

Young Generations for the New Balkans

Vision 2030

Towards Alternative Horizons

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Caught in a vicious circle between old-fashioned backwards oriented politics and nationalisms on the one hand, and lack of economic, educational and social perspectives on the other, young generations in the Balkans seem to be losing patience and when possible emigrating to the West in search for a better life. UN agencies and experts speak about a massive demographic revolution in Eastern and Southeastern Europe that is changing society more than a majority of developments in the past. Meanwhile, democracies in the region are vulnerable and the EU integration process is not delivering fast results. 2018 was frequently described as the “Year of Hope” for EU enlargement and for a better future for the Balkans. The EU Commission presented a new enlargement strategy, only to be followed by the Balkans Summit in May 2018. As the country holding the EU presidency country of in the second half of 2018, Austria worked towards keeping the region a high priority on the EU agenda. Without opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, as well as without granting Kosovo citizens visa-free travel to the Schengen zone, the question remains whether enthusiasm for EU enlargement can be restored. Pressured by the looming democratic and socio-economic crisis in the Western Balkans as well as the return of a geopolitical power struggle to the region, it is obvious that a new momentum for enlargement and overall political and socio-economic development of the region is much needed. Societies in the region are in dire need of alternatives and progressive engagement and action.

Our initiative/series *Young Generations for the new Balkans 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons* sets the spotlight on youth, their progressive stances and hopes for the future. Together with local and international partners, we discuss the overall socio-political situation in the Western Balkans and, EU and NATO integration through workshops, seminars, panel discussions and policy recommendations. This is done in order to understand the reality on the ground and to set trends for a positive future of our neighbouring region. The project is a common initiative, led by European and regional institutes, that features stakeholders, activists, and young people from the region and the EU.

We brought our ideas to EU capitals, visiting Vienna, The Hague, Berlin, Paris and Brussels. We also went to the Western Balkans, talking to experts, politicians, diplomats and general public in Belgrade, Pristina and Skopje. We took ideas, energy and the network from our individual daily work and streamlined it into a unified initiative that has seen discussions, expert interviews and articles produced as a result. This paper represents an attempt to summarize all that energy and ideas we have collected throughout the last two years.

WELCOME TO 2030

Welcome to the European Western Balkans! That could possibly be the shortest introductory-sum-up of the present paper, which sublimates all hopes, distant horizons and shivery dreams for 2030 in one. Notwithstanding desirable outcome, the current EU prospects seem remote and misty, while the situation in the region is rather gloomy than glittery.

By first glance, if one was to describe a young person in any of the Western Balkan Six at the moment, fears, hopes and preferences are congruent. Surprisingly, according to the latest Youth Study published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, young generation in the nowadays Balkans seems to be optimistic, mobile and well-connected which is not the most intuitive description.¹ Furthermore, they are more concerned about economic prospects, education quality and environment than the national identity, ever-looming war prospects, or political and security instability. Yet, in stark contrast to these findings stands the fact that Balkans youth leans towards the strong, autocratic leader, as they are consequently distrustful towards political parties, governments and institutions in general. Finally, the young generation vigorously supports the EU membership of the region.

What these data tell us is that after decades of wars, isolation, mass atrocities and omnipresent hatred towards the ‘others’, the youth in the Western Balkans needs more concrete action which will have a palpable result on the ground. Despite the latent insecurity and lack of substantial and sincere debate about the legacy of Yugoslav wars (1991-2001), the youth in that part of European southeast desires to move forward. Indeed, there is a growing need for a deep and comprehensive transformation of the region which shall bring a profound change, tackling the areas stretching from education and economic development to environmental and social issues.

A series of debates, reflections and exchanges among young professionals and experts from the region in the scope of this project has demonstrated that the youth in the region has capacity and need to be the integrative part of any debate, both at the regional and European level. The youth contribution is both indispensable and meaningful, as it sheds a new light on the upcoming decade and brings fresh, new ideas and suggestions for the volatile region.

This publication comes out at the moment when two non-papers on future of European Union and the Western Balkans are floated around.

¹Friedrich Ebert Foundation, “Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019”, 2019. <https://www.fes-soe.org/features/youth-studies/>

The first non-paper being the French non-paper on the future of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans. It is welcoming that this non-paper reaffirms the full EU membership perspective of the region. As well as its basic principle of ‘more for more’ and focus on the rule of law. However, adoption of all ideas from the non-paper would not contribute to a more effective process that brings benefits for the EU and the region.

The second non-paper is a French-German one on a Conference on the Future of Europe from 2020 to 2022 and guiding principles of the Conference, which should be focused on EU policies, including a possible change of EU treaties, and institutional issues, is also welcoming move. It is welcoming that the EU wants to discuss its future in a process that should lead to concrete changes and decisions on the EU. Since the future of the Western Balkans is closely linked to the future of the EU, both politicians and the civil society from the region, should be included in activities and debates. They should be given a fair chance to argue and present their interests and vision.

