

Western Heritage in European Union. Legal Values and Intercultural Competence

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between Western heritage, European Union legal values, and intercultural competence as interconnected dimensions of contemporary European integration. It argues that the normative foundations of the European Union are deeply rooted in Greco-Roman philosophy, Judeo-Christian ethics, and Enlightenment thought, which collectively shaped core principles such as sovereignty, democracy, political pluralism, human

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rights protection, and the rule of law. These principles underpin constitutional pluralism and the multi-level governance structure of the European Union, reflecting both shared values and the autonomy of Member States. The study first analyses the historical development of Western legal culture and its institutional expression within the EU, emphasizing the continued importance of state sovereignty alongside supranational cooperation.

The second part adopts a historical perspective on intercultural competence, demonstrating that the capacity to manage cultural diversity has been a persistent feature of European societies, evident in imperial governance, trade networks, diplomacy, and multinational political entities. These experiences created foundations for modern democratic coexistence across cultural boundaries.

The article then explores intercultural dialogue as a normative framework that translates legal principles—particularly democracy, pluralism, and equality—into everyday social practice through education, policy initiatives, and professional networks. It concludes that intercultural competence represents a practical extension of Western legal heritage, supporting democratic resilience, social cohesion, and inclusive European citizenship in culturally diverse societies.

Keywords: European heritage, European Union, legal values, intercultural competence, intercultural dialogue

El patrimonio occidental en la Unión Europea. Valores jurídicos y competencia intercultural

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la relación entre el legado occidental, los valores jurídicos de la Unión Europea y la competencia intercultural como dimensiones interconectadas de la integración europea contemporánea. Sostiene que los fundamentos normativos de la Unión Europea están profundamente arraigados en la filosofía grecorromana, la ética judeocristiana y el pensamiento de la Ilustración, que en conjunto dieron forma a principios fundamentales como la soberanía, la democracia, el pluralismo político, la protección de los derechos humanos y el Estado de derecho. Estos principios sustentan el pluralismo constitucional y la estructura de gobernanza multinivel de la Unión Europea, reflejando tanto los valores compartidos como la autonomía de los Estados miembros. El estudio analiza en primer lugar el desarrollo histórico de la cultura jurídica occidental y su expresión institucional dentro de la UE, haciendo hincapié en la importancia continuada de la soberanía estatal junto con la cooperación supranacional.

La segunda parte adopta una perspectiva histórica sobre la competencia intercultural, demostrando que la capacidad de gestionar la diversidad cultural ha sido una característica persistente de las sociedades europeas, evidente en la gobernanza imperial, las redes comerciales, la diplomacia y las entidades políticas multinacionales. Estas experiencias sentaron las bases para la coexistencia democrática moderna más allá de las fronteras culturales.

A continuación, el artículo explora el diálogo intercultural, competencia intercultural como un marco normativo que traduce los principios jurídicos —en particular, la democracia, el pluralismo y la igualdad— en la práctica social cotidiana a través de la educación, las iniciativas

políticas y las redes profesionales. Concluye que la competencia intercultural representa una extensión práctica del patrimonio jurídico occidental, que apoya la resiliencia democrática, la cohesión social y la ciudadanía europea inclusiva en sociedades culturalmente diversas.

Palabras clave: patrimonio europeo, Unión Europea, valores jurídicos, competencia intercultural, diálogo intercultural

1. INTRODUCTION. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design combining comparative historical analysis, normative legal analysis, and policy analysis to examine the relationship between Western heritage, European Union legal values, and intercultural competence. The central research question guiding the study is: *How has Western normative heritage shaped the legal foundations of the European Union, and to what extent can intercultural competence be understood as a practical mechanism for implementing these values within contemporary European societies?* A subsidiary objective is to analyze whether intercultural competence functions as a structural complement to legal norms within the multilevel governance system of the European Union.

The analytical framework integrates three complementary perspectives. First, constitutional pluralism theory provides the legal lens for examining the relationship between European Union law and national constitutional traditions, highlighting the coexistence of multiple legal authorities within a shared normative order. Second, historical institutionalism supports the analysis of long-term continuities and transformations in European approaches to cultural diversity, governance, and coexistence, allowing identification of path dependencies linking historical experiences with contemporary institutional arrangements. Third, intercultural competence theory offers the conceptual bridge connecting normative legal principles with everyday social practice, emphasizing the interaction between values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge in intercultural contexts. Together, these perspectives enable a multi-level analysis linking historical formation, legal institutionalization, and practical implementation of European values.

