, speed is of the essence. A permit or a form, a grid connection or financing decision. All of this can determine where an investment is made. Where jobs are created. We need to move much faster. This is why we will put forward proposals to further speed up permitting.

Where projects are in Europe's strategic interests we need to massively accelerate. And where administrative burden is slowing down business and SMEs, we need to slash that too.

You know that our 12 omnibus proposals are reducing administrative burden by around €17 billion a year. But simplification cannot be a one-way street. All levels have to have skin in the game. We have long spoken about the harms of gold-plating.

Honourable Members,

Yes, we are doing our best at the European level to cut red tape. But now I think it is time for the Member States to step up. If we are serious about simplification we also need a pact against gold-plating.

Honourable Members,

Europe cannot remain an industrial powerhouse if its energy prices are structurally too high.

When Russia cut off the gas we fought back. Our supplies are now more diversified. And we invested in our homegrown clean energies — renewables and nuclear.

But then came the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. And again we bitterly felt the cost of our general dependence on imported fossil fuels. Since the start of the conflict, imported fossil fuels cost us an additional €90 billion. Without a single molecule of energy added.

So, we need to double down on our affordable and homegrown, clean energy. Be it renewables and nuclear. Or biomethane and others. Technologically neutral. But they must give us independence.

For this independence, we need to electrify Europe. Our goal is to double the share of electricity by 2040. With this, Europe could cut its fossil-fuel import bill by €260 billion a year. But we also need to ensure that the electricity we generate is available.

Last year, we installed more than 80 GW of renewable capacity. But six times more capacity is still waiting to be connected. This is why we need the grids package so urgently.

We must invest faster. Speed up grid connections. Develop storage. In short, let's make Europe's future electric.

Honourable Members,

We can bring down energy prices, invest and innovate more, reform our economies. But all this is undermined if our companies do not compete on a level playing field.

Our trade deficit with China is now €1 billion euro — a day. It has reached a tipping point. Some say the second China shock is looming. But it's already here. It shows in our communities and factories across our Union. It leads to de-industrialisation in the industrial heartlands of Europe. This is unsustainable.

And this is why we are engaged in a dialogue with China to rebalance our trade. But this dialogue must now lead to results. China's weaker domestic demand means it also needs our European market. So, it is in both our interests to work together to find solutions.

Let me be clear: we will use all tools at our disposal to rebalance our relationship. Words are good. But deeds are better.

And there is another point. We still have too many dangerous dependencies. We are more than 80% dependent on China for many critical raw materials. 90% for some rare earths. We have done a lot. But we are not the only ones trying to diversify. We need to urgently procure and build up our reserves.

No country can do this alone. So we need to think bigger. This is why we will establish a new European Corporation on Critical Raw Materials. It will help us obtain and stockpile what we need. For electric cars, chips and batteries, clean tech and defence. And so much more.

Not only our industry depends on this. But also our independence and security.

This brings me to my last point, on financing. We must create the conditions for our companies to attract investment and grow. This is why our work on the Savings and Investments Union is so critical. But developing capital markets takes time. And the needs of our companies are urgent. We need a banking system that is built for growth — not just stability.

This is why we will put forward a new Banking Package focusing on simplification and tackling fragmentation. We know the demand for capital is out there. But we need a greater capacity and appetite for risk.

Our deep-tech startups are on track to attract record venture capital investment in 2026. This is why I announced a new Scaleup Europe Fund last year.

A year on, the first investments have been made. In companies such as ICEYE. ICEYE was set up by two young Europeans: Rafal from Poland and Pekka from Finland. They initially met through Erasmus some 15 years ago. Together they founded a tech start-up. They developed their idea around satellite imagery. They got Horizon funding. They proved their technology. They grew with private investment. And today they are one of the world's leading space-technology companies. With offices in Finland, Poland, Spain and Greece.

ICEYE's story shows that Europe is the home of innovation. And that we can re-ignite Europe's entrepreneurial spirit.

I am delighted that the founders are with us today. Please join me in welcoming Rafal and Pekka. You are a true European success story.

Honourable Members,

These are Europe's economic fundamentals. But our future prosperity and security will greatly depend on how we manage the tipping points of our time: climate change and AI.

On climate change, this summer was the summer of truth. Almost no part of our continent was spared. In Belgium's High Fens, a peatland formed over centuries burned into a wasteland of ash.

