



HOW TO BETTER RESPOND TO EUROPEAN ASPIRATIONS OF THE YOUNG GENERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

Bucharest, 28 – 29 May 2019

**Main conclusions and recommendations summarized
by
The Presidency of the Council of the European Union**

Under the auspices of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, over 200 representatives of youth organizations, social workers, young entrepreneurs, researchers, students, experts from Western Balkans and the European Union met in Bucharest, on 28 -29 May 2019, to explore creative ways to amplify the role of youth in supporting the transformation of the Western Balkans.

Representatives of the European Commission, European External Actions Service, International Financial Institutions and international and regional organizations also attended the conference.

The event was organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the support of the European Commission, the EEA and Norway grants, in partnership with Regional Cooperation Council, Regional Youth Cooperation Office, National School for Political and Administrative Studies, European Youth Forum and Digital Citizen/Social Doers.

Conference objectives:

- Explore creative ways to inspire and empower young people in finding/improving their professional prospects in their own countries while restating the support for the European perspective of Western Balkans.
- Facilitate the establishment of a long-lasting dialogue among young professionals from the local administration and civil society, entrepreneurs, academics, youth organizations from WB and EU, thus contributing to a better mutual understanding and attachment to the European values.
- Enable the transfer of best practices and sharing of expertise among young professionals in the process of economic reforms, democratization and civic participation.
- Raise awareness on the need to build trust and resilience, while contributing to the reconciliation efforts.
- Support the implementation of the Enlargement Strategy (Commission's Communication from 6 February 2018) and its flagship initiatives, as well as of the Sofia Priority Agenda (EU-Western Balkans Summit, Sofia, 17 May 2018).
- Take stock of the European and regional strategic development framework for youth and offer models of cooperation and good practices to be promoted and further scaled up.

The conference structure consisted of one opening session and four thematic interactive panels. Mr. Dan Neculăescu, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on behalf of the Romanian EU Council Presidency, addressed the audience with a keynote speech highlighting the importance granted by the EU Council Presidency to the enlargement policy and the focus on a positive agenda for youth.

Panel 1: Investing in today's youth for tomorrow's development: Youth Employment in the WB and the EU; Unemployment and NEET- a growing phenomenon; Solutions for social & economic inclusion: examples of good practices

The discussion looked at learned lessons and good practices in addressing youth unemployment and creating services for young people in NEET situations, with a focus on what can be done differently in the WB. It highlighted the challenges and opportunities in WB region in addressing youth unemployment, created synergies among different actors and drew relevant recommendations at practitioners' levels.

The panelists brought together perspectives from national level, international organizations and local youth civil society in the Western Balkans. Each of them presented their initiatives and the importance of highlighting key elements and creating synergies in addressing the phenomena of young people in NEET situations and youth unemployment.

Conclusions and recommendations

From a national perspective: the Vocational Education and Training system implemented in Romania was presented as a good practice to address youth unemployment, with the following elements:

- It's important that young people have access to vocational education after finishing primary school;
- It's important to correlate the labor market needs, employers and vocational educational curricula;
- The employers have to be involved in designing the curricula for VET;
- The National Authority for Dual Learning invited 2 young beneficiaries to tell their own story and speak about how VET changed their lives for the good, offering them access to a profession and education. Moreover, the Authority ensures that students are in direct contact with their future employers and they attend practical traineeships in the companies / factories for which they prepare, further offering them the opportunity to continue with university studies in the same field;
- Being part of the VET system doesn't mean one student cannot do research, on the contrary. After finishing vocational education, they get employed and there are success stories where the employer covered the university costs of the young persons to continue with research and support innovation in the professional field they chose;
- It's important to use all databases and information available to reflect the results also at policy level and in national programmes. The National Authority benefits from a series of databases and they use it to make the case for the importance of strengthening Dual Learning system in Romania;
- Romania can offer assistance and share its own experience to the Western Balkans in areas such as: building a dual educational learning unit; connecting employers with education;

facilitating youth insertion on labor market, but still ensuring they have the possibility to follow university degrees.

From a regional perspective: the ongoing EU funded project “Employment & Social Affairs Platform” – ESAP is a unique project in the Western Balkans, offering the space for peer learning among institutions and a competitive, healthy peer pressure among employment institutions in WB to address the issue of youth unemployment:

