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European values: rhetoric, reality, and responsibility



**UNIVERSIDAD
DE BURGOS**

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RHETORIC, REALITY, AND
RESPONSIBILITY**

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INTRODUCTION

European Union¹ finds itself at a moment of profound uncertainty. Over the past two decades, the continent has experienced a succession of economic, political, social and geopolitical crises that have challenged many of the assumptions upon which the European project was built. The financial crisis, growing political polarisation, migration pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic, the return of large-scale war to the European continent and the accelerating pace of technological and social change have all contributed to a widespread sense that Europe is entering a period of transformation whose final direction remains uncertain.

These developments have emerged within a broader global context characterised by increasing complexity, fragmentation and instability. Traditional political alignments are being questioned, trust in institutions is often declining, and citizens across many societies are searching for new sources of meaning, belonging and security. In such circumstances, questions concerning collective identity become increasingly important. Political communities are sustained not only by institutions and regulations, but also by the capacity of their members to recognise themselves as part of a shared project.

For this reason, the construction of a European identity has become a recurring priority within European institutions and public policy. Numerous initiatives have sought to strengthen citizens' sense of belonging to the European Union through educational programmes, cultural exchanges, mobility schemes and civic participation projects. The underlying assumption is clear: if the European Union is to face the challenges of the future successfully, it requires citizens who recognise themselves not only as members of their local, regional or national communities, but also as participants in a broader European community.

¹ Many of the reflections presented in this book may extend beyond the European Union to Europe more broadly. However, the analysis focuses primarily on the European Union as the principal political and institutional framework through which questions about values, identity, trust and integration are currently articulated.

Yet this objective raises a fundamental question: upon what foundations should such an identity be built?

The answer is not straightforward. Discussions surrounding European identity inevitably led to debates about European values. However, the concept of ‘European values’ has become increasingly ambiguous. It is often used to refer simultaneously to moral values, political principles, institutional arrangements, legal commitments and policy objectives. Democracy, human rights, equality, solidarity, pluralism and the rule of law are frequently grouped together under the same label despite performing different functions within social and political life. This ambiguity complicates attempts to understand what the European Union ultimately stands for and how a meaningful sense of belonging might be cultivated among its citizens.

This essay begins from the premise that greater conceptual clarity is needed. It argues that many of the concepts commonly presented as European values are more accurately understood as principles that guide action rather than as foundational values themselves. Building upon this distinction, the book proposes an alternative ethical framework centred on Human Dignity, understood primarily as the capacity of all individuals to participate fully in society. From this value derive two closely interconnected values—Responsible Freedom and Equal Moral Recognition—which together provide the basis for a broader reflection on identity, trust and the future of the European project.

The purpose of this essay is not to provide definitive answers to the complex challenges facing Europe. Rather, it seeks to contribute to an ongoing conversation about the ethical foundations that may be required if the European Union is to remain a meaningful political and social community in the decades ahead. The argument developed throughout the book is that values, identity and trust are deeply interconnected, and that understanding this relationship is essential for addressing many of the challenges confronting the contemporary European Union.

The structure of the book reflects this progression. Chapter 1 examines the origins of the European project; the values commonly associated with it and the tensions that emerge from their interpretation and application. Chapter 2

proposes a distinction between values, principles and actions, and develops an alternative ethical framework grounded in human dignity. Chapter 3 explores how identities are constructed, the nature of European identity and the relationship between identity, values and education. Finally, Chapter 4 considers the implications of these discussions for the future of Europe, focusing particularly on the roles of trust, education and shared identity in sustaining a common political project.

Although the chapters build upon one another, this book has been written so that each chapter may also be read independently. Readers seeking a broad understanding of the overall argument may choose to read the text sequentially from beginning to end. Those interested in specific themes—such as European values, identity, education or the future of the European project—may approach individual chapters separately without losing the central thread of the discussion. Cross-references have been kept to a minimum, while sufficient context has been provided to ensure that each chapter remains understandable on its own.

Ultimately, this essay is an invitation to reflect upon a simple but increasingly important question: what kind of European Union do we wish to build together after 70 years? Our purpose is not to provide a definitive answer, but to contribute to a broader conversation about the values, principles, actions and forms of coexistence that may guide the European project in the years to come. The reflections presented here constitute one possible framework for thinking about Europe's future, offered in the hope of stimulating dialogue, critical discussion and collective reflection. For this reason, the argument begins not with institutions, markets or policies, but with values, because the future of any political community ultimately depends upon the ethical foundations that its members are willing to share, debate and continually renew.

VISUAL SUMMARY

WHAT IS NEW IN THIS BOOK?

A VISUAL SUMMARY OF THE BOOK'S ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This book offers a new framework to understand European values, identity and trust and their essential role in the future of the European project.

1 A CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

The book distinguishes clearly between values, principles and policies—three categories often confused in public and academic debates.



VALUES

Fundamental ethical commitments that give meaning and direction to our collective life.



PRINCIPLES

Normative guidelines that translate values into orientations for action and decision-making.



POLICIES

Concrete measures and instruments designed to address specific problems and achieve practical results.



This distinction provides conceptual clarity and prevents common misunderstandings that weaken the public conversation about Europe.

2 A NEW ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

The book proposes an original framework grounded in one foundational value and two derived values.



HUMAN DIGNITY

The inherent worth of every person and their capacity to participate fully in society.



RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM

The freedom to choose and act, exercised with awareness of its impact on others and on the common good.



EQUAL MORAL RECOGNITION

The commitment to recognise every person as an equal moral agent, entitled to the same respect, consideration and opportunities.



From this foundation emerge guiding principles (democracy, human rights, rule of law, solidarity, pluralism, sustainability) and, ultimately, policies. This offers a coherent ethical architecture for Europe.

3 IDENTITY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

The book provides a comprehensive analysis of how identities are formed—individually and collectively—and applies this understanding to the case of European identity.



MULTIDIMENSIONAL IDENTITY

Identities are multiple, overlapping and dynamic, not fixed or exclusive.



EUROPEAN IDENTITY IS PLURAL

It must embrace diversity and remain open, inclusive and evolving.



THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Education is key to transmitting values, critical thinking and democratic citizenship.



IDENTITY AND TRUST ARE INTERTWINED

Shared identities and trust reinforce each other and enable cooperation.



A mature European identity recognises Europe's contradictions, limitations and failures while remaining committed to improving the common project through democratic participation and collective responsibility.

4 TRUST AS THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE

The book shows that trust is not just another value: it is the social condition that allows all other values and institutions to work.



Enables cooperation despite uncertainty



Supports acceptance of collective decisions



Encourages respect for diversity



Strengthens the link between citizens and institutions



Strengthening trust between citizens and institutions is one of Europe's central challenges.

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE'S FUTURE

The book draws practical lessons for the future.

- ✓ **Europe must recover its human dimension:** not only a technical or economic project, but a lived and shared community.
- ✓ **Values, identity and trust must be cultivated** continuously through participation, education and everyday experiences.
- ✓ **European identity cannot be homogeneous or closed:** its strength lies in its capacity to organise diversity without suppressing it.
- ✓ **The future of Europe depends on common commitments** rather than common interests.



IN SHORT: THIS BOOK OFFERS A COHERENT ETHICAL FRAMEWORK, A CLEARER UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY AND TRUST, AND A ROADMAP FOR A STRONGER, MORE INCLUSIVE AND MORE RESILIENT EUROPE.



CHAPTER 1: THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS VALUES

The European Union as a Political Project

The European Union (EU hereinafter) cannot be understood solely as an economic arrangement or a collection of institutions. It is the result of a historical process through which the EU states sought to create a stable framework capable of guaranteeing peace, cooperation and prosperity after centuries marked by conflict and rivalry. Although economic integration has played a central role throughout this process, the European project has gradually evolved into something broader: a political and normative community built upon a shared set of principles and aspirations.

To understand the values that the EU claims to embody today, it is first necessary to understand the origins of the project itself. The EU did not emerge suddenly, nor was it the product of a single political decision. Rather, it developed through the convergence of political, economic and ideological factors that shaped post-war Europe. Following the devastation of the Second World War, European leaders faced a common challenge: how to prevent future conflicts while rebuilding societies and economies that had been profoundly damaged.

The search for lasting peace encouraged the emergence of new forms of cooperation. Already in the immediate post-war years, proposals for greater European unity began to circulate. Winston Churchill's call for a form of 'United States of Europe' in 1946 and the subsequent Congress of The Hague in 1948 contributed to the development of a shared vision of continental cooperation. Although these early initiatives did not involve any transfer of sovereignty, they established many of the ideological foundations upon which European integration would later be built².

A decisive step was taken on 9 May 1950 when the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman presented a proposal prepared by Jean Monnet to

² See Churchill, W. (1946, September 19). Speech at the University of Zurich; proceedings of the Congress of Europe held in The Hague (1948); and subsequent analyses of the intellectual origins of European integration.

place Franco-German coal and steel production under a common authority. The objective was both economic and strategic. By jointly managing the industries that had fuelled Europe's war machines, future conflicts between former rivals would become materially and politically more difficult. This initiative led to the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1951 and the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), bringing together France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

The significance of the ECSC extended far beyond the sectors it regulated. For the first time in modern European history, sovereign states voluntarily agreed to transfer part of their authority over strategic industries to a common institution. In doing so, they created a precedent for a new form of political cooperation based on interdependence rather than competition³.

The success of the ECSC encouraged further integration. The Treaties of Rome, signed in 1957, established the European Economic Community (EEC) and EURATOM, laying the foundations for a common market and cooperation in the field of nuclear energy. Although these initiatives remained primarily economic in nature, they gradually expanded into social, regional and mobility-related policies. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the integration process deepened alongside sustained economic growth and the accession of new member states, including Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

The European Union was not created because cooperation emerged naturally, but because history revealed the need to build it deliberately.

The end of the Cold War created new opportunities and new challenges. The collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe transformed the geopolitical landscape and accelerated discussions about the future direction of European integration. These developments culminated in the

³ For a detailed account of the creation and significance of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in the post-war European integration process, see Urwin, D. W. (1995). *The Community of Europe: A History of European Integration Since 1945*. Longman.

Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, which formally established the European Union, introduced European citizenship and paved the way for monetary union.

The early twenty-first century witnessed the largest enlargement in the history of the Union. The accession of numerous Central and Eastern European countries fundamentally altered the composition of the European project, increasing its cultural, historical and political diversity. Managing a larger and more heterogeneous Union required new institutional arrangements, eventually leading to the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force in 2009 and clarified the distribution of competences while strengthening the legal status of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁴.

Viewed from a historical perspective, European integration has been driven primarily by economic considerations. Nevertheless, the process gradually produced consequences that extended far beyond the economic sphere. The Union evolved into a political and legal framework capable of shaping legislation, regulating markets and coordinating public policies across member states. In this respect, the construction of a common political order has been remarkably successful.

The development of a shared European identity, however, has proven considerably more complex. While European law and institutions exert a visible influence on the daily lives of citizens, the emergence of a common sense of belonging remains incomplete and uneven across the continent. This issue will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 3. For now, it is sufficient to note that, from its earliest stages, the European project has been guided by aspirations that extend beyond economic cooperation. Peace, prosperity and solidarity gradually became central reference points for integration and, over time, contributed to the emergence of what are now commonly described as 'European values'.

⁴ See: Gil Pecharromán, J. (2024). Historia de la integración europea. UNED

The Values Chosen by the European Union

As discussed in the previous section, the EU gradually evolved from a primarily economic project into a broader political and normative community. Alongside this transformation, the Union sought to articulate a set of foundational values capable of guiding both its internal development and its external action. These values are formally established in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU hereinafter)⁵ and reinforced through the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁶.

According to Article 2, the Union is founded on six core values: **human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights**. Although formally codified during the final decades of the twentieth century and consolidated in the early twenty-first century, these principles emerged from a much longer historical process shaped by the experiences of war, totalitarianism, democratic reconstruction and international cooperation. They represent an attempt to define the normative foundations upon which European integration rests.