Flames roared from the mountains of Ireland to the islands of Greece or Croatia. In the Alps, ancient glaciers retreat further every day. The impact of all of this is simply devastating: 660,000 hectares burnt to the ground. Some 12 million tonnes of crops lost.

Key rivers like the Danube, der Rhein or La Garonne are disappearing before our eyes.

More than 35,000 additional deaths during the heatwaves. Care homes and hospitals dangerously overheated. And all of this is a mere preview.

These were the hottest summer months ever — but probably the coolest of the years to come.

Science is clear: Europe is warming at double the global rate. Of course, the transition is complex. And we will need to adjust and learn along the way.

But there is no doubt: Europe can, must and will stay the course on our climate targets.

Honourable Members,

This is not about mitigation or adaptation. We need both. And they need to strengthen each other. This is the only way to reach climate resilience. But we need to step up dramatically on preparedness.

We will present a new framework for climate resilience next month. We will identify 100 of the most vulnerable territories in Europe. And we will assess the risks — and at which level they should be managed.

It will give us a whole-of-society approach — all the way through to the local level where adaptation matters most. And it will aim to make Europe the champion in adaptation technologies — a huge emerging market.

Whether drought resistant crops, flood prevention, or energy efficient cooling. Europe is already a leader. And we must capture this market.

Today, only around 25% of catastrophe losses in Europe are covered by private insurance. This means that, far too often, national budgets become the insurer of last resort.

We need to take action to close this gap. This is why the Commission will set up a Climate Insurance Alliance.

Honourable Members,

There can be no repeat of this summer. This is why we will also soon present a European Heatwave Plan. We need better early warning systems and better health preparedness. We need urban adaptation and cooling. And we need to support the most vulnerable.

The second point is on water and food security.

We know the risks of water scarcity and supply chains. Yet, European pipes lose almost one litre in every four litres. Mostly through leakage. What a waste. So we will put forward a new European Water initiative. Because water is precious. For our industry — and for our food security.

Crops need water to grow, livestock to survive. Entire harvests depend on it. This is why we will make proposals to improve risk management and address the insurance gap.

Once again, Europe's farmers have risen to the challenge of this never-ending summer.

Honourable Members,

Europe's farmers are the best in the world. And we will support them every step of the way.

The next point is about wildfires. They are getting more intense, more frequent and more spread out.

I am so proud of Europe's response. Of our European assets flying across the continent. But clearly we need to think bigger. And learn faster.

This is why we have asked some of Europe's most senior firefighters and emergency responders to lead the work. They will look at all aspects of preparedness and prevention. From civil-military coordination to needs for new capabilities. And I have asked them to make proposals, including for a future European Firefighting Fleet.

Our emergency crews have saved countless lives and homes this year alone. And there is one story I would like to tell. It is the story of a Danish pilot, Rune Kyndal.

His passion for flying brought him all around the world. He settled down in a small Canadian city called Terrace. He became one of the country's most experienced civilian pilots. But Rune wanted to put his talent at the service of a bigger mission. So he came back to Europe to help tame wildfires across our continent.

In July, he carried out many successful missions across Greece. He was then supposed to get a well-deserved break. But the emergency was at its peak. So Rune decided to stay.

A few days later he was involved in a tragic accident, with his fire liaison officer.

Both Rune and the officer were killed. They died as heroes.

I have asked Rune's mother and brothers to join us today as special guests.

Dear Margit, dear Tue, dear Kaare,

We are honoured to have you. Rune gave his life to save others. Today, all of Europe owes him.

Honourable Members,

The second tipping point of our times is artificial intelligence.

AI is fast becoming a foundational layer for our economy and security. Europe's stance is clear. We want to make the most of AI to improve our society, our quality of life and our productivity.

I am an optimist that AI has the potential to benefit humanity — if we get it right. But, as with any powerful new technology, AI comes with a balance of possibilities and risks. Without addressing these risks, we will never be able to unlock AI's possibilities.

As the frontier models become more capable, these risks have come sharper into focus.

Models being developed will allow hacking on a level we never thought possible. And they will soon be in the hands of adversaries who see the world very differently to us.

At the same time, the dangers of self-improving models are becoming ever more apparent.

