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A NEW DEAL FOR YOUTH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

A Non-paper with policy proposals based on the
FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019

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Introduction

Talent is equally distributed, opportunity is not.

Leila Janah, Samasource founder

This non-paper stems from the assumption that the best approach for youth policy in six countries of the Western Balkans (hereafter: WB6)¹ is to create more opportunities for young people. It mainly builds on the results of the *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019* (YSEE18/19), which, among other things, confirmed that young people in the WB6 countries face a severe lack of possibilities to access quality education and employment. In the labor market realm, besides a high incidence of unemployment, most of the employed youth work in precarious jobs. Youth also face significant skills-mismatches in the labor market, which signals that educational and labor market institutions poorly facilitate school-to-work transitions. Indeed, young people across the region are predominantly dissatisfied with the level of connectedness between education systems and the world of work. There is also a very high perception of corruption in education in all SEE countries, and in most of them, such perceptions have increased over recent years.²

It is therefore not surprising that the youth across the region are largely dissatisfied with the state of the economy and democracy in their countries, which is related to the very low, and in most countries further declining interest in politics and civic engagement. A vast majority of young people in the region feel poorly represented in national politics and think that they should have a stronger say. Considering all of the above, it comes as no surprise that the emigration potential of youth from the WB6 countries continues to be very high, making brain drain one of the critical targets in terms of youth policy.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has addressed matters of regional youth cooperation in the WB6 region, not only through communicating the YSSEE 2018/2019 findings but also through an initiative for strengthening regional cooperation among youth organizations. The main idea behind this process was to give youth within the region a voice they are clearly lacking; the process was appropriately dubbed *Western Balkans Youth Voice (WBYV)*. The participants from each of the WB countries representing national youth councils and other organizations working for or primarily with youth have helped in mapping why such regional cooperation is not yet established, what the problems for youth representativity in the region are and what challenges activities with a regional scope face. The takeaways from these meetings were integrated into this non-paper by including participants of these workshops in its preparation.

¹ Pertains to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

² Please see: Miran Lavrić, Smiljka Tomanović and Mirna Jusić, *Youth Study Southeast 2018/2019* (Sarajevo: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2019). Accessed 15 June 2019 at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>

Mapping relevant policy processes

Over the past decades, several youth-oriented policies have been developed in the region to tackle the previously described problems. Policies are usually nested in broader policy processes that can broadly be categorized into three inter-related levels: national, regional and European Union (EU)-level political processes focusing on the Western Balkans. Since this paper deals with the regional rather than national policy measures, we continue by focusing on the latter two levels. An important consideration about the current status of national policy measures pertaining to youth, despite their context specificities, is that they too create common trends that influence the two supra-level policy arenas.³

When speaking about the EU level, the overarching and most influential political process is undoubtedly the European integration of the Western Balkans. The EU has for a long time been actively engaged in the region. From the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003, the European perspective of the region has helped countries to enact many political and economic reforms, including the introduction of useful policies in the youth sector. In February 2018, the European Commission adopted a strategic document titled "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans," according to which the EU will significantly enhance its support to processes of political, social and economic transformation in the Western Balkans. To ensure adequate support, the European Commission intends to increase funding under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). In June 2018, the Commission published its legislative proposal for a regulation establishing IPA III for the period 2021-2027. The proposed financial envelope for IPA III accounts for a 13 % increase compared to funding within IPA II (2014-2020).⁴ Among other things, the new proposal suggests that investment in youth, education and skills be one of the thematic priorities for cross-border cooperation. Importantly, at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in May 2018, the EU leaders and their Western Balkan counterparts have agreed that special emphasis will be placed on creating further opportunities for youth while ensuring that this contributes to the socio-economic development of the Western Balkans.

