

Lieve
Blancquaert

We
Are
Europe

*Encounter
with
a Continent*

HANNIBAL











Lieve Blancquaert

Ghent – 4 March

Today I am setting off on a long journey. Together with Marij, my companion and close friend, I want to visit all the member states of the European Union (EU). Not because I want to discover this continent or because I doubt its beauty – I know how beautiful it is in places, I am familiar with the postcards and landscapes – but mainly because I want to understand who we are. Who are these Europeans? What unites us? The group currently has twenty-seven member states and we speak twenty-four different languages. It seems to be and is indeed a mishmash, but for me it is my home. I also like saying, ‘I am European’.

Of course, I realise that on this journey I will shed light on only a small piece of this vast and complex continent and from my own subjective perspective. Chance encounters will make up the substance of this book. Each country deserves at least a full year of our time for us to cover it in depth and understand it

a little, but we are passers-by, journeying across the continent. The decision to visit only the current EU member states is a conscious one. The countries that are currently in the waiting room deserve a separate book.

The feeling that ‘I am/we are Europe’ overcame me on 9 November 1989.

That particular day, I was driving my old Volvo 240 from Essen to Berlin, ‘East Berlin’ to be precise. At the time, strangely enough, that didn’t even sound strange. In Essen, I had taken pictures of a world-famous circus whose name I have now forgotten. On 10 November I was to do a portrait in East Berlin of a famous East German poet for *Knack* magazine. I have forgotten his name too.

But history was written that day, and I will never forget the power of that moment.

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Foreword

In my primary school, a map of the world hung on the wall. Europe was right in the middle, colossal and impressive, a robust continent that radiated power and unity. Other continents seemed to have been tagged on at the edges. Later I discovered that you can cheat with maps by manipulating the projection. Europe certainly looked very different on a globe: a small outgrowth of Asia, and a fragmented one at that; a crackle continent, with dozens of small separate states.

Over the past few decades, twenty-seven of those countries have gradually begun to work together. Borders have blurred and evaporated, economies have become intertwined, and ministers, diplomats, civil servants and experts from all member states have started thinking together about all possible challenges and problems.

Lieve Blancquaert and Marij De Brabandere travelled around the European Union and came back with photos and stories from all these countries. ‘What holds us together?’, they wonder.

The differences especially are striking; no two places here are alike. A trip across Europe is a journey through a range of landscapes, cultures and histories. All sorts of languages are spoken, various traditions celebrated and different dishes eaten. The light does not fall the same way twice here, colours are nowhere identical.

Europe is a continent with romantic alleyways, iconic bridges, historic squares, monuments photographed to excess and enchanting islands, but above all, many ordinary streets, avenues and roads that are nevertheless different every time, whether in villages or towns, through vast fields or rolling hills, in the countryside or along banal waterfronts. That is where Europeans live, whether they are recent arrivals or have been there for many generations. Men, women and children, young and old, poor and rich, black and white and everything in-between. Europe is a mosaic, with all kinds of people, and even though many feel settled, almost all have migration in their DNA.

‘United in diversity’ is the official motto of the European Union. The concept is not unique to Europe. You can also find it in the national emblem of Indonesia, and it probably also applies to China, India and the USA. Not even microstates are homogeneous; they too are home to all sorts of differences.

So where is the unity that Europe claims to have? What connects all these places? What holds Europeans together, other than the fact that they inhabit the same stretch of land? It is said that they share the same values. That remains to be seen, however. The fisherman, the soldier, the nun, the refugee, the Gen Zer, the harpist, the farmer with his hoe and the toddler at the circus: are they perhaps imbued with similar standards and norms? Election results show otherwise, and when all these Europeans engage in unfiltered discussions with each other, whether in real life or online, a common ground is hard to find.