Incidents of AI agents escaping their environment or inserting malicious code are a glimpse. After the HuggingFace incident, developers are ringing the alarm. And CEOs of the most advanced companies tell us that it is time to slow down on the self-recursive models. To pace the frontier.

If the people developing the technology are clear, then we should be too. The AI Act is of course a crucial piece to put in place guardrails. And it puts Europe in the position to shape global efforts of how to tackle this.

So we will step up together with our like-minded partners like Canada, UK and others. We want to team up on model evaluation, verification, early-warning, AI security and much more.

And I will invite the main frontier labs for a discussion on how we can support ongoing industry efforts to pace the frontier.

Honourable Members,

It is also true that Europe will need its own capabilities — in particular to protect our national security.

We need to stay in the race. Because this is crucial for our independence. So we need to massively boost our computing capacity. And we will set out our ideas for how to achieve this in a clean and efficient way.

We will also develop new ways to use public and private funds to invest in the most promising European start-ups and companies.

Honourable Members,

By limiting the risks of AI, we can maximise the benefits. We have already done a lot. On gigafactories and tech sovereignty, for example. But the next leg of this race is not only about frontier models. Just as with the printing press in times gone by. It was invented by a German inventor. But was mastered and applied across Western Europe.

We do not need who develop the frontier technology, to be the ones who draw the greatest value from it. The key is creating the value that AI has not yet delivered. Moving AI from the screen to the real economy and society. On the factory floor. In the hospital ward. In precision agriculture. In our energy grids. For autonomous driving. For defence.

This is where the real value is hidden. And it is where Europe has big advantages. We have world-class industries that sit on the highest quality data. These data are a precious European treasure. They are — what can power tailor-made Industrial AI models.

Let me give you one societal example. On breast cancer screening — an issue many of you have campaigned tirelessly on. Mammography screening reduces mortality by around 30-40% among women who attend. Early detection is of the essence. This is where AI can step in.

AI-supported mammography can identify earlier and more cancers during screening. And as a result more women can survive. So we need AI for health. But, here again, we must do it in a European way.

Do I want my doctor to have instant AI access to all the data needed to make the best diagnostic or treatment choice? Yes of course. But do I want my doctor to be a robot, AI-assisted? No, of course not.

The point is AI needs to empower our doctors. Not replace them.

This is just one example. We are now focusing on five of the highest value sectors where industrial AI has the biggest potential: health, transport, agri-food, advanced manufacturing, and defence and space.

In November, we will announce game changing initiatives across these sectors.

We will invite Member States, MEPs, industry and entrepreneurs to join us in this ambitious European project.

Our approach is clear: We want AI. We want AI to create more value more responsibly. And at a lower cost and with less energy consumption. But above all, we want AI with human agency.

Honourable Members,

This is our European way.

Many of the risks of AI also spillover into our social market economy. For some, AI allows them to speed up repetitive tasks, to make better use of their skills. But clearly, these benefits are unevenly spread between skillsets, generations and regions.

Look at young people and the barriers they are facing, just to get on the first rung of employment.

Our response must keep pace. From education to employment. AI must help develop skills, improve the quality of jobs, and give workers a fair chance.

This is why we need our Quality Jobs Act. And we will deliver before the end of the year.

Honourable Members,

Next year, we will celebrate the 10th anniversary of our European Pillar of Social Rights. And we will keep delivering on its promise.

We will launch a European Care Deal to address the challenges linked to our demographic changes.

We have just proposed the first-ever Housing Act to tackle short-term rentals and housing speculation.

Because, honourable Members, care is not a privilege. Housing is not a privilege. They are rights.

When we proclaimed this Pillar of Social Rights ten years ago, the world was different. Our society has changed. In many ways for the better, in others not.

Today, our fundamental values are being challenged. Some people even want to backslide on women's rights. To send us back to an age, where women were second class citizens.

We have fought so hard for equal treatment, equal opportunities, equal pay.

Look around this room. Finally, there are many of us here: Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Group Leaders, Commissioners, MEPs, staffers and ushers.

So let me send a very clear message to all those who need to hear it: women are here to stay. And we will continue to stand up for our values every single day.

This is why, together with my dear friend António Costa, we will host a Summit to uphold the enduring principles of our Social Pillar.

Times may change, technologies may change, but our values do not. In Europe, people will always come first.

