

The Future of Europe

Dear Colleagues, Guests, Fellow Students, Europeans,

My name is Gergely Gáthy. I am European, Hungarian and a Master Student. I was born a few years after the democratic transition of my country. The Iron Curtain had just fallen, and the future looked bright. Everyone was talking about catching up with the West, about creating a democratic and social welfare state and becoming a member of the European Union. Excitement filled the air and many adults assured me time and again that my generation would enjoy far greater opportunities in life than they had enjoyed. They told us we would travel, study and make friends across Europe and the entire planet, and that all we had to do was be courageous enough to dream big.

25 years have passed and I have indeed studied in different countries, and I do indeed have friends in nearly all member states. I have tried to be courageous and to dream big. One of my biggest dreams, for example, was to address a room full of important people. Well, here I am. And, yes, I'm happy. But to be honest, I'm also worried. I'm worried and saddened by what I see. When I look at European society, I see anger, rising tensions and frustrations from London to Rome, from Barcelona to Warsaw. And frankly, I'm beginning to fear that the promise of a bright future is about to be torn apart.

The European Union has been going through a series of crises in recent years. And it's not over yet. We are just about to recover from the worst economic crisis in 8 decades. And although we produce fancy aggregated data about decreasing unemployment, rising GDP and increasing trade volume, our problems aren't over. The idea of Europe being finally back on track is an illusion. Let's not allow ourselves to be deceived by the pure numbers. While we are busy with architecting bulletproof financial mechanisms and institutions, we tend to lose sight of the essence of the European project, and that is human beings. People! People, many of whom feel desperate, neglected and left alone. They feel desperate because they can't make ends meet and give their children the education they deserve. They feel neglected because no one wants to hire them. Or their job might have been replaced by automatization. And they feel left alone because division in society is increasing, because the middle class is shrinking, and because they feel betrayed by the political elite they elected.

And this is exactly where populism finds its roots. We should recognize these roots, recognize these problems. We should determine which policies have failed and which decisions proved to be wrong decisions that resulted in the problems we are facing. We should do something about this, but not in a populist way. Why? Because populists only make these problems bigger instead of smaller. Populists are opportunists who shamelessly exploit the people's most existential fears in order to gain power. They are irresponsible, because they promise easy solutions without having any real answers. They are liars, because instead of engaging in fruitful debate about our future, they simply deny facts and figures. And they label anyone who dares to think independently as fake news.

Therefore, it is our moral duty to fight back. Across the continent. Because populists are the smugglers of fear. Fear and hatred. Feelings that turned Europeans against Europeans and covered our soil with blood so many times in the past. Yes indeed, despite its shortcomings, European integration has brought us the longest standing period of peace in the entire history of our continent! It's our mutual responsibility to work on our common and peaceful future. This cannot be preserved without the European Union. Hence we must stand up against those forces that try to destroy it. Those who tell you that global challenges – such as economic crises, terrorism, cyber warfare and mass migration – can be addressed by nation states alone, those are either lying or have no clue how big these challenges are! By building walls and by closing down our societies, these populist leaders are depriving us of what the European Union has promised and delivered. It's only when you lose something that you really realize what you first had.

Because the benefits of the European integration are everywhere in our lives. We are just so used to them that we don't even recognize them anymore. We take them for granted. The European Union is far from perfect. Sometimes it is even an annoying and bureaucratic nightmare. But I still firmly believe this is our best option. Therefore, we need to repair its old engine and make it move forward again, with renewed dynamism and with new results. Results that improve the living standards of our fellow European citizens.

I know. There are many challenges ahead. And some of them might seem herculean at times. But we must stay optimistic. In fact, I am very optimistic. There have been many challenges throughout the history of European

integration, far greater than those we face today. Yet time and again we managed to overcome them together, with compromises based on mutual respect. I am optimistic because these challenges provide an exceptional opportunity to finally take courageous steps forward. I am optimistic because the often-criticized millennials are probably the best educated generation in history. And these young talents have finally started to demand their place at the decision-making table. Therefore, what they deserve is not cynicism and compassion, but faith and trust.

Let us work together. Let us work on better and deeper European foundations. Let us work on a real European identity. Use our generation, because most of us already have this personal attachment and the identity of feeling European. Because we shouldn't leave identity politics to populists. Instead of building Europe, we should build Europeans first. How can we expect a strong European Union in the future? How can we expect high European parliamentary election turnout and greater legitimacy, if there are no Europeans per se? If people don't understand what it means to belong to Europe? Studying abroad, traveling, working abroad and making friends around Europe. These are the means to plant the seeds of European identity. And it works. We know that. But today these programs are only for the few, not the many.

One example. Erasmus works. Well, make it ten times bigger. Second example. Since last year Europe gives train tickets to young people to travel around and to explore the continent. This works too. So make it a hundred times bigger. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to create a new form of nationalism at the European level. And I definitely don't want to wipe out the beautiful and diverse cultural

heritage of European nations. But I do agree with Vice-President Frans Timmermans when he says that we need more European patriotism. We need European patriots who are passionate about the European Union and who want to make it better.

An inclusive European Union, which works for its people, has enormous potential. An inclusive Europe, where young people don't struggle to find a job with their degrees, because they are considered a source of creativity and innovation. A caring Union, where women finally earn the same wages as men in the same positions. Where fathers and mothers are not afraid of losing their jobs if they want to stay at home with their new-borns. A developing Europe, which takes the lead in technological innovation and legislation. Where our data and customer rights are properly protected. Where we can pay with the euro in every member state. A responsible Europe, which possesses capabilities to defend itself against any military or non-military threat. An accountable Europe, where governments behave as responsible shareholders in our common European project. And lastly, where the rule of law, media plurality, checks and balances, judicial independence and academic freedom are self-evident principles that can never be a matter of political dispute. Not in Warsaw, not in Rome and not in Budapest.

Ladies and gentlemen,

25 years ago, my generation received a promise.

A promise of a better European future.

Today we know that this future is not a gift.

It is something we have to fight for. Every week and every day.

It is our common job to keep the dream of Monet, Adenauer and Schuman alive.

It is time to reject staying silent and break through the wall of political apathy.

It is time to stand up for the core values of our democracy and say it out loud and clear:

We want a strong and united Europe, not a weak and nationalistic one.

Turning back is not an option. There is only one way for Europe and that way is forward.

Thank you very much.