

After Brexit, what can revitalise the EU?

The principles of its founding father, says a Robert Schuman scholar.

Margriet Krijtenburg



Robert Schuman, architect of the European Union

It has been a big week for Europe. It started last Saturday with celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the founding of the European Economic Community (forerunner of the European Union) and proceeded with one of the current members walking out. A letter from British Prime Minister Theresa May to EU President Donald Tusk on Wednesday began the formal process of “Brexit” that 52 percent of Britons voted for nine months ago.

*We know some of the issues that divide this family of nations – immigration looms large -- but what brought them together in the first place? And, given today’s rumblings of discontent, are the founding principles of the European Union still valid? **Margriet Krijtenburg**, a scholar of European unification at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, insists that they are, and that they are capable of prospering Europe and the world beyond it.*

Addressing the heads of 27 member states of the European Union on the eve of its 60th anniversary, Pope Francis [recalled](#) that the present cannot be understood or lead to a better future without an understanding of the past.

For this reason it is good to remember that the European unification project came into being with the Schuman Declaration on May 9, 1950, with the aim of achieving peace and security on a European continent devastated by World War II. The economy was the means to implement this peace project that would lead to political integration, make states interdependent and thereby make war impossible.

The main architect of the Union, Robert Schuman (other founding fathers were Konrad Adenaur, Jean Monnet and Alcide de Gasperi), highlighted in his declaration four key principles to guide unification:

- * **Reconciliation**, in the first place between the arch-enemies France and Germany
- * **Effective solidarity**, based on keeping man, understood as a spiritual and social being, at the heart of all undertakings. The first of these undertakings would be to use coal and steel, formerly instruments of war between France and Germany, as instruments of peace.
- * **Equality between the partners** in this peace project.
- * **Subsidiarity and supranationality**. According to these principles the central agencies of the union would only act where needed, and then in a way consistent with the common good of Europe and rest of humanity – especially Africa. Otherwise states would look after their own affairs.

Borders should become lines of communication where material and cultural exchanges take place, rather than rigid lines of separation.

Above all, Europe needed a soul: *“This whole cannot and must not remain an economic and technical enterprise: it needs a soul, the conscience of its historical affinities and of its responsibilities, in the present and in the future, and a political will at the service of the same human ideal.”*

Evidently, these principles have not always been honoured. Today’s populism, lack of confidence in Brussels and all the other crises, even the fact that ISIS takes advantage of spinelessness of the EU today, can be partly explained by its not having put man and his spiritual and social dimension at the heart of the economy -- and technology. Rather, the economy and technology have become ends in themselves. Man has become an instrument of the economy instead of the other way round.

But is flight into nationalism, “my country first”, really the answer to Europe’s problems? Even from a self-interested point of view, this retreat into “national egoisms” is not a solution. As Angela Merkel has pointed out, it would merely turn the continent into a product of globalisation designed by other actors on the world stage, with all the political, economic and social consequences that would have.

Doesn’t Europe rather need a revival of Schuman’s vision to re-vitalise the unification project and give its people an ideal to strive towards? I believe that Schuman’s key principles can contribute tremendously to the solution of today’s crises: climate change, war and migration, unemployment and poverty.

Let’s learn from history and its good initiatives! Putting man with his spiritual and social dimension at the heart of economic, political, social and judicial structures will enable us to “clean up” these structures where they currently alienate people, achieve reconciliation and uplift society and the world as such.

How should we go about this?

Respect for the sacredness of the human being, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has to underpin everything. As Pope Francis said to the EU leaders last week, Europe is not a conglomeration of rules to obey... It is a way of life, a way of understanding man based on his transcendent and inalienable dignity..." It requires that Europe rediscovers its soul through solidarity, the Pope said, echoing Schuman.

There are many hands-on ways that we can affirm this:

- * Care for minorities and those who suffer.
- * Creation of work and attractive employment prospects for young people.
- * Improvement of migrants' homelands, revitalising their economies and providing technical aid to improve food production, for example.
- * Arranging channels for legal migration.
- * Contributing to community building projects both locally and in the wider world.

Of course, such efforts are unlikely without a personal struggle to grow in the virtues that make us free and happy and open to reconciliation and solidarity. For this reason the university where I work, at The Hague, introduced personal leadership courses based on the virtues some 15 years ago, and they have proven to be very successful.

With Schuman as a guide, let us, wherever we live, take up the fascinating adventure of caring for the other(s) and the earth, and of humanising economic and political structures.

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- See more at: <https://www.mercatornet.com/features/view/after-brexit-what-can-revitalise-the-european-union/19584#sthash.zKxxGYfx.dpuf>