The youth vision for 2030 is the European Western Balkans. It comes as no surprise since they want to see their respective countries becoming EU member states as soon as possible. Furthermore, a fairer, just societies which embrace and cherish all its differences, is the overarching vision of the Western Balkans in 2030. For that to happen, the Western Balkans should become part of the European programs and common initiatives now. Rome was not built in one day, nor will ‘Balkan 2030 vision’ be implemented. The youth hence requires concrete actions, policies and support for the interruption of the vicious circle of non-reforms and non-progressing. Liberal democracy, youth employment, reconciliation or fight against climate changes ought to start being implemented as of today in order not to remain just a far-flung desire.

This paper offers a list of effective, clear-cut, policy-oriented list of recommendations which blaze the trail for the European engagement with the young generation of the Western Balkans. It paves the way for a reinvigorated and substantial commitment which ensures a more prosperous, EU-oriented vision of the region in the coming long-term.

1. LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES WITH ENGAGED CITIZENS

By 2030 the Western Balkans are the interconnected space with market economies and liberal democracies based on the rule of law. Institutions protecting each of the six countries are strong, independent and professional. The understanding of the civic engagement has developed in a direction

where citizens have become more aware of their civil rights and power of initiatives, but also need to protect free media and independent institutions, making their democracies stronger and sustainable.

Today, fragile democracies in the Western Balkan are under attack. The process of democratic elections has been compromised through direct interference, there is misuse of public funds, judiciary and security services are politicized, corruption in the institutions is omnipresent, and citizens' awareness about the possibility of political change in the elections is low. Our societies are deeply divided and fragile, institutions are captured and political instability is everywhere.

Furthermore, media is under pressure and politicians use hate speech against all those with a different opinion posing a threat: from journalists and civil society representatives to political opposition. Delegitimized by the authorities with the help of pro-regime media, the opposition is targeted as the enemy of the state working for foreign interests.

In order for the 2030 vision to turn into reality the key change that needs to happen is for each of the states and their citizens to become aware that its political elites and citizens are the owners of the reform and institution-building processes that should lead to EU membership. This is why it would be important to create and increase funding mechanisms to recognise and support initiatives of citizens, their activism, as well as independent and investigative media. The EU should continue and increase its support for the Western Balkans – grassroot initiatives and investigative and free media - through the European Endowment for Democracy.

For the EU to remain relevant in the Western Balkan it will need to boost its offer for the region. It could consider steps in direction of the gradual integration of the region into the EU, as it was done in the Energy Community or the Transport Community. This should be used to insist on bringing to the EU level fight against corruption and improvements in areas such as public procurement and state aid.

Furthermore, the EU should be more open and critical of the authoritarian tendencies in each of the countries in the region. This should help civil society and free media in the region to create environment for a dialogue, reduction of tensions and even fair competition in the election race, which renders the outcomes of democratic processes unfair.

Countries in the region should as a matter of priority work on introducing changes in their electoral systems that create an environment in which the process is brought in line with the EU and international

standards, and member of the parliaments are less estranged from voters so to better represent the interests of citizens and less serve their personal and party interests.

2. ECONOMIES THAT DELIVER TO (YOUNG) CITIZENS

By 2030 the Western Balkans have reached equal participation of youth in the employment, while active labour market measures are targeting the employment increase and contribute to the schemes which enhance young entrepreneurs.

Today, considerable gaps in labour market participation and school-to-work transition have not been adequately addressed in the Western Balkans. The youth unemployment rate in the region is among the highest in Europe, varying from around 25 percent in Serbia to almost 55.4 percent in Kosovo. Meanwhile, the percentage of youth in the category known as NEET (who are not in education, employment, or training) is rising. Thus, young people and recent graduates are not well integrated into the labour market and their employment level are still below the region's potentials.

The direct linkage with the issue of youth unemployment is the continuing trend of brain drain, including young people with particular skillsets. Given the negative demographic trends, it risks aggravating labour shortages in the future. Hence, unless something is undertaken urgently, the region will put in jeopardy the proper functioning of the public sector and service deliveries.

Very high unemployment among young people aged 18-24 (31 percent in 2018), including university graduates, points to a problem in aligning the education and training system with the needs of labour market and a weak business environment still significantly under-developed to generate employment. Overall, young people seem to lack necessary skills to find work. Skills mismatch also hinders a more sustained labour market expansion. The 2018 PISA test results were far below the OECD average. They show that a large proportion of young people do not have the basic skills to enter the labour market, in addition to other reasons such as low mobility, unattractive wages and working conditions. The latest tracer studies on VET and higher education graduates show that young people are rarely well matched to the jobs they hold early in their career.

