



A HUMANIST VISION FOR EUROPE

The European Union is 60 years old!

For the first time in history, EU citizens have been safeguarded for six decades from the tendency of European states to make war to each other. Never has a common project allowed peoples of Europe to learn more about each other and exchange so much, both economically and culturally. Over the years, Europe has grown as a space of freedom and solidarity where people are allowed to pursue happiness.

Yet, more has to be done. The effects of an economic recession hitting hard EU citizens and the fallouts of conflicts in Europe's vicinity resulting in unprecedented migratory pressure have put the EU in a very delicate situation where it is expected to address important continent-wide challenges without being given the necessary tools and political support to do so. This sadly fuels simplistic and populist discourses thriving on the most dangerous emotions human nature can offer – the very emotions that led to so many wars and suffering. With the result that many EU citizens now question the very reason for its existence.

Our vision for Europe proposes a confident, optimistic and inclusive perspective for Europe to tackle the many challenges it is currently facing, to safeguard its model based on the welfare state and public services and to project an ambitious political vision for its future. It is based on core humanist values: the principles of freedom, equality and solidarity, the respect for human dignity, the necessity to equip everyone for full participation in society, the recourse to rational argumentation, dialogue and facts-based debate in the resolution of disagreements and our duty to prepare a sustainable future for the next generations.

Secularism as the best framework for harmonious coexistence of all life stances

For many people, religion or belief is an important part of life and identity. As Humanists, we believe that people should have the freedom to live in accordance with such religions and/or beliefs. This entails that there can be no laws restricting freedom of religion or belief but it also means that freedom of religion cannot extend to practices which could harm the rights of others.

What secularism addresses is exactly this. In the European Parliament's words, "secularism defined as the strict separation between non-confessional political authorities and religious authorities as well as the impartiality of the State are the best means of guaranteeing non-discrimination and equality between religions and between believers and non-believers."

Secularism as an institutional framework is a necessary but not sufficient condition to allow the multitude of life stances present in European societies to co-exist in harmony. It has to be combined with the values of freedom, equality and solidarity, which are essential values of humanism.

Today, too many women struggle to exercise their fundamental rights, especially sexual and reproductive health and rights. Too many same-sex couples demand respect for their right to love and equality. These situations are the result of a religious pressure on public and private spheres.

Roughly half of EU Member States still penalize mockery or criticism of religion and at least five of them prosecuted individuals for blasphemy over the last 5 years. Too many schools have compulsory religion courses without proposing a non-confessional alternative or a large enough palette of denominations to choose from. These Member States need to embrace secularism for the benefit of all.

No concessions on the Rule of Law and Human Rights

The Rule of Law and human rights offer are the best guarantee for a just society in which all people may live free and equal in harmony. They are at the very core of the European project and therefore enshrined the successive EU treaties, including the Charter for Fundamental Rights.

Today, the proliferation of exclusionary discourses attempting to divide societies in many countries (“true nationals vs. migrants”, “hard workers vs. scroungers”, “experts vs. people” or “religious moral vs. immoral non-religious”) create a climate where it is more and more acceptable to defend a vision of society where certain groups of individuals have rights while others do not.

In certain European countries, the rule of law and fundamental rights have been either eroded or frontally undermined by laws weakening essential checks over the executive, by prolonged states of emergency, by political pressure and administrative measures gradually limiting the public space in which civil society is allowed to operate, by the subordination of independent media by business circles close to governments.

Based on their current record, some countries would probably not be allowed to join the EU today. Yet, the EU reaction was not up to the challenge. The EU has a legal obligation to demand the respect of the Rule of Law from its Member States. By not using the full leverage at its disposal to protect its core values, the EU gives the wrong signal to other governments who may be tempted to follow the same path, it undermines the trust of its citizens and erodes its credibility worldwide.

Education as the backbone of critical thinking and vital for democracy

Education should provide citizens with the necessary tools to be a full participant in society. It should promote intellectual honesty, critical thinking and foster curiosity. It should promote reason and demonstration in the search for knowledge.

Education is also vital for democracy as it enables citizens to grasp the essence of public debate, develop their own understanding of the major themes shaping it, influence it and make their own choice when exercising their citizenship rights. Globalization results in ever more complex and interconnected societies. Digital technologies have enabled many new ways of exchanging information. While both phenomena have undisputable benefits, they also pose challenges. One of them is for citizens to make their way through the proliferation of messages and information and to forge their own critical world vision.

Yet, Eurostat’s data shows that in the EU 28, government expenditure on education as a share of total expenditure decreased from 11.1% in 2002 to 10.3% in 2015 while 11% of young Europeans still leave school early. The latest data from the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment identifies that competences in fundamental skills have been stagnating or even decreasing in many EU countries.

