

International Youth Day and the journey of Telemachus

Today the world is celebrating International Youth Day, an outstanding initiative launched by the United Nations to underline the fundamental role young people must play in the common struggle to build a better World for all. The OSCE for its part has constantly attached priority to young people, advocating for their active role as agents of change, in the democratization of society and contribution to international peace and stability.

The role of young people in society is a topic of global political and intellectual width. Not accidentally, we find the roots of that debate in one universally recognized masterpiece of literature: The Odyssey. The character of Telemachus is, in many respects, the forerunner of today's discourse on youth and, why not, the patron of young people. He is anxious because he is thinking of the journey he is about to commence in search of his father, whom he never met ("So there, the night through, wrapped in a fleece of wool, he pondered in his mind upon the journey which Athena had shown him"). That journey is a call on Telemachus to become an adult, and his insomnia reflects the internal torment every young person goes through in his or her path to adulthood. It is a journey dotted with hurdles, out of one's comfort zone. Telemachus succeeds in his endeavor because he can rely on the support of the gods, a primordial version of what we call today youth empowerment and an enabling environment.

From poetry to prose...on the ground, the Presence is fully committed to promote the role of youth in Albania. Our engagement reflects the commitment of the OSCE as a whole towards including youth in its discourse on peace and security – a commitment that all participating States took with the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, and which was subsequently further developed throughout a number of fundamental Documents. Accordingly, we see youth at the heart of society, politics and democracy more broadly and therefore mainstream youth perspectives throughout our projects. This also reflects the priorities of the current Swedish OSCE Chairpersonship, namely upholding the OSCE concept of comprehensive security and promoting the broad participation of civil society representatives in security discussions.

Our work with Albanian youth is wide ranging. We are engaging them in finding solutions to safety and security problems through training on conflict resolution, violent extremism, and domestic and gender-based violence; promoting youth engagement in decision-making, and strengthening youth partnership with security actors through participation in Local Security Councils. These are local bodies set up by the Presence, bringing together local administration, police, civil society and youth groups to address security issues at the local level throughout the country. We also engaged youth in electoral education projects ahead of the April 2021 general elections, and in fighting environmental crime through involvement in a consultative group to advise decision-making bodies. Furthermore, we promote the broader engagement of youth in law-making process.

With the aim of fostering regional peace and stability in South-Eastern Europe through promoting an exchange among youth, the OSCE Presence in Albania launched "YouthTrail", a flagship initiative held in three editions in Tirana in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Young people from across the region spend a week in Albania to learn about the OSCE values of democracy, security and co-operation, about gender equality, anti-corruption, civic engagement, human rights, security and anti-trafficking. A long-standing partnership with the Municipality of Tirana and the Tirana-based Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is one of the pillars of the success of these activities, which has been included in various guidelines as a good practice on how to promote OSCE values through youth-targeted projects. YouthTrail was included in the application bid prepared by the Tirana Municipality and various youth

organizations in Albania, which helped Tirana win the title “European Youth Capital 2022” in November 2019, a prestigious recognition awarded each year by the European Youth Forum, “to empower young people, boost youth participation and strengthen European identity”.

For this reason, after more than a year of a pandemic that has severely affected all aspects of our societies, including youth exchanges, we are contributing to creating novel spaces for youth mobility and participation. In this spirit, we will renew the YouthTrail initiative with generous joint support from our partners, Greece and Italy, who share the same vision and belief in the OSCE common values and commitments towards enabling youth to contribute meaningfully in all three dimensions of security.

The new series of the YouthTrail initiatives will commence this October, bringing together young journalists from the region in an effort to augment their understanding, role and collaboration in improving the freedom of media in the face of new challenges, and in safeguarding journalists’ rights in the region. The young journalists’ deliberations will then be showcased during a special session of the South East Europe Media Conference.

We do not see youth as passive “beneficiaries” of trainings, of projects, or initiatives that are conceived by someone else. Strengthening this genuine bond, the Presence created a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) in 2018 with the purpose of hearing and reflecting their views in our work. With its initiatives and activities, the YAG members are instrumental in informing and advising us from project planning to implementation, as the situation of young people, starting from the best and the brightest, to those living under social and economic hardship, calls for actions. Young people in Albania between 15 and 29 years old represent 23.2% of the total population, making Albania one of Europe’s youngest nations. Albanian youth have high expectations, which often do not match reality, where the disparity between rural and urban areas is particularly marked, according to the Youth Study Albania 2018-2019, conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Albania.

Our goal is to work both on “negative” and “positive” liberties, to empower young citizens, to help them to be well informed and capable of participating in decision-making processes. A more inclusive society hopefully would minimize the dilemma that many young Albanians presently face: between the Scylla of building their future here and the Charybdis of seeking alternatives abroad.

Happy International Youth Day!