Furthermore, new opportunities for job creation are scarce and localized, while labour mobility both within the countries and overall inside the region is low. If the Western Balkans tends to change negative trends in emigration, the substantial work must be done to facilitate the labour mobility within the region. Along with the mobility of labour, a facilitation of starting a business is essential. Young start-uppers and entrepreneurs face troublesome procedures due to complicated procedures and unharmonized regulations. Active measure such as abolition of numerous para-fiscal fees and charges emanating from overlapping administrations which would underpin young entrepreneurs to start their business in the Western Balkans.

There are also significant disincentives to work in the region. One such problem is the relatively high social security contribution rates that create high tax wedge on low-wage earnings. In addition, social expenditure is largely concentrated on categorical benefits and pensions, with limited investments in human capital. Another pressing issue is the high level of informal economy, whose share in total employment is significant (for instance, around 30% in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Informality has numerous adverse effects. It creates unfair competition for formal businesses, limiting their opportunities for expansion and further investments in their development, innovation and productivity. According to surveys, competitor's informal activity is seen as the major obstacle to doing business in the region.

Therefore, tackling high youth unemployment in the region should be a national priority for all Western Balkans Six. The first and urgent measure shall be the introduction of Youth Guarantees with a targeting of the most underdeveloped regions where urgent measures are needed. The Youth Guarantee includes activities to reach out to non-registered NEETs in their direct environment and to connect them to individual services such as counselling, mediation and training. Some 100.000 young people (aged 15-29) are expected to benefit from the Youth Guarantee in the most underdeveloped parts of the Western Balkans.

Furthermore, the transferable skills should be tackled. In order to conduct a successful school-to-work transition, the youth in the region needs a set of transferable skills to be acquired during their primary education. Thus, the Western Balkans needs the 21st century skills supply as transferable skills are key for problem-solving and applicable skills.

Training programs shall be fundamental in addressing employment gaps and high level of unemployment. With the contribution of employers and national employment agencies, this could

increase the level of entrepreneurial skills and economic literacy. VET trainings need furthermore to be extended and streamlined.

Supporting the legislative/regulatory and institutional framework for integration into the regional market would finally contribute to the higher mobility and youth employability throughout the region. While the focus should be the creation of a single space where ideas, people and capital can flow, it will substantially open the path to creation of new and better-paid jobs.

3. EDUCATION THAT PROVIDES BASIS FOR A STABLE LIFE

By 2030 the region has reformed its education systems in a way that they shape, connect and keep young people in touch with the real-life and that they provide further development opportunities. This is best seen through sharp and continuous improvements of the PISA ranking of these countries. Furthermore, the education systems transfer of good and democratic values, learning about civic rights and liberties, critically approaching what is right and what is wrong, learning how to advocate for oneself and to set goals as a group while developing as a young individual.

Today, the access to education is not a challenge in the region, but the access to quality education is considered a privilege. The educational system fails to support young people and countries find themselves at the bottom of the international PISA testing ranking. The Western Balkan students do not understand what they read and learn enough to use it in practice. Besides being barely functionally literate – the educational system leaves about 4 years of studying without any particular effect on the students – meaning that even though the first 11.8 years of schooling are mandatory, effective gain of education is present as for 6.8 years of schooling.²

Recently some positive changes in the region could be observed in North Macedonia, regarding changes in the civic education curricula, Until couple of years ago students were thought to obey the government, the rules and to be humble to whatever is served to them from the state system. Today, curricula are more supportive and provides motivating surrounding for the students to learn and research the

² The World Bank, “If FYR Macedonia Acts Now, Children Born Today Could Be Healthier, Wealthier, More Productive”, October 2018.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/11/if-macedonia-acts-now-children-born-today-could-be-healthier-wealthier-more-productive>

boundaries of their civic rights. Nevertheless, regionally speaking, critical thinking remains a skill non-formally acquainted and youth participation both at school and local level are left upon the good will of the schools in most of the Western Balkan countries without any systematically secured support for the process itself. This leaves the young people out of the social processes, especially out of the policy creation processes and decision making on daily basis.

