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From accession to belonging: European Union values, identity, and democratic voice in Cyprus twenty years on

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Abstract

Twenty years after its accession to the European Union (EU), Cyprus presents a compelling case for examining how EU foundational values are experienced, contested, and negotiated in practice. This paper explores the lived meanings of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights through dialogue-based discussions focused on land, bodies, borders, and civic voice. Drawing on qualitative reflections emerging from the EUnity20 conference "Are we European now?", which brought together scholars, civil society actors, policymakers, and members of the public, the analysis interprets panel discussions and audience exchanges as illustrative reflections of broader debates surrounding the interpretation and practice of EU values in contemporary Cypriot society. By foregrounding perspectives on environmental governance, bodily autonomy and equality, migration and belonging, and civic participation and youth engagement, the paper demonstrates how European values are not merely implemented through institutions but are continuously reinterpreted through social struggle, political debate, and lived experience in Cyprus.

Keywords

Cyprus, European Union (EU), European Values, Environmental Governance, Human Rights, Borders, Migration, Security, Democratic participation, Civic voice.

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Introduction

On May 1st, 2004, the Republic of Cyprus became a full Member State of the European Union following a prolonged and complex accession process shaped by both geopolitical realities and internal division. Despite the island's de facto partition since 1974, relations between Cyprus and the European Communities had begun decades earlier, initially through trade, financial, and technical cooperation agreements signed in 1973. These early forms of engagement evolved into development and infrastructure projects that benefited both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities, laying the groundwork for broader EU involvement across the island.[1]

In the late 1990s, EU engagement increasingly emphasized bicommunal collaboration and civil society development. In 1999, additional funding was allocated to support bicommunal initiatives and cultural heritage restoration projects, reflecting the Union's commitment to reconciliation and social cohesion. As Cyprus's application for EU membership progressed, the development of a bicommunal strategy and structured political dialogue between the two communities became a prerequisite for accession-related assessment.[2] Following successive progress reports confirming substantial alignment with the EU acquis, the Copenhagen European Council in 2002 took the historic decision to admit Cyprus as a full member of the Union. According to Vassiliou[3] the EU had no choice but to accept the Republic of Cyprus as a whole specifying that "as long as there is no solution, the application of the acquis in the occupied areas is suspended. Once the island will be reunited automatically the T/C federated state will be part of the EU and all Turkish Cypriots will be citizens of the Union". The Accession Treaty was ratified by the Republic of Cyprus in April 2003, ahead of formal accession in 2004.

Nearly twenty-two years later, Cyprus offers a particularly revealing case for examining how the European Union's foundational values[4] such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights, are lived, interpreted, and contested in practice. As presented and protected in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union[5] and further articulated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights,[6] these values constitute the normative core of European integration and democratic legitimacy. Yet their realisation is neither uniform nor uncontested. Across member states, and particularly in contexts marked by historical division and political fragmentation, tensions persist between formal legal alignment and everyday social and political experience.

In Cyprus, EU membership has embedded these values within legal and institutional frameworks, while at the same time exposing gaps between procedural compliance and lived democratic participation. This paper examines these dynamics through four interconnected thematic lenses: land and environmental governance (*Whose Land, Whose Voice?*), bodily autonomy and equality (*Bodies, Beliefs, and Who Decides?*), borders and belonging (*Fortress or Home?*), and civic voice and democratic participation (*Permission to Speak?*). These themes, as articulated during the EUnity20 Conference "Are we European now?", reflect central arenas in which EU values are negotiated in contemporary Cyprus.

Together, the thematic sections explore how European norms are enacted, challenged, and reinterpreted through struggles over land and environmental decision-making, debates on bodies and rights, competing narratives of borders and belonging, and the conditions under which civic voice becomes meaningful or marginalised. By situating these discussions within the Cypriot context two decades after EU accession, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how EU values function not only as legal commitments, but as contested social and political practices shaping everyday life on the island.

Whose land, whose voice?

Environmental protection and democratic participation

This thematic section examines the intersection of environmental governance and democratic participation in Cyprus, foregrounding questions of land, ownership, and collective decision-making. Drawing on dialogue-based contributions by Klitos Papastyliianou, Environmental Policy Officer at *Terra Cypria*, and Andromachi Sophocleous, Co-President of *Volt Cyprus* and political analyst, the discussion explores how environmental protection emerges as a contested political field in which economic interests, state authority, and community voices often collide. The section questions who is empowered to decide over land use and ecological futures, and how citizens' participation is enabled or constrained within environmental policymaking processes, particularly in relation to EU environmental standards and local governance practices.

