

The State of the Union and the Meaning of Solidarity

[Published on 06. September 2017](#) by [Teresa Pullano](#)

On September 13, Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, will deliver the annual speech on 'The State of the European Union' before the members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg. As the [official statement](#) goes: 'The speech comes against the backdrop of a changing political and economic landscape and the EU response to ensure a secure, prosperous and inclusive future of Europe.' Is the EU at present sufficiently secure, prosperous and inclusive? It seems that, today, all these aspects are problematic. Is the EU secure? European citizens have never felt more vulnerable than now, when terrorist attacks strike at the heart of its more representative cities. The Catalan capital Barcelona, that was the theatre of the suicidal attacks of a group of Islamist terrorist on August 17, causing the death of 16 people, is one of the symbols of inclusive politics in Europe. In the neighbourhood of El Raval, not far away from la Rambla, the main street where the attacks took place, Halal shops can be found next to Filipino shops and others. Moreover, Ada Colau, the current left-wing mayor of Barcelona, has put in place a [programme for hosting and putting to work refugees](#) living in the city.

If we move to the other two points to be tackled in the 'State of the European Union' discourse, prosperity and inclusion, prospects look even bleaker. I am writing this blog from Athens, Greece. I am here to attend the [European Sociological Association conference](#), whose title is '(Un)making Europe: Capitalism, Solidarities, Subjectivities'. Athens is a very interesting place from where to observe the current situation of the EU and its prospects for further, stronger integration or disintegration. As the conference's title suggests, the EU and its Member States, as well as its citizens, find themselves at a tipping point. Either European integration is capable of providing security, prosperity and inclusion for all, or the EU will collapse, creating a dangerous void that all right-wing forces at a national and at the global level will be more than happy to fill. As the German sociologist Claus Offe said when presenting his most recent book here in Athens, [Europe Entrapped](#): everyone knows what should be done, but no one wants to do it. Among the concrete measures on which there is little disagreement among scientists, Offe lists the need for harmonising fiscal policies across the EU, in order to avoid social dumping and impoverishment of former industrial areas as well as a race to the bottom among European workers.

Also, it is clear by now that austerity policies alone do not solve the problem of economic efficiency and innovation in the countries of southern Europe where they have been implemented. Looking around Athens this is clear: speaking with friends here, everyone admits that corruption was indeed a plague in the the state services and the economy. For sure, reforms in the public sector were and are needed. Nevertheless, the country passed from one extreme to the other: from wasting money for public services, to having so little money that the honest public officers still present cannot do their job. Syriza, the progressive coalition that governs Greece, has tried to do some reforms without losing the sense of social solidarity it was elected to reinforce and keep. I am told that at least they have managed to introduce free health insurance as well as free public transport in Athens for the unemployed. At the same time, public expenditure on health has been dramatically cut under the obligations of the Troika. After the implementation of the austerity measures that Syriza has tried to manage in a way to avoid hitting the poorest, the country's economy is in better shape. And, compared to my last visit in Athens three years ago, one can see it: in the central area of the city, including the left wing area of Exarchia, shops have opened, hip cafes and restaurants are everywhere; and prices are also on the rise in the trendy areas. The cost of a coffee and an orange juice on the hip Exarchia square is around five euros, for example. And you see many young Europeans there. Nevertheless, life for the middle class is difficult: difficult to pay for rents, for their kids to study, difficult to get a decent pension after retiring. Everyone here is depressed: they don't see hope for the future. The rich on the other hand remain rich: in Kolonaki, one of the wealthy neighbourhoods, you find without a problem the main luxury brands, and new expensive cars are parked on the streets. Offe, in his book, also emphasises this point: rich citizens need to be taxed more, and the only way to achieve this is, again, at the European level. After austerity measures have been implemented, there is the need now for a European New Deal: employment, good employment, needs to be created. And this again is only possible through an EU system of unemployment insurance, of social insurance, of measures tackling poverty of Europeans and migrants alike. Education and research need to be fostered at the European level to also provide the infrastructure for innovation. Without a European New Deal, disintegration will occur. In Greece, the affiliates of Golden Dawn were going around assaulting immigrants during the crisis, now the situation is under control. But for how long? Racism, of the worst kind, is on the rise all over Europe. Without a New Deal, giving a direction and hope to European citizens, our societies are going to revive the well-known monsters of racism and of



nationalism. And this will not spare the rich. There is a limit to the sacrifices a nation and people can endure – even the bible of capitalism, the *Financial Times* has acknowledged this much by now. This situation concerns us all: there will be no security or prosperity in the countries of northern Europe without solidarity. And finally, what is solidarity? Here Offe makes a relevant point: solidarity is not what is good for the other, solidarity is what is good for us all. We should all keep this in mind when thinking about the current and the future state of the European Union.