The adoption of these values reflects more than a legal exercise. Throughout the post-war period, European integration was accompanied by the conviction that lasting peace and cooperation required not only economic interdependence but also a minimum degree of political and ethical convergence. As successive enlargements brought together countries with diverse historical experiences, political traditions and cultural backgrounds, the need for a

Many of the concepts described as European values function more accurately as principles guiding political action.

5. For more information, see Treaty of Lisbon / Treaty on European Union.

6. For more information about the establishing of the official European values, see the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

common normative framework became increasingly evident. Membership of the EU therefore came to imply not only participation in a shared market, but also adherence to a common set of democratic and legal standards.

These values are often presented as distinct elements, yet they operate as an interconnected system. The absence or erosion of any one of them inevitably affects the others. Democracy cannot function effectively without respect for the rule of law. Equality becomes difficult to guarantee without the protection of fundamental rights. Freedom loses much of its meaning when human dignity is not respected. In this sense, the six values are not independent pillars but mutually reinforcing components of a broader normative architecture.

Among them, **human rights** occupy a particularly significant position. While formally listed as one value among others, they can also be understood as the practical expression through which many of the remaining values become tangible. The protection of rights provides the mechanisms through which freedom, equality, dignity and democratic participation are realised in everyday life. For this reason, the EU has progressively expanded its legal and institutional framework for safeguarding fundamental rights, both within its borders and in its external relations.

The principle of **equality** seeks to ensure that individuals enjoy equal protection under the law and are not subject to unjust discrimination. Historically, one of the earliest expressions of this commitment appeared in the Treaty of Rome, which established equal pay for equal work as a foundational principle of European integration. Over time, the scope of equality has expanded to encompass broader concerns relating to discrimination, inclusion and equal opportunities.

Freedom occupies an equally central position within the European project. In the European context, freedom encompasses both individual liberties and economic freedoms. On the one hand, the Charter of Fundamental Rights protects freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, expression, assembly and information. On the other, the European project has been built around the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. These different

dimensions of freedom reflect the dual nature of European integration as both a political and an economic undertaking.

The value of **democracy** underpins the institutional architecture of the Union. The EU is founded upon representative democracy, whereby citizens participate in political decision-making through elected representatives at both national and European levels. European citizenship grants individuals a range of political rights, including participation in elections to the European Parliament and, under certain conditions, local elections within member states. Democratic participation is therefore presented as a central mechanism to maintain the legitimacy of European institutions.

Closely related to democracy is the principle of **the rule of law**. This value requires that political power be exercised within a legal framework that is transparent, predictable and subject to judicial oversight. It ensures that public authorities remain accountable and that legal protections are applied consistently. Within the EU, the Court of Justice of the European Union plays a crucial role in safeguarding the coherence of this legal order and ensuring the uniform interpretation of European law across member states.

Finally, **human dignity** occupies a unique position within the European normative framework. The Charter of Fundamental Rights explicitly states that human dignity is inviolable and must be respected and protected. In many respects, dignity can be regarded as the ethical foundation from which the other values derive their meaning. Freedom, equality, democracy, the rule of law and human rights all seek, in different ways, to protect the worth and integrity of the individual person.

Taken together, these six values form the official normative foundation of the EU. They provide the language through which the Union defines itself, legitimises its institutions and presents its role in the world. At the same time, their practical interpretation and implementation raise important questions regarding coherence, universality and shared commitment. Before examining these challenges in greater depth, it is necessary to ask a more fundamental question: to what extent are these values genuinely shared across European societies?

Structural Contradictions of the European Union

The previous sections have presented the historical development of the European project and the values that officially underpin it. Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights constitute the normative foundation through which the EU defines itself and legitimises its political action. Yet any attentive observer of contemporary European politics will quickly notice a recurring tension: the distance between these proclaimed values and their practical implementation.

This gap should not be understood as the result of isolated failures, occasional inconsistencies or simple political hypocrisy. Rather, it reflects a series of structural tensions embedded within the very nature of the European project. The EU simultaneously functions as a community of values, a supranational legal order, a political union in continuous development and a geopolitical actor operating within an increasingly complex international environment. These different dimensions do not always advance in the same direction, creating contradictions that are often difficult to resolve.

The first source of tension stems from the Union's hybrid institutional architecture. Unlike a traditional nation-state, the EU does not possess a fully autonomous centre of sovereign power. Authority is distributed across multiple levels, with supranational institutions and member states sharing responsibilities and competences. This arrangement has facilitated cooperation among diverse countries, but it has also created significant obstacles when common values come into conflict with national political interests.

The difficulties surrounding the enforcement of the rule of law illustrate this challenge particularly clearly. Although the values contained in Article 2 of the TEU are legally binding, their enforcement often depends upon political mechanisms that require broad consensus among member states. The procedure established under Article 7, sometimes referred to as the Union's 'nuclear option', requires exceptionally

*The legitimacy of principles
depends not only on their
proclamation, but also on their
consistent application.*

high levels of agreement before sanctions can be imposed. Consequently, governments facing similar accusations may support one another and effectively prevent stronger corrective measures. Several scholars have argued that traditional infringement procedures and judicial rulings are often insufficient to address systemic violations of democratic standards, creating a situation in which the Union may prevail legally while remaining politically constrained⁷.

A second source of contradiction emerges from the persistent primacy of national interests. Official discourse frequently presents European values as universal commitments applicable across all member states. In practice, however, governments often evaluate these commitments through the lens of domestic political priorities, electoral pressures and national strategic interests.

Migration policy provides a particularly visible example. While the EU formally recognises the right to asylum and places considerable emphasis on human dignity and human rights, member states have frequently adopted highly divergent approaches in response to migration pressures. Humanitarian obligations often coexist with restrictive border policies, externalisation agreements and security-driven responses. The resulting tension reveals the difficulty of reconciling common principles with competing national priorities.

Closely connected to this dynamic is the increasing politicisation of European values themselves. Many of the principles that were once presented as broad post-war consensuses have become objects of political contestation. Debates concerning judicial independence, gender equality, minority rights, freedom of expression and democratic accountability increasingly divide political actors both within and across member states.

⁷ See: Scheppele, K. L., Kochenov, D. V., & Grabowska-Moroz, B. (2020). EU values are law, after all: Enforcing EU values through systemic infringement actions by the European Commission and the Member States of the European Union. *Yearbook of European Law*, 39, 3–121. <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaa012>

As Olsen observes, some governments have become particularly adept at exploiting ambiguities within the European framework to justify policies that challenge shared commitments while remaining formally within legal boundaries⁸. In these contexts, values cease to function as common reference points and instead become instruments of political struggle. The consequence is a gradual erosion of the normative consensus that originally supported European integration.

A fourth structural tension derives from what might be described as the politics of exception. During the past two decades, Europe has experienced a succession of major crises, including the global financial one, the migration one, the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the growing pressures associated with climate change. Each of these events required rapid responses under conditions of uncertainty and urgency.

While exceptional measures may be justified in times of crisis, they often place values under considerable strain. Restrictions on civil liberties during public health emergencies, emergency border controls during migration crises or pragmatic compromises in energy and security policy illustrate how immediate political necessities can temporarily displace normative commitments. The challenge lies not only in managing crises effectively, but also in ensuring that exceptional measures do not become permanent features of governance.

The uneven implementation of common norms constitutes a fifth source of contradiction. The EU is frequently recognised as one of the world's most advanced producers of regulatory standards, particularly in fields such as data protection, consumer rights, environmental protection and anti-discrimination legislation. Yet the existence of common legislation does not guarantee uniform implementation.

⁸ See: Olsen, T. V. (2023). Why and how should the European Union defend its values? *Res Publica*, 29, 69–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-022-09560-5>

As a result, citizens across the EU often experience significantly different levels of protection and access to rights despite living under the same legal framework. Democratic guarantees, judicial independence and anti-discrimination measures may be firmly embedded in some national contexts while remaining more fragile in others. This divergence creates what might be described as an EU of unequal implementation, where common standards coexist with markedly different realities.

Finally, European external action reveals a further layer of complexity. The EU has frequently described itself as a normative power capable of promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law beyond its borders. Yet international politics rarely operates according to purely normative considerations.

The Union must cooperate with countries that do not necessarily share its political values to address challenges relating to migration, security, trade or energy supply. Such partnerships are often strategically necessary, but they may also generate perceptions of inconsistency. Research examining the promotion of European norms abroad demonstrates that these values are not always received as universal aspirations; in some contexts, they are interpreted as forms of external interference, generating resistance rather than convergence⁹.

Taken together, these structural tensions help explain why contradictions repeatedly emerge between the values proclaimed by the EU and the realities of political practice. Importantly, recognising these contradictions does not require rejecting the European project. On the contrary, it requires acknowledging its complexity.

The EU remains one of the most ambitious political experiments in modern history: an attempt to combine supranational governance, democratic

⁹ See: Luciani, L. (2025). European values, Eurasian family, or neither? A contrapuntal reading of the European Union's agenda to combat domestic violence in Armenia. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 27(3), 656–682. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2025.2488879>

legitimacy, legal integration and cultural diversity within a single political framework. Yet precisely because of this ambition, tensions between principles and practice are inevitable. Understanding these tensions is therefore essential for any serious evaluation of Europe's present condition and future prospects.

Critical Reflection

The preceding sections have examined the historical development of the European project, the values officially enshrined in the EU's foundational treaties and the structural tensions that frequently emerge between those values and political practice. Taken together, these elements reveal a paradox that lies at the heart of contemporary Europe.

On the one hand, the EU presents itself as a political community founded upon human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. These principles provide the normative framework through which the Union understands its purpose and justifies its existence. On the other hand, the repeated emergence of contradictions, exceptions and uneven implementation raises an unavoidable question: why do these difficulties persist despite the apparent centrality of these values?

A common explanation attributes such inconsistencies to political failures, insufficient enforcement mechanisms or the resistance of governments. While these factors undoubtedly play a role, they may not provide a complete explanation. If the same tensions continue to appear across different countries, policy areas and historical periods, it becomes necessary to consider whether the problem lies not only in implementation but also in the nature of the values themselves and in the role, they are expected to perform within the European project.

One possible explanation concerns the relationship between values and social consensus. Values are often understood as deeply shared beliefs regarding what a community considers desirable, legitimate or morally important. They provide meaning, guide behaviour and contribute to the formation of collective identities. However, contemporary Europe is characterised by extraordinary levels of cultural, historical, political and social diversity. Citizens across the continent differ substantially in their views on religion, family, national sovereignty, social justice, migration, economic organisation and the role of the state.

In this context, it is legitimate to ask whether the elements listed in Article 2 of the TEU are genuinely shared values in the sociological sense of the term. While there is broad support for many of these principles across the EU, the controversies surrounding issues such as migration, judicial reform, minority rights, gender equality or democratic accountability suggest that consensus is often less robust than institutional discourse may imply. The existence of legal mechanisms designed to monitor, enforce and sanction compliance further highlights an important tension. Values that are deeply internalised by a community generally rely on social legitimacy and voluntary adherence. By contrast, principles that require continuous supervision and corrective intervention often operate according to a different logic.

This observation does not diminish the importance of the European framework. Nor does it imply that democracy, equality or the rule of law are undesirable objectives. Rather, it suggests that the EU may be asking a particular set of concepts to perform two functions simultaneously. They are expected to operate both as normative standards that guide political action and as shared moral foundations capable of generating social cohesion and collective identity. Yet these functions are not necessarily identical.

The distinction is particularly important because one of the recurring challenges facing the European project concerns' identity. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, political communities require more than institutional arrangements and legal frameworks. They also depend upon shared meanings, mutual recognition and a sense of belonging. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions, cooperate with one another and support common projects when they perceive themselves as members of a meaningful community.

This issue becomes increasingly relevant in a Europe confronted by geopolitical instability, technological transformation, demographic change and growing political polarisation. The challenges of the twenty-first century require not only effective institutions but also a degree of social trust and collective commitment capable of sustaining cooperation across diverse societies. Yet trust cannot be generated solely through legislation, nor can identity emerge automatically from administrative integration.

