

Young Bled Strategic Forum 2022 Democracy fit for the new age

The term democracy derives from the Greek word *demokratia*, coined from *demos* (“people”) and *kratos* (“rule”), thus characterising a typology of leadership and decision-making process determined by rule of the people (Britannica, 2022). From the first spirit of democratic thought in the Greek city state of Athens onwards, the definition was identified in different interpretations in historical, social and geographical dimensions. It is therefore necessary to outline that the institution of democracy is not a finished entity nor created in a vacuum. It is the result of the transformation of our societies, based on the identified needs of their citizens and constructed in response to our changed environments.

Painting a picture of what democracy stands for today may be most vivid through contrast with its foe, namely authoritarian regimes. According to analysis by the Democracy Index for 2021 (determined by the Economist Intelligence Unit on the basis of 60 parameters), only 21 of the 167 world countries covered by the research can be described as full democracies. By adding flawed democracies to the equation, a combined 45.7% of the world’s population live in versions of democracies whereas the remaining 4.2 billion live in hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Downgrades in democratic liberties, severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, are also identified within the average global score of the Democracy Index, which has decreased from a value of 5.37 for 2020 to 5.28 for 2021, setting the lowest result in the history of the established research (ibid).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of our societies (its health systems, communication networks, business models) and outlined the importance of solidarity and cooperation as building blocks for its progress and reinstated resilience. Additionally harmful were/are effects on our democracies, which have taken a turn towards infringement of human rights, abuses of power and more difficult opportunities for the continued coordination of efficient checks and balances. Whereas individuals and economies have mostly re-gained their health within the first two years of the pandemic, the poor health of democratic societies is visible in different symptoms (hindered cooperation, infringement of media freedom, polarisation of societies...) that should not be neglected. Values and liberties are most appreciated and missed when lost, and active citizenship may not be enforced if the former are not first identified and established.

Time and history will interpret the true long-term effectiveness of our societies in the face of the challenges endured. Opportunities to do better today remain and call upon our shared responsibility to determine through retrospective and developed vision whether new challenges will meet us unprepared and direct us towards reactive solution-building. Have we learned from our experiences, and how can we improve the resilience of our democracies by proactively empowering our societies on the local, regional and global levels in order to create a joint prosperous future?



The 11th edition of the Young Bled Strategic Forum will build on its tradition and interactive framework that enable peer-to-peer cooperation of young leaders, encourage exchanges with decision-makers and international representatives as equal partners in discussion, and will be interwoven with the Bled Strategic Forum platform in all of its activities.

The programme of the Young BSF, developed in close cooperation with expert speakers and valued institutional partners, will explore different Interpretations of the term democracy, democratic values and principles through the prism of four core pillars:

- **Media literacy and information society** (with close attention to the challenges of disinformation, misinformation, the importance of free media and support for information integrity as a backbone for strong and resilient democracies).
- **Prosperity through diversity** (contributing to an open discussion on all aspects of diversity, on the basis of gender, ethnicity, nationality, age and other societal divisions that result in unjust polarisation and marginalisation).
- **Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?** (holding a mirror up to our democracies, paying attention to all its features, institutional structures, democratic principles and values. How do our standards, wishes and trust change over time, but also what challenges are identified? And ultimately, is democracy still the fairest of them all?).
- **Joint solutions for joint challenges** (discovering democratic values in a transnational environment, through multilateralism and cross-sector cooperation on challenges that can not/should not be tackled in isolation, in order to yield evident and more prosperous common results on the local, regional and international levels).

Participants of the Young BSF will participate in panel discussions, dynamic workshops and comprehensive cross-sector exchanges of opinions in order to contribute to the critical analysis of democratic functions within our societies, define visions for democracies fit for and resilient against the challenges that await us now and in the future, and improve the well-being of our democracies as ambassadors within their (local, national, regional and transnational) environment.

First Pillar: Media literacy

The abundance of information in today's digital world is both a blessing and a curse. While the greater accessibility to valued sources of information (media outlets, social media platforms, research...) has expanded the diversity within education, civic engagement and freedom of speech, transparency, elements of checks and balances, etc., the communication environment has simultaneously become more prone to harmful dynamics such as misinformation (that is the spreading of untrue information and/or narratives without awareness or harmful intent), and disinformation (that is the spreading of untrue information and/or narratives with prior knowledge, led by an intent to mitigate damage).

The COVID-19 pandemic experience (with communication challenges further exacerbated by misinformation/disinformation narratives) and the aggression of Russia in Ukraine (fought both in the field and through means of communication) have shown that a strong, resilient, and democratic society rests on sound societal foundations that cannot be established instantaneously and in times of crisis, but require long-term investment through education, the sharing of best practices and stakeholder-inclusive communication.

The aim of the workshop is to combine the creativity, expertise and motivation of young leaders, media representatives, NGOs and institutions, decision-makers, fact-checkers, influencers, and members of academia in their efforts to secure an inclusive and democratic information-media landscape, and share best practices for its proactive support and mechanisms for reactive defence of core democratic values and principles. The cooperation and capacity-building will empower critical thinking, and enable active participation of involved stakeholders on the local, regional, national and cross-border levels.