Honourable Members,

In this age of tipping points, our prosperity and security will not only be built at home.

This year, we signed free trade agreements with India, Mercosur, Mexico, Australia and Indonesia.

We now have trade deals in place with more than 80 countries — more than anyone else in the world. And business is asking us for more.

I can announce today a new international connectivity project. It will link the South Caucasus and Central Asia directly to the European market — what we call the Middle Corridor.

Through Global Gateway, we will aim to crowd up to €12 billion in public and private investments. Our goal is to diversify routes, triple trade flows and slash freight transit times by 2030.

To make this a reality, we will organise a Regional Connectivity Summit with the Prime Minister of Bulgaria.

Honourable Members,

These partnerships are a strategic choice for Europe. But they also respond to the fracture in the international rules-based system.

For some, the answer is to go it alone. But this is not an option for us. Europe will always lead when it comes to defending the rules-based system. But we can no longer rely on it, as the only way to secure our interests. Or assume that its rules will shelter us from the complex threats that we face.

In this new world, we must urgently re-imagine our partnerships. And build global coalitions for our resilience and democracies.

And here too only Europe — with its size and power — can take the lead.

And this is why I have invited Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada.

Mark, your presence here is a symbol of the enduring friendship between our people. Our cultural, historical and personal links run deep in the fabric of our societies.

And thanks to CETA, our trade in goods has grown by 75% in less than a decade.

This shows the power of our trade agreements. We see the world with the same eyes: from AI to climate change, from the Arctic to geopolitics. And we have stood together: on Ukraine, on defence, on raw materials and supply chains.

But above all, dear Mark, Europe and Canada believe in democracy.

That power does not belong to the strongest, the richest, or the loudest — but to all of us. That democracies have the freedom to choose with whom to work.

So, we are joining forces voluntarily. We will move from CETA to an Alliance for the Future. To create a common prosperity and economic security space. We will work on intelligent manufacturing. We will create a tech alliance. We will integrate defence industrial bases. We will make the Arctic a flagship joint project. We will work on energy, critical minerals and batteries. On AI, quantum, cyber and economic security.

This is a partnership not against anyone else. But for our common strength.

In short, we want to bring the relationship with Canada to the highest level possible.

Dear Mark,

I said we must urgently reimagine our partnerships. So, I would like to work with you.

We share one ocean, one set of values, one way of seeing the world. And we will now build our shared future as well — thank you for being here.

Honourable Members,

Europe's belief in cooperation has always been driven by peace. It is our *raison d'être*.

Today, that peace is threatened. Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine rages on. And threats are mounting on our soil. Just this week we saw it in Lithuania. The attempted drone attack in Leipzig is the latest proof. We need to be clear about what this was. An attack using military-grade material, carried out by Russian operatives on European soil.

An attack not only on one Member State — but against all of our Union.

And, honourable Members, we will not allow it.

We should be under no illusions about what is happening here: hybrid threats facing Europe are less and less hybrid and less and less threats.

Cyberattacks or sabotage, arson or drone incursions. They are ramping up every day. So, as the threat level climbs, so must Europe's preparedness.

This is why I will propose, together with HRVP, a new European security strategy.

We already have many tools. And we are strengthening our work with NATO. But our doctrine, our institutions and our decision making have not kept pace with the new reality.

Our systems were made for a different world. They are driven by well-intentioned attempts at consensus and compromise. But we need to consider if they are still fit for purpose.

For instance, Europe needs its own counter-hybrid playbook. We urgently need a consensus on how to respond to certain incidents. Those which fall below armed aggression but clearly threaten our national security. In other words, a mechanism to flank NATO's "Article 4".

I believe it is time for Europe's own Article 4 — or an Emergency Security Protocol. When triggered by one Member State, all Member States would convene. To coordinate a European response. To deter further escalation and to mitigate the impact.

And I believe we must go further still.

For a long time, we have discussed a Leaders' format focused on the security of our continent. With partners like Ukraine, UK, Norway, Canada and others involved.

This is even more urgent now, given the nature and scale of the risks at play. This is why we will set out our ideas to make a European Security Council a reality.

The urgency is clear. And the principle is simple: Europe's security is indivisible.

Honourable Members,

This united front also drives our work on European defence.