The contradictions explored throughout this chapter therefore point towards a broader question. Perhaps the central issue is not simply whether the EU applies its proclaimed values consistently, but whether these values can provide the type of moral foundation that a shared European identity requires. If they are not, then the future of the European project may depend upon identifying a more fundamental ethical basis from which both principles and policies can be derived.

The purpose of this reflection is not to reject the European project, nor to deny the achievements of European integration. On the contrary, it is precisely because the EU remains one of the most ambitious political experiments in modern history that these questions deserve careful consideration. Understanding the nature of the EU's values, the reasons behind their limitations and the conditions under which they can contribute to genuine social cohesion is essential for any meaningful discussion of our future.

A useful way of understanding this limitation comes from the contrast between two influential traditions of political and economic thought. Classical liberal approaches, inspired by Adam Smith¹⁰, suggest that the pursuit of individual interests can generate collective benefits through spontaneous coordination. However, later developments in game theory, particularly the

EU's challenge is not the absence of principles, but the absence of a deeper moral foundation capable of sustaining them.

work of John Nash¹¹, demonstrated that rational individuals do not necessarily produce socially desirable outcomes. Under many circumstances, actors acting in their own interest become trapped in stable but collectively suboptimal equilibria.

¹⁰ See: Rothschild, E. (1994). Adam Smith and the invisible hand. *The American Economic Review*, 84(2), 319-322.

¹¹ See: Myerson, Roger, B. 1999. 'Nash Equilibrium and the History of Economic Theory.' *Journal of Economic Literature* 37 (3): 1067–1082. DOI: 10.1257/jel.37.3.1067

From this perspective, cooperation cannot be assumed to emerge automatically. It requires shared expectations, trust, common rules and mechanisms capable of aligning individual and collective interests. The European project itself can be understood as a response to this challenge. The Union was not created because cooperation emerged naturally among European states, but because historical experience demonstrated the need to construct and protect cooperative frameworks capable of preventing conflict and sustaining common goods.

The next chapter addresses these questions directly. Before determining which values the EU should promote, it is first necessary to clarify a more fundamental issue: what exactly do we mean when we speak of a value?

CHAPTER 2: TOWARDS A RENEWED EUROPEAN ETHICS

Values, Principles and Actions

The previous chapter examined the values officially proclaimed by the EU and the structural contradictions that frequently emerge between these normative commitments and political practice. These tensions raise an important question. If the principles contained in Article 2 of the TEU occupy such a central position within the European project, why do difficulties concerning their interpretation, implementation and legitimacy persist so consistently?

Before attempting to answer this question, it is necessary to clarify a more fundamental issue. What exactly do we mean when we speak of a value? More specifically, are the elements commonly described as ‘European values’ genuinely values, or do they belong to a different category of concepts altogether?

The objective of this chapter is not to engage in an exhaustive philosophical discussion of moral theory. Nevertheless, a minimum degree of conceptual clarity is necessary if we are to understand both the strengths and limitations of the current European framework. Throughout political discourse, the terms *value*, *principle* and *policy*¹² are often used interchangeably. Yet they refer to distinct realities and perform different functions within social and political life.

A **value** may be understood as a deeply held belief regarding what is desirable, worthwhile or morally important. Values provide orientation rather than instruction. They express collective aspirations and help individuals and communities determine what they consider worth pursuing. Because they

¹² The terms actions, policies, measures and related expressions are used throughout this book to denote the practical implementation of values and principles. While these concepts may differ in specific contexts, such distinctions are not essential for the purposes of the present discussion.

operate at a fundamental level, values contribute to the formation of identities, influence behaviour and shape broader cultural expectations¹³.

Importantly, values do not necessarily prescribe specific courses of action. A society may value freedom, solidarity, equality or responsibility without agreeing on the precise mechanisms through which these ideals should be realised. Values therefore function primarily as moral reference points. They tell us what matters, but not necessarily how to achieve it.

A **principle**, by contrast, occupies a more operational position. Principles translate broad aspirations into normative guidelines capable of orienting political, legal and institutional action. Whereas values express what a community considers desirable, principles indicate how institutions and individuals should behave to pursue those aspirations. Principles therefore possess a more explicitly normative character. They establish standards against which actions, policies and decisions can be evaluated.

For example, a society may value justice while adopting principles such as non-discrimination, equality before the law or procedural fairness to pursue that objective. Similarly, a commitment to freedom may give rise to principles concerning transparency, accountability or the protection of civil liberties. Principles thus provide the bridge between abstract moral aspirations and practical governance.

A third category consists of **actions, policies or concrete measures**. These represent the most tangible level of social and political life. Policies translate principles into specific interventions, programmes or regulations that can be implemented, monitored and evaluated. Unlike values or principles, policies possess clearly defined objectives, procedures and instruments.

¹³ See: Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 25, 1–65.

To illustrate this distinction, consider the concept of transparency. Transparency itself may be regarded as a desirable aspiration. However, transparency becomes operational only when it is translated into principles concerning public accountability and access to information. These principles, in turn, may generate concrete actions such as open-data portals, public reporting requirements or mandatory disclosure procedures for public officials.

Values define what matters, principles indicate how to act, and policies transform both into reality.

The relationship between values, principles and actions is therefore hierarchical rather than interchangeable. Values provide moral direction. Principles transform that direction into normative guidance. Policies and actions translate that guidance into practical reality. Each level depends upon the others, yet each fulfils a distinct function.

This distinction becomes particularly relevant when examining the language employed by the EU. Many of the elements commonly described as European values—democracy, the rule of law, equality or respect for human rights—certainly possess immense political and moral importance. However, they also exhibit characteristics commonly associated with principles. They provide normative standards, guide institutional behaviour and can be monitored, evaluated and enforced through legal mechanisms.

This observation does not diminish their significance. On the contrary, it highlights the need for greater conceptual precision. Confusing values with principles risks obscuring both their strengths and their limitations. Principles are essential for organising political communities and protecting rights. Values, however, perform a different function: they provide the deeper moral foundations capable of generating meaning, legitimacy, identity and social cohesion.

The distinction is not merely academic. If the EU seeks to strengthen its capacity for cooperation, democratic participation and collective belonging, it becomes necessary to identify the moral foundations from which its principles

and policies ultimately derive their legitimacy. In other words, before asking how the EU should act, we must first ask what the EU should value.

The following sections explore this question in greater depth. They argue that many of the concepts currently presented as European values are more accurately understood as principles and that a renewed European ethical framework requires a smaller number of genuinely foundational values capable of supporting both institutional action and a shared sense of purpose.

From Values to Policy

The distinction between values, principles and actions is not merely a matter of conceptual precision. It also provides a practical framework for understanding how political communities transform moral aspirations into concrete forms of governance. Without such a framework, discussions about values often remain abstract, while political decisions appear disconnected from the ethical foundations that supposedly justify them.

Political systems rarely operate directly at the level of values. Values are typically broad, enduring and relatively stable. They express what a community considers important, desirable or worth pursuing, but they do not normally provide immediate guidance for specific decisions. To influence political life, values must first be translated into more operational forms capable of guiding institutions and collective action.

This process usually occurs through an intermediate level: principles. Principles serve as interpretative bridges between abstract values and concrete policies¹⁴. They provide normative criteria that help determine how a value should be expressed within a particular social, legal or political context. Because principles are more specific than values, they can be incorporated into legislation, institutional frameworks and public administration.

Policies and actions constitute the final stage of this process. At this level, principles are transformed into programmes, regulations, procedures and practical interventions. While values answer the question of what matters, principles help answer how society should pursue those aspirations, and policies determine what should be done in specific circumstances.

¹⁴ See: Gewirth, A. (1989). Reason and Morality. University of Chicago Press.

The relationship can therefore be understood as a process of progressive concretisation¹⁵. Moving from values to principles and from principles to actions involves increasing levels of specificity, implementation and contextual adaptation.

This distinction is particularly relevant when analysing the EU. Many of the concepts described as ‘European values’ in Article 2 of the TEU—such as democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights—function less as values than as normative principles guiding institutional action through legal and political mechanisms. Their importance remains unquestionable, but recognising their role provides a clearer understanding of the relationship between values, principles and public action. This distinction underpins the argument developed throughout this book and is illustrated in Figure 1.

¹⁵ The Values → Principles → Policies framework presented in this book is an analytical model developed by the authors for the purposes of conceptual clarification.

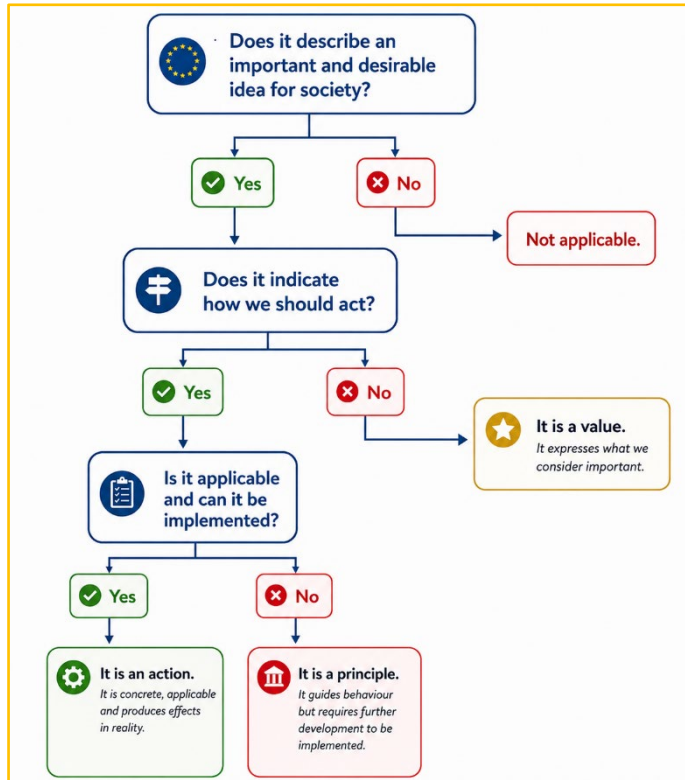


Figure 1. Conceptual decision diagram for distinguishing values, principles and actions. Own elaboration.

This framework offers a useful tool for evaluating political systems because it allows us to identify the level at which disagreements occur. Political debates are often presented as conflicts over values when participants may share the same underlying values while disagreeing about the principles or policies required to realise them.

For example, individuals may broadly agree that human dignity is important while proposing very different approaches to social welfare, migration, healthcare or education. Similarly, most democratic societies endorse freedom as a desirable objective, yet they frequently disagree about the balance between liberty and security, the limits of state intervention or the regulation of economic activity. In such cases, the disagreement does not

necessarily concern the value itself but rather the principles and policies derived from it.

The framework also helps explain why political systems sometimes experience difficulties when values, principles and actions become conceptually blurred. If principles are mistaken for values, political disagreements may appear more fundamental than they are. Conversely, if policies are treated as values, specific political choices may acquire an unwarranted moral status that discourages critical examination and democratic debate.

This distinction becomes particularly relevant when examining the language used by the EU. As discussed in the previous chapter, concepts such as democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights are commonly presented as European values. Yet many of these concepts also function as principles that guide institutional behaviour, legal interpretation and political decision-making. They are not merely aspirations; they are operational standards capable of being monitored, regulated and enforced.

Recognising this distinction does not weaken the European project. Rather, it enables a more precise understanding of its normative architecture.

Without values, policies lose direction; without policies, values remain aspirations.

If democracy, equality or the rule of law function primarily as principles, then an important question emerges: what are the deeper values from which these principles derive their legitimacy?

Answering this question is essential because principles rarely generate social cohesion or collective identity on their own. Principles organise political life, but values provide meaning. Principles establish rules, but values explain why those rules matter. If the EU seeks not only effective governance but also a stronger sense of common purpose and belonging, it must identify the moral foundations capable of sustaining both its institutions and its citizens' commitment to the wider political community.

The remainder of this chapter argues that such foundations can be found in a smaller set of genuinely fundamental values from which the principles currently associated with the European project may be derived. By distinguishing more clearly between values, principles and actions, it becomes possible to develop a more coherent ethical framework for the EU and a more consistent basis for future political decision-making. Table 1 summarises the different functions performed by each level within this conceptual framework.

