
'A EUROPE THAT PROTECTS': WHAT DOES THAT ACTUALLY MEAN?

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The EU has long been in need of a new strategic narrative.

At last it may have found one in the narrative of "a Europe that protects".

Austria used it as its motto for its EU Council Presidency in 2018, the European Commission adopted it as its mission, and various centrist politicians, from Emmanuel Macron to Manfred Weber, seized on it to appeal to voters during the recent European elections.

Yet despite its recent traction, I argue that the narrative puts too much weight on the protection of borders, security and living standards and not enough on the protection of European values.

According to The Economist, the EU, at long last, may well be closing in on something resembling a common purpose.

Shocked into action by various crises, the rise of populism, and Brexit, European leaders are hoping to address what Macron called the EU's failure "to respond to its peoples' need for protection from the major shocks of the modern world".

By proposing, for instance, a common border force and by promising to deliver on the European Pillar of Social Rights, they hope to increase support for the EU and stave off the populist threat.

Today's challenges – whether it'd be terrorism, economic crises, or global warming - require European, rather than (merely) national, responses, is their argument.

And it's a convincing one.

But I argue that an overemphasis on the protection of borders, security, and living standards may undercut the narrative's appeal among the European public.

In particular, I argue that a more inclusive meaning of "a Europe that protects", one that also recognises the need for the protection of our core European values - such as a respect for individual freedoms, the rule of law, and minority rights – would likely make it more compelling to a wider group of Europeans.

This is not to deny the importance of protecting citizens from the negative consequences of globalisation and digitalisation.

The rise of populism and the Brexit vote are at least in part attributable to a failure to address

people's social, economic, and security concerns.

Alleviating some of these concerns may well go some way to reducing the populist and nationalist threat to European democracy.

And this is exactly what someone like Macron seems to have in mind. It is not so much that that he is not concerned with protecting European values. On the contrary, he aims to protect them by protecting Europe's citizens.

But European democracy needs direct, not just indirect, protection.

Current challenges to the rule of law, an independent civil society, and the equal treatment of minorities are just as much in need of tackling as are the challenges of globalisation, migration, and digitalisation.

'Jobs and security'

And according to our Voices on Values research, a project by d|part and the Open Society European Policy Institute, conducted in six different European countries, there's reason to believe that European citizens agree.

The current narrative of "a Europe that protects" appears centred on the assumption that people want their jobs and security taken care of first; equality, the rule of law, and human rights later.

And in some cases – though certainly not all – there may be some truth to this. For instance, our research found that a majority of Europeans are more concerned with their economic-wellbeing than they are with the equal treatment of newcomers to their country.

Yet our research also demonstrated that Europeans care more about the values incorporated in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union than often assumed.

Minority rights and freedom of religion

An overwhelming majority of Europeans subscribe to them.

For instance, 86 percent of respondents considered a free civil society essential for a good society. 84 percent said the same about the protection of minority rights, and 80 percent about the freedom of religion.

Just as European citizens have social, economic, and security concerns in common, so too do they have values in common. European values are not a myth.

What's more, a majority of respondents considered the protection of these values at least as important as the protection of economic security and social cohesion.

In fact, when explicitly asked, there was only a minority of respondents that prioritised their living standards over a well-functioning democracy.

In other words, European leaders are well advised not to immediately assume that citizens with

social and economic concerns are not also concerned about challenges to democracy and human rights.

Delivering a 'Europe that protects' can only serve as a true common purpose if it not only protects citizens' from unemployment and harm, but also protects their civil rights and liberties.

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The views expressed in this opinion piece are the author's, not those of EUobserver.

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