

In a world in crisis, can Europe assert itself through its 'values'?¹

• Introduction

Europe's 'geopolitical awakening'² in the face of the shocks to sovereignty³ in recent years has led to a prevailing view that we should now speak the realistic language of interests and power rather than the language of values, which is deemed idealistic. If it is clear that Europe must undertake a 'geopolitical transition'⁴ this must not lead Europeans to sacrifice their heritage and the 'values' that stem from it.

In his recent speech on receiving the Charlemagne Prize, Mario Draghi stated that "under the pressure of recent years, Europeans are remembering the values they had begun to take for granted: solidarity, democracy, the rule of law, the protection of

minorities. These are the legacy of post-war Europe. And they are becoming visible again because they are being put to the test. This is more powerful than any political programme, because it gives Europeans a reason to act. And citizens already have a clear idea of the direction Europe should take: nine out of ten people surveyed by Eurobarometer want the Union to act with greater unity; three-quarters want it to have more resources to tackle the challenges ahead"⁵.

A system of values is essential for building society and uniting a political community, particularly in the face of external threats. The EU and its citizens are being targeted not only on the security and economic fronts but also on the ideological one, against a backdrop of attacks on the 'values' of our liberal

DEMOCRACY &
INSTITUTIONS

POLICY BRIEF
JUNE 2026

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This text is based on a conference and debate co-organised by the Jacques Delors Institute and the European Parliament's representation in France, which took place at Europa Expérience in Paris on 19 May 2026.

- 1 This text is based on a conference and debate co-organised by the Jacques Delors Institute and the Parliament's Bureau
- 2 Luuk van Middelaar, *Le réveil géopolitique de l'Europe*, Collège de France Editions, 2022.
- 3 The eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, the health crisis, the energy crisis, the war in Ukraine, etc.
- 4 Florian Louis, « La transition géopolitique européenne », *Le Grand Continent*, septembre 2022.
- 5 Speech by Mario Draghi at the Charlemagne Prize ceremony in Aachen, Germany, 14 May 2026 - <https://www.karlspreis.de/files/docs/Reden%20bei%20Verleihung/2026%20Mario%20Draghi%20English.pdf>



democracies and our open economies⁶. These ‘values’ are indeed being challenged today in Europe and elsewhere, not only under pressure from national-populist and extremist political forces in particular, but also outside the European Union, against a backdrop of the rise of authoritarian, dictatorial and totalitarian regimes across the world. These various internal and external challenges thus give a democratic opportunity in that they force us to defend the ‘values’ specific to Europeans.

I • The European Union: a community of destiny founded on common ‘values’ to be defended

The debate on ‘European values’ is often confused because of the different dimensions of the concept of ‘values’: (i) legal and (ii) political on the one hand, and (iii) societal on the other. This confusion has adverse effects and undermines the clarity of the debate on the subject. As Jacques Delors noted: ‘The struggle [over values] is not entirely clear, as it sometimes takes the form of a conflict between modernists and traditionalists’⁷. It is therefore necessary to clarify the terms of this debate and distinguish between three different dimensions of these ‘values’, which are sometimes wrongly mixed with the struggle to defend the values of the rule of law and liberal democracy, both internally and externally⁸:

- The rule of law *in the strict sense*⁹ legality; prohibition of arbitrary exercise of power by the executive; independent and impartial courts; effective judicial review, including of respect for fundamental rights; equality before the law. These elements are non-negotiable and are, in particular, the subject of detailed case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (we are therefore not dealing here solely with the political sphere but also with the legal sphere).

- The fundamental political ‘values’ (which would be better described as ‘principles’) of the European Union, as set out in Article 2 of the TEU, which include but are not limited to the requirements of the rule of law: ‘respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society characterised by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men’.

