

Centre for Geopolitics and  
International Policy



# OUR VALUES

## THE EUROPE AGENDA

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

Britain faces a transformed world: unreliable allies, emerging security threats, and increased pressure on living standards and the climate. In this context, the driving questions for relations with its European neighbours cannot be those of the past, but how the UK can act strategically – identifying opportunities for partnerships and building effective coalitions to advance British goals on growth, security, the climate transition, and shared values.

This note is part of a series by IPPR examining each of these terrains in turn, building on the 2025 reset as a starting point.

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## INTRODUCTION

The European project has always had two layers, and has been spoken about in two registers.

The first of Europe's two layers is the power of the European Commission, the 'four freedoms' of trade and movement, and the real-world impacts of economic integration. This is spoken about in the language of economic efficiency, and made real through regulation.

The second layer is that of values. Its vocabulary is not economic, but that of principle and commitment. This is what is invoked at moments of genuine crisis – the notion that the European project is an expression of what the continent's societies prize about human dignity, democratic governance and the rule of law.

It is this second layer that has driven change at crucial moments in European history. It was the possibility of peace and reconciliation that first built the economic community in the 1950s. And, again, after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, enlargement eastwards was understood as an effort to consolidate and nurture democracy in states emerging from the Soviet bloc.

The UK, in its relationship with the continent, has always been more comfortable with the first layer than it has been with the second. This reticence may have had solid political roots, but it has come at a cost. It has meant the relationship was defined as purely transactional, weakening Britain's importance to its partners on the continent. In its own internal politics, it meant the case for integration could come across as less compelling than the long tradition of Euroscepticism in national politics, which made a more direct appeal to political values and emotions.

This paper argues that the moment has arrived for a different approach – and that the case for it is stronger than at any point in the last half-century.

Today, we can no longer take principles for granted, whether in our international relationships or at home. This is precisely why it is necessary to create a firmer foundation for our partnerships, one that builds in British values. These values – dignity, perhaps, or democracy, perhaps fair play – are contested and evolving. Yet, at this particular moment of global crisis, it seems clear that there is indeed a set of values that most people in this country identify with, and seek to defend.

## A CHANGED CONTEXT

The world has changed around Britain and Europe: Russian aggression, US withdrawal from liberal internationalism and the rise of authoritarian models have centred the question of what kind of international order we need, not just what trade relations we have.

All European societies see their foundational principles as being under assault (Chopin and Macek 2022). They are being challenged by populists within, often supported by forces from outside, while geopolitical circumstances are challenging them to abandon or moderate the things in which they believe.

The European Union itself is struggling for cohesion. Its greatest impact in the past has been possible when shared principles allowed it to make clear policy, and to manage the trade-offs those policies entailed. This was visible, for example, in its commitment to constructing a workable green deal. But challenges to those principles threaten to stymie its ability to act on issues including climate, security and competitiveness.

This is because the two layers of the European project are mutually dependent. The single market rests on shared legal and political values; the values argument depends on economic integration to demonstrate it delivers for ordinary people.

The very idea of the ‘four freedoms’ – that a person or a company can choose to operate or trade anywhere within the EU – is dependent on all parts of the European bloc sharing the same approach to the rule of law. If some populist European leaders turn instead to authoritarianism (choosing to bully judges, for example, or steer EU money towards their chosen oligarchs), or if they centralise decision-making and attack the independence of the institutions that regulate and oversee state power, then that divergence on political principles leads to a breakdown in the effectiveness of the single market. It is this understanding that underlies the creation in 2021 of the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation (European Commission 2021).

Those political forces that are today seen as threats to the European project as it stands make it clear that their disagreement is not over the distribution of benefits or arcane policies, but about the nature of the Europe that is being built. Domestically, they define themselves as the enemies of progressive policy; in international affairs, they minimise the importance of shared values. According to Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico: “In world politics, there is no justice, only economic interests” (Katuška 2024).

Many populist parties across Europe reflect such views. Yet it is also true that voters for these parties are not quite as enthused about Donald Trump and Trumpian politics as many of their leaders (Cokelaere 2025). Furthermore, polls suggest that there exists a comfortable majority within Europe for a ‘values coalition’ that marries European principles with a more effective approach to asserting those (Belin and Zerka 2026).