Environmental protection has increasingly been mediated through European directives and international agreements, particularly those concerning renewable energy development, biodiversity conservation, and democratic participation in environmental decision-making. Particularly through the Renewable Energy Directive[7] and the broader objectives of the European Green Deal 2019–2024,[8] member states of the EU have been encouraged to increase the share of renewable energy in their national energy mix. Given Cyprus's high solar irradiation levels, photovoltaic systems have become a

central pillar of national energy planning. Government schemes have promoted the installation of solar panels at both household and commercial levels, supported by EU structural funds and national subsidies. In principle, these initiatives create opportunities for citizens to participate in the energy transition as small-scale energy producers. However, the development of renewable energy infrastructure has also exposed institutional limitations, including delays in electricity market liberalisation, grid capacity constraints, and regulatory uncertainties regarding energy storage and distribution with households and small producers who invested in solar panels to have limited influence over grid management decisions that directly affect their ability to produce and supply renewable energy.

Environmental governance debates in Cyprus are also shaped by conflicts surrounding biodiversity protection and land use, as in the case of the Akamas Peninsula. This region represents one of the island's most ecologically significant landscapes and forms part of the Natura 2000 network, the European Union's flagship biodiversity conservation framework established under the Habitats Directive[9] and the Birds Directive.[10] The Akamas area hosts important habitats and endangered species, including nesting sites for Mediterranean Sea turtles such as *Caretta caretta.* For several years, however, the region has been at the centre of intense political contestation between conservation advocates, state authorities, local communities, and tourism developers. Proposed infrastructure projects, road upgrades, and tourism developments have repeatedly generated conflict, with environmental organisations arguing that such initiatives risk undermining Cyprus's obligations under EU environmental law. The Akamas case[11] demonstrates how EU conservation frameworks can empower civil society actors by providing legal tools and institutional leverage to challenge state decisions, while simultaneously exposing the limits of environmental enforcement when economic development interests remain politically influential.

Similar debates arise in many environmental policy contexts in Cyprus, particularly when citizens are not informed in a timely manner about decisions affecting their local environments. Non-governmental organisations focusing on environmental preservation, like *Terra Cyprus* and *BirdLife Cyprus,* have played a prominent role in monitoring environmental policy, mobilising public debate, and challenging decisions that may threaten protected ecosystems. A significant legal development occurred in 2023, when the Administrative Court of Cyprus recognised the legitimate standing of environmental NGOs to bring legal challenges concerning environmental protection. This ruling strengthened the role of civil society in environmental governance and expanded mechanisms for public oversight and accountability. Still though, the practical implementation of participatory governance remains uneven as environmental decision-making in Cyprus is often criticised for being highly centralised, limiting the ability of citizens and local communities to meaningfully influence final decisions.

Thus, the question of *whose land and whose voice* remains only partially resolved, as the depth of democratic participation in environmental governance continues to be negotiated through legal frameworks, economic incentives, and collective responsibilities.

Bodies, beliefs, & who decides?

Equality, sex education, and LGBTQI+ rights

Focusing on the regulation of bodies and identities, this section addresses how equality, sex education, and LGBTQI+ rights are debated and negotiated in contemporary Cyprus. Based on interventions by Maria Epaminonda, Director of the *Cyprus Family Planning Association (CFPA)*, and Costa Gavrielides, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) expert, the discussion highlights the frictions and tensions between individual rights, religious and cultural beliefs, and state responsibility. These discussions are situated within the broader EU framework of fundamental rights- human rights-, examining how European norms are selectively embraced, resisted, or reframed within national policy, institutional practice, and public discourse.

Since accession in 2004, Cyprus has progressively aligned its legislative framework with EU norms on human dignity, equality, and human rights, as presented in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.[6] Yet the pace and depth of reform in matters concerning the bodily autonomy and sexual rights have remained a part of ongoing domestic contestation.

A significant turning point came with the adoption of Law,[12] which permits abortion on request up until the 12th week of pregnancy and until the 19th week in rape cases. Advocacy by the Cyprus Family Planning Association (CFPA), a member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) European Network, and other civil society organisations, was instrumental in framing abortion reform as a matter of public health and fundamental rights rather than morality. However, according to the needs assessment report, published as part of the *Mothers and Daughters* project and co-funded by the European Union,[13] it is highlighted the fact that even after legalisation, practical barriers remain in Cyprus, including uneven service provision, stigma, and limitations in youth-friendly SRHR services. This gap between

legal reform and lived access reflects a broader post-accession dynamic which is the fact that compliance with EU norms at the legislative level does not automatically translate into uniform institutional practice.