The Berlin Process, starting in 2014, represents another valuable political framework in terms of creating youth policies in the Western Balkans. It is an initiative to boost regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries and their European integration. The Process is taking place with the support of the European Commission, international financial institutions and seven EU Member States. It can be seen as supplementary to individual countries' institutional EU integration process. The Process's connectivity agenda refers to linking the people, economies and states of the region. Within this agenda, the Process has thus far yielded initiatives and projects in the fields of transport and infrastructure, economic connectivity, youth cooperation and cooperation among businesses and the civil society of the Western Balkans. Importantly for the youth sector, the Process encompasses, among others, meetings of the representatives of regional civil society organizations (Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkan Summit Series) and youth organizations (Youth Forum). As part of the process, an Action Plan for youth work and youth policy was defined at a 2016 Europe-Western Balkans

³ Slađana Petković, *Recent Achievements and Current Challenges in Youth Policies in the Western Balkans (WB6)* (Pool of European Youth Researchers PEYR, 2018), Accessed: 16 October 2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2qv7lyp>

⁴ European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), COM (2018) 465 final, 2018/0247 (COD), Brussels, 14 June 2018. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018PC0465>

Youth Meeting in Ljubljana.⁵ Even more importantly, the Berlin Process has inspired intergovernmental cooperation through the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), an independently functioning institutional mechanism founded by the Western Balkans countries in 2016, aiming to promote reconciliation and cooperation between the youth of the region through youth exchange programs. In 2017, the Process also sparked the Western Balkans Fund as another robust mechanism for promoting regional cooperation and development.

Another crucial political framework is the *South-East European Cooperation Process* (SEECP). Initiated in 1996, this regional cooperation forum aims at strengthening good neighborly relations among thirteen countries of Southeast Europe and transforming this region into an area of peace, security, stability and cooperation, with the main aim of full integration of SEE into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Within this process, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was officially launched in 2008. Within the SEECP framework, the RCC works to develop and maintain a political climate of dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance and openness towards cooperation, to enable the implementation of regional programs aimed at economic and social development to the benefit of the people in the region. In its 2020-2022 Strategy and Work Program, the RCC commits to supporting youth policies and the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes.⁶ Over the next years, the Regional Cooperation Council will further implement an Action on Western Balkans Youth Labs.⁷ The action was adopted in July 2019 with the aim to offer a safe space for young people to participate and to engage meaningfully in policy development based upon principles of co-management and co-production.

Additional youth policies and related documents, such as strategies and action plans, are being developed in all WB6 countries, especially relating to EU accession requirements. Strikingly, the challenges in the legal and policy frameworks are quite similar in all WB6 countries. With lacking capacities and financial resources serving as an excuse, policy-making too often does not address the real challenges sufficiently. Existing policies are not focused enough on the outcomes, which results in inadequate implementation and lacklustre efficiency that is often neither measured nor measurable.⁸

Such discouraging youth policy development, when combined with confirmed lack of interest and trust in national-level politics, is bound to be an obstacle for harnessing the full potential of EU- and regional-level cooperation and to prompt the engagement of youth to better their own future.

⁵ Please see: Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting: Connecting Youth Work and Youth Policy: Action Plan for Youth Work and Youth Policy, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 25-28 September 2016, available at: <https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3438/Action%20plan%20FWBYM.pdf>

⁶ For more, please see: RCC, Stepping up the Transformation: RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2020-2022, April 2019, available at: <https://www.rcc.int/admin/files/docs/reports/RCC-Strateqy-and-Work-Programme-2020-22-text.pdf>

⁷ The action is part of the IPA Multi-country Action Programme for the year 2019 (Commission Implementing Decision C(2019) 5515).

⁸ Sladana Petković, *Recent Achievements and Current Challenges in Youth Policies in the Western Balkans (WB6)* (Pool of European Youth Researchers PEYR, 2018), Accessed: 16 October 2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2qv7lyp>

Proposing a New Deal for Youth in the Western Balkans

Based on the results of *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019*, a review of youth policies in the region, as well as interviews with representatives of youth organizations and youth practitioners from the Western Balkans,⁹ this chapter contains a proposal for a package of youth policies for WB6 countries over the 2021-2027 period, which coincides with the IPA III framework. The package assumes support from policy processes outlined in the previous chapter and is designed as a set of concrete policy measures that can be implemented by governments, international organizations and NGOs across the region. Inspired by the famous program of US president Franklin D. Roosevelt, the package is titled *A New Deal for Youth in the Western Balkans*.

