

Author: Klajdi Kaziu

Title: EU and You - What do EU values mean to me as a YEA?

I have been acquainted with the Young European Ambassadors concept for a long time. While pursuing my Master studies in Berlin, Nice and Rome - by the way, funded by a generous EU Jean Monnet scholarship – I befriended an Armenian classmate who was amongst the YEAs from the Eastern Partnership. His insights on the programme's mission and ways of youth activism struck me – and I wondered about the lack of such an initiative for the Enlargement Countries. Therefore, in June 2020, once WeBalkans introduced this flagship project for the Western Balkans, I immediately jumped in, expecting it to act as a platform of cooperation and networking - a positive role model for youth engagement in our countries.

As an ex-student on EU Affairs, a beneficiary of European programmes, and first and foremost a staunch defender of a European identity, I find spaces of linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity to be my comfort zone. Whilst many tend to shed light on the challenging dynamics of a heterogeneous society, I find it hard to imagine being part of a community of strictly likeminded and lookalike peers. Indeed, the European Union and its lengthy way of becoming is a living example of diversity, many cultures peacefully co-existing in a single area once torn by hatred and oppressive tendencies.

Being bound to its constructivist nature, the EU has always had to rely on idealistic yet visionary allies. Its youth are its best fit, whereby "ERASMUS" has been its most strategic investment in a secure and enduring Union. Young, mobile, multicultural, and democratic-minded Erasmus babies/citizens are Europe's greatest invention, and simultaneously, Albania's and the Western Balkans' one-way ticket to peace and prosperity. Introducing Youth Guarantee schemes in our region and supporting RYCO's youth exchanges are just a few of the signs of how Europe's successful practices may help shape the Balkans' path to a shared, rather than divisive, "Identity".

Better connecting people is a prerequisite to more open and flourishing communities. That's how high the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans should aim. WB citizens - me included - have no chance of "Europeanising" our societies if we can't reach each other first. Social connectivity has always stood at the core of the EU's foundations, and it shall play a similar role in our region.

Although efforts such as the "Young European Ambassadors" represent a solid example of soft connectivity, our ambition ought to stand up to the challenges youngsters are facing in our region. The EU

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Celebrating
diversity to
inspire change

YOUNG
EUROPEAN
AMBASSADORS



Youth Strategy, targeting Space and Participation for All (Goal 09) does constitute a ground framework of work. WB's young citizens need the adequate resources to act exactly as such: "Citizens" who can meaningfully participate, deliberate and influence public debate.

"Opportunity to engage, connect and shape our realm" - that is what Europe means to me, and that's what, I believe, the Balkans shall mean to us all!