

Laura D. Kelemen

## **BECOMING WESTERN**

*A personal essay on the division between the East and the West of  
Europe*

Coached by **Petra Quaadvlieg**

## Artist statement

I am Laura D. Kelemen, a Hungarian maker and artist. I express my social engagement through writing, illustration, and film. I collect stories through my own experiences and encounters. My work bases itself on and often consists of socially engaged projects and works its way through research, experience, and creation.

My critical thinking is influenced by growing up in an illiberal democracy. From an early age on I have had felt the urge to be the maker of things, but I was discouraged to create with the help of art. Where I come from, art is an undervalued part of life, and to build dreams upon it seemed surreal for everyone around me, therefore I first started studying the fields of politics and law. I wanted to understand the rules of the world we live in. When it comes down to life, I feel like we are forced to live in a manufactured society from which we cannot escape from. There are better countries to be born in and there are worse ones. I was born in Europe, which is the "first world," epicentrum of history, culture, and the Western civilization. However, there is a cultural and economic division between the East and West of the European Union (EU), which causes the East to be underdeveloped, which affects state matters and therefore the law-making processes. Many of us recognize this and feel the need to leave the East of the EU because we yearn to feel the freedom and economic secureness of the West.

I moved to the Netherlands five years ago and I at once started questioning the differences between Hungary and the Netherlands. How can we belong to the same economic union with such economic differences? How come we get support but never see changes in Hungary? I embrace such questions and they fuel me to stay motivated. I will never be able to provoke radical change in my own country, so through my artistic practice I try to make a more international audience aware of the illiberal democratic state I come from, and the imbalanced economic and cultural union we live in which drives people away from the countries with weaker economies in the EU. Through my artistic engagement I acknowledge other people experiencing the same while looking at these societal problems from both Eastern and Western European perspectives.

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## In search of an answer

There is a division in the European Union (EU) which affects people with weaker economies, especially in the Eastern part of Europe, and it forces them to eventually leave their home in search of a better, more affordable, and comfortable life. I know this because I have experienced it myself. Leaving my country is one of the most difficult things I have gone through and there is not a day passing by that I don't think about my home, my family, friends, and my city; filled with history and traditions. It fills me with sadness knowing that becoming a journalist in Hungary (in which for most media involve "*becoming a journalist for the State*") would not be possible for someone with a liberal mindset, like me.

Poland and Hungary both were put on a spotlight within the EU since 2015. This is because the monetary support from the EU fell into corruption (by the governance of these countries) which has systematically built itself into the Eastern European societies. Financial support does not reach the citizens. The development they yearn for, never has never arrived. Many Eastern Europeans have realized that there is a problem with the system and decided to go somewhere where they earn enough to support themselves and where the government is able to support them in case of a crisis. Brain drain, the emigration of educated people, is affecting both the East and the West of the EU. It should be discussed to find resolution to. Thinking about the consequences of these events is crucial because if the Eastern Europeans are leaving, who is going to stay in their countries? Who is going to become their doctor, their teacher, their nurse, or their journalist?

My artistic practice begins with research and learning; finding out the reasons behind and making my own conclusion; then creating an artistic translation. My current project is going through the civic integration process while I collect stories through self-observation influenced by the process of learning the language, analyzed documentaries about the history and economy of Hungary and the Netherlands, philosophical books about identity, while getting in contact with other Eastern Europeans (in the same position as me) about the inequality that impacted our everyday lives back home and made us leave the country and change our nationality. I am interested in how one's change of nationality influences the change of identity and will try to bridge this topic with the influence of economy on everyday lives in the hope of finding an opportunity to foster dialogue. With the help of others, I

will be able to gain inspiration and visualize our collective memories as well as individual experiences and I will then create an artistic translation with the help of writing and illustration.

With my graduation project I aim to reach Eastern European people who want to integrate into Dutch society, this means becoming Western, and hopefully I will influence people with similar minds to speak up and eventually fuel change. Therefore, throughout this project I stand to research how can I use civic integration as an artistic tool to highlight the inequality between the East and the West of the EU?