A similar pattern emerges in the area of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Over the past two decades, Cyprus has incorporated elements of sexuality education into school curricula, partly influenced by EU gender equality commitments and public health frameworks.[14] However, implementation remains contested, particularly regarding references to sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, institutional gaps persist, including the absence of systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the quality and consistency of delivery. As a result, the content and pedagogical approach of sexuality education continue to reflect broader societal ambivalence toward sexual diversity, while remaining constrained by the enduring influence of religious and moral frameworks within Cypriot society.

Regarding, LGBTQI+ equality, civil society organisations such as ACCEPT-LGBTI Cyprus have documented ongoing discrimination, particularly in educational settings and public discourse. As recorded in the LGBTIQ Strategy 2020–2025 of the European Commission,[15] 43% of LGBT persons across the EU reported experiencing discrimination in 2019, compared to 37% in 2012, indicating the persistence, and in some contexts the intensification of unequal treatment. In Cyprus, Article 28 of the Cypriot Constitution[16] prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex, aligning with EU gender equality directives; however, as elsewhere, legal recognition has not eliminated social stigma or institutional resistance.

A step forward occurred in December 2015, when the House of Representatives passed the Civil Union Law,[17] granting same-sex couples the right to enter into legally recognised civil unions. The law provides many of the rights and obligations associated with marriage, including inheritance, property, and social benefits. However, the law does not establish marriage equality or full joint adoption rights for same-sex couples, thereby reflecting the gradual and negotiated nature of LGBTQI+ legal reform in Cyprus.

The governance of bodies and human rights implementation in Cyprus therefore reveal Europeanisation not as a linear process of adoption, rather than an ongoing process of dispute. Civil society organisations have strategically mobilised EU rights language to advance reform, while opponents often frame resistance in terms of cultural sovereignty, ethics and religious identity. In this sense, the question of "who decides?" (the individual, the church, the state, or Europe), remains central to understanding how equality, human rights and bodily autonomy are truly expressed in contemporary Cypriot society.

Across the discourses of abortion, sexuality education, and LGBTQI+ equality, the Cypriot case demonstrates that EU membership has functioned less as a one-time transformative event and more as a sustained normative framework within which domestic actors make a significant effort to shift towards inclusive practices.

Fortress or home?
Borders, fear and belonging

This section explores competing narratives surrounding borders and belonging in Cyprus, a country which is not only affected by historical division and geopolitical insecurity, but also by the overlapping and often inconsistent border regimes into which it is drawn. During the conference, the discussion between Dr Giorgos Charalambous, Associate Professor of Political Science, and Dr Nicos Trimikliniotis, Professor of Sociology, Social Sciences, and Law, offered an important point of departure for thinking about the role of borders in the Cypriot context. It drew attention to the extent to which borders may be understood either as mechanisms of protection and collective security or as sites of exclusion through which precarious hierarchies of belonging are produced and maintained.

Our analysis takes that discussion as a starting point, but turns to a different and more recent development, namely the ongoing US and Israel war in Iran in 2026. The reason of doing so lies not simply in the fact that this war unfolds at the time of writing. It lies, rather, in the way it brings into sharper view the unsettled and often contradictory character of Cyprus's border condition. This is a war that prompts us to ask not only "who belongs in Cyprus?", but also "where does Cyprus belong?". Seen through the lens of the present conflict, the question of "Borders, Fear and Belonging" moves beyond migration management alone. What recent developments show is that Cyprus is itself constituted by multiple "belongings", and that these continue to shape the unstable terms on which the island's European identity is lived and claimed.

We can begin by noting the existence of a certain symbolic irony in the timing of the present situation. The war in Iran is taking place amidst what may be regarded as one of the island's most prominent "European" moments of the decade, as Cyprus holds and hosts the presidency of the Council of Europe from January to June 2026. On the one hand, the Presidency affirms Cyprus's institutional position within the European project, with the Republic of Cyprus (RoC)

projecting an image of diplomatic leadership, political maturity among European peers, and deepening integration into the structures of EU governance. On the other hand, precisely at this moment of heightened European visibility, the island's exposure to regional instability is laid bare.[18] The contrast is revealing. For even as the institutional centre of the EU appears, temporarily, to have shifted towards Cyprus, the war has shown that the latter also has remained geographically and strategically positioned in the neighbouring Middle East region, which is marked by recurrent conflict and turmoil. Cyprus's European belonging, however, politically significant, does not and cannot suspend the geopolitical conditions that continue to shape its security environment.