Table 1. Conceptual relationship among values, principles and policies/actions.

Level	Function	Example
Value	Defines what a community considers desirable	Human Dignity
Principle	Indicates how action should be oriented	Non-discrimination
Policy / Action	Concrete and measurable implementation	Accessibility requirements in public services

A Proposal for New European Values

The analysis developed throughout the previous chapters has highlighted a recurring problem within the contemporary European project. Many of the concepts commonly presented as European values perform functions that are more characteristic of principles, institutional actions or political objectives. While these concepts remain indispensable for the functioning of democratic societies, they may be less effective as the foundational moral basis upon which a shared European identity can be built.

If values are to provide meaning, legitimacy and social cohesion, then it becomes necessary to identify a smaller set of genuinely fundamental moral commitments from which political principles and public policies can subsequently be derived. Such values should be sufficiently universal to be recognised across diverse cultural and national contexts while remaining sufficiently concrete to guide both collective and individual action.

This chapter proposes three interconnected values capable of fulfilling this role: **human dignity**, **responsible freedom**, and **equal moral recognition**. Together, they provide a coherent ethical framework that can support both the institutional architecture of the EU and the development of a stronger sense of shared European belonging.

Among these values, **human dignity** occupies a foundational position. Throughout European intellectual history, dignity has often been understood as the intrinsic worth possessed by every human being. While this understanding remains essential, the present proposal introduces a complementary dimension. Human dignity should not be regarded solely as an abstract moral status. It should also be understood in terms of the real capacity of individuals to participate fully in the social, political, economic and cultural life of their communities.

Human dignity is not measured by wealth, but by the capacity to participate fully in society.

Human dignity should not be confused with comfort, affluence or luxury. A dignified life does not require exceptional levels of wealth, status or consumption. Rather, it requires the conditions that allow individuals to participate meaningfully in society and to exercise their freedoms without fear, exclusion or degradation. A person may live with modest material resources and still enjoy a dignified life, while another may possess considerable wealth and yet experience forms of social exclusion, dependency or vulnerability that undermine dignity. In this sense, dignity is better understood through participation and recognition than through material accumulation.

Access to adequate housing provides a useful illustration. Human dignity does not require that every individual own a large house or enjoys exceptional material comfort. It does, however, require living conditions that allow people to participate fully in society, maintain personal security and develop meaningful social relationships. The issue is therefore not luxury, but the minimum conditions necessary for participation and inclusion.

A person whose basic opportunities for participation are systematically restricted may formally possess dignity while being unable to experience its practical expression. Consequently, the protection of dignity requires more than the mere recognition of rights; it also requires the creation of conditions that enable meaningful participation within society. Human dignity therefore becomes both a moral principle and a social objective capable of connecting individual worth with collective responsibility.

From this foundational value emerge two complementary values that help translate dignity into social and political life: **responsible freedom** and **equal moral recognition**.

Responsible freedom recognises that individual liberty cannot be understood in isolation from its social consequences. Freedom is not merely the absence of constraints, nor the unrestricted pursuit of personal preferences. Human beings live within networks of interdependence in which individual actions affect others, sometimes profoundly. A sustainable conception of freedom therefore requires responsibility towards fellow citizens, institutions, future generations and the wider social environment. Responsible freedom

preserves individual autonomy while recognising that genuine liberty can only flourish within communities capable of sustaining cooperation and mutual trust.

Alongside responsible freedom stands **equal moral recognition**. This value affirms that every person possesses the same fundamental moral worth regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, socioeconomic status or any other characteristic. Equal moral recognition extends beyond legal equality. It requires individuals and institutions to acknowledge one another as equally deserving of respect, participation and consideration. In increasingly diverse societies, this form of recognition becomes essential for social cohesion, democratic legitimacy and peaceful coexistence.

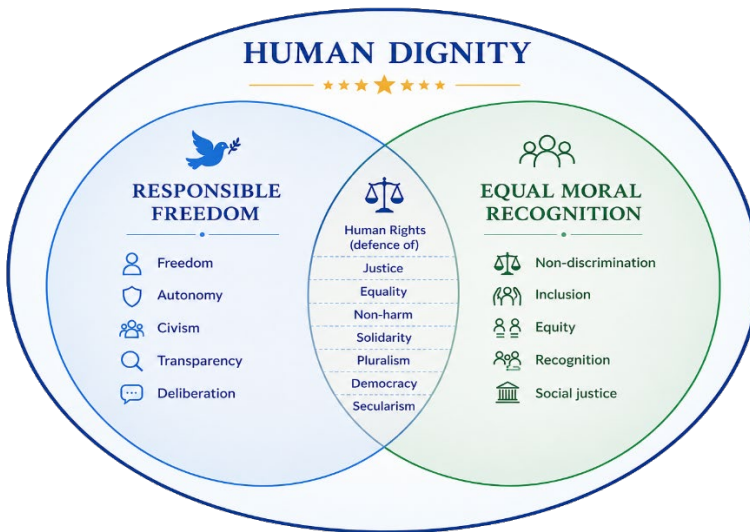


Figure 2 Explanatory diagram of the proposal for fundamental values. Own elaboration

As illustrated in Figure 2, these three values form a coherent ethical structure within the broader framework proposed in this book. Human dignity establishes the moral foundation, responsible freedom defines the relationship between personal autonomy and collective responsibility, and equal moral recognition ensures that participation and freedom are extended to all members of society without exclusion or hierarchy.

This framework differs from many existing approaches because it does not begin with institutions, legal norms or political arrangements. Instead, it begins with a moral understanding of what human beings need to live together within complex and diverse societies. Institutions, principles and policies remain indispensable, but they are understood as consequences rather than starting points.

From this perspective, democracy, the rule of law, equality, participation, transparency, inclusion and human rights remain critically important. However, they are more accurately understood as principles that derive their legitimacy from deeper moral commitments. Their value does not diminish because of this reclassification. On the contrary, their purpose becomes clearer as their relationship to the underlying ethical foundations is made explicit.

This proposal does not seek to replace the achievements of European integration, nor to reject the normative framework developed by the EU over recent decades. Rather, it seeks to strengthen that framework by providing a more coherent ethical foundation capable of generating trust, legitimacy and a stronger sense of common purpose.

Ultimately, political communities are not sustained by institutions alone. They endure because citizens perceive a shared moral horizon that justifies cooperation and mutual commitment. If the EU wishes to deepen its political integration while preserving its diversity, it requires values capable not only of organising governance but also of inspiring belonging. Human dignity, responsible freedom and equal moral recognition offer one possible foundation for such a project.

The Principles of Human Dignity

The ethical framework proposed in this chapter rests upon a simple but important premise: **human dignity constitutes the foundational value from which the remaining elements of the European project should derive their legitimacy.** However, dignity does not operate directly as a political programme. To influence social and institutional life, it must first be expressed through values that translate its meaning into more specific forms of guidance.

As argued in the previous section, human dignity can be understood not only as the intrinsic worth of every individual but also as the capacity of all people to participate meaningfully in the social, political, economic and cultural life of their communities. This understanding of dignity gives rise to two complementary values: **Responsible Freedom** and **Equal Moral Recognition**. Together, these values represent two inseparable dimensions of human flourishing. The first emphasises autonomy, agency and responsibility; the second emphasises inclusion, respect and equal consideration. Neither can be fully realised without the other.

From these values emerge a series of principles that help translate ethical commitments into political, legal and social arrangements. These principles do not replace the values from which they derive. Rather, they provide the normative guidance necessary to transform moral aspirations into collective action.

Principles Derived from Responsible Freedom

Responsible Freedom recognises that individuals must be free to make choices, pursue their own projects and participate actively in public life. Yet this freedom cannot be understood as unlimited individual autonomy detached from social consequences. Human beings exist within communities, and their actions inevitably affect others. Consequently, freedom becomes meaningful only when exercised in a manner that recognises responsibilities towards fellow citizens and the wider social environment.

Several principles emerge from this understanding. Freedom itself remains essential, but it is complemented by autonomy, civic responsibility, transparency and deliberation. Together, these principles encourage active citizenship, informed participation and accountable decision-making. They promote a conception of democracy that extends beyond electoral processes and includes continuous engagement in public life. Transparency and deliberation specifically help create the conditions under which citizens can participate meaningfully in collective decision-making and hold institutions accountable for their actions.

These principles seek to cultivate citizens who are not merely passive recipients of rights but active contributors to the common good. In doing so, they reinforce the relationship between personal liberty and collective responsibility that lies at the heart of responsible freedom.

Principles Derived from Equal Moral Recognition

If responsible freedom emphasises agency, equal moral recognition emphasises belonging. It begins from the premise that every individual possesses the same fundamental moral worth and therefore deserves equal respect, consideration and opportunities for participation.

Among these principles, equity occupies a particularly important position. Equal moral recognition does not imply identical treatment in every circumstance. Rather, it requires recognising that different individuals and communities may face different barriers to participation and therefore require

A democratic society begins by recognising the equal moral worth of every person.

different forms of support. Equity provides the practical mechanism through which equal moral worth can be translated into fair opportunities for participation and development.

This value gives rise to principles such as non-discrimination, inclusion, equity, recognition and social justice. Collectively, these principles seek to remove barriers that prevent individuals or groups from participating fully in society. They acknowledge that equal treatment does not always require

identical treatment and that different circumstances may demand different forms of support to ensure meaningful participation.

The emphasis on recognition is particularly significant within increasingly diverse societies. Modern Europe encompasses a wide range of cultural, linguistic, religious and social backgrounds. Social cohesion therefore depends not only on legal equality but also on the capacity of individuals and institutions to recognise and respect difference without transforming it into exclusion. Inclusion, equity and social justice become practical expressions of this commitment, helping ensure that dignity is experienced by all members of society rather than reserved for privileged groups.

Through these principles, equal moral recognition contributes to the creation of communities in which diversity is not perceived as a threat but as a legitimate feature of democratic coexistence.

Principles Shared by Both Values

Although **Responsible Freedom** and **Equal Moral Recognition** emphasise different dimensions of human dignity, they converge in several shared principles that are essential for sustaining democratic societies. These include the defence of human rights, justice, equality, non-harm, solidarity, pluralism, democracy and secularism.

These principles occupy a distinctive position within the proposed framework because they cannot be fully attributed to one value alone. Rather, they emerge from the interaction between responsible freedom and equal moral recognition, providing the normative foundations through which dignity is translated into social and political life. Human rights, for example, protect both individual autonomy and equal recognition. Within the framework proposed in this book, they are not understood as foundational values in themselves, but as normative principles derived from the deeper value of **Human Dignity**. Their purpose is to safeguard the conditions that enable individuals to participate fully in society while protecting both freedom and equal moral worth. This distinction does not diminish their importance; on the

contrary, it clarifies the ethical foundation upon which their legitimacy ultimately rests.

The same logic applies to the other shared principles. Democracy requires freedom of participation while simultaneously affirming the equal political standing of all citizens. Pluralism depends upon respect for diversity while preserving individual liberty. Solidarity reflects the mutual responsibilities generated by freedom while reinforcing commitments to inclusion and social cohesion. Together, these principles establish the conditions necessary for cooperation among diverse individuals and communities while protecting both individual freedoms and collective responsibilities.

In this regard, responsible freedom implies that rights and responsibilities cannot be entirely separated. Democratic societies depend upon citizens who are willing not only to claim rights for themselves but also to recognise the responsibilities that accompany those rights. Freedom of expression presupposes a willingness to engage with others respectfully; political participation requires acceptance of democratic outcomes; and individual autonomy depends upon maintaining the social conditions that make autonomy possible for others. Responsibility is therefore not a limitation of freedom but one of the conditions that allows freedom itself to be sustained over time.

Secularism deserves particular attention within this framework. It should not be understood as opposition to religion, but as a political principle that protects the equal standing of citizens holding different religious, philosophical and moral convictions. In diverse societies, public institutions cannot rely exclusively on the beliefs of a particular group without undermining equal moral recognition. Secularism therefore creates the conditions under which freedom of conscience, pluralism and democratic coexistence can flourish simultaneously, ensuring that no single worldview enjoys privileged status within the public sphere.

