

MY EUROPEAN STORY

#EU60



Dear all

To continue the celebrations of Europe Day and 60 years of the Rome Treaties we want to share three stories about the enormous impact of European integration.

Since we are marking a special anniversary, the stories themselves are quite unique, expressing the personal reflections on the European project of **Bernhard Url**, Executive Director of EFSA, **António Campinos**, Executive Director of EUIPO and **Juan Menéndez-Valdés**, Executive Director of Eurofound .

Read on to find out their stories, hopes and aspirations for a united Europe, many of which we share together as Europeans!

To the next 60 years!

A UNION 60 YEARS YOUNG

Bernhard Url, Executive
Director, EFSA



The 60th Anniversary of the Treaties of Rome is an opportunity for us to reflect not only on the future of the European Union, but also on its past achievements. When I think about what 60 years means as a person, this sounds like a mature age. But for a civilisation this is still very young. The average lifetime of a civilisation is about 330 years, some even reaching the grand age of 1 000 years! Compared to this, 60 years corresponds to a small child – filled with curiosity, developing at lightning speed, and with a great future ahead.

Today, when some of the most basic principles underpinning our democracies and economies seem under threat, there is even more reason to remind ourselves of where we are coming from, what has improved in just one generation or two, and how the EU has changed our lives for the better – as the arrival of a new child usually does.

At a recent meeting with the EU's Intellectual Property Office, which handed over to EFSA the chairmanship of the EU Agencies Network earlier this month, we talked about the EU and how it's changed our lives compared to those of our parents and grandparents. This made me think of a personal story that illustrates the impact the EU has had on my life.

In 1944 my mother was 13 years old and lived in an industrial area in Austria. Each day she had to walk for one hour to get to school. On her way, she often saw low-flying fighter planes skimming overhead. They were looking for targets like trains, trucks or industrial plants, and frequently she had to jump into a ditch to hide. She literally had to risk her life every day when she went to school. My mother told us this story often, and I can still be puzzled when I think about it and realise: this happened only one generation ago. Nowadays, we look at Syria and the situation there, and sometimes we forget that, not too long ago, our parents or grandparents had to face very similar circumstances.

To me, first of all, the EU means peace. I know there are many other benefits the European integration has brought with it – democracy, prosperity, opportunities, well-being and diversity, to name just a few. But in our conversations and in the media we tend not to focus on these achievements but rather on the problems that still need resolving. We wonder why the EU does this or doesn't do that, and why it isn't solving all the issues we face today.

What we often forget, though, is that the longest period of peace and stability in Europe's written history – 70 years since the end of World War II – started with the economic integration initiatives that in 1957 led to the formation of the European Communities as a basis for peace. To me this is the most important achievement of the EU; yet it is often taken for granted. It's not mere chance that we are living in a peaceful society – it is also thanks to the European Union. Without peace there is no democracy, no diversity, no science or progress. No hope. As Elie Wiesel once said, "hope is like peace. It is not a gift from God. It is a gift we can give one another."

In my view, we should take this 60th Anniversary of the Treaties of Rome as an occasion to remind ourselves of how far we've come over these six decades. We live in one of the world's best regions when it comes to safety, well-being and social coherence as well as culture, education and science – and yes, even food! This is the result of working together and having common goals and values. For us at EFSA this is everyday practice as cooperation is at the very heart of our mandate. And we also know that, whether in science or politics, this is not always an easy endeavour, but well worth it – and worth continuing together.

I would encourage all of us to reflect on our own stories and compare them to those of our parents and grandparents to realise the impact the EU has had on our lives and those of our families and friends. Maybe this will help us to remember that only one or two generations ago, things were quite different ... **Our Union is only 60 years young!**

THE EU IS A LIVING PROJECT...

António Campinos
Executive Director, EUIPO



...not just something from the history books. It was born when the reality was seemingly endless conflict in Europe leading to hardship, oppression, and exile.

My mother came into this world in a cellar in Brittany in 1944 in the weeks after the D-Day landings. My father was a student activist in Portugal, forced to flee to France by a dictatorship.

It is fortunate that the current generation has not had to experience directly some of the hard lessons of the past, but they are written in our personal stories and should not be forgotten.

My father learned French and restarted his law studies in Poitiers where he met and fell in love with my mother. He never lost sight of the need for democracy, justice and human rights, and eventually formed part of several governments and served as a judge in the Constitutional Court. He fought for Portugal to join the EEC and played a role in the European project as an MEP, as Jurisconsult, and as a judge at the European Court of Human Rights.

My personal history, therefore, is that of a European, born and largely educated in France, and able to return from exile to my Portuguese homeland only in the mid-1970s, once it was set on the path of democracy and wishing to join the EU family.

Since the founding of the EU 60 years ago, Europe experienced decades of growth and advance in which the values of democracy and justice were shared and allowed to flourish. Economic progress has been joined by new opportunities for studying, working and living under the four freedoms of goods, people, services and capital.