The first thing that needs to be properly addressed in the educational systems in the region is the consecutive passing from one to another educational level without practically using the knowledge and get familiarized with the labour market before finishing university. Numbers say that quarter of the university students in North Macedonia fake their obligatory practice while studying, and unfortunately this is valid also for the other countries of the region.³ This is partially due to the lack of preparedness, but also due to the lack of connectivity between the academic curricula, labour market's needs and private sector in general. It is disappointing that even though above 90 percent of the young people participate in the higher education, they grade it with a low 2.62 on a scale from 1-5, in accordance to this they are also not satisfied with the skills they get from the educational system and their match with the demands of the demands of the private sector and labour market.⁴

When considering the educational system and social surrounding of the young people in the Western Balkans countries in general, it is important to look in their social capital. Currently the rate of youth unemployment in North Macedonia is significantly high equaling 47 percent (dropping only 2 percent from 2015 -2019), while in the neighbouring Albania it equals 22 percent during the first semester of 2019 and what both countries feature is a significant number of young people that have never been to a cinema or a theatre. Lacking national sources of information regarding the brain drain, we can rely on the alarming data from the World Bank recent report (2019) – stating that 500.000 people have already left the country, most of them young, well-educated and well-qualified. Having this insight, it is easy to conclude that there is a need for young people's support from within the educational system but also from their surrounding so they can find their mechanisms for social participation and the labour market.

Instead of being a repetitive and rather theoretical experience, the region needs to adjust, upgrade, and align the educational system in the region with the good European practices, so that it is in accordance to the social context in which our next generations grow. Instead of putting the students in a passive listening position in the classrooms we must support their independent researches, ideas and expressive

³ Youth Educational Forum Research on Student Practice, 2016

⁴ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, "Youth Study North Macedonia 2018/2019", 2018.

creations so that they start shaping the society as early as possible. The educational system should be a firm support, not afraid of listening the students' critical opinions and demands, preparing them for the life that comes, so that the education does not remain a goal in itself but rather an empowering mechanism for social changes. And lastly, learning from peers across countries must become a practice in the region as it is in the European Union. Instead of study-visits resembling an eye opening experience (bringing about brain drain) for where and how young people live nowadays, it needs to become a sustainable educational practice and positive model for cooperation and development of the region in that manner as well, in view also of the interdependency factor.

4. SOCIETIES THAT PROTECT THEIR ENVIRONMENT

By 2030 all Western Balkan countries should be fully in line with the EU environmental standards. This should among other help bring down to the EU average the number of premature deaths caused by exposure to the air pollution. Furthermore, the region's ability to react to natural disasters should be enhanced and fully integrated with the EU. The environmental agenda for the Western Balkans – financially and technically supported by the EU – could also contribute to the economic growth and creation of jobs. The European Commission should extend a planned “European Green Deal” to the Western Balkans. All this would respond to a shared concern of today's youth living in the Western Balkan.

Without breathing the oxygen humans cannot survive long. In 2016, Spanish free diver Aleix Segura held his breath underwater for 24 minutes and 3 seconds, setting the world record.⁵ Often, however, breathing can also cause human death through exposure to air pollutants, such as fine particular matter (PM_{2.5}).⁶

In the EU, only during 2015, this fine particular matter caused 391,000 premature deaths. Air pollution is also a major health hazard for people in the Western Balkans. According to data of the World Health Organization (WHO), quoted in the Guardian, half of Europe's ten-most-polluted cities are in the

⁵ The Guinness World Record, “Longest time breath held voluntarily (male)”, 2019.
[http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/longest-time-breath-held-voluntarily-\(male\)](http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/longest-time-breath-held-voluntarily-(male))

⁶ US Environmental Protection Agency, “Particulate Matter (PM) Pollution”, 2019.
<https://www.epa.gov/pm-pollution/particulate-matter-pm-basics>

Western Balkans.⁷ In 2015, exposure to PM_{2.5} alone was estimated by the European Environment Agency (EEA) to have caused more than 25,000 premature deaths in the Western Balkans (WB6).⁸ This means that on every 100,000 people in the Balkans 137 have had a pre-mature death because of fine particular matter alone. This is two times more than in the EU28 (77) and six times more than in Ireland (24).

In order to improve the environmental situation in the Western Balkan countries, the region will need to have credible analysis of the current situation. In 2018, the EEA has for the first time included all Western Balkan states in its “Air quality in Europe report.”⁹ The report provided information on concentrations of air pollutants at country level and allowed for credible comparison with rest of the EU. Such credible data is essential and should continue to be provided.

Furthermore, the European Commission should offer to all countries in the region a clear roadmap with all the EU environmental legislation and standards. The governments should commit themselves to adopt and implement the entire EU acquis by 2030. In return, the Commission should provide necessary feedback, as well as financial and technical support.

At the time when European continent is confronted with more complex and frequent natural disasters, the capacity of the Western Balkan countries to respond is well below that in the EU. Many natural disasters in this decade – such as floods in May 2014 – showed lack of effective cross-border cooperation among the Western Balkans and with the EU neighbors. Due to the geographic position these disasters affect not just the region but the EU as well.

Therefore, all six Western Balkan countries should be invited to take part in recently established EU system to tackle natural disasters (rescEU) that is fully financed by the EU and assists countries “in responding to disasters, when national capacities are overwhelmed.”¹⁰ In a same way as for the EU member states, the Commission should also provide support for “the adaptation, repair, transport and operation costs of their existing resources.” In return, the Commission should request development and implementation of their national prevention and preparedness strategies.

