

Op-Ed: The young

By Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of Regional Cooperation Council

Europe: the idea

Ideas and reality have always had a complicated relationship. If youth knew, if age could, Freud said.

Even we who are not so young, yet not old, who work with young people, try to adopt our reality in hope that energy, innovation and freshness of youngsters can save us all.

It was Churchill who said that it is in difficulty that an optimist sees an opportunity. The pandemic, approaching the second anniversary of its arrival to the global stage, has transformed our lives fundamentally, especially for us in the Balkans, so close yet so far from Europe

It is indeed here in the Balkans that we have experienced Europe and Europeans in the best and the worst of times. Historical hot days for both of us are intertwined.

Like nature, politics hates vacuum, and I can hardly deny that these days there is a disconnection between the energy triggered by the process of European integration of the Western Balkans and the current expectations.

So what is to be done?

Let's not fool ourselves. Even though we live in calmer and safer times, we are actually in a challenging situation. Despite the ideas advocated by thinkers, scholars, and political activists on how we can still re-embodiment the spirit that gave birth to the European union, the values of one Europe, one continent and calls for proactive responses to the emerging realities both in EU and the Balkans, still the story of enlargement of EU to the Balkans convinces ever fewer people in Europe.

However, I go on believing that the idea of some sober minded politicians and activists that gave birth to the European Union as a necessity to reconcile its warring nation states, establish cooperation and stability without stirring up and stocking the fires of discord among neighboring countries, and the art of living with others is the greatest vocation we should still insist on keeping alive.

To foster vocations, trust young people, Pope Francis said.

Well, religious life is not the only vocation we know.

If this may appear counterintuitive at first, it is everything but that.

70 per cent of Western Balkan citizens aged 18-24 believe that EU membership would be a good thing for their respective economies – far more than any other age group. Their vision of the EU – of Europe – is one which allows freedom of travel (59 per cent), freedom of work and study (59 per cent) and economic prosperity (48 per cent). Fears over loss of sovereignty, a major theme among EU's Eurosceptics, are minimal, standing at mere 5 per cent. It is thus the values that take the center stage – or as some from Brussels would say, the values enshrined in the Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union.

Freedom is the main vocation of youth. Even if you could make the long drives sound romantic, it is not only the freedom of travel which Western Balkans youth think of when they envisage Europe. It is also the freedom to study and work and for some among us like young people from Kosovo* this is still a dream.

In a region where over two thirds of young people would be ready to acquire additional qualifications to get a job, or additional skills to advance, nearly a quarter of them are neither in employment, nor in education or training. It therefore should not surprise us that, again, two thirds of them would be willing to live and work abroad. Yet, work and study opportunities outside of

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

their home economies are exhausting, expensive bureaucratic processes of recognition procedures and chasing the necessary permits.

Ask young people in the Western Balkans what they want, and they will, in their own words, cite back the Article 2 of the Treaty of the EU to you. It is not the definition they have learned, it is the idea they want to live by.

Between idea and reality

Reality imposes restrictions on ideas. The EU is not perfect, the enlargement process is not easy, and for the most part, the future is not a straight line. However, if we are led by the idea, there are things we can do both to navigate the reality of today and to shape tomorrow along the lines of ideals to which we strive.

For today, we can start at home. If Europe is an idea, we can bring it to life in any corner of the world, including in the heart of the European continent, the Western Balkans.

Citizens of the region have great ideas. How do we know? We asked them to take part in our Balkathon competition and they delivered fresh, digital and innovative solutions which will benefit our region. Western Balkans also have many positive examples of girls in STEM, women entrepreneurs, and successful young people, which we are following and noticing and are always there to promote. By supporting regional coalition on jobs and skills the region will ensure that companies develop and retain the talent pool of the WB. All of this for one most important cause - to make this region a place where young people have a reason to stay, and a reason to return to. Despite undeniably great steps that have been taken, such as entry into force of the Roam Like at Home regime in the region this summer, the road ahead is long and different factors sometimes slow our stride. It is no reason to despair, much less to abandon our vision. Instead, it is an additional encouragement to accelerate the process and strengthen the mechanisms of youth participation in decision-making and regional initiatives on youth cooperation.

Trust in young people is not misplaced. When the first Western Balkans Youth Policy Lab was launched in 2020, it was an experimental, innovative approach. Albeit modelled on best EU practices, it was a novelty in the region, it was an idea yet to become a reality, and because of that,

its success was not a given one. Nevertheless, the incredible commitment, enthusiasm and intelligence of youth, working together with policy-makers, resulted in various initiatives across the region.

Policy Lab continued running, turning now in the direction of youth mental health. A topic of great importance, not only since suicide is the second most common cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 to 29, but also as experts and practitioners warn that the pandemic has exacerbated the feelings of stress, anxiety and depression.

Let us be frank: the generational gap in the digital sphere is indisputable. Taking a banal example, whereas on average a Western Balkan citizen is most likely to use Facebook among social media platforms, 62 per cent of young people are on Instagram instead.

Reality in which youth live today is specific, marked by the rapidly transforming era of the fourth industrial revolution, a changing and precarious labor market, and a pandemic unprecedented in modern history. In this and other issues, it should not be our goal to understand young people – it should be to give their inputs, priorities and recommendations adequate space in policy-making and public discussions. In 2022, the European Year of Youth carries a promise to do just that.

As of yesterday Tirana is bringing European youth to the Balkans. Being the Youth Capital is an honor, a responsibility and an opportunity to shape the future of this city and our region in the heart of Europe.

When asked what is to be done first, most of youth involved in the process highlighted the same; to be involved in creating concrete changes, especially regarding the issues of education, employment, and environment.

So what is to be done?

We should not deceive ourselves. Western Balkans is full of young women and men of ideas, bright, talented, speaking several languages, with guts and self-confidence, second to none in sport or arts, and not poor cousins of Europeans. As a matter of urgency we need to rethink, refurbish, recreate the reality young people would like to cope with.

It always seems impossible until is done, Nelson Mandela said.