To trace the evolution of Western legal values and intercultural competence, the study conducts a purposive comparative historical analysis across selected political entities characterized by cultural diversity and institutionalized interaction among heterogeneous populations. Cases include the Roman Empire, medieval Iberia (Al-Andalus), the Habsburg Monarchy, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, and European colonial encounters. These cases were selected according to three criteria:

(1) governance structures encompassing culturally diverse populations, (2) institutional mechanisms designed to manage coexistence or interaction across cultural boundaries, and (3) documented evidence of sustained intercultural exchange in political, economic, or intellectual domains. This comparative strategy allows identification of recurring structural patterns and adaptive strategies relevant to contemporary European integration while acknowledging contextual differences across historical periods.

The study also incorporates normative legal analysis focusing on primary European Union law, including the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, alongside relevant documents produced by European institutions, particularly the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. This component examines how core principles associated with Western legal heritage—such as human dignity, democracy, pluralism, equality, and the rule of law—are articulated, institutionalized, and operationalized within European governance structures. Both textual interpretation and institutional context are considered in order to connect legal norms with their practical implications.

To link historical and legal perspectives with contemporary practice, the research includes qualitative policy analysis of European programmes and initiatives promoting intercultural competence, such as educational mobility schemes, intercultural dialogue frameworks, and professional training networks. Policy documents, institutional reports, and programmatic objectives are analyzed to assess how intercultural competence is translated into concrete practices within education, public administration, and civil society. This dimension highlights the interaction between normative principles and implementation mechanisms across multiple levels of governance.

Methodological triangulation across historical, legal, and policy domains enables a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Western heritage and intercultural competence. Historical analysis illuminates the structural roots of European approaches to diversity, legal analysis identifies contemporary normative frameworks, and policy analysis demonstrates their practical application in institutional and social contexts. This integrative approach supports the article's central argument that intercultural competence operates as a practical extension of European legal values, which are present for ages in European environment, contributing to democratic resilience and social cohesion in culturally diverse societies.

The study relies primarily on secondary sources, including historical scholarship, legal documents, and policy reports, and does not incorporate primary empirical fieldwork or quantitative measurement of intercultural competence outcomes. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as conceptual and interpretive rather than

empirically generalizable. The selection of historical cases, while purposive and theoretically justified, cannot capture the full diversity of European experiences. Future research could complement this analysis through empirical case studies, comparative surveys, or ethnographic investigations examining how intercultural competence operates in specific institutional contexts. Nonetheless, the interdisciplinary design provides a robust framework for analyzing the complex interaction between heritage, law, and social practice in the European Union.

2. LEGAL VALUES AND ITS WESTERN HERITAGE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The concepts of “west” and “east” originate from the place where the sun rises and sets, which used to regulate, and to some degree regulates also nowadays, the pulse of social relations. Etymologically, concepts such as “West”, “Western world” or Occidentalism are derived from the Latin phrase *occidens* meaning “sunset” and “west” (as a cardinal direction). A derivative of this noun is the adjective *occidentalis* “western”, with its antonym *orientalis* “eastern”, derived in turn from the noun *oriens*, which denotes “sunrise” and “east” as a cardinal direction. The etymology of these terms alone clearly reveals two dichotomous sets, distinct from each other and, as it were, naturally independent or even quite specific, in their simplicity derived from the world order, the division into times of a day and the cardinal directions. This is because the legal order and social contracts stem from the rules of societies for which nature, of divine origin, shaped the rhythm of work and thus also duties towards the community.

For it would be impossible to split the world – strictly, definitively and conclusively – into two parts dividing nations into those inhabiting western and eastern hemispheres. It is assumed that such a distinction was first made by William Warner, a British researcher and lawyer by profession. This scholar, living at the turn of the 17th century, was also dedicated to reporting on his travels, mainly eastwards, to Russia. He is credited with compiling two catalogues of traits describing the rules of functioning on the European continent (in the then developing Britain, France, the small kingdoms of Italy and Germany), together with those he observed after crossing the Ural Mountains (Lexico, 2022).

Today, the phrase “Western world” refers equally to colonized, and therefore Europeanized, North America, Latin America (Central and South America), and Australia (the Commonwealth of Australia, New Zealand and the countries of Oceania). It is a result of the conquests of Europeans at the time of the great geographical discoveries of the Americas, Asia, and the distant Oceania microstates on the Australian continent, the concept of the West, with all its civilizational achievements, extended also to areas outside Europe (Siekiera, 2022).

