



# The European Union as a global power of values

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**Abstract** The European Union has been traditionally perceived as a values-based power that has exerted a certain appeal to the world and a transformative influence on its neighbours. The power of its attraction derives from the fact that it is a unique model in history, constructed on common values, mutual interests, solidarity and joint policies for economic development and convergence, with the aim to preserve peace, stability and welfare for all European peoples. Despite occasional ups and downs, this has been a successful endeavour, as demonstrated by its successive development and unprecedented enlargements. The effectiveness of the EU in disseminating its values varies, depending on different factors. Overall, the EU's most powerful tool is its paradigm. In response to current challenges threatening the credibility of its model, the EU needs to remain committed to its values and principles, speak with one voice and keep inspiring its peoples first, so that it can inspire the world.

**Keywords** Values · Interests · Financial crisis · Solidarity · Coherence · Paradigm

## Introduction

In the midst of the global financial turmoil and Europe's current preoccupation with the struggle against its consequences, it may seem theoretical or irrelevant to talk about values or about the EU as a power of values. But is this so? And if not, what would qualify such a discussion as relevant and well timed?

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Current debate emphasises the precedence of numbers and interests over ideas and values. And yet, the very creation of the European Union has been founded upon values-based reasoning. The ideal of a pacified European continent, where war would henceforth become inconceivable, was the fundamental concept that inspired the establishment of this unique experiment in world history—a so-far successful experiment, despite occasional ups and downs, as demonstrated by its successive development and unprecedented enlargements. It is also true, however, that we live in a pragmatic world and, as realists would argue, none of this would have happened if it weren't for interests. And certainly, interests did play their part. However, what makes this endeavour a remarkable case in point is not the absence of interests in its construction but the drive of the founders in mobilising interests, which were to serve values.<sup>1</sup> In the search for ways to ensure stability and peace, the idea of an economic and political integration of European states emerged immediately after the Second World War as a means to develop common interests and a balance of power that would prevent a new armed confrontation. The Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950, inspired by Jean Monnet, captures this conception. It describes the path to be followed, with the aim of gradually establishing bonds among the countries involved, through common policies, and consolidating solidarity. Initially, the production and distribution of those resources, namely coal and steel, which played an important role in both world wars were to be placed under joint control. This would ensure the establishment of common bases for economic development, rendering war among participants unthinkable, but also impossible in terms of resources.

The connection here is obvious. A community of nations run by values and principles serves the interest of all of them and hence it cannot be considered as a daydream. Those who inspired the EU sought to create a foundation based on values and solidarity, recognising that the existence and effective functioning of these values and principles would produce the most favourable environment for the preservation and advancement of European interests. Acknowledging these interests as common and mutual was the key to this notion.

## **A Union founded on values**

Hence, the EU does not only embrace certain values, it has also been founded upon them. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union declares that

the Union is founded on the values of 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 in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. (Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union [2010](#))

<sup>1</sup> The bibliography is inexhaustible; see for example Monnet ([1955](#)), Monnet ([1978](#)), Churchill ([1946](#)), Haas ([1968](#)), Spinelli ([1957](#)), O'Neill ([1996](#)).

At the same time, and already in Article 3, the EU also announces its intention to promote its values along with its interests in the framework of its foreign policy: 'In its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values and interests and contribute to the protection of its citizens' (Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union 2010).

### Promoting values to the world

In Article 21 of the Treaty, a multiple set of goals and priorities is listed, shaping an EU foreign and security policy that is guided by the Union's values and principles and extends not only to trade and aid, the European Community's traditional fields of foreign action, but plays a strong political role as well. Guided by these principles and values, the Union shall pursue common policies and actions in all fields of international relations with a task that includes safeguarding its values, fundamental interests and security; consolidating and supporting democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law; preserving peace, preventing conflicts and strengthening international security; fostering the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of developing countries and encouraging the integration of all countries into the world economy; assisting populations, countries and regions confronting natural or man-made disasters (Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union 2010).

