



**Call for Papers "Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?"**

**HOW CAN A COMMON EUROPEAN HISTORICAL MEMORY ENHANCE EU'S SOFT  
POWER AFTER THE COVID-19 CRISIS?**

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How can a common European historical memory enhance EU's soft power after the COVID-19 crisis?





## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The present research paper argues that the European Union should redefine its goals on the global stage and critically assess its own foreign policy instruments, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and tensions within the liberal global order. With limited capabilities to act as a hard power competitor, while being a strong advocate for multilateralism and cooperation, EU must find new and innovative ways to use diplomacy and soft power. As a consequence, this research aims to analyse the ways in which the EU's soft power could be enhanced after the COVID-19 crisis. The paper looks at the connection between a common European memory and the concept of solidarity. Emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, the European project had at its core from the very beginning the idea of solidarity. On the other hand, European historical memory is still very much an objective, rather than a reality, but its further development could promote and enhance a stronger European project.

### **Short bio**

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## ***Introduction***

The crisis generated by the novel coronavirus pandemic has greatly accentuated the risks and tendencies linked to the degradation of the liberal global order. In a rapidly evolving international community, power politics, inwards-looking policies and discourses, and increased international competition, rather than collaboration, seem to become the norm. The COVID-19 pandemic put significant stress on the multilateral institutional framework, as countries tried to cope up with the spread of the virus. In this context, more and more countries, from all over the Globe, proposed nation-orientated solutions and policies, questioning the value and importance of international collaboration. Correlated with the recent difficulties within the transatlantic relation, as well as the internal problems of the Union, the position of the European Union as part of the global community became less stable. The EU's multilateral, value-based, approach to international relations could turn out to become the exception on the global arena. On the other hand, as this paper will argue, the COVID-19 crisis and structural changes affecting the international community could provide opportunities for the European Union. In a global order defined increasingly by individualistic tendencies and isolationist foreign policies, the EU could transform itself, as the main actor fighting for collaboration and an international community based on shared values, rather than power politics. As more countries are increasingly looking inwards, how can the EU increase its role in global politics, if it underlines and enhances the European solidarity as the core value of the European project?

The crisis created intense pressure on all countries around the world, including the EU Member States. After a short period of time in which the crisis was tackled with nationwide actions, it became clear that a European common approach was necessary. The key concept of *solidarity* was present in both the European response to the spread of the virus, as well as the project of economic reconstruction in the long term. But in order to understand its consequences, the health crisis must be put into the broader context. The international system is going through structural changes, with re-emerging hard power competition, lack of trust between nations and increased tensions. The European Union must redefine its goals on the global stage and critically assess its own foreign policy instruments. With limited capabilities to act as a hard power competitor, and being a strong advocate for multilateralism and cooperation, the EU must find new and innovative ways to use diplomacy and soft power. As a consequence, this research paper aims to analyse the ways in which the EU's soft power could be enhanced after the COVID-19 crisis. I propose looking at the connection between a common European historical memory framework and the concept of solidarity. Emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, the European project had at its core, from the very beginning, the idea of solidarity. On the other hand, European historical memory is still very much an objective, rather than a reality and progress is yet to be made.

Soft power has been defined by Joseph Nye as: `the ability to shape the preferences of others.` (Nye, 2004:5). Any country's soft power is based on three core elements: `its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.)` (Ney, 2004:11). In this sense, it becomes clear that the three core elements described by Ney are strongly interconnected. Political values are embedded in culture, while legitimacy and moral authority on the international arena are a direct result of the first two. Created after the Second World War in order to ensure peace and economic recovery, the project of European integration is in many ways based on cultural and political values. These values, such as democracy, liberalism, rule of law, international collaboration, multilateralism, became therefore the core elements of the European



soft power capabilities. These soft power capabilities were of great importance during all of the integration waves, especially after the end of the Cold War and the accession of the former countries from Central and Eastern Europe. But this value-system seems not to be sufficient in tackling the recent challenges, both internal and external to the Union. As a consequence, the EU must further develop its soft power cultural component, especially in relation to its historical experiences, both positive and negative.