Key discussion topics:

- Resilience against disinformation
- The credibility of information (recognition, evaluation, production)
- Dialogue among stakeholders and civil society
- Communication coordination and results amplification
- Free media and media literacy safeguarding
- Independent media vs the role of governments.
- Increased awareness of digital threats

Second Pillar: Prosperity through diversity

The process of cooperation and respect for diversity, sovereignty and the inalienable rights of people has reached universal recognition. Seventy-seven years after the Second World War, core principles are still tested in the face of geopolitical changes and democratic backsliding. National disputes resulting in the polarisation of international relations, rising ethnic tensions in heterogeneous regions, migration, and the protection of individuals fleeing war may all result in high tensions within and among societies. Discrimination (both silent and physical) and acts of aggression arise in environments where societal understanding, cooperation and balance have not been reached. Such a transformation also does not occur instantaneously, but requires a long-term approach of tolerance-building, education and constant multilogue.

Diversity is enforced and valued as beneficial in different settings, from work environments (with identified positive effects such as higher creativity and productivity of heterogeneous teams) to within our institutions, societies and other environments. However, the narrative of diversity as a process where the uniqueness and abilities of each individual/society may contribute to greater common prosperity is frequently depicted as a threat (through the depiction of us vs them and enforcement of stereotypes based on untrue information). Taking a step in the shoes of others, dialogue and communication can all contribute to our own perceptions based on fact and experience. The tolerance of our societies therefore has more ground to gain in the prevention of gender discrimination, respect of vulnerable groups, and building of cross-generational cooperation, with inclusiveness as building blocks for greater prosperity. As Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) said, “Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilisation”.

Young generations have the opportunity to explore diversity and broaden their horizons through exchange programmes in formal and informal settings, through travel and in online networks. The aim of the workshop is to provide a safe and accepting space for discussion in order to build a comprehensive appreciation of diversity and its protection, tolerance and understanding through the sharing of best practices by participants and expert speakers. The programme will not serve as an end result but as a first step towards empowering participants to become better ambassadors of diversity at their local, national, regional and transnational levels of activities.

Key discussion topics:

- Aspects of diversity
- Sustaining multi-ethnic democracies
- Engagement of marginalised groups
- Political values and polarisation
- Debunking stereotypes
- Polarisation= zero-sum game
- Cross-border cooperation

Third Pillar: Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all? (Holding a mirror up to our democracies)

Infringement of media freedom, diminished trust in institutions and breaches of fundamental rights represent challenges our societies are facing. They may have devastating effects if democratic values and core elements remain inscribed as empty words on pieces of paper, not visible in our minds, hearts and actions. Of what value is democracy to us today and what are its core features we are prepared to advocate and defend if need be?

Determining what democracy stands for is also far from clear cut, depicted in an array of both historical and contemporary geopolitical interpretations that hold different explanations of rudimentary concepts of freedom, equality and other values. Democracy is a dynamic process, one that requires active citizenship and cooperation of decision-makers and all stakeholders within our societies, whose role is not determined only by democratic rights and opportunities, but also responsibilities.

In order to better understand the comparative advantages and shortcomings of our democratic realities, the workshop will hold a mirror up to our communities, decision-making processes, and institutions at the local, regional and national levels. By revisiting great wells of democracy, which were dug deep by generations, and historical examples of democratic thought, its values and interpretations, workshop participants will determine and (re)discover the founding elements of our democracies. What are the steps needed to re-establish trust in our institutions, and how can we build stronger participation within our societies and prevent the apathy of our citizens? How can we approach the challenges in a practical and proactive way, so to achieve a spill-over effect? And ultimately, is democracy still the fairest of them all?

Key discussion topics:

- (Re)discovering the roots – key pillars of our democracies
- (Re)building trust in our institutions
- Social listening and dialogue (among decision-makers and citizens)
- User-friendly public services
- Individual rights vs collective rights

Fourth Pillar: Joint solutions for joint challenges (Cross-border cross-sector cooperation)

Solutions for global challenges (COVID-19 pandemic outcomes visible in health sovereignty, economic effects and destabilised international production chains, food sovereignty) are seen by some decision-makers through reactionary short-term solution-building based on national priorities and in isolation. However, only maintenance of long-term proactive cooperation through multilateral joint solutions guarantees responsibility sharing, a higher skill set, knowledge-building and shared resources with a higher degree of resilience for all stakeholders included. Furthermore, it is self-evident that global challenges of all forms (related to health, sustainability and environmental care, mobility, etc.) transcend our national borders, calling for joint solutions.

Importantly, cooperation comes in all shapes and forms, and is led through top-down and bottom-up approaches, generated in local communities, on the regional and national levels and in the international arena. The power of individual projects, best practices at the level of municipalities, regional initiatives and strategies of cooperation and international platforms of cooperation are all contributing to the creation of better standards within our communities.

Action for climate change prevention and support for green transformation towards greater sustainability is one of the global challenges, with a prism of solutions most obviously reflected in the need for joint cooperation of cross-national magnitude. Climate change, pollution, floods and other natural phenomenon transcend national borders, and even sound and progressive green policies on the local, national and regional levels may not give a satisfactory end result if a coordinated and responsibility-sharing international response is not implemented.

The aim of the workshop is to provide for a hands-on discussion and interactive workshop for Young BSF participants and stakeholders who are actively involved in projects, initiatives and strategies developing progressive solutions in the field of cross-border cooperation, mobility, economic cooperation, sustainability and green transformation, involvement of young generations and regional cooperation.

Key topics discussed:

- Building joint prosperity through economic and cultural cooperation, among others
- Regional cooperation
- Green transformation
- Inclusion of best practices at the local and municipality levels
- Multilateral action and cross-border cooperation in the field of green transformation
- Building a bridge of cooperation between EU and non-EU countries
- A partnership of stakeholders (civil society, academia, entrepreneurs, young people, government representatives)