The negotiations leading up to the latest tentative deal on Greece’s debt brought into relief two competing visions of the European Union: the flexible, humane, and political union espoused by France, and the legalistic and economy-focused union promoted by Germany. As François Heisbourg recently wrote, “By openly contemplating the forced secession of Greece [from the eurozone], Germany has demonstrated that economics trumps political and strategic considerations. France views the order of factors differently.” The question now is which vision will prevail?

The Greeks, for their part, have been putting their national identity ahead of their pocketbooks, in ways that economists do not understand and continually fail to predict. It is economically irrational for Greeks to prefer continued membership in the eurozone, when they could remain in the EU with a restored national currency that they could devalue.

But, for the Greeks, eurozone membership does not mean only that they can use the common currency. It places their country on a par with Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, as a “full member” of Europe – a position consistent with Greece’s status as the birthplace of Western civilization.

Whereas that stance reflects the vision of an “ever-closer union” that motivated the EU’s founders, Germany’s narrower, economic understanding of European integration cannot inspire ordinary citizens to support the compromises necessary to keep the EU together. Nor can it withstand the inevitable attacks directed against EU institutions for every action and regulation that citizens dislike and for which national politicians want to avoid responsibility.

The original European Economic Community, created by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, was, as the name indicates, economic in nature. The Treaty itself was hard-headed, grounded in the converging economic interests of France and Germany, with the Benelux countries and Italy rounding out the basis of a new European economy.

But economic integration was underpinned by a vision of peace and prosperity for Europe’s peoples, after centuries of unprecedented violence had culminated in two world wars that reinforced the seemingly eternal enmity between France and Germany. And, indeed, the language of a larger political union was embedded in Europe’s treaties, to be interpreted by the European Court of Justice and subsequent generations of European decision-makers in ways that supported the construction of a common European polity and identity, as well as a unified economy.

My mother, a young Belgian in the 1950s, remembers the idealism and the excitement of the European federalist movement, with its promise that her generation could create a different future for Europe and the world. To be sure, the vision of a United States of Europe, espoused by
many of those early federalists, looked backward to the founding of the US, rather than forward to a distinctive European venture. Nonetheless, the EU that emerged – which pools sovereignty sufficiently to benefit from being a powerful regional entity in a world of almost 200 countries while maintaining its members’ distinct languages and cultures – is something new.

That experiment cannot survive if supported only by economic rigor and rules. What can continue to justify a political entity after the urgent realities and convictions that drove its establishment have faded to the pages of history and civics books or, at best, are the subject of grandparents’ stories?

For the US, those questions arose in the 1840s and 1850s, when the urgent need for a union to secure independence had faded, causing issues and conflicts that had been papered over to resurface. In particular, slavery was allowed in some states, but prohibited in others, and the 1787 compromise to count each slave as three-fifths of a person when determining a state’s population for representation and taxation was fraying. Economic differences between the industrial north and the agricultural south meant that discussions over states’ rights were about livelihoods as well as lives. A horrific war resulted, in which the US defeated the secessionist southern Confederacy and imposed its vision of the union.

Before the war’s end, President Abraham Lincoln created a new narrative, declaring in the Gettysburg Address that it was fought for democracy as much as equality, with the goal of ensuring that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” This account simplified – and, in many ways, distorted – the historical record. But no matter; the speech became as important a part of American national identity as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

The EU is now facing its own civil war, though one that, fortunately, is free of physical violence. Without statesmen and stateswomen able to articulate a vision of a shared future worth working and even sacrificing for, the side of unity may not win. Europe’s national anthem, a circle of stars, and talk of fiscal rectitude and structural reforms cannot compete with the potent messages of the EU’s opponents.

Those opponents, on both the right and the left, are focusing on the everyday living conditions of European citizens – those who feel threatened by migrants and those who are suffering as a result of austerity. For the EU to continue its march toward a stronger and closer polity and economy – one that nevertheless falls far short of a federal state – it must offer the credible prospect of a better life for all of its citizens.

Just before the final round of the recent Greek negotiations, French President François Hollande said that he did not want a Europe that “no longer progresses.” Fair enough. But progress toward what? Toward liberty, equality, and fraternity for all of Europe? Toward the dignity and solidarity of all European citizens? Toward a shared European house that is kept in order?

These are the questions that a new generation of European politicians must answer.