I have chosen to undergo the civic integration procedure and design it as an artistic tool to gain an insight into the lifestyle/mindset of a Western European citizen. I attempt to look at the differences between Eastern and Western European countries by comparing the Netherlands and Hungary, my home country. I have lived in the Netherlands for five years and I have noticed quite some differences between the qualities of life in the Netherlands vs. Hungary. I know that this is not new, there are many Eastern Europeans who left their country to be able to live a better life or even just to support their family at home. I find that going through the civic integration procedure and talking with people who have also went through this experience to change their nationality is a personal way to gain consciousness about what impacted the lives of these people and my own, so deeply, that we would want to change our very own nationality.

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## **Historical research**

To understand the differences between the Netherlands and Hungary, I thoroughly researched their form of government. While the Netherlands governs in democracy, Hungary governs in a unique form of a totalitarian democracy, and to understand that I had to look back in time and have an overview of the history of the country.

Hungary is over a thousand years old, making it one of the oldest countries in Europe. The people's nationalism stems from their history, culture, and language. It is surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains and lies in its basin. Geographically it lays in Central Europe but due to history it is associated with Eastern Europe. There are different theories of how the Hungarian people came to be there. Our closest language relatives are the Finnish people who live two-thousand kilometers away, but

we can't understand each other. The theory I believe in is that we have been separated from them somewhere in North-Eurasia thousands of years ago and settled down at some point in different areas of Europe. Of course, there is the legend of Attila the Hun guiding the Hungarian nation through the steppe.<sup>1</sup>

We Hungarians were attacked and annexed by the Ottoman Empire for more than a hundred years. We had hundreds of kings, some great, some terrible. We had a king who did not even want to be our king and never officially took the oath to do so. We had a king who had urban legends written about him as he sneaked into the streets at night as a commoner and caught people on wrongful acts and punished them. At some point Hungary was so powerful that its territory was brushing three seas. Then, it was ruled by a dynasty that did not understand it. It became Austria-Hungary in 1864. After World War I, big parts of Hungary were taken as punishment for picking the wrong side, however, it was rather picking the wrong leader (which is a re-occurring Hungarian pattern that could potentially destroy the whole country in the future).

Hungary has chosen the wrong side once again in World War II when it joined Hitler's side. In their defense, the Hungarian were promised to get the partitioned lands of Hungary from WWI back if they just keep their cool. As surprising as it is, we have lost once again and were saved (or one could say, quietly taken over) by the Soviet-Union. After fifty years of communist regime, in 1989, Hungary finally became independent again. It seemed there has been a systematic governance change and we are on our way to better days.

Overall, Hungarians have an impactful history which has shaped our identity; to think and feel in a certain way. Learning and singing a poem as the following at every school gathering makes one feel like they are part of and belong to a sacred land which their ancestors fought for and died for, therefore one must stay and die there also, no matter what.

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<sup>1</sup> Flegler, A. (n.d.). *A Magyar Történelmi történelme*. Vissza a MEK kezd. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://mek.oszk.hu/10700/10787/>.

To your homeland without fail  
Be faithful, O Hungarian!  
It is your cradle and will your grave be  
Which nurses and will bury you.  
In the great world outside of here  
There is no place for you  
May fortune's hand bless or beat you  
Here you must live and die!<sup>2</sup>

This kind of mental manipulation is built into our world and are shaping us who we are without us knowing or realizing it. I realized that I still feel guilty for leaving my country and leaving everyone else there. I question if this guilt of leaving my country stems from the nationalism, which was built into us by the system that kept preaching about the great old history of Hungary, or from leaving my own heritage there.

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## Governing forces

Hungary adopted Christianity as a state religion in the year 1000. Its constitution is written in a very Christian oriented way. The legislation from the *Constitution of Hungary XVI of the Basic Law* (Article T/13647 §1) was replaced by the following provision in 2020: "*All children have the right to the protection and care necessary for their proper physical, mental and moral development. Hungary protects children's right to self-identity according to their birth sex and ensures education according to the value system based on our country's constitutional self-identity and Christian culture.*"

Viktor Orban has been the Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010. He reached success and is valued for defending the borders of Hungary from undocumented immigrants by building a fence throughout the southern border in 2015. Analyzing multiple of his speeches, I would like to conclude that not only have his values changed throughout the years but also his approach towards EU politics. He has built a labyrinth of corruption where anyone opposing the system gets punished. Orban follows radical

