EU enlargement should aim to "turn despair into hope" for young people

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The European Union and any country wishing to join the EU need to do more to address the concerns of young people and secure their participation in politics, local and regional politicians from the EU, the western Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia at a two-day conference focused on EU enlargement.

The Enlargement Days conference – organised and hosted by the European Committee of the Regions on 6-7 July –focused on youth issues and came in a year that has seen dramatic increase in the number of young people with a chance of eventually becoming citizens of the European Union. Just two weeks ago, EU national leaders agreed to recognise Ukraine and Moldova as candidates for EU membership and Georgia as a potential candidate. However, the difficulties of entering the EU have been thrown into focus by Bulgaria's ongoing refusal to allow North Macedonia, a long-standing candidate, to start accession focus, which this week led to violent protests in Skopje.

Other frustrations, concerns and problems faced by young people that were discussed included a persistent brain drain that has seen an estimated 150,000 people leave the western Balkans annually since 2012, as well as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, low rates of participation in elections and low levels of trust in public institutions. At the same time, participants highlighting the role of young people in driving change in Ukraine and the success of youth guarantees introduced in 2018 in North Macedonia. In the western Balkans, 3.6 million people are under the age of 29, equivalent to 21% of the region's population, while 25 million Turks are aged 20 or less.

The CoR's rapporteur on the future of youth policy in the EU – Tine Radinja (SI/Greens), mayor of Škofja Loka – said that "our main aims should be to turn despair into hope that a better future is possible and that socio-economic opportunities will be better". His suggestions

explicitly included efforts to improve young people's access to mental-health services. He also highlighted a challenge for the older generations – "to have the grit and bravery to open the door to give youth an equal say". Mr Radinja's opinion should be adopted in December, at the end of the European Year of Youth.

The importance of trust and participation were recurrent themes, with Ionut Sibian, rapporteur for the European Economic and Social Committee on youth policy in the western Balkans, saying that polls suggested that young people in the Western Balkans identify institutions – including low rates of trust in the judiciary – as a bigger problem than the economy, with even young people from privileged backgrounds opting to emigrate.

While there were warnings of "youth-washing" and tokenism in outreach towards the young, the European Year of Youth was welcomed as an opportunity to mainstream youth issues. This has also been the case in Albania, whose capital – Tirana – is this year's European Youth Capital. Eriselda Sefa, mayor of Lushnja in Albania, said that Tirana's status has had a galvanising impact beyond the capital.

Dafina Peci , secretary-general of the National Youth Congress of Albania, said that Tirana's experience perhaps held wider lessons that should be shared with young people. "We should spread this message and teach it to the younger generation", she said – that "everything is about process, commitment and hard work" and that "nothing can be taken for granted." She said that "a lack of involvement, energy or interest" help explain a lack of trust in institutions and a lack of knowledge about existing opportunities, but said that this underscored the importance of outreach. "If we don't inform or engage meaningfully and do not share good examples, then the level of motivation will remain at the same level," she warned.

By contrast, speakers from Ukraine indicated that young Ukrainians are a driving force for change in their country, with Tatiana Yehorova-Lutsenko, chairwoman of the Council of Kharkiv District, saying that "our young people are so active in this area" of EU integration. "If you support them and treat them as equal partners, that would be very much appreciated," she said.

The President of the European Committee of the Regions – Vasco

Alves Cordeiro (PT/PES), member of the Regional Parliament of the Azores – said: "Young people across the western Balkans are facing enormous challenges too, with high levels of unemployment and lack of opportunities which may push them away. Building the future of our communities without young people is both unthinkable and short-sighted."

Among the ideas spotlighted by participants in the event – governors, mayors and councillors from the EU and would-be member states, together with experts and officials – was the need to support tried-and-tested policies, to try out fresh ideas, and to focus on institutional change. The student-exchange Erasmus+ programme was mentioned frequently – it is "a place where the European magic happens", said Mayor Radinja – while supporting greater cross-border ties between young people – the idea of a Western Balkans Games was specifically mentioned – was championed. The introduction of youth guarantees in North Macedonia was praised as a good means of smoothing the transition from school to the workplace, while lowering the voting age was advocated as a means of developing a culture of participation, as too were active measures to involve young people in policy-making. Cross-cutting proposals included calls for better data, reforms to increase the transparency of public administration, and a sharper rule-of-law conditionality in the EU's Economic Investment Plan for the western Balkans.

An enlarged role for local authorities in the enlargement process?

The European Committee of the Regions has been working with enlargement countries since 2010, following a structured work programme with some countries – via Joint Consultative Committees – or meeting, in working groups, with regional representatives from partner countries with topics based on the time and location of the meeting. The CoR set up Enlargement Days in 2015, to provide a collective focus for the work with local and regional authorities in all enlargement countries. The CoR's engagement with local and regional politicians in countries wishing to join the EU is a recognition that most EU legislation requires action on the part of local and regional authorities and that, consequently, the success of the accession process requires sub-national administrations to be able to meet EU requirements.

The rationale was backed by Jiří Kozák, Deputy Minister of Foreign

Affairs of the Czech Republic, which holds the six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union . "We believe that local and regional governing structures carry immense power which can be transformed into a national or even international force," he said. "That is why we need local and regional authorities. Not only to administer their municipalities, but also to play a positive transformative role in the EU and the countries that wish to be part of it."

In closing remarks, Alexandra Dulkiewicz (PL/EPP), mayor of Gdańsk (PL/EPP) and chairwoman of the CoR Working Group on Ukraine, said that the potential for locally driven change should be tapped further. "The role of local and regional authorities in the enlargement process must be enlarged," she said.

The CoR on 29 June adopted recommendations on ways in which the local and regional aspects of enlargement could be better addressed in the enlargement process. The recommendations are contained in an opinion drafted by Anna Magyar (HU/ECR), member of the County Council of Csongrád Megye.

Politicians from the EU, the western Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia met collectively on 7 July. The day before, representatives from the western Balkans and Turkey met in five parallel sessions for discussions focused on youth issues.

The Enlargement Day sessions can be re-watched using the following links. A detailed agenda is available here.

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