



Why we mustn't abandon the European idea

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“EUROPEAN UNITY WAS A DREAM OF A FEW PEOPLE. IT BECAME A HOPE FOR MANY. TODAY IT IS A NECESSITY FOR ALL OF US. IT IS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, NECESSARY FOR OUR SECURITY, FOR OUR FREEDOM, FOR OUR EXISTENCE (...) AND AS AN INTELLECTUAL AND CREATIVE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY.”

-KONRAD ADENAUER AT THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG, 15.12.1954

As long as I have been alive, my family goes to northern Italy for summer vacation, and as long as I can think we always take the same route, crossing the German-Austrian border at Kiefersfelden/Kufstein and the Austrian-Italian border over the famous Brennerpass. The borders basically consist of two roadsigns, one saying 'Austria' and the other one saying 'Italy', so crossing them never was a big deal for me - nobody wants to see your ID, nobody searches your car - you don't even have to stop your vehicle.

It wasn't until some moment earlier this year that I began to understand the symbolic meaning of that one special roadsign on the Brennerpass: When I drive over the pass this summer, I will most likely have to show my ID, and maybe someone will search my car. Because for the first time since the Schengen Agreement became valid on the 1st of April 1998, there going to be border controls on the Austrian-Italian border - due to the migration crisis. It became clear to me that if we do not take actions now, we will witness the downfall of one of the greatest achievements in the history of European integration. The Schengen Agreement made it possible for an entire generation to grow up without having to deal with borders, and it's up to this generation, it's up to us, to do everything we can to never let borders be considered normal on this continent ever again. Because among all the terrible lessons the 20th century has taught us, one of the most painful ones is that borders are not just physical lines between countries, but that they can mean the difference between democracy and tyranny, between poor and rich, between living a life in dignity and barely living a life at all, and that our main goal should be to overcome them.

But the reverse is true. Ultra-conservative, right wing parties such as Marine Le Pen's Front National in France, the FPÖ in Austria, the AfD in Germany and Geert Wilders Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands seek to destroy everything the EU stands for in favour for national states and a policy guideline that is dangerously close to the ones of the fascist states that have destroyed Europe for almost one century. All their political campaigns are based on populism, on racism, on empty phrases and, most of all, on the fear of the unknown. Because when we take a look at what the European Union has done and achieved for it's member states since the Treaty on the Foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, the justification behind the parties' existence crumbles away:



The first thing we should mention is the conservation of peace. There has never been such a long, enduring peacetime on the continent than since the foundation of the European Union. As a second point there is the sheer power of our economy - we are the strongest domestic market on the planet, making out one fifth of the gross world product, with one single currency that is facilitating trade on the continent. All European nations benefit from that economic power. If you, for example, compare Poland and Ukraine, which were at about the same level when the iron curtain fell, Poland is now about three times richer than Ukraine, and the credit belongs to the power of the economic side of the European idea. The third point is the spread of democracy - Every nation that wants to join the Union must be a democracy, thus respecting freedom of speech, religious freedom and with free and secret elections. And furthermore, the European Union has made education easier to access. If I want to study at a university in Barcelona for example, I can do that without having to face major bureaucratic obstacles - something that is unique on this whole planet.

The last, but not least, achievement of the European Union is what I was talking about in the beginning of this essay: I can drive from France to Lithuania without having to worry about border control, customs control or anything like that. For the first time in the history of our continent people got to learn what peace and freedom are; all these aspects are the pillars of the house that is the European idea.

And there's hope. The percentage of people who voted for these parties in the last elections of their country is quite small compared to the people who didn't vote for them. For example, in 2012 13,9% of all people who voted in France gave their voice to the Front National. At a voter turnout of 56% this equals to more than 60 million french people who did not vote for Marine Le Pen's populist right-wing party. We can do these calculations for each of the aforementioned parties, and we will always get really small numbers. That's good news, after all. But in order to be able to accordingly face the difficulties ahead we need to do more than just playing with numbers. Here's what I think.

I would like to quote Donald Tusk, former Polish prime minister and president of the European Council:

"The more difficult, the more painful the experience, the more people who doubt us from without, the more we have to hold the flag of Europe high and cry loudly that the EU is a phenomenal concept."

If extremists all over the continent can communicate to grow stronger and internationally spread toxic ideologies, then why can't we do the same with our messages? I mean, apparently we are the vast majority. So why shouldn't we use our achievements and the power of our freedom we have worked so hard for to unite and make people of all the nations in the Union realise what great value the European idea has, how far their personal life standard would decrease if we suddenly abandoned everything we have accomplished so far. But who is supposed to do that? As I mentioned above, all my hopes are with this generation, because we grew up with all the great conveniences this idea has to offer already in place. It's the standard for us, but instead of taking it for granted we should carry the flag, carry our idea of freedom, prosperity and peace into



the world because we need it now more than ever. Our universities with their democratic, liberal and international atmosphere are a great place to start with that. Let us all become ambassadors of the European idea and everything it stands for, let us overcome borders instead of rebuilding them. Remind those who spread hateful speech and nationalism that many European citizens were migrants in the first place, and that we have come so far because we included people in our concept, because we shared the idea of a unified Europe, not excluded them. Because now, a few decades later, it's time to remind everyone of what we stand for. Go talk to the exchange students at your campus, talk about your interests, your hobbies, our values, our culture, their values, their culture. Make friends and spread your ideas, go to forums, participate in the international political discourse. What I'm suggesting is a conversation across borders - about borders. So that our children can enjoy the same freedom and wealth than we did. Abandon the borders. Let's make this the longest peace period in the history of mankind. And don't let it die