⁷ The Guardian, “Pant by numbers: the cities with the most dangerous air – listed”, 13 February 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/datablog/2017/feb/13/most-polluted-cities-world-listed-region>

⁸ European Environmental Agency, “EEA Report No 12/2018”, 2018.
<https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2018>

⁹ European Environmental Agency, “EEA Report No 12/2018”, 2018.
<https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2018>

¹⁰ European Commission, “rescEU: a new European system to tackle natural disasters”, November 2017.
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/resceu-new-european-system-tackle-natural-disasters-2017-nov-23-0_en

The new European Commission has promised to “propose a European Green Deal in the first 100 days in office” which will include “the first European Climate Law to enshrine the 2050 climate-neutrality target into law.”¹¹ All these plans should include and be extended to the Western Balkans.

5. WITH A SHARED COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS

By 2030, the Balkans can be a peaceful region of democratic and open societies, if it is built on a shared rejection of ethnic nationalism, a common appreciation of every human life, and a shared commitment to justice for every victim.

In past several years regional cooperation among the countries of former Yugoslavia, regarding prosecution of war crimes, has been stagnating or even deteriorating. On the national level, there is a somewhat consistent progress observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Prosecution office continues active operation, even against mid- and high-ranking officials, and in Kosovo with the establishment of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office. However, in other countries, local judiciaries are demonstrating both the signs of political pressure, and of inability to adequately prosecute persons responsible for war crimes. Croatia has seen significant regress in this process after becoming a member state of the EU, after the pressure of EU accession negotiations faded. Serbia, to date, has failed to prosecute a high-ranking official. Both countries engage less and less in regional cooperation, in exchange of information and evidence.

These developments, or the lack thereof, are coupled with the denial and relativization from the top levels of governments, each providing exclusive, one-sided narratives that reject facts established at the ICTY and other courts to date. Such interpretations are exerting severe pressure on regional cooperation. Even humanitarian processes, such as locating and identifying missing persons, are heavily burdened by these verbal conflicts.

The EU is in a problematic situation when it comes to transitional justice processes in the Balkans, although they are supposed to be a key part of the *acquis* and accession negotiations. The fact that Croatia

¹¹ European Commission, “Political Guidelines for the Next Commission”, 2019.
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf

became a member — without accepting the findings of the ICTY, without following-up on them at the level of local judiciary, without significant investments in regional cooperation in criminal matters, without building sufficient capacity on a national level to enable its judicial system to adequately prosecute persons responsible for war crimes — makes it hard but even more necessary to enforce clear expectations from other countries.

There is a clear sense that the countries in the region do not see the potential for benevolent cooperation in establishment of justice. This is due to widespread identification with and glorification of war criminals. This demonstrates that the nationalist ideology still reigns in the Balkans.

Unfortunately, this is in accordance with nationalistic trends in many EU member states and beyond the EU. Some EU representatives are ready to accept the violations of basic fundamental rights - like media freedom - in order to achieve political aims. One example is the negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo, which led to neglecting of unacceptable domestic political developments in both countries. Liberal forces in the EU and its member states as well as the Western Balkan countries must together fight against a revisionist tendency on parts of the political elites. The European project can only be successful if recognition of one owns crimes and reconciliation with former enemies are going hand in hand.

At the same time, no democratic nation can exist without a viable system that helps it build a system of accountability. Functional, independent and unbiased justice system is a *condicio sine qua non* of a democratic state. And in the Balkans, the ability to effectively prosecute war crimes, alongside the ability to prosecute (political) corruption, is the indicator of how (under)developed, (un)biased and (in)dependent a judicial system is. Differently put, former Yugoslav nations will never be stable and peaceful democracies if significant investments are not made to strengthen their justice systems and enable them to prosecute those responsible for the most heinous violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

As for reconciliation, it simply cannot be forged on the basis of denial and evasion of responsibility. It cannot be forged if each side sees pain only in their own victims, if each side finds excuses for inexcusable crimes committed by those who wore their flag. There will only be a possibility of reconciliation when there is a recognition of humanity in the ‘other’.

In order to remedy the current situation, the Balkan societies and leaders must acknowledge the injustices regardless of who they were committed by and engage in bona fide cooperation aimed at bringing justice for all victims. The EU, on another hand, should be explicit and consistent in insisting

on the development of sufficient local judicial capacities; should support and, when necessary, facilitate processes of regional cooperation around humanitarian issues and criminal matters; and should openly politically support initiatives from civil society, such as RECOM, that aim at achieving progress in the area of justice and reconciliation.

6. EMPOWERED YOUTH THAT COOPERATES

By 2030 programs and instruments to empower youth of all genders by providing youth mobility programs to facilitate their participation in decision-making processes in local, national and regional levels have increased significantly.

