

Speech for the EU-UN Conference on Promoting Youth in Peacebuilding

Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament

Colleagues,

Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the European Parliament and to this innovative and inclusive conference.

It is a pleasure to see so many of you from all over the world to discuss this extremely important topic: Promoting Youth in Peacebuilding.

Forty six per cent of the world's population is under twenty-five. This is more than ever before in human history. The highest proportion of young people being in Africa and the Middle East. Two of the most unstable places on earth. Therefore, we have to understand that in such demographic realities, the youth holds an enormous potential for change and positive action. You are a unique resource that can develop innovative solutions for peace and development. And this applies not only to these two regions, but to the entire world.

Why is youth so important? Because young people have extremely strong values of tolerance and social cohesion. They aspire to a life of dignity for all. They are committed to peace. You are champions for development and change in communities and societies. You make essential contributors to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The UN Security Council Resolution 2250 has recognised youth's positive contribution to peace.

All these things are evident to us, but unfortunately not always to others. Too often, young people are linked to problems. Opposing this false narrative is our responsibility. I want to make it clear that I am not one of those. I also want to say loud and clear that I do not agree with the well-known cliché that defines the youth as "future leaders". I personally think that you are already leaders of today! And you need and deserve a place at the table.

It is not normal that decisions made by earlier generations affect you and your entire lives. This applies not only to conflict and political, social and economic instability but also to climate change! We must ensure the full participation and inclusion of young people. The European Parliament is very serious about strengthening your voice.

Last year, for the first time, we held an African Week and high-level event on Africa. It took place just before the African Union - European Union Summit in Abidjan, which focused on “youth”. This is why we dedicated one panel to the youth with the presence of young entrepreneurs, representatives of the diaspora, of civil society, of the media and the academia. Along the same lines, this year we will organise a Latin American Week and high-level event where young people will also take pride of place.

To conclude, some places in the world are still very unstable: The Caucasus. The Middle East. Libya and the Sahel. The Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa. Venezuela. Many of you here today come from these regions. Let me be clear: nothing is set in stone! European construction is a testament to this.

Peace is a political decision made by actors - you - who agree to use dialogue as weapons and compromises as ammunitions. This is the essence of this house: United in Diversity. United by universal values, a commitment to democracy and human rights. Just like you. Diversity coming from the different cultures and traditions that brings our Union together. Just like you.

I am therefore optimistic. The European Parliament has always been at the forefront with its Young Political Leaders Programme. Fostering peaceful dialogue, promoting long-term confidence building and cooperation between leaders in third countries.

This conference represents a new form of engagement to strengthen your voice and your role.

You can count on us. We will not let you down.

Thank you!

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Ivana Tufegdžik, Member of Parliament of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and EP Young Political Leader

Thank You Vice-President,

Dear attendees,

Allow me at the outset to express my gratitude and honour for the opportunity to address you at this important conference.

Today I will try, through my personal experience and through the retrospective of what happened in my country, to reveal the importance of the topic of our discussion and the importance of the action that needs to be taken to reach peace.

Events and images from Macedonia in the past years were dramatic, tense, and the end of the crisis brought the country on the brink of civil war, with the events in Parliament on 27 April when a group of nationalists entered the Parliament and physically assaulted members of parliament and journalists. It did not come to a civil war, particularly because of what the young people in the country managed to build.

The student movement that emerged in 2014, which I was fortunate and delighted to be a part of, made a tectonic shift in the society and the awareness of citizens. In that period, the regime was at the zenith of its power, with controlled media, or what is today known as authoritarian rule by using the power of information control; as well a society divided along all lines, and foremost ethnically.

The student movement Students Plenum emerged as a response to the infringement of the then Government on the autonomy of the universities, the only place that they did not control. However, my personal motive for becoming a part of the movement was its multi-ethnicity and the togetherness that the students demonstrated. Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Roma, Serbians, people with different sexual orientation fought together for better education and autonomy of the universities. That struggle grew into a motive for many citizens who felt encouraged by the voice of the youth. At the same time, the leader of the then opposition, and today's Prime Minister, revealed that more than 20.000 citizens, including officials of the then Government, had been illegally wiretapped. That was the most serious attack on human rights and freedoms, which they had been conducting for years with the single aim of controlling both political opponents and closest associates.

Macedonia entered a deep crisis which lasted for more than 3 years. During those 3 years, I was a part of countless peaceful protests, with the sole goal of a society without divisions and rule of law. When the President of the country pardoned 56 politicians for many criminal activities there was born the Colourful Revolution, also led by young people. I have learned a lot, made many friends, and step by step young people imposed their progressive vision for the country.