The failure of assumptions about shared values is also reflected in the breakdown of Europe’s external economic relations. The speed with which, in the Trump era, existing trade commitments, multilateral agreements and long-standing alliances have been overturned or threatened reveals how fragile arrangements are when values diverge. A more transactional United States has sought to use tariffs as a form of intimidation, and has simultaneously linked the future of the transatlantic military alliance to the protection of the interests of American tech companies.

Decades of economic integration with North America presupposed a coincidence of values between Europe and the US, and the failure of that supposition may lead to the unwinding of integration. Less stringent assumptions governed the EU’s decisions about its energy supplies and its manufacturing value chain. But even these were shown to be faulty when Russia violated the sovereignty of a mutual neighbour, and China showed signs of weaponising its control over supply chains.

The lesson that Europe has learned is that close and co-dependent economic relationships are predictable sources of prosperity only if they are underpinned by shared values. The rule of law, the independence of institutions and the respect for sovereignty are how we know that economic partnerships can last. Without them, the most trusted and valuable affiliations can turn into threats.

## **WHAT BRITAIN BRINGS AND BELIEVES**

Britain still has a sense of who it is – an identity which values democracy, respect and fair play. This is under profound challenge at the moment. Nevertheless, the UK retains a strong values-based identity. And it has clearly benefitted from and identified with a world designed to a certain set of values: openness, tolerance, transparency, sovereignty, democracy and the dignity of the individual. These are

precisely those aspects of the international order, however imperfectly they were manifested in the past, that today are threatened.

European societies are natural, indeed indispensable, allies in any attempt to preserve and defend these principles. They face similar assaults on their foundational ethics, from within and without, that the UK does; and they share an interest in a world that advances their prosperity and responds to their values. As a corollary, it means that they welcome British participation – and sometimes leadership – on issues defined around shared values.

There are some hints of this approach in the most successful partnerships that the UK has developed with Europe in the recent past. Assisting Ukraine's defence, for example, has often been framed explicitly as a defence of shared values. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen described the Russian invasion in 2022 as: "A war on our values and a war on our future. This is about autocracy against democracy" (Reynders 2022). French president Emmanuel Macron has said that: "In the name of international law, our values and the defence of Europe, our responsibility is to stand by their side" (Macron 2023). And, according to Keir Starmer: "Ukraine's courage continues to hold the line for our shared values" (FCDO 2026).

Conversely, political forces in Western nations that have stepped away from direct assistance to Ukraine – Hungary, the US, Slovakia – either deny the salience of values in international life, or believe that those espoused by the leadership of the Russian Federation are more appealing than those associated with Europe or Britain.

It might be argued that Britain has been active in supporting resistance to the invasion of Ukraine because it has security implications for the UK. In a deeper sense, however, it is Russia that views Britain and Europe as a danger – for reasons that have less to do with geography or economic interests, and far more to do with a vision of what the world should be. Some on the populist right in the US or central Europe might share Moscow's view of a world defined by conservative or religious traditions, one divided into 19th-century spheres of influence. It is precisely because Britain does not share that vision that Russia poses a security threat.

The UK's bipartisan commitment to Ukraine is an imperfect signpost of its values; it sits in contrast to its approach to Gaza, for example. But it has meant that, for the first time in a decade, Britain has been welcomed to the centre of European conversations about the continent's future.

Furthermore, that this commitment has largely spanned the political spectrum demonstrates that values-based engagement can command political consensus more easily than economic integration. The political arithmetic of values is different from that of trade.

This is true at both the international and the domestic level. Some of the UK's interlocutors in Brussels and member-state capitals are seen as being intransigent over specific trade issues, partly because they wish to underline to their own populist movements the costs of exiting the EU; partly because they do not wish to hand these challengers any ammunition by granting Britain a 'victory' on trade. But EU governments that use populist pressure as a reason for caution about UK-EU ambition are more likely to be moved by a Britain that is actively engaged in the political debate about the future of European democracy, than by a Britain that is asking transactionally for trade concessions.