Therefore, geography clearly shapes the securitised condition Cyprus lives today. Yet Cyprus's vulnerability is not a matter of geographical proximity alone. It is also affected by colonial arrangements that outlived formal imperial rule and continue to define the island's security status in the present.[19] The continued presence of the British Sovereign Base Areas at Akrotiri and Dhekelia means that Cyprus is not exposed to regional conflict only as a nearby state, but also as a territory that is actively embedded in military actions not controlled by the Republic itself.[20] The current war makes it easy to see how the insecurity of Cyprus is not just the insecurity of a small state on the edge of a war zone. Within the island, territorially distinct spaces carry military significance either as sites from which action may be launched or as possible targets of attack. In this sense, the insecurity of Cyprus is the insecurity of a state whose territory carries different strategic meanings for different actors. With its sovereignty remaining constrained,[21] the border condition of Cyprus is affected by forms of power that complicate and confuse the distinction between national territory, European frontier,[22] and (post) colonial military logics.

Finally, the question of sovereignty opens onto a further question: alignment. Where does Cyprus belong to strategically in a region marked by war, military build-up and alliance formation? On the surface, the Republic of Cyprus has sought to present itself as non-aligned. Official discourse has stressed restraint and has framed the island as a responsible regional actor, able to support humanitarian efforts and contribute to stability in a moment of crisis. The Amalthea initiative, the use of Cyprus as a hub for humanitarian shipments to Gaza, and the island's repeated role as a corridor for the evacuation of foreign nationals from nearby war zones have all reinforced this image.[23] This posture is politically intelligible. It allows Cyprus to project itself as not a participant to regional conflict, but as an agent of assistance, coordination, and care. It also sits comfortably with the image Cyprus seeks to cultivate within the EU of a mature member state, committed to order, responsibility, and humanitarian action. However, non-alignment is increasingly difficult for the Republic to sustain as a credible self-description, since its recent trajectory has involved not only a marked distancing from earlier Russian-linked financial and political relations, but also the institutionalisation of much closer alignment with the West through the 2024 US-Cyprus Strategic Dialogue, a five-year bilateral defence roadmap, expanded sanctions-enforcement cooperation with Washington and London, and even discussions on upgrading Cypriot military infrastructure for interoperability with US and partner forces.[24,25] None of this is necessarily at odds with Cyprus's European identity. On the contrary, such alignment may be understood as an extension of it, and as a possible source of strategic protection.

Yet this does not remove the tension or the fear. For the same alignment that appears to secure Cyprus also deepens its securitisation. With the escalation of the war, Cyprus has found itself surrounded by the presence, interests, and movements of multiple military powers. More concretely, this has taken the form of British operations continuing from Akrotiri, the reinforcement of the base's defences after the March 2026 strike, and the wider movement of allied naval and air-defence assets around the island, including British, French, Greek, Italian, Spanish, and Dutch deployments.[26] Neutrality, then, becomes difficult to sustain in anything more than a formal or declaratory sense, not because it has been explicitly abandoned, but because the island is now being positioned and read through the strategic uses of its territory, infrastructure, and surrounding waters.

What, then, might this mean for Cyprus in the short term? One immediate effect is likely extended insecurity. This is not only because the island may remain a target, but also because proximity to war increases exposure in less direct, but no less real, ways. Conflict spills over. It disrupts, unsettles, and creates the possibility of accident and miscalculation. Earlier incidents, such as the July 2019 accidental landing of a missile in Northern Cyprus during an Israel-Syria clash, are reminders that the effects of regional violence do not stop neatly at political borders.[27]

At the same time, the war raises difficult questions about protection and solidarity. The present moment shows that borders are not only lines of defence. They are equally spaces of interruption, and allies cannot simply be taken for granted. In the first days of the conflict, Cyprus expressed discontent with the British government over the handling of the Sovereign Base Areas.[28] There was also growing concern over the European Union's chronic responsiveness to unfolding developments, with President Nikos Christodoulides criticising what Reuters described as the EU's "slow reaction" to the situation.[29] Read alongside other recent crises, including the summer 2025 fires, these reactions point to the limits of preparedness on the island, and the limits of crisis support experienced at Europe's periphery. Cyprus is part

of Europe, yet it also remains one of its outskirt borders, and this position shapes the practicalities of Europe's presence on the island. Cyprus's EU Presidency, which was meant to project stability, diplomatic leadership, and European centrality, has itself been affected by the war, including through flight cancellations and wider disruptions.[30] This shows how quickly the language of order, preparedness, and connectivity can be unsettled when a border space is drawn more directly into a regional crisis. In Cyprus, borders do not simply secure belonging; they also expose how fragile, conditional, and inconsistently protected that belonging can be.