Solidarity is at the core of the European project. Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union puts solidarity among the core values of the European Union: `The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for 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.` In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the importance of European solidarity became even higher. In the 2020 State of the European Union speech, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, made four references to the European solidarity and the various ways it was put into action, from the migration crisis to climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic (SOTEU, 2020).

Conceptually, historical memory is extremely hard to define and operationalize. It is not the objective of this paper to describe and analyse these highly nuanced theoretical debates, but rather to underline that historical memory as a concept is fluid, and this characteristic must be taken into account when designing policies. Pierre Nora (1976:398) described historical memory as `the memory or the aggregate of memories, conscious or not, of an experience that was lived through and/or transformed into myth by a living collective body, of whose identity the sentiment of the past forms an integral part`<sup>1</sup>. Maurice Halbwachs (1997) research on the collective memory argued convincingly that historical and collective memory, while not the same, are in many ways entangled and embedded one in the other. Prutsch (2015:11-12) defined four main characteristics of the concept of historical memory:

1. `it is widely agreed that historical memory is a form of collective memory and as such can be distinguished from what might be called individual, private or personal memory;
2. though generally acknowledged as directed towards the past and providing a common view of the same or parts thereof, historical memory eludes any uniform definition;
3. historical memory should not be seen as something objective and unbiased, but as incorporating a distinct degree of subjectivity, and is by necessity based on value judgements accordingly;
4. historical memory can potentially play a functional role, which exposes it not only to politics of memory, but also to the danger of it becoming a tool for a deliberate misinterpretation or falsification of history.`

The link between the three concepts described in this introduction are not particularly easy to see. This is, of course, made even more difficult by the unique institutional and political framework of

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<sup>1</sup> In French: “[...] le souvenir ou l’ensemble de souvenirs, conscients ou non, d’une expérience vécue et/ou mythifiée par une collectivité vivante de l’identité de laquelle le sentiment du passé fait partie intégrante.” The English translation used here was quoted in Prutsch, 2015:9.



the European Union itself. The argument of this research paper is that a European historical memory framework based on the concept of solidarity as the key metadiscursive paradigm could enhance the soft power capabilities of the European Union, especially after the end of the COVID-19 crisis, in a rapidly changing international environment. As the following sections will describe, there are many challenges to be taken into account, as well as various political and discursive options. As the challenges for a common European historical memory are indeed high, solidarity seems to be both fluid and concrete enough in order to provide a broader framework that could work at two levels. First of all, at the EU level, where a single unitary common discursive approach could be applied. Secondly, at the level of each Member State, where it could be distinctively applied, taking into consideration the diversity of national historical memories across the Union.

### *Challenges and possible solutions for a common European historical memory*

At the national level(s), there is a long tradition of enhancing historical memory. History and nation-building are two strongly linked concepts and phenomena. Especially because of this strong entanglement, there are many challenges to a common European historical memory framework. There are, of course, attempts at establishing transnational and EU-level historical elements, such as the 23<sup>rd</sup> August as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism or the House of European History. The Europe for Citizens Programme did comprise between 2007 and 2013 a reference to `developing a sense of European identity among European citizens based on recognised common values, history and culture` (EP/Council 2006, Article 1). However, only 4% of the overall budget of the Programme was used for the Active European Remembrance. For 2014-2020, the budget was increased to 18.6% (Commission, 2011).

As Prutsch (2015:15) argued, three frameworks have been proposed regarding the common European historical memory:

1. the long European historical perspective, where the common European culture and values are the most important elements of European identity; in this perspective, a common European memory framework must include all European history, from Antiquity to the present.
2. the framework based around the tragedy of the two World Wars, the crimes of totalitarian regimes and the post-1945 effort for European reconstruction;
3. the European integration process itself; in this perspective, the common European historical memory would discursively start after the Second World War, and it would be defined as a supranational framework, neither trying to integrate, nor replace, national historical memories;

All of these three perspectives have advantages and disadvantages. While a long-term narrative grounds the European project in the longer European historical experience, it can create a high number of contentious points between national narratives. The short-term perspective would create less tensions between Member States, but it would reduce the common European historical memory framework in its scope, while making extremely difficult its application across the entire EU. The *European integration only* perspective tries to overcome all these difficulties by defining the European project as a unique event in history, an entirely new phase in political arrangements. On the other hand, this perspective would be very hard to be transferred into concrete policy





instruments. As this paper will argue in the following pages, a new approach is necessary, significantly more dynamic, while at the same time achieving several objectives.