These principles are also non-negotiable but much broader in scope; the extent to which they may be the subject of an independent legal action before a court is thus restricted by European case-law to situations involving ‘manifest and particularly serious breaches of one or more of the values shared by the Member States, such breaches being incompatible with the very identity of the Union as a common legal order of a society characterised by pluralism’ (CJEU, 21 April 2026, Commission v Hungary, C-769/22, para. 551). In this regard, a breach of one or more elements of the rule of law *stricto sensu* or of a specific article of the Charter is an ‘indication’ of such manifest breaches but is not, in itself, sufficient to characterise them. Legally speaking, an autonomous sanction for a breach of Article 2 TEU is possible but is reserved for cases of an explicit and particularly serious challenge to the foundations of shared membership of the European legal order. The threshold for a breach of a legal obligation arising from Article 2 TEU is therefore met when a Member State’s conduct demonstrates a deliberate intention to place itself at odds with the other Member States of the Union, as illustrated by the fact that case law bases such a breach on a combined interpretation of Articles 2 and 49 TEU (the latter recalling that respect for the values set out in Article 2 TEU is a

6 See National Security Strategy of the United States of America, November 2025 - <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

7 Jacques Delors, « Dissertation sur les valeurs », conférence mondiale quadriennale des abbés bénédictins, San Anselmo, Rome, 8 septembre 2000, in *Relire Delors. Discours de Jacques Delors depuis 1996*, Institut Jacques Delors, 2021, p. 102.

8 Thierry Chopin and Lukas Macek, ‘European Values: A Debate to be Clarified for a Battle to be Fought’, Policy Paper No 275, Jacques Delors Institute, April 2022.

9 See Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, ‘A new framework to strengthen the rule of law’, COM (2014) 158 final, p. 4.

prerequisite for accession to the Union) they cannot be invoked independently before a court and constitute, at best, a framework through which other texts can be understood¹⁰. The exceptional nature of the potential autonomous sanction for a breach of these principles, as compared with the elements of the rule of law in the strict sense, does not, however, detract from their political importance.¹¹ The political principles set out in Article 2 of the TEU are thus frequently invoked by European political leaders, particularly in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, to distinguish themselves from Russia.¹² Even political movements hostile to European integration do not explicitly choose to oppose these principles and the content of Article 2 TEU head-on; their discourse consists far more of asserting that the European Union has strayed from its path and should be more respectful of nations (for example, as Viktor Orbán did, by targeting controversial societal issues, see below) than to openly criticise the principles of Article 2 of the TEU, even if they may be indirectly called into question in the process.¹³

- This ultimately falls within the scope of legitimate political debate in any given national society, including on the subject of ‘societal’ values, as exemplified by the recent debate on end-of-life care in France. From this perspective, the EU leaves Member States considerable leeway, provided that national specificities are not invoked to obstruct a fundamental European acquis¹⁴.

Here, the ‘European values’ in question are the political and legal ‘principles’ (the first two dimensions mentioned above) derived from political liberalism, as they have been developed throughout European history and affirmed since the Enlightenment. These principles form the foundation of European integration: fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, equality before the law, the rule of law, representative democracy¹⁵, etc. The historical experience of the European peoples following the tragedies of the 20th century has forged a consensus on these principles; these are embodied in the political project of European integration, which takes the form of a community of law and political ‘principles’.

The consequence is that the EU is not merely an alliance between sovereign states that cannot guarantee the permanence of the peace established. If that were the case, the EU would simply be an intergovernmental entity and we would not have gone so far in integration as to not only enshrine it in treaties that take precedence over national law but also to create supranational institutions with a clear mandate to ensure its effectiveness¹⁶. It is historical, political and geopolitical factors that bring together the states and citizens of the European Union. This is, moreover, where the founding ‘value’ of Europe lies: the Union first brought about peace and established democracy before building strength. In other words, the founding value of Europe lies in the need to remain united, that is to say, united geopolitically, and to protect itself from a return to authoritarian or even totalitarian tendencies.

¹⁰ I would like to thank Jean-Baptiste Roche for sharing his insights on this matter with me.

¹¹ It should be noted that some legal works emphasise that the ‘value of democracy is not merely a political proclamation devoid of legal significance’ and that ‘Article 2 TEU does not merely set out political guidelines or intentions, but contains values that form part [...] of the very identity of the Union as a common legal order, values which are embodied in principles containing legally binding obligations for Member States’; see Sébastien Platon, « La démocratie illibérale en droit de l’Union européenne. La question de l’activation juridictionnelle des valeurs de l’Union », in V. Barbé, B.-L. Combrade et C.-E. Sénac (dir.), *La démocratie illibérale en droit constitutionnel*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 2023, p. 107-134.

¹² See Thierry Chopin and Auguste Naïm, ‘European values put to the test by the war in Ukraine’, Jacques Delors Institute, May 2023.