The analysis of Western culture, including its legal culture, cannot begin without mentioning Christianity, mainly its Catholic denomination, since it is the Catholic Church and its head, the pope, who have had and continue to exert a real influence on the shaping of values, including those protected by law, in Europe. It is for this reason that the Western world has become known as “Latin culture”. After all, the concept of the western part of the world has its roots in Greco-Roman civilization – the ancient world, which entered its next, mature phase with the advent of Christianity, first as the religion of the Roman Empire and then as the political sink-or-swim on the international arena, where failure to baptize a state meant that the individual in question was not recognized as an equal negotiating partner and, worse still, that he was doomed to ostracism by being dubbed a barbarian (Kuśakowska, 1964).

Nonetheless, in the modern era, Western culture remained under the strong (albeit temporary, if we look at the overall history of Europe and its close ties with the Papal State) influence of the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance and then the Age of Enlightenment. It can therefore be concluded that the expansive colonialism of the early 15th century and, in fact, also of the First World War (the war for colonial possessions and the clash of powers in Africa and Asia, and to a lesser extent the countries of Oceania) contributed to the imposition of Western culture on other nations (Bayly, 2012).

The traditional Western perspective identified Western civilization with Western countries and their Christian (Catholic-Protestant) culture. As the term “West” originally had a literal geographical meaning, today belonging to Western civilization is not determined by geography. Just compare the United States of America, Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia and New Zealand, which are (thanks to their colonial legacy) rooted in the Judeo-Christian culture that has its origins in Europe. Besides, Russia (the Russian Federation) is culturally closer to the European continent than to Asia, despite its territory lying predominantly in Asia (as much as 77%) (Clowes, 2011; Danks, 2001).

Professor William H. McNeill, historian of Western civilization, published in 1963 a famous polemic against the thesis that all cultures were equal and had the same role in the history of mankind. His book “The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community” (McNeill, 1963) puts emphasis on the dominance of the West, the need to regain the balance of values of the Western world against the Islamic world in the Maghreb and the countries of the Middle East, which was not at all facilitated by colonial exploitation and European expansion, above all in the Americas. McNeill described the West as a cosmopolitan construct that is constantly expanding, carrying out territorial and intellectual (including democratic) expansion (McNeill, 1997).

What has to be emphasized here is the legal fact that of the systemic cohesion of Europe within the pluralism of European states, which has its origins in ancient culture. Mythology, philosophy, art, science, and politics (practiced via various forms of government) are not only symbols of Europeanness but also real references in the day-to-day life of the West. The course taken by the European Union (EU), with its harmonization of legal norms, economic equalization and interpenetration of political and social solutions, is also directly related to, or rather stems from, the Greek model of amphictyony (Kociuba, 2002). Greek *amphiktýones* literally means “living around”, which referred to an association of cities (tribes) looking after a place of cult, just like the temple of Apollo of Delos, where its authorities dealt with matters related to the functioning of the sanctuary, its finances, organization of sports games.

Constitutional pluralism is one of the core values of the European Union, which should be understood in two meanings: formal (institutionalized aspects) and material (axiology). The first one is connected with doctrine, a set of principles and rules according to which favorable and therefore effective systemic conditions are created for the expression of various opinions, beliefs, ideas in public life, the formation of political parties or other social organizations such as foundations or associations. The result is the emergence of a network of interconnected, interdependent interest groups (as we observe in the EU), whether in the national division (27 unique state entities), professional division (groups of farmers, fishermen, etc. lobbying for their rights), or axiological division (social democrats, liberals, conservatists, etc.). What is important here is social consensus, which, after all, is what Aristotle, Locke and Montesquieu all discussed (Avbelj & Komárek, 2008; Kirchhof, 2002).

In its material aspect pluralism stands for specific rules, usually formulated in the form of legal norms implementing doctrine. Political pluralism is thus a constitutional principle which guarantees and protects the coexistence of political parties with different views. In democratic states, this principle is stipulated in their basic laws. The European Union mentions the principle of pluralism, or more precisely a society based on pluralism, in Article 2 of the *Treaty on European Union*, “its constitution” in a material sense, while anyhow the institutionalized context of the document. After all, pluralism is an integral characteristic of Europe, of the nations that comprise it. *Article 3(3)* of the Treaty states in its objectives and areas of activity that “[the Union] shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity and shall ensure that Europe’s cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced.” Hence, the countries that were already the European Communities members and the new member states, plus those which joined the newly established entity, the EU, had as their objective (but also as a guarantee) to respect constitutional pluralism, so that national societies may freely develop, but in a way that is diverse and suited to their unique characteristics.