What they do share is the fact that, willingly or unwillingly, they are part of the same political project, they have the same background in common – the European Union. They all stand against that backdrop. They all have their own thoughts about it too, for that matter. There are the believers, the sceptics, the haters, the lovers, the indifferent, the pragmatists and the romantic souls whose eyes moisten every time they see the blue flag with the circle of gold stars swaying or hear Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 swelling. This group of romantics is probably the smallest of them all, consisting mainly of elders who still remember World War II.

In any case, that political project does have its own genetic code, grounded in treaties. It has been sewn up, fixed up, patched up, built up and stitched up for decades. It began after the last world war. For centuries, countries and peoples had feuded with each other, and those feuds had invariably been settled on the battlefield. The inhabitants of this battered continent had fought each other with clubs and axes, swords and cannon, machine guns and mustard gas. In the mid-twentieth century, it was decided to do things differently from then on. Diversity was allowed to remain as a source of beauty and wealth. It was not erased, but rather

Odette and Dirk

Germany 357,121 km² – 83,358,845 inhabitants – EU member state since 1958

Berlin – 7 March

It is now thirty-four years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and I am back in what was once East Berlin, a unified and by now unrecognisable city, vibrant and green. Today I had the opportunity to meet a very special woman here, Odette Bereska. Along with her husband Dirk Neldner, we speak in the house where she grew up. From her balcony she could look towards what was then West Berlin. She could see the big Mercedes star, the symbol of wealth, luxury and freedom on the other side of the Wall. There was always a telescope at the window back then for visitors who were curious to look over the Wall, in search of a glimpse of life on the other side, of freedom and that shining star.

I wonder what they thought at the time. Did they fantasise about that world on the other side, free and wild? About an abundance of luxury goods and exotic fruits? A car other than those cute little Trabants that generated more noise and soot than actual horsepower? I have no idea what was going on in the minds of the people on the eastern side of the Wall back then, but Odette speaks words that touch me. She tells me that freedom is also something in your mind, that for many people freedom in the West can also be a prison of capitalism and materialism.

Her life took strange turns because of that Wall. She says the Wall still literally runs through her life, everywhere and always. Even today, in her relationship with her husband. He and many other Westerners look at *them* from a superior Western mindset.



Dirk from the West and Odette from the former East.

They sometimes look down on people who grew up in the East. They feel they are smarter, better and freer thinkers. I can see that it can still make her quite angry. It's not that she was a fan of the system and of that Wall, but she also can't tolerate people just talking badly about it without ever having lived through it themselves. Despite everything, she also has fond memories of her childhood behind that Wall.



Portrait of a Russian soldier at Checkpoint Charlie.

Odette's East German passport with a visa for 11/11/89 to West Berlin.



A few months before the Wall was erected in 1961, her mother became pregnant with her. How exactly it happened is not clear to me, but her biological father was suddenly living on the other side of the Wall and Odette's mother couldn't reach him.

Only twenty-eight years later did Odette finally get the chance to meet her real father. But it was too late. He had just died. The man never knew he had a daughter so near and yet so far, on the other side of the Wall. As she shares her story, I can see that this was a terrible missed opportunity for her.

Her grandmother also lived in the West and could only visit once a month. When she fell ill, she could no longer travel, and Odette's mother was given no opportunity to visit her own sick mother in West Berlin. The GDR and the system didn't give her permission. Only when it was too late were they allowed to go. For her funeral. Crazy system. That, too, clearly hurt Odette deeply.

That is also what made the sudden fall of the Wall so strange to her. During all those years they had made so many efforts in vain to get to the West, and suddenly everyone was clambering onto and over the Wall, this way and that, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. It all happened too fast, in barely twenty-seven minutes.

She didn't have that same euphoric feeling at that moment as me. She was overwhelmed by the speed with which it was happening. She couldn't grasp it, she says.

How many generations does it take for the impact of such major events to disappear? Is there such a thing as transgenerational trauma that can be passed on through our genes?

And what does that mean for the children and grandchildren of the children of the Holocaust? How long do trauma and history flow through our veins?

How strange that both of us, two women, Odette at 28 and me as a 26-year-old photographer, stood at that Wall somewhere on that evening of 9 November. Perhaps even side by side. She was crying and completely confused. I felt only happiness and tried to capture that turning point.

