

## The European way of life

*“The Union is founded on the values of the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for the human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”*

- Article 2 , Treaty on European Union

Last month marked thirty years since two million people across the Baltic States joined hands to form a “chain of freedom” more than 600 kilometres long. The images were a poignant and powerful reminder of how far Europe has come in the space of a generation. But they also showed the uniting force of our common values: freedom, equality, democracy and respect for human dignity.

These values, and our attachment to them, are our very foundation. They are enshrined in our Treaty and they give us the freedoms that we enjoy today. They define and encapsulate what our Union is about.

We should be proud of our European way of life in all of its forms and dimensions and we should constantly preserve, protect and nurture it. This is why it was one of the six guiding principles in my Political Guidelines, which received the European Parliament’s support in July.

For most people, the European way of life is not something that needs explaining. It is simply a daily reality. But clearly a debate has sparked this week on the connotations and the concept of the term.

This is good. And it is a debate we should have in the open.

For me, the European way of life is best summed up by the words in Article 2 of the Treaty at the top of this article.

Each of these words has two faces. To coin President Kennedy’s phrase we should not only ask what our Union does for us, but also what we can do for our Union. Each word in Article 2 is both a right and a duty for us all, wherever we come from and wherever we live in our Union.

This is the European conception of life.

It is about building a Union of equality in which we all have the same access to opportunities. It is about equipping people with the knowledge, education and skills they need to live and work in dignity. It is about having access to the services we need and the knowledge that we are safe in our homes and in our streets. It is about protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

Ultimately, it is about how we all live together.

This European way of life came at a great price and sacrifice. It should never be taken for granted – it is neither a given nor a guarantee. The proof of that is that our way of living is being challenged every day – as much by anti-Europeans from within as from without. We have seen foreign powers

interfere in our elections from the outside. And we have seen home-grown populists with cheap nationalistic slogans try to destabilise us from the inside.

We should not allow these forces to hijack the definition of the European way of life. They want it to mean the opposite of what it is. They want to chip away at our foundations and sow division amongst us. They believe in politics that exposes problems, rather than solves them. We must fight back against this.

Of course, words matter. I recognise that. For some, the European way of life is a loaded and politically charged term. But we cannot and must not let others take away our language from us: this is also part of who we are.

Other parts of the world have their own way of life that differs from ours. We all have our own traditions, our own set of values and own way of doing things. But I would always choose Europe's way of life – and our Union of solidarity, tolerance and reliability – over any other.

The European way of life also means listening and debating with one another to find solutions for the common good. And this is what I want us to do together.