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IN THE BALKANS I MET THE TRUE EUROPEANS
 AN ENLARGED EU CAN HELP US TO REMEMBER OUR SHARED EUROPEAN PAST.

We have forgotten who we are. We have forgotten European history and the struggles that have shaped us. We have forgotten the story of ourselves. It is a story about ensuring freedom, democracy and stability in an area that has provided the stage for some of the worst wars in history. It is in this story that the core of Europe is to be found. The biggest problem facing the EU is not economic crisis, bureaucracy or the threat of competition from abroad. The real spectre haunting Europe is the deep depression that has overtaken the Union – we have lost our belief in a shared European future.

I had also forgotten about the story of the EU. Like so many others, I associated the European Union much more with rules governing liquorice and chemicals than with peace and human rights. To me, the EU represented first and foremost a complicated bureaucracy which swallowed up another group of elected representatives in the tumult of Brussels every five years.

I would probably still have had this view of the EU if it had not been for the fact that, at the age of 20, I chose to go and live in Serbia. It was here that I was reminded who we are as EU citizens.

From October 2013 to June 2014, I worked as a volunteer on the European Voluntary Service Programme in a local Roma organisation based in Belgrade in Serbia. Thanks to my network of young volunteers and a very efficient bus system in the Balkans, during my time on the ‘other side of the Danube’ I had rich opportunities to meet young voices from the Balkan countries.

Young people who are all children of the armed conflict that saw the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Young people, who, unlike most EU citizens, have seen war up close. They were all so different. Albanian Bujar, Serbian Miroslava, Croatian Zvonimir and Blerta from Kosovo had different religions, different stories and different memories of the war that had dissolved their shared homeland.

But at the same time they were also alike. They all had a desire to heal the wounds of the past and they all regarded EU membership as the missing piece in the jigsaw of stability and healing in the Balkans. They all wanted so much to be European. To them, being European meant that instead of only being Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian, they would be united in a European identity. This international identity would be the beginning of a new era in the Balkans.

I thought that they were naïve: that they had a romanticised view of the EU and that they were out of step with reality. In encountering their EU optimism, it was hard not to dole out the EU scepticism that most of us within the walls of Schengen are plagued by. But if war and conflict had been part of the background music to their childhood, was it then really so strange that they



harboured a desire for reconciliation? The EU started as a peace project with precisely this purpose. Maybe it is the young people in the Balkans who see the EU's true colours and us who – in our scepticism – have become colour blind. And maybe that is precisely why an enlarged EU is important. If we cannot remember our shared past, it is difficult to imagine a shared future. If we cannot imagine a shared future, how will current EU challenges be met?

Because no matter how you look at it, many challenges are appearing on the horizon, many more than an enlarged EU will be able to contribute to solving. Increasing nationalism and economic instability are just some of the problems that the European project in the year 2015 needs to think about.

But without belief, we cannot move the necessary mountains. It was Miroslava, Zvonimir, Bujar and Blerta who reminded me why I still need to believe in the EU. They became the teachers of my own history and, with their stories of the Balkan Wars, they reminded me that the story of the EU is about more than curved cucumber rules and agricultural subsidy.

They also taught me that being European does not mean being the same. That we need to remember and acknowledge that we are different in terms of our culture, our language and our daily lives. What binds us together and makes us alike is the belief in a better future for all Europeans. It is this belief in the European story that we need to rediscover. I found that belief in the Balkans.