

## **Strengthen cohesion of the European society through values**

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Criticism of our society, of our European society, is today a common place.

We are familiar with several studies and analyses that point out what is wrong, what is not working and the solution they advocate. The approach is usually financial, economical, sociological (and other academic or technical approaches) and, of course, political, that is, a little bit of all the others, together with a personal opinion under a specific ideological framework.

It is then very rare to point out other factors and almost no one dares to talk about values in the political speech. Values are generally neglected or explicitly rejected as belonging to another reality, to religions and their ministers, or to very traditional and conservative people with lack of instruction. A speech on values is seen as a trace of arrogance of character of some or a sign of weakness of others.

Nevertheless, it was at the political level that I heard Mayor Oreja saying for the first time in a crystal clear way that the failure of values is at the very roots of some of our main problems in today's society.

You can tell me, of course, that I am totally out of place, forgetting that European Popular Party/EPP always refers to values, that we are gathering here precisely to talk about values, that our theme for this session is exactly "Leading European Network on Values". And my answer would be that this session on values is, indeed, the celebration of the EPP's commitment to its very roots as Christian Democrats, but that, unfortunately, this is not clearly perceived, it does not have an effective impact in practice if we consider the views that sometimes members from the EPP Group in the European Parliament put forward and the way they vote.

Perhaps, our journey here is also a kind of renewal of "vows" at the beginning of a new legislature; it might even be a reminder to the former members of EPP Group in the European Parliament who continue and an appeal to those who are now starting. In this case we still have hopes that values might come into the political speech more often and in a coherent way, that is, within a coincidence between words and actions, speeches and practices. And we sure need it especially in this upcoming legislature

characterized by the increasing strength of the extreme right wing, also the extreme left wing, populists, in a nutshell, euroskepticists who were able to gather all the discontent from the European citizens, mainly by using a speech on values, national values, identity values.... In this context, I believe that talk about values is more needed today than ever before and I would like to stress three main points:

- (1) firstly, our heritage of values, its rejection, and the consequences of this rejection in what concerns our personal, family and social identity that we risk to lose all together with the rejection of these values;

- (2) secondly, the emptiness and orphanhood of our loss of identity, and the replacement of all values by a misunderstood tolerance as the prime value, led us to the loss of what is good or bad, right or wrong, falling into a deeper and deeper emptiness;

- (3) thirdly, what could and ought to be done by the members of the EPP Group in order to stand for our European identity, and strengthen itself.

### **1. The heritage of values and its rejection**

Is there such a thing as European values? Europeans do share a common heritage of moral values, beyond the different history, language and customs of each nation. These values are of Jewish-Christian origin being also grounded in the Greek rationality, and complemented by the ideals of freedom and equality of the Enlightenment.

This does not mean, of course, that they are religious values that only address to believers. The belief that human beings were created by God at His image and resemblance is not needed to acknowledge the unconditional value of the person and to respect human dignity; the belief that we are all brothers and sisters and that love (brotherly love) is the supreme law, and charity (as unselfish love) is a way of relating to others is not needed to acknowledge the value of solidarity and the obligation of caring for the others that are vulnerable and fragile.

Having a religious origin, our Jewish-Christian values entered and shaped our culture and are now the essence of our common morality, that is, they express the way we live and the way we relate to others, the way we raise our children and the way we expect the others to be.

However, it seems that we, Europeans, do not feel comfortable acknowledging these values that shaped our way of living and also the European project itself of a peaceful life, among all the nations, among all the peoples of Europe, building social systems able to help those in need, trying to achieve the same level of life for all citizens, what became evident in the refusal of a reference to our common Christian values in the introduction of the unsuccessful project of an European Constitution.

We rejected our origins, we rejected our heritage, and by denying the assumption of our values, they lose power because they lack foundation, they lose impact because they lack orientation, and, on top of it, we lose our identity because, beyond our biological dimension, we define ourselves as spiritual beings, as beings that shape themselves through values (that is what makes us different from the other animals and from one another).

Persons, families, societies are built on values that help them grow, develop, evolve and bind them together, as a part of a community to which each and all of us belong. Therefore, they also strengthen our society, and promote our democracy and our citizenship, our will to be a part of a common project. These common values define our identity as a people and the singular way each one of us fulfills them defines our personality; they express who we are and what we want to be, as persons and as societies.

By rejecting the values that indeed constitute our common morality we also deny who we are, we lose our own identity.

## **2. The loss of our identity and its consequences**

This loss of (our common) identity is not without costs, and I would say that we are experiencing two main consequences.