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<sup>2</sup> Vorosmarty, M. (n.d.). *Szozat*. Laszlokorossy.net. Retrieved November 7, 2022, from <http://www.laszlokorossy.net/magyar/szozat.html>

far-right populist politics and is therefore exceedingly popular amongst the major, elderly part of society. The rest of his strategy to maintain control is to corrupt all aspects of governance by using his wide network of oligarch friends. His strategy in politics is similar to the Russian approach, which keeps him in government. This is quite contradictory because he started his political career back in the soviet times and gained popularity with his speeches in which he asked Russians to leave Hungary. During Orban's governance freedom of speech has been limited as well as the freedom of the media as well as human rights. His speech in 2010 opened with "The knowledge that we, Hungarians, are facing a great opportunity fills me with hope, since today pretty much everyone in Hungary wants one thing: change. (...) We can close an era whose disappointments stemmed from the fact that private goals and business interests increasingly determined government policy." and continued as "Many people feel that the government today resembles a criminal organization that loots and falls apart from corruption. We hear and experience the mafia-like operation of state and government organizations. We consider it a national matter for the government to account for the forints entrusted to it by taxpayers, to account for subsidies from the European Union, and to account for the operation and financial support of state-owned economic companies."<sup>3</sup> In 2022, these statements are ridiculed. Not only did he not succeed to follow up with his steps, but he has done the opposite of what he promised to change. Now, corruption is so deeply rooted in the system that it is hard to point out exactly where it began and almost impossible to cut it out. One can only carefully navigate through it. Orban's political moves are careful, yet sudden. His populist politics allows him to interact with the public and bribe them for their votes. For instance, he has sent money for Christmas to the elderly. This is generous of course but acts like this one can damage the democratic process of the next elections.

"The status of media freedom has been downgraded by international press freedom watch organisations, and Freedom House now lists Hungary among the 'partly free' countries."<sup>4</sup> The YouTube channel 444! Is a Hungarian internet portal I follow and receive most of my news from. It is one of the only honest media that objectively and passionately reports about the happenings in the country. All other medias are under

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<sup>3</sup> Gergely, T., István, F., Szabolcs, D., & Zsolt, M. T. I. / E. (2021, October 4). *Átolvastuk a fidesz 2010-es választási programját, megnéztük, Mi Maradt Belőle*. hvg.hu. Retrieved October 30, 2022, from [https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20211004\\_fidesz\\_2010\\_kormanyprogram\\_ner12](https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20211004_fidesz_2010_kormanyprogram_ner12)

<sup>4</sup> Bajomi-Lazar, P. (n.d.). *Hungary*. Expert analyses of the state of media. Retrieved November 28, 2022, from <https://medialandscapes.org/country/hungary>

the control of the government. In the video series '*Systems of national scenery construction, part 1: The Cult of the West*' <sup>5</sup> and in '*Systems of national scenery construction, part 2: The cult of the freedom struggle*' <sup>6</sup> describes the political situation in Hungary very well since Orbán's governance and gives explanation to my extreme feelings towards my country and the rest of Eastern Europe. I choose this video because it is a collection of recent events and shows exactly how Orbán caught so much power so easily.

Part one and two both start off with an animation about a dystopian Hungary where people want to progress the economy in a Western development and end corruption. They do not believe any of the political parties anymore. Then, a journalist appears on the screen reporting from next to the river Danube and says if we look at what the government has promised and what goals they had, then we can debate about a lot of them, if they have succeeded or not, but there is one point which they have managed to complete. Viktor Orbán appears on the screen in the middle of his speech at Tusványos city in 2014 in which he says "A popular topic in thinking is the understanding of those systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies, perhaps not even democracies, and yet they make nations successful. (...) In this sense, the new state, which we build in Hungary is an illiberal state. Not a liberal state." The video continues with the news lady saying on national television "Last year Lőrinc Mészáros's (now the richest man in Hungary and Orbán's oligarch) fortune has grown 240 million Forints (approx. 600000\$) per day". The journalist commenting the video is presenting the audience the question: How did we get here? He states names of previous prime ministers and agrees that it is partially their fault, but he says that is not enough. "It is not true that our problems would be solved if we changed our politicians and elites to another class. (...) Why is it natural to us (Hungarians) to find ourselves in this situation again and again?"

