



*Understanding the EU's Association Agreements
and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas
with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia*

3DCFTAs Youth Essay Competition

The EU for me Bogdan Cuza



My name is Bogdan Cuza. I am 16 years old and I live in Chisinau, Republic of Moldova. My passion is foreign languages and my goal is to be able to speak 10 languages (quite a high bar, right?). I really like travelling and thanks to my participating twice in an international Olympiad I have been far away from home and from my culture, part of which inspired me to write this essay. My last school was a school with advanced teaching of German, so I grew up with a passion for German culture and a very European mindset. I have an older brother and he is a student in Romania. When I went to visit him (in Cluj) I noticed the diversity of the people there. You

can hear Romanian, Hungarian, German etc. I feel like that is what the European spirit is all about.



Preface

What is the European Union exactly? It might seem like a trivial question for some—“surely, we’re educated people, we know that the EU is a political and economic union of 28 member states that are located primarily in Europe.” I don’t know about you, but I personally do not see any value in that response. Politics and economics aren’t my main occupations. That definition is of little value to me. But as a proud supporter of the EU, how should I come about to explain it not only to myself but to everyone else? I think this is especially relevant for the countries whose goal is to join the EU. Is our only goal to link into the European economy or to integrate ourselves into every part of the EU, because (at least for me) it is not only defined as a political and economic union; it’s culture, it’s a common identity, it’s opportunities, it’s progress.

The European Union is a different concept from other unions of states. Every member gets to keep its independence, yet it is not only an economical union. It also provides a legal backbone for every state and it promotes the culture of every nation at the same level (e.g. all of the official languages of a member state are also official languages of the EU). As such, I think of the EU as starting from an idea of a common Europe, united by history and working towards the benefit of everyone. Looking at the history of Europe, we can clearly see that centuries of division have never done any good to anyone and that uniting through diversity is the only thing that can assure further progress for every nation.

The EU for me

I think the first step towards discovering what the Association Agreement means for my country is actually discovering what it means for me. First of all, I have to admit I am biased: like a lot of people in my country, I am, in fact, already a citizen of the EU, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t impact me at all. It actually creates a divide. One citizenship rewards me officially with EU identity, while the other does not; my home is still outside the EU and I cannot call my country fully European (in a social, political, or economical sense of the word). Yet, the EU has impacted my life quite a bit. Thanks to the EU, I am able to travel freely almost everywhere in Europe. I have comfortable and ecological transportation in my city. My mother (and everyone else who shares her profession) can submit documents via the internet and save time; we have interesting exhibitions and cultural events in my country. I know I can always pursue a job or education in a European country without much hassle.

Most of all, thanks to the EU I can see my rights and security as a given, and I didn’t realize how important a European perspective on life is until I stayed in another non-European country for more than one month. As a matter of fact, I cannot really describe the influence of the EU on my life because it’s always been there, I take it

for granted. Unfortunately, everybody else does too, and it hurts when they choose to ignore it. I've been born with a European mindset and I always rely on it. Sure, you might say: what does this have to do with the actual institution of the EU and the Association Agreements? Well, this would never have been possible without a united Europe. I could never replace the EU in this essay with any particular country, it has always been Europe. And the Agreements? If my government suddenly decides to take a 180 degree turn, I am sure everyone would feel it. Personally, I would know that my rights and freedoms are no longer guaranteed, I know that the government of my country would not be obliged to be democratic (as faulty as it is), I know that prejudice and discrimination would take place. How would this impact me personally? If I knew for sure that my government decided one day to stop all negotiations with the EU and regress, my family would probably permanently move to another country and come back as rarely as possible — which is the usual story with emigrants who have successfully found a new future abroad. Indeed, the meaning of Europe is (at least for me) very much tied with my opinion about my whole country, because I cannot see it survive on its own and even if it can, I don't want to see it reject European ideals.

The EU for the Moldovan people

What does the EU mean for the people of my country? It is actually indisputable that individuals benefit the most from the EU. It is a pillar of democracy and human rights. A good quality of life for all is one of the most important goals of the EU. Its policies are often implemented towards helping rural communities (agriculture, an important factor for my country), funding education and research etc. If you travel my country, you can see the impact of the EU: numerous projects funded by it that help people lead better lives every day. Some critics might say it is a form of bribery, but I see these remarks as lacking foundation. Frankly, the European Union does not gain a huge advantage by letting new countries join, but it still continues development because continuous progress leads to success—it invests in itself, so that on a common foundation all EU citizens would stand. One of the biggest examples of the aforementioned impact of the EU was the visa-free regime. All citizens from my country who hold a biometric passport can travel to EU countries. This policy sends the message that we are welcome, which I think is very important. A lot of people actually question that and think that the EU only imposes its rules, which makes them feel disappointed. But when you take a closer look, you can clearly see that this can be refuted.

