



Value conflicts and value polarization in Europe as a challenge to democracy

Hans-Jörg Trenz

Workshop European Political Democracy from the Jean Monnet Network
“European Media and Platform Policy

19 – 20 November 2020



Value conflicts and value polarization in Europe as a
challenge to democracy

Hans-Jörg Trenz,

University of Copenhagen
Arena, University of Oslo

Sted og dato
Dias 1





Critical questions

1. Does democracy need values or is democracy primarily about the expression of the will of the people? The question about the primacy of values or of popular sovereignty
2. What has the defence of 'our community of values' to do with democracy? The question of the value base of democracy against the principle of popular sovereignty
3. How much consensus do we need about values? The question of value consensus and value pluralism
4. Is there and can there be a European community of values? How much conflict about values we can allow between European democracies?
5. What (if anything) distinguishes European (Western) values from universal values? The question of European values between particularism and universalism



Let me raise some critical questions for the understanding of European democracy:

My starting point is the relationship between values and democracy: some would claim that democracy is a procedure to decide only about the allocation of the will of the people. In that case values do not inform democracy, they are only the outcome of democratic procedures of will formation. People can agree on shared values, but the way they do this is open, so values come after democracy. Others would claim that democracy is essentially about shared values and that this value base of the democratic community has primacy over democratic procedures of will aggregation and thus constrains the expression of popular sovereignty.

Secondly, we might ask what do we mean by 'our community of values' that has to be defended. Also in light of current debates: we need to defend our values, has become a slogan. But Defended against what? And what has such a defence to do with democracy? Is this not some sort of value conservatism. Should we not allow values to change? Protecting democratic values should not be defending the 'way of life' of a particular community.

Thirdly, the question is raised how much do we need to agree about values? Do we need to build consensus about values or should we not allow for value pluralism and accept conflict about values?

Fourthly, we might discuss the idea of Europe as a community of values and the notion of EU democracy. The title of my talk reads:

'Value conflicts and value polarization in Europe as a challenge to democracy. This already contains a kind of problem formulation: I assume that value conflicts are somehow problematic in a democracy and that value polarisation, if it happens is something to be avoided. But why is this so and why can EU democracy not cope with plural values, and possibly also value polarisation among its member states and populations? For the design of a European democracy, it needs to be decided how much conflict about values can be allowed not only within a democracy but also in the relationship between democracies? Is it the case that in a European setting, we are confronted with enhanced value pluralism and that the EU is exposed to a higher risk of conflicts about values?

And finally: What (if anything) distinguishes European (Western) values from universal values? The question of European values between particularism and universalism



The European Community of value

The EU as a 'normative power' in its external relations: beyond interest politics and politics of power: norm setting and norm-defending

But:

Impotence of the EU to defend rule of law and democracy of its member states

November 4, 2020: Deal reached to link EU funding to respect of rule of law: 'a historical moment that shows that it is possible to win against the autocrats' (statement by EP)

November 15, 2020: Hungary and Poland veto EU budget plan

November 20, 2020: EU leaders gave in to Poland and Hungary on rule of law in order to save the EU budget and coronavirus stimulus package

1,8 trillion Euro against values

What is the price of values?

And where is democracy? (majorities will opt for money over values)

Sted og dato
Dias 3



The European Union likes to see itself as a community of value, but the EU has very little possibilities to defend its values.

The EU has been described as a normative power in its external relations relation: it is norm setting and norm defending and claims to base its external relations not only on interest and traditional power politics but on the defence of norms and values

The EU has however little or no legal sanctioning mechanism when it comes to violations of democratic norms and principles of its member states: it sets standards and a high threshold of compliance with democratic norms as a criteria for memberships: to become a member of the EU, you need to democratise and abide to the rule of law. Yet, once you are a member, the possibilities of the EU to control compliance with the rule of law and democracy are very limited. There is no expulsion mechanism foreseen in the Treaties

Yet, recent developments indicate a possible readiness of the EU to step forward more proactively in the defense of its values

On November 4 the EU Parliament and the Council agreed on the application of a sanctioning mechanism: that would allow the EU to cut EU funding or impose penalties on government which violate EU principles and values. And, this could be done by simple majority vote, so the veto on a single member state would be ineffective. Is this a historical moment that indicates that the EU is now ready to make use of its sanctioning power against autocrats?

