Communicating European values: the German EU presidency and the Berlin Declaration

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Communicating European Values – The German EU Presidency and the Berlin Declaration

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Since the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in two of the EU's founding member states in spring 2005, much has been said about the gap between the European Union and its citizens. The strong "Non" and "Nee" of the French und Dutch voters were not only a simple vote on the content of the constitutional text. Rather, they unveiled great deficits in achieving a legitimate and acceptable political order at the European level. One of the main points blamed for being responsible for the EU's democratic deficit has been the lack of social legitimacy. Therefore, European actors have increased their efforts on communicating European values aiming at re-gaining public support for the European integration process and at establishing the grounds for a European sense of belonging.

The formation of such a sense of belonging requires – apart from other features such as the right to participate in the political decision-making process – a certain consensus on values, principles and beliefs. The German EU presidency, which took office on January 1, 2007, stressed the importance of a common European base of values for further deepening and widening the EU. Chancellor Angela Merkel actively contributed to the debate on a European value community. Especially the Berlin Declaration, which was drafted by the German presidency and published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome on March 25, 2007, is meant to symbolise the principles, which the EU is built on and strengthen citizens' empathy for the Union.

But how does the European citizenry react to this strategy of communicating values? Do the German presidency's contributions stimulate a public debate about European values? And can they strengthen citizens' support for the European Union?

1. Stimulating the European Value Debate – The German Government's Contributions

Searching for new rationale …

Confronted with signs of the EU's declining popularity, Merkel stressed the need for finding a "new rationale to the historical reasons for the foundation of the European Union" (Neubegründung Europas) as early as in May 2006. As she argued, the narrative of Europe as a "community of pacific interests" (Friedensgemeinschaft), once the central reference point for legitimising European

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integration, had lost its appeal. Even if the unification of the European continent, which was almost completed with the Union's fifth and biggest enlargement round in 2004/2007, was a great historical achievement after the disastrous experience of two World Wars, this pattern of justification is not sufficient any more to ensure popular support for the Union. As Merkel acknowledged, a new narrative has to be found which can clearly be attributed to the EU. The Chancellor's approach is twofold: on the one hand, the Union's output capacity is to be strengthened to provide the citizens with significant results. On the other hand, the Union should be developed towards a community of values. Merkel referred to inclusive and universal values as they are laid down in the Union's Treaties such as peace, freedom, democracy and human rights.

… and Europe's soul

In further appearances, Merkel has tried to specify the European uniqueness. As homage to Jacques Delors she stressed the necessity to find "Europe's soul" as a crucial prerequisite for further integrating the Union. Merkel focused on two dominant keywords: tolerance and diversity. Without tolerance, Merkel argued, the European Union's *unity in diversity*-slogan falls short in defining "what holds Europe together in its innermost being, what defines its soul." However, although Merkel acknowledged the need to find a specific and exclusive explanation for Europe's character, it can be doubted whether the argument that "Europe's soul is tolerance" is more persuasive than the *unity in diversity*-concept.

Merkel's policy statement at the EU Spring Summit in the German Bundestag on March 1, 2007 marked a turn regarding her communication strategy. As Merkel tries to express: Projects show Europe's nature – by linking the Union's values with concrete policy projects, values become comprehensible. Therefore, the German Chancellor focussed on two main tasks of the presidency: the social dimension of the Union's economic policy and the efforts regarding a common European climate and energy policy. As specific European projects both policy fields can in a sense be viewed from a value based perspective and therefore enable identification with Europe.

2. The Berlin Declaration – European Values in a Nutshell?

Angela Merkel's contributions to the value debate were aimed at paving the way for publishing the Berlin Declaration. As a major project of the German EU presidency, the Declaration's central goal was to provide citizens with a short and catchy document, which reflects the uniqueness of the European Union and serves as a reference point for people's sense of belonging. As the first *European commemoration document*, it was signed by the acting presidency, the European Commission and the European Parliament after all 27 Heads of State and Government had agreed on the content of the text.

Common European ideals

The first part of the Declaration points out the major successes of the European integration process. The document mentions peace, prosperity, democracy, rule of law, the common market and the Euro to convince the reader of the Union's added value. Due to divergent points of view, the EU's enlargement policy and further controversial topics are not mentioned explicitly. As concerns the "common ideals" shared by EU member states, institutions and citizens, the focus is put on universal values: dignity of man, human rights, gender equality, peace, freedom, democracy, rule of law, mutual respect, shared responsibility, prosperity, security, tolerance, participation, justice and solidarity. To underline the specific European

dimension of those values, the Declaration refers to "the democratic interaction of the member states and the European institutions". Furthermore, the principles of diversity and plurality and a "supportive cooperation" among all EU actors are stressed.