I think the EU is especially important for young people in my country, because they view it from the perspective of limitless opportunities. Since my school is a DSD-School (advanced German language learning), I have always been in an environment where I could see these opportunities materialize. Germany is one of the most important pillars of the EU and being immersed in German culture in my education I

have come to realize just how many chances await young people in the European Union. A lot of the graduates at my school end up going to study in a European country (mostly Romania and Germany). I personally know someone who finished university there and has a job at a leading bank, all things that would be much harder if the EU and the Republic of Moldova were two completely opposite concepts.

But even for people who already have jobs and families, the freedoms and rights the EU guarantees are unmatched. A high quality of life in European countries has its reasons, it's not an impossible dream. It might be hard to explain to a 70-year old in my country the meaning of this, but people learn best my experience and comparison; people who have already lived in an EU country know what it means and can elaborate further. But do they actually know? There's a slight difference between being an immigrant in the EU and your country being part of the EU. I think if I were born in an EU country, I would not live with the insecurities that I deal with in my country. Sure, especially now, the EU has some problems, but they are actually everywhere. The advantages outnumber the disadvantages. The Association Agreement should show not only a strong will of the government to be European, but also of the people. Accepting a different lifestyle and mindset is hard, until you realize that they're fundamentally the same, which is what I think the whole foundation of the EU is. I wish for my people to understand this, because if they don't then it's always easier to instill another culture and for them to accept it — a culture more appropriate to that of how they've lived their lives up until my country got its independence, which I think would only intensify their Stockholm syndrome.

The EU for my country

What is a country? Even though it's a conceptualization mostly dependent on the nation, it is still something we like to regard as a real thing that we have a deep connection with. After all, patriotism wouldn't be a thing if people didn't feel it fiercely in their hearts. So, separating the people from the country for a little bit, what impact does the Association Agreement and the EU in general have on my country? Here's where the definition of the EU in the preface kicks in. Politics and economy are important things we need to survive in this day and age. "In union there is strength" — even though it might seem that a lot of European countries are quite small and insignificant, together the European Union is the second biggest GDP in the world, it is a diplomatic machine with immense power and a lighthouse of human rights that sets the standard everywhere else. As such, I'd like to say that I hope to see my government be represented by such a global power. The world is never 100% safe and having this massive shield in front of us is definitely a good thing. I also hope to see my government abide by European standards.

The government and the people should work together, which I think is not happening in my country at the moment. It seems like a lot of people are confused and the European Union is always a heated debate. Joining or not joining the EU is probably one of the most historical decisions my country can make in its small time period of existence. In order to understand what's so special about a country being "European" you can actually look at it from our perspective. EU countries for us distinguish themselves by their freedoms, rights, collaboration between the government and the people, being proud of their culture and sharing it with others as European, making an impact as a powerful country among all of the others in the world. And it doesn't apply only to Western countries. Even smaller countries, with similar backgrounds to mine, create a different perspective in our minds (e.g. when we think about Estonia).

Therefore, I think the EU can have a huge influence on every concept I associate more with "my country" than "me" or "my people". For instance, I think the European Union can finally bring out my country out of its shell and modernize it, something that I see is already happening (e.g. the aforementioned projects of the EU, free trade, environmental protection, science & education).

The EU for everyone

In conclusion, I have shown that the EU is an important part of life in my country and the Association Agreement and all other documents that help us get closer to being part of the Union are, respectively, essential. It is key to realize that the EU is not just a dream but actually something that can be achieved, one just needs the will of the people and the government. The government should change its opinions according to those of the people and I think it is crucial to explain to them better what exactly the EU means, not some abstract miracle, but a system that we can be part of. We can improve our economy, we can reach a higher development index, we can promote our culture as part of a common European heritage and we can regard human rights and democracy as one of the key elements of a state. Actually, I think some of us are already doing it. I have but sometimes felt like I lack rights in my country or that my culture is not truly European. Unfortunately, many people give up and say that the reality is completely different, we are not democratic, we are far from Europe and we can never achieve the same level of development because it's just something that is axiomatically not possible. I disagree, it is actually quite astonishing how being such a young country and transitioning from a completely different system of life, a lot of people still support the European Union even though they have for half of their lifetime not even imagined the existence of such a system of values, rights and opportunities.

The Association Agreements are crucial because they formally show my country's desire to join the EU, the EU's importance for my country, the rights and freedoms

Moldovan people will enjoy and, finally, that I might see the day when I can truthfully say that my country is European!