The European Union constitutional pluralism, also known as the doctrine of the EU constitutionalism, emphasizes the close and interdependent relationship between the constitutions of all twenty-seven Member States and the treaties that form the Union. Again, there is nothing such as the “Constitution for Europe” in a legal sense, but only in the economic and political sense. It all stems from the essence of the EU being an intergovernmental organization (IGO) while not a federation of states. According to the Polish scholar of European law, Professor Robert Grzeszczak of the University of Warsaw: “Constitutional pluralism in the European Union has a wider perspective and refers mainly to the pluralism of constitutional jurisdictions and the multiplicity of constitutional sources of both national and EU provenience. The European Union has a multi-level constitution, composed of the constitutions of the Member States complemented by constitutional bodies of constituent treaties and other acts such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights” (Grzeszczak, 2015)

Yet there are numerous reasons for the differences in the constitutional systems of European states, which, like the principle of sovereignty of states, are to be found in the very different roots, heritage, and culture (including legal culture) of the entities making up the European continent (MacCormick, 2007). We must, therefore, look at these reasons in two ways. Firstly, every country, every administrative unit, and later a sovereign and independent state in the international arena (also in Europe) was guided by its own interest in exercising power over a specific territory and a particular population, most often a single nation, which led to the creation of the so-called nation states. This was, and still is, linked to natural needs, geopolitical position, possible opponents and strategic allies, demography, level of economic, educational, and presently technological development. Thus, the constitutional differences here are motivated by the needs, the interests of the states, which pursue their own prosperity and that of their citizens – the future electorate. Secondly, in line with international law and accepted principles of international relations, this pluralism stems from the legal (hence inherent in international norms reproducing the provisions of national laws) possibility of self-determination of each state. Formation of a state, on the other hand, presupposes institutional and structural freedom. After all, it is the sovereign (which in democratic states is the people) who knows best what the people need and what they can expect from the state bodies they have elected to exercise power on their behalf.

Entire catalogues of axiological principles and norms creating constitutional standards, inscribed in norms already enshrined in the basic laws of European states, are therefore not only the effect of specific legal solutions, but precisely a socio-historical and cultural product. For before the law of the European Union appeared – or to be more precise, was passed by the states signatory to the Treaties – the nations of

Europe created their own legal systems based on their civilizational heritage. After all, this heritage of the West rests on the four pillars mentioned earlier: the spiritual culture of the Greeks and Romans and the two main religions which formed the foundation for moral, social and legal principles in Europe, that is, Judaism and Christianity. It is these fundamental elements that have shaped modern Europe and the concept of the West, including the constitutional standards of the EU Member States.

Some scientists, especially European legal scholars see some legal threat as to whether the increased processes of European integration could oppose the idea of constitutional pluralism in the Member States. In an attempt to answer this question, one could refer to the reasons for the differences in the systems of European states. The causes can be realist and legal. In fact, the theory of realism in international relations, as presented by Thucydides, Hobbes, and Machiavelli, emphasizes the role of the state and its needs, based on the national interest as the overriding objective continuously pursued by the power of sovereign states (Czaputowicz, 2007). Thus, it is states, as the main actors in international relations, which determine their shape, as well as the role and geopolitical position of secondary subjects, the non-state actors (NSAs). In consequence, it should not be expected that the intensive processes of integration on the European soil will force states into a position where their own sovereign competences are curtailed. In fact, it would be a fallacy, incompatible with international law, that primary subjects do not have a monopoly on shaping legal norms.

This inevitably reveals a second aspect of the reasons for the systemic differences of European states. EU law is formed by the Member States through treaty law – primary legislation, but also secondary legislation coming from the EU organs. However, it is still solely down to the states to decide how the organization they have established operates, not the other way around. This also means that if the sovereignty of states is jeopardized, they have every right to modify the Union's operations to protect their own position and their own good interests.

The uniqueness of the European Union as a regional intergovernmental organization lay in the legal competence to create a common norm, where the consent of all states must be obtained through constitutional consensus. It is evident in many aspects, but the most fundamental is the list of the EU values enumerated in Article 2 of the Treaty on 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. (European Union, 2012, Art. 2)

Here we must not forget also the entire system of the human rights jurisdiction, dedicated to protecting not only those vested in a European citizen, thus one holding a citizenship of one of the 27 Member States, but also a non-EU person or a so-called stateless person. This regional human rights regime is being presented and protected by the Court of Justice of the European Union, as well as of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg – a Council of Europe's (so another IGO) organ with a vital role in the development of human rights protection. Finally, there is also a unique on the global scale the set of general rules of EU law – rules laid down by the European judges.