After all that dramatic events today we are back on the path of EU and NATO. Today we are discussing the lessons learned from the past, trying to improve the present, and to project the future as well. We have built a consensus in the Assembly, both on reforms in the society, especially rule of law, but also on youth issues and policies, and we have become the first county in the region with a Caucus for youth issues and policies which includes MPs coming from all parties in the parliament. That is our path to reconciliation. We initiated the formation of networks of youth caucuses of Western Balkans Parliaments supported by the European Parliament, following the example of RYCO, because it is the only way for us to connect and to be able to talk about peace and prosperity. On the initiative of the National Youth Council of Macedonia we will start a process on ratification of the Resolution 2250, Resolution of a huge importance for youth in peace building.

I believe that the only way to prosperity is through connection and union, and most importantly – active youth with strong voices. We as generations do not have the luxury of staying silent, maybe living in historic times, nor do we have the luxury of not believing we could make a change. Our non-reaction to injustice, war, and oppression of the rights of minorities, women, and children victims of war makes the world leaders silent, but it also makes us accomplices.

Therefore I propose that this is the first of many conferences where we will meet to send a message through the UN and the EU to world leaders that youth can be and are the greatest promoters of peace.

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Massimo Castaldo, Vice-President of the European Parliament

Good afternoon everyone,

I am delighted to be here today and conclude this important Conference on Youth, Peace and Security.

Robert Kennedy once said: “This world demands the qualities of youth: not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease.” It was June 1966 when he appealed for the empowerment of the youth to become a reality. Today as in 1966, these words are even more powerful and inspiring: they remind us of the potential and strength of youth in our changing world.

Indeed, young people are often depicted as the leaders of tomorrow. But, in reality, they are already leading an important change today, especially in conflict and fragile contexts. Actually, I am here not to talk about some great examples from the past but to highlight real and concrete initiatives taken every day by young people like you all over the world.

In Colombia for instance, a group of young people felt the necessity to re-conciliate citizens with former FARC guerrillas who decided to give up to their guns. Three young Colombians Leonardo Párraga, Cristian Palacio and Franz Rodriguez realized that it was important to give ex FARC fighters messages of hope and love, to express and instil a sense of citizenship, to let these people know they were not alone. At the same time, they also thought that Colombian citizens should have been aware of former fighters’ feelings and conditions. So, they had an interesting idea: they launched a campaign called ‘Letters of Reconciliation’, (‘Cartas por la Reconciliation’), and they motivated young Colombians to create a communication channel with the former guerrillas. Reconcile victims with perpetrators is not an easy task, of course, but what could have been the alternative? Indeed, we know that forgiveness is the first step in any reconciliation process. Thanks to this amazing initiative, young Colombians are showing to the world that words of hope and love can be the seeds of a long-lasting peace and I really wish this project could trigger a positive effect and push other young people to bring forward similar projects.

Another case that I would like to recall today is the one of Musa Ansumana Soko, from Sierra Leone. At young age, Musa came face to face to the one of longest civil war Africa has ever known. He was forced to abandon his country and found a new ‘home’ in Freetown, where he completed his education. But once the war was over in Sierra Leone, he came back to his country and founded the Youth Partnership for Peace

and Development. He continued developing inspiring post-conflict approaches to help young people to cope with the effects of war through a reconciliation with former child/youth combatants in conflict zones. Thanks to his determination, he managed to make his project to be well-known and he was recognized in 2017 as one of the “50 Most Influential Young Sierra Leoneans”.

Like these, there are many other examples, which clearly show that we need a paradigm shift. Instead of depicting young people as victims or perpetrators of violence, we need to recognise and acknowledge their important role: they are social actors with their own ideas and visions for the future, able to drive a real change in our societies.

Besides, I believe they don't only play an important role as peace-builders but they can also be key actors in preventing and countering radicalisation of their peers in the world. As we know today, high unemployment rate, poverty and social and political exclusion are pushing more and more young citizens to join extremist groups. As Vivian Onano, a 24-year-old Kenyan activist said “If you are left out, you are filled with anger”. Therefore, what we need to do is to have the courage to revert this tendency and directly engage with young people, to EMPOWER THEM. We need to ALLOW YOUTH to be RADICAL in the fight against RADICALISATION.

We need to create spaces where young people can freely express their voice and debate with peers and policy makers, thus influencing behaviours, ideas and policies. In this sense, the EP Young Political Leaders program, of which I am the leading MEP, is a clear demonstration of the EU's willingness to give more voice to youngsters through the creation of “people to people” contacts and the establishment of a valuable network between themselves. Besides, we need to provide young people with useful and concrete educational tools to fight violence, hatred and extremism. As Malala Yousafzai rightly said: “one pen can change the world.”

For all these reasons, it is of utmost importance that we implement the historic UN resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, which for the first time has recognised young people as powerful drivers of change. I started with a quote. Now, let me finish with another quote, an appeal to all of you from one of the most inspirational and revolutionary political leader, Nelson Mandela: “To the youth of today, I also have a wish to make: be the scriptwriters of your destiny and feature yourselves as stars that showed the way towards a brighter future.”

Thank you and have a nice evening.