Today, young people of Western Balkan face a lot of challenges in their countries, starting from high unemployment rate, low-quality education, lack of conducive environment for volunteering and participation in different activities outside the region because of the visa issues, migration or different social-economic inequalities.

There is also a lack of opportunities for young people to become part of decision-making processes and have a say in policymaking, especially when it comes to processes that include youth people directly, such as the educational system. Considering that education should be tailored to the needs of youth, excluding young people from consultations on reform processes is a deprivation of and limitation of youth participation and thus contributes to the lack of motivation of young people to be active participants in national societies.¹²

Fortunately, some initiatives to encourage regional cooperation and youth mobility have already been taken. There is a decision to increase youth mobility by doubling Erasmus+ funding. The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) as an independently functioning institutional mechanism was founded by six participating countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) with an aim to increase youth exchange through promoting reconciliation, trust and cooperation.

¹² Civil Society and Youth Engagement in the Western Balkans, “Policy Brief 05/19”, 2019.

To improve their status, governments should create possibilities and conditions for young people to address their needs notwithstanding the field of interest. To achieve that, each of the respective Western Balkan countries should regulate youth position by adopting youth policies, youth action programs, and youth strategies. In this aspect, most of the Western Balkan except North Macedonia, and Albania have passed a law on youth. However, one should always question the quality of its implementation.

Furthermore, continuous support should be given to young people, in regard of youth mobility in order to raise their participation in the national level as well. Youth mobility also needs to be tackled from the perspective of a mutual recognition of diplomas.

In order to identify the challenges and overcome future problems related to youth cooperation, Western Balkan countries should begin by conducting a survey. It is necessary to gain input from young people who have been part of various youth mobility programs or other platforms to understand the benefits but also the obstacles that would help improve quality.

Young people have a lack of information about youth cooperation opportunities. Therefore, it is essential to make information about national and regional youth mobility programs more accessible to youth through innovative and creative ways. Therefore, mobility programs should be made more accessible to people from a socio-economically vulnerable background as well. Moreover, financial issues are another obstacle that prevent youngsters from becoming mobile. In this regard, donors and institutions should underpin programs or find a better formula that could make programs more inclusive. For example, support for educational mobility incentives and more scholarships should be given.

Further legislative and institutional frameworks in the area of mobility would have a significant impact on strengthening youth cooperation. A well-implemented framework will provide support to local and national mobility programs as well.

7. INTERCONNECTED REGION

On the eve of the 2030 during the EU – Western Balkans Summit, all six Western Balkans countries are launching the “*Balkaneum*”, a regional office that will represent the interests of the WB within the EU. Cooperation between countries in the region is gradually being rooted in socio-political and economic

sphere. The political elites in the region now are convinced that regional cooperation indeed is a rightful method to solving bilateral issues and to reaching agreements in the most notorious open issues, without any necessity to have the external actors heavily involved in the process. This regional cooperation is not in contradiction to a common European Project but helps to build a strong European Union.

The aftermath of the Prespa Agreement - despite all hurdles - had a positive spill-over effect. Its impact was extensively reflected on the Kosovo – Serbia EU facilitated dialogue paving the way for the Comprehensive Normalization Agreement to be reached in the end of 2020. Both parties have since been committed to the effective implementation with the external assistance provided by the EU. Solving the political dispute between Kosovo and Serbia served as an initial step to overcoming the challenges of cooperation between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, the five EU non-recognizers have gradually considered their approach toward Kosovo. This gradually unlocked the EU perspective of the country, enabling its ability to catch up with other countries in the region.

Cooperation between six Western Balkan countries is now an essential element serving as a driving force toward stability in the region, good neighbor relations replaced nationalism discourse and intolerance, thus paving the way for wider societal development within the region. The new constellation and removed obstacle within the region have created favorable atmosphere in which all countries committed to working jointly with the EU to strategically pursue the goal of EU membership through multi-frontal proactive support each-other.

With the bilateral disputes out of picture, the long lasting “stabilitocracy” deeply imbedded between the EU and Western Balkan countries became irrelevant. Free from populism and nationalism, all six countries committed to working together in delivering tangible results in Chapter 23 and 24 by joining efforts against corruption and organized crime in the region. This would mark the last round of reforms before closing these chapters to further proceed completing the EU membership process.

The improvement of rule of law with focus on transparency, accountability, and effectiveness, followed up by regional cooperation contributed to creating a solid environment for economic development. Furthermore, it attracted foreign direct investment – mainly by the EU, thus making Western Balkans a competitive region in Europe. By 2030 all countries in the region are trading freely with each other, thus impacting positively trade between the region and the EU. Countries are actively working on breaking the last barriers hindering regional cooperation such as infrastructure projects on transportation. Further, they are jointly co-funding – with the help of the EU – the railway linking Pristina – Belgrade, thus connecting the entire region with the EU.