I also reflect that I was pretty naive, standing there at the Wall applauding in 1989.



K12 is one of the last unrenovated complexes of working-class flats from the GDR era. It forms a village in the city, with more than a hundred people spread over fifty-five flats. They oppose the sale of the building they live in and believe that everyone has the right to affordable housing. Mila and her father Zander are the driving force behind the protest.





Rafal and Adam

Poland 311,888 km² – 38,282,325 inhabitants – EU member state since 2004

Warsaw – 10 March

The Poland we are driving through today is a long way away from what I remember from the photos I took there in the 1980s. Horse and cart were part of the streetscape back then. Now Warsaw has become a dynamic European metropolis, which in no way reminds me of then.



I had already visited Warsaw in 1991, when I took this photo.

The country gained independence in 1989 and joined the EU in 2004. The speed with which Poland had to adapt to the new values didn't work well for everyone.

The country is divided and this division is really palpable. The conservative and Catholic population wants to protect the old values of the Poles, while progressives support more liberal values. The two clash in many areas, and when it comes to issues such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights especially, the polarisation is visible.

People in big cities don't disapprove of homosexuality, but alternatively, half the population and a large number of politicians view it as a disgusting aberration that shouldn't exist in society.

For this reason I am meeting with Adam in the centre of Warsaw. For just under a year he has been running a club for queer people here with his husband. In deeply Catholic Poland, this is a real challenge.



Rafal and Adam hope to get married one day in Poland.

Adam tells me that while setting up the club, he received many comments. People said they should clear out with their dirty ways. It made him feel scared and insecure, but everything changed on the day of the opening when his mother spoke to him. She told him that as a young girl she used to go out, there, on that same street and that now, forty years later, he should be proud of what he had achieved. He had, against all the odds, created a place where people who are supposedly 'not normal' could dance and flirt with each other safely. Since then, he had squared his shoulders and believed in his cause. The fear was gone. Proof once again that words from mothers can be as powerful as they can be destructive. I have seen it so many times in so many different places.

As I lay in bed that night, unable to clear my head, I tried to make sense of it. That disgust, that aversion and resistance that so many people feel towards people who are just a little different. Why do we interfere in something so personal and private? What do we gain from erupting in anger when it comes to other people's feelings and desires? It has brought misery to so many generations. As long as you're not bothering anyone else, you'd think that you could just about do what you want between the sheets.

I can understand that things are moving too fast for many people. But I find it much harder to understand the banning, the aggression, the discrimination. How incredible it would be if one day, globally, we reached that point where gender just doesn't matter and doesn't even need to be named.







Auschwitz – 12 March

‘Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’ This line is written in large letters above the door to one of the barracks where Jews tried to survive in the most horrific conditions between 1940 and 1945. They are famous words by the philosopher George Santayana.

Auschwitz. I have never been here before. I always felt reluctant – or was it fearful? – at the idea of coming here. Around the age of 13, I saw for the first time the black-and-white photographs taken at this camp. Images of corpses dumped on top of each other. Images of some survivors too, looking straight at the camera with their large sunken eyes and hollowed cheeks. People who were nothing more than skin and bone. Everything had been taken from them.

More than a million people were taken to this camp and destroyed, a caption read. Something broke inside me then.

Never before had it occurred to me that we, humans, were capable of such a thing. It felt like my childhood stopped there in that moment.

Together with Marij and hundreds of other visitors, we stand in line waiting for a sign to enter. Behind the fence, we see the brick buildings. The place where so much horror took place, where for five years all dignity and humanity were non-existent. There, Marij tells me the story of an old man from Paris. He was the only one of his family to survive the camps. He was never able to talk about it. Not even with his own children. It was hidden somewhere deep inside his being. The man lived next to a school, and a teacher was once able to persuade him to share his story with the children. After doing so, he broke down. He went mad and was admitted to an asylum.

If sadness, fear, anger were audible, no human being would ever visit this place.