Then Orbán is shown, speaking at various places at various times, talking about a great new system that is being made. He said he would change and revolutionize the system, but back then this did not have a meaning attached to it. He says that the

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<sup>5</sup> 444.hu, (2017). *Systems of national scenery construction, part 1: The Cult of the West*. 444! Retrieved October 17, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTyRKM4BmjY>.

<sup>6</sup> 444.hu. (2017, November 7). *Systems of national scenery construction, part 2: The cult of the freedom struggle*. YouTube. Retrieved November 9, 2022, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7GJfxv1Wak&t=89s&ab\\_channel=444.hu](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7GJfxv1Wak&t=89s&ab_channel=444.hu)



2/3<sup>rd</sup> majority he won in the parliament in 2010 is the revolution which opened the possibilities for a new political, economic, cultural establishment and new system to achieve.

The video continues talking about the government's ideologies right after 1989, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. People wanted Hungary to resemble the West, having products from the West, earn higher, Western-like salaries, have freedom in political decision making and they did not want to listen to the obvious lies of the state. This need partially became reality as the country opened its gate towards capitalism. The government wanted to privatize too quickly since there were still a lot of debt pending from the soviet times.

The reporter keeps talking about rich and poor countries and the differences between them. Rich countries are rich because they are producing products or services which can be sold expensively throughout the entire world. In Hungary there are not many successful industries as such because after the collapse of the Soviet Union there were not a lot of people left with money to invest or re-buy companies from the state or foreigners. In the second part of the 90's Hungary became one of the most open economies in the World, however if we depend on foreign companies to provide workplaces it can drastically influence the long-term economic development of a country. Foreign companies pay a ridiculously small amount of taxes, and their profit goes right back to their native country. Local businesses sell products for cheap but depend on buying expensive goods. The locals did not receive any support. This brought about a time where Hungary was striking towards the West but did not have any societal building bricks to support its development. Therefore, Hungary has missed out on all digital developments and never had the budget to make up for it with one big developmental leap. This means, however much we would have liked to, we cannot develop without technology from abroad.

There is a throwback to 1990 where former prime minister, József Antal speaks about true democracy. He says true political democracy can only work when it builds upon a wide middle-class, because true political democracy cannot be built on the misery of masses. The video ends with the reporter stating that the Western lifestyle did not quite become the norm for everyone. Salaries have increased but looking at the statistics of the global scale in comparison the Hungarians still have not earned enough and ended up taking loans. Between 1999 and 2006, household loans have

increased ten times and crisis hit when the currency the loan was taken in have started to inflate with the upcoming global monetary crisis of 2007 and 2008. In the meantime, the state of Hungary has also become indebted. This made people even more skeptical about the Western ways and capitalism.

This is where Orban comes into focus again, talking about entering this new sphere of uncertainty and blaming the collapse of economy on the liberal ideologies of the West. In his speeches he uses metaphors, and, in this case, he says "They are letting foxes into the coop and giving them the freedom to race with the chickens. Of course, it is not anyone's fault that the foxes win all the time."

To conclude, Hungary was not ready and knowing that people were exhausted by capitalism, it can be partially understood how the government convinced people about how the negative influence of the West and laid down its basic pillars to maintain its power and recognition.

Part two, *The cult of the freedom struggle* starts with the introduction to the Hungarian state's debt. Between 2010 and 2016 the debt of the state has decreased about 6% and the foreign currency loans have also spectacularly decreased. In Orban's yearly speech at Tusvanyos in 2017 he says, "A strong nation and a strong country doesn't live on other's money." This is yet again quite contradictory since he later frauded the funds from the EU to invest in Hungary. That is why eventually Article 7 was initiated, amongst other reasons such as the mistreatment of migrants in the migration crisis of 2015, the case of the CEU, violation of human rights, etc. The government of Hungary realized that the support from the EU is at stake and started looking for other resources and ended up making a treaty with Russia about the new atom energy source they will finance to build, called 'Paks 2'. This decision led the country to depend on the support of the East no longer only on the support of the West. Hungary is being advertised to its people as a strong country however it still depends on other's financial support.

Orban has promised to go against the excessive influence of multinational companies in the country but again ended up doing the exact opposite. He has supported these companies more extensively than the governments before him. Only 34% of the EU's financial investment to support economic growth in Hungary has been invested into the local businesses, the access 66% flows into multinational companies. Within

Europe, Hungary has the lowest rate for profit tax for multinational companies. This is a great profit for those countries that have enough money to contribute to investing in multinational companies, such as Western European countries, hence their distance from involving themselves in discussing such topics.

