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NEW
SPACES



DARING A EUROPEAN
PUBLIC SPHERE

PAVING THE
WAY TOWARDS

COMMON VALUES

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DARING A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE: PAVING THE WAY TOWARDS COMMON VALUES

This paper outlines challenges and opportunities to creating a robust and resilient European public sphere. First, it presents an overarching vision of a possible European public sphere in 2025 as well as milestones that need to be reached to achieve such a reality. We then narrow in by presenting a vision of a genuine Union of values, including a meaningful European identity and civic education system. These bold visions assist us in developing policy recommendations and gathering existing successful practices that bring us closer to a truly European public sphere. The ideas presented have emerged in a collaborative and co-creative process of exchange among experts and professionals passionate for a more united Europe. This future-oriented exercise was launched within the Daring New Spaces project in a working group focusing on practiced European values.

I. DARING VISION: A EUROPE FOR ALL

In our vision for the year 2025, a truly European public sphere has emerged. In this world, Europeans engage in respectful and constructive discourse on European issues across national borders. This shift is noticeable across all corners of the continent: from political decision-makers at EU institutions to the broader public, there are high levels of engagement and interactions in many spaces. In 2025, Europeans truly live according to the EU's slogan: They are united in diversity. But also networked through lived, shared experiences.

A CONNECTED EUROPEAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In this future, national and transnational media actors cooperate across borders. The daily digital exchange of data, information and perspectives on current issues has become a normality. Regular exchange programmes are also normalised: journalists throughout Europe are able to better understand other countries' narratives and priorities. These new networks lead to more and better informed coverage of current topics, including both EU

politics and stories about the daily realities of EU citizens in other member states. Thanks to these exchanges, European narratives have emerged and have managed to reconcile different views on Europe, while creating mutual understanding of differing public opinions.

The emergence of a European media landscape has been backed by public funding. This helps to support independent and diverse media outlets, but also is directed at creating an EU public service broadcaster that carries out European journalism in the public interest and takes into account diverse perspectives. This publicly funded journalism upholds an independent media, while supporting and improving the level of European public debate.

A COMMON AND SOVEREIGN DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The emergence of a European public sphere has also taken place digitally. This development is closely linked to the EU's investment in its digital sovereignty. This digital public sphere is supported by an independent European digital infrastructure and improved connectivity across the EU, with high data protection standards as well as ethical and transparent Automatic Decision Making Systems (ADM systems) and pan-European digital platforms.

Hate speech, fake news and online disinformation are regulated by European laws and repeated offenses lead to consequent and effective banning from the platforms. The EU has invested massively in the development of open source and public platforms, developing competition that is beginning to seriously challenge the existing private US tech firms. Instant translators allow for new forms of direct communication and exchange. This well-funded digital infrastructure, opens up new possibilities for networking throughout Europe: between cities and the countryside, between government and citizens, and amongst citizens themselves. Europe comes closer together thanks to a strong digital public sphere.

A VIVID EUROPEAN CULTURE THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES

Spaces to experience Europe are abundant and accessible in 2025. There are more opportunities to share experiences, both on and offline. Similarly to the Eurovision song contest, which is watched (and its results debated) across Europe, there is a crime series (“Euro-Crime”). This rotates between cities across Europe and introduces viewers to particular characteristics of regions and areas every Saturday evening. The idea of the Ryder Cup has also been transferred from golf to other sports, with the all-star European teams playing against teams from other continents every two years. EU-Tubers go viral with videos on European E-Sports, EU elections and cooking shows. These events give Europeans the opportunity to develop a common sense of belonging.

The shared space of experience is not limited to common media consumption or sports - in-person exchanges have also greatly increased and are widely accessible. The Erasmus+ programme has been expanded, as well as the DiscoverEU programme for 18 years olds to travel across Europe by train. Students aged 15 and up are encouraged to go to an EU country of their choice for a school exchange year and European Community Service Programmes are well-funded and popular. A core part of military training is to participate in one-year stints in other EU armies or a joint corps. Europeans from all walks of life are able to grasp and experience Europe in their everyday lives. Europe is not a far-removed concept, but a tangible reality.