In the age of “alternative facts”, the EU and its Member States must place formal and non-formal education on the very top of their agenda to oppose simplistic narratives thriving on the anxiety generated by a lack of competence in grasping the complexities of today’s world.

Science as our best chance to address today’s and tomorrow’s challenges

From addressing global warming to developing a cure for cancer, through providing enough food to their populations, modern societies rely on science to provide knowledge enabling appropriate responses.

Moreover, science helps informing public debate with the evidence needed to make the best decisions at a given time with a given knowledge. Social sciences have helped grasping the drivers that shape public opinion, the interactions between its components and wider societal phenomena in general.

Yet, the EU’s Research and Development intensity (the ratio of R&D expenditure to GDP) still falls short of Japan’s or the US (respectively 3,59% and 2,73% vs. 2,01% in the EU). Moreover, the initial budget of € 80 Billion for Horizon 2020 was eventually reduced by € 5 Billion.

Finally, ultra-religious lobbies regularly advocate for bans on research areas that they consider unethical based on religious dogmas. This was the case with stem cells research on which they attempted to impose a full ban. EU institutions resisted but full freedom of scientific research is not achieved as some Member States still ban such type of research for ethical reasons thereby delaying the completion of treatments for severe diseases such as cancer.

If the EU is to address its environmental, social and political challenges in the future, it will have to adopt a bold research and innovation policy with a steady increase of funding including for social sciences and fundamental research so as to understand today’s social phenomena and prepare tomorrow’s innovations.

Solidarity and humanity at the core of a long-term vision on asylum and migration

As humanists, we believe that refugees and migrants are first and foremost human beings who hold human rights and should be treated as such. Moreover, refugees and migrants not only contribute economically and demographically to our societies, they also bring with them new cultures and traditions that contribute to a rich and diverse European society.

While no one underestimates the practical challenges posed by the current crisis, the EU’s current response has proved inefficient and costly in term of human lives. By blocking the legal ways to access Europe, the EU has reinforced the position of smugglers instead of weakening it. It is now time for the EU to open safe access to its territory to all people seeking international protection and to fully respect the principle of non-refoulement laid down in the 1951 Geneva Convention.

As humanists, we also urge the EU to make sure that refugees and migrants arriving to Europe are treated in a decent way, especially regarding their fundamental rights to health, to a private life and to circulate freely. We call on Member States to strengthen their efforts in helping migrants integrate into their host society and to tackle anti-immigration discourses at odds with European values.

The EU should also finally deliver a common asylum and migration system based on solidarity between Member States so as to replace the Dublin Regulation posing unbearable burden on a few countries.

Furthermore, it should also put an end to the externalization of European asylum policies which consist in outsourcing and offshoring the management of this crisis to governments with often very poor human rights standards such as Turkey. Indeed, these agreements not only allow the EU to bypass its international commitments, they also make development aid dependent on effective border controls and readmission agreements instead of human rights.

The EU urgently needs a common political vision

European citizens and economic actors have reaped countless benefits of European integration. Yet, these achievements are overshadowed by the sum of challenges that the continent is facing and the difficulty and time needed to overcome them.

On the one hand, the EU lacks a political vision that would foster support from its citizens while on the other hand it is exactly the gradual decrease of citizen's support that results in a fatigue that precludes this political vision from being achieved.

The endless debate "EU competence vs. national sovereignty" results in a complex system of opt-outs, derogations and limitations and in incomplete integration in fundamental areas such as the Economic and Monetary Union, Schengen or Immigration and Asylum policy, to name a few. This hinders the EU and its Member States to equip themselves with the necessary policies to tackle the many challenges they are facing and to propose a political vision that its citizens could join and support.

This in turn, gives rise to the emergence of euro-skeptic leaders whose discourses thrive on these very deficiencies as well as to mainstream parties giving in to the temptation of blaming issues on "Brussels" while claiming successes for themselves.

There is little doubt that the main losers in this situation are European citizens. While they are expecting bold answers to difficult questions, they see their governments and the EU tied up in internal negotiations showing their weaknesses not only to their citizens but to the entire world.

If Europe is to move forward from its current crisis of confidence, it needs to reaffirm its core values. It needs to fully endorse secularism to allow for peaceful co-existence of the many beliefs held by its citizens. It needs to firmly condemn and discourage attempts to undermine human rights and the rule of law. It has to put education and science on the very top of the agenda so as to address today's challenges and ensure meaningful public debate in the future. Finally, it has to ensure that an inclusive and humane response is found to address the increased migratory pressure it is facing.

Only so can it project an optimistic and confident political vision of a better, more inclusive and more progressive Europe transcending short-term national interests, bringing swift and efficient responses to current and future challenges and gradually win back the trust of its citizens.