With improved freedom of movement, people to people communication increased. Mobility of students and workers made the region attractive for the young people, but it also gradually started positively to stimulate brain-gain. All government are working on further strengthening the “Balkanus” scholarship and exchange program for the students studying in all Western Balkans. Many joint projects are ongoing aiming to positively contribute to the overall Western Balkans 6 reality.

It is important for the countries in the region to understand that regional cooperation shall be enhanced for the benefits of the six Western Balkans and their citizens and not to be used as a tool to please Brussels nor another tick-in-the-box in the EU integration. The leaders ought to understand that even after joining the Union, Balkans will remain a region within the Union – similarly to the Visegrad Four – as such it is important to strengthen regional cooperation prior to entering the EU.

The political elites of the region must understand that solving all open bilateral disputes is the key to the success of the region and countries particularly. Following the example of Greece and North Macedonia, it is crucial that countries take full ownership in solving bilateral disputes with support from the EU throughout the process.

Countries in the region should further work on enhancing cooperation in infrastructure and economic cooperation. The connectivity agenda shall remain as a top priority for all Western Balkan countries, including transport, energy, digitalization and mobility, and be recognized as the crucial element behind regional development. As such all six Western Balkan countries shall invest and generate funds to support connectivity agenda, while seeking support from the EU to make this a Pan-European agenda.

The Berlin Process is a necessary forum for fostering the regional cooperation. All countries shall use this high-level platform to keep political ties solid within the region and with the EU, but also to further improve regional cooperation in terms of infrastructure. In line with this, countries shall proactively work on removing economic barriers and jointly contributing to the creation of Regional Economic Area.

Invest in the youth education and exchanges to gradually establish the already missed connections between young generation in the Balkans. In addition, further investment in strengthening the RYCO will be a strategic short-term goal, whereas on the longer run, it is crucial to deepen cooperation among youth, culture, sports, and art platforms. University exchanges between students and academic staff is significant in order to link higher education institutions within the region as well.

Civil Society, think-tank community, and experts – there is a need to further support free and independent civil society sector in all countries and solid cooperation among already existing civil society networks. Moreover, the EU shall be invited to continue underpinning the civil society sector in the region as a way to ensure transparent, accountable, and effective political processes.

8. MIGRATION WITH BENEFITS

By 2030 all Western Balkan states have introduced EU comparable policies on emigration and circular migration. The *formal circular migration programs* in the Western Balkans attract the region's diaspora that only a decade earlier was a single untapped potential and global asset for the region.

Today, one of the biggest challenges for the Western Balkans is the large number of people leaving their countries every year in pursuit of a better life. According to the recent Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) survey in the Western Balkans, nearly one in two respondents contemplated looking for a job abroad. Every year, thousands depart from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia (EU member state) – among them, many highly educated. The scope of this emigration is best understood when compared to worldwide trends. While overall the share of sourced population in countries that are living overseas is only about 3 percent, in the Western Balkans, it is 31,2 percent. Evidently, such mass emigration has a severe impact on the public sector (health care, primary and higher education, science, public administration); however, what remains untold is that emigration also brings much necessary vigor, human capital exchange, transfer of know-how and so much more.

The evidence shows that many emigrants would be willing to contribute to their home country – in some cases, even return for a certain period or permanently, given that conditions back home improve, primarily socio-economic but also political. Circular migration schemes are rare and often overlook the real potential that diaspora can generate. Western Balkans lacks systematic evidence about emigrants, their skills sets, locations, preferences, competences and agendas. But the available data shows that the returning emigrant commands a 7 percent premium in salary relative to people with similar qualifications and experience who have never lived abroad.

Emigrants from the Western Balkans tend to work hard and are well regarded by both employers and their host country, possess invaluable qualifications that make them instrumental for the labour market

and economy back home. If Western Balkans policies were even partially designed to attract people back home, offering meaningful incentives and decent opportunities, in the short run, the region would be able to rebuild valuable communities. Currently, there is very little understanding of where to look for answers on emigration.

Engaging with diaspora is critical not only to help consolidate the regional economic outlook, bring the latest cutting-edge technologies into the region and deepen know-how, but even more importantly it can profoundly challenge current political narratives and help bring about much-needed energy and change. Questions like “What are the experiences of the emigrants?” “Under which conditions would they consider returning to the region?” and, ultimately, “What policies could bring a meaningful change in the medium term?” need to be answered. Credible research and chronic lack of solid data on emigration is one of the key impediments to any sound policies or future roadmaps on emigration and circular migration.

