

A Threefold Mission

The whole project of European integration is charged with the idea of a particular way of life.

DANILO TÜRK



The notion of a “European way of life” is an invitation to debate. Political talk about “a way of life” reaches beyond the ordinary dictionary meaning of the word. While the latter refers to the ways in which people usually live, the political use of the same words is meant to stimulate action. Sometimes this becomes highly ideological. During the Cold War era, talk about the “American” or “European” way of life carried highly charged ideological meanings supporting the idea of material and moral superiority of the West versus the communist ideological rivals and, to a lesser extent, versus all other “non-Western ways of life.”

The European Union is not a newcomer to this debate. The whole project of European integration, from its early post-World War II period, was heavily charged with the idea of a particular way of life. This meant, most generally, ever higher standards of living, political stability and democratic governance, individual freedom and security. The point here was not that other regions or countries do not share these broad aspirations, but that European integration is the best path toward their realisation on the European continent. Fair enough.

Danilo Türk

is a diplomat, politician, and Emeritus Professor of International Law. He served as president of Slovenia between 2007 and 2012. He is currently president of the Club de Madrid, an organisation of over 120 former presidents and prime ministers. In 1992, Türk became the first Slovene Permanent Representative to the UN in New York, serving on the UN Security Council (1999–2000), and from 2000 to 2005 as UN Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs. In 2005, he returned to Slovenia as vice-dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Ljubljana. He was elected president in 2007 as an independent.

Image: Club de Madrid

However, this relatively benign interpretation does not catch the whole range of meanings of the “European way of life.” Politics is an effort to mobilise. In 2019, the vision for the first Ursula von der Leyen EU Commission included a proposal to establish a position for “protecting our European way of life” — at an elevated status of the Vice President of the Commission. However, the establishment of the post did not happen without controversy in the European Parliament and the media. Some critics believed that the position tended to emphasise the exclusive nature of the “European club,” and others feared that it would be used to counter immigration that the European Union actually needed. As is often the case, the dispute was papered over at the terminological level with the agreement that the vice president of the Commission should work “to promote”, rather than — as the original proposal suggested — “to protect” our European way of life.

In the current composition of the EU Commission, there is no special portfolio for the European way of life, while much space to promote European values and way of life remains in most of the existing portfolios. However, the deeper questions about European values and way of life persist and must be addressed on a broader front.

So, what are the essential European values that constitute the European way of life and have to be promoted irrespective of the day-to-day politics or evolving political structures on the continent? One might think about the following three priorities:

PEACE AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS. The first among them should be peace, understood as a minimum, as the absence of war. Without peace, there is no promotion of the European way of life. Therefore, European institutions and governments have to make themselves able to provide a serious contribution to the maintenance of peace and security on our continent. Obviously, this task involves difficult questions such as the ques-

tion of defence spending and, above all, the problem of how to develop effective European diplomacy. Peace in Europe is not guaranteed right now, while the European institutions seem to be too weak and too confused for the needed practical, diplomatic efforts for peace. A solid political base for such a role is sadly lacking. Its creation should be a major priority.

The second priority should be economic adaptability to the changing world. Europe will promote its values and way of life most effectively by being at the forefront of economic, technological, and scientific progress. Without such progress, the talk about the European way of life becomes idle and hollow. Are European institutions able to decisively promote economic development in the changing world? A familiar phrase from the current discourse of EU relations with China comes to mind: The world needs both competition and cooperation, and both are needed simultaneously.

Europe needs to be an active player in competition and cooperation with all other major international players. This, too, is a demanding task to be addressed with a sense of urgency.

Third, Europe has to ensure that the existing high standards of human rights and democracy are not diminished. Human rights require permanent vigilance. Democracy in Europe has to be discussed and promoted continuously. Legal and institutional developments of the past decades have endowed Eu-

rope with robust structures, such as the European Convention and the Court of Human Rights. They have to be supported and, above all, scrupulously respected.

In short, Europe has a good basis to build policies to promote a genuinely European way of life. The time for the articulation of such policies is now.

This issue of European Voices addresses the most important tasks. Let us have the needed debate so that an updated, sophisticated understanding of the European way of life will emerge.

Europe has to ensure that the existing high standards of human rights and democracy are not diminished.