Least common denominator

With regard to the high expectations the German Chancellor had raised in view of the Declaration's ability to symbolise the EU's moral core, the wording of the document is rather disappointing. The heavy struggles about the concrete content of the text among the EU member states in the run-up of the Declaration's publication dashed the hope to find a comprehensive formula of the EU's unique nature. Rather, the text represents the least common denominator of how the history and sense of European integration can be interpreted. Thus, it is unlikely that the Declaration can serve as a starting point for a new European self-conception. Firstly, the proposed principles do not represent a "new rationale" for the European integration process. The values expressed in the Declaration are already incorporated in the EU's legal documents and have been communicated for a long time – without generating a stable European feeling of belonging. Secondly, the strategy of keeping the negotiations secret during the Declaration's drafting process is highly counterproductive to the aim of creating a document representing the whole European citizenry. It should be questioned whether citizens will accept the Declaration as symbol for constructing their own identity as it is a product of deliberation among political elites. Therefore, the impact of the Declaration on its major addressee – each European citizen – is likely to be much more moderate than its signatories have promised.

Positive side effect

Nevertheless, the Declaration might turn out to have a significant effect on another addressee, namely the EU member states. Even if only the German EU presidency and not every single Head of State and Government signed the Declaration, it reflects a common consensus and each government's commitment to go beyond the Union's legal status quo. As it is mentioned, the aim is to place "the European Union on a renewed common basis before the European Parliament elections in 2009." Bearing in mind the confusion and lack of orientation, which were caused by the negative outcome of the referenda in France and the Netherlands, the Declaration can thus be seen as a remarkable step forward – even if its ambitious aim to facilitate citizens' empathy for the EU is unlikely to be fulfilled.

3. Debating European Values – the Public's own Agenda

The German EU presidency – as well as other European actors – seems to prefer an inclusive and universal communication strategy when trying to actively set the European value debate agenda. Even if there is a tendency to stress specific policy programmes, there is no comprehensive European narrative, which could unfold an integrative power similar to the *Friedensgemeinschaft*-pattern or Jacques Delors' project of the common market. How does the public respond to these efforts of communicating values?

Supporting universal values

When asked about the most important personal values, Europeans mention peace (52%), respect for human life (43%) and human rights (41%). With regard to the European Union, human rights (38%), democracy (38%) and peace (36%) as most important values are mentioned (see Eurobarometer 66). At a first glance, the answers seem to indicate a high support for the values communicated by the German presidency. However, the question has to be raised why despite an obvious support

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for the general European principles an alarming alienation between the Union and its citizens can be observed.

Demanding exclusive definitions

Other indicators such as the controversial debates on the possible accession of Turkey, immigration policy and the integration capacity of the European Union might give a more detailed insight in European citizens' value and identity concepts. Even if the issue of European values is not directly raised, all these topics allow for drawing conclusions on how they might be defined. The arguments put forward in the debates indicate the fact that a universal and inclusive definition of European values might not be enough to create a stable common European identity. Rather, it seems that there is an additional demand for an exclusive definition of what should be regarded as European.

As long as the Union was no major reference point for people's political awareness, the strategy of defining the EU's character merely by universal and inclusive values did not cause deeper problems. However, as the Union's policies will increasingly depend upon a popular vote – e.g. as it will be the case in France concerning future enlargements – the question of how close the ties are between the European Union and its citizens will gain great significance. The normative claim for a well-developed sense of belonging as a legitimising factor of a political entity is therefore reinforced by the pragmatic need for a sustainable support for further integrating the EU.

Defining membership

Without any doubt, values like democracy, human rights, rule of law and equality are the most crucial achievements of Western civilizations. They enable a peaceful co-existence of plural beliefs and norms. As regards the European Union, they offer the opportunity to cope with the different traditions and backgrounds of 27 and more member states (promoted by the Union's identity concept of *unity in diversity*). However, it is doubtful whether an open, inclusive concept is sufficient to facilitate social cohesion, solidarity and identity. Political entities are usually characterised through specific features, which allow for a clear attribution. If the EU wants to be recognised as a political entity on its own and if the European constituency shall legitimise further integration steps, the inclusive and universal values will have to be interpreted from a unique European point of view.