In 2012 Orban stated that Hungary needs a national capitalist class who can invest a lot of money into the local businesses, otherwise foreigners will take away all the money that is profited in the country. However, during the governance of Orban, it can be clearly distinguished which areas he supports and which he does not. The reporter says in the video that they have noticed that the government is opposing those fields that cannot be replaced by foreign products, ownerships or supplies as they produce for the local Hungarian market, for instance the media, advertisement, retail, or construction, so they have started to buy them up. This explains how Orban's close friends became richer and richer through the years. Lorinc Meszaros is then shown on the footage being interviewed stating that he does not know how much money he actually has. His fortune has grown five times within just one year! He owns most of the tourist accommodations, media and construction industries and vineyards around the lake Balaton.

Orban is seen again a while later in his speech in 2014 talking about that the system has been changed twice within twenty years, once after the Soviet Union and once in 2010. He states that the political and economic system that has been built after the communism has been replaced. These dictatorial systems build upon this strategy. Seemingly the problems of the previous governance are being solved and reconstructed while the whole system is just being destroyed and replaced.

The video ends with the question that will be still a mystery to the nations to come "How did we get here?"

There is much influencing our views on the world and our identity, including what we see and hear and experience and the place where we grow up. Growing up in Hungary, being part of the post Eastern block is impactful to me and influenced a lot on how I see the world. I remember unhappy people, frustrated people, people who do not have time and work three jobs and people who sleep on the streets, people who drink a lot of alcohol to not think about all of it. Doctors leaving to work abroad, teachers working three jobs. Learning unnecessary things just to forget about it and

never learning about our government, our rights, or how to pay our taxes. Nowadays politics is something we do not discuss unless we are with people who share our ideologies.

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## United economy

Hungary has been part of the European Union since 2004. The EU has also noticed the non-democratic processes that influence and switch the values in Hungary and tried to step in with initiating the Article 7 procedure in 2015. The procedure is conducted to suspend certain rights from a member state and would be enacted when another member persistently breaches the EU's founding values (respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities). Now, in 2022 it is a fact that Hungary is not a democracy, but the EU is doing barely anything to prevent any further anti-democratic actions or human rights violations<sup>7</sup>. Taking away financial support is not enough.

Circular economy was number one on the European Union's agenda. The modern, more developed, Western countries are pushing the idea of sustainability because of climate change and stating 'The government is working with industry, civil-society organizations, knowledge institutions and other authorities to achieve a sustainable economy for the future. In this circular economy, there will be no more waste, as resources will be reused repeatedly. The government-wide Circular Economy program sets out what we will need to do to achieve a circular Dutch economy by 2050.'<sup>8</sup> while more underdeveloped, Eastern European countries, such as Hungary are not even going to reach the political establishment of democracy by 2050.

Circular economy in the European Union was created to make our economy more sustainable. However, it does not give easy access to help more undeveloped countries and adjusting to new regulations, such as COVID-19 regulations, and with regards to the sharpened political situation in Europe in 2022, living towards the

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<sup>7</sup> **European Parliament ups pressure for action on Hungary.** Human Rights Watch. (2022, September 15). Retrieved November 7, 2022, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/15/european-parliament-ups-pressure-action-hungary>

<sup>8</sup> **Waterstaat, M. van I. en.** (2021, December 23). *Need for a circular economy.* Circular economy | Government.nl. Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.government.nl/topics/circular-economy/need-for-a-circular-economy>

circular economy currently may be impossible for more underdeveloped European countries. Countries in the Eastern part of the European Union are more underdeveloped and in Hungary, hence the corrupted government, there really are serious lack of finances in the educational department (as well as other departments...), hence why teachers are barely making ends meet and are out on the streets protesting together with their students in the fall of 2022<sup>9</sup>. Now more than ever people are being pushed to their limits and are willing to try to their maximum. Either that or if they are lucky, they can afford to leave and try to settle somewhere more affordable to live for the salaries they earn. Somewhere peaceful, where you do not have to fight your fights every day. Somewhere sustainable, somewhere democratic.