It is easier, as well, to build domestic consensus and deliver action within a values framework. One of the few successful pushbacks against US pressure in the past

year was the UK's threat to use the Online Safety Act to block xAI's chatbot Grok (Kendall 2026). This action was necessary because of divergent approaches to free speech and tech regulation – and the sense that the government was standing up for its citizens met with wide approval.

## **PRIORITIES FOR ACTION**

The argument above suggests three areas for immediate action. They may not add up to a comprehensive programme, but they are places where values and interests most clearly coincide, and where near-term action is achievable.

### **1. Invest in the European Political Community (EPC)**

This grouping, which has held six summits and includes a total of 47 nations, is described as a “platform for political coordination”, is definitionally distinct from the EU, and is the most immediately available institutional vehicle for an explicit values-based partnership (European Parliament 2025). It is largely informal at present. But its existence provides an opportunity for the UK to take the initiative. Underpinned by a treaty, a core group of members might create a permanent secretariat for the EPC and commit themselves to a particular set of liberal democratic principles as well as to laws and institutions that work to uphold those values. In practical terms, the core members of this community would seek to coordinate their responses to individuals, organisations and states that pose a threat to liberal democracy in Europe.

### **2. Protect democracy against interference**

Europe's most active frontier is not physical, but epistemic. Its democracies are besieged by disinformation, foreign interference and the corruption – sometimes deliberate – of their news and information landscapes. These undermine democratic processes and social cohesion, and they serve as a direct challenge to the values that Europe and Britain share. The EU has considered possible mechanisms for a “European democracy shield” (Bentzen 2025). But the UK can propose a structure that will coordinate responses with specific European member states in this domain. This might involve the sharing of intelligence, as well as joint counter-disinformation capabilities. An agreed template of responses to foreign interference, framed explicitly as the defence of democracy, would ensure that the values agenda is seen as operational rather than aspirational.

### **3. Re-centre UK-EU agreements around values**

In practice, this might mean expanding the mention of ‘shared values’ in previous joint statements, such as the one issued at the 2025 summit, into a formal joint political statement that names the liberal democratic order being defended, and frames cooperation on economic and military security as a component of that larger attempt (FCDO 2025).

## **A PATH FORWARD**

The priorities for action laid out above must build momentum towards acts of greater ambition. The UK's objectives should be to recreate the European economic and security order around a firmer values-based foundation, and to unite the two registers of the European project – this time with Britain as a founding participant and co-designer.

That in turn should be seen as part of an attempt not to restore an old, damaged international system, but to discover a possible successor – one with the values of dignity, democracy and the rule of law at its heart, but that includes partners beyond the continent that feel the same need for a stable, human-centred, rules-based order.

The government has proposed that Britain will show greater ambition when it comes to redefining its partnership with Europe, and that it must be “a partnership that recognises our shared values, our shared interests, and our shared future” (PMO 2026). It should in fact be a partnership that is founded on our shared values and on a shared approach to navigating a newly dangerous geopolitical context.

The progressive case for liberal democracy depends in part on showing it delivers better lives. And a values-centred approach to the European reset does not replace other ambitions on economics or security. It anchors those ambitions.

When it comes to the British domestic response to the two layers of the European project, it is important to note that, a decade on from the referendum, the argument on economics no longer defines the debate. Few make the case today that the UK has done better in purely economic terms outside the European Union than it would have inside. Whatever resistance remains to greater economic integration is downstream of concerns about immigration.

Values-based engagement directly tackles the other layer. It requires no headline-grabbing ‘concessions’; it enhances sovereignty and defends the things that British people care about. This country feels a deep disquiet about the disintegrating global system. It feels the world is increasingly run by raw power rather than by rules, and that Britain is not large enough to reverse this on its own, or even to defend our values and way of life in it. Participation in a renewed European project will aid the UK in navigating a world between orders.

A Britain that leads on values in Europe is not a Britain that has reversed its position on Brexit; it is a Britain that has recognised, on strategic grounds, that an open democratic international system requires trusted partners, and that Europe is the most natural source of them.

But this would require a change in the register in which the UK’s politicians talk about Europe. Rather than defensiveness about lines not crossed and concessions not made, it requires a switch to an affirmative register that speaks of what we are for, and of the world we want to build together.

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