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The Future of the EU: Values and the Will of the People

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Article text:

Common values and the future of the European Union are intrinsically linked, writes Dawid Bunikowski. Taking a legal philosophical perspective, he argues that the EU needs a stronger axiological foundation in order to be more effective, and he calls for a Europe-wide public debate on values to help shape the EU's direction.

The main issue in the EU today is whether we know where we are going as a community. Considering the many crises facing Europe, such as on Greece, the Eurozone, migration, radical terrorism, Ukraine and the Polish constitution, it seems as though we are not sure who we are as a community of values.

There are two arguments to put on the table here. One is about common European values rooted in history, which should illuminate the future. The other concerns democracy in the EU and the will of the European people to decide on the future of the EU.

Without strict [axiological](#) foundations, the sense of existence of the EU would be based only on economic and commercial reasons. This does not include deeper political integration of the community and ideas such as those in the Fiscal Compact (including EU supervision over national budgets).

Every organisation should be based on concrete values, and this is a major problem for the EU. Our European legal culture is made up of not only the continental law tradition and common law origins, but also the axiological (moral, philosophical, theoretical-historical) foundations which come from Greek philosophy, Roman law and Christianity.

Liberal values like freedoms, the rule of law, reason, intellect and *communitarian* values like solidarity, peace, welfare and dialogue come from these sources, and they are still being interpreted by new epochs in a critical way.

No society can exist without its history, traditions and origins. Where would we – Europe – be without our history? Maybe Patrick Devlin, who talked about public morality and values as essential to society's existence and survival, is more right than one could imagine!

We must remember that values cannot be an empty concept nor a hollow right (look at the Scandinavian realists, especially Karl Olivecrona and Alf Ross, and the Uppsala School). We need to keep this in mind for values in practice in an organisation or a society.

Every society should also follow 'the minimum content of Natural Law' and respect it, accordingly to liberal legal philosopher Herbert Hart. Hart's theory concerns values in the community. Without values such as life, health, public security, family, property, restraint and altruism, we would be a 'one-generation society' or a 'club of suicides'. Are we doomed to become a one-generation society?

The same must be for our Europe as a community, the community of values. This is not going well in Europe, in terms of values and also from sociological and demographic points of view.

The crisis of values in Europe in the 20th and 21st centuries remains visible. The problem of identity and hierarchy of values in private life seems to be too deep. Nietzschean revaluation of values is a social fact, but it does not imply a total collapse of Europe. There is no trodden path to follow that is always right. Every era has its own way. We, as Europeans and citizens of national states (we formally play a double role), can find our new path now.

The EU needs stronger references to axiological foundations to make it a better organisation and a more serious international player in the world. This necessitates difficult decisions on which values are the most important.

While cultural and moral pluralism might be important, perhaps other values – such as individual freedoms, liberal legal systems, welfare, security, peace, equality, solidarity, or reason, or European spirituality, philosophy, Christianity or promotion of these abroad – are more important.

This choice of values would be consistent with the feelings of EU citizens. Maybe then the EU would be more internally effective and externally influential. Nevertheless, to do so would require bold political decisions. However, values, traditions and the past cannot be ignored.

There is no society without the past and values. The values in which we truly believe are the basis of our community. This enables a nation of law based on common values. European citizens should be taken seriously on these questions. Discussions on values and the current crises in the EU are important.

What should happen then? We need a great Europe-wide public debate about values in Europe (*where we come from, who we are*), and about what we are becoming as a political community (*where we are going*). If the EU is a democracy, and democracy is one of the EU's values, one must ask the European people what they think on the EU's direction and future.

It often seems that the politicians and bureaucrats in Brussels think they know best *how* to make our future better. But this is not so. Politicians do not know how to make the EU, its future and its citizens better off. Only outstanding politicians understand this, and there are not many of them.

Without question the EU (earlier the European Communities) has had many positive aspects in the aftermath of the Second World War. The absence of war in Europe

(except in the former Yugoslavia and Ukraine) and the rise of the welfare state have been significant achievements.

However, these accomplishments do not equate to an axiology or the deeper axiological foundations of the community. They are more about pragmatic issues concerning the functioning of the EU. This is about peace and welfare, the two pragmatic values behind the creation of the European Community in the 1940s and 1950s.

More than 50 years on, we require something institutionally stronger to develop the community if it is to become a political community at all. However, we may decide that we do not want to integrate more and more politically in order to create a federal United States of Europe. UK Prime Minister David Cameron's current EU policy is clear example in this opposite direction. Everyone should respect the decisions made by the people as Europeans and as citizens of nation states.

The people have common sense and are reasonable. They know that *something is rotten in the state of Denmark* – or in this case, the EU, its values and its future. Where is Europe headed? This question concerns both European [soft power](#) and its economic-political power, neither of which exist in a [vacuum](#).

The EU has been a novelty in public international law in its institutional complexity and cultural sophistication. In international politics, a good organisation must have strong values that define the community, given the moral character of supranational governance.

Nevertheless, the EU remains a paradox of values. One of its objectives is to promote European values in international politics and its external relations. However, the EU is extremely weak in pursuing these values with countries like Russia and China. More to the point, how can the EU promote its values when it does not know where they come from, what they mean and when people do not believe in them?

Hope is fading for a community of values in Europe. Is there any chance left? Yes, there still is. It must begin with the discussion of what our values are and what we want the EU to be in the context of those values.

This article draws from the author's recent [paper](#) published by Atlantic Community.

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