



Opinions

A liveable Europe, retrieving the hopes of the youth

by Group of authors 18. 11. 2024.



Photo: ÖGfE

When Brexit struck, Laura was too young to vote. Eight years have passed, but she still remembers the morning the results were published. That day, she went to school devastated, and most of her classmates in the United Kingdom shared this sentiment. The vote was decisive for a whole generation, she says, and later on, applying to universities, people realised how many opportunities were taken away from them. Even though most young people were against leaving the European Union (EU), the vote of the elderly population settled Brexit.

However, while citizens of the country that left the EU were only able to recognise its benefits after leaving, the populations of countries aspiring for EU membership for years are becoming increasingly frustrated. Tesa, from Prishtina, claims that the young generation were raised with the idea of a future within the EU. Kosovo is the youngest European country, but now its youth feel unsure about the European accession path. The information campaigns portraying a European future of Kosovo feel off-key for a large share of the population and depicted objectives far away from the reality on the ground. At the same time, the lack of comprehensive information kills hope, and the youth becomes increasingly sceptical.

Act before it is too late

Ana, from Zagreb, believes that for people in Croatia, joining the EU was a once in a lifetime historical accomplishment. Over a decade after the event,

society still perceives the significant impact of EU membership, especially in finances and infrastructure. However, there is a feeling that the interests of smaller countries are not equally heard, and policymakers seem out of touch with people's views and daily needs.

There are many elements that steer public opinion. Communication, or even the lack of it, is one of them. How to communicate before it is too late?

European values – the importance of democracy, respect for human rights and dignity, the rule of law, and equality – have been discussed hundreds of times and are all included in treaties. However, implementing and protecting these is a different, much harder story.

What about our values?

Present politics in Europe are tainted with geopolitical fragmentation, confrontation, and competition. We hear that Europe needs to adopt a more proactive role in the world – and yes, our security worries us, but so does defending our values. Our democracy is at stake, our economies are closing in, our societies are becoming more distrusting and polarised, and, for many people, our joint European Union is under pressure and seriously questioned.

In addition, the EU is often accused of applying double standards or acting one-sidedly when it comes to its democratic values and human rights. Add the quickly growing problem of affordable housing and living, social and environmental injustices, the divergence of opportunities available across and within European countries, including between urban and rural areas, and the sense that EU enlargement negotiations with many aspiring countries are stuck for too long. With all these developments, discontent and disengagement are boosted among the next generations, both within EU countries and candidate countries, and even beyond European borders.

What do Laura, Tesa, Ana, and all of us want?

We want equality for all! From rules that apply equally to all EU members, to politics, which act on the basis of citizens' needs from the top to the local level.

We need an EU that acts proactively and reflects the diverse realities of its members, without geopolitical pragmatism and biased interests as the only criteria in the decision-making process. An EU that can recognise and distribute resources to the extent that member states need them while protecting local businesses and industries.

An EU, which, among other factors, aims at fully integrating the Western Balkans into the Green Agenda, ensuring that climate action is not a barrier but a pathway to accession. The impossibility of meeting EU environmental regulations without sufficient financial and technical support only widens the gap between the EU's ideals and the reality faced by candidate countries.

A liveable Europe promotes informed citizenry by increasing transparency

in the reform and enlargement process and by providing accessible, in-depth information on its motives, negotiations, and outcomes. At the same time, the candidate countries themselves must be held accountable for transforming their countries beyond mere formal reform steps. The EU needs to be consistent and bold in its efforts, making it stronger and better equipped to meet future challenges.

A liveable Europe is a united Europe. More emphasis should be placed on political cohesion. We need an EU that actively fights populism and nationalism in its member states and candidate countries at the same time by heavily investing in education as well as communicating its values, not passively but by taking action.

Too many people feel detached from European politics and are not aware of how it impacts our daily lives. This is where the importance of conveying knowledge and awareness in both the EU member states and in the candidate countries comes in. Effective information flows, true participation processes, and campaigns tailored specifically to different regions can debunk myths, clarify misconceptions, and build broader support for the EU and its enlargement.

Our liveable Europe considers the unique context of each country and region, and keeps the door open for all who share European values. Communication and participation need to go bottom-up, engaging with schools and local communities. This approach would allow for local governments to make EU policies more relatable and actionable for everyday people at the community level.

A Europe that lives up to its expectations is the only liveable Europe. And only a liveable Europe enables a European identity among young generations and offers them new hope. This is the Europe we want!

This op-ed was written during the “Cres Summer School” 2024 by 18 young people from 13 European countries on the Croatian island of Cres (<https://summerschool.oegfe.at>).

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