

# Ode to Joy

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On 24 February 2022 at 3:30 a.m. Central European Time, the President of the Russian Federation declared war. With just a few sentences, the Helsinki Consensus, a cooperation and security structure for Europe (OSCE) that had brought peace to the entire continent, was ended. This event is a turning point, and the consequences for the history of our continent cannot yet be foreseen. What is certain is that it will shape an entire generation (Gen22).

If we now look at the bigger picture and move beyond Europe, we realise that old certainties and positions have to be called into question all over the world. For example, during the term of office of the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump, it dawned on many people in Europe that the earlier consensus on democratic values and traditions that had held true within the US and between the US and other countries ceased to be certain and may not even exist anymore. A united showing as “the West” could therefore become a relic of the past.

At the same time, nations of the Global South such as China and India are experiencing a rapid and significant rise, contributing to the creation of a multipolar world order. These changes require us to adjust our perception and to critically reflect on Europe's imperial past. Taking this thought one step further, we are seeing a development in which the nation states of Europe on their own could become progressively insignificant. They would be just like any other countries in the world and, in the worst case, become pawns of larger powers.

So when, if not now, would be the best time to formulate a vision for Europe? I believe that the problems of our future and present are solvable, above all through the active participation of young people in Europe.

To understand my vision, you need to know how I arrived at it. When I thought about writing this essay, I first wanted to hear the opinions and ideas of people around me. I realised from the outset that, given my passion for history and politics, I might not be the most neutral voice to speak for all youth. However, I did try to take into account many views because the answers I received were as varied as the people and stories behind them. It became apparent that there is no one plan for the future of Europe, because Europe holds a different place in everyone's life. At the same time, it also became clear that especially among the young people I asked, Europe is at the core of debates, hopes, and dreams.

In the following, I would like to explain three of these ideas, which together represent my vision for Europe.

### 1. United in Diversity:

Europe – for most people, this word evokes very different images and memories. Some think of summer vacations in Spain, skiing holidays in France, or exploring the historic cities of Italy. Others have friends or relatives living across the continent in mind and fondly remember the countless experiences they shared with them. All of this was only made possible through the EU's open borders.

In conversations with my friends, we realised how much our perspective on life has been shaped by the fact that our borders are open and how much freedom we gain from that. We listen to French pop or dream of going on a hiking tour through Sweden's countryside. We watch British series and celebrate with other Europeans in the continent's party destinations. Europe is part of our homeland, sometimes defined more narrowly and sometimes more widely.

We forget all too quickly not only how much we depend on each other economically, socially, and politically, but also how closely we have already joined together. Europe has become a gigantic melting pot from which everyone has the freedom to take what he or she likes. This applies not only to Europeans who were born here but also to people from outside the continent who have decided to make Europe their home. The experience of open borders is not limited to crossing national borders – our intellectual borders are open as well. Europe is both a meeting place and a place to be explored. In this sense, we need to broaden our definition of Europe and move away from a narrow perspective. Europe is not just a geographical area. This Europe is our project to shape our homeland together.

Europe stretches as far as the Europeans wish to take it. For Generation 22, Europe is a project of unity in diversity, a project that should not stop at fictional geographical borders. Europe is the rivers, the forests, the cities, the food, but above all the people who live this project every day and turn it into our home. Europe should therefore reach out to all those who are willing to join our project. In doing so, we should not exclude or forget anyone, whether we consider them part of a geographical Europe or an open Europe.

## **2. The Legacy of the Continent:**

For a better understanding of what the European project is and what it means for us, we must look to the past. The European continent is drenched in blood. It is an almost impossible task to count the number of people who have been engulfed by the conflicts and wars of this continent, whether in fights among themselves or with people from other continents. This continent has seen countless empires, which reveals a fundamental issue: The strong have always tried to impose their will on the weak, using brute force or sometimes softer means. This set off a never-ending cycle, in which the strong cling to power until they are displaced by other strongmen. This logical result of this cycle was and is slavery, war, and destruction.

But at the end of the Second World War, a decision was taken to stop going on like this. The origins of the European Union began in a devastated, ruined Europe. The European Economic Community (EEC), the first version of the European project, was born as an experiment to break the eternal cycle of destruction. The EEC aimed to learn from the past. How can a European nation ever live freely and in peace if its neighbour can fall prey to repression, chauvinism, and militarism? The fate of the European nations was never separate because the problems of one country could quickly spread to others.

