



VON DER LEYEN: BETWEEN AMBITION AND FRAGILITY



In September 2026, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen delivered her annual State of the European Union speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Opening with Charles Dickens' line "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," she framed the European Union as stronger and more independent than ever—yet operating in an "openly hostile world" of geopolitical rivalry, climate extremes, technological disruption, and hybrid threats.

The roughly 70-minute address mixed stock-taking of recent progress with a raft of new or accelerated initiatives. It struck a tone of determined sovereignty: Europe must forge its own path because “only Europe can provide true sovereignty for Europeans.” Supporters saw a coherent push for resilience and competitiveness. Critics noted familiar themes, questions of feasibility, and the gap between announcements and delivery in a Union still dependent on national capitals.

Competitiveness featured prominently early on. Von der Leyen highlighted efforts to break free from Russian fossil fuels, deepen the Single Market, cut red tape through omnibus packages aimed at significant administrative savings, and mobilise investment and innovation. She pointed to rising defence spending, trade diversification, and support for deep-tech scale-ups.

A sharper edge came on China, where she described the EU’s goods trade deficit of roughly €1 billion a day as having reached a tipping point linked to deindustrialisation risks, vowing to “use all the tools at our disposal to rebalance our relationship.” Words must be matched by deeds. A new European Corporation on Critical Raw Materials was proposed to secure and stockpile supplies. These priorities build on earlier Draghi- and Letta-inspired competitiveness agendas. Progress on trade deals and simplification has been tangible in some areas, yet industrial capacity, energy costs, and regulatory consistency remain contested, with northern member states in particular wary of more hands-on EU industrial policy.

Extreme weather received significant attention. Von der Leyen called the summer of 2026 Europe’s “summer of truth,” citing hundreds of thousands of hectares burned, millions of tonnes of crops lost, and tens of thousands of excess heat-related deaths. Europe is warming faster than the global average, she stressed. Concrete responses included a European Heatwave Plan covering early warning, health preparedness and urban adaptation; a Climate Insurance Alliance to raise private coverage of catastrophe losses (currently only around 25 percent); a European Water Initiative; and plans for a European firefighting fleet. A broader climate resilience framework was also flagged. This marked a shift from pure mitigation rhetoric toward adaptation and fiscal preparedness, though the practical rollout and funding will test member-state willingness.

On digital safety for children she announced the EU Kids Act: a ban on social media access for under-13s and restricted “mini accounts” with parental supervision and limits until age 15. Platforms would face a reversed burden of proof to demonstrate safety by design. This completes a personal priority from the previous year and responds to concerns over addictive design, extreme content, and AI-generated abuse, though implementation will face technical, legal, and free-speech debates.

Unspent SAFE defence loans would support joint projects with Ukrainian industry. Strongest-ever support for Ukraine through the coming winter was pledged, including energy and air defences. The day’s most striking announcement was the offer of “associate membership” for Canada—the first such status, outside existing treaties—building on CETA toward deeper cooperation in economic security, technology, defence, energy, critical minerals, and the Arctic.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney attended as guest of honour. Details remain vague and will require careful negotiation with capitals. On migration, an Emergency Response Framework was promised for sudden, large-scale or weaponised inflows, offering time-limited flexibility under strict criteria. Illegal entries have fallen significantly in recent years, yet summer events underscored remaining pressures.

Von der Leyen's second-term Commission runs until 2029. In the years ahead she will seek to convert the speech's roadmap into measurable results on competitiveness, climate adaptation, security partnerships, and digital safeguards—building a record of tangible successes before she steps down.

Summary: On 16 September 2026, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen delivered her State of the European Union address in Strasbourg, framing the EU as stronger and more independent than ever yet facing an openly hostile world of geopolitical rivalry, climate extremes, and hybrid threats. She emphasised boosting competitiveness through Single Market reforms, reduced dependencies, and a tougher stance on the EU's large trade deficit with China, while proposing a European Corporation on Critical Raw Materials. Climate resilience featured prominently after a severe summer of extreme weather, with announcements including a Heatwave Plan, Climate Insurance Alliance, and measures on water and firefighting. Security and partnerships were central, covering stronger support for Ukraine, a proposed European Security Council, hybrid-threat response mechanisms, an emergency migration framework, and the striking offer of associate membership for Canada, alongside digital protections such as the EU Kids Act banning social media for under-13s. While the speech projected confident ambition and concrete tools, questions remain about feasibility and delivery given the need for member-state support, as von der Leyen works to secure tangible successes by the end of her term in 2029.