

Topic 1:

YOUTH COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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STATE OF PLAY

In the past two decades, youth cooperation among the Western Balkans states was encouraged, stimulated and facilitated mostly by the EU and its member states. The structures created to enable youth cooperation were mostly of an ad-hoc nature. And they lacked true and tangible support by regional governments.

With challenges in regard to heritage of the countries in the region common, the joint actions and cooperation among youth can tackle many of these challenges. This is why it was encouraging to see that the so-called Berlin Process has put the spotlight on the issue of youth cooperation in the Western Balkans. The idea of setting youth cooperation as one of the priorities first emerged in 2015 at the *EU-WB6 Vienna Summit* and was then reiterated last year in Paris.

The most prominent result of this focus of the Berlin Process was the birth of the *Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans (RYCO)*. The main motive for creating it was to have a regionally owned organization that would support the regional exchange of youth. Although still not fully operational, expectations are high for RYCO.

Youth cooperation in the Western Balkans in coming years will occur in a world of great uncertainties. The inevitability of the Western Balkans states joining the EU does not look as certain as just several years ago. The rise of populism and anti-EU narrative throughout the EU, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, and ever stronger authoritarian temptations throughout the Western Balkans and its neighbourhood will have some kind of impact on relations and stability in the region. The role of non-EU actors and the way that the region addresses its economical challenges will also play a role. And all this will have an impact on youth cooperation.

Supported by the European Fund for the Balkans, in 2016, a group of young professionals from all six Western Balkans states and different walks of life came together to discuss different scenarios for the prospects of youth cooperation in the Western Balkans by 2020. They developed four different scenarios in light of different potential developments in the EU and the Western Balkans, and in light of economic, political, security, and socio-cultural challenges.

The first scenario was developed based on the return of nation states in the EU and the Western Balkans becoming more stable. This scenario included the establishment of a Joint Fund for the Information Technology sector and youth in the region benefiting from a dynamic IT revolution.

The second scenario was developed around the EU becoming more integrated and the Western Balkans becoming more stable. It included the revitalization of the EU accession talks and youth in the region becoming more pro-active. One of the major points included substantial educational reform instigated by the 2018 PISA results.

The third scenario was centred on the EU's internal quarrels intensifying and the Western Balkans turning towards other global actors as models of governance and sources of financial support. This scenario displayed consequences of potential radicalization of the youth in the region.

The fourth scenario was developed around the EU becoming more integrated, the Western Balkans moving towards more instability, and the Western Balkans giving in to its authoritarian temptations in case the EU gives up on future enlargement. In such circumstances, youth cooperation would find itself under the pressure of limited resources and shrinking freedoms, as well as the absence of the vision for the future.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- ✓ What structures and resources are needed to enable stable and long-term youth cooperation in the region? Is RYCO enough? Or just a first step?

- ✓ How is the support provided by the regional governments for youth and youth cooperation assessed? What more could be done?

- ✓ What more could be done to improve youth mobility within the region? And with the EU?

- ✓ What is the assessment of the support provided by the EU for youth in the region? And for youth cooperation in the Western Balkans? What more could be done?
- ✓ How could youth cooperation help fight/prevent the rise of nationalism and radicalization across the region?
- ✓ Can youth cooperation improve the socio-economic situation in the region? How?

POTENTIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Governments and the EU should increase funding for education, innovation, culture and sports.
- ✓ Governments should use the 2018 PISA results as a means to instigate reforms aimed at improving education, with a particular focus on the improvement of vocational education and training. By implementing the 2015 "Roadmap to a sustainable apprentice system." EU could support.
- ✓ Governments should modify school curricula and university profiling to ensure more specialized knowledge in different IT sectors and areas. EU could support.
- ✓ Governments should make entrepreneurial events and activities an obligatory element in the university/high school syllabuses. EU could support.
- ✓ Governments and the EU should increase funding for mobility, exchange, cooperation and innovation in the region and with the EU.
- ✓ Governments should reach agreement on mutual recognition of diplomas.
- ✓ EU should continue and increase participation of the Western Balkans countries in the EU-funded student exchange programmes.
- ✓ Regional governments should create their joint fund for the IT sector and promote the region as an IT hub. EU could support.
- ✓ EU and governments should enable/protect freedom of movement.
- ✓ EU should make its carrot and stick/strict but fair approach more meaningful in order to maintain/regain the trust of youth in the EU accession process.
- ✓ Governments should establish a network for preventing radicalisation, and the EU should extend EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) to the region.

- ✓ Governments should establish a regional Anti-Corruption Institution to help raise awareness, increase the exchange of experience and boost the fight against corruption.
- ✓ Governments and the EU should invest greater efforts in preventing bilateral disputes in the region.