

What vision?

By Petra Arih

My Europe is not your Europe. My European Union is not your European Union. For the last few months, I have thought long and hard about what your prompt means to me. Two hours before the deadline, I think I have something that resembles an answer. You asked us where the spark is that can kindle young people's enthusiasm for Europe today. The truth is, it's hard to feel enthusiastic about something you feel hopeless about. I know this isn't the answer you were looking for and I don't expect it to win any awards for me, but if I feel like there is someone out there who will consider my opinion, I feel obligated to share it.

I come from a small place in Northern Slovenia. I say 'place' because it is neither a village nor a town. It is hovering on the line of being nothing at all. None of you have ever heard of it, and I highly doubt you will ever put a foot there. Nevertheless, it is my home. My region is the only one in the country that doesn't have a highway, therefore I go home from university only every few months. What makes me angry, though, is that we have been promised a highway since I can remember.

If there is one word that I would use to describe myself with it is angry. Most people don't notice it, but I can assure you that sometimes it consumes me completely. How could I not be? I live in a country where having a doctor or a dentist is not to be expected, it is a luxury. It is hard not to be angry when you walk around with a dead tooth and four wisdom teeth hurting every day, but there is no dentist who will make the pain go away. The people who went to medical or dental school here all escaped to your Europe, so they don't have to participate in strikes here, can make an honest living and also earn bragging rights that they are not living here anymore.

I am angry because I can't speak Serbo-Croatian. You were most likely alive while Yugoslavia still existed, I was not. I am nostalgic about a time I never experienced. From the stories my elders tell me, that time was a better one. There was a sense of community that is nowhere to be found today. We replaced brotherhood and assistance with selfishness and pride. The Serbo-Croatian which was taught in schools was replaced with German. Why? To make us more employable in your Europe. Instead of building our communities, we decided to build yours.

Our doctors and dentists were not born in Slovenia. They come from Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, or Kosovo. Of course, at the cost of their communities where people also walk around with dead teeth and medical issues that will likely never be discovered. When I was 17, my best friend's mother knew she had lung cancer. She knew it because she had had it four times before, did chemotherapy, and it always came back. The last time, she knew she had it, but the doctor she waited months for said it was bronchitis and refused to examine her for cancer. A month later she died.

Before I went to university I decided to work and save up some money. I was employed by an Austrian inventory firm, where for five or six days a week my home was a van or one of hundreds of hotels situated near airports, highways, or general industrial areas. My neighbours were usually prostitutes and drug dealers. I sincerely hope none of you have ever had to work a 16-hour shift and then get your bag checked to see if you stole something. Needless to say, it is degrading. I hope none of you ever have to worry about whether you'll be lucky enough that the seatbelt in your vehicle will actually work, or if your coworker who only got two hours sleep every night for a week will get you home safely. I hope I never have to again, either.

My favourite day of work was probably when we worked in the centre of Vienna, in a store called Steffl. Every item of clothing being counted and then tossed around dirty floors cost more than my paycheck, making the very concept of money seem laughable. But the truly funny part was, every single worker I encountered there was from my Europe, including the boss. Imagine, six stories of absurdly priced items being counted, folded, and sold by former Yugoslavians.

My mother was born in the Netherlands and moved here when I was a month old. When I started dating my boyfriend, she was overjoyed because he's Belgian. She wants me to live a better life than she has had here, and perhaps I can find it with him there. I always think it's ironic how he pronounces Yugoslavia. Yugo-slave-ia. A very accurate description. I always say I know two slaves, my mother and my father. I don't know anyone who has worked as much as they have with so little to show for it.

I think my anger began with watching them. My mother gets up every day from Monday to Saturday at four in the morning and goes to work, lifting approximately two tons of wood every single day. Her back is ruined, she has developed asthma, and I cannot recall a single time when she went out with her friends or attended an event that interested her. The mother I know is asleep on the couch from exhaustion.

My father goes to work, comes home to eat and then does woodwork in his workshop beneath the building we live in to make ends meet. He takes pills for his back every day. My parents rent a one-bedroom apartment that will likely never be theirs. To go to their bedroom, they have to go through the room I shared with my brother. They do not have savings and spend their time worrying whether they will leave anything to me and my brother. For as long as I can remember, they have talked about death in an excited manner. Like it's an old friend they can't wait to see again. Needless to say, our relationship is strained. For the sake of my mental health, I stay away. There is only so much pain a person can take.

I love my country. I love Europe. I love the people, culture, and nature. I love the water that runs through our pipes – wherever I go, nothing compares. I love the strength we possess. I love the things we have in common and the things that make us different. But I only love life when I don't think about it too much.

I love my classmates who come from every Slavic country you can think of, again, only when I don't think about it too much. I can't bear to ask the nice girl in my class

why she came here from Ukraine. I love going out with my friends from Macedonia, but we have an unspoken rule to never speak about things that might spoil the mood, such as basic human necessities. I especially love my female friends and family members, but I can't pretend to not remember the fact that every single one of us has experienced sexual violence and likely will again.

I love floods. I don't love the flood itself, but I do love what happens because of it. Last summer, my region experienced the worst natural disaster in the history of Slovenia. It was a flood that came out of nowhere, and the water ravaged through everything in its path. Nobody knew if our friends from neighbouring towns were alive because there was no signal.

But that day, when the alarm went off in the morning, something happened that I had never seen before. Every person who could stand came to a location across the street from me, and for three days straight, we filled sand into bags, tied them up, and delivered them or had people pick them up. We would enter random houses to dig out the dirt, and we loaded up one helicopter after another. For those three days, we were in perfect harmony. People would bring us food and beer, and for three days we felt useful and truly satisfied. Load up sand for two hours, have a beer and some pizza, get back to work. As strange as it sounds, I've never felt as happy as then. My anger melted away, and I felt a sense of community that had been hiding in plain sight.

I do not want the answer to the question of how to rekindle young people's enthusiasm for Europe to be an enormous disaster or a charismatic leader (read dictator). I don't think it is. But I do know for a fact that we lack hope. Not just in my Europe, in yours, too. Young people all around the world have a sense of hopelessness. Students shouldn't have to be couch surfing to attend university because rent is too high, working multiple jobs just to avoid starvation.

We shouldn't be watching our parents killing themselves every day and study out of fear of turning into them. When I was in 7th grade, I realized I wasn't happy with our school system. That day I sat down and wrote a list of changes I saw as necessary to make school as effective, fair, and pleasant as possible. When I came across that list last month, I cried. I cried because I miss the feeling of thinking I can change the world and believing I will. I miss being the poor kid with so much to prove.

I don't want my Europe to be your Europe. I want both of them to be better. To take care of its people and every other living creature in it. I deserve that, you deserve that, our children deserve that. Despite everything, we young people have hope, we have enthusiasm. It is in this essay; it is in our happiness, and it is especially in our anger.