As was to be expected, : Hungary and Poland in response to this new rule of law directive vetoed the EU budget plan. Think of the The budget veto: when two member states can keep the EU hostage over the question of the defense of values.

So here we are in a classical situation of money against values: and we might ask where exactly is democracy?

And I am asking this not only rhetorically but would like you all to reflect upon this



What is the price of the defense of the European community of value. We might argue that the the EU should not give in: democratic values and the rule of law have absolute priority, there can be no compromise.

On the other hand, we are living a dramatic moment of global health crisis and the major achievement of the EU has been to find a response to it and to agree on a recovery plan that would make available the incredible amount of 1.8 trillion Europe, the largest budget for distribution. This money is essential to rescue our economies.. So if the EU does not seek a compromise, and Hungary and Poland continue their blockage, how do you explain in a couple of months to Italiand and Spaniards that they loose their jobs because the European community of value has priority over economic recovery?

And who the Italian and Spanish worker wil blame? Will they really blame Orban for loosing their jobs, and if if they want to blame Orban, how could they possibly do this, as there are no control mechanisms at their disposal?

The question would also be how democratic is the defense of the European community of values in tis critical moment? It is likely that it would be opposed by a majority of Europeans who prefer to see money. There is also the suspicion that the idea of a European community of values is the project of a liberal elite and that they impolse their choices on the people of Europe. The European community of values would be even more under attack by popular elites who emphasize popular sovereignty over constitutional principles and the rule of law

The idea of 'shared values' and European integration

The **European** Union's fundamental **values** are respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. ... The main goal of the **European** Union is to defend these **values** in **Europe** and promote peace and the wellbeing of the citizens.

Art. 3 TEU)

- The value-based foundations of European integration (historical roots of shared values, Europe as a value community or civilisation)
- The idea that European integration leads to the consolidation of shared values (integration as a measurement of value convergence over time)



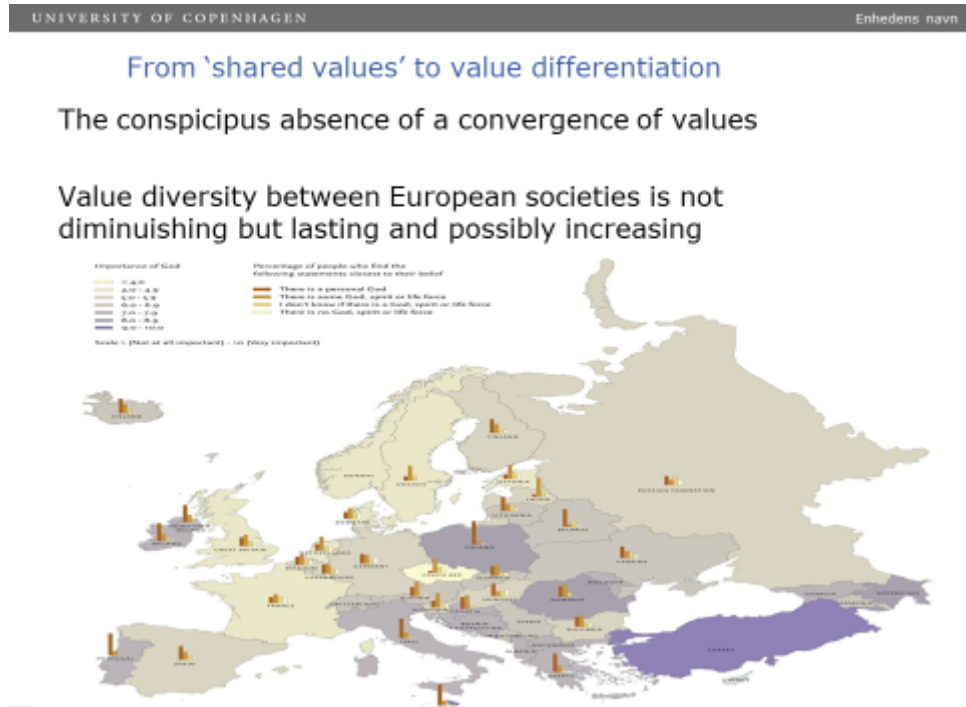
The shared European values: where do we find them?