Near Auschwitz – 13 March

It is still freezing cold, and Marij and I have opted for a warm bed instead of parking our campervan somewhere along the bleak road and spending the night in a deep freeze.

In the breakfast room of the hotel, an oversized buffet with sausages and eggs awaits the guests. A young mother in her pyjamas shuffles into the room with two children. She tells us she is a refugee from Ukraine and has been living at the hotel for more than a year. Her son has severe autism and needs a lot of care. Her little daughter – I'd say about 3 years old – lets the Chocopops roll out of her bowl onto the floor one by one.

She is clearly happy to be able to talk to us this morning. She feels safe here, she tells us. Her husband is a doctor and he therefore had to stay in Ukraine. He takes care of the wounded there.

Her daughter has no memory of her father. She only knows this strange man through Zoom.

It is a short conversation but a little later she sends me a lovely email. I regret not photographing her. I would have loved to give her a face in this book.



LADCE

Aldin

Slovakia 48,702 km² – 5,428,792 inhabitants – EU member state since 2004

Ladce – 14 March

As we cross the border between Poland and Slovakia on our way to Hungary, I read about Slovakia's complex history on the country's Wikipedia page. I also realise that I know next to nothing about Slovaks.

The small, mountainous country belonged to Hungary for centuries before becoming a republic along with the Czech Republic (Czechia). During World War II, it was occupied by the Germans, only to be liberated and then occupied by the Russians. On 1 January 1993, it finally became the independent republic of Slovakia and was no longer part of Czechoslovakia.

We pull off at Ladce. We can't immediately find a nice café, and the village seems completely deserted. A cathedral-like cement factory next to a railway catches our attention. As he carries out some work on his car, a man's legs stick out from underneath. He has the radio on loud, so he flinches when I gently tug at his feet.

He looks at our campervan in surprise and, using gestures and a little English, I understand that he thinks we are tourists who are completely lost. His name is Aldin, which means old friend, he tells me. He is old and friendly too. He has few teeth. When I ask him what he is most worried about today, he doesn't hesitate. 'Our neighbour Ukraine is at war and there will be no end to it. Since my childhood,' he tells us, 'the battle for freedom has been ongoing. Every day I thank heaven that we are members of Europe and NATO. Every day I contemplate that otherwise the Russians would soon be at our doorstep again.'

Aldin disappears under his old worn-out BMW again and we drive on towards Hungary.

When I look at Google Maps, I realise that we are close to the outer border of the EU. Ukraine and Slovakia share 97 kilometres of common border. I didn't know that either.



Blanka and David

Hungary 91,248 km² – 9,597,085 inhabitants – EU member state since 2004

Budapest – 16 March

Our campsite lies opposite a giant orange-pink residential block that houses students. It is a hall of residence where most of the young people are from China and Africa. Hungarians are heavily outnumbered here.

We eat goulash soup at the student restaurant and marvel at how cheap the food is. As we try to convert the Hungarian forints into euros, we meet a young couple. They currently have no place to live. Only in this residential tower can they pay for a bed and do their studies. Blanka's parents have left permanently for Vienna and David's parents live in London. They themselves are waiting to see what the future holds. They are still considering whether to stay in their homeland or not. They tell me this on a cold morning. I can tell from everything that they are distressed, desperate even, and anxious about the future. The future with their leader is a disaster for them, but there is always interference in the elections, so the situation remains unchanged.

Those two could be my children, and I am moved all the more because of that. Everything wavers when even your parents don't trust the system and their leaders. How strange is it that Europeans flee within Europe? Their suitcases are always ready. They wait. They are wary. Their future is unclear.

On the beautiful Liberty Bridge that takes us across the Danube towards the Hotel Gellért, I photograph the cargo ships slowly emerging from under the bridge. A family of Hungarian tourists next to me does the same. I ask them if they are happy with the



Blanka and David dream of a better future in their own country.

political situation in their country. The wife and mother of the offspring lashes out at once, pointing her finger at me. 'You people from Brussels don't understand who we are. Orbán is good for our country. He may be strict but he is fair. When I see in the news how dangerous Brussels is with all those foreigners and refugees, I am happy we have him. He will provide a future for our children.' Apparently, the woman had understood from the tone of my question how I felt about the man.