Starting from these three main frameworks, the same author (Prutsch, 2015:14) underlines three policy options. First of all, to basically accept the high level of diversity within European historical memories across all EU Member States, with all the problems associated with it. Secondly, to create a common European framework around a broadly defined metaconcept (a *topoi*, as the author calls it), such as the concept of liberty. Thirdly, to construct a new European historical memory, with new landmarks and historical paradigms. These three options are in no way strict categories, rather broader types of policy options. Any successful policy instrument must take into account the delicate status of historical memory in all EU Member States and apply measures specific to all these three categories, as defined by Prutsch.

Prutsch (2015) underlines that two of the three above options seemed to have been preferred by policy-makers. Both the focus on the long European historical heritage and the European integration project as the 'peace project' after the tragedy of the Second World War failed to successfully integrate with national historical memory frameworks. Nevertheless, his argument that focusing on the Holocaust as a unique historical phenomenon, and to some extent on the Stalinism in Central and Eastern Europe, is a viable solution is insufficiently developed. A common European historical memory framework must have broader objectives and, in one way or another, integrate all the diverse national master narratives. In this sense, it can be pointed out that objectives must not be too limited in their scope<sup>2</sup>.

A successful policy regarding a common European historical memory must achieve two objectives, that are in many ways in opposition. First of all, any common framework of European history must critically assess, discuss, and overcome the many tragedies from the European past, especially during the XX<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, it must propose an optimistic, almost teleological, master narrative, a common goal for the European project. In this sense, it becomes increasingly clear that any common European historical memory must use the *learned from our mistakes* approach. This discursive paradigm would underline the tragic consequences of inwards-looking, autarchic, non-democratic policies and discourses, as the European history provides several examples in this sense. As a result of these tragic consequences, the project of European integration would be defined as a unique alternative to competition between nations.

As it has been argued in this section, there are significant challenges to a common European historical memory. One could argue that it would actually do more harm than good, exacerbating those who oppose a stronger European integration and believe that their cultural and historical values must be *defended* from replacement by alternative, European, ones. After defining the advantages and disadvantages of a common European historical memory framework, Rigney concludes that the importance of a shared European cultural history resides in this ability to promote values that are significantly more dynamic and tolerant than it is possible at the national level: 'So the conclusion from the case of Europe must be that memory should not be abandoned as a resource for shaping citizenship. We should, however, conceive of it in much more dynamic terms, not as a singular or monumental destiny, but rather as an ongoing conversation about multiple pasts and just as many futures.' (Rigney, 2012:624). As a consequence, the author stresses out that historical memory policy frameworks, when applied at the European Union level, must be

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<sup>2</sup> This of course does not mean in any way contesting the uniqueness of the Holocaust or the importance of crimes of totalitarianisms in the XX<sup>th</sup> century.



defined and applied differently than at the national level. If national frameworks are in many ways static, using the past as a legitimization of the present *status quo*, a European framework must be significantly more fluid, not based strictly around a big historical master narrative, but rather on the diversity of European past(s). In this sense, a successful framework for a European historical memory must be based around the European *unity in diversity*.

It is almost common sense that historical memories are strongly nation-based. Any successful European historical memory framework must be supranational (Rigney, 2012). This is of the highest importance. A supranational framework would critically integrate national frameworks, without opposing or replacing them. This is not any easy task, of course. National historical discourses are overlapping antinomically very often and a supranational perspective that would overcome these problems is not easy to be defined.