The **European** Union's fundamental **values** are respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. ... The main goal of the **European** Union is to defend these **values** in **Europe** and promote peace and the wellbeing of the citizens. (Art. 3 TEU)



Values are located in the past and projected towards the future:

- The value-based foundations of European integration (historical roots of shared values, Europe as a value community or civilisation)
- The idea that European integration leads to the consolidation of shared values (integration as a measurement of value convergence over time)



Do we find these values also shaping the minds of the people? The world value survey and Eurobarometer are established tools to measure adherence to values and allow comparison. The results are: European integration does not necessarily lead to value convergence.

Even though the foundations of the EU seem to be value based, various empirical studies have shown clearly that there is no single value community in Europe, neither of political nor of cultural values (Haller 2008; Inglehart, Baker 2000).

Even more, recent empirical studies indicate that this value diversity between European societies is not diminishing over time but lasting and possibly increasing

One often quoted example for this is religion: *Church attendance – Confidence in the church – Importance of God – Traditional beliefs*

If you think that Europe is a secular continent, you are largely wrong, some countries are, but others remain or have even become more recently deeply religious

Notwithstanding these historical lessons and the emphasis on value consensus and convergence, the core set of European values is at the same time held to be pluralistic. Europeans agree on a plural understanding of values that should facilitate a peaceful co-existence of different belief systems and identitarian projects. There is, in other words, an inbuilt mechanism of conflict as an integral part of the European understanding of value pluralism. Value conflict is from this perspective not something alien or external, but an intrinsic element of the plural understanding of European values



The European Community of Values: A look into the past: strong religious and secular bonds of the 'founding fathers'



There is a deep rooted belief that Europe is distinguished by shared values, that sharing these values qualified you to be a member of the EU, membership in the EU is membership in a value community, not simply member of a market

The European Community of Values: A look at the presence: enhanced conflicts about values?



Sted og dato
Dias 7



The EU as a community of values is increasingly challenged by value conflicts.

How can we explain this development // what are the driving forces of these **value conflicts** beyond populist parties and their leaders?

Existing research ignores increasing impact of social and digital media on **value polarisation**.

The new right and 'shared values'

'The news is that we are broadening the community, the family. We are working for a new European dream today. We are protecting European culture and promoting a stronger sense of European values'



The defense of European values is also propagated by right-wing populists.

On occasion of the 2019 EP elections, they build a coalition for the defense of European values. I quote from their manifesto: "The news is that we are broadening the community, the family. We are working for a new European dream today. We are protecting European culture and promoting a stronger sense of European values'

The idea of shared values is also inherent in their notion of an organic state and the strong emphasis on community

Pegida, Le Pen, Salvini, the German AfD have one thing in common, they see themselves not only as nationalists, but as patriotic Europeans in defence of shared values against Islam, but also in defence of true democracy and the people against the elites



Values and Democracy: From value community to value pluralism and conflicts of values

Values not a 'sacred' or as 'universals' that are placed outside the realm of political conflict

The validity of values remains contested

From the essence of values to the process of validation

-> democracy as a form of value contestation in the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit)

If we wish to understand the prospects of EU democracy, we do not need to ask 'what are the underlying values'? We need to ask how are value conflicts carried out through the public sphere and the media and what are the procedures for settling such conflicts

Sted og dato
Dias 9



So what is wrong with the notion of Europe based on shared values?

The case of the new right's defence of shared values is quite instructive: the emphasis on shared values is a typical rhetorical strategy, which is targeted against those who defend a plural understanding of values, so, the emphasis on shared values is meant primarily as a form of anti-pluralism.

We need to bring in democratic theory at this point and send a reminder that democracy was introduced 200 years ago to break with the idea of shared values and to introduce an understanding of value pluralism and to establish procedures to settle conflict of values.

Values are therefore not considered as 'sacred' or as 'universals' that are placed outside the realm of political conflict. The validity of values remains contested.

A conflict of values is therefore not a new phenomenon, but rather inbuilt in the European understanding of value pluralism.

Then conflicts of values are maybe not so much about values, but about different understandings how such conflicts are to be carried out and how they are to be settled

What counts is the way values are contested and not the essence of the value that is contested

Europe is not simply based on a set of inviolable core values but on an understanding of plural values and procedures or mechanisms to discuss the validity of norms. Value pluralism means that values first and foremost are contested, that there is a common political space for such value contestation, which we call Öffentlichkeit and that there are established procedures and institutions such as political parties and the media that carry such value conflicts .