European nations pride themselves on their unity embedded in common principles equally important to each of them. These are: democracy, the rule of law, equality before the law, tolerance, freedom, pluralism and a liberal economy functioning in an open society. These values, together with their position at the top of the hierarchy also in the legal space, in constitutions, in constitutional identity, distinguish the West (the European continent) from the East, guaranteeing unity and close, friendly cooperation on the old continent.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EUROPEAN SOCIETIES: HISTORICAL PATTERNS AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Intercultural competence—understood as the ability of individuals, institutions, and societies to efficiently communicate, cooperate, and negotiate across cultural boundaries—has been a recurring feature of European history. Rather than emerging only in the modern era, intercultural competence can be observed across multiple historical periods, particularly in contexts characterized by cultural diversity, political integration, trade, and intellectual exchange. This chapter examines several key historical settings in which intercultural competence is visible, focusing on governance, coexistence, economic interaction, diplomacy, and supranational cooperation.

One of the earliest and most significant examples of intercultural competence in Europe can be found in the administration of the Roman Empire. The empire encompassed vast territories populated by diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. Roman authorities developed administrative strategies that balanced imperial cohesion with local autonomy, allowing provincial populations to retain elements of their cultural traditions while integrating them into Roman political structures. The extension of citizenship to provincial populations and the incorporation of local elites into governance illustrate institutionalized mechanisms for managing cultural diversity. Such practices demonstrate that intercultural competence was embedded in political administration as a pragmatic necessity for imperial stability (Ando, 2000).

A second major historical context is medieval Iberia under Muslim rule, commonly referred to as Al-Andalus. Urban centers such as Córdoba and Toledo became important sites of interaction among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Although coexistence was neither uniform nor free of conflict, periods of relative stability enabled significant cultural and intellectual exchange. Translation movements played a crucial role in transmitting knowledge from Arabic into Latin, particularly in fields such as medicine, philosophy, and mathematics. These scholarly collaborations required linguistic proficiency, mutual intellectual respect, and the capacity to navigate religious differences—key elements of intercultural competence (Menocal, 2002).

Intercultural competence is also visible in the commercial networks of medieval and early modern Europe, especially in maritime trade. Merchant republics such as Venice established long-distance trade relations with both Christian and Muslim regions of the Mediterranean. Merchants were required to understand foreign legal systems, commercial customs, and social norms in order to conduct successful transactions. Diplomatic agreements with non-European powers further illustrate how economic interests fostered cross-cultural negotiation skills. In this context, intercultural competence emerged not primarily from ideological openness but from practical economic incentives (Abulafia, 2011).

The frontier zones between European states and the Ottoman Empire provide another important example. From the fifteenth century onward, European powers maintained permanent diplomatic missions in Ottoman territories, particularly in Istanbul. Cultural intermediaries, often known as dragomans, facilitated communication between political authorities who differed in language, religion, and political traditions. Diplomatic practice required not only translation but also an understanding of etiquette, symbolism, and political expectations across cultures. These interactions demonstrate that intercultural competence developed even between rival civilizations, driven by the necessity of negotiation and conflict management (Rothman, 2021).

Within Europe itself, multinational states such as the Habsburg Monarchy illustrate the internal dimension of intercultural competence. Governing populations that included Germans, Hungarians, Slavs, Italians, and others required complex administrative arrangements, including multilingual governance, regional autonomy, and continuous negotiation with local elites. The political survival of such empires depended on their ability to balance unity with diversity, demonstrating that intercultural competence was not limited to interactions between Europe and external regions but also shaped intra-European relations (Kulke, 2015).

Intercultural competence in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth emerged from political union, religious diversity, and multilingual administration between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Nobles from Polish, Lithuanian, Ruthenian, Jewish, German, and Armenian backgrounds cooperated through shared legal norms, notably the concept of “Golden Liberty,” which encouraged negotiation and tolerance. The Commonwealth’s elective monarchy required diplomatic communication across cultures, while trade networks and urban autonomy fostered everyday contact among communities. Educational institutions and confessional coexistence further normalized pluralism. As a result, elites and townspeople developed skills in mediation, code-switching, and cultural translation that sustained governance across vast territories despite conflicts and external pressures (Davies, 1982).

European colonial expansion from the fifteenth century onward created new contexts for intercultural interaction on a global scale. Encounters between Europeans and indigenous populations in the Americas, Africa, and Asia involved processes of cultural exchange, adaptation, and hybridization. Missionaries, traders, and colonial administrators often learned local languages and customs to achieve political or religious objectives. However, these interactions were frequently characterized by power asymmetries, coercion, and exploitation. Consequently, colonial history reveals both the presence of intercultural competence and its ethical ambiguities (Bayly, 2012).