Indeed, the EU has developed a wide network of policies and actions to uphold and promote these values and goals globally, ranging from development and humanitarian aid to its Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy (Policy areas of the European Union 2012). They also include trade, sanctions, diplomatic instruments and civil and military missions within the Common Security and Defence Policy, e.g. judicial, police and peacekeeping missions. An eloquent example of the Union's approach to projecting its values to the world is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). This is a financial instrument supporting the promotion of democracy and human rights, and it is based on the belief that the establishment of these values will allow for effective conflict prevention and resolution, the fight against terrorism and the creation of an environment of peace and security that will enable people to make economic improvements (Wissenbach 2009, 6–7). Moreover, the EU's development aid and cooperation policies contain actions that support the promotion of human rights worldwide and, in its trade or cooperation agreements with other countries, the EU includes a human rights clause. The Cotonou Agreement—the trade and aid pact with countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific—stipulates that EU trade concessions can be suspended and aid programmes curtailed if any of these countries fails to respect human rights. The EU and its Member States are the world's biggest aid donor, and the Union also seeks to promote development through trade by opening its markets to exports from poor countries.

The target is ambitious and the effectiveness of the EU in advancing its values to the world varies significantly. The most successful examples are those



countries for which the Union is able to present the strongest incentive, namely those aspiring to join the EU. Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union notes that '[t]he Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation' (Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union 2010).

The Union's top priority is its immediate neighbourhood: neighbouring countries at the EU's periphery destined by geography to live side by side with it, and particularly those countries with a future inside the EU. For all of them, the Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policies are devised from the same values shared within the EU and inspired by the necessity to create an environment of peace, stability, prosperity, good neighbourliness and cooperation that is essential for the well-being of the Union itself. Especially for accession countries, membership is conditional on the Copenhagen criteria, which codify the EU's values and principles, and on certain requirements essentially related to good neighbourly relations. Hence, as regards accession countries, where the EU exercises greater attraction and its tools are more powerful and effective, the Union has been successful in extending its values to other countries. Results are feeble the more the motivation becomes weaker. Sanctions or incentives, such as development aid and enabling trade, have a relatively wider impact in poorer countries, for example in Africa, but a more limited one in richer and politically stronger countries, such as Russia or China (Wissenbach 2009, 6–8).

Still, the EU's strategy for promoting its values also underlines its main approach, which is driven more by means of dialogue, mutual respect and cooperation than by a division between worlds of good and evil. The EU does not opt for external imposition of its values. Rather, it insists on local ownership by involving not only governments but also civil society. The predominantly soft-power nature of its policies has a soothing influence on countries and peoples and, in most cases, has instilled trust and wider acceptance towards the Union. And it is exactly its primarily values-based foreign policy that has gained it the reputation of a normative power in global politics. At the same time, and despite differences as regards values, the cooperation of emerging or established global powers, such as Russia, China, India and Brazil, is essential in addressing the daunting agenda of global challenges facing the world today within effective multilateralism, which is at the core of the Union's foreign policy. Nevertheless, the Union is regarded as a secondary political and economic partner with limited influence on global affairs as compared to the US.

## **Sustaining and enhancing global influence**

What then would be the leading and most influential tool of the EU for promoting its values to the world? I believe that would be its paradigm. The European endeavour itself has acquired throughout the years the prestige of a unique model with a certain universal appeal. Its major success in achieving

lasting peace and prosperity for its countries and peoples, together with its unprecedented enlargement, has made the EU known to the world as a key transformative power. This model is an unrivalled asset to 'export'. Its value and mission is recognised in Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union:

The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law. (Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union 2010)

The logic is very simple. The European endeavour became possible due to the awareness that common interests binding the Member States together are stronger and much more compelling than those interests dividing them along national lines. In the same way, this can also be applied to other states in the world, taking into account the 'common interests of humanity' (de Vasconcelos 2010, 15–16). Peace, stability and prosperity are largely universally accepted common interests in the welfare of countries and peoples. The values and principles of the EU such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and solidarity—namely, the means by which it has essentially accomplished these interests—may not be automatically considered the single or most effective ones. However, one could hardly dispute that in the case of the EU, this mechanism has worked and, for a long time, has succeeded in bringing peace, stability and prosperity to the European continent in a way that is unique in a global context. And therefore, by way of a working model and paradigm, it can exert a specific appeal and influence on other countries of the world.