To overcome such limitations, the Western Balkans governments, along with its specialized agencies and with an assistance of the EU counterparts must commit to a comprehensive mid to long terms continuous research and analysis and explore all the aspects of the emigration and possibilities to attract its citizens back. Research results will directly feed into the future policies and facilitate development of the region.

Effective policies that promote the circular migration can simplify and foster the progress of the region. Moreover, emigration must be part of any high-level EU - Western Balkans agenda and the governments of the Western Balkans must look for complementary policies within the EU and introduce a set of new policies, thus opening opportunities for its citizens.

VISION 2030: CONCRETE PROPOSALS

- All six countries of the Western Balkans have a perspective of joining the EU as full members and this perspective should not be taken away but made more credible and tangible.

- The Western Balkans, politicians and civil society, should be offered a chance to take part in upcoming discussion on the future of Europe (the Conference)
- For the EU to remain relevant in the Western Balkan, it will need to boost its offer for the region. Therefore, EU should consider steps in direction of the sectoral integration of the region into the EU.
- Mechanisms to recognize and support financially citizens' initiatives, their activism, as well as independent and investigative media should be created and increased. The EU should therefore continue and increase its support for the Western Balkans through the European Endowment for Democracy. The EU officials should be more vocal and critical of the authoritarian tendencies.
- Countries in the region should comprehensively reform their electoral systems in order to bring them in line with the European standards. Initiatives to strengthen the role of parliaments could be considered, such as support for the work of the secretariats and their transparency.
- Western Balkan countries should speed up their fight against corruption and organized crime. The EU ought to consider setting a clear date (2023) for full alignment with the EU acquis and best practices in areas such as public procurement and state aid. Furthermore, the European Commission should explore avenues for the EU Court of Auditors to engage with the Western Balkans.
- In order to boost entrepreneurship and youth employment, introduction of Youth Guarantees should be considered, with a particular targeting of the most underdeveloped regions where urgent measures are needed. Furthermore, the VET trainings need to be extended and streamlined.
- The Western Balkans education systems should be reformed with an aim to provide the applicable knowledge and get aligned with the labour market needs. One aspect should be working on improving aspects of the education system that are relevant for the results of the OECD's PISA study. The education systems should be designed to encourage independent

researches, ideas and expressive creations so that young people start shaping the society as early as possible.

- The European Commission should develop and offer to all Western Balkan countries a clear roadmap with all the EU environmental legislation and standards and include the Western Balkans in the “European Green Deal”. The governments in the region should commit themselves to adopt and implement the entire EU environmental acquis by 2030. In return, the Commission should provide necessary feedback, as well as financial and technical support. All six Western Balkan countries should be invited to take part in the EU’s system to tackle natural disasters (rescEU) that is fully financed by the EU. In return, the Commission should request development and implementation of the national prevention and preparedness strategies that are in line with EU’s best practice.
- The Western Balkan societies and authorities should engage in *bona fide* cooperation aimed at bringing justice for all victims of the 1990s wars. The EU should be explicit and consistent in insisting on the development of sufficient local judicial capacities; should support and, when necessary, facilitate processes of regional cooperation around humanitarian issues and criminal matters; and should openly, politically support initiatives from civil society, such as RECOM, that aim at achieving progress in the area of justice and reconciliation.
- All Western Balkan states should adopt youth policies, youth action programs, and youth strategies. Continuous support should be given to young people, in the regard of youth mobility in order to raise their participation in the national levels as well. Information about national and regional youth mobility programs should be made more accessible to youth through innovative and creative ways, in particular to people from a socio-economically vulnerable background as well. Youth mobility also needs to be tackled from the perspective of a mutual recognition of diplomas.
- Western Balkans states should further work on enhancing cooperation in infrastructure and economic cooperation. They should align with the EU their actions on the digitalization and cyber security. As well as work on removing economic barriers and creation of a regional economic area that is in line with the EU standards.

- Further investment in strengthening the Regional Youth Cooperation Office should be a strategic short-term goal, whereas on the longer run, it is crucial to deepen cooperation among youth, culture, sports, and art platforms. University exchanges between students and academic staff is crucial to link higher education institutions within the region.
- The Western Balkans governments, along with its specialized agencies and with an assistance of the EU counterparts should commit to a comprehensive mid-to-long term continuous research and analysis and explore all the aspects of the emigration and possibilities to attract its citizens back. Research results would directly feed into the future policies and facilitate development of the region. Effective policies that promote the circular migration can simplify and foster the progress of the region. Moreover, emigration should be part of any high-level EU - Western Balkans agenda and the governments of the Western Balkans should look for complementary policies within the EU and introduce a set of new policies, thus opening opportunities for its citizens.

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In this project young people from all six Western Balkans states participated in meetings, brainstorming sessions and public events we have organized. This paper was drafted by some of them and reflects parts of discussions led and ideas that emerged since the project started.

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