II. REALISING THE VISION – WORKING TOWARDS 2025

How can we arrive at such a reality? Some elements of the above-mentioned vision already exist, but others do not. As we work towards the goal of a truly European public sphere, it is clear that we will need to reach certain milestones. They include: public spaces that can withstand diverse and contrasting opinions, a European media landscape, accessible opportunities for non-electoral democratic participation, increased European civic education, and the development of Europarties, to name a few. Normalising and institutionalising these components of the public sphere are crucial stepping stones towards our goal.

When working towards our overarching vision, it is important to take into account current regional and global socio-political developments. As we enter the post-Brexit period, we must consider how the EU is now more politically united and how EU integration is advancing. Economic inequalities stemming from the Euro-Crisis and expanded during the Covid-19 pandemic will surely continue to be a central point in any discourse on Europe, in addition to persistent regional challenges such as migration and the rule of law. And as the global political order shifts, the role of Europe as a single unit within larger political and economic systems is still to be decided. Together, these topics remind us that Europe is also interconnected with a larger world – one that cannot be ignored.

With these milestones and overarching topics in mind, the next section will zoom in on a more detailed vision of European values in 2025. This closer examination serves to expand on the overarching vision and dive even deeper into a future society to see more clearly on how we can arrive at such a point.

III. EUROPEAN VALUES: STRIVING FOR A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF EUROPE

In 2025, a European public sphere has emerged. The EU has played an important role in managing the Covid-19 crisis during the previous years and therefore has gained in popularity and in legitimacy. Europeans increasingly acknowledge that they are better off together than when retreating into nationalism. The political successes of the EU, as well as this shift in the mindset of Europeans, has led to the emergence of a pluralist European public sphere. Shared European values (e.g. Article 2 TEU and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights) lay out core principles that are necessary to establish a common ground for a pluralist debate in the public sphere, for instance on the values of diversity and unity, as well as tolerance and solidarity.

Even if by 2025 a European public sphere has emerged, it remains an ideal - there is no finality to this project. Nevertheless, by 2025, the European public sphere is the space in which European values are continually redefined, concretised and adapted to social, political and economic transformations, and examined in terms of their democratic ethos. The emerging public sphere still suffers from fragmented public debates, due to the proliferation of digital communication, especially on private and public platforms that promote sensationalism and partisanship for commercial and political gains. But solidarity between Europeans has helped to slowly but surely overcome the challenges of polarisation and fragmentation.

Our vision emphasises an agonistic understanding of democracy as the basis of Europe. This means Europeans may not agree or share all the values, but they share an endorsement of diversity, a common understanding that

disagreement is acceptable, as long as it respects democratic rules, solidarity and the final political decision, as well as common rules, such as the rule of law and representative parliamentarianism. The Union's practical emphasis on cross-border cooperation, mobility and collaboration applied to European values in the public sphere means thoughts and practices are transferable and translatable across Europe and that access to ideas and participation in debates is possible. This leads us to our vision for 2025 in more practical terms:

- 1. A common understanding of basic European values relies on diversity (pluralism) and unity (shared "rules of the game") as well as a framework for mutual cooperation and solidarity.** There is space for respectful disagreement within Europe, allowing for a diversity of views but also respect for shared rules and the intention to find common grounds.
- 2. An open and equally accessible public debate stretches widely into civil society, engaging most EU citizens.** All citizens are equipped to participate in the European public sphere. **Rather than set in stone and applied top down, European values are assessed, practiced and discussed.** The EU fosters regular, continuous and respectful lively debates in public spaces, helping to connect citizens and discussions through media channels, in-person gatherings and online platforms, translating and interpreting ideas. Citizens engage with the media and participate in exchange programmes to learn about other European cultures, histories and languages. The European public sphere produces an ongoing conversation on several social and political issues, such as the EU's policy priorities but also on the values that inform our different societies and the Union.
- 3. Practicing European values feed into a stronger sense of solidarity through dialogue amongst citizens and within societies.** Knowledge of the



DISKUTIER MIT MIR ("Discuss with me") is an online platform developed by a not-for-profit organisation in 2017 to create private chat rooms for political dialogues between people who hold different political views. To begin, users select their preferred political party or answer a series of questions on societal issues. The algorithm then matches them with people from the other side of the political spectrum. In 2019, Diskutier mit mir co-founded Talking Europe, a network of organisations that facilitates respectful online discussions on a pan-European level, using a digital tool to translate chats in real time.



