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DO I FEEL EUROPEAN?

Last year, in the run-up to the European elections, I participated in a round table about Europe. This was organised by a member of the European Parliament and what interested her was to know if we felt “European”. Did we feel that we belonged to Europe, to the European Union? Which was stronger, the national or the European identity? Did the European Union create links between us?

This is not something I think about very often, things pass by, so much else is going on. Do I have any idea what the “Troika” is? When our MPs were asked this question, it turned out, believe it or not, that they didn’t know the answer. I used to not know either, but recently I started to get interested in what is being said in the news.

I was born the year after Slovenia became an independent country, when Slovenia, full of optimism, started on the path towards a new modern regime. When I was growing up we still used Tolars, of which some still entertain nostalgic memories today. We spoke of the European Union with such respect, or so it seemed to me then, when I look back. “Countries will be united, you won’t need a passport,” they said. We looked towards the future with great optimism, insofar as primary school children think about such things. The idea of a united Europe seemed wonderful to everyone.

And so we took the path towards a united continent and after a while also got a common currency. I had just started secondary school. I felt happy that we would be able to travel freely and that I would have many opportunities to study abroad, and also that we would no longer need to buy foreign currency. A democratic, effective, free, united Europe, enjoying solidarity! It really is great when you don’t need to produce your passport. While at secondary school, I decided what I wanted to study. I wouldn’t go abroad, just to another town inside our national borders. Even if you don’t need to show your passport, national differences can still be felt; I have never got the feeling that we are living in a united Europe. Everybody has their own patriotic feelings. And so, I moved from our capital to Koper, on the coast, and plunged into academic waters, which brought me quite some novelties, primarily mental ones. I became much more interested in where I lived, in what was happening around me and in what was being said in the news, and the picture which I was now seeing somehow didn’t match the one I had formed in my secondary school days. Is it I who have learned and changed so much, or is it our overall situation and position in society which has changed? Why does it seem to me that suddenly everything is different? Just became a member of the EU, and already we have been suffering from the economic crisis for six years. I cannot remember when we lost that optimism and I don’t know where it has gone, but the fact is that it is vanishing and even that little trace which is left could disappear into forgetfulness at any moment. Reality is quite different from figures we see in the Treaty of Lisbon; I would be lying if I were to claim otherwise. The European Union is distant words, a pale faraway outline or unreachable stars on the flag. Nobody can quite understand it, not more than those MPs could



explain the Troika, but nevertheless, we are all taking part in the game. Will anyone whistle “time out”?

Some of us might need time to draw breath and swallow a sip of water, but it seems that there is no time for that. We are rushing around trying to find solutions to the current situation, wondering in frenzy about what we should do, which way to turn. A nine-year-old girl is struggling for words with which to describe the horrors she has experienced in the war in Ukraine. A mother in Greece is hunting for small change in order to put food into the mouths of her children. Hundreds of refugees are looking for the Italian coast. We are all seeking a better tomorrow. We have forgotten how to live for today, because we are constantly being told how bad things are and so we focus on a better tomorrow, which will bring us all the equality, brotherhood and unity for which Europe is longing. Her prospects looked good, but her plans have miscarried. She has let the current which was carrying her take her in the wrong direction and we will need a lot of luck and a powerful helmsman to sail her back to the right course.

This year I will complete the first level of my studies and probably take advantage of one of the many international mobility opportunities which Europe offers. I still cannot imagine where this road will take me. The best years of my life are wracked by uncertainty, unemployment looms on every side, we are ever more worried about the future and many young people are forced to leave our country. We are on the brink of adulthood, but nothing suggests that any of us will succeed in growing up. We are condemned to eternal youth, for there is a lack of space for adults. And Europe, our mother, just looks perplexed, has no idea what steps to take or what she can do to make it right. Many of her daughters have already been left in the lurch, she has disappointed many more. I know it must be hard for her. But she needs to think deeply and thoroughly enough about the need to plan to give back reasons for hope and optimism to her people - so that to the question of whether we feel European we will all be able to give a loud and clear “yes!” and take pride in saying so.