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OUR BEAUTIFUL HOMELAND AND THEIRS – A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE EUROPEAN DREAM
L'Europe, c'est moi!

This was the pretentious title of an article I was commissioned to write last year for *Begegnung*, a magazine about German schooling abroad. The topic given was 'Do you feel a part of Europe, do you feel like a European?', and I responded with a large helping of teenage defiance and cynicism. As the child of a Croatian diplomat and pupil of a German school in Eastern Europe, I had had enough of the arrogance of Westerners, who were forever coming over on peace-building projects of one sort or another, or on other such student exchanges, and observing us in school as though we were in a museum. Or a zoo.

So I opted for an equally arrogant title, since for the last eight years I have been living in conformity to this slogan in the German school system. What is Europe if not us, its citizens?

Interpretations of what we call Europe vary from country to country. The first that I encountered was the Zagreb interpretation. I like to compare it to a play, a blockbuster titled 'Zagreb – a European Metropolis'. In it, Zagreb becomes a stage, envisaged as Vienna in miniature, in which its people play the warped role of Austrians...

The first act of this drama is our mass invasion of the European ski resorts – taking our own frozen sarma with us to 'save a kuna or two'; we send our children on foreign language courses the moment they utter their first words; we wear cognac-coloured furs, and under them, last season's Zara.

Act two is a tireless denunciation of all that bears even a trace (interpretations again) of the Balkans. 'We are quite different, after all. We are the West.' This aversion to all that is Balkan seems almost congenital.

The third act is my personal favourite: when the child of 'actors' in our 'European play', who has grown up in the foreign language schools and the ambiance of Viennese coffee houses, gets the idea to go and study in this cultured Europe; then suddenly we are all shocked. Taken aback. It's a brain-drain. The young people are leaving.

The curtain falls. Our tragicomedy ends.

A second play I had the opportunity to watch when I moved to Berlin was equally successful: excessive sorting of waste glass (by colour! And then it all ends up on the same pile anyway?!); the insistence on 'vegan-eco-ethical consumption' coupled with passionate smoking; the promotion of superficial tolerance, concealing the conviction that they are better than those miserable immigrants sponging off their superior welfare system.

My Europe is, I am sure, more than all this performance and hypocrisy.



And that is why I can assert that the title of my sarcastic article is still true: Europe, that's me; my friends and I who – each in their own way – pursue our European dream every day, each of us firmly convinced that a community of cultural diversity, founded on democratic values, offers us limitless possibilities.

Only in such a Europe can a group of friends form in an entirely natural way, yet each carry a passport of a different colour in their pocket. A Polish girl, a Turkish girl, a German girl and I were an inseparable team in Berlin. Then we shared desks in a Berlin Gymnasium, now each of us is striving towards some goal of her own. Lili plans to study journalism, with a focus on politics; Marissa wants to go to medical school; Ilayda will travel Great Britain before going to university.

My choice is to return to Berlin to study law.

This Berlin (my Berlin), the pulsating heart of (my) Europe, is home to countless talented and promising immigrants, especially from the more eastern ends of the continent. Sometimes their European dream does not end with a university degree. Sometimes this dream is simply the aspiration towards a better life. While I was there I met asylum-seekers and refugees, too, people who had escaped from the worse to the better, to democracy. People who had something other than intellectual abilities to offer their new home and homeland: their music, their food, their physical labour, their art or, simply put – themselves, their life.

Without this multicultural aspect of Berlin it would not be, as I have already called it, my Berlin.

Europe without the mingling of cultures would be no Europe at all; if America is a 'melting-pot', then we can see Europe as a bowl of fruit salad. With each mouthful we can taste every piece of fruit, but that is just what makes the salad so tasty and healthy.

The expansion of the European community gives us the opportunity to travel without restriction. The choice of places to study grows – Damir from the Czech Republic, a Serb/Croat, plans to move on from the German Gymnasium to a German university in Barcelona. The concentration of different cultures and languages is one of the great assets of Europe; few other parts of the world can claim such widespread multilingualism as here. Especially in its eastern regions... (so it turns out sending children on language courses does have its positive sides!)

In my Zagreb, the true European mindset has yet to fully develop. Only now is there a real trend developing towards seriously considering studying abroad. Vienna is the most attractive destination for many, but London and Berlin are by no means out of reach, either. And there is no fear. No place for fear about fitting in after arriving in another country. Why would there be, when other European countries are also accessible to us all – if you are ready to take a risk and work hard. Europe welcomes. It can hardly do otherwise, when this diversity is its essence. I believe that behind this need to distance ourselves from the Balkans lies an inferiority complex which many of us have. To deny part of our national identity, in my opinion, leads nowhere – it is very often just these characteristics, which we are ashamed of in Croatia, that bring us together in Croat communities outside Croatia. Sometimes immediately. Sometimes after a couple of shots of



the strong stuff.

I live in the Balkans, in Belgrade, where I am completing my schooling in the aforementioned German school. Believe it or not, it's not that uncivilised! There are just as many courteous and uncourteous people as in Zagreb!

European dreams are flourishing here, too. The eleven pupils in my class (half of them Serbs) have much the same desires and ambitions as young people in Zagreb. Saša wants to study architecture in Innsbruck and is already building and creating and making. Today it is sculptures, tomorrow, cities. Andrej wants to go to England to study Economics, but knows his heart will lead him back home one day. We all want something, we are all seeking for something, we are all striving for something. And Europe offers it to us.

I don't like this fear and pretence about losing the national spirit after entering the European Union. There is no place for fear in a world so rapidly changing as ours. I live firm in the conviction that the future of the European community is in the hands of inspired young people.

These are our stories, our future and our European dream.