

## THE VALUES CRISIS: CALLING THE EUROPEAN UNION ITSELF INTO QUESTION

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**E**ven with the shocking images of hundreds of thousands of refugees on Europe's external borders, our attention remains focussed on discussions and negotiations that elicit only a tepid, weak internal response from the European institutions. What have become of the democratic values of solidarity, dignity and liberty on which the European Union has been built? Political discourses speak of "migratory crisis" and even "humanitarian crisis". But invoking those concepts leads us to a sad, shameful realisation if they are not accompanied by a strong, shared, long-term strategy. In this context, fundamental European values emerge again, such as those established in the Treaty of Lisbon: "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". The same treaty, meant to open Europe up to the 21st century, also maintains that "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". Such postulations were made at times when renewed enthusiasm for openness and unity was needed: enlargement and a single currency shared by all member states.

Two questions present themselves in relation to the reappearance and emphasis in the debate on European values: Are these values European, universal or national? How does this story of values reach the citizens and to what extent can we consider Europe an engine of motivation? At first sight, European values are indistinguishable from universal values and in fact they should not distinguish Europe from the rest of the world. What is specifically "European" about these values is the historical importance of countries who had just lived through and participated in the two world wars recognising shared values. Peace was the common denominator out of which a desire for solidarity, tolerance and justice was born, and over time the pluses and minuses were meant to be evened out. But today's reality is different. Europe is suffering from an economic and financial crisis in the midst of which the values of tolerance and openness are in decline. Hundreds of thousands of people are seeking to enter Europe – refugees and migrants – and the response of our leaders is to let the countries with external borders build fences

or seek any other means of rejecting them. Thus, while from one side efforts are made to close the borders and impose restrictive migratory policies, from the other come messages of unity and warnings about retreating into nationalist responses. We have been able to hear François Hollande in the European Parliament on October 7<sup>th</sup>, reusing François Mitterrand's words, "Nationalism is war", and adding that "Sovereignty is decline". Angela Merkel, in the same plenary session, saw the end of Europe in the return of national borders and lack of unity to fight the crisis: "More Europe, not less", she demanded.

For years, there has been talk of a "European identity crisis" or an "identity deficit", reproaching the European Union for shirking its responsibility and accusing it of advancing the European construction while neglecting the citizens, thereby increasing disaffection. Nevertheless, it is Europe's current economic and financial crisis, as well as the strict austerity measures that have resulted, which feed directly anti-European populist discourses. To this may be added the public alarm about Islamist terrorism, which seeks to link Muslim identity to an excess of immigration that is itself due to the opening of the borders. All of this produces the perfect chemistry for populist discourses, institutional cowardice and fear of foreigners causing the loss of a putative European identity.

What gets through to us, the European citizens? Why does the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees put the existence of certain European values to the test and produce warnings about national selfishness and intolerance?

The images, the vision of hundreds of thousands of people seeking refuge on the borders of Europe, challenge us. What is Europe's response? Allowing borders to be closed and restrictions placed on immigration is not exactly a show of this "solidarity between member states" who defend the treaties, but neither is there a strong voice. In fact, what has resulted is an absence of voice, a total silence while other voices make noise, a lot of noise. The dominant discourse in this time of crisis has been overwhelmed by the opinions of the populist leaders of xenophobic parties. The xenophobic discourse has established itself, curiously, in countries with rather tolerant pasts – the cases of Sweden and Finland, for example – and has been consolidated in places where extremist populist parties already form part of coalition governments or support minority governments. Their influence on mainstream politics is evident. The threat of the rise of extremist populist parties results in a Europe that is intolerant, xenophobic and racist.

The MEP Marine le Pen, president of the French National Front, was indignant that Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris, posted "Welcome to Paris" in French, English and Arabic on Twitter, aimed at the refugees. The next day, in a meeting, she suggested Hidalgo wear the veil to welcome the "clandestines". Some speeches have also crossed the line and are explicitly racist. The leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), Geert Wilders, speaks in the Netherlands of an "Islamist tsunami" in which the homeland will be lost to the invasion of young Muslim "testosterone bombs" from whom their wives, sisters and daughters will be at risk. Pure identitarian ultranationalist victimisation. Muslims and the supposed threat to European culture are at the centre of his message and his policy proposals increase xenophobia by putting fear into the voters

about the loss of the autochthonous culture. The Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, leader of FIDESZ, is closing the borders because of the arrival of the refugees. “Most of them are not Christians, but Muslims. This is an important question, because Europe and European identity is rooted in Christianity”, he said, accusing Europe of setting aside the primordial role of Christianity in the history and culture of the continent. There is a worrying, growing tendency to gain popularity with slogans based on “our people first”. In response to this kind of intolerance, the French president, François Hollande, invites those countries who do not share the values and principles of the European Union to rethink their presence in it.

Is there real concern about the rise in popularity of the extreme right and the populist parties in Europe? Who is condemning the racism? Where is the initiative of the progressive parties to prevent intolerance, xenophobia and racism returning to the mainstream of any European society? Europe has a historical challenge to provide a valid response to a crisis where the paradigm of exclusion, xenophobia and racism are overriding the values of solidarity and tolerance. This response concerns all of us and has much to do with European *values*: it is our time to *evaluate* whether we can still believe in this Europe.