- Investing in outreach and identification programmes at local level is important, as usually working to identify the young NEETs is one of the most challenging aspects, therefore coordination of different stakeholders is important;
- It's crucial to invest in employment services and in the skills of human resources working in these institutions so as to be able to understand larger phenomena of young NEETs;
- It's important to create synergies at regional level and build the institutional capacity so as to prevent situations of high youth unemployment, so working only with employment agencies is not enough, in parallel is needed to build an educational system that is correlated to the labor market;
- It's important to have a trans-sectoral approach and use the data available to develop policies and systemic approaches to addressing youth unemployment.
- The role of entrepreneurship in addressing youth unemployment and the need to improve access to financing for SMEs, start-ups was highlighted; grants facilitations increase accessibility of vulnerable categories and ensures that entrepreneurship is a viable option for young people in WB;
- It's important that financial schemes are also doubled by training and building capacities for young entrepreneurs in order to make the programme sustainable: not only offering the financial support, but also train them to become successful entrepreneurs;
- Create an ecosystem where experienced entrepreneurs and young innovators can come together and learn from each other, respectively young people can benefit from the learned lessons and experiences of other entrepreneurs.
- Addressing the gender dimension of youth unemployment: it is important to have a gender strategy and mainstream this priority not only when preventing or addressing youth unemployment, but at all stages: in the educational system, in labor market and in relation with employers, in promoting entrepreneurship etc.

The civil society perspective: the importance of recognition of youth work as a profession and the role of youth work in developing life skills that prevent youth unemployment;

- It's crucial to involve youth workers in decisions: policy and programme development that address youth unemployment or the phenomena of young people in NEET situations;
- Young workers have the role to translate in a friendly language all the opportunities and programmes young people have access to and to support them in being part of those programmes;
- Youth mobility is crucial for life skills development and building cohesive societies;
- Youth workers play a crucial role in identifying young people at risk of becoming marginalized and they can guide them to the specialized services;

- It's crucial that young people have safe spaces for participation in community, such as youth centers, as this is essential in preventing disengagement and becoming a person in NEET situation.

Panel 2: Supporting the next generation of young innovators. Entrepreneurship and startups, Technology/ICT, Science: examples and best practices in EU & the WB

Europe is pro-actively engaging in solutions to strengthen the entire region, through policies and funding programmes that support entrepreneurship, research and innovation as cross-sectoral pillars for development. In this framework, countries in the EU and in the neighborhood have got recognition for their young talent, from IT specialists to innovative entrepreneurs.

The discussion focused on better understanding what is the state of the art in the region, and provided examples and best practices in EU & the WB region - from inspiring stories of young entrepreneurs to funding opportunities and existing digital policies.

The presentation of success stories from young entrepreneurs/innovators in Western Balkans illustrated the existing opportunities and perspectives.

Conclusions and recommendations

- A multi-stakeholder approach is necessary in order to ensure a sustainable environment for entrepreneurship and innovation. Governments, academia & business sector need to work together and commit to joint strategic objectives.
- Entrepreneurship is a real opportunity to strengthen the Western Balkans region and the wider South East Europe. The young talent available and expertise in the IT sector have the potential to boost the economies in the region and generate long-term social and economic growth.
- Emigration does not only have negative effects: the high-educated diaspora should be seen as a resource, also in the perspective of a possible return to their country.
- The importance digital skills and media literacy but also the digital divide between rural and urban areas as a challenge.
- What it takes to be a successful young entrepreneur: skills, passion and enthusiasm, not to be afraid of failure, critical thinking, empathy, lead by example; focusing on the product first and second on the marketing, have a good team, management skills but also a bit of luck.
- Entrepreneurship is equally an opportunity to respond to the brain drain phenomenon. In this context, the efforts to regain the lost human capital need to be complemented by new incentives for the youngest generation: access to innovation & research opportunities, facilities to start a business, a culture open to entrepreneurship and risk taking – among others.
- Stronger cooperation in the region, as well between the EU and WB, is highly important. Due to the rising power of Internet and new technologies challenges are similar everywhere, thus, adopting common solutions and standards can accelerate entrepreneurial initiatives and allow them to be competitive in a global market.
- A successful innovative and entrepreneurial ecosystem needs a series of key ingredients: a proper legal/public policy framework, sustainable funding, investments in new digital skills – necessary for the work of the future, a culture where failure and risk taking is encouraged.

- Going beyond the existing young talent, the WB & wider SEE region needs to focus on increased efforts that can support its competitiveness through:
 - a. investments in human capital and specialised STEM (science, technology, education & math) skills
 - b. support for business as well as social innovation
 - c. offering access to cross-border expertise and networks
 - d. addressing the digital divide and ensuring that there is no citizen left behind.
- Building on the efforts of this conference and in anticipation of future initiatives, a network of Young Innovators could be established. The network can act as a real platform that enhances the cooperation in the region and offers tailored opportunities on relevant topics.

Panel 3: Re-imagining the Balkans in Europe. Building trust and consolidating resilience for a common future

The panel aimed at fostering the dialogue between representatives of the academic society, policy experts, civil society and policy-makers focused on proposing a new EU narrative for consolidating resilience in the Western Balkans together with advancing the EU enlargement agenda, involving both member states and candidate countries.

