

Youth and the EU Agenda Are Natural Allies



“The generation now coming to maturity in Bosnia and Herzegovina can make a conclusive break with the past” – such was the key message expressed at the opening of a two-day regional youth conference in Sarajevo today. The event gathers more than 130 young people from BiH, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

Participants are focusing on young people’s role in public life and the decision-making process. Panellists from the whole region are to discuss the position and status of young people in the EU integration process and their contribution to the further democratization of countries in the region, whether through political activities or civic society pressure.

“Youth and the EU agenda are natural allies. If young people become engaged in the political process they become a part of the solution, and this means that they can work to ensure that the solution meets the needs of a new generation of citizens”, EU Special Representative in BiH, Miroslav Lajčák, told participants at the beginning of the conference.

He noted that youth-targeted obligations are part of the European Partnership document and Stabilisation and Association Agreement signed between BiH and the EU. “These obligations include implementing the BiH Law on Higher Education, which, among other things, will clear the way for

having BiH degrees recognised abroad and having foreign degrees recognised in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

“In Bosnia and Herzegovina alone the EU has spent just in the last two years almost a million Euros to help develop institutional capacity in the education sector,” Lajčák said. “This has facilitated agreement on a reform plan for 2008 to 2013, one of the main elements of which is to integrate BiH education in the European system.”

“The voice of young people, a predominantly constructive, creative and inclusive voice, must be heard – and heard clearly”, the Head of the European Commission Delegation Dimitris Kourkoulas told participants.

Ambassador Kourkoulas noted that “the situation for young people in the Western Balkans is problematic – and this particularly applies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the education sector is poorly organised and inefficiently funded and where high unemployment means that new entrants to the labour force face extreme difficulty.” In light of this, he warned, “there is no scope for wasting time or resources – and in the last decade, unfortunately, time and resources that should have been applied to the BiH youth sector have been squandered elsewhere.”

Ambassador Kourkoulas pointed out that the EU’s Youth in Action programme has allocated 885 million Euros over six years to increase participation by young people in civic life and in representative democracy. He added that young people from Southeast European countries that are not yet EU members are eligible to take part in some elements of the programme.

“The EU’s pre-accession assistance for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2008 and 2009 includes direct support for government agencies that are responsible for the youth sector, and youth NGOs are also now able to access funds through the new European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights programme,”

he said. "This is not a forlorn exercise but a continent-wide initiative that is funded and fully supported by the European Union. The force is with us!"

Today's gathering of young people from across the region is the result of an increased engagement and co-operation between domestic actors and the European Union in promoting the EU agenda in BiH. Earlier this week, BiH parliamentarians met for the opening session of the "Parliament for Europe", and NGO actors will discuss their contribution to the EU debate tomorrow in Sarajevo.

The youth conference, which ends tomorrow, is being attended by representatives of institutions from the region in charge of youth matters, as well as representatives of youth and students' councils, political parties and international organizations. The event is being organized by „Forum Syd – Balkans Programme“ and the Commission for the Coordination of Youth Issues of the BiH Council of Ministers, with the support of the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and under the auspices of the EU Special Representative in BiH.