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We might not be as competitive as Germany, but we need to counter our fears and ensure mobility of students in the Western Balkans

RCC works on several fronts to address key concerns of young people in our region

Youth accounts for over 21% of population in the Western Balkans (WB), or more than 3.5 million in a region of some 18 million people all together. I call this a potential for future, for further strengthening of cooperation, for reconciliation in the region.

Young people are also our greatest supporters of EU integration - compared to overall 56% of people who support EU, overwhelming 61% of young people would like their country to become EU member, as they associate it with better opportunities to travel, study and work.

This is quite understandable as youth in the region continuously suffer from high unemployment. Their unemployment rate stands at 35% in WB, compared to 17% in the EU. A large majority of them express anxiety about being jobless. It takes about 2 years on average for young person to land a first job. But many of those who have a job experience precarious working conditions. Moreover, young people coming from underprivileged social backgrounds have considerably more difficult access to higher education, participation in political or civic activities, engagement in activities related to self-development, and find it harder to use ICT for educational and informational purposes or to find adequate employment.

This pretty much puts in perspective both the position of youth and areas in which interventions are gravely needed.

We in the RCC work on three fronts: recognition of academic and professional qualifications and improving quality of education, improving employment opportunities and we are embarking on enabling youth participation in decision-making. These three themes are also the key concerns shared by the youth as evidenced by the Balkan Barometer annual surveys and the study FES carried out recently.

Mobility is the key

It is estimated that today there is around 5 million students studying abroad which is an exponential increase in numbers compared to 2.1 million in 2000. This trend will continue with experts estimating that in 2025 there will be between 8 and 15 million students studying abroad, globally. We don't have good estimates of the outgoing and incoming mobility in the WB yet. However, we do know that the trend of rapid growth in the number of students studying abroad is visible in our region too, and being committed to becoming part of the EU, mobility of students between the EU and our region is of particular importance.

Although, due to high migration flows from our region, and with more than 200.000 people from WB emigrating legally to EU in 2018 alone, there are realistic fears of leaving to study and never coming back. Still, we want our students, our children, to learn new skills, acquire new knowledge and competences for both the labour market and continuing their studies as well as to experience different academic culture. We want them to broaden their horizons, become more independent, experience different societies and their cultures and bring that back home and spread it.

To counter our fears, we need to think more about our responsibility to ensure that these students are attracted and welcomed back. That they are valued and ready for our labour markets and higher education systems. We need to make sure that their experiences contribute to the development of our education systems, our businesses and our societies in general.

Once those students complete their studies, we need to enable them to move freely in the region. To make sure our doctors, dentists, architects and engineers don't go to Germany or elsewhere in EU in search of a job. We know that the region cannot be as competitive as Germany, but we need to enable people to move freely, for their professional and academic qualifications to be recognized everywhere in the region. We might not get as competitive as Germany anytime soon, but we owe it to the people to work on this, and make it a reality.

Youth Policy Labs

In April next year the RCC is embarking on a new project in the Western Balkans - Youth Policy Lab, which aims to contribute to enhanced participation of young people in decision-making.

Majority of youth state that their political knowledge is poor and that they are disinterested in politics. The Balkan Barometer 2019 shows that 49% of all respondents do not even discuss government decisions, while 27% do so but in a private setting only, so it may be easy to conclude that youth are apathetic. Still, lack of political activity at political party level might not necessarily mean disengagement - many young people are involved in their local communities and volunteering.

Young people's participation in decisions that affect them and the life of their community is valuable and important. They connect with their peers easier, they feel their views and needs matter and are respected, while on the other hand policy makers can improve and adjust their programmes.

However, to have the benefits identified above, youth participation needs to be authentic and as such it must be youth-centred, rooted in their realities and following the pursuit of youth's visions and concerns, not youth-focused or limited to one topic.

Young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect them and the life of their community. Participation gives them the opportunity to have a say about what is important to them, allows them to make their 'own' decisions about their lives, increases self-confidence and skills, and empowers them to be a full and valued part of the community.

So, to conclude, the holy trinity is mobility, better jobs and decision-making. That is where we are going. Ultimately, it is for the benefit and future of all our societies.

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Majlinda Bregu is an accomplished Albanian politician and a strong believer in the European project. Before becoming the top official of the RCC, a regional cooperative framework for Southeast European countries promoting Euro-Atlantic integration, Bregu served as a Member of Parliament for three consecutive legislatures for the Centre Right (2005-2017). In this role, she worked for an all-inclusive approach and far-reaching consensus on the European perspective of Albania and the region. She has also served as Minister of European Integration and as Government's Spokesperson, where she helped promote the importance of Albania's membership perspective to the EU for the stability of the region. Additionally, she has actively supported and contributed to the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum established under the Berlin Process.