In the modern period, intercultural competence has become institutionalized within European political frameworks, most notably in the European Union. The European integration process requires continuous negotiation among member states with distinct languages, historical experiences, and political cultures. Multilingual communication, transnational mobility programs, and collaborative policymaking represent contemporary manifestations of intercultural competence at the institutional level. Unlike earlier historical examples driven primarily by empire or trade, modern European cooperation is explicitly grounded in principles of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence (Pinder, 2012).

Across European history, intercultural competence is most visible in contexts characterized by sustained contact between culturally diverse populations. Empires, trade networks, diplomatic relations, religious coexistence, and political unions all created environments in which cultural negotiation became essential. Importantly, intercultural competence did not always imply equality or harmony; it often developed alongside conflict, competition, and power imbalance. Nevertheless, the historical record demonstrates that the ability to engage across cultural boundaries has been a persistent and structurally significant feature of European development.

4. FROM WESTERN VALUES TO SOCIAL PRACTICE: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

History, tradition and culture brought and formed their experiences for ages in the European continent. The European Union presents itself as a community of values grounded in Western legal and philosophical traditions. Its founding treaties emphasize respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights, including minority rights, and envision a society in which pluralism, nondiscrimination, tolerance, justice and solidarity prevail (Article 2 TEU) (European Union, 2012). These values, as shown in the legal part of the paper, are deeply rooted in GrecoRoman thought, JudeoChristian ethics, and Enlightenment rationalism, and are institutionalized through constitutional pluralism and the multi-level legal order of the Union. Yet, translating these abstract principles into everyday practices in an increasingly diverse Europe requires more than legal codification and institutional design.

In contemporary European societies, individuals and institutions routinely encounter cultural, religious, linguistic and ideological diversity in schools, workplaces, local communities, and the digital sphere. This reality raises the question of how citizens and authorities can interact across differences in ways that respect fundamental rights, foster social cohesion and sustain democratic life.

Several influential European institutions (Council of Europe, European Commission, UNESCO—not European but influential in Europe) and scholars (Michael Byram, Geert Hofstede, Martyn Barrett, Fons Trompenaars, Adrian Holliday, Aleksander Thomas, Hellen Spencer-Oatey, Philippe Pierre et Michel Sauquet, Geneviève Zarate, Peter Franklin, Paweł Boski, Jerzy Nikitorowicz, Tadeusz Lewowicki, Darla Deardorff and others) have developed distinctive approaches to intercultural competence and intercultural communication. In the European context, intercultural competence is typically linked to democratic citizenship, human rights, and social cohesion rather than only to professional effectiveness or mobility (Barrett et al., 2014; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006).

A key European institution which plays important role in spreading and developing framework for intercultural competence is the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe conceptualizes intercultural competence as a fundamental component of democratic citizenship and inclusive societies. Its Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) proposes a comprehensive model of competences required to respond appropriately to intercultural and democratic situations. These competences include values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge together with critical understanding. The RFCDC explicitly defines “democratically

and interculturally competent behavior” as arising from the interplay of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding in concrete situations. It identifies 20 key competences, including valuing human dignity and human rights, valuing cultural diversity, openness to cultural otherness, respect, civic-mindedness, responsibility, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity, skills of listening and observing, empathy, flexibility and adaptability, linguistic and plurilingual skills, and critical understanding of the self and of the world. These competences provide an integrated framework where intercultural ability is inseparable from democratic commitment and human rights awareness, aligning clearly with the Western legal and philosophical foundations of the European project (Council of Europe, 2016).

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), developed between 2013 and 2018, provides an operational model for implementing dialogue. It identifies twenty competences grouped into values, attitudes, skills and knowledge with critical understanding, emphasizing that intercultural competence is inseparable from democratic participation and human rights awareness (Council of Europe, 2016).

Values include commitment to human dignity, equality and the rule of law; attitudes involve openness, respect and civic responsibility; skills encompass empathy, cooperation, communication and critical thinking; and knowledge includes understanding of politics, culture, religion and social processes. Together, these elements form what the framework defines as “*democratically and interculturally competent behavior*,” understood as appropriate responses to situations involving cultural diversity and democratic participation.

The framework is primarily designed for education systems, encouraging participatory pedagogies, whole-school approaches and experiential learning. By embedding intercultural competence across subjects rather than limiting it to civic education, the RFCDC continues the Western tradition of civic education while adapting it to contemporary pluralistic societies (Council of Europe, 2016).