Given these aspects, a successful common European historical memory framework must be based around broadly defined European values. In the following section, this research paper will describe how solidarity could be useful in this endeavour. This option would overcome several of the problems identified in this section. First of all, it would analyse critically the many tragic events from the European historical experience, while, at the same time, it would propose an objective and a future direction for the European integration project. This would not be in contradiction with the idea of multiple pasts and multiple futures, expressed by Rigney, as solidarity would be broad enough not to be imposing static discursive paradigms. On the contrary, solidarity is broad enough in order to enhance critical assessment and debate. Secondly, this framework would be sufficiently supranational, integrating various national frameworks, while not replacing them. Last, but not least, this value-based European historical memory framework would be fluid enough to include both the long-term European history, starting from the Antiquity if needed, and the shorter-term contemporary European history.

### ***Solidarity as a concept for a historical memory framework***

How can solidarity be used in enhancing a common European historical memory policy? Why would this concept be better than others? How would solidarity be defined in this sense and how it should be applied? These questions are not easy to answer and it is not even the objective of this research paper to do so. Our aim here is to include solidarity, as a metaconcept of a common European historical framework, in the present discussion regarding how to increase the European Union's soft power capabilities.

Our approach is based on the third policy option, as described by Prutsch and detailed in the previous section. Building on his research, we will argue that solidarity is one of the best, if not the best, conceptual option. Afterwards, we will try to link this perspective with a discussion on how to enhance the EU's soft power position after the COVID-19 pandemic.

As recent research has pointed out (Lahusen & Grasso, 2018) most European citizens value the idea of solidarity, even if there are important differences between Member States. It can be argued that Europeans consider solidarity as one of the most important aspects of their identity as Europeans. As a consequence, Geremek rightly points out that: 'We must abandon the language of accountants and go back to the language of day-to-day communication, where we ask ourselves what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong. At the current turning point in the European Union's history, it is not only that Community institutions need to be redefined, but also that a



feeling of belonging to the Community needs to be generated.` (Geremek, 2006:5). In this sense, European solidarity could provide the most useful key concept and a solution for the post-COVID-19 soft power global status of the EU.

The crisis generated by the novel coronavirus pandemic made acute and more important the need for a real European solidarity. The significant challenges, both related to public health and economy, meant that no single, national, response was sufficient. Coordination and collaboration at the European level was necessary, making the concept of solidarity one of the most present in public and political discourse. The long-term economic recovery of the EU Member States implied that solidarity would remain at the forefront of EU politics. Ursula von der Leyen described the NextGenerationEU programme as `a magnificent signal of solidarity`, in her European Parliament address from 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 2020. This is, as it has been described already, in contradiction with the general trend on the international arena.

In this context, focusing a common European historical memory framework on the concept of European solidarity seems like a natural choice. On the other hand, there are several arguments why this option is indeed the best one available, regardless of the context. First of all, European solidarity underlines the unique character of the European integration project. European integration will be, in this sense, the end of a long history of political, economic, and military competition between nation-states, a lesson of what the lack of solidarity and international collaboration means. This would provide for a middle ground between the long-term perspective and the short-term one. Secondly, solidarity as the main value of the European project would allow for diverse applications, in various national or regional contexts. Thirdly, while other alternative concepts (such as liberty) could suggest, more or less subtly, a focus on the national interests, solidarity, by definition, is transnational and international. Last, but not least, the recent developments on the international arena, described in the introduction of this paper, mean that there is a strong opportunity for the European Union to become a pro-solidarity global actor. The following section of this paper will describe how increasing the importance of the European historical memory framework, based around solidarity as a key concept, could enhance the soft power capabilities of the European Union.

### ***How can a common European historical memory enhance the EU's soft power after the COVID-19 crisis?***

The need for a stronger EU presence in international affairs is something that European institutions and Member States have been struggling with for a long time. As Anna Michalski puts it: `although there is no doubt about the EU's capacity and know-how in a number of individual areas (such as development assistance, humanitarian aid, international trade, peacekeeping and reconstruction), it is seen as a weak actor (and sometimes non-existing) in the domain of international politics and an easy target for external pressure or diverging national interests of the member states` (Michalski, 2005:125). According to Azpíroz (2005:6-10), EU's soft powers resources are:

1. European Culture and Identity;
2. EU Principles and Values;
3. EU Institutions, especially the European External Action Service (EEAS);
4. EU Foreign Policy Strategies.