The surge in defence spending has led to record levels of investment in our capabilities and forces.

New joint projects are getting off the ground. And we are spending more European than ever before.

Bigger orders for our industry, more interoperability, and more economies of scale. Now we need to take that approach to the next level.

The war in Ukraine has shown us the importance of strategic enablers. These are the critical support assets and force multipliers that any credible defence relies on. From air and missile defence, to strategic transport and air-to-air refuelling. From space to cyber.

These systems are essential, and we need more of them. Only together does Europe have the scale to deliver them.

That is why I can announce a new European Instrument for Strategic Enablers — fully aligned with NATO. Because only a strong and credible European defence posture will guarantee our security.

And that there is no room for doubt: Europe will defend each and every single square metre of its territory.

Honourable Members,

What this means is shown to us every day by the men and women of Ukraine.

We know that the coming winter will be hard for Ukraine. But — we also know that North Korean missiles and Russian drones cannot break the Ukrainian spirit of resistance.

Because Ukrainians are fighting for something. They are fighting for the survival of their state, their identity and their freedom.

And they are also fighting for our freedom and our self-determination.

Our task remains to support Ukraine in this to the best of our ability.

Concretely, this means: First, we will support Ukraine more strongly than ever through the hardest winter of the war. Together with partners, we will provide humanitarian aid — and harden Ukraine's energy and heating supply.

Second, we will strengthen Ukraine's air defence. In recent weeks, we agreed for the first time to the purchase of American Patriot defence missiles. These now urgently need to be delivered.

But we must also work together to reduce our dependency on a single supplier.

That is why we want to develop an affordable and modular missile defence system together with Ukraine.

The centrepiece of this cooperation is Freyja. Here we bring together Ukraine's combat experience and innovative strength with Europe's technological leadership. And, of course, our substantial production capacity.

And Freyja is only the beginning. More is needed. With the remaining SAFE funds, we will set up a new programme for joint projects with Ukrainian companies.

Third, we will tighten our sanctions against Russia.

The pressure on Russia must keep increasing. This does not always require new sanctions, but above all the enforcement of existing ones.

Our sanctions are painful. They put the Russian economy under enormous pressure. Russia is trying everything to circumvent them. So we must close every loophole.

Because, honourable Members,

Every day this summer, strike after strike hit Ukrainian cities.

In Kryvyi Rih, Russian drones struck a crowded shopping mall in broad daylight. Then they struck a second time — deliberately targeting the rescue workers who rushed in to help.

This is not just war. This is a deliberate strategy of terror.

But Ukrainians have proven countless times that their spirit cannot be broken. And this summer, a little girl has shown the whole world the true essence of this.

When the war began, Sasha was a six-year-old girl with a great passion. She loved gymnastics more than anything. But on a sunny day in May, a Russian missile struck her home. Sasha was rescued from under the rubble. She spent two weeks in a coma. And when she woke up, she discovered that her left leg was gone forever. It seemed her dream had collapsed with her house.

But Sasha refused to give up. Just seven months after the attack, she was back in the gym with her new prosthetic leg. She trained harder than ever. And started winning gold after gold.

This summer she travelled the world with her Dance of Freedom tour. Her aim is to tell the world about Ukrainian resilience in the fight for freedom. She has inspired people at the Tour Eiffel and in Times Square, in Rio and in Tokyo.

And today, she wants to bring her message right here to the heart of Europe.

Honourable Members, please join me in welcoming Sasha.

You are a great inspiration to all of us.

Slava Ukraini!

Honourable Members,

The deep suffering in Gaza and unchecked settler violence in the West Bank have deeply affected Europeans.

The Israeli government's decision to advance the illegal E1 settlement project is unacceptable.

Last year, I called for Europe to act, proposing a number of measures.

It is painful for many Europeans that Member States have been unable to build the necessary majorities for a unified response. Some Member States have moved ahead. Others are considering to do so.

When Europe is divided, it cannot change the course of events.

The months ahead in the region will be critical. Despite these challenges, Europe is leading the way in supporting Palestinians.

We have delivered more aid than anyone else. Through the Palestine Donor Group and the Team Gaza Initiative, we have brought together 65 delegations. Together we have pledged nearly €1 billion to rebuild Gaza and support a modern Palestinian Authority.