1. Regional Youth Guarantee

Description:

Given the urgent need to ensure that young people in the region have access to decent jobs, a joint WB Youth Guarantee (YG) scheme would be rolled out as a joint commitment of governments of the region to provide all young people under the age of 25 with either employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or having left formal education. This would be similar to the YG commitment of EU Member States.¹⁰ Countries would implement youth guarantee schemes within their own vicinities, while also committing funding and political support towards a joint program supporting a diverse portfolio of education and employment mobility schemes organized within the region. Given that all countries of the region urgently need to build up the capacities of public employment services (PES) in implementing such programs, a common capacity-building initiative may be rolled out to help countries in designing measures, reaching out to young people (especially those who are not in employment or education), connecting with training providers and evaluating the progress of measures.

Examples of good practice:

North Macedonia is the only country in the WB6 region that has thus far piloted a YG scheme; information on the effectiveness of the scheme is yet to be published. In the region, Croatian and Slovenian employment authorities have been implementing YG programs for years and may be good points of contact for counterparts in the region.

Argumentation:

All countries of the region have similar problems in terms of youth unemployment and the share of youth who is outside of employment and education. Beyond joblessness, young people from the region usually experience precarious working conditions. Joblessness and existential insecurity are some of the key reasons why young people postpone family formation, but also the dominant reason given for wanting to leave their home country and move abroad. While all governments of the region are working to reform their education systems to reduce skills mismatches and have also contributed funding towards active labor market policies targeting youth, these measures generally remain insufficient to address the severity of problems young people encounter in the labor market. A regional commitment towards YG would provide an

⁹ The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen interlocutors in September and October 2019.

¹⁰ For more, see European Commission, Youth Guarantee, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/youthguarantee>

additional impetus for reform, especially if the commitment spells out that a larger share of funding is to be committed towards YG measures. Moreover, given the EU's devotio towards YG programs, as well as support for reforms focusing on activation policies in the region, the financing of a YG could be supported through IPA III. Existing and new mobility schemes would provide a range of opportunities¹¹ for youth from the region to engage in education, training or employment. However, such ongoing programs would require more visibility in order to be utilized to their full potential by youth in the region.

2. Regional support system for young entrepreneurs

Description:

Entrepreneurship among youth in the region remains insufficiently tackled, both through systems of education and employment policies. This measure proposes the establishment of a Regional Entrepreneurship Fund, which would provide grants to young entrepreneurs, provide networking and training opportunities, and organize capacity-building and peer-learning events for public employment services, education and training institutions and individual teachers, as well as NGOs dealing with youth entrepreneurship from the region. Helping countries develop entrepreneurship programs as part of education curricula would be a core activity of the fund.

Examples of good practice:

Stakeholders participating in this measure could learn from the Youth Start Network¹², as part of which organizations and institutions from a number of countries (including Young Entrepreneurship Albania – YEA!) have developed entrepreneurship programs for youth in their respective countries.

Argumentation:

Streamlining entrepreneurship in education and financial support for entrepreneurship among youth in the region is in its infancy. Significant assistance is needed in terms of teaching entrepreneurship and in terms of helping young people roll out their ideas. A regional initiative of this kind could have multiple effects in terms of increasing young people's engagement and employment opportunities; but also, in terms of linking different service providers and exchanging best practices.

3. Regional system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Description:

This measure would seek to expand the reach of Youthpass (www.youthpass.eu) as a recognition tool for non-formal and informal learning in youth work and solidarity activities within the region. As a start, participants in projects funded by RYCO in the region could be given access to a Youthpass certificate.

Examples of good practice:

¹¹ See, for instance, the EU's recent pilot VET mobility scheme with enlargement countries, which fosters student and staff exchanges between VET colleges in the EU and the Western Balkans. For more, see:
https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/58969/pilot-vet-mobility-scheme-enlargement-counties-call-proposals_en

¹² For more information, see: <http://www.youthstart.network/>

The European Commission has instituted Youthpass as a tool whereby learning outcomes stemming from projects funded under Erasmus+:Youth in Action and the European Solidarity Corps programs are recognized. A Youthpass certificate is created jointly between participants in these activities and a support person to reflect the competences acquired through non-formal learning. Young people in the region involved in the two schemes mentioned may already benefit from access to such a certificate.¹³ The EU Youth Strategy as envisioned by the European Commission also devotes significant attention to the necessity of empowering youth through not only quality and innovation, but the recognition of youth work.¹⁴

Argumentation:

Non-formal and informal learning constitute an important part of young people's education. The *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019* shows that a substantial share of young people in several countries of the region have not engaged in a practical or an internship through the formal system of education. Although young people may complement their knowledge and skills through a variety of opportunities offered online, after-school or volunteering programs, these are usually not recognized by the formal education systems or by (prospective) employers. Extending the reach of Youthpass to activities organized by bodies such as RYCO would provide young people with the possibility not only to articulate the learning outcomes of the activities they have engaged with (self-recognition), but potentially also increase the social recognition of such activities, as well as foster their employability.