Such a notion of value contestation in the public sphere is helpful to confine the particular challenge for Europe, which this project will be investigating. What is currently challenged is not so much the principled validity of some fundamental values of Western society (such as equality, freedom or truth), but the communicative infrastructure for the validation of such principles and its capacity to bind the community of Europeans together while at the same time connecting it to the world. We do



therefore not ask in this project what are the European values, but we ask what are the conditions for contesting them and claiming universal validity. This requires us to turn to the actors, forms of action and media infrastructures through which such value contestations are carried forward in the current EU. We further need to understand the different reception contexts for value contestation and the ways various members of the public and audiences are not only passively addressed but also actively involved and mobilised in value contestation.

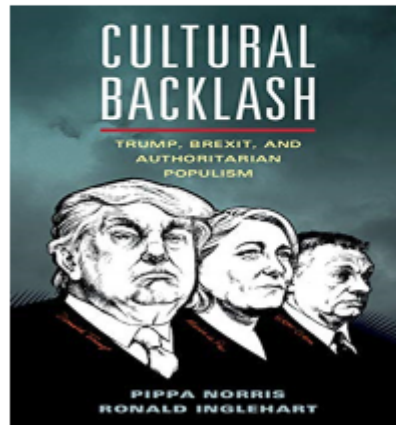
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

Enhedens navn

'New' and 'enhanced' value conflicts in the EU?

Cultural backlash and new cleavages:

- Internal (domestic): primordial against cosmopolitan
- Transnational (European): Old vs new Europe, East-West, North-South divides



Sted og dato
Dias 10

Despite this, the impression prevails that the European Union and European societies are shattered by new conflicts of values

There is a common understanding that there is a new type of value conflicts and that such value conflicts have been enhanced in the Western world

There are various symptoms for this new salience of value conflicts:

- Euroscepticism
- populism

The cultural backlash thesis: that there is a new cultural cleavage emerging dividing populations into cosmopolitans and primordialists: this is a cleavage that applied domestically, accounting for the salience of populist parties,

Value conflicts also figure prominently dividing the EU and positioning states, governments and populations against each other: Old vs new Europe, East-West, North-South divides



What is new with the 'new' value conflicts?

The Media and communicative dynamics of value contestation

- emergence of value conflicts and new social cleavages as facilitated by the new digital media
- The linkage between value conflicts and new social media communications

-> a transformation of media and communicative infrastructure that drive value contestation, nationally and transnationally

Sted og dato
Dias 11



What is new with the 'new' value conflicts?

What seems to be new is not that there are conflicts of values, but how these conflicts are carried out, how values are contested

What is new is not that values are contested. What is new are the conflict dynamics in the public sphere and the media through which values are contested and how such contestations are made salient and amplified by the media.

What is relatively new instead is the way such value conflicts gain prominence and lead to polarization of substantial parts of the population beyond established cleavages (such as the ideological divisions between the left and right). The challenge to European values therefore needs to be discussed at the level of intermediation of conflicts, which includes a view at the communicative infrastructures available for carrying out such conflicts.

There is a need to understand new media as a driving force of value contestation in and between democracies.



User and Media driven dynamics of value contestation



Sted og dato
Dags 12



Social media are not only occupied strategically by populist parties and their eladers to contest values, but there is a user and media driven dynamic of value contestation, value conflicts as driven not only by the strategies of political actors, but also by interactive and responsive media audiences and their involvement in political debates.

The keyboard can be used by anybody to launch private wars of values.

