

Yes, EUtopia is possible!

*“Europe will be forged in crisis, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises”,
Jean Monnet, founding father of the European project*

While the war is raging in Ukraine, we might not even recognize what a paradoxical gift we hold in our hands, which is to live in peace. New security risks for Europe as a whole, but especially for fragile regions such as the Western Balkans, have brought the area back into international spotlight and given it a renewed chance to leave conflicts and frictions behind, thus moving towards a common European future.

The Western Balkans were torn apart by its wars in the 1990s and although the prospect of joining the European Union (EU) rose in the early 2000s, the process has proven to be unpleasantly slow. In many aspects, EU enlargement has still not achieved concrete steps towards progressive change so much needed by the people in the region, especially the youth. In consequence, the odds of joining the EU started to fade, driving national and regional Euroscepticism.

However, there will be no stability for the whole European continent without anchoring the Western Balkans firmly within the EU. We believe that the long-term guarantee for peace and prosperity is not only secured by the ink to sign treaties but based on sustainable and ever closer European cooperation for which we need a common vision – our EUtopia.

Building strong and resilient democracies

In the past years and decades, anti-democratic tendencies and the rise of far-right parties have contributed to the polarization of European societies. Their political game consists of simplifying complex problems and effortlessly offering unrealistic solutions. The ‘migration card’ has been played intensively, resulting in hate speech, the rise of discrimination as well as violations of human rights. Consequently, the Russian war against Ukraine has posed new threats to democracy. Yet, it could also sharpen our understanding of democratic values and offer a new momentum to strengthen the unity of Europe. It has become more obvious than ever: if we want to live in a pluralistic and liberal democracy, we have got to take action. Now.

Dysfunctional democracies provide fertile ground for autocrats in the Western Balkans and beyond to capture core-mechanisms of democracy such as elections, rule of law, free media, and independent institutions. Democratic backsliding, a lack of political engagement, disinformation and threats to the freedom of speech is daily reality particularly for the citizens of the region and puts us, the progressive youth, into a seemingly hopeless situation. But we are not giving up, we feel responsible for our region and the whole of Europe and we want to push for change.

We will not stand still, but rather do everything in our power to safeguard freedom of speech by actively countering disinformation both in social media and within our peer groups. By investing in our education and claiming for us the right to be listened to, we will contribute to the resilience of our society. We don’t want to be mere passengers on a ship without a clear

course, but rather contribute to shaping a progressive and open society based on solidarity and equality.

Yet, we cannot do it alone. Many more of the young people in the region – or with roots in the Balkans and living all across Europe – need to join us. We all call for being recognized and accepted as equal Europeans. Let us start by saying loud and clear that what is sold as “freedom of movement” shall be no more burden to anyone. Kosovo for example has fulfilled all the conditions for visa liberalization the EU has demanded for years. Now is the time to abolish this absurd visa regime.

We demand more institutionalized participatory processes, like the Conference on the Future of Europe – where the youth of the Western Balkans shall be an integral part of this transnational exercise. Our ideas and experiences also need to be translated into concrete political action and tangible policies.

No second-class Europeans

February 24th has put the European political landscape upside down. It is now high time to bring the Western Balkans closer to a European, progressive, and democratic future. For that, it is crucial to reiterate and further promote the common European values such as human rights, dignity, democracy, freedom, and equal opportunities.

Although many young people in the Western Balkans share these values, they are not recognized as equal Europeans. The region is often perceived as not “good” or “mature” enough to belong to the EU. This public perception runs the danger of breeding new frustrations. This feeling of exclusion becomes a reality on the labour market, in education, health and social security systems – all aspects of daily life – when the promise of liberal democracy turns into a false illusion and deception for so many of us. Intentionally or not, EU leaders treat millions of people as inferior even though they only want the same things as their counterparts fortunately to them born slightly further west: a prosperous and good life in peace and stability. This discrimination has to end.

Education and social inclusion are key in the fight for equal opportunities. That is true also within the EU where inequality between member states, take the example of Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, is alarmingly high. While EU enlargement has taken place, integration is still lacking behind.

Second-class status is ghettoizing. If you're not given a perspective to break out of your pigeonhole, you will stop even striving for it. Western Balkan countries thus need a realistic perspective to be an integral part of the European family to make sure that they do not turn away from it– no more empty promises but equal opportunities!

Together we want to work towards our real EUtopian idea, our vision for Europe's future. Given the historic momentum Europe finds itself in, not only do we need to learn how to dream of utopias but we need to learn to actively live in them. As the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek put it, the core of pursuing this real utopian idea lies in shaping reality and opening up the space for a possible other and better future.

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