

I am writing these words down out of a need to communicate what is in my heart right now watching how thousands of people arrive on the doorsteps of my homeland completely devastated, desperate and in shock. What is happening in Ukraine is touching everyone's heart in Eastern Europe, including mine.

I feel that my life as a European and specifically as an Eastern European has changed drastically and dramatically on February 24th, 2022, and so did the future of an entire continent. There is a before and an after for us, a sort of a 9 11 which brings a level of restlessness with itself that engulfs my life, our lives as Europeans, no matter where we live.

I know that, regardless of the outcome of this conflict, Eastern Europe, maybe Europe as a whole, will not be the same for many, many years to come.

My continent has been ravaged by war throughout its existence, but that ended with the last 2 World Wars we unleashed upon the entire globe because we swore it would never happen again. We created a Union to uphold that promise, a club anyone could join if they wanted to and met certain conditions of rule of law, a free-market economy and having a stable democracy, our own European Union.

It was not a perfect union, yet it was helping us keep our promise. Our continent flourished, conscription ended in most places, and, after the end of the Cold War, countries up until then, consumed by the sickness of communism, were offered a ticket to join the club, too, and we did. It brought and it keeps bringing us prosperity, unprecedented growth, albeit slower in some places as our governments still need to rid themselves of the vestiges left by communism, especially rampant corruption. We can and we will get there, given the opportunity to continue the reforms started decades ago in addition to the support offered by the European Union.

With all that said, there is a change within the Union, a fury in the air, the danger brought on by amnesia. Europeans started forgetting why the Union was created in the first place and took up bickering and fighting amongst ourselves again. I blame Putin for part of it. He knew exactly where to poke for us to move in the direction he wanted us to. He and his army of trolls point out our differences as nations, the high cost of the European Union, over and over again, until people assume we are more different than we are alike, and the cost of a Union is higher than what we are willing to pay. I ask all those who believe the propaganda: Is war a cheaper alternative and are we that different in our hopes and aspirations?

Who would have thought a Ukrainian comedian turned president would be the person we would rally around to defend us? He is the leader of the country that was not even offered a seat at the table of our Union before February 24th. Yet, he is uniting us. At least this is my hope. We in the East understand the desire of Ukraine to run as far away from Putin's Russia as possible and we support it. We can empathise with these people who have already lost so much in their struggle to be independent and European. Many of our countries made such sacrifices. 1956 in Budapest, 1968 in Prague, Solidarnosc in Poland in the 80s, the Revolution in 1989 in Romania are just a handful of examples.

Now we feel scared, horrified that we may be next. Our governments try to reassure us by reminding us we are NATO member countries and, according to article 5, if one country is attacked, all of us are under attack. But, will we run to another country's aid or would we be left to fend for ourselves? And what

about Georgia and Moldova which are not NATO members and just like Ukraine, have been stolen pieces of their territory?

Ukraine was given false expectations, humiliated into renouncing Crimea before and now maybe its Eastern territories. I know Ukraine should have not been led to believe it could join NATO and there is a lot to discuss about NATO's past mistakes, but, from the perspective of an Eastern European, this is not about NATO. It is about a sovereign country having the freedom to decide what it wants to do with its future. We can all relate to it. While we were forced into the Warsaw Pact, we all joined NATO as well as the European Union gladly.

The question on many people's mind in the East is, will they, the West, abandon us again just like they did in Yalta in 1945? We, Eastern Europe, were handed over to Stalin and his monstrous regime on a napkin like dirty, unwanted leftovers.

We have for so long been second class citizens in Europe that it is hard for us to believe we matter or is it more likely that they will sacrifice us and send us back into darkness for decades to come? Should we take matters into our own hands before the West has a chance to throw us to the lions or should we trust that they will see us as equal partners this time around?

Our hope and saviour is Zelensky and his brave compatriots who are protecting the rule of law, a free-market economy and above all, democracy. Ukraine is defending our European Union all on its own.

At this moment, all we can do as citizens is protect the mothers, the children and the elderly fleeing the constant bombings, offer them shelter, warmth and welcome them as family into our land because we owe it to them. Their fathers, brothers, sons as well as all the women who decided to stay behind, are protecting us all from a new Stalin and his thugs. But, until when? When will we say enough is enough, how long until we will have no choice, but join the fight?

Crista Szilagyi

MA in Political Science

BA in European Studies