Europe can only be rebuilt and, more importantly, survive if from now on, we work together. These are the concerns and hopes that the European project was founded on. The project bore fruit because mutual dependence linked the destinies of Europe's peoples. The past was recapitulated, reparations were made in recognition of responsibility towards others and towards the future. With the end of the Iron Curtain, this development extended to the whole

of Europe and found supporters there, too. People were certain that the cruel cycle of history had been broken and would never return.

However, as mentioned in the introduction, this hope was destroyed in February 2022. Russia, the continent's neighbour, is shrouded in oppression, chauvinism, and militarism.

Another answer I received surprisingly often was that Europe could become the world's superpower if it pooled its armies. Europe could regain the power it had in the world before the world wars. It would appear that despite all our claims, Europe has not learnt from history. In fact, Europe has a responsibility – a responsibility to itself and a responsibility to all the nations of the world on which it has inflicted great damage through colonialism and imperialism.

For a world that once again faces the danger of disintegrating into empires and vassal states, the European project needs to be the grown-up alternative. Peaceful cooperation instead of world war, and open borders instead of the Iron Curtain. Yet if our world is once again threatened by empires, how can we counter this? I would suggest going back the ideas of the Polish politician of the interwar period, Józef Piłsudski. Poland, which had gained its independence at the end of the First World War, was in danger of becoming a victim of imperialism from day one. The Soviet Union and Weimar Germany, which was heading towards a return of repression, chauvinism, and militarism, were a threat not only to Poland, but also to its neighbours. The idea emerged in Piłsudski's circle that a bloc of states should be brought together to jointly defy the imperialism of the USSR and then Germany – the *Intermarum*.

Unfortunately, history turned out differently, and the impending horror could not be prevented. My hope for Europe is that it will become a bloc of states that unite – not to become a great power, but to be a guarantor for all those who want to escape imperialism. A Europe of cooperation and responsibility that forms an alternative to a world order of the strong and that reflects on its own past.

### **3. Democracy, Freedom, Revolution:**

One answer I received was that Europe stands for human rights, and that the EU Parliament can work towards defending our rights on the internet. I believe Europe can do more than that. As mentioned, Europe should come together to shatter the system in which the strong rule the weak. But this system also exists at a societal level. Across the world, how many people are being exploited today, living almost like slaves, all to promote a global economy that corresponds precisely to the rule of the strong? Whether it is apps which are created to make people dependent, discrimination in the workplace, or the unimaginable conditions under which people work in factories overseas, we can find ourselves at the mercy of the system of the strong everywhere.

In all of this, a clear difference can be seen between “the West” and “the Global South”. The reason is that Europe and the strong who ruled Europe in earlier times put the Global South in chains. They introduced exploitation not only between nations, but also between people. While we no longer rule these nations, their lack of freedom is still a direct consequence of Europe.

Europe itself has long been immersed in exploitation between people. From the Glorious Revolution to the fall of the Iron Curtain, Europe has had to fight, argue, and suffer many times before it achieved its current shape. The mission of freedom and equality for all has not yet come to an end. We have even dedicated our system, democracy, to the fight against inequality and exploitation.

Democracy's only task is to argue and fight so that everybody can be heard equally. In view of its past, Europe has a responsibility and a mission: to keep the flame of freedom alive and to protect all those who want to bring the revolution against the system of the strong to their homeland. Europe should reinvent itself as an oasis of freedom. New ways should be discussed in Europe to eliminate the lack of freedom between people. Those solutions should then be implemented and shared with the world.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that Europe faces enormous challenges. The shadow of war and the threat of a Cold War looms over us. But it is precisely in these turbulent times that Europe is our grand answer. My vision for Europe is based on cooperation, solidarity, and progress. Our project has learnt from the mistakes of history and is determined not to repeat them.

Together we can defend everyone's freedom and confront injustice in the world. It is within our power to establish an order of open borders and cooperation that will consign war and exploitation to history once and for all. But we cannot accomplish this task alone. Therefore, we must reach out and work together. Our Europe has the potential to be a shining example – a place where everyone is welcome and can develop their talents to work together for a better future. Let's fight for it.