Taken together, these shared principles provide the normative infrastructure through which human dignity becomes visible in public life. They

help establish the trust, cooperation and mutual recognition necessary for democratic coexistence while creating a bridge between ethical commitments and institutional arrangements.

Importantly, these principles correspond closely to many of the concepts currently described as European values. Within the framework proposed in this book, however, they occupy a different position within the ethical architecture. Their significance is not diminished; rather, their role becomes clearer. They are not the ultimate source of legitimacy but the mechanisms through which deeper values are translated into social practices, political institutions and public policies.

This distinction helps explain why principles alone are often insufficient to generate a shared sense of belonging. Principles can regulate behaviour, guide institutions and protect rights, but they do not necessarily provide the emotional and moral foundations upon which collective identities are built. That role belongs to values. By rooting these principles in the interconnected values of **Human Dignity**, **Responsible Freedom** and **Equal Moral Recognition**, it becomes possible to establish a more coherent ethical foundation for the European project and a stronger basis for the development of trust, social cohesion and shared identity.

From Principles to European Policies

The ethical framework proposed in this chapter would have little practical value if it remained confined to the realm of moral reflection. Values provide meaning and principles offer guidance, but the success of any political project ultimately depends upon its capacity to translate ethical commitments into concrete forms of action. For this reason, the final step in the proposed framework concerns the relationship between principles and public policy.

Policies represent the most visible expression of collective priorities. Through legislation, public programmes, institutional arrangements and administrative decisions, political communities transform abstract aspirations into tangible realities that affect the everyday lives of citizens. The challenge, however, lies in ensuring that these policies remain connected to the values and principles that originally justified them.

Within the framework proposed in this book, public policies should not be understood as independent objectives. Rather, they should be evaluated according to their capacity to promote human dignity through responsible freedom and equal moral recognition. This perspective provides a coherent ethical criterion for assessing both existing and future policy initiatives.

Policies inspired by **responsible freedom** would seek to strengthen the capacity of individuals to participate actively in society while recognising their responsibilities towards others. Such policies might promote civic engagement, democratic participation, transparency, access to information and opportunities for public deliberation. Educational initiatives aimed at developing critical thinking, media literacy and civic competence would also form part of this broader objective. The underlying purpose is not simply to maximise individual choice but to cultivate citizens capable of exercising freedom responsibly within democratic communities.

Policies derived from **equal moral recognition** would focus on removing barriers that limit participation and on ensuring that all individuals are treated with equal respect and consideration. These policies may address discrimination, social exclusion, accessibility, equitable access to education,

healthcare, employment and public services, as well as mechanisms designed to protect vulnerable groups. Their purpose is not to eliminate difference but to ensure that difference does not become a basis for exclusion or marginalisation.

Many policy areas naturally involve both values simultaneously. Education provides a particularly illustrative example. Educational systems should equip individuals with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to exercise freedom responsibly while also fostering respect for diversity, inclusion and equal participation. Similarly, labour market policies should promote individual initiative and economic autonomy while ensuring fair opportunities and protection against discrimination. Digital governance should protect freedom of expression and access to information while safeguarding individuals from harm, exclusion and unequal treatment.

The same logic applies to broader European priorities. Environmental sustainability, technological innovation, public health, migration governance and social cohesion can all be evaluated through the lens of human dignity. The relevant question is not simply whether a policy achieves its immediate objectives, but whether it contributes to the conditions that enable individuals and communities to participate fully in society while recognising the equal moral worth of others.

The quality of a policy depends on its capacity to translate dignity into lived reality.

This approach also offers a useful framework for addressing disagreements within democratic societies. Political actors may legitimately disagree about specific policy solutions while still sharing the same underlying values and principles. Recognising this distinction helps reduce the tendency to transform policy disputes into fundamental moral conflicts. Citizens may support different approaches to migration, welfare, education or economic regulation while remaining committed to the same ethical foundations. Such disagreements are not necessarily signs of division; they are often an inevitable feature of democratic deliberation.

Importantly, the proposed framework does not prescribe a single set of policies. Values and principles provide direction, but democratic societies must retain the capacity to debate, revise and adapt their political choices in response to changing circumstances. The purpose of the framework is therefore not to eliminate political disagreement but to ensure that public debate remains anchored in a coherent ethical foundation.

In this sense, the relationship between values, principles and actions is not linear but dynamic. Policies generate social outcomes that may reinforce or undermine the values from which they derive. Citizens evaluate institutions not only according to their intentions but also according to their effects. When policies consistently promote participation, inclusion, trust and cooperation, they strengthen the legitimacy of the broader political project. When they fail to do so, public confidence may gradually erode.

For the EU, this observation is particularly significant. The future of the European project will depend not only on its institutional arrangements or economic performance but also on its ability to demonstrate that its policies contribute meaningfully to the dignity of its citizens. Human dignity, responsible freedom and equal moral recognition therefore provide more than an ethical vocabulary. They offer a framework through which European policies can be evaluated, justified and continuously improved.

Ultimately, values define what a political community seeks to achieve, principles establish how it should pursue those objectives, and policies determine how those aspirations become reality. An EU capable of maintaining coherence across these three levels is more likely to foster trust, legitimacy and a shared sense of purpose among its citizens. In this sense, equity becomes the practical bridge that allows equal moral recognition to move from ethical aspiration to social reality.

CHAPTER 3: EUROPEAN IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

How Identities Work

Identity refers to the set of characteristics, meanings and beliefs through which individuals recognise themselves and distinguish themselves from others. It forms what is commonly described as the self or self-concept. However, identity is neither singular nor fixed. Rather, it is multiple, dynamic and continuously shaped by social interaction. Individuals define themselves through a variety of dimensions that become relevant depending on the context in which they find themselves.

According to self-categorisation theory, the self operates at different levels of abstraction¹⁶. At times, individuals perceive themselves as unique persons with distinctive characteristics. In other situations, they define themselves primarily as members of specific groups. At the most inclusive level, they may perceive themselves as members of humanity. This perspective suggests that identity is fundamentally relational: it is not a fixed attribute but a product of the relationships and social environments within which individuals interact.

From this perspective, identity can be understood at different levels. At the interpersonal level, individuals see themselves as unique persons interacting with other individuals. At the intergroup level, they define themselves through their membership in social groups such as families, friendship networks, professions, regions or nations. At the most abstract level, they recognise themselves as members of a broader human community. The way in which individuals define themselves in each situation has important consequences because it influences how they

People do not possess a single identity; they activate different identities according to context and circumstance.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of self-categorisation theory, see Turner, J. C. (1982). Towards a cognitive redefinition of the social group. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (pp. 15–40). Cambridge University Press; and Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*. Basil Blackwell.

think, feel and behave. When identity is experienced primarily at the interpersonal level, behaviour tends to be guided by personal characteristics and individual preferences. When identity is activated at the intergroup level, however, group norms, shared beliefs and collective values become increasingly influential.

The self-concept therefore consists of both a personal identity and multiple social identities. Henri Tajfel defined social identity as the part of an individual's self-concept that derives from knowledge of membership in a social group, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership¹⁷. People do not merely belong to groups; they also think, feel and act in ways that are influenced by what those groups represent.

In the context of this book, European identity is particularly interesting because it constitutes a highly inclusive territorial identity. It operates at a broader level of abstraction than local, regional or national identities and, in principle, can encompass all of them within a wider framework of belonging¹⁸.

Yet if individuals possess multiple identities, each associated with different values, norms and beliefs, an important question arises: which identity guides behaviour at any particular moment? The answer lies in the contextual nature of identity. Social identities do not operate simultaneously with equal intensity. Rather, they tend to become activated situationally, with one identity becoming more salient than others depending on the circumstances. The social context and the way individuals interpret reality largely determine which identity becomes active and subsequently guides how they think, feel and behave. This contextual activation of identity is crucial for understanding both individual behaviour and broader social dynamics.

¹⁷ For a more detailed account of social identities, see Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Academic Press.

¹⁸ Although the European Union has sought to strengthen a sense of European belonging among its citizens, European identity is not confined to the Union's institutional boundaries. As a broader cultural, historical and geographical construct, it may also encompass individuals and societies beyond the member states of the European Union.

This helps explain why the same person may behave differently across different settings: as an individual in a personal context, as a professional in the workplace, or as a member of a nation during an international event. The identity that becomes salient at a particular moment provides the interpretative framework through which emotions, thoughts and behaviours are organised.

The activation of an identity depends primarily on two factors: accessibility and fit¹⁹. Accessibility refers to the predisposition to use particular social categories, shaped by previous experiences, values, expectations and personal needs. Fit, by contrast, refers to the extent to which a particular identity helps individuals make sense of the social reality they are facing. Put simply, the identity that is most useful for interpreting a situation is often the one that becomes salient.

For example, European identity may become particularly relevant in situations where the distinction between Europeans and non-Europeans provides a meaningful framework for understanding events. Developments such as Brexit or Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrate how certain circumstances can make European identity especially salient, while other identities temporarily recede into the background because they provide a less useful interpretative lens.

Social identity theory proposes that identities operate through a three-stage process²⁰. First, individuals categorise people into groups. Second, they identify with one group, adopting their values, norms and beliefs. Finally, they compare their group with other groups. These comparisons contribute to

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the principles of accessibility and fit, see Oakes, P. J. (1987). *The Salience of Social Categories*. In J. C. Turner et al. (Eds.), *Rediscovering the Social Group* (pp. 117–141). Blackwell; and Oakes, P. J., Haslam, S. A., & Turner, J. C. (1994). *Stereotyping and Social Reality*. Blackwell.

²⁰ A review of these three stages can be found in Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Academic Press; and Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33–48). Brooks/Cole.

evaluations of social worth and encourage the search for positive distinctiveness in relation to others.

This process strengthens feelings of belonging, highlights similarities within the group and accentuates differences with those outside it. At the same time, it shapes how individuals think, feel and act because the norms and values associated with the group increasingly become part of their own self-understanding.

In summary, a European identity exists, at least potentially, as a meaningful form of social identification. Individuals who live in Europe or have grown up within European societies can recognise themselves as members of a broader European community. However, the importance attached to this identity varies across individuals and contexts. Its influence depends both on the degree of personal commitment to the group and on the extent to which European identity provides a useful framework for interpreting social reality at a given moment.

European Identity

If identity is understood as a socially constructed sense of belonging accompanied by the meanings, values and emotions associated with that belonging, an important question emerges: is the European identity experienced in the same way by a Spanish citizen, a German citizen or a Serbian citizen? While all may potentially identify as European, this does not necessarily mean that they understand or experience Europeanness in the same manner.

As discussed in the previous section, social identities are neither fixed nor homogeneous. They are shaped by historical experiences, social contexts, cultural narratives and patterns of interaction. Consequently, European identity should not be understood as a single, uniform phenomenon. Rather, it encompasses a range of different interpretations, experiences and forms of identification that coexist across the continent.

This diversity is partly explained by the internal structure of social groups themselves. Members of a group do not usually occupy equivalent symbolic positions within it. Some individuals or subgroups are perceived as more representative, central or prototypical, while others occupy more peripheral positions. The same dynamic can be observed in relation to the continent.

Recent research has shown that citizens from different countries often perceive certain states as more representative of Europeanness than others²¹. Studies involving German and Serbian participants, for example, found that Western European countries were generally regarded as more representative of Europe than countries located in Southern or Eastern Europe, regardless of whether those countries belonged to the EU. In the German case, these perceptions were strongly associated with perceived cultural, political and

²¹ See: Karić, T., Eckerle, F., & Cohrs, J. C. (2025). The West and the Rest: The Westernised Nature of Europe(anness). *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 33(4), 1201–1222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2025.2500399>

economic similarity to Germany itself. Among Serbian participants, however, this relationship appeared less pronounced.

Similar findings had already emerged in earlier research. German participants tended to regard characteristics associated with Germany as more prototypical of the category 'European' than characteristics associated with other countries²². These findings suggest that the idea of Europe is not entirely neutral but is often constructed around specific reference points that are perceived as embodying Europeanness more fully than others.

