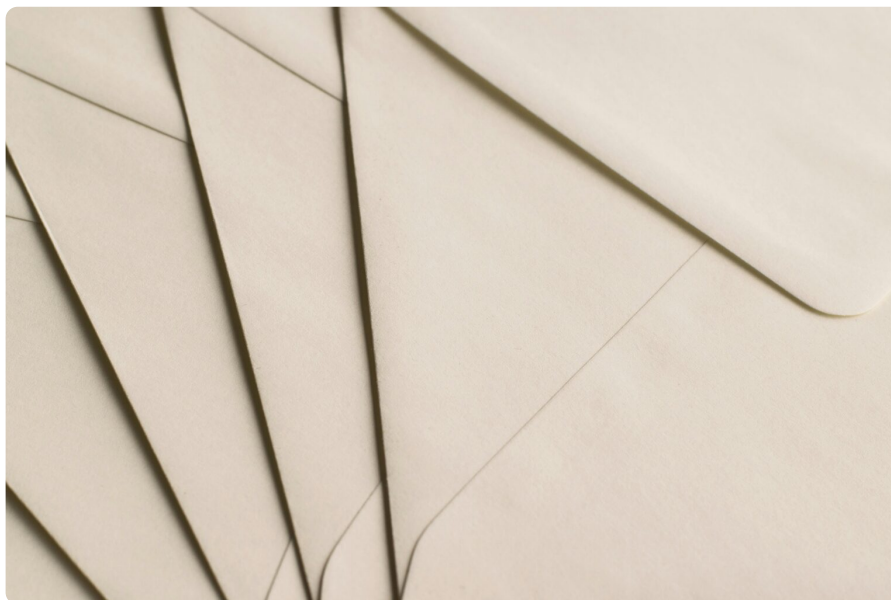


EUROPEAN UNION
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This is the state of our Union!

Published on: October 28, 2025



Dear Ms. President,

In your State of the European Union address, you declared that "Europe is in a fight." Defence, competitiveness and new geopolitical tensions seem to be the inevitabilities of our time. You called us into battle, but what for? According to your speech, to "fight for our values and our democracies." Of course, we are a Union built on human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. These values are the bedrock of our identity, but are we really upholding them?

Not if we look at some of the EU Member States. Orbán's administration continues to dismantle the rule of law, repress the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, and undermine media independence in Hungary. In Slovakia, Fico is tightening his grip on the judiciary and the media, while attacking civil society organizations. Even Germany, a founding member of the European Union, restricts freedoms of assembly and expression at pro-Palestinian protests, where demonstrators face police brutality.

Bulgaria hides deep-rooted problems of governance behind its democratic facade. Seven parliamentary elections in 5 years and a turnout falling below 50% have failed to produce any meaningful political change. The very day of Bulgaria's green light to adopt the euro, the pro-European, liberal mayor of Varna was arrested under presumed corruption charges. While Europe was silent, the public took to the streets to defend the rule of law.

These instances of democratic backsliding are not merely country-specific developments; they represent a much broader challenge, proving that European integration is very much work in progress – one that does not end with a country's membership to the club. Which leads us to the following questions: Are we really the democratic role model that we pretend to be? Can we credibly demand candidate countries to perfectly align to the democratic playbook before entering the Union or are we holding them to a higher standard? While their institutions, procedures, and processes need reform – many of their people show us where the heart of democracy lies: in taking responsibility, with courage and action.

Democracy exists only when people nurture it, defend it, and strengthen it through their choices and sacrifices, just like the brave people of Ukraine, who have been resisting the Russian aggression now for more than 3 years. Or the protesters in Georgia, where over 400 people have been detained for speaking up against falsified elections and repressive laws. Among them are people like Mzia Amaghlobeli, a journalist who has been sentenced and endured a 38-day hunger strike in protest. Her story is just one of many of those who continue to risk everything for a better European future.

In Serbia, people realized that corruption can be lethal after the canopy collapse at the Novi Sad train station

that claimed 16 lives. The thought "It could have been either one of us" instilled a new fear in the minds of Serbian people. Students took to the streets, defending fundamental European values even outside EU borders. Serbia's Gen Z support for democracy is rising – a stark contrast to the decline across much of the EU. A beacon of hope can emerge even from candidate countries, offering an example of how faith in democracy can survive adversity. But it needs your support!

The courage of Ukrainians, Georgians, Serbians and many others should be a wake-up call for Europe: it is time to stop just listing our values but also to act upon them. If democracy is a core EU value, it should also be our core EU priority – within our borders and beyond. Each time we tolerate its erosion within the Union, we betray our own principles and those nations and people placing their hopes on the EU. How can we ask candidate countries to uphold the values we fail to defend at home? How can we not help them? By neglecting democracy, we risk losing both our credibility and our integrity. To remain true to who we are, as a Union that claims to embody liberty and justice, democracy must not be merely an afterthought. It is certainly not for the young people from all across Europe who gathered in Budapest to celebrate Pride in June 2025 despite its ban. It is not for the young Ukrainian soldiers dying to defend it, nor for the Georgians and Serbians who keep demonstrating to demand it.

Dear Ms. President, allow us, young people, to add the missing paragraph to your State of the Union Address:

"The European Union is surrounded by constant reminders about the importance of its own values and what is at stake if they are not upheld. If democracy backslides inside of our Union, so will the momentum for change and democratic renewal around us. Enlarging our Union is not charity, nor is it one-sided. If done correctly, it strengthens us all and can help put democracy back where it belongs – on top of the agenda. Democracy is our identity. We owe it to the next generations and to those who aspire to be part of the European Union to stay true to our values and pass them on. We cannot let them be the only ones who fight for it. We, citizens and Member States of the European Union, must lead by example – with words and with action. Let us fight for it and flood our regions, our town halls, our high schools, kitchen tables and workplaces with hope and democracy."

This op-ed was written during the "Cres Summer School" 2025 by 18 young people from 13 European countries on the Croatian island of Cres (<https://summerschool.oegfe.at> (<https://summerschool.oegfe.at/>)).

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