4. Value Debate Catalysts: Projects and Politicisation

European Social Model

As has been tried to express by the German EU presidency, linking the EU's values with specific projects can clarify the difference between the Union and other political entities. Therefore, a new "master project" has to be identified, which can facilitate support and empathy among European citizens. The German presidency focused on two major projects – the European social model and the energy and climate policy. The European social model is not only understood as a guarantee for a minimum in living quality, but symbolises certain values such as solidarity, non-discrimination, gender equality and workers' rights. "Europe stands for a combination of strong economic performance and a fair deal for all members of society", as Merkel put it. Hence, one could perceive the idea of establishing the European social model as perfectly adequate to serve as an identity-building instrument – not least as the concept picks up the most serious concerns citizens have regarding their future: unemployment, rising costs of living and decreasing pensions (see Special Eurobarometer 273).

But the concept faces serious problems. The main competencies in the field of social policy still remain within the nation states; the Union's abilities to shape the European social model are extremely weak. Furthermore, the diversity of 27 European social models is a crucial obstacle when it comes to defining and implementing one single European social model. Therefore, raising expectations on the one side by actively communicating the values and principles of a social Europe and the lack of decision-making competences on the other side might turn out to be highly counterproductive to the aim of enhancing citizens' trust towards the EU.

Energy and climate policy

As regards the Union's efforts to build a common European energy and climate policy, central requirements for a new European identity project seem to be fulfilled: especially the climate policy can be interpreted from a value perspective and thus generate a certain degree of identification. Moreover, this policy field affects every citizen in Europe. Furthermore, measures are currently adopted to provide the European level with adequate competencies. However, the European Union cannot deliver significant results in this policy field by itself. Only a global approach, which also involves other major energy consumers like the United States or China, can lead to visible successes. Promoting climate policy as new European "master project" therefore inheres a serious risk. Not being able to deliver acceptable results might lead to the "Lisbon dilemma" – the ambitious aims of the Lisbon strategy could not be realised adequately, which led to a deep loss of credibility of the project.

Public communication

Enhancing a European sense of belonging by bringing forward the "Europe of results" can only succeed if the values, which the policy projects are based on, are made clear. The fact that, until now, there is no final consensus on how European values and identity are characterised should not be seen as an obstacle to constructing a common feeling of belonging. Even the nation states lack an ultimate definition of identity due to its constructed and therefore alterable nature. Values and beliefs need an open communication sphere where they can be debated and (re-)interpreted. Thus, the public debates about European identity and its constitutive attributes should be regarded as a signal that European citizens are beginning to communicate about the same topics with similar interpretation patterns – what better way to demonstrate the slow, but constant emergence of a common European public sphere which can build the ground for a European demos?

Openness for controversies

However, the passiveness, with which European actors have reacted to the own dynamic the public debates are developing, is worrying. Instead of picking up the demand for finding a specific definition of the European character with inclusive as well as with exclusive attributes, European actors rather point to universal values and omit controversial issues. Even if raising certain topics might provoke conflict and dispute, this should not be seen as an excuse to be silent on issues like further enlargements. This could be interpreted as dishonesty and lead to a massive loss of credibility. Other actors are likely to engage in the debate with populist interpretations of how the distinction between European and non-European can be made. As a result, the EU might face the risk to lose its power of interpretation. Therefore, an open communication process has to be stimulated where European actors take their responsibility and actively contribute to the debates – even if the topics raised might be inconvenient.

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Institutional reforms

In the long run, mere communication efforts will not be enough. Politics in democratic entities need clear alternatives, which allow for a choice between different political points of view. Political controversies can best be tackled within adequate institutional and structural arrangements. The instruments provided by the Constitutional Treaty would be a remarkable step forward compared to the status quo: by further strengthening the EP's competences, by linking the appointment of the Commission's president to the EP election results or by strengthening the role of national parliaments the EU would be further politicised. The intended reforms would contribute to a vital democracy where cross-border debates about norms and values become a natural part of the political process. Thus, if the acting German EU presidency can realise its aim to put the constitutional process back on track this would probably be the most efficient and sustainable way to narrow the gap between the European Union and its citizens.

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