As regards to circular economy, I love the idea of stopping climate change and a clean recycled planet, however, I question why is it the most important agenda to make living sustainable? Why isn't it the most important thing on the European Union's agenda to save the people and democracy, to strengthen shared values, to develop connections, to stand together for a united economy (while being sustainable, of course)? Couldn't we come out as a stronger economy if all countries shared the same opportunities?

The European Union's agenda for 2023 brings me hope. "In 2023, the Commission will put forward a defense of democracy package to deepen the action under the European Democracy Action Plan to promote free and fair elections, to step up the fight against disinformation and to support media freedom and pluralism, including by developing civic space and citizen participation to bolster democratic resilience from within. In particular, it will include proposals to protect our democracies and strengthen trust by defending our democratic system from outside interests. We will also propose measures to update our legislative framework against corruption."<sup>10</sup>

The EU should take drastic measures to stop brain drain. Salaries within the E.U. should be regulated and set at a minimum to equalize the economic imbalance and decrease poverty. If there are no measures taken seriously, the EU's economy is going

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<sup>9</sup> 444.hu, (2022). *As the country watched the political reality show, education collapsed.* 444! Retrieved October 17, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICS3wJ65IpE>.

<sup>10</sup> *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - EUR-Lex.* (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2022, from [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF)

to collapse. The West of Europe does not have the space and the devotion to support all Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe cannot support itself and it's far behind in all aspects of vital developments. If everyone leaves the country to live a better-quality life, the only ones staying will be people who have no choice but to stay or people who can afford to stay and are comfortable laying in the cooling shade of corruption.

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## ***Inburgering***

Anyone can apply to integrate to become a Dutch national after five years of living here. The civic integration exam (or in Dutch: *Inburgeringsexam*) consists of five parts in my case: listening (*luisteren*), reading (*lezen*), writing (*schrijven*), speaking (*spreken*) and KNM (*Kennis Nederlandse Maatschappij*). Dutch takes about a thousand hours to learn; therefore, it is quite the challenge to memorize all the harsh sounding words that sound quite like each other. Applying for the exams is however easy and the application can be made three weeks in advance via the digital governmental platform. Going through this process I learned that the Dutch language is not as harsh as I thought, but still difficult. I study Dutch every day and if I do not study my course book, I read the news in Dutch or watch Dutch reality-TV shows. When I go to the supermarket, I speak Dutch. I actively try to push my language skills, and I do not give up even if people try to talk English back to me. I however appreciate that everyone here speaks English well and that is something that's not very common in Hungary. I am currently on the process of applying to the language exams and still investing time, money, and energy to go through this process. Language skills will serve my future career well in the Netherlands.

I am one of the lucky ones to be able to integrate into a Western European country. Here, I know if I work, I will receive pension when I am old. If I cannot work, the government is going to support me. I have access to good healthcare and if I wanted to have children, they would have a safe childhood here. Here, I have the right to state my opinion, and when I do so I do not even feel judged. I am glad to be integrating into the Dutch society. As a Hungarian person I didn't feel I belonged to the collective mindset of the country, and I didn't even understand art until I came to the Netherlands. Living here as an artist and becoming one of the free people of the Netherlands will give me opportunities for my future career.

Becoming Dutch, however was not my first choice. I first wanted to stay in Hungary and study international relations to be able to work at an embassy and to investigate the external relations of Hungary. I thought if I have an overview of what connections, treaties and agreements Hungary makes, I could find the problem in the country. I could find out what makes people there so miserable. Why is there a cloud of depression hanging above my country?

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## **Artistic involvement**

I use civic integration as a tool to experience, gain knowledge and understanding of Western European identity. My process is documented through film, journaling and illustrations and will be expressed through written text and illustrations.

I am developing a website, which I have experimented with through a previous project, Amplify. On my website people will be able to answer my specific questions about moving away, their country, corruption, integration, identity changes, etc. and they will be able to share their story or their experience on these topics. This website will function as an inspirational database which I can gather materials from for further developments. I find that this method could work well because it doesn't require a high level of trust to tell, write or share a personal story online; not like in real life where that is built through time and personal interactions.

I use film as documentation of my process. I am filming when I am interviewing someone in person or online, communicating with the community and I am also recording all my therapy sessions with my psychotherapist for identity-study purposes. I also use film for my personal reflection moments. Film is easy to develop, and it also records speech which can be traced back exactly and while working I end up listening to previous recordings repeatedly to gain inspiration or understanding of the person or the topic. Recording is also a wonderful way to practice confidence.