Permission to speak?

Civic voice, protest rights, and youth engagement

The question of civic voice in Cyprus can be productively reframed through a human rights lens, particularly the interdependence between freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the right to participate in public affairs. These rights are enshrined in Article 10 and Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)[31] and Article 12 and Article 39 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.[6]

The final thematic section examines civic voice as a lived democratic practice rather than a purely formal entitlement. Based on the contributions of Giorgos Koukoumas, Member of the Cyprus Parliament, as part of the *Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL)*, and Christiana Xenophontos, Member of the Political Office of the *Democratic Rally (DISY)* and youth advocate, the discussion focuses on protest rights, youth engagement, and the conditions under which political participation is perceived as meaningful or ineffective. The section highlights a growing sense of political distance and disengagement, particularly among younger citizens, and analyses how EU democratic values are mediated through national institutions, public trust, and experiences of collective belonging in Cyprus two decades after EU accession.

The "permission to speak" emerges not as a legal threshold but as a socio-political condition: individuals may be legally entitled to express themselves while simultaneously experiencing structural exclusion from meaningful influence. From a human rights perspective, this gap between formal entitlement and lived experience constitutes a form of democratic erosion, where rights persist in law but weaken in practice. This erosion is closely connected to what Xenophontos described as a "pandemic of loneliness," a term that was shared during the Conference from a participant. This concept, according to Xenophontos' analysis in a personal article, was perceived as the fragmentation of civic community necessary for rights to function collectively. Human rights, particularly participatory rights, are inherently relational; they presuppose a public sphere in which voices are not only expressed but heard, acknowledged, and capable of shaping outcomes.[32] In the Cypriot context, declining trust in institutions and low levels of political participation suggest that citizens increasingly perceive the public sphere as inaccessible or performative rather than deliberative. Empirical studies on social capital and democratic participation support this interpretation, demonstrating that when communal bonds weaken, individuals retreat from civic engagement not out of apathy but out of perceived futility.[33] Loneliness thus becomes a political condition that undermines the collective exercise of rights.

The human rights implications of this condition are particularly evident in relation to the right to protest and youth political participation. Although freedom of peaceful assembly is formally protected under international and European law,[31,34] its effective enjoyment depends on whether protest is institutionally recognised as a legitimate mode of democratic participation rather than framed as a disruptive exception to political order. Article 21 of the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus[16] enshrines this right, reflecting parallel safeguards under Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights[31] and Article 12 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.[6] Nevertheless, the adoption of the Public Assemblies and Parades Law[35] in July 2025 marked a significant recalibration of the regulatory framework governing public demonstrations. The law introduced mandatory notification procedures and expanded police discretion to impose conditions, alter protest routes, or disperse assemblies deemed non-peaceful, alongside heightened sanctions for non-compliance with identification orders or acts classified as incitement to violence. Critics have argued that these provisions risk shifting the balance from protection to containment, potentially weakening the substantive exercise of assembly rights even as formal legal guarantees remain intact.

The implications of this regulatory shift are particularly pronounced for younger citizens, who increasingly perceive protest and civic mobilisation as disconnected from institutional responsiveness. Contributions by Giorgos Koukoumas and Christiana Xenophontos underscore a widespread sentiment among young people in Cyprus that youth participation rarely produces tangible political outcomes as they do not feel heard or seen. This perception resonates with broader European findings on youth disengagement, which the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights associates with declining trust in institutions and underdeveloped participatory infrastructures.[36] Where youth engagement is confined to symbolic consultation rather than meaningful co-decision or accountability mechanisms, civic voice is experienced as performative rather than empowering. In such contexts, participation risks reinforcing political isolation, deepening the very sense of civic marginalisation that democratic rights are intended to counteract.