Europe supports the right to self-defence for Israel. And the Palestinian people have an equal right to live in safety and with dignity.

It is Europe's role to keep the flame of a two-State solution alive.

Honourable Members,

Throughout this speech, I have spoken about the need for Europe to act together. Or risk being pulled apart.

Once again this summer, this reality was tested at our borders.

From our Eastern borders to the shores of Crete and right across the Mediterranean. And of course, with the crisis in Ceuta. These events are different in nature. But they have two things in common. The first is that vulnerable people are being exploited. By callous traffickers and smugglers. By our adversaries. This is why we have proposed a sanction regime to hit criminals where it hurts most.

This brings me to the second parallel.

All of our external borders are European borders. So, I want to address the people of Spain directly.

Ceuta's border is a European border. Because Ceuta is Spain. Ceuta is Europe. And Europe will be there for you.

The point is that the only solution is a European solution. And that is the Pact on Migration and Asylum.

After years of work, we finally have a common European framework. One that gives responsibilities to all — and that demands solidarity from all. And it now needs to be fully implemented.

We are on the right way. We have seen a 55% reduction in illegal arrivals over the past two years. And a further 35% drop this year. That is real progress.

But the events of this summer show that our tools need to evolve — especially for emergency situations. Europe needs the means to protect its borders at all times. Especially in scenarios when mass movements are engineered and weaponised. This is why we will propose a new European Emergency Response Framework.

It will only be triggered under a strictly defined set of criteria. And in those cases, it will allow for a time-limited and strictly defined flexibility of standard procedures.

The message from Europe is clear: We will always comply with our values and fundamental rights. But we will never compromise on protecting our borders. It is us, European, that decide who comes to our Union and under what circumstances. And not the smugglers and the traffickers.

This is why we also step up our work to strengthen Frontex — especially to speed up returns. We will improve our early warning systems — also in partnership with third countries. We will ensure that we can detect and anticipate online. And finally, we will keep tackling the root causes of illegal migration.

We need to work together with our neighbours to boost investment. To offer young people meaningful prospects — so they are not compelled to gamble with their lives. Jobs, skills, training, apprenticeships.

This is why I am announcing today a new Mediterranean Youth Skills and Jobs initiative.

Honourable Members,

This is how we can reduce illegal migration. Uphold the rights of individuals seeking protection. Facilitate safe, legal migration with new Gateway Offices in partner countries. And defend the freedoms of our Schengen area. But above all, it proves that Europe can act together.

Honourable Members,

This need for collective European solutions is more important than ever. Because it is also our European democracy that is being threatened.

Time and again, we have seen disinformation and foreign interference seeking to divide us. Seeking to erode trust in our democratic fabric and free media. Election campaigns poisoned by foreign propaganda. Conspiracy theories built on viral deepfake videos.

This is cognitive warfare. In Europe, we form our own opinions based on access to reliable, independent information. This is how we debate, compromise and find solutions — even on controversial issues. This openness is our biggest strength. But it is being weaponised by our opponents to distort debate and truth.

So we need a collective capacity to anticipate, detect and respond. This is why, last year, I announced the Centre for Democratic Resilience. It is already delivering with all the Member States and this House. We will step up our work, pooling our resources with Member States and stakeholders.

But we should be under no illusions. The threats to our democracies do not only come from the outside. We see the rise of anti-democratic, anti-European forces. And we know the risks.

But nothing is inevitable. Just look at Hungary.

The 12 April will stay in our memory for a very long time. The day Hungarian people took their future in their hands. They chose democracy. They chose Europe. They brought Hungary back to where it belongs: at the heart of our Union.

Years of backsliding have started to be reversed. The fight against corruption and state capture is speeding up. There is real progress on fundamental rights. On academic freedom. And now, billions of euro of investment in Hungary have been unlocked.

There is of course much more work ahead. But this shows that hard work pays off.

Thanks to our Rule of Law reports, any issues are now detected early and addressed through dialogue.

And thanks to this House, we have strengthened the link between funds and respect for the rule of law.

With the next long-term budget we must go even further. Respecting the rule of law and fundamental rights is a must for EU funds. It has to be front and centre in the budget. Now and in the future.

Honourable Members,

At its heart, democracy is about giving people the power to choose the society they want to live in.