Intercultural dialogue has emerged in Europe as a key mechanism for translating abstract legal values into social practice. A central reference is the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue *Living Together as Equals in Dignity* (2008), developed by the Council of Europe. The document links intercultural dialogue directly to the foundational pillars of European societies: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It argues that sustainable social cohesion in culturally diverse societies requires not only legal protection, but also everyday interaction based on mutual respect, recognition and shared responsibility (Council of Europe, 2008).

Intercultural dialogue is strongly supported and promoted by UNESCO. The intercultural dialogue is presented as a proactive process that goes beyond tolerance toward engagement, mutual learning and reciprocal transformation. It aims to prevent social fragmentation, reduce discrimination and create a sense of belonging compatible with diversity. Importantly, it is not limited to diplomacy or elite discourse but should permeate education systems, media, public administration and civil society (UNESCO, 2013).

From the perspective of Western heritage, this approach represents a contemporary reinterpretation of classical dialogical traditions, Christian concepts of human dignity and Enlightenment universalism. At the same time, it acknowledges historical limitations of Eurocentrism and colonial hierarchies, proposing a model grounded in equal dignity and plural identities. Thus, intercultural dialogue becomes a modern expression of Western normative development adapted to globalized and multicultural European societies.

5. ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS: SIETAR EUROPA AND LIFELONG INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Beyond formal education systems, the development of intercultural competence in Europe is also supported by professional communities, NGOs, and lifelong learning networks. An important example is SIETAR Europa (Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research SIETAR Europa), together with its national independent affiliates such as SIETAR France, SIETAR Deutschland, SIETAR Polska, SIETAR Netherlands, SIETAR United Kingdom, SIETAR Switzerland, and SIETAR Young. These organizations function as professional platforms for trainers, consultants, researchers and educators working in intercultural communication across sectors including education, business, migration, diplomacy and public administration.

SIETAR Europa emerged in 1991 as a European development distinct and independent from its American origins in SIETAR USA. This organizational differentiation reflected the recognition that European societies required approaches to intercultural competence shaped by their own historical experiences, legal traditions and socio-political contexts. While early intercultural training models were often influenced by managerial and business-oriented frameworks developed in the United States, European practitioners increasingly emphasized democratic citizenship, human rights, social cohesion and public policy dimensions. The creation of SIETAR Europa and other national SIETARs therefore illustrates how Western heritage itself is not monolithic but regionally interpreted, with European traditions

of social welfare, multilingualism, constitutionalism and pluralism generating specific professional needs.

As a lifelong learning community, SIETAR organizations contribute to the professionalization of intercultural practice through conferences, webinars, training programmes, publications, supervision networks and ethical standards. They provide spaces for reflective practice where professionals can critically examine cultural assumptions, power relations and methodological approaches. This function is particularly important because intercultural competence, unlike many technical skills, evolves through continuous experiential learning rather than one-time formal education. The presence of national SIETAR associations across Europe also facilitates contextual adaptation, allowing practitioners to address country-specific historical and cultural memories, migration patterns, linguistic diversity and institutional frameworks.

From the perspective of Western heritage, the existence and growth of SIETAR Europa can be interpreted as a contemporary expression of European traditions of civil society, professional associations and knowledge exchange communities of practice. These networks contribute to translating abstract legal principles—human dignity, equality, non-discrimination and solidarity—into everyday organizational and interpersonal practices. They also complement institutional initiatives such as the Council of Europe's RFCDC by supporting practitioners who implement intercultural learning in real-world contexts. In this way, SIETAR Europa and its national Chapters represent an important bridge between normative frameworks and lived social interaction, reinforcing the role of intercultural competence as a practical dimension of European democratic culture.

6. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EUROPEAN UNION POLICY AND PRACTICE

Within the European Union, the European Commission promotes intercultural competences through education, Erasmus+, migration and integration policies. Intercultural competence appears across multiple policy domains, particularly education, mobility and external relations (European Commission, 2018; Lähdesmäki et al., 2020). Programmes such as Erasmus+ promote transnational mobility not only to enhance employability but also to foster openness, tolerance and European identity. Research demonstrates that intercultural learning outcomes are strongest when mobility experiences include structured reflection and institutional support (Vande Berg et al., 2012).

Intercultural competence also plays a role in cultural diplomacy and international cooperation, where dialogue and mutual understanding contribute to peacebuilding, sustainable development and global partnerships (UNESCO, 2013). In this sense, European approaches extend domestic democratic values into international relations, reflecting a cosmopolitan dimension of Western heritage (Delanty, 2013).