¹³ For example, as Viktor Orbán did, by targeting controversial societal issues

¹⁴ See, for example, the balance struck by the Court of Justice of the European Union in the *Coman and Hamilton* judgment: Romania is free not to recognise same-sex marriages, but it cannot stand in the way of the freedom of movement acquired by an individual as a result of a same-sex marriage validly contracted in another Member State.

¹⁵ Article 10 TEU states in this regard that “the functioning of the Union shall be based on representative democracy”.

¹⁶ Thierry Chopin, Jean-Baptiste Roche, « En finir avec le mythe d’une union politique sans primauté juridique », *Le Grand Continent*, novembre 2021.

Europeans feel European because they know that their histories (past and future) are inseparable and that they form a community of destiny.

To understand what this fundamentally means, it may be useful to read Raymond Aron's analyses of European unification and the issue of defence. For him, the question of defending the territory of a political community is linked to that of its founding values, and the condition for the possibility of a 'European defence community' is 'that it is accompanied by a political and moral community'; more concretely, this also means that, 'if a sentiment were gradually created within the European political community such that the territory of one merges with the territory of the other, and if the integration of conventional forces reached such a degree that any aggression against, let us say, the Federal Republic of Germany were necessarily regarded by France and Great Britain as an attack on their own forces, then in that scenario the European defence community would cease to be a fiction and could become effective (...). This difficulty, in my view, does not amount to impossibility; it simply means that, in order to succeed in creating a European military defence community, it would be necessary at the same time to create a sense of political and moral community perceived as such by both Europeans and the potential adversary'¹⁷.

Responding to the current ideological battle over 'values'¹⁸ and the offensive on 'civilisation'¹⁹ launched against the European Union and its Member States therefore requires us to recognise and reaffirm, without any ambiguity, the principles underpinning Europe's (geo)political identity²⁰.

II • Europeans facing the revolution in international relations. Power and identity

Any strategic reflection on the European response to the critical situation in which we find ourselves – both in terms of the attack on our interests and on our 'values' – must first be based on a clear understanding of the revolution in international relations currently underway.

One of the key elements of the new international relations lies in the dominant assertion of an authoritarian and illiberal oligarchic logic. Whilst the United States once sought to be the embodiment of government of the people, by the people and for the people – in accordance with Abraham Lincoln's vision – it is now the scene of a government of a handful of billionaires for their own benefit, relying on their media, financial and now executive power against domestic opposition. They are thus following the model of power at work in Russia (concentrating economic and political power in the hands of Putin and his inner circle) and in China (centred on the Chinese Communist Party).

While such a logic is not unprecedented, what is new today lies in the means available to these new illiberal oligarchies. Such means give them the capacity to reshape the balance of power, in the face of which the EU and its member states find themselves highly isolated and in a position of great vulnerability, given the demographic, economic and military weight represented by this 'alliance' – albeit an informal one – of the authoritarian and illiberal oligarchies.

This unnatural 'alliance' finds its common ground in the attack on what the EU embodies: a community of destiny based on the political and legal principles underpinning a democratic and liberal constitutional order that protects freedoms and founded on the rule of law, the separation and balance of powers. A new international political order

17 Raymond Aron, « Défense nationale et unification européenne » (1969), *Commentaire*, n°184, hiver 2023.

18 Luuk van Middelaar, « Avec Trump, l'Europe encaisse une attaque idéologique de la part de son protecteur historique », *Le Monde*, 30 January 2026.

19 See, for example, the speech by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2026.

20 Thierry Chopin, Céline Spector, « Que faire du concept de civilisation » ?, *Esprit*, avril 2026.

is thus emerging, with a shift from a political dynamic based on the opposition between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes to an international order now dominated by the dual divide between oligarchies and non-oligarchies on the political front, on the one hand, and between the social market economy and illiberal capitalism, on the other.

In such a context, the EU and its Member States find themselves in a relationship of the weak to the strong. To resist, Europeans must maintain their cohesion and unity around the 'values' and political principles underpinning the EU. Internally, the stability of a political and legal order comprising states that have freely and sovereignly decided to join together in a broader Union to permanently rule out any risk of conflict between them requires a minimum degree of political homogeneity, which in turn implies a consensus on these common political principles, one that cannot tolerate any possible divergence. Externally, this degree of 'political homogeneity' is also an essential condition for ensuring that the Union has the capacity for collective action to address external geopolitical challenges and defend itself.