An important implication follows from this observation. European identity appears to be influenced, at least in part, by those countries and social actors that possess greater political, economic or cultural influence, allowing certain interpretations of Europeanness to become more visible and socially legitimate than others. Consequently, individuals or societies that perceive themselves as more distanced than these dominant countries may experience a weaker sense of identification with Europe or may prefer to emphasise alternative identities in which they occupy a less peripheral position.

*There is no single way of being
European, but many ways of
belonging to Europe.*

However, as emphasised throughout this chapter, social identities are not static realities. They are continuously shaped and reshaped by historical events, political developments, collective needs and social interactions. The content of European identity therefore evolves over time.

The example of Volodymyr Zelenskyy illustrates this process particularly well. Today, many Europeans perceive him as a distinctly European political figure despite Ukraine not being a member of the EU. Yet only a few years ago, his name was largely unknown outside his own country. This transformation

²² See: Wenzel, M., Mummendey, A., Weber, U., & Waldzus, S. (2003). The Ingroup as Pars Pro Toto: Projection from the Ingroup onto the Inclusive Category as a Precursor to Social Discrimination. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29(4), 461–473.

demonstrates how political events and collective experiences can rapidly alter the symbolic boundaries of social identities and redefine who is perceived as representing a particular community.

The values, norms and beliefs associated with European identity are therefore neither fixed nor universally shared. Their meaning varies across social groups, generations and national contexts. Although European identity is partly shaped by political and institutional actors through treaties, policies, public discourse and symbolic initiatives—a process that might be described as top-down construction—it is also shaped from below through the everyday experiences of citizens. Education, socioeconomic conditions, media consumption, transnational networks, mobility opportunities and personal encounters within Europe all contribute to the ongoing construction of what Europe means to different individuals and communities.

This observation is particularly important for the broader argument developed throughout this book. If identities are socially constructed, they cannot be reduced to institutional definitions alone. The meaning of Europe emerges not only from official documents and political declarations but also from the ways in which citizens experience Europe in their daily lives.

For this reason, there is no single European identity. Rather, there are multiple ways of being European, each combining different values, norms, memories and symbolic meanings shaped by history, social context and the position that individuals and groups occupy within the broader European imagination.

Recognising this diversity does not weaken the European project. On the contrary, it allows us to appreciate its complexity and richness. European identity should not be understood as a uniform block or a finished product. It is an ongoing and dynamic process that reflects the plurality of experiences, perspectives and forms of belonging that coexist across the continent.

Indeed, this diversity may constitute one of its greatest strengths. A European identity capable of accommodating different histories, cultures and experiences is more consistent with the values of human dignity, responsible

freedom and equal moral recognition proposed in this book than any attempt to impose a single model of Europeanness. The challenge is therefore not to eliminate diversity, but to ensure that these different ways of being European can coexist within a shared framework of belonging and mutual recognition.

The Coexistence of Identities

One of the defining characteristics of contemporary European societies is the coexistence of multiple forms of belonging. Individuals simultaneously identify with local communities, regions, nations, cultural traditions and, potentially, Europe itself. Far from being unusual, this multiplicity reflects the complex social environments in which people live. However, it also raises important questions concerning how these different identities interact and whether they can coexist without generating conflict.

In recent decades, several scholars have argued that social identities have undergone increasing processes of fragmentation. Francis Fukuyama, for example, suggests that although individuals remain capable of identifying with broad and inclusive communities, there is a growing tendency to prioritise smaller and more specific identities²³. According to this perspective, national identities have lost part of their former centrality, while ethnic, religious, cultural and lifestyle-based identities have become increasingly salient in many societies.

To understand this development, it is important to recognise that social identities fulfil fundamental psychological functions. Among these, the need for belonging occupies a central position. Human beings seek recognition, security and meaning through membership in social groups. At the same time, however, they also seek differentiation. Individuals wish to belong, but they also wish to feel distinctive and unique.

This tension between inclusion and differentiation creates a delicate balance. According to optimal distinctiveness theory, people tend to identify most strongly with groups that allow them to satisfy both needs simultaneously²⁴. Groups that are sufficiently inclusive to provide belonging,

²³ See: Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

²⁴ See: Brewer, M. B. (1991). The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17(5), 475–482. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167291175001>

yet sufficiently distinctive to preserve uniqueness, often become particularly attractive sources of identification.

Within Europe, minority linguistic and cultural communities provide a useful illustration of this dynamic. Speakers of Basque, Welsh or Gaelic, for example, may experience a strong sense of belonging through their language, traditions and shared historical experiences. At the same time, these identities provide a source of differentiation both from national majorities and from other European communities. Such forms of identification demonstrate how inclusion and distinctiveness can coexist within broader political frameworks.

From this perspective, regional and national identities often offer stronger feelings of distinctiveness than a broad identity such as European. Indeed, numerous studies suggest that individuals generally identify more

European identity does not replace other identities; it adds a new layer of belonging.

strongly with their region or nation than with Europe as a whole²⁵. This pattern is also reflected in Eurobarometer data, where national identification consistently exceeds European identification²⁶.

This observation should not be interpreted as evidence that European identity lacks significance. Rather, it suggests that this identity is activated less frequently in everyday life because more immediate and concrete forms of belonging often provide stronger interpretative frameworks for understanding social reality. People typically encounter their local, regional and national communities daily, whereas Europe often operates at a more abstract level.

Nevertheless, identities do not necessarily compete with one another. They can instead be organised in nested forms, much like Russian matryoshka

25 See: Bauhr, M., & Charron, N. (2020). The EU as a Savior and a Saint? Corruption and Public Support for Redistribution. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(4), 509–527; and Sekerdej, M., & Tabernero, C. (2025). How Regional and National Affiliations Shape European Identity: Insights from Spain. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 56(7), 888–903.

26 See: European Commission. (2024). Eurobarometer 99.4 (2023). GESIS. <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14167>

dolls, where one identity contains another without eliminating it. A person may simultaneously feel Basque, Spanish and European, just as another individual may feel Bavarian, German and European. These different forms of belonging do not automatically generate contradiction.

The crucial issue therefore concerns how the relationship between identities is managed. Several models have been proposed to explain the interaction between national and supranational identities²⁷.

The first possibility involves maintaining identities as largely separate categories. In such circumstances, individuals may prioritise either national or European identification, potentially generating competition between groups. Those who emphasise one identity may view those who prioritise another as less legitimate members of the broader community.

A second possibility involves recategorization into a single overarching identity; whereby European identity would gradually replace national identities. While theoretically possible, this scenario appears unrealistic in the European context. National identities possess deep historical, cultural and emotional roots that make their disappearance highly improbable in the foreseeable future.

The third possibility—and arguably the most promising for the European project—is the development of a dual or integrated identity. Under this model, individuals maintain both national and European identities simultaneously without perceiving them as incompatible. Rather than choosing between different forms of belonging, citizens recognise that these identities operate at different levels and fulfil different functions.

Examples of such coexistence can be found in other political contexts. In the United States, a strong national identity coexists with robust state identities without generating significant conflict. Similarly, multicultural societies such as

27 See: Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., Ufkes, E. G., Saguy, T., & Pearson, A. R. (2016). Included but Invisible? Subtle Bias, Common Identity, and the Darker Side of 'We'. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 10(1), 6–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12017>

Bolivia accommodate multiple linguistic and cultural traditions within a broader political framework. These examples suggest that layered forms of belonging are neither unusual nor inherently problematic.

However, even dual identities are not free from challenges. Under certain circumstances, identities may come to be perceived as incompatible. Moreover, if European identity continues to be associated primarily with the most influential or prosperous regions of the continent, citizens living in areas regarded as peripheral may continue to experience a sense of symbolic marginalisation within the European project. This challenge is particularly relevant because perceptions of exclusion can weaken identification and undermine the sense of belonging necessary for social cohesion.

For this reason, the future of European identity depends not only on institutional integration but also on the capacity to create a framework within which different forms of belonging are recognised as legitimate and mutually compatible. Such recognition is closely connected to the principle of equal moral recognition discussed in the previous chapter. Individuals are more likely to embrace broader identities when they feel that their own communities, traditions and experiences are respected rather than subordinated.

Ultimately, contemporary identities should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. They coexist, overlap and become salient according to context. Appreciating this complexity is essential for understanding the dynamics of contemporary European societies and for developing political projects capable of combining diversity with cohesion.

The challenge facing the EU is therefore not to replace existing identities, but to create conditions under which local, regional, national and European forms of belonging can reinforce one another. If successful, such coexistence may provide one of the strongest foundations for a European community built not on uniformity, but on shared dignity, mutual recognition and cooperation across difference.

Identity and Values: A Virtuous Circle

The previous sections have examined how identities are constructed, how a European identity may emerge and how multiple forms of belonging can coexist within the same individual. Yet an important question remains: what gives identities their content and meaning?

Social identities are not merely labels used to classify individuals into groups. They also provide normative frameworks that influence how people interpret reality, evaluate situations and interact with others. When a particular identity becomes salient, the values, beliefs and norms associated with that identity become more influential in shaping behaviour²⁸. Identity therefore functions not only as a source of belonging but also as a guide for action.

This relationship highlights the close connection between identities and values. While identities help individuals answer the question ‘Who am I?’, values help answer the question ‘What is important?’. Together, they contribute to the formation of shared understandings concerning how individuals should relate to one another and to the communities of which they are part.

Values can be understood as broad guiding principles that transcend specific situations and influence judgments, preferences and behaviour²⁹. They provide the moral content through which identities acquire meaning. Without values, identities risk becoming little more than descriptive categories. Conversely, values that are not embedded within meaningful identities often struggle to generate lasting social commitment. Identities and values therefore operate through a mutually reinforcing relationship.

²⁸ See: Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33–48). Brooks/Cole; and Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*. Basil Blackwell.

²⁹ See: Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 25, 1–65.

This relationship can be described as a virtuous circle. Shared values contribute to the formation of collective identities because they provide common points of reference around which individuals can organise feelings of belonging. At the same time, identities reinforce these values by encouraging individuals to internalise, reproduce and defend them as part of their own self-understanding. Values help create identities, and identities help sustain values.

The importance of this dynamic becomes particularly evident when considering political communities. Societies characterised by broadly shared values often display stronger levels of social cohesion because citizens possess common normative frameworks that facilitate cooperation and mutual understanding. Shared values reduce uncertainty, establish expectations regarding behaviour and create conditions under which trust can emerge.

Conversely, when values become fragmented or lose social legitimacy, collective identities may weaken. Individuals may continue to share institutions, legal frameworks or geographical spaces, but their sense of belonging to a common community may gradually diminish. Under such circumstances, social cohesion becomes increasingly dependent upon formal rules and administrative mechanisms rather than upon shared commitments and mutual recognition.

This observation is especially relevant in the European context. Since its origins, the European project has been built upon a set of principles commonly associated with democracy, human rights, freedom, equality, solidarity and the rule of law³⁰. These principles have undoubtedly played a crucial role in shaping European institutions and promoting cooperation among member states. However, as argued throughout this book, principles alone may be insufficient to generate the deeper forms of belonging typically associated with collective identities.

If identities require values capable of providing meaning and purpose, the question becomes which values are most capable of supporting a shared

³⁰ See: European Union. (2012). Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union (Article 2).

European identity. The framework proposed in Chapter 2 suggests that **Human Dignity**, expressed through **Responsible Freedom** and **Equal Moral Recognition**, offers a particularly coherent foundation. Unlike identities based on ethnicity, language or cultural homogeneity, these values possess the potential to unite highly diverse populations without requiring uniformity. They provide a moral basis for belonging that remains compatible with the plurality that characterises contemporary Europe.

Importantly, such values also contribute to the development of trust. Individuals are generally more willing to cooperate when they believe that others recognise their dignity, respect their freedoms and acknowledge their equal moral worth. Shared values help establish these expectations by providing common standards for social interaction. Trust emerges not only from repeated experiences but also from confidence that others are guided by similar ethical commitments.

*Shared values create identities, and
identities help sustain shared
values.*

Trust, in turn, reinforces identity. Citizens are more likely to identify with communities that they perceive as fair, inclusive and worthy of confidence. Communities characterised by higher levels of trust often display stronger participation, greater resilience and deeper commitments to common institutions. Through this process, values, trust and identity become mutually reinforcing components of the same social dynamic.