Reading every day from my books of choice which can be found in the Appendix really inspires me to keep going and I need this kind of stimulation to keep the ideas flowing. I also read classical literature and the daily news. I write my experience of the day in my notebook, but I do not manage to do it every day. Sometimes I just end up drawing instead and sometimes I am left speechless for the day. I will write a collection

of stories from the material I gather through my website and visualize them through my illustrations.

I use illustration most commonly in my artistic practice. Digital drawing is a tool I am curious to always learn more about and in the future, I see myself making my own practice with drawing therefore I dedicated myself to make an illustration every day. I do not set limits to myself, but there are some days where I try to push myself to do more. Sometimes all I draw is a few lines. I try to reimagine how a surreal world could look like to prepare for my stories with the Eastern European community. Once I know their insights and experiences and know what they think about all the topics I mentioned, I will make illustrations inspired by their personal story. In the meantime, I illustrate my own process and struggles. I also research other artists to learn and gain inspiration from and I love the compositions, lighting, colors, and techniques in the illustrations of the Dutch artist, Loish. Through her tutorials I learned about negative space, detail distribution, focal points. In my works I currently focus on developing my own palette and learning to perfect the light and shade contrast. I am looking forward to working with an external coach to help me teach the ideal steps of illustration.

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## **Cultural involvement**

I know quite a lot about the Dutch history, culture, and customs because I have been surrounded with Dutch people for five years and I got accustomed to the traditions in the Netherlands.

Open-mindedness, tolerance, and inclusivity are the words that come into mind when thinking about the Dutch society. If I had to describe what a Dutch person looks like, I could not. In my opinion, there is not a single person who looks the same way in this country, yet everyone seems to behave the same way. They are all well-maintained, calm, friendly. In Hungary, not only most people look the same, but they also behave genuinely different compared to the Dutch. The temperament is much higher due to the historical pressure and the social circumstances. People can barely have a positive mood if they are thinking about what to eat at the end of the month. In the Netherlands, the first time I went inside an Albert Heijn, the cashier smiled at me and wished me a wonderful day. This rarely ever happens in Hungary.



To me, civic integration, becoming a member of another nation is an artistic tool to experience the feeling of freedom and safety, the experience of feeling Western-European. Through my journey I will find out how other people have used this process and changes of identity for their own benefits and how it has influenced them.

To bring more attention to Hungary and to the Eastern European countries that also face corruption and therefore underdevelopment, I have started building an online community from social media groups to talk and share our stories and experiences about our countries and the integration stories to another country within the EU. The website I am making will allow people to answer my specific questions about leaving their home, integration, corruption, qualities of life, Western vs. Eastern Europe, the EU, etc. and to share their personal story or memory that stuck with them around these topics. I am collecting these stories as inspiration for my written texts and my digital drawings, which then I will share on my social medias, hoping to gain attention and start a discussion upon these stories.

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## **Personal insights**

Going through this project I had couple of breaking points because of how close this topic is to not only what I am but also to what I stand for and who I want to become. Doing research and analyses made me realize how my country's history impacted my identity, my view on society and economy and the whole nation, changed me. After not finding answers in factual subjects, I started looking at emotions. This is where I had a problem with expression when it was about my own emotions and my own country. I struggle with my own identity as a Hungarian person because of what Hungary resembles now. I cannot seem to assimilate with it. How could I proudly state that I am from Hungary when my country is turning into a dictatorship? The emotion that came to my mind first was anger. That is all I could feel before. Now I understand that the anger I feel stems from oppression.

Using myself and my identity as an experiment for this project, as an artistic tool or an inspiration, thrives me and fills me up with curiosity. I am excited to know how it will feel to be Dutch. Giving up my Hungarian identity, however, is a contradictory task for me and makes me wonder if that's the right thing to do in my position. My mother is scared for me because of the ongoing political situation in Ukraine which is right next to the

border of Hungary. She asks me all the time what would happen if suddenly Hungary got invaded by Russia (again) and I am not Hungarian any longer? Would I be able to visit her? What would happen to our house (which is officially my property)? Would the state take it away? Would they be able to visit me?