All of these four instruments of soft power are important individually, but of course they work in close correlation, even in concatenation, from values and principles to institutions and policies. In this sense, this research paper focuses on the first two, underlining their high relevance, but the recommendations are addressed for the third and fourth instruments.

When discussing and assessing European Union's soft power capabilities, one must take into account the unique status of the EU as a political and institutional construction. As previously described, soft power is usually defined as an attribute of states, one that is used in relations with other likewise organised entities. In this sense, soft power does not include the ability of a given state to influence its own citizens. While not entering into this rather complex debate, it can be easily observed that the European integration project is and has always been in a different position in relation to convincing its citizens of its merits. As a consequence, a stronger and enhanced soft power presence of the EU could have two directions. First of all, the Union could better present its importance and good influence internally, for the European citizens. Secondly, the EU's soft power capabilities would be of great importance in the rather classical sense, in promoting liberal democracy and multilateralism on the global stage. A fully developed European historical memory framework would provide useful arguments in both cases.

Convincing Europeans of the importance of the integration process is an old and difficult task that is not necessarily linked to the COVID-19 crisis, but it could be aggravated by it. From the rejection of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe to the Brexit process, it was very often clear that EU institutions must further develop their ability to persuade citizens. It is a truism that cultural and historical narratives are of the highest importance in this process. In this sense, the international evolutions, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, could provide an interesting opportunity for strengthening EU cohesion. European solidarity *in action*, not just in theory, in comparison to other countries' policies, would become the best argument for a stronger Union. Building on this argument, solidarity must be linked discursively to a common European historical memory framework, establishing, while taking into account all the previously discussed precautions, a stronger European identity and citizenship.

On the global arena, it is clearly imperative for a stronger EU presence. From its very inception, the European project has been a strong advocate for solidarity, democracy, liberalism, and collaboration. The recent evolution made the EU one of the few remaining actors in this position. The COVID-19 crisis accentuated these fractures and put in an even greater risk the entire global liberal order. While the crisis will certainly end, sooner or later, its consequences will be felt for a very long term. In this sense, the EU must enhance its soft power capabilities. A European historical memory framework built around the concept of European solidarity could promote externally the European integration project very successfully. This could be of great use in at least three ways. First of all, the European Neighbourhood Policy would most certainly benefit neighbouring countries that consider the EU as a strong and helpful partner, both at the state level, as the citizens' one. Secondly, a stronger EU soft power would be of the highest importance in any accession talks. The European project would better transfer its values within states that are candidates to membership if it could convincingly argue its it the best political and axiological arrangement. The third advantage is linked to this latter point. A strong EU soft power would have, by definition, a comparative undertone. As more and more countries turn inwards, the European Union could benefit in its foreign affairs presence by underlining its uniqueness. In this sense, constructing a common European historical memory framework that presents the European project



as the solidarity-orientated experiment would transmit to all international actors, from states to organisation or states, the reliable values the EU Member States stand for.

This argumentation is in many ways on the same lines as the one developed by Erkki Tuomioja:

“But this hard power does not, nor should it, define the EU's role. On the contrary, the EU as an international organisation of a *sui generis* kind - less than a federal state, but with a large degree of super-national decision-making and pooled sovereignty that no other international organisation has - is also unique in its capacity to bring to international crisis-management tasks a comprehensive variety of different instruments which no other international organisation or nation state can match (...) Nor should we overlook what is perhaps the most powerful instrument in the EU's arsenal: the so-called European perspective of membership in the European union it can offer to countries in its neighbourhood. The EU is, after all, arguably the most successful peace project in world history, having put to an end the sceptre of war between its member states, who have between them started two world wars and countless lesser ones” (Tuomioja, 2009).