Fátima

Portugal

90,996 km² – 10,467,366 inhabitants – EU member state since 1986

Fátima – 10 May

I watch as Andrea, with the support of her husband, shuffles centimetre by centimetre on her bare knees across the main square towards the Basilica of Our Lady of Fátima, the Lourdes of Portugal so to speak, about an hour and a half's drive from Lisbon. Through my lens, I can read the pain on her face. She is a woman with blonde hair well into her 40s. When she finally reaches her goal, the steps of the basilica, and wearily stands upright again, I go up to her. She politely asks me not to use the photos I took of her. I solemnly promise, on Our Lady of Fátima herself.

She tells me they have come to this pilgrimage site to ask a favour of Mary. Their daughter is gravely ill and it is uncertain whether she will survive. Andrea makes it clear to me that she is willing to do everything within her power to save her child. There is no point asking me if I believe the Virgin Mary appeared here several times to the three shepherd children Lúcia, Jacinta and Francisco in 1917. Nor do I know if I should believe that she gave those children three messages. But I certainly do believe in the power that people like Andrea feel here. Pilgrims of all kinds gather here from all over the world. They are all looking for something. They pray for support for what lies ahead. They crawl, say endless rosaries, burn candles. I am moved by that display by so many people of profound devotion, of humility, asking for favours or forgiveness for their sins.

When Marij and I turn to two couples in the large dusty car park at the pilgrimage site who are having a picnic together at



Devotion in the Lourdes of Portugal: some pilgrims cover the route to Our Lady of Fátima on their knees.

a small table between their cars, we are suddenly surrounded by three men in black suits straight out of a bad B-movie. The type of men whose authority and sacrosanct importance depend on the little earpieces I see sticking in their ears. They look like a comic trio. A thin long one, a medium-sized bruiser and a small chubby one who clearly appears to be the boss of *les gendarmes*



de Fátima. One of them says something unintelligible into a walkie-talkie, from which indistinct chatter immediately bursts. These are apparently the ‘security boys’ of Holy Mary herself who in all probability are also in direct contact with the all-seeing eye of this holy basilica and adjoining car park. We don’t learn much about them, but what I understand is that they saw us on their screens taking photos and asking people questions. Apparently they don’t like that, and they emphatically ask us to leave this ‘private domain’.

My good friend can never resist getting a little wanton at such times and asks the little guy what is so sinful about asking a few

questions. But that question in itself seems to confirm their belief that we urgently need to be deported from this holy place.

As we drive out of the car park under their watchful eye, we honk our horn loudly and both stick out our tongues at the same time at these roguish ‘men in black’, as if we had timed it. We both get the kind of giggles that the Virgin Mary will have to forgive us for, and I instantly feel like I am 13 years old again and at boarding school with the Sisters of Charity in Wetteren. The big difference is that we can now tear away laughing in our campervan.





Eloi

France

663,886 km² – 68,070,697 inhabitants – EU member state since 1958

Poiseul-la-Grange – 16 May

Eloi is a shy young shepherd of 24 with a farm near Dijon. I meet him pretty much right in the middle of this country that is as rich and beautiful as it is vast (and where, it is said, God also lives). The contrast with the south, where we have just come from, is stark. There, the landscape was dry, arid and painted in many shades of brown. Here the softly rolling land comes in every possible shade of green. The soil here is clearly fertile and there are many farmers.

Eloi is a farmer's son, but above all an entrepreneur. He already owns 160 sheep. Pregnant ewes are kept in the barn to keep that number growing, while many cute little lambs frolic around their proud mamas in the field.

I take a portrait of the young farmer in his barn. I can tell from everything that he loves the animals and the profession he has chosen. He talks about the big challenges, about the many rules farmers have to follow today, about the lack of understanding of people sitting behind a computer somewhere in a city, far away from the 'real work'.