The Cypriot experience reflects a wider tension within the European Union between normative commitments to human rights and the uneven social conditions under which those rights are exercised. As scholars of democratic legitimacy argue, participation loses meaning when political power appears concentrated within informal networks of influence rather than transparent, accountable institutions.[37] Xenophontos' intervention situates civic loneliness not as a cultural deficit but as a rights-based challenge; the weakening of the collective foundations that make democratic participation possible. Addressing this challenge requires more than legal compliance or episodic mobilization; it demands sustained practices of inclusion, deliberation, accountability and shared responsibility. Without these, the right to speak remains formally intact yet substantively diminished, leaving citizens alone within democratic systems that no longer feel like their own.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to examine how European Union values are experienced, contested, and negotiated in Cyprus two decades after accession, drawing on dialogue-based discussions from the EUnity20 Conference "Are we European now?". Across the four thematic areas explored; land and environmental governance, bodily autonomy and equality, borders and belonging, and civic voice and democratic participation, a consistent pattern emerges: while EU values are firmly embedded within Cyprus's legal and institutional frameworks, their realisation in everyday political and social life remains uneven and deeply contested.

The analysis demonstrates that tensions between formal alignment and lived experience are not anomalies, but structural features of how European norms are mediated within a context marked by historical division, geopolitical vulnerability, and persistent trust deficits. In discussions over land and environmental governance, questions of participation and transparency reveal the limits of democratic inclusion in decision-making processes that are formally compliant with EU standards yet often experienced as exclusionary. Similarly, discussions on bodies, beliefs, and rights illustrate how fundamental EU principles of equality and non-discrimination encounter resistance when filtered through entrenched cultural, religious, and political norms.

The thematic focus on borders and belonging further underscores the fragility of European commitments to solidarity and freedom of movement when confronted with security, fear, and identity-based politics. In this context, EU values are not rejected outright but selectively invoked, reshaped, or suspended. Finally, the examination of civic voice and protest rights highlights a growing sense of political distance, particularly among younger citizens, where participation is formally guaranteed but substantively constrained by limited trust, perceived ineffectiveness, and the erosion of collective belonging.

Taken together, these findings suggest that EU values in Cyprus function less as fixed benchmarks of democratic achievement and more as contested social and political practices. Their meaning is continuously negotiated through struggles over space, bodies, borders, and voice, revealing both the transformative potential and the limitations of European integration at the national and local levels. Rather than offering definitive answers to whether Cyprus is "European" two decades after accession, this paper demonstrates that Europeanness itself remains an open, dynamic, and relational process, one that depends not only on legal conformity but on the cultivation of inclusive participation, accountability, and community. The question "Are we European now?" therefore becomes less a question of institutional membership and more a question of belonging: who participates, who decides, and whose voices ultimately shape the future of the European project.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required for this study.

Use of AI tools

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.3) during manuscript preparation for formatting and refinement. No AI tools were used for data generation, analysis, or interpretation. The content was critically assessed and verified by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the content.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the author(s). Publication in Open Research Europe does not imply endorsement of the European Commission.

Data availability

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As this manuscript is based on a public panel discussion and does not involve the generation or analysis of research datasets, no research data were created or analysed in the course of this study. Therefore, a data repository deposition is not applicable.

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Marianne Riddervold
University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

This manuscript addresses an important and timely question, asking how EU values are experienced and contested and negotiated in Cyprus more than two decades after accession. Its strongest contribution lies in shifting attention from formal membership to lived belonging. The Cyprus case is well suited for a discussion of the gap between membership and social or political experience.
The article has potential, but it needs to be revised to address several shortcomings fit the Open Letter format more clearly.

1. Some formulations need more clarification, in particular as regards what is really studied her. For example, the first thematic section concludes that the question of “whose land and whose voice” remains only partially resolved. What does “resolved” mean in this context? Would resolution mean full compliance with EU environmental law, more meaningful public participation, stronger local democratic control, or a closer match between practice and EU values? Since the article is concerned with the lived meaning of EU values, the authors need to explain (operationalize) what a ‘match’ between EU values and lived experience across each of the teams/question would actually entail.
2. The paper sometimes reads as an empirical research article, with references to analysis, findings and broader conclusions about Cyprus. The data availability statement however says that no research data were generated or analysed. Instead, it is based on discussions between experts and policy makers, and sometimes what seems to be the authors subjective interpretations. If the article is based on public conference discussions, it should be framed as a reflective and agenda-setting contribution rather than as a systematic empirical study.
3. Related to this, I worry about the empirical basis of the broad claims made in the manuscript. Each theme appears to draw mainly on a discussion between two speakers, supplemented by policy documents, legal references and secondary sources. This is ok for Open Letter, but the authors should be clearer what this discussions/empirical material more broadly can actually show. How much can a discussion between two people tell us about broad issues such as environmental governance, borders, belonging or youth participation in Cyprus? In particular, the manuscript should avoid claims that these

discussions represent Cypriot society more broadly. I suggest that they are presented as reflections that point to some important tensions and questions (that could be studied more in-depth). If the authors make broader claims, they must either qualify them or support them with additional empirical sources.