Media and public sphere transformations

- 1) The decline of news consumption: the number of news readers is dramatically shrinking
- 2) The tabloidisation of news: quality journalism does no longer deliver, decline of public service media in some European countries, from balanced to imbalanced news
- 3) Decline of trust in legacy media and journalism: we find instances of direct attacks to journalistic institutions by politicians but also public turning away from them
- 4) Decline of press freedom: direct interventions by law, dismantling of public service broadcasting
- 5) The selective exposure to news: social media become the first access point to political news, especially for young people
- 6) The selective exposure to opinion: Fringe or extreme perspectives entering mainstream debate

Sted og dato
Dags 13





In several ways, social media seem to contribute to the process of polarisation (what is often mentioned is the problem of echo

chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce people's existing beliefs and reduce their exposure to opposing Perspectives, but I think there is a deeper structural problem of the transformation of news media behind, and I list some points:

- 1) The decline of news consumption: the number of news readers is dramatically shrinking
- 2) The tabloidisation of news: quality journalism does no longer deliver, decline of public service media in some European countries, from balanced to imbalanced news
- 3) Decline of trust in legacy media and journalism: we find instances of direct attacks to journalistic institutions by politicians but also public turning away from them, think for instances the case of Austria
- 4) Decline of press freedom: direct interventions by law, dismantling of public service broadcasting (even in Denmark, the budget of PB has been cut one third
- 5) The selective exposure to news: social media become the first access point to political news, especially for young people
- 6) The selective exposure to opinion: Fringe or extreme perspectives can far more easily enter mainstream debate in the digital era. where there are fewer information 'gatekeepers,' where trust in traditional media has declined, false information can be spread widely and information can be micro-targeted to specific audiences

segmenting national populations concerning their attitudes to issues of identity, belonging and 'otherness.' These issues are re-shaping national debates and creating a new spectrum of opinion between the 'open' and 'closed' values. Segmentation studies find two groups clustered at opposite ends of this scale, with profoundly different values and beliefs

***A pessimistic view into the future of
European democracy: Fragmented societies,
declining democracies***

- Democracy under siege: recent trends towards social fracturing will continue
- Social media dynamics of political communication have a potential to trigger democratic reversals in multiple countries and jeopardising the role and future of the European Union
- Authoritarian populists will continue to cause major political disruptions
- Far-right extremists will strengthen their ability to cooperate across Europe and refine their tactics and Strategies
- Algorithm based news will continue to polarize and radicalise populations
- Larger numbers of people (especially young males) will radicalise online
- This will result in more frequent violent attacks and acts of terrorism targeting minorities and groups that challenge extremist organisations





How much reasons are there to be concerned with the future of democracy in Europe? The following is a rather gloomy scenario:

- Democracy under siege: recent trends towards social fracturing will continue
- Social media dynamics of political communication have a potential to trigger democratic reversals in multiple countries and jeopardising the role and future of the European Union
- Authoritarian populists will continue to cause major political disruptions
- Far-right extremists will strengthen their ability to cooperate across Europe and refine their tactics and Strategies
- Algorithm based news will continue to polarize and radicalise populations
- Larger numbers of people (especially young males) will radicalise online
- This will result in more frequent violent attacks and acts of terrorism targeting minorities and groups that challenge extremist organisations

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN Enhedens navn

An optimistic outlook; From 'disruptive' to resilient public spheres


Individual rights protection: A charter that protects the rights and liberties of citizens — a Magna Carta for the digital age — is the place to start (A. Giddens)
The EU as a pioneer: **Data protection and online privacy**

Collective mobilisation: expression of shared concerns and identification of common good
Don't be afraid of value conflicts!
Greta Thunberg: 'Forget Brexit and focus on climate change'

Constructive journalism: the revival of quality news formats
The collective struggle against fake news and misinformation

The backlash against the 'populist backlash': populist parties are not necessarily winners of enhanced value conflicts, the 'mobilisation of the silent majoritie

The experienced European solidarity: The 'unlikely' becomes real: EU recovery plan
The pandemic as an opportunity for EU redistributive politics



Here is a more optimistic outlook of the future of democracy in Europe:

- **Individual rights protection:** A charter that protects the rights and liberties of citizens — a Magna Carta for the digital age — is the place to start (A. Giddens)
- The EU as a pioneer: **Data protection and online privacy**
- **Collective mobilisation:** expression of shared concerns and identification of common good
- Don't be afraid of value conflicts!
- Greta Thunberg: 'Forget Brexit and focus on climate change'
- **Constructive journalism:** the revival of quality news formats
- The collective struggle against fake news and misinformation
- **The backlash against the 'populist backlash':** populist parties are not necessarily winners of enhanced value conflicts, the 'mobilisation of the silent majoritie
- **The experienced European solidarity:** The 'unlikely' becomes real: EU recovery plan
- The pandemic as an opportunity for EU redistributive politics