Changing identity is not something a person does in one day. It happens casually, through years of influence. I have been living in the Netherlands for a while now and I feel Dutch in certain ways. I started to have some political insights in this country. Politics and ideologies are quite different in the Netherlands than what I was used to. I should not be surprised as the Netherlands share a rather small but glorious history. The liberal-left side here in Western Europe means something completely different than it does in Hungary. In Hungary, I am on the left side of the political spectrum, while here I struggle to place myself on the same spectrum of the left.

Learning a new language is like gaining a new identity. It makes you grow as a person and see the world from a unique perspective. I wonder about the Dutch perspective on the world. When I first moved here, I had no doubt that God exists. I was born and raised Christian (like most Hungarians and I never in my wildest dreams imagined that I would end up integrating to a country which is filled with non-believers. This scattered my heart into pieces at first. I remember crying to my mother and questioning the truth that was taught to me, that I have always believed before, that when we die, we go to heaven. When I first felt Dutch, I felt like an atheist, like a true believer of scientific facts and evidence. I could not cope with the idea of true death as in dying and stopping breathing and not feeling or sensing anything and just put into the grave or burned to ashes. The thoughts around this make me question the values of life and the importance of the future.

The true meaning for me behind becoming Dutch is becoming free: free from religion, from oppression, from depression. To become a healthy member of the Dutch society, I chose to tackle my own past and traumas that gave me the identity I have right now and change it with the help of Psychotherapy. Digging into my past is a heavy job, but an extremely rewarding one. Now I recognize something that has influenced my identity, I can't really grasp why that certain thing has impacted me, but later I reflect upon it and reveal the connections between the influence of the past event and my identity. One of my challenges for myself to overcome through this project is my anxiety that stems from the identity I carry. For instance, I know I must be active on

social media and social platforms, but it has been really challenging. When I encounter challenges, I try to turn to alternative approaches. I visit family, friends, go to therapy, recharge my batteries. I need to let myself create freely to gain strength to keep on going. This can take up time, which then pulls time from other things, however the time spent on recharging is very much needed as I go through these changes.

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## **Conclusion**

The economic imbalance and systematic corruption in the East of the EU affects people and it forces them to eventually leave their home in search of a better, more affordable, and comfortable life. The EU has been focusing on sustainability before, but they have recently initiated TEU Article 7 protocol against Hungary. The upcoming agenda of 2023 of the Union brings me hope that these systematic developments that turn countries towards totalitarianism can be stopped and evolved which could stop the extensive migration from the East of the EU.

Hungary has an impactful history which shaped me to be Hungarian; to think and feel in a certain way. My education happened according to the value system based on our country's constitutional self-identity and Christian culture which has given me a lot of subjective views on the world. Escaping these views and the system and becoming Dutch is my privilege and my challenge. With this project I aim to show the challenges as well as the success of changing nationality which, for some, brings about changing identity. I feel like the research I have conducted was necessary for me to be gathered, acknowledged, and dealt with, so I can move on and find peace and a new angle of insight to create from. It is important to mention that Hungary does not represent all Eastern European countries within the EU, and it is a unique case of governance therefore other Eastern Europeans would have a similar but probably different perspective on this subject.

My position as a person and as a creative has changed since I did my thorough research, in a way that I have a much deeper understanding now of where I come from and what I want to keep within my values. Becoming Western acquires the ability to let go of the past. I needed time to accept and reevaluate my past and let it lift me up instead of constantly pulling me down and only finding the dark side to this subject. Becoming western is my personal solution and escape to a much bigger societal

problem that I otherwise can't fix alone. I use this strategy to move forward with my life and with my art but still gain inspiration from what I've went though and what other people go through.

This project is not only a piece of paper or an assignment to work on, it is a journey through space: a Continent (Europe) and in particular two European countries, the Netherlands and Hungary and *time* because history cannot be forgotten in our desire to understand the vicious circle we currently witness; it will also be a personal journey that influenced me as a person but also as an artist. Our collective involvement as a community of artists has been and will forever be influenced by our subjective experiences, failures, and successes. I choose a sensitive topic on purpose to keep me inspired and to share that an interdisciplinary artist involved in such a dilemma can put their feelings and emotions all together to shape an artistic expression or a voice becoming louder by the weight and power of the artistic creation.



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## Appendix

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