When he talks of the disaster that befell him two years earlier, I see how his bright blue eyes moisten. His voice breaks. 'One night, wolves mauled twelve of my sheep to death. I found them scattered all over the field, covered in blood. I can still see that image. It was horrific. All those ewes were pregnant, so twenty-four of my animals were actually killed that night. It was traumatic for me, but equally traumatic for the remaining ewes. My animals experienced so much stress during that massacre that it led to a second disaster.

When they were due to lamb not much later, many lambs proved to be too small and weak. Sheep that experience stress barely eat, they hardly dare to graze with their noses to the ground because they're constantly looking around to see if there is any danger. Other ewes rejected their own lambs. This sounds harsh and it is quite exceptional, but it is their instinct. They apparently want to protect them from danger that way. I was really devastated by that.'

Eloi catches a small, black lamb. The little animal is scared and I watch the young farmer stroke it behind the ears until it calms down completely. Eloi wonders a lot about the consequences of protecting wolves. I myself am a city mouse, and probably as a result an intuitive supporter of that European rule, although I don't know much about the matter. But as I listen to Eloi's words, I understand that the knife, as always, cuts both ways, more ways even. There is also a dark side to the financial compensation for livestock farmers, Eloi explains. He got money for the sheep that were mauled to death, but the dead lambs were not compensated. Such compensation was not anticipated. Only what happens during a direct attack by wolves is taken into account.

'Did you know that trading dead lambs is becoming a lucrative business?', he asks me. 'People buy weak little lambs for about sixty euros. They bring them to places where they know there are many wolves. Then they release the poor lambs that get killed by the wolves. These people get 200 euros per dead lamb in compensation, making a hefty profit in the process.'



Wilson and Abdul

Ireland 68,655 km² – 5,194,336 inhabitants – EU member state since 1973

Carndonagh – 29 May

It is night-time when we drive into the dark county of Donegal, high in the cold north of the Republic of Ireland. We are on our way to Wilson's Country House. There is little or nothing to be seen at the moment of the beautiful nature Ireland is so famous for. The white lines on the road guide us more or less on these small roads with thousands of bends. I'm at the wheel and it takes all my concentration. The eyes of startled hares reflect in our lights and I see them anxiously leaping away into the darkness.

Tense with stress and dead tired after the long trek, we finally find the bed we booked for that night, in Wilson's Country House, which simply turns out to be the house of a man named Wilson.

It is the loud and curiously high-pitched voice of the same Wilson that wakes us up the next morning. Wilson is a tall, bald man over fifty. He dashes happily in and out of the breakfast room with coffee, eggs and fresh fruit juice, all the while talking non-stop, even more than the average Irishman already does. I also tell him about our tour of the EU member states and then suddenly ask him, too, who would be the best person to talk to about the meaning of European membership? He sits down, suddenly falls completely silent and becomes deadly nervous. He thinks for so long that it becomes almost uncomfortable in the room. Hesitantly, he says: 'Abdul. I think you should speak to my friend Abdul. He and his wife Malak fled Syria on account of the war. Their journey was one big trauma. They are the new Europeans. Meanwhile, they have three children, Ahmad, Arwa and Aya. A fourth child, a son, is on its way.'



For Wilson, an Irishman, his friendship with Syrian refugee Abdul is vital.

Wilson suddenly lowers his voice, and I watch him wring his hands in his kitchen apron. 'We saved each other. He was in that terrible camp in Greece. He had to leave his parents behind and lived in constant fear. But I too carry a huge trauma. It's a completely different story, and I'm not ready to share it with the world yet. Abdul and I recognise that in each other, and we support each other.'

'What makes me happy is the pleasure I take in my work, and what makes me unhappy are the people who judge my work without knowing anything. The biggest challenges for me are overcoming all the conflicts coming our way, and the lack of water.' – Eloi

France – Eloi, a shepherd







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