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WHERE IS EUROPE HEADED?

EU enlargement represents a challenge for Europe's identity and its future. We may be going through a process of Europeanisation, but identification with the EU is conditioned by history in each Member State, and therefore varies in strength. Europe is diverse, and no one is forcing uniformity on us or suppressing our national characteristics. Our motives for cooperation also vary. Sometimes people have the feeling that the EU interferes too much in their lives and tries to regulate them, when they see no need for such measures. The quality of products and services offered are not the same in the West and in the East, even though we are part of the same Union. The EU therefore has to protect consumers by setting equal standards and conditions for everybody. The same applies to the sweeping away of differences in living standards. The EU has long ceased to be an economic grouping of just six West European countries; it is now a means for spreading stability, prosperity and democracy throughout Europe.

We often fail to see the benefits the EU brings, while being quick to point out its errors. Our transition to a democratic state would not have gone so smoothly had we not received financial assistance for the necessary reforms to institutions and the economy, and the same applies to other countries that joined in the various waves of integration. Today, we see around us numerous projects that would never have been possible without help from EU funds. These projects are focused on poorer and less-developed areas, and have a multiplier effect that goes beyond the regions concerned. Thanks to free movement within the EU, we can visit places that were closed to us during the Communist era, and we feel at home everywhere. We can, in turn, enjoy a bit of France or Slovenia here at home, since our favourite French cheeses, Styrian pumpkin seed oil, Scotch whisky or other products are not subject to foreign trade restrictions. Cooperation is deepening at various levels, and as a student I feel this especially at an academic level. Our school is regularly visited by students from all over the world and by world experts in various fields, and I am also able to go abroad to study. This is only a limited list of the opportunities that the enlarged Union can offer us. No one is depriving us of our freedom of choice or our personal freedom – it is up to us to take advantage of these opportunities.

An enlarged European Union can respond to the challenges if it realises that union is not about competition between individual states, but cooperation and solidarity between them. We must stop blaming failures on 'those people in Brussels', who seem to be an abstract concept, since Brussels is in fact made up of the nation states themselves. Even if we limit sovereignty in certain areas, this does not mean that we lose our national characteristics. We should remember that dictatorship is not a feature of the present regime, but of the previous one. European history must lead to a united Europe which shows its partners that it is an 'arena' for dialogue, and not a battleground between nation states. The current crisis confirms that the EU can respond to challenges if it develops a unified position which is not undermined by national interests. When other countries are admitted, their geopolitical development must be respected. Some countries



do not know how to govern themselves, and are thus easy prey. Therefore, they need the promise of EU membership, which is a driving force for reform. If the EU shuts the door on certain states to the East, it will deny them the democratic progress made by the Member States, thus renouncing the principles and values (support for democracy, the rule of law, human rights, etc.) which underpin the entire Euro-Atlantic community.