

On the heels of the horrors that had occurred in our continent in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the European integration process has found its reason to be. The goal of this process was global peace and democracy. Indeed, this has been at the forefront of the world order that the European project has successfully managed to build.

Since the delivery of the Schuman declaration and subsequent creation of the European Coal and Steel Community seventy years ago, the project of European integration has resulted in the European Union as we know it today. This Union, based upon a common set of values, has accomplished a great deal of what the founders originally hoped for. Peace, prosperity, and the freedoms of movement have improved the lives of people within the EU and beyond. Through a continuous process of integration, the EU has proven that values can be spread and borders can be expanded without the prospect of war or conflict. Within Europe, competition has given way to cooperation and formed strong ties between historical enemies. Our differences are what makes us unique, with multiculturalism as part of our inclusiveness instead of creating barriers. This unique establishment has accomplished a great deal; however, the contemporary world requires us to reevaluate the future of the Union. The meaning of war and peace has changed since the 1950s, as have the definition of the norms and values the EU holds highest.

We have the duty to defend the will to live together based on the unyielding belief that what binds us is a common destiny and shared values. On this basis we must harmonise the relationship between Europe and its citizens based on values tailored to the challenges we face today.

Europe has not been made all at once, but the achievements thus far have resulted in de facto solidarity. This is an opportunity for the voices of the future to outline the next steps beyond this point.

The first value that the European Union must dedicate itself to is the protection of human rights. The inevitable rise of digitalisation has brought about many changes that pose a risk to the rights of individuals. The rights of workers are under pressure from large, online corporations, operating outside our previous understanding of “employers.” Income and gender inequality are further areas of concern in the human rights sphere. The European Union must act as a guardian of human rights, ensuring a strong, law-based order that is suited to adapt to an accelerated pace of change. Supranational control of this area is imperative to the future.

We need to bring the European Union closer to European citizens. Political participation at the EU-level is not as high as it should be, especially among young Europeans. Through education about the European Union, we will increase awareness on what European

citizenship means. This will enable our citizens to better understand the EU and make informed decisions, leading to increased political participation at the EU-level as well as increased visibility of the EU. We envision digital education as part of this solution. Though digitalisation poses challenges, it may help us along the way as well. A shared digital future can empower us and help us to find solutions to global contemporary challenges. In the last decades, digital means have signified an enhancement of democracy, the chance to elaborate and widen inclusive education and raise public awareness about climate change. Accordingly, the EU should take the voices expressed by young Europeans more seriously. The youth is worried about being left in a world where issues have been ignored for too long—where problems were not dealt with adequately or in a timely manner. The EU should strongly consider these concerns which include: the state and future of our environment, our climate, our nature, our access to resources, and our quality of life. The EU should shift towards alternative energy sources which are sustainable and environmentally friendly. These concerns affect all of us, but they affect the youth most of all.

Finally, the EU must continue its commitment to peace using efficient and robust development cooperation. Immigration and migration are constant points of debate across all levels of European society. The influence of the EU is under question both at home and abroad. Even within the EU, there is tension regarding the power and influence of the larger, central states over those of the periphery. Strong development cooperation programs are the ideal solution for these issues. As the main tool of the EU and the value that distinguishes it from other actors on the global stage, development cooperation is an agent of change that works within the confines of peace. It seeks to address the primary causes of so many problems: immigration, poverty, and security. A more developed world will mitigate the risks associated with instability both at home and abroad while bolstering the global image of the EU. The future of the EU should be one in which people do not have to risk their lives for the prospect of a better one.

As the European Union is decreasing in size for the first time in history, it is our duty to come together. History has seen waves of escalations before revolutionary changes, like the creation of what we now call the EU. Let us seek to avoid the necessity of this escalation in order to take a step forward. Let us base this step on our will to maintain and strengthen peace instead of repeating history. Let us do it not in our weakest moment, but in our greatest. Let both our diversity and our unity guide us to the next step forward. Let peace be the vehicle of the EU to change, move forward, and spread its values.