This link between the issue of cohesion around the EU's political and legal principles and the geopolitical challenges of 'power' is essential. From this perspective, this link between the two dimensions must be asserted much more forcefully, and it seems quite clear in this context that 'the ambition for conceptual renewal embodied in European sovereignty must be placed in the context of the Union's constitutional vision (...) the rather vaguely outlined link (...) between European sovereignty and values will undoubtedly need to be strengthened and clarified. Indeed, sovereignty-power is formally dissociated from the requirements relating to membership. However, it is very

clear from recent case law, particularly in the body of case law relating to the rule of law, that the various imperatives arising from it, as well as the affirmation of values as 'the very foundation of the Union and its legal order'²¹, now constitute the bedrock of the Member States' bond of membership of the Union'²². To put it another way, "the external projection of European sovereignty vis-à-vis powers such as Russia or China will only truly make sense if the exercise of that sovereignty enables the defence and promotion of the values that contribute to the very identity of the Union's legal order' and the war in Ukraine 'could prove to be a major catalyst and accelerate the external dimension of European sovereignty, particularly in terms of common defence capabilities'²³.

European 'power' is thus inextricably linked to a sense of 'belonging' rooted in respect for the political and legal principles that underpin the Union's existence and the (geo)political identity of Europeans in the face of external threats²⁴. To prevail, Europeans must maintain their cohesion and unity around these principles. And they must demonstrate that they are a geopolitical force that commands respect, has many allies²⁵, and supports those who wish to follow its lead. Furthermore, if the European Union becomes the rallying point for liberal democracies and open economies, if its support for Ukraine remains sufficiently strong even in the face of adversity, and if Member States equip themselves with the means to protect themselves effectively and in solidarity against a potential invader, then this will create a sufficiently strong bond between Member States to reinforce consensus on these principles, at the very least, so that partial dissent does not jeopardise the entire edifice. The European Union will then be able not only to protect its sovereignty but also to strengthen its collective identity.

21 CJEU, Plenary Session, 16 February 2022, *Hungary and Poland v Parliament and Council*, Case C-156/21, cited above.

22 Stéphane de La Rosa, « La souveraineté européenne : du discours au concept ? », in Beligh Nabli (dir.), *L'Etat intégré, un nouveau type d'Etat européen. Le cas de la France*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 2022, p. 64.

23 Ibid.

24 On the link between issues of 'power' and 'identity', see Thierry Chopin (dir.), *Une Europe pour aujourd'hui et pour demain. Souveraineté, solidarités, identité commune*, La documentation française, 2022.

25 See Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada, Speech delivered at the World Economic Forum in Davos, 20 January 2026.

On the geopolitical front, the centrality of sovereign challenges today relates to the question of the EU's borders and identity, as addressing these issues generally allows for the identification of an 'inside' and an 'outside'. Yet identifying an 'outside' can help to strengthen internal cohesion. The dynamics resulting from the responses to the 'sovereignty shocks' of the past decade (Brexit, the health crisis, the war in Ukraine, etc.) illustrate this: the fact that Europeans must provide common and united responses to challenges tends to bring them together. Furthermore, opinion polls suggest that public opinion has become more favourable towards participation in the EU as a relevant level of public authority for presenting a united front against external threats in an unstable and conflict-ridden world²⁶. From this perspective, it is as though public opinion in Europe, despite various forms of Euroscepticism – which vary in intensity and differ across Member States – is ahead of its political leaders.

An examination of American society is interesting to draw the following conclusion: it is a people that is in reality deeply divided, and even polarised, on the question of values; yet its unity has nonetheless remained solid until recently, as it has demonstrated its ability to play a major role in foreign relations. Until now, there has been a general agreement on the form of the political system, with deep disagreements over the values that this system should uphold, yet without these discussions—or even these divisions—undermining the overall structure, again at least until recently... This is what needs to be achieved in Europe. Of course, the American case is very different from the European one, but the shift in the rhetoric of the extremes

(moving from advocating the end of the EU to promoting their own vision of the EU) seems to be an early indication of the possibility of reaching the same outcome within the EU if a sufficiently powerful defining moment were to definitively justify the idea that the European Union is the right solution. Could the conflict-ridden state of the world and the attack on our 'values' be that 'founding moment' for Europeans ?

²⁶ See Standard Eurobarometer Survey 105, Spring 2026 ; see also "Europeans No Longer Rely on the US for Security: ECFR Poll 2026".

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The Jacques Delors Institute is part of the Jacques Delors Friends of Europe Foundation