The relationship between values and identity is not automatic, however. Values must be communicated, experienced and internalised if they are to become meaningful components of collective identity. Political declarations and institutional documents may establish formal commitments, but identities are shaped primarily through social experience. Individuals develop attachments to values when they encounter them in practice through relationships, participation and everyday interactions.

For this reason, education, media, cultural exchange, academic mobility and transnational experiences play a particularly important role in the

development of European identity³¹. The narratives disseminated through public discourse and media environments contribute significantly to how citizens interpret Europe, understand its values and perceive their relationship with broader political communities.

Ultimately, the relationship between identity and values helps explain why the future of the European project cannot depend solely on institutions, regulations or economic integration. Political structures may facilitate cooperation, but lasting communities are sustained by shared meanings and moral commitments. If the EU seeks to strengthen its capacity for collective action while preserving its diversity, it requires values capable of generating both belonging and trust.

Identity and values should therefore not be viewed as separate dimensions of social life. They form a self-reinforcing process through which communities define who they are, what they stand for and how they wish to live together. In this sense, the relationship between identity and values constitutes one of the most important foundations upon which a stronger and more cohesive European community may be built.

³¹ See: Checkel, J. T., & Katzenstein, P. J. (2009). *European Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Education and European Identity

As identities are not inherited but constructed through social interaction and shared experience, then education occupies a central position in the development of collective identities. This is particularly relevant in the European context, where the emergence of a common identity cannot rely upon a single language, a homogeneous culture or a unified historical narrative. Instead, it must be cultivated through processes that enable individuals to recognise common values while preserving legitimate forms of diversity.

Education has long been recognised as one of the principal mechanisms through which societies transmit knowledge, values, norms and collective memories across generations. Beyond the acquisition of academic competences, educational systems contribute to the formation of civic attitudes, social expectations and perceptions of belonging. Through formal curricula, institutional practices and everyday interactions, education influences how individuals understand themselves and the communities of which they are part³².

From this perspective, education plays a dual role in the construction of European identity. First, it provides opportunities for individuals to acquire knowledge about Europe and the EU, its institutions, its history and its cultural diversity. Such knowledge helps citizens understand the political and social framework within which they live. Second, and perhaps more importantly, education contributes to the internalisation of the values that give meaning to the European project. Without this normative dimension, knowledge about Europe and the EU may remain largely informational rather than transformative.

The EU has consistently recognised the importance of education in promoting citizenship and social cohesion. Numerous educational initiatives have sought to strengthen awareness of European cooperation, democratic

³² See: Durkheim, É. (1956). *Education and Sociology*. Free Press; and Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. Macmillan.

participation and intercultural understanding. Programmes such as Erasmus+, student mobility schemes and transnational educational partnerships have enabled millions of citizens to experience Europe beyond the boundaries of their national contexts³³. These experiences often foster greater openness towards diversity and encourage individuals to perceive themselves as members of broader communities.

Education is where values become experiences, identities take shape, and trust begins to grow.

Research suggests that participation in international educational experiences can contribute positively to European identification. Exposure to different cultures, languages and social realities may reduce prejudice, increase empathy and strengthen perceptions of commonality across national borders³⁴. Importantly, these outcomes do not emerge because differences disappear, but because individuals learn to interpret diversity as compatible with shared belonging.

However, the relationship between education and identity is neither simple nor automatic. Educational institutions do not merely transmit values; they also reflect broader social and political tensions. In contemporary Europe, schools and universities increasingly operate within contexts characterised by ideological polarisation, social fragmentation, misinformation and declining trust in public institutions. Under these conditions, educational systems face the challenge of preparing citizens not only to participate in democratic societies but also to sustain the conditions that make democratic coexistence possible.

This challenge requires moving beyond approaches that treat citizenship education as the transmission of institutional knowledge alone. Understanding the structure of European institutions is important, but the knowledge of

³³ See: European Commission. (2024). Erasmus+ Annual Report. Publications Office of the European Union.

³⁴ See: Mitchell, K. (2012). Student Mobility and European Identity: Erasmus Study as a Civic Experience? *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 8(4), 490–518.

institutions does not necessarily generate commitment to the values that justify them. Citizens may understand democratic procedures while simultaneously rejecting the principles of dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity upon which democratic systems depend.

For this reason, education aimed at strengthening European identity should focus on both civic information and ethical reflection and meaningful social experience. **Diversity** within classrooms and communities should not be regarded as an obstacle to social cohesion or democratic education. On the contrary, it represents one of the **most powerful educational resources** available. It is through everyday encounters with people who hold different perspectives, backgrounds, identities and experiences that individuals learn to navigate disagreement, develop empathy, practise mutual recognition and appreciate the responsibilities associated with living in pluralistic societies. Such experiences provide opportunities to transform abstract values into lived realities, demonstrating that diversity is not incompatible with unity but can become one of its strongest foundations. Rather than seeking ideological conformity, education should cultivate the capacities necessary for respectful disagreement, dialogue, cooperation and collective problem-solving within diverse communities.

Within the framework proposed throughout this book, education acquires a particularly significant role because it provides one of the primary contexts in which **Human Dignity, Responsible Freedom** and **Equal Moral Recognition** can be experienced and practised. These values cannot be fully learned through theoretical instruction alone. They become meaningful when learners encounter them in relationships characterised by respect, participation, responsibility and mutual recognition.

This role is especially important because democratic societies cannot rely solely on legal frameworks or institutional arrangements to sustain civic life. Citizens must develop the capacity to exercise freedom responsibly, recognising that individual choices inevitably affect others and that rights are inseparable from the responsibilities required to preserve them. Educational environments provide opportunities to experience this relationship directly through

participation, cooperation and shared decision-making, transforming responsibility from an abstract concept into a lived social practice.

Schools and universities therefore function as microcosms of the societies they seek to build. By promoting participation, encouraging critical reflection, respecting diversity and fostering cooperative relationships, they enable students to experience the values associated with democratic citizenship in concrete ways. In doing so, they contribute not only to individual development but also to the creation of more cohesive communities grounded in mutual trust and shared responsibility.

This idea becomes particularly significant in the context of contemporary Europe. The rise of political polarisation, exclusionary forms of nationalism, misinformation and growing distrust towards institutions suggests that democratic values cannot be assumed to reproduce themselves automatically across generations. They require deliberate cultivation. Educational institutions remain among the few social spaces where individuals from different backgrounds can engage in sustained dialogue, encounter alternative perspectives and develop shared understandings of common challenges.

Consequently, the future of European identity may depend less upon the creation of new institutions than upon the capacity of existing institutions to foster meaningful experiences of belonging. Education provides one of the most powerful mechanisms through which such experiences can emerge because it connects knowledge, values and social interaction within the same developmental process. Through these experiences, citizens learn not only about Europe and the EU but also how to live constructively within diverse communities characterised by cooperation, recognition and trust.

The contribution of education to European identity lies not in producing uniform citizens or imposing a singular conception of Europe. Rather, its role is to help individuals recognise that diversity and commonality are not opposing forces. A shared commitment to human dignity, responsible freedom and equal moral recognition can provide a basis for belonging that remains fully compatible with cultural, linguistic and political pluralism.

At the same time, the challenge facing the EU is not merely institutional or economic; it is also profoundly relational. No political community can endure without sufficient levels of trust among citizens and confidence in shared institutions. Education contributes to this objective by creating opportunities for cooperation, dialogue and mutual recognition, thereby strengthening the social foundations upon which trust is built and sustained over time.

In this sense, education does not simply prepare individuals to participate in European society; it actively contributes to shaping the kind of European society that future generations will inherit. The strength of European identity will therefore depend, to a significant extent, on the educational experiences through which citizens learn what it means to live together in freedom, responsibility, equality and mutual respect. More fundamentally, it will depend on their capacity to develop the trust necessary to transform a collection of diverse societies into a genuine community of shared purpose.

CHAPTER 4: THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

A European Identity Grounded in Values

Throughout this volume, we have critically examined what is commonly understood as ‘European values’, where these values originate, how they are applied and whether they genuinely provide a shared foundation for the construction of a common European identity. The analysis developed across the previous chapters points towards a central conclusion: the EU cannot be sustained solely through economic arrangements, institutional frameworks or legal structures. While these elements have been indispensable for securing peace, stability and cooperation, they are insufficient to generate the deeper sense of belonging required for a durable political community.

The European project emerged largely as a pragmatic response to the devastation of the Second World War. Economic cooperation proved remarkably successful in reducing historical rivalries and creating conditions for unprecedented prosperity and stability. Yet the succession of crises experienced during recent decades—including economic, migratory, health, energy and geopolitical crises—has revealed a fundamental limitation. Economic interdependence alone does not automatically generate social cohesion, mutual trust or collective identity.

In response to this challenge, European institutions have increasingly appealed to a set of so-called European values. However, as argued in Chapter 1, many of these concepts' function more accurately as principles guiding political action than as deeply internalised moral values. Their importance is undeniable, but the persistent tensions between institutional discourse and political practice suggest that proclaiming principles is not sufficient to transform them into meaningful components of collective identity.

Part of the difficulty lies in the absence of a sufficiently compelling shared narrative. For many citizens, the EU continues to be associated primarily with markets, regulations, economic integration or administrative governance. It is often experienced as a bureaucratic and technocratic project rather than as a human community built upon cooperation, mutual recognition and shared purpose. Yet collective identities rarely emerge from institutional

arrangements alone. They develop when individuals perceive that they belong to a community whose values they recognise as meaningful and whose future they regard as partly their own.

For this reason, this book has proposed a clear distinction between values, principles and actions. Values define what a community considers fundamentally desirable; principles provide normative guidance for behaviour and institutions; and policies

The European Union will endure not because its citizens share interests, but because they recognise one another as members of a common moral community.

translate both into concrete forms of action. This distinction allows us to identify a deeper ethical foundation for the European project and to move beyond purely procedural or administrative understandings of European integration.

Within this framework, **Human Dignity** emerges as the fundamental value upon which a renewed European identity can be built. As discussed in Chapter 2, dignity should not be understood primarily in terms of material prosperity, privilege or social status. Rather, it refers to the conditions that enable individuals to participate fully in society and to be recognised as members of a common human community.

From this foundational value derive two closely interconnected values: **Responsible Freedom** and **Equal Moral Recognition**. Responsible freedom recognises the importance of individual autonomy while acknowledging that freedom cannot be sustained independently of the social conditions that make it possible. Equal moral recognition affirms that all individuals possess equal moral worth regardless of their origin, identity, beliefs or circumstances. Together, these values provide a moral framework capable of supporting diversity without demanding uniformity.

This point is particularly important because Europe is characterised by profound cultural, linguistic, historical and political diversity. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, European identity cannot be understood as a fixed or homogeneous reality. Nor can it be imposed through treaties, symbols or

institutional declarations. Identities are socially constructed through experience, participation and interaction. They develop gradually when individuals perceive that they share meaningful values, common challenges and reciprocal obligations.

A European identity grounded in dignity, responsible freedom and equal moral recognition offers an important advantage in this regard. Unlike identities based upon ethnicity, religion, language or cultural homogeneity, it remains compatible with pluralism. It allows individuals to maintain local, regional and national forms of belonging while simultaneously participating in a broader European community. Rather than replacing existing identities, it provides an additional layer of belonging capable of connecting diverse populations through shared ethical commitments.

Such an identity would also strengthen one of the themes that has emerged repeatedly throughout this volume: trust. Shared values help create common expectations regarding how individuals and institutions should behave. When citizens perceive that these values are consistently reflected in social and political life, trust becomes more likely to develop. In turn, trust reinforces cooperation, participation and the willingness to support common institutions. Identity and trust therefore become mutually reinforcing dimensions of the same process.

Education occupies a particularly important place within this framework. A European identity grounded in values cannot be transmitted solely through information about institutions or historical events. It must be cultivated through experiences that allow individuals to practise cooperation, democratic participation, critical reflection and mutual recognition. Education therefore becomes one of the principal mechanisms through which values are transformed into lived realities and through which a shared sense of belonging can gradually emerge.