EUROPEAN HOMEPARLIAMENTS is a project by the citizens' initiative Pulse of Europe, which brings together a group of four to eight people around a kitchen table to discuss and offer answers to a given European question, such as the future of European solidarity. Besides stimulating civic engagement and interest in European politics, the project also aims to improve legislative processes as the outcomes of the discussions are passed on to high-ranking European politicians.

diversity of the Union leads to greater mutual respect, understanding and cooperation within and amongst member states. EU citizens have become more aware about the living conditions, history, culture and backgrounds of others across the EU, resulting in a greater mutual understanding, based on a more intense and regular exchange. The public sphere engagement forms empathy as citizens listen to one another, learn to disagree while also respecting each other, and experience a sense of togetherness beyond existing differences. This is made possible by practising European values.

4. During the European parliamentary election campaign in May 2024, EU citizens engage vividly with the campaigns on several communication channels and on multiple levels: Europe-wide, nationally, regionally and locally. This leads to a rise in voter turnout on Election Day. The elections are followed almost as intensively within the EU and across the world as the US elections in 2020, without polarisation and distrust in the “rules of the game”. Media are free and pluralistic across member states. Freedom of speech is respected, while hate speech and disinformation did not spread. The emergence of such a vibrant public sphere around the elections in 2024 is a result of **several concrete measures (see below)** that include civil society, media and decision-makers, in order to re-establish social cohesion, empathy and trust in European values and democracy. The high turnout and engagement provides the EU with the needed legitimacy and mandate to continuously foster its common values within European society.

TOWARDS PRACTICED EUROPEAN VALUES

Our vision for a common European public sphere in 2025 needs to build on a solid foundation of European values. This leads to some fundamental questions, also of philosophical nature, about the principles that should underpin such a public sphere. For instance, are shared

values required to form a public sphere or vice versa? Is there a difference between national, European and universalist values?

The present approach to practised European values acknowledges the variation in understanding across member states, based upon different legal and constitutional sources as well as national and cultural frames. Instead of opening the “Pandora box” of European values by (pre-)defining top-down a closed and static set of values and referring solely to Article 2 TEU or the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, **we conceive European values in their plurality, diversity and fluidity.** Often translated into abstract concepts, values not only shape the legal texts which they are enshrined in and protected by, but are constantly evolving in their importance and interpretation by EU citizens due to societal change.

Deliberate violations of European values considerably increased in recent years; spanning from undermining core values such as the rule of law, shrinking spaces for civil society, over debates about freedom of speech to violent terrorist attacks on European societies. These developments challenge European narratives. Ongoing tendencies of European disintegration such as Brexit and an ever growing competition of different political and values systems, for instance between the EU and China, have only added to the multiple, yet unresolved challenges European values continue to face in the upcoming years. Lastly, issues such as migration or the response of some member states to the pandemic by closing their borders show how fragile the EU's internal values-based order is.

In addition, ever growing digital public spheres in Europe are both a blessing and a curse: Social media platforms can provide more inclusive fora for discussion and can create a momentum for broader pan-European engagement if well-used, while at the same time pose a threat to democracy due to echo chambers, hate speech and disinformation. **Within a European digital public sphere, it is crucial to uphold a pluralistic, open and free debate based on equality and mutual respect.**



A EUROPEAN AGENCY FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

The establishment of a European Agency for Citizenship Education is a concrete proposal by the initiative VALUES UNITE to strengthen European values and democratic competences through citizenship education. The agency should provide additional resources at the European level to establish equal access to citizenship education throughout Europe, enhance its quality and foster innovative and digital learning methods. There have been multiple declarations to foster active citizenship by decision-makers in the past, but the EU still lacks policy instruments and resources to follow up on this objective.

Those challenges not only threaten the integrity of European values, but also hinder the creation of a public pluralistic space in which values can be practiced by Europeans, but also have a possibility to continue evolving. European values are not simply “nice to have”, but are the basis for a strengthened sense of community and a public sphere in Europe, alongside the economic and political integration. **Practised European values can enhance solidarity and social cohesion across borders, provide a basis for mutual understanding and cooperation and allow us to live according to the EU’s slogan “united in diversity”.** Potentially, practiced common values can foster a common European identity in addition to existing national or regional identities, which would further support cohesion. This is why there is a need to actively foster European values within a more developed European public sphere.

IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM VISIONS TO REALITIES

Our recommendations are informed by the following analysis. Firstly, there is a need for more qualitative and more inclusive debates to discuss European values and their meaning, as core values have come under pressure. Secondly, we assume Covid-19 restrictions have led to reduced mobility and therefore less interactions among EU citizens, and the economic recession is likely to further reduce opportunities for the disadvantaged. It is crucial that the EU invests in its citizens and into a European public sphere at this point in time.

To help achieve these goals, we present the following concrete policy recommendations:

OBJECTIVE: Creating a values-based European public sphere

DESCRIPTION:

- Re-establish and safeguard common spaces of exchange and discussions on- and offline as well as a diverse media landscape in Europe, which facilitates inclusive debates on European values.
- Strengthen cross-border media connections and transnational media networks, i.e. newspapers and publishing houses growing their network of correspondents, featuring more op-eds by foreign authors, reporting about politics in neighboring countries and linking it to domestic debates. This would feed into a shared European media landscape and stronger European narratives.
- Promote multilingualism to better understand discourses in other parts of Europe and different points of view, while at the same time support English as a foreign language, for instance in schools.
- Guarantee strong European data protection and privacy rules by regulating big tech companies and social media platforms.
- Fight more effectively against disinformation, fake news and hate speech, while also challenging authoritarian and populist agendas to rebuild trust in democratic institutions, elections and the media.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS:

Directorate-General for Education, Audiovisual and Culture (EAC) in the European Commission, Education, the European Parliament’s CULT committee, Vice-President of the European Commission Vera Jourova, EU member states and governments

OBJECTIVE: Providing EU citizens with the necessary education to practice European values

DESCRIPTION:

- Promoting equal access to and high quality of citizenship education in formal, non-formal and informal education for all people living in the EU. EU citizens need to be equipped with knowledge and skills, such as critical thinking and knowledge of decision-making processes, to engage in political and social life.
- Further develop cooperation between EU member states in the education policy field in order to develop common minimum standards among others for the European dimension of citizenship education, media literacy and foreign languages in national education systems.
- Foster a common education policy through the envisioned European Education Area, which prepares citizens for a digitalised and globalised world. Supporting citizens through lifelong learning will help them to adapt to changes, become more resilient and foster tolerance and openness in a fast-changing world.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS:

Directorate-General EAC in the European Commission, Commissioner for Education Mariya Gabriel, the European Parliament's CULT committee, the Council of the European Union and national governments, in particular education ministries

OBJECTIVE: Fostering inclusive political participation and strengthening European citizenship

DESCRIPTION:

- Encourage and support exchange between people from all over Europe, from peripheries and centres, from different social backgrounds and with different political views, for instance through municipality exchanges, youth exchanges, improved mobility programmes accessible to everyone, but also directed at national decision-makers.

- Strengthen European citizenship through sustainable personal exchanges available to all EU citizens and through different formats. EU citizenship should be seen as complementary to other forms of identities, such as regional and national ones.
- Create and sustain regular dialogue between citizens and political representatives to reconnect EU institutions with European citizens by better involving people in decision-making on European level. The upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe should be a starting point for more bottom-up approaches towards EU democracy. Participative democracy should be viewed as complementary rather than a competition to parliamentary democracy.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS:

European Commission, European Parliament's AFCD committee, national governments

MOVING FORWARD

Strengthening the European public sphere is an urgent matter. The visions we laid out in this paper are goals that can guide us and ensure that we are on the right track. What will ultimately determine the success of this endeavour will be if we are able to make the European public sphere accessible to all.

To do so, it will be important to actively pursue these visions, for example by implementing the above-mentioned policy recommendations and advancing similar existing initiatives. Structural change will be required. But the political will to implement these changes needs to be as bold as the visions guiding us.

ABOUT



The project “**Daring New Spaces: Striving towards a European Public Sphere**” was initiated by Das Progressive Zentrum and supported by the German Federal Foreign Office in cooperation with the Mercator Stiftung, with the support of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).



Meet the working group on Practiced European Values:

<https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/practised-european-values/?lang=en>

Das Progressive Zentrum (DPZ)



is an independent, non-profit think-tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different back-

grounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves the next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes: “Future of Democracy”, “Structural Change” and “International Dialogue”, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organization is based in Berlin and also operates in other European countries (including France, Poland and Great Britain) as well as in the United States.

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