

Central Europe, the EU and myself.

The last century was arguably a challenging one for the whole world, but mostly for the Europeans. After several local and two world wars, history's pace seemed to slow down. Europe's colourful palette of nations and cultures started to mix in a very new and unusual way. European nations wanted to stop fighting and make peaceful and hopefully wise steps into the unknown future. As we all know, they started with different economic and political treaties, stating their wholehearted intention to make Europe the most beautiful and liveable continent. Let us skip the first steps that led to the creation of the European Union. In 2004 we Hungarians were given the possibility to leap into the magnificent fairytale, as the EU had been perceived. Bearing in mind that the 20th century is considered among the darkest phases in Hungary's history, this step was to bring an economic relief for the country. Just like in the other post-socialist Central European countries that became EU members at the same time as Hungary, the people of Hungary were happy and hopeful that joining the EU could be the start of the times of prosperity for the region. However, did the people know what to expect? Do the generations grown-up after 2004 have a different attitude towards EU than those who lived through the times of our entry? What do the other EU residents think about our homeland? How do we see ourselves?- Many questions pop up when thinking about the EU and our daily life.

Joining the EU was accompanied by lots of unanswered questions. Overall, people were happy, but still had some profound concerns about the impact Hungary's becoming an EU member state could have on our country's sovereignty. Many people feared that the economic changes imposed by the EU would lead to higher unemployment. However, looking back on the past years, we can probably all agree that the past 16 years have brought growth in GDP and also development for our country. EU's declared plan of helping every member state to reach economic stability seemed to show some results. There was always the "Big helper's" hand that the governments could reach for in case of need and crisis. A few years ago, if you had asked a random stranger on the street how they perceived the impact of Hungary's EU membership, there was a huge probability you would have received a positive and optimistic answer. There was a lot to be grateful for: The countryside dwelling in poverty received a financial influx. EU's health programs meant a massive push for Hungary's HDI and the educational ones opened new doors for the younger generations, giving them access to cheaper education abroad, a freedom to travel and study languages.

However, with time, perceptions seem to have changed. A few years ago, Europe faced a new crisis: People from a different culture sought refuge on the continent. The EU was facing a huge dilemma: Should they offer shelter to the refugees or should they set morals aside and turn their back on those seeking help? The question drove a wedge among the member states. While some countries went down the road of offering a home to those people in need, others, among them Hungary, were not willing to let anyone through their borders. The Hungarian government launched a massive communication campaign vilifying Brussels and the refugees. Our country sunk into a political conflict dividing the population into those who agreed with the government's anti-EU, anti-refugee rhetorics and those who supported an EU-wide solution.

The most saddening moments for me are perhaps the ones when I watch foreign TV or speak to someone, who has never been to my home country but already have a strong and unfortunately negative opinion about Hungary. Those negative assumptions are often based on the media coverage of the questionable statements made by our politicians. It is disappointing. It is frightening. Is it really what people think about us? People tend to forget that politics never define the whole population of a nation. Many people can agree or disagree with the things our government says in and about Brussels. And that is fine. That is how democracy works. People should be allowed to have different opinions, but should still be able to live together and love the same land. Yet, our internal and external politics polarised our society down to the level of families and households. Young Hungarians started to leave the country not only for the sake of better economic prospects but also as a sign of protest.

Brexit was a reality check for the young generation. It was the first time we started to think about what losing the EU would mean for us. Teenagers, longing to study in GB watched in horror, as they realised, things might completely change for them. Only then it hit us, that possibilities we took for granted, like access to good universities, the advantage of travelling without a visa, the opportunity to find work across the continent, can all be taken away should the EU fall apart. Or if our government decided to leave. We, the generation born into the European Union, understand that a considerable part of our lives depends on the existence of the EU. We study about it in school, see its flag floating on our buildings, connect with one another through its numerous programs. We know we enjoy many of the benefits the EU offers. There is always the thought of having other countries ready to back you up in need. Just like Germany is flying Italian patients to provide medical treatment in German hospitals. This is an admirable humanitarian gesture and an example of sharing available resources to provide at least some relief to the Italian medical system overloaded by the pandemic.

In my view this is what the EU should be about. By uniting 27 states with distinct cultures, different languages, and historical alliances and adversities, the EU is teaching us to accept one another, and it gives us the possibility to learn about and from one another. I believe most of my generation understands that we are stronger together.

In sixteen years, we have been through a lot together: we welcomed new member states, supported one another through natural disasters, shared responsibilities and benefits. The European Union has had its ups and downs, but in hard times we have mostly stood together. I hope that with time we will learn to put our differences aside and join forces for the benefit of all. Let's never forget, we as a union aim for the same goal: to live together in peace and prosperity.