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OBESSU Reaction Paper on the "State of the European Union 2026"

We, the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), represent school students active in general secondary, secondary vocational education in Europe since 1975 and ever since have been advocating for participatory, inclusive and quality education for all.

In today's speech, European Commission President - Ursula Von der Leyen touched on the tipping points shaping Europe's future, from climate resilience to artificial intelligence, from democratic resilience to the digital lives of young people. So, with President von der Leyen making her remarks, the State of the European Union 2026 is now "complete".

It is only fair that now we take the floor, as it is our turn to speak up.

Our Take on What was Said & What we still Need to Hear

We first wish to address the announcement of ***the EU KIDS ACT***. We welcome the initiative as well as the value of recognising that platforms, not young people, must prove they are safe. Nevertheless, we wish to stress how protection cannot come at the cost of participation. If this is about our digital lives, we - young people and learners **- need to be in the room shaping the rules**, not only to be "shielded" by them.

Next, we hold the same principle in relation to the ***new Congress of Europe***. Marking seventy years since the Treaty of Rome is a moment worth seizing. Yet, a vision for the next generation only means something if the next generation is holding the pen. Secondary school and vocational education and training learners, school student unions, and youth organisations have worked and continue to work and navigate across the vast challenges towards building democratic culture from the ground up. **We expect a seat at that table,** not just an invitation to admire it from the door.

Another key issue tackled was ***climate resilience***. The announcement of a new framework and the identification of the most vulnerable territories in Europe is a promising start. Yet, promises risk becoming too little and too late unless we ensure an intergenerational and cross-sectoral approach. As young people and school students, we have been calling for action for years and **must be engaged from the outset in shaping both the principles and the actions** that will follow.

Last, yet equally important, is addressing ***European and shared values***. The President stated that women are here to stay and that Europe will keep standing up for its values, with the European Parliament as well as OBESSU stand in support with her.

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We, however, wish to share that we must and will keep pushing for extending the same commitment and dedication through practices that **include all learners and educators, all genders and generations, all minorities, all people across the globe** - local or foreign, across Europe, its neighbouring regions and in recognition of the EU's role.

Conclusion

In reflection of today's speech and remarks made by President Von der Leyen, we notice a single, recurring gap. Decision makers tend to speak about young people and learners **more often than the time spent engaging and working with them**. Whether the subject is our digital safety, the shape of a new European Congress, the urgency of climate resilience, or the defence of shared values, our message as OBESSU remains the same.

We are not a constituency to be consulted once the direction has already been set.
We must be recognised for what we are. Equal partners who must help set it.

President von der Leyen's address marked the priorities for the year ahead. We expect and share our call towards all the institutions and key stakeholders to ensure that school students, vocational learners and youth organisations are genuinely present. Being provided with the channels, structures and resources to meaningfully be part as those priorities take shape, in the drafting rooms and negotiating tables as much as in the speeches.

As OBESSU, together with our members and partners, we will keep watching, keep organising and keep showing up, because the State of the Union is not complete until the voices of those who will live longest with its consequences have been properly heard.

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