THE BIRTH OF A UNION – AND ITS VALUES

Invite participants to sit in the circle. Make it personal, not academic. Tell it like a story – with pauses and reflection points.)

You just worked together in groups to define your own values. That's actually very similar to what the first European leaders had to do – but instead of a team or a project, they were creating something between entire countries. A new kind of cooperation.

When people come together, they naturally bring different perspectives, needs, and fears. Defining values for a friend group or a team often means focusing on how we work together – things like trust, respect, fun, flexibility.

But defining values for a group of states means choosing foundations that will survive disagreement, elections, conflict, and change. They need to be clear, universal, and legally grounded – like human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

Both are important – but they serve different purposes.

Imagine it's just after the Second World War. Europe is in ruins – not just buildings, but trust, relationships, and societies; cities destroyed, economies collapsed, families broken. But amidst the devastation, people began to ask: How do we make sure this never happens again? How can we work together – across borders – for peace, prosperity, and a better life for all?

People had seen what nationalism, hatred, and dehumanization could lead to. Out of this destruction, some visionary leaders dared to imagine something different: cooperation instead of conflict, unity instead of division.

This is when the foundations of the European Union were laid.

In 1951, six countries – Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands – came together to form the European Coal and Steel Community. Why coal and steel? Because they were the key resources for war – and if we control them together, war becomes less likely.

But the real goal was not just economic. It was deeply value-driven: to secure peace, freedom, and dignity for all people in Europe. They needed to agree not just on goals, but on shared values that could hold them together through conflict, change, and growth.

Fast forward to 1957 – the Treaty of Rome lays the groundwork for closer integration, and slowly, more countries join this project. Nowadays, the EU has 27 member states. But what really defines a 'Union'? It's not only treaties, markets, or open borders. It's shared values.

In 2000, the EU adopts the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and later, the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) makes it clear: the European Union is founded on common values.

If I mention a value that matches one from your earlier group work, grab that sticky note and come place it on the 'EU Wall of Values' over here.

(Read slowly and dramatically:)

In the heart of Europe, after decades of war, leaders made a promise:

To build a union based on **respect for human dignity** – where every life matters equally.

They committed to **freedom** – the freedom to live, to speak, to move, to love.

They insisted on **democracy** – that power belongs to the people.

They upheld **equality** – across gender, race, religion, and more.

They enshrined the **rule of law** – where no one is above the law.

And they vowed to protect **human rights** – for all, everywhere in the Union, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

(Every time a value is recognized, participants post the matching sticky note on the wall. If someone's note is close but not exact, encourage conversation about it.)

Let's take a moment to see what we came up with as a group – and what overlaps with these EU values.

Ask the group:

- Which of your values matched those of the EU?
- What's missing? What do you think the EU maybe forgot?
- Why might those be more important in a smaller group than in a union of countries?
- Was anything in the EU list surprising?
- Who gets to define what values like "democracy" or "equality" really means?

These values are not just abstract ideas – they are meant to guide how EU countries treat their citizens, how they work together, and how they engage with the world.

But values don't just live on paper.