

Are we still dreaming the European dream?

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We've all heard about the American dream. Many people still see the US as a country where you can go from **zero to hero** if you only work hard and **play your cards right**. A country where, no matter where you came from yesterday, today you are considered American, and will be considered to be one tomorrow. A country where **miracles happen and life can change overnight**. A country of houses with **white picket fences** in the suburbs, where soccer moms and their polite children live, **warm Thanksgiving dinners** and cold, snowy and wonderfully shiny Christmas nights. That is what we think of when we hear the phrase "American dream".

For centuries, there has been something like a "European dream", too. Politicians, writers, philosophers thought and preached about the **united Europe**: a **continent of peace, solidarity, tolerance and economic prosperity**. An **inclusive environment where human rights are respected, differences and diversity celebrated and social justice enforced**. Some authors consider this dream to be more people-oriented than the American one. While the latter **praises autonomy, independence, economic growth and wealth**, the former is more community-oriented and it focuses on sustainable development, quality of life and interdependence. In the United States, people celebrate a **strong work ethic, patriotism and the country's religious inheritance**, while in Europe, countries are **predominantly secular** and their inhabitants more **cosmopolitan and less attached to a particular territory**.

The realisation of **European dream** began in earnest in the **1950s** with the creation of the **European Economic Community (EEC)** and the **European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM)**. Those were the first steps towards the creation of a union of European states that **share common values, traditions and a predominant religion**. After a period of economic growth during the 1960s, the 1970s brought the first round of enlargement. The **EU integration process gained further momentum in the 1980s**, especially after the **fall of the Berlin Wall** and the subsequently **collapse of Communism**. In 1993, the **European Union** was officially created. At that time the **European dream was more alive than ever: people felt united and excited about a future without borders, frontiers and divisions**. The next decade brought that dream closer to reality, as some of the economically less-developed countries in Europe became a part of the EU. It seemed that Europeans were **slowly yet steadily building a joint, European identity** and that they were ready to **lend each other a helping hand** as they **continued on the path of progress together**.

However, the last decade has proved to be very challenging for the dream of a united and strong Europe. **Voter turnout at the European elections has been decreasing steadily** and the Netherlands and France put a stop to an idea of a European constitution. The **global economic crisis hit some member states particularly hard**. They faced **growing unemployment, high budget deficits and accelerating debt levels**. The member states that were hit the hardest, like Greece, were **bailed out by other member states**, but that **did not sit well with many of the citizens of the countries providing the loans**. The situation got even more complicated when **thousands of starved and desperate refugees started arriving on European shores, searching for a safe heaven**. **Europe failed to come up with a common and comprehensive approach**. The response of the member states varied drastically, from Hungary's push to build impenetrable walls to Germany's "Wir schaffen das".

With Eurosceptics and nationalists winning more seats both in national and European governing and representative bodies, the Spanish government's struggle with the Catalan separatist movement, Polish and Hungarian governments being reprimanded¹ over their blatant² disrespect for the rule of law and democratic values and Brexit, one might conclude that Europe has awakened from the European dream and is ready to face reality. This has been repeatedly stated in different forums, political debates, expert analysis and even

¹ reprimanded: gerügt

² blatant: offen

among citizens in the streets. In my country, Serbia – one that has been striving for EU membership for the last 17 years and is ready to take some quite difficult decisions in order to achieve that aim (should we call it a dream?), there are people who think that we are giving up everything to board a sinking ship.

One cannot blame people for losing faith in their dreams from time to time. In the last 17 years, all I heard about was the European dream. “There is no alternative to Europe” has become a massively popular election slogan that made a party reach the majority in the Serbian parliament. “Europe has no alternative”, our politicians repeated for years to the poor and desperate people who get poorer and more desperate as time goes by. “Europe has no alternative” I’ve heard numerous times in Brussels, Berlin, Amsterdam and other places across the continent.

And although you hear it so many times and you do believe it, from time to time it is hard to hold on to that dream. When you see your peers unemployed or working for peanuts, when you see others leaving the country because they see it as the only way to live a decent life, when you witness your dear ones getting older and more skeptical and all you hear are empty promises of a better life once you enter this magical place called the EU, you cannot blame a girl for sometimes losing faith. Serbia was expected to join the EU in 2010, 2012, 2020 and now some mention 2022, others 2025 or 2030. How old will I be then? How many job and further education opportunities will I have missed by that time, despite all of my knowledge and qualifications, just because I do not possess an EU passport? And who has the right to tell me that I am less European in my heart and mind than any other EU citizen, just because I wasn’t born within the borders of the Union?

It would be very easy to conclude that the European dream is dead. However, it is not.

“It was horrible back home in Syria” Ishtar told me, looking me straight in the eyes. “It was not just the war, although it was bad when things went mental³. She continued: “It was not able to be myself. My parents knew, I am into women as well. But we never talked about it. And saying that out loud was prohibited. I could maybe hold my girlfriend’s hand in public – you know, people would think we are just friends, acting cute and girly. But if you are a man, a gay man...” she sighed. Then she told me all about her escaping Syria with her mother and sister: how they sold their apartment to be able to pay the smugglers, the struggles and fear along the way and finally the asylum application in Germany. Then the difficulty of finding a place to live, living with her relatives in an overcrowded one-bedroom apartment. She also told me about her family back in Syria denouncing her because she did the unthinkable: publicly admitting she was gay, moving out to live with strangers, who were also gay, and accepted her for who she was.

“Are you happy in Berlin?” I asked. Her eyes lightened up. “How could I not be? Of course I am! I can do my music, my artwork. I can be who I am without being punished or judged for it. I can go out for a walk or go to a club. And there is peace, no sirens going off in the background. It is all I have dreamed of, back home in Damascus, when I was preparing to emigrate. All that and a lot more. I am living a dream here.” She smiled.

And that is when I suddenly realised: the European dream is not dead. It is still very much alive for the people who are aware of the progress we have made. Just seven decades ago, Europe was recovering from a bloody war. It was a place of hate, sad memories and open wounds. Today it is a place of peace, of solidarity and acceptance. Is there still a long way to go? Undoubtedly. Does that mean we should disregard all the steps we’ve made so far? Absolutely not. If we want to see how close we are to making the European dream come true, it is enough to see how far we’ve come from where we started. It is enough to see the hope in people’s eyes, people who risked everything to come here and be accepted into our community. It is enough to see young people from different countries studying together, working together, traveling and getting to know each other in ways which a century ago would have been inconceivable. As J. Rifkin explains in his book: “The fledgling⁴ European Dream represents humanity’s best aspirations⁵ for a better tomorrow. A new generation of Europeans carries the world’s hopes with it.

³ to go mental: psychisch / seelisch werden

⁴ fledgling: jung

⁵ aspiration for sth: Streben nach etwas