The discussion stirred reflection on finding innovative ways of 're-imagining' the future of the Balkans in the EU and bridging the scholarly dialogue to policy-makers and practitioners from the region by explaining how these issues would be of use for strengthening EU enlargement policy narratives.

Conclusions and recommendations

Main challenges and solutions to promote and consolidate trust among youth from different countries of the Western Balkans:

- **Tackling low trust in the government and judicial authorities:** leaders from the region should promote trust in state institutions. Other agents of change should be part of this process of re-building trust: youth, mass-media, teachers; this requires more investment as the local governments invest too low. Solutions: **RYCO** is worth more financial support, because of its own activities that are targeted on building trust at the regional level. **The Sustainable Development Goals** (Agenda 2030) and cooperation with the UN offers an opportunity for young people to build bridges across borders (healthcare, gender equalities, fighting poverty).
- **The need to change the narrative in the field of EU integration process:** One of the ways forward is to engage youth in the discussion regarding the future of Europe. Another way is through civic engagement. The youth should use more their skills - here, the experience of Romania and Bulgaria is valuable (beside the accession itself). It's visible that young people are actually keen on doing something constructive for the region. There is a need to change narratives in the WB, raising truly important topics in a positive way (unemployment vs employment). Solutions: promoting more inter-regional exchange of good practices. A more collaborative relationship with the EU is needed. However, joining the EU is not the end, but just a mean to reaching the end – a better standard of living. In addition, a better dialogue between WB countries with Member States and EU institutions is needed. WB citizens should be able to express their needs and expectations directly to elites from Member States and EU institutions. Solution: to open the 'enlargement bubble' by

organizing more citizen consultations in the WB countries on these issues, and not let only political elites be the interface.

- **Tackling differences/asymmetries between categories youth in the region** - organized and non-organized young people; between urban and rural youth. It's difficult for non-organized young people, who are not part of any structures, when it comes to education, employment, connectivity etc. Their voice needs also to be heard. Solutions: schools need to become part of the change. The governments need to listen to the people at meetings and have meaningful dialogues at events held in the WB countries.
- **Building more trust through education** – to change education, we need a change in the mindset (what resources we have, how do we use them). More focus on promoting critical thinking and this brings change. Education, in particular peace education, can help the region to react differently to certain situations and it offers the chance to overcome burdens through cooperation. Solutions: the new Erasmus is a beneficial program for countries in the WB, but it has its limitations (25% of the budget is actually spent). Erasmus programme is a tool to advocate change targeted for young people. It should be more inclusive. There is a need to advocate for a more flexible funding scheme for the Erasmus programme in the future, as accession countries have limited funding. Peace education should not remain just a topic in the curricula, but a focal process of changing mindsets and promoting 'healthy' values.

Panel 4: From traditional participation mechanisms to e-participation. Challenges and opportunities of the online world: cyber resilience, countering hate speech and fake news

The discussions explored the continuum of participation between the analog and digital world, the necessary infrastructure in the physical and virtual world. It focused on initiatives, examples and best practices of youth engagement and implications of an intensive online presence.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Young citizens have a right to a democratic and pluralist society, respecting the equal dignity of all human beings, striving for gender equality and eradicating poverty;
- Young people are committed to realizing the fundamental rights and freedoms of everyone, developing democracy, upholding the rule of law;
- In particular, young people are concerned and suffer by the resurgence of racism, xenophobia, the development of a climate of intolerance, the increase in acts of violence.
- Support comprehensive youth policies that foster empathy, tolerance, stimulate critical thinking and European citizenship;
- Young people need opportunities to embrace diversity of traditions and cultures, tolerance – all guarantee for an open society;
- Media literacy has become a key challenge in a continent adapting to the digital age. Media literacy programmes will need to become an inter-generational learning and developing exercise in participatory democracy to help securing freedom expression, navigating information disorder and countering hate speech;
- History education has an important role to play in confronting the current political, cultural and social challenges facing Europe; in particular, those posed by the increasingly diverse

nature of young people individual experiences and divided societies as well as questions concerning reconciliation and integration of the Western Balkans region. The Council of Europe principles and guidelines should serve as a basis to enhance the expertise and capability needed for meaningful history education in the region and beyond;

- Western Balkans are most vulnerable to disinformation; in order to address fake news and disinformation one needs a pro-active approach, providing positive narratives, placing people in focus;
- The need to address the lack of trust in governments and politicians; e-participation is important, but not a substitute to politics; education plays a key role;
- Various ongoing programmes (such as Young digital leaders) may contribute to increase awareness and help media literacy.



The EU Council Presidency takes this opportunity to express its gratitude to all partners that contributed to the success of this event.

Romania will encourage and support the follow up on the implementation of the conference recommendations at the level of the regional organizations and the European Union, including the possible launching of the Western Balkans Network of Young Innovators, in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders. .