The first one is the feeling of emptiness, since we rejected what constitutes us as spiritual beings, and of orphanhood, since we lost our common heritage. This emptiness of values becomes void of spiritual meanings, of values, wherever they came from, whatever they are, and can frequently be strangers to our heritage, because we need to fill in the void. But, without foundations or orientation, without criteria, we run a daily management of our decisions, of our options, according to the ever changing circumstances, therefore without coherence or credibility. Orphans, we also start to follow those (whoever they are) who, in a certain moment, show what we lack: conviction and orientation.

The second consequence is that we elected a new supreme value, that of the tolerance. This concept is intentionally proposed and is now being perceived as compelling us to accept everything. But “tolerance” is indeed to accept what we disagree or disapprove, within limits established by principles and values. Freedom of expression is a value that leads me to accept different opinions, even when I do not agree with them, but not the opinion that different opinions are not allowed.

When “tolerance” is said to accept everything, no matter what, by accepting everything we dismiss ourselves of giving any advice or suggest whatever might be different. Everything is allowed, everything is the same, and everything is valued the same, that is: nothing really values.

We replaced all morality, every kind of obligation either at the person’s level, or at the social level, by something softer. At the person’s level, morality is substituted by authenticity, by authenticity as a moral ideal. That is, you can think and act as you wish if you are being sincere to yourself. The concepts of perfection or improvement, of effort and merit are simply vanished. At the social level, morality is substituted by something that we can call an “etiocracy”, that is, good or bad, right or wrong are decided at each instant by the vote of politicians or by citizens in a referendum. It seems that we do not have a substantial idea about good or bad and these are decided by vote, that is, good or bad tend to coincide with what is approved or rejected.

### **3. What politicians ought to do to restore values in societal life?**

The EPP is the only European Party that is grounded on values, moral values, and that claims to be faithful to these values and to align its political orientation accordingly. The commitment of the EPP to values is often very openly and in a responsible way assumed in several speeches from high level representatives, meetings like the present one, publications, and also by the group on values created within the EPP Group a couple of years ago.

Therefore, we would expect that EPP Members could make a difference in the European Parliament sticking faithfully to values of the group and, therefore, making them stronger, but, unfortunately, that is not what happens. The member of the EPP Group votes according to the interpretation he/she gives to public opinion, on a specific issue, within certain circumstances and at a precise moment, trying to follow it, just like

all the other politicians from any other group. This is pretty obviously what happens every time we are called to vote on issues related to person's dignity or to family issues.

Those politicians, in general, instead of being leaders, try to follow the mob or what they perceive as being the majority of the public opinion, which correspond more often to those who have more power, or have a stronger lobby, but that are not necessary the largest part of society. Besides, frequently there are hidden agendas behind many of these controversial issues what makes that politicians taking part in one of these issues end up strengthening other causes: accepting that there are different models of family, which is true, members of the EPP Group can be reinforcing the plea for gay marriages, which is not accepted in all Member States of the European Union and remains highly controversial.

By pretending always to follow the mainstream, wherever this goes, it is very hard to be faithful to any values, to keep coherence between the speeches and the decisions on the long run, and to draw a trustworthy orientation for the people who feel they do not have anyone who represents them in these values controversies, they cannot believe in politicians any more.

If we had a hard relationship with values, because we are keen on announcing them but we do not put them into practice, this relationship is about to become even harder.

Before, at the European Parliament, we didn't have any political force to compete with, and, nevertheless, in practice, we abandoned the domain of values. Now it is time to realize that we need to regain this domain, what has become harder with the rising of the extreme right wing parties that conquer this domain for themselves.

The extreme right wing gained many seats in the European Parliament by sticking to a discourse on values that yesterday was not even considered and yet is voted, in some Members States, by a wide majority. They did not change; they waited without changing their discourse and they finally received a significant support from Europeans. We are constantly changing our discourse and actions adjusting them to the momentary mainstream and that is how we lose the voters.

The extreme right wing will continue to speak the language of values, in favor of restoring our identity and live up faithful to our values: cherishing our traditional ways of life, and defending them from the

spreading of other customs that come from abroad and are imposed upon us, changing our societies and threatening our security. This is an appealing and attractive discourse that hides that this identity is a national one, breaking the European project, feeding independent movements; it hides the project of a non-inclusive society, of a non solidarity society, of a non tolerant people. In view of this situation, I believe that we should indeed become much stronger and coherent in the defense of our values and my proposal would be:

- firstly, at the theoretical level, identifying (once again) and defining (in a broad but rigorous way) the nuclear values;
- secondly, go from theory into practice coherently, that is to draw the right consequences at the political level from the values adopted;
- thirdly, to established the political positions we ought to defend and also put at the members of the EPP Group disposal, a body of arguments, rational and sound arguments, that justify each position taken, useful for the members themselves for their process of decision making, but also to make available to their citizens and to media.

More than making our values clear, distinguishing them from what the extreme right defends, to ground and justify them, to establish criteria for action, we need to follow them in politics if we want to strengthen our identity, as persons and as a people, as Europeans.