Which brings us to the question of how this paradigm can remain credible, given the EU's frequent lack of cohesion and the severe turbulence of the recent financial crisis. Especially in the light of the financial crisis shaking the Union, can we still speak of a successful EU model that is able to inspire the world? Besides, we are obviously still far from the actual implementation of a coherent EU foreign policy. Shortcomings are repeatedly identified and stressed. The coherence of this policy impinges on the individual approaches, interests and priorities of the 27 Member States with their veto power. Often, an EU common policy is undermined by mixed threat assessments, different perceptions as to the degree to which a certain challenge affects each Member State individually, varied capacities for resistance to challenges, diverse philosophies and strategies against crises and diverse approaches towards European integration, internal restrictions, external interference and non-EU pressures. The division arising from divergent priorities and interests is what weakens Europe and prevents it from exerting its full influence as a global power of values, not only politically but also economically, commercially and financially. In addition, the EU is often absorbed by its own internal priorities, such as enlargement, the Constitutional Treaty and now the effects of the financial crisis on the eurozone, thus neglecting its



outward-looking, global role. Today, the EU's internal coherence and the image it projects to the world have been seriously undermined by the difficulties of the Member States in adopting a truly common strategy against the financial crisis.

It would, of course, be unrealistic to expect that these shortcomings could one day, beyond inducing certain improvements to the functioning of the EU, be rooted out completely. What the EU can do is keep its eye on the medium- and long-term shared interests that outweigh short-term relative gains, bearing in mind that in an interdependent world, ultimately there can be no divergence among individual priorities and interests. The agenda facing the international community is overwhelming. The EU Member States, in particular, have at times acknowledged their convergence on major and daunting challenges facing the Union and the world, such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure, organised crime, competition for natural resources, energy security and climate change (A secure Europe 2003). Today, the financial crisis is also one of these challenges, perhaps the most threatening to the Union's coherence for the moment.

## Conclusion

At this critical juncture, it is of paramount importance that the EU continue to do what it does best. Focus on the broader picture, preserving stability and prosperity for the whole continent as an enduring prerequisite for the stability and welfare of each and every state. Unite even more closely in order to address destructive divisions and competition. Demonstrate solidarity in the sense that nowadays interdependence makes all states—smaller and bigger, weaker and stronger, richer and poorer—equally important, since they all can affect the fate of each other. It is this understanding that has promoted social and economic cohesion, the reduction of social and economic disparities and real convergence, as a basic tool for European integration and prosperity throughout the years. Moreover, it is the understanding of how limited our possibilities are when we act alone and of how much greater our power, effectiveness and achievements can be when we accumulate resources and forces, which promoted European integration. This is a concept that certainly presupposes collective efforts and, finally, the understanding that benefits go hand in hand with obligations in order for this mechanism to work and for convergence to become real.

But ultimately, all this is more than a concept: it is a vision. And for this vision to remain relevant it needs to keep inspiring European peoples first. Hence, it needs to address their concerns in a way that is honest, convincing and inspiring, so that it will keep them involved in the common purpose; and it needs to be credible, in the sense that Europe demonstrates resolve and speaks with one voice. The path has already been laid out by European values and common interests, and it has been followed successfully in the past. Only in this way can the European Union also inspire other peoples too, sustain its position as a paradigm and remain credible as a global power of values.

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