Fast-forwarding to 2017, as we raise our glasses in celebration, many are now asking if some of the sparkle has gone from the Champagne or Cava.

The EU is only slowly emerging from a long period of austerity and is in the process of losing a member of the family. The world has gone through many changes that are bewildering for citizens and they are asking who or what is to blame for failing to address low economic growth, high unemployment, mass immigration and rising debt. Too many politicians found it tempting to blame “Europe” for everything and advocate departure.

But has any country become rich in isolation? Certainly in our 60-year journey we made mistakes. Too many citizens think that decisions impacting their lives are being made in Brussels by people who are not elected, unaccountable and unknown.

On the other hand, when we look back, Europe is certainly a success story. Even if the past ten years have been more difficult, we have never experienced on our continent such a long period of peace and prosperity.

Looking to the future, the concerns of our citizens must be addressed. Over-regulation and over-centralisation must be overturned, and more democracy must be transfused into Europe and its institutions.

We must come closer to citizens and celebrate a Europe that delivers things that really matter to their lives and those of their children, whether these are the freedoms of Erasmus, or the achievements of our science programmes that are pushing the boundaries of everything from medicine to the frontiers of rocket science.

Above all, we must celebrate and protect the European values that have spread peace, prosperity and democracy.

Politicians and citizens too, must learn to say that they love the EU and are proud of its achievements. The EU is more than the technical sum of its parts. It is the beating heart of Europe.

LIGHT THE FIRE

Juan Menéndez-Valdés
Executive Director,
Eurofound



In 1957, when European leaders were signing the Treaty of Rome, my parents were a newly married couple setting up house in Spain. My father warned against spending too much on the (coal) kitchen as “butano” domestic gas should be soon available in our country. He had recently seen that handy development in France, just a few kilometres away from the village in the Pyrenees where they had met. At that time in that area, goods were being smuggled over the border and exiled Spaniards were crossing clandestinely on a regular basis. The wounds of a civil war where relatives and neighbours shot each other from both sides of the trenches were still painful. Those were the dark years of Spanish dictatorship, when Europe opened only at the other side of the frontier. It was beyond those high mountains that there was freedom and progress – and orange butane bottles.

I myself was born in the more privileged baby-boom sixties, where a rapidly growing Spanish economy saw increasing number of families driving their ‘Seat 600’, and cooking without gas was almost inconceivable. There was also wider access to education and welfare. But Europe still began beyond the border. They - the Europeans (we even excluded ourselves from this category) - enjoyed not just peace and economic growth, but freedom, democracy and unrivalled social progress.

As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, I feel sometimes outraged by the post-truth allegations about the European Union. Poverty, unemployment, social dumping, inequalities, weakened public services, the deterioration of living and working standards; all, it would seem, a direct result of the EU. Or so they would have us believe. Clearly, recent years have seen us battle the deepest economic and social crisis since the war, and we are still confronted with unemployment, social inclusion challenges and security threats. But as the director of an EU Agency whose mission is to provide high-quality, reliable evidence to policy makers, I call on us all to honestly examine the facts and figures at hand.

And looking at the facts – while in no way underplaying the many serious challenges facing us today - there can be very little doubt about the huge progress realised by European integration. We have dismantled most frontiers on a continent where one can cross borders without custom controls, buy and sell with the same currency and carry consumer protection rights across countries. We can study and work abroad, have our qualifications recognised across frontiers and access medical assistance in any European city using an EU health card. The list goes on ...

Despite the incomplete architecture of the Euro, the common currency can boast in part at least an intense period of growth and economic convergence and net gains in terms of growth and employment, since its creation. We have reached the highest number of people at work in Europe (albeit persistently unacceptable unemployment levels in some countries). We have seen the highest proportion of women integrated in the labour market and increasing. We managed to maintain and further extend, as visible in the recent Social Pillar initiative, features that make Europe a Social Model for the world. Take the examples of working time, substantially reduced and open to much more flexible use, the still longest paid holiday and maternity leaves guaranteed in the world, a strong social partnership that empowers employers and workers to shape, through social dialogue, a fair and competitive working environment. The Union has also facilitated more cohesion. Countries with the lowest living and working standards have gradually approached those at the top. We have seen life expectancy increase in 14 years, and we report amongst the highest levels of life satisfaction in the world.

With facts and figures at hand, we can show that the EU, notwithstanding the ongoing challenges, not least in the social area or in terms of the need to rebuild citizens' trust or indeed the growing security threat, has walked a long and successful road to ensuring peace, freedom, prosperity and social progress. This has been possible through joining forces, sharing and building together, demonstrating that the whole can always achieve more than the sum of its parts. And it is precisely our shared understanding of this history which confirms my profound belief that this same unity of strength will guide us through the challenges ahead, together.

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