4. The authors should also explain more clearly why they chose four thematic questions that structure the manuscript. Why are land, bodies, borders and voice chosen as lenses through which to examine EU values in Cyprus? Are these themes derived from the conference programme, from the authors' own analytical framework, or from a broader understanding of EU values in Article 2 TEU and the Charter of Fundamental Rights? The manuscript would be stronger if each section began by explaining which EU values are at stake and why that theme helps us understand the relationship between EU membership, belonging and democratic voice.
5. The concept of "negotiated" EU values also needs clarification. What does it mean to say that EU values are negotiated in Cyprus? Does this refer to legal implementation, political and social contestation, the gap between formal rights and lived experience or something? As it stands, this is a much-used concept but it is not sufficiently defined. The authors should specify what they are exploring through the lens of negotiated values and how the conference discussions allow them to study this.
6. I am struggling a bit with the third theme, 'Fortress or home?' The three other sections are based on discussions between policy actors and experts. This section begins from a conference discussion but then turns to a broader analysis of the Iran war, British Sovereign Base Areas, sovereignty and strategic alignment. Is this section mainly based on the authors' own interpretation of recent geopolitical developments? This needs to be explained. The authors should also explain more clearly how the discussion of sovereignty and military alignment links to the article's main question about the implementation and lived experience of EU values. As it stands, the conclusion of this section does not really align with what the paper set out to do.
7. The discussion in abortion and reproductive rights also needs some more explanation. Reproductive health is not EU competences in the same way as, for example, environmental regulation or non-discrimination. It might still be relevant for an article on EU values, but the authors need to explain why and how. If not, the paper risks treating all rights-related issues as 'EU' issues, even when there is no explicit link.
8. Finally, and linked to comment 2, the conclusion needs to be toned down. As it stands, it makes very broad claims about how EU values function in Cyprus and about Europeanness. The empirical material does not really support this. Instead, and in light of letter's the limited empirical basis, the conclusion should frame the article's contribution as identifying tensions and questions emerging from the conference discussions and say that the discussions indicate some findings that could be explored further. If the authors want to make strong claims, they need more systematic empirical evidence, also engaging with the broader literature.

Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail? (Please consider whether existing challenges in the field are outlined clearly and whether the purpose of the letter is explained)

Partly

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?

Partly

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements and arguments made adequately supported by citations?
No

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language? (Please consider whether all subject-specific terms, concepts and abbreviations are explained)
No

Where applicable, are recommendations and next steps explained clearly for others to follow? (Please consider whether others in the research community would be able to implement guidelines or recommendations and/or constructively engage in the debate)
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

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Sviatlana Karpava
University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus

Summary of the Article
This open letter critically reflects on Cyprus's experiences and challenges in embodying EU values, twenty years after its accession in 2004. It is based on discussions from the EUnity20 conference, involving scholars, civil society actors, policymakers, and citizens. The paper explores how core EU principles, human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights, are interpreted, contested, and lived in the specific context of divided Cyprus.

The article is structured into thematic sections:
Land and Environmental Governance: Examines land rights, environmental protection, and citizen participation, highlighting conflicts such as the Akamas Peninsula disputes.
Bodily Autonomy and Rights: Addresses debates on gender equality, abortion laws, sexuality education, and LGBTQI+ rights, illustrating ongoing social and legal negotiations.
Borders and Belonging: Discusses Cyprus's geopolitical vulnerability, border regimes, and the impact of regional conflicts, with a focus on the island's strategic and symbolic position.

Civic Voice and Democratic Participation: Analyzes citizens' engagement, protest rights, youth participation, and the perceived gap between legal rights and social realities.
The conclusion emphasizes that EU values in Cyprus are not simply embedded through law but are actively negotiated through social struggles, identity, and political debates. It questions whether Cyprus's EU membership has translated into genuine belonging, or if it remains a contested, relational process.

Assessment of the Rationale and Clarity

Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail?
Yes.
The article clearly articulates its purpose: to explore how EU values are experienced and contested in Cyprus, a country with a complex history of division, geopolitical insecurity, and social change. It contextualizes the importance of this examination by referencing Cyprus's accession history and ongoing societal debates. The thematic framing further clarifies the specific areas of focus and the social-political relevance of each.