Migration and integration policies further illustrate the practical importance of intercultural competence. Legal equality alone cannot ensure inclusion if institutions lack the capacity to interact effectively with diverse populations. Training programmes for educators, public officials and social workers emphasize reflection on biases, communication skills and awareness of structural inequalities (Council of Europe, 2016; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Such competences help translate universal legal principles—human dignity, equality and non-discrimination—into everyday administrative practice.

Digitalization has transformed encounters with cultural difference. Online platforms facilitate intercultural communication but also amplify polarization, hate speech and misinformation. Legal regulation remains essential, yet intercultural and media competences are equally necessary for responsible participation in digital public life (Council of Europe, 2019).

The RFCDC addresses these challenges by including critical understanding of media, analytical thinking, empathy and tolerance of ambiguity as key competences (Council of Europe, 2016). Developing these abilities, particularly among young people, supports democratic engagement while protecting freedom of expression in ways consistent with respect for human dignity.

Intercultural competence also contributes to the development of European citizenship. While EU law provides rights such as free movement and political participation, a sense of belonging depends on individuals' ability to navigate multiple identities—local, national and European (Delanty, 2013; Habermas, 2012). Education that promotes dialogue, cooperation and cultural understanding therefore supports the emergence of a post-national civic identity grounded in shared legal values rather than cultural uniformity. Historically, this evolution reflects the Western expansion of citizenship from the city-state to supranational governance structures.

7. TENSIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Despite its normative appeal, intercultural competence discourse faces challenges. Critics argue that policies may sometimes emphasize dialogue without sufficiently

addressing structural inequalities or power asymmetries (Holliday, 2011; Piller, 2017). There is also a risk that responsibility for adaptation falls disproportionately on minorities rather than institutions and vice versa.

Political developments within Europe further reveal competing interpretations of Western heritage. Populist movements (in Europe existing on both sides, on the left and on the right) may invoke democracy, sovereignty or Christian identity in exclusionary ways, demonstrating that shared heritage does not automatically produce inclusive outcomes. Intercultural competence therefore includes the capacity for critical reflection on competing narratives and for articulating interpretations of Western values consistent with human rights and equality. Intercultural competence development helps to deal with increasing polarization (Holliday, 2011; Piller, 2017).

Practical implementation also encounters obstacles, including limited resources, curricular constraints and difficulties in assessing attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, mixed assessment approaches combining qualitative and quantitative methods offer promising avenues for evaluating intercultural learning (Deardorff, 2006; Wiśniewska et al., 2014; Wiśniewska, 2017).

8. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that Western heritage remains a fundamental reference point for understanding both the legal architecture and the social dynamics of the European Union. Rooted in the intellectual traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity, Judeo-Christian ethical thought, and Enlightenment universalism, the core European values of human dignity, democracy, the rule of law, equality, and human rights have been institutionalized within a multilevel constitutional framework shaped by constitutional pluralism (Habermas, 2012). The diversity of national legal systems does not undermine European integration; rather, it confirms that integration operates through cooperation, consensus, and respect for sovereignty within a shared normative horizon.

A central argument of this study is that legal norms alone cannot sustain a pluralistic democratic community. Intercultural competence emerges as a structural complement to law—an historically grounded capacity that translates abstract principles into everyday social practice. Far from being an artificial or purely contemporary construct, intercultural competence reflects long-standing European experiences of coexistence, negotiation, and dialogue across cultural boundaries. It does not require abandoning national traditions or identities; on the contrary, it enables them to remain vibrant while connecting them to universal human rights standards and shared democratic commitments. Frameworks developed within institutions such as

the Council of Europe illustrate how values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and critical understanding together allow citizens and institutions to operationalize Western legal principles in daily interactions.

At the same time, tensions within Europe—including political polarization, populist narratives, social inequalities, and migration-related challenges—demonstrate that Western heritage is neither static nor uncontested. Its meaning is continuously negotiated in political discourse and social practice. Intercultural competence therefore involves not only openness to diversity but also the capacity for critical reflection on competing interpretations of tradition, ensuring that references to heritage remain compatible with inclusion, equality, and democratic legitimacy.

Ultimately, Western heritage in the European Union should be understood as a living and evolving project. Its future vitality depends not only on preserving institutional achievements but also on cultivating citizens and institutions capable of dialogue, empathy, and cooperative problem-solving across differences. Intercultural competence is both the outcome of Europe's historical development and a prerequisite for its continued democratic resilience—enabling diverse societies to live together as equals in dignity while sustaining unity through respect for pluralism, national sovereignty, and shared legal values.

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