Today, much of this power has been taken out of the hands of parents. Young Europeans now spend four to six hours per day on screens. Children are pulled ever deeper into feeds designed to keep them scrolling.

What we are witnessing is a great capture of our children. A capture of their attention, their focus, their minds. This is depriving children of their childhood.

What our children need is time to grow into themselves, to grow up with others. To be confronted with all of the emotions and choices that come with real life. They even need time to get bored. Because this is when they have to use their imagination. When they have to talk, agree, disagree, form an opinion, change an opinion.

But when a child has a smartphone, all of this is taken away.

Day and night, parents see the cost: loss of sleep, anxiety, even self-harm.

And in a growing number of cases even fatal tragedies. Like the one of Oléa, a 14-year-old girl living in Belgium.

Oléa took her life exactly one month ago — victim of bullying online.

The story is so tragic and full of sorrow, I was not sure whether to include it.

But Oléa's mum has spoken so movingly about her daughter. And so passionately about stopping this happening to others.

I want to do her words justice so I will speak in French, as she did.

"I am convinced that without these omnipresent networks, my daughter would still be here. This is too much."

Honourable Members,

She is right. This is too much. Enough is enough.

I convened a Special Panel of experts. We spoke to young people. We looked at Australia and others who have moved ahead. And now it is time for Europe to act.

Tomorrow, the Commission is proposing the Kids Act. We will take a gradual and differentiated approach. Each age has its own sensitivities. And therefore, each will have its own tailored protection level.

No personal account under the age of 15. No social media under the age of 13.

That means only mini accounts from 13 to under 15, set up and supervised by parents, with limited features and time restriction. And between 15 and 18, safe design will be an obligation for the platforms.

I am aware that many perceive the power of big tech as overwhelming. And impossible to roll back.

I disagree.

We do not have to accept addictive features. We do not have to accept children being drawn into ever more extreme content. We do not have to accept that girls have their photos used for AI-generated sexualised images.

So we are reversing the burden of proof.

Platforms will have to prove that they are safe. Because it is not about our minors accessing social media. It is about when and how do we allow social media to access minors.

Europe has the power to act. It is us who decide our rules, not big tech.

Honourable Members,

All of this shows us what Europe can achieve on what truly matters. But we must also win back the hearts of Europeans. To create that sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves.

Belonging to a common home. The certainty that, as Europeans, we will always be there for one another.

Because we only need to look beyond our borders to understand how alive this European idea still is.

We need only look towards Ukraine and Moldova. Towards the Western Balkans. We need only look towards all those countries close to our Union.

And because their future lies within our Union, we will soon propose roadmaps for the most advanced candidates.

This process will remain merit-based. And, Honourable Members, I repeat: respect for our values is non-negotiable.

I was horrified by the images of Ratko Mladić's funeral in Belgrade last week.

He committed the most atrocious crimes against humanity.

The glorification of war criminals simply has no place in the European Union.

All the victims of the wars in the former Yugoslavia deserve to be remembered, and all their families deserve our compassion.

Because this is what we defend as a Union: truth, justice and respect for our values.

Honourable Members,

Europe will always remain true to its values. Our Union was born as a project of peace. So that our tragic past could give way to a shared future for Europeans.

Decades later, millions of people still see in Europe a promise — sometimes as far away as Canada.

And yet, we often forget just how powerful that promise remains.

In the aftermath of the war, a Congress of Europe was held in 1948. It brought together the greatest minds of our continent to reflect on the future of European cooperation. To help this European idea, which is ours, to grow. As a society, we must rediscover this capacity to think Europe.

Next year, we will celebrate the historic 70th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

On this occasion, I am announcing today that we will launch a new Congress of Europe. Bringing together the greatest thinkers and writers, artists and scientists, citizens and civil society.

We need our brightest minds — from across our Union and our whole continent. Together, they will develop a vision capable of inspiring the new generation of Europeans. Capable of reclaiming our European imagination. So that the next generation can write its own history.

Let us never forget the birth of our Union. Peoples who had been at war for so long came together to build a common destiny. A destiny of peace, prosperity, democracy and freedom.

They never wrote down how far that destiny would ultimately take us. But each generation has built on the legacy of the one before it. Step by step. Stone by stone.

Of course, our imperfections, our diversity and our differences remain. But that is precisely what makes Europe our Europe. Our common home.