Does the article outline existing challenges in the field clearly?
Yes, partly.
The article effectively highlights challenges such as the gap between legal frameworks and social realities, environmental conflicts, social resistance to rights reforms, border security issues, and democratic participation deficits. However, while these challenges are well described, some could benefit from more explicit connection to broader scholarly debates on EU integration and social acceptance, to enhance clarity and depth.

Is the purpose of the letter explained?
Yes.
The purpose, to analyze the lived realities of EU values in Cyprus and to demonstrate that these are socially negotiated rather than purely institutional, is clearly stated and reinforced throughout the article.

Assessment of Referencing Differing Views and Opinions

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?
Partly.
The article presents multiple perspectives from conference speakers and civil society actors, reflecting debates on land use, rights, borders, and civic participation. It acknowledges social resistance, legal reforms, and conflicting normative claims. However, it could strengthen this aspect by explicitly referencing academic or policy literature that presents alternative or critical views on EU integration, social cohesion, or regional geopolitics, thus providing a more comprehensive view of the debates.

Factual Accuracy and Support

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements supported by citations?
Yes, partly.
The article is factually consistent with Cyprus's history, legal developments, and EU references, supported by numerous citations. However, some claims, such as the impact of EU directives or

specific legal rulings, would benefit from more direct citations to primary sources or scholarly analyses to enhance credibility and support.

Accessibility of Language

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language?

Partly.

The language is generally clear and formal, suitable for an academic policy context. Some subject-specific terms (e.g., "Natura 2000," "EU acquis," "sovereign base areas") are explained or contextualized, but others like "EU Green Deal," "biodiversity frameworks," or "border regimes" could be briefly clarified for a broader audience unfamiliar with technical terminology.

Clarity of Recommendations and Next Steps

Are recommendations and next steps clearly explained?

No.

While the conclusion offers insightful reflections on the social and political dynamics shaping EU values in Cyprus, it lacks explicit, concrete recommendations or guidelines for policymakers, civil society, or the research community. To strengthen this area, the authors should outline specific actions, such as promoting participatory governance, enhancing civic education, or fostering dialogue, to advance the realization of EU values.

Constructive Feedback and Specific Points for Improvement

Enhance Clarity of Challenges:

Explicitly frame how specific challenges relate to existing academic debates on EU integration or post-conflict social cohesion. For example, integrating references to literature on social trust, EU legal transposition, or regional geopolitics would deepen the analysis.

Broaden Perspectives and References:

Incorporate contrasting views from scholarly sources or policy reports that might critique or question the effectiveness of EU frameworks in divided societies. This would provide a more balanced view and strengthen the argument.

Support with Primary Sources:

Cite specific legal texts, court rulings, or policy documents mentioned, such as the 2023 environmental NGO legal recognition or the 2015 Civil Union Law, to improve factual accuracy and support.

Simplify Subject-Specific Terms:

Briefly define or contextualize technical terms and EU directives to ensure accessibility for non-specialist readers.

Develop Clear Recommendations:

Conclude with specific, actionable recommendations for advancing EU values in Cyprus, such as promoting inclusive environmental participation, reforming civic engagement mechanisms, or fostering intercultural dialogue on borders and identity.

Address Potential Biases and Limitations:

Acknowledge any limitations of the dialogue-based approach or the scope of the conference discussions, and suggest avenues for further empirical research or policy engagement.

Summary of the Overall Evaluation

This open letter provides a comprehensive, well-structured reflection on the lived experience of EU values in Cyprus, notably capturing the social, legal, and geopolitical dimensions. Its strengths lie

in contextual depth and thematic breadth. The main areas for improvement include explicitly referencing contrasting scholarly opinions, supporting factual claims with primary sources, clarifying technical language, and providing concrete next steps.

Addressing these points will enhance the article's clarity, academic rigor, and practical utility, ensuring it makes a substantial contribution to understanding the complex dynamics of European integration and social belonging in divided societies.

Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail? (Please consider whether existing challenges in the field are outlined clearly and whether the purpose of the letter is explained)
Yes

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?
Partly

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements and arguments made adequately supported by citations?
Partly

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language? (Please consider whether all subject-specific terms, concepts and abbreviations are explained)
Partly

Where applicable, are recommendations and next steps explained clearly for others to follow? (Please consider whether others in the research community would be able to implement guidelines or recommendations and/or constructively engage in the debate)
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Multilingualism and Language Policy; Language Ideologies and Discourse Analysis; Social Justice and Equity in Language Education; Language and Identity Politics; Language and Democratic Participation; Language and Borders.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.