The same author makes a very interesting argumentation regarding how the European Union could reduce its advantages in soft power. While the author's objective is in direct contradiction with the aim of this paper<sup>3</sup>, his line of argumentation is very similar to the one developed here. The three designated mistakes EU institutions could make are of course grounded in the context of the referenced paper, given that it was written in 2009. The author argues that the European Union must not put a theoretical or geographical limit to its enlargement. This would increase the attractiveness of the European project as it will give hope for accession. Secondly, the EU must avoid unilateral trade deals or any ways of attracting some countries and excluding others. In other words, the EU must keep its equality-driven relation with all possible partners. Thirdly, EU Member States must all live to the standards, in policy and values, that are expected from countries outside the Union (Tuomioja, 2009).

It is important to point out that our proposal of enhancing EU's soft power capabilities by establishing a value-based European historical memory framework, focused on the concept of European solidarity, implicitly prevents these mistakes identified by Tuomioja. Even if mistakes such as these could be made, a strong European identity and culture would help significantly the process of correction.

EU's soft power is most certainly not enough in itself, or when defined with a limited, classic, scope and approach. The European Union approach to its foreign relations is much better described by the smart power concept, as explained by Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, in 2007: “The answer is clearly that we need some combination of the two. Or perhaps a new form of power altogether, what some scholars have called “smart power”. (Ferrero-Waldner, 2007). It is in this sense that should be read the argumentation of this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> He looks at how possible mistakes could hinder the EU soft power capabilities, while this paper analyzes how to improve it.



This paper has argued that a strongly and fully developed European historical memory framework, focused on the concept of European solidarity, would improve and enhance the EU's soft power capabilities, especially in the international context affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following section, six policy recommendations will be proposed and briefly described.

### *Recommendations*

Given the arguments detailed in this paper, six main policy directions could be taken by EU decision-makers in order to improve EU's soft power capabilities by orientating a common European historical memory framework around the concept of European solidarity:

**1. designing a European history curriculum;**

The curriculum should not be too restrictive, as to include specific experiences from all EU Member States, while, at the same time, be adaptable enough. Organisations such as European Association of History Educators (EUROCLIO) could provide useful expertise. This policy should not aim to replace national historical narratives, rather to ground them in the larger European history, while, at the same time, providing a sort of supra-national historical knowledge .

**2. frequent promotion of the European integration project, by the instruments of public diplomacy, as the focus on both internal and external solidarity;**

While this is of course happening already, its scope, focus, and importance should be significantly improved, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The inward looking tendencies will not disappear after the end of the pandemic, and the EU must use this moment as an opportunity to promote itself as the *solidarity project*.

**3. expanding the institutional framework focused on European history (starting from the example of the House of European History);**

Given the success of the House of European History, the institutional framework could be expanded with foundations, institutes, museums, etc.; financed by the various European institutions and programmes. These must be located all across the European Union, focused on both broad European historical topics, as well as the entanglements between European and national history.

**4. increasing the available research grants and programmes focused on the European history (starting from programmes such as Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions);**

Available programmes should be expanded in scope and available financial resources, while new initiatives could attract researchers from within or outside the EU. This would promote research both from European researchers, as well as interest from researchers from outside the EU.



**5. underlining the importance of values in all relations part of the European Neighbourhood Policy;**

While this is part of the discourse already, this aspect should be strongly correlated with other points, including in accessions negotiations. As described by the Treaties, values are an important component of the European project, and this importance must be underlined in all accession negotiations.

**6. increased scope of the Europe for Citizens programme;**

Given the objective of the Europe for Citizens programme is to bring citizens closer to the European Union, its scope should expand and the funds be increased.

Building from these six main actions coordinates, other policy initiatives could be designed. They are, in many ways, only a starting point and, given their level of success, the options available for expansion are significant.

**Conclusion**

The main argument of this paper could be summarised as it follows: *History matters*. Not only as a chain of past events or phenomena, but as perceptions and ideas structuring our understanding of our past as well. European Union`s future role in the fast-changing global order could be very significantly determined by how Europeans understand and build on their shared historical experiences, as well as by their commitment to strengthen and defend their uniqueness. An important common European historical memory framework focused on the concept of European solidarity could indeed enhance the EU`s ability to achieve those objectives by the means of soft power.

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