The future of the EU will ultimately depend less on its capacity to generate economic growth than on its capacity to sustain a meaningful community of citizens who recognise themselves as part of a common project. Shared interests may facilitate cooperation, but they rarely generate lasting

solidarity. Shared values, by contrast, provide the moral foundations upon which trust, belonging and collective action can be built.

A European identity grounded in values is therefore neither an abstract aspiration nor a symbolic luxury. It is a practical necessity for the long-term resilience of the European project. Only by strengthening the ethical foundations of cooperation will the EU be able to confront the social, technological, environmental and geopolitical challenges of the twenty-first century while preserving the human dimension that ultimately gives the project its meaning.

Challenges, Opportunities and the Reconstruction of the European Project

The EU finds itself at a pivotal moment in its history. The accumulation of economic, migratory, health, energy, environmental and geopolitical crises over recent decades has tested not only the operational capacity of European institutions but also the resilience of the relationship between citizens and the broader European project. As a result, the central challenge facing the EU today is no longer merely economic or institutional. It is fundamentally political, moral and identitarian.

For much of its history, European integration has been driven by a functional logic. Economic cooperation, monetary stability, freedom of movement and the construction of common markets proved highly effective in securing peace and prosperity across a continent long characterised by conflict. Yet experience has shown that no political community can rely indefinitely on shared interests alone. When societies face uncertainty, fear or social tension, economic arrangements by themselves are rarely sufficient to generate solidarity, belonging or collective purpose.

This limitation helps explain the growing emotional and symbolic distance that many citizens perceive between themselves and European institutions. The EU continues to be associated primarily with regulations, administrative procedures and economic governance. While these functions remain essential, they rarely inspire the forms of attachment that sustain long-term political communities. The resulting gap has contributed to the growth of Euroscepticism, democratic disengagement and political movements that portray European integration as incompatible with national, regional or cultural identities.

The rise of populist and extremist movements across different parts of Europe should therefore not be understood solely as a political phenomenon. It also reflects a broader crisis of belonging. Such movements often succeed because they offer emotionally compelling narratives and easily recognisable identities at a time when many citizens struggle to locate themselves within a

rapidly changing social and political landscape. In contrast, the European project has frequently relied upon legal and economic arguments while neglecting the emotional, cultural and moral dimensions of collective identity.

At the same time, the EU faces a profoundly transformed international environment. Growing geopolitical competition, increasing global polarisation, the weakening of multilateral consensus and the resurgence of authoritarian political models require the EU to reconsider its role in the world. These present significant challenges, but they also create opportunities.

Precisely because many societies are experiencing crises of trust, representation and social cohesion, the EU has an opportunity to redefine itself not merely as an economic union but as a political community grounded in

The European Union's greatest challenge is not managing diversity but transforming diversity into cooperation.

democratic coexistence, cooperation and human dignity. In a world increasingly characterised by fragmentation and confrontation, the EU's experience in managing diversity remains one of its most distinctive achievements.

Indeed, what is often presented as a European weakness may constitute one of its greatest strengths. The EU has demonstrated that cooperation is possible among societies that differ substantially in language, culture, religion, history and political traditions. Although imperfect, the European project remains one of the most ambitious experiments in supranational coexistence ever undertaken. This experience may prove increasingly valuable in a century characterised by complexity, interdependence and diversity.

However, such opportunities can only be realised if the EU succeeds in rebuilding trust. Trust constitutes the invisible foundation of every durable political community. Without it, societies become increasingly vulnerable to fear, polarisation and exclusionary forms of politics. As argued throughout this book, trust cannot be generated solely through institutional design. It emerges when citizens perceive that they participate in a community characterised by reciprocity, fairness and mutual recognition.

For this reason, the reconstruction of the European project must extend beyond institutional reform. The EU requires experiences capable of strengthening human connections across borders and reinforcing the perception of belonging to a common community. Educational exchanges, transnational civic initiatives, collaborative research programmes, cultural partnerships, citizen assemblies and participatory democratic processes all contribute to this objective. Identities are not built through declarations alone; they emerge through interaction, cooperation and shared experience. Initiatives such as Erasmus+, transnational service-learning programmes, joint cultural projects, citizen assemblies, cross-border educational partnerships and collaborative research networks illustrate how shared experiences can transform abstract ideas of the EU into meaningful forms of belonging.

The central question facing the EU is therefore not simply what it can provide materially, but what kind of community Europeans wish to build together. This shift in perspective moves the debate beyond questions of economic efficiency and towards questions of meaning, purpose and collective responsibility.

From this perspective, the future of European integration depends upon its capacity to evolve from a project based primarily on functional cooperation towards one supported by genuinely shared moral foundations. The values proposed throughout this book—**Human Dignity, Responsible Freedom and Equal Moral Recognition**—offer a framework capable of supporting such a transformation. They provide a common ethical language through which diverse populations can cooperate without abandoning their differences.

Europe does not need to reduce or overcome its internal diversity to strengthen its unity. On the contrary, it should be understood as one of the EU's greatest assets rather than one of its principal challenges. The continent's linguistic, cultural, historical, religious and political plurality provides opportunities for learning, innovation, creativity and democratic development that more homogeneous societies may struggle to generate. Far from weakening the European project, this diversity offers a unique foundation upon which broader forms of cooperation and mutual understanding can be built.

Europe's greatest potential therefore lies not in creating uniformity, but in its capacity to transform diversity into cooperation rather than confrontation. The ability to live, deliberate and act collectively despite differences may be one of the most valuable political lessons the EU can offer in an increasingly interconnected world. Achieving this objective requires strengthening participation, rebuilding trust and creating spaces where citizens can recognise one another as members of a shared political and moral community while preserving the distinct identities that enrich the European experience.

The reconstruction of the European project will not be achieved through a single policy, institution or reform. It will depend upon a long-term process of cultivating trust, reinforcing democratic participation and reconnecting political structures with the lived experiences of citizens. Only through such a process will the EU be able to confront the social, technological, environmental and geopolitical challenges of the coming decades with both legitimacy and resilience.

The future of the EU will therefore depend not only on what it does, but also on what it represents. If it succeeds in combining diversity with cooperation, freedom with responsibility, and pluralism with mutual recognition, the EU may yet offer one of the most compelling models for democratic coexistence in the twenty-first century.

Transmitting the European Project: Education, Trust and Shared Identity

Every political community faces a fundamental challenge: how to ensure that its defining values, institutions and aspirations endure beyond the generation that created them. The European project is no exception. If the EU is to remain a meaningful political community in the decades ahead, it must find ways not only to preserve its institutional structures but also to transmit the ethical foundations that give those structures legitimacy and purpose.

Throughout this book, we have argued that the long-term sustainability of the European project depends upon more than economic integration, legal frameworks or administrative coordination. These elements remain essential, but they are ultimately insufficient on their own. Political communities endure because successive generations develop a sense of belonging to a common project and recognise the value of maintaining it. The transmission of the European project is therefore inseparable from the transmission of the values that sustain it.

This challenge is particularly significant in contemporary societies characterised by rapid social change, technological transformation, increasing political polarisation and declining trust in institutions. Under such conditions, values can no longer be assumed to reproduce themselves automatically. Democratic coexistence, mutual recognition and civic responsibility require active cultivation. If they are not deliberately nurtured, they may gradually weaken, leaving political communities vulnerable to fragmentation, distrust and disengagement.

Importantly, the available evidence suggests that the European challenge is not primarily one of collapsing interpersonal trust. Longitudinal data indicate that levels of trust between citizens have remained relatively stable across the EU, despite persistent regional differences. What appears more problematic is the relationship between citizens and political institutions. Trust in governments, political parties and representative structures has often proven more fragile and volatile than trust between individuals. This distinction is

significant because it suggests that the EU's central challenge may not be rebuilding social trust from scratch but rather strengthening the links between citizens and the institutions that claim to represent them³⁵.

For this reason, education occupies a central position in the future of the EU. Its importance extends far beyond the transmission of knowledge about European history, institutions or policies. Education provides one of the primary spaces in which individuals learn how to live with others, how to participate in collective decision-making, how to manage disagreement constructively and how to assume responsibility for their actions within a broader community. It also plays a crucial role in shaping the kind of European identity that future generations may develop. A mature European identity is not based upon uncritical loyalty or institutional idealisation. Rather, it involves the capacity to recognise the EU's contradictions, limitations and failures while remaining committed to improving the common project through democratic participation, critical reflection and collective responsibility.

Therefore, education serves not merely as a vehicle for transmitting information but as a mechanism through which values become lived experiences. Human dignity, responsible freedom and equal moral recognition acquire practical meaning when they are encountered in contexts characterised by participation, cooperation, respect and reciprocity. Individuals learn these values not only by studying them, but by experiencing them.

Yet education alone cannot guarantee the continuity of the European project. What ultimately determines the strength of a political community is the degree of trust that exists among its members. Trust allows individuals to cooperate despite uncertainty, to accept collective decisions despite disagreement and to recognise one another as legitimate participants in a shared social and political order. Without trust, even the most sophisticated

³⁵ Based on data from the European Social Survey (Rounds 1–11, 2002–2023) and the European Commission's Standard Eurobarometer series.

institutions become fragile. With trust, diversity becomes manageable and cooperation becomes possible.

Trust is therefore not simply one value among many. It is the social condition that enables other values to operate effectively. Citizens are more likely to respect democratic outcomes when they trust the fairness of institutions. They are more willing to cooperate when they trust that others will reciprocate. They are more inclined to embrace diversity when they trust that differences will not threaten their own dignity or security. In this sense, trust functions as the connective tissue linking values, identities and institutions.

The link between identity and trust is particularly important. Shared identities help create expectations of cooperation and mutual responsibility, while experiences of trust reinforce feelings of belonging. Both processes therefore strengthen one another. Individuals are more likely to identify with communities that they perceive as fair, inclusive and trustworthy, and stronger identification often encourages further cooperation and solidarity.

Values create belonging, identity creates trust, and trust makes collective action possible.

A resilient European identity cannot be imposed through symbols or declarations alone; it must emerge gradually through repeated experiences of trust, participation and cooperation across different social contexts. For this reason, the development of a European identity grounded in shared values will neither be rapid nor linear. It requires time, sustained social commitment and the active involvement of citizens in the life of the broader community.

At the same time, such an identity cannot be homogeneous or closed. Europe is characterised by cultural, linguistic, historical and political diversity, and any attempt to impose a single model of Europeanness would ultimately undermine the very principles upon which the European project rests. A European identity grounded in dignity, responsible freedom and equal moral recognition must therefore remain plural, dynamic and continuously evolving, adapting to new realities while preserving the ethical foundations that make

cooperation possible. Precisely in this capacity to organise diversity without suppressing it lies one of the EU's greatest potential strengths.

This observation has important implications for the future of the EU. If European identity is to become a meaningful source of belonging, citizens must encounter the EU both as a political structure and as a lived reality. Educational exchanges, civic participation, cultural cooperation, scientific collaboration and everyday experiences of transnational interaction all contribute to this process. Through such experiences, abstract principles are transformed into personal relationships and institutional frameworks become human communities.

The transmission of the European project therefore depends upon a continuous process of connecting values, identity and trust. Values provide the ethical foundation. Identity creates a sense of belonging. Trust enables cooperation. Together, they generate the conditions necessary for collective action and democratic resilience.

Thus, one of the EU's greatest challenges is to recover the human dimension of the European project itself. For too long, integration has often been presented primarily as a technical, administrative or economic process. Yet political communities are not sustained by procedures alone. The EU must once again become something that is lived, experienced and shared, rather than merely administered.

Ultimately, the future of the EU will not be determined solely by economic performance, technological innovation or institutional reform. It will depend upon whether Europeans continue to recognise themselves as members of a shared moral and political community. It requires more than common interests; it requires common commitments.

If the EU is to confront the challenges of the 21st century successfully, it must strengthen the social bonds that connect its citizens while preserving the diversity that enriches the continent. Education, trust and shared identity provide the means through which this objective can be pursued. They constitute not merely instruments of policy, but the foundations upon which the future of the European project ultimately rests.

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