4. Regional online educational platform

Description:

Rolling out a regional education platform that would offer a variety of courses and programs to young people, provided by education institutions, NGOs and companies from the region, would serve to reduce skills mismatches and foster life-long learning, encourage civic education, and could go a long way in promoting, as well as improving, educational programs offered in the region.

Examples of good practice:

edX (www.edx.org) is one example of a platform that could serve as inspiration for a platform to be offered regionally. However, courses delivered as part of VET may also constitute a part of such a platform.¹⁵

Argumentation:

As in other parts of the world, young people in the region are becoming ever more accustomed to seeking knowledge and skills outside of formal education institutions, especially in light of their limitations in terms of the quality of programs offered, as reflected in significant skills mismatches in the region. The EU Youth Strategy also recognizes the educational potential, creativity and ambitions of young people when it comes to their adaptability and advanced

¹³ The Erasmus+:Youth in Action is open to both program countries from the region (North Macedonia, Serbia) and partner countries neighboring the EU (Albania, BIH, Kosovo and Montenegro). The European Solidarity Corps offers opportunities to partake in volunteering projects to young persons and organizations from the Western Balkans. For more, please visit: <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/seeyia/> and <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/esc/>

¹⁴ European Commission, Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy, COM(2018) 269 final, Brussels 22 May 2018. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

¹⁵ For instance, see online courses offered by the Artist-Blacksmith's Association of North America (ABANA): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gw1xRL0Yjp0&list=PLD364F16C12CA94F0>

knowledge in utilizing Information and Communication Technologies. However, language barriers and a search for knowledge that is more contextual may discourage young people from enrolling in programs offered by platforms such as www.edx.org, and others. Creating an online platform where pupils and students from the WB region could benefit from access to high-quality courses and programs (not limited to humanities and social sciences, mathematics, computer science and others) of public and private higher education institutions, VET schools, but also NGOs and private companies in their own language could have multiple effects. First of all, this would entail free-of-charge learning opportunities for young people from the region that could contribute to reducing skills mismatches and encourage life-long learning. It would also incentivize education providers to develop online courses and, by learning from each other, through feedback of students, but also the program team of the educational platform itself, continuously improve their quality. Last but not least, given the need for improved access to quality civic education in the WB region, courses in civic education, including ones with a European dimension,¹⁶ could be promoted through the platform. One of the most significant challenges of youth-related policies for each of the countries is that they in fact do not explicitly mention civic education, which is more than necessary for active engagement with their communities and political processes. Offering more opportunities for such forms of education would also address the crucial deficit of critical thinking among youngsters in WB6.¹⁷

5. Include all WB6 countries in ERASMUS+ as program countries

Description:

Program countries can fully take part in all the Actions of the Erasmus+ Program. Among the six WB countries, currently only Serbia and North Macedonia have the status of a program country, while Albania, BiH, Kosovo, and Montenegro have the status of partner countries, which can take part only in certain Actions of the Program, subject to specific criteria or conditions. For example, Erasmus+ supports traineeships (work placements, internships, etc.) abroad only for students¹⁸ enrolled in higher education in a Program Country, but not for young people from Partner Countries.

Examples of good practice:

Examples of good practice are Serbia and North Macedonia, the two WB countries that already have the status of a program country.

Argumentation:

Numerous studies confirm that learning mobility adds to human capital by giving young people the opportunity of accessing new knowledge and of developing new linguistic skills and intercultural competences. The YSEE2018/19 study also showed that international mobility is related to higher political and civic engagement, higher interest and knowledge in politics, as well as lower levels of nationalism. The same study also revealed that youth in general, but especially youth from lower social strata, have limited access and motivation for international mobility. The Erasmus program has been shown as very effective in stimulating educational cross-border mobility and thus harvesting its full potential across the WB region seems to be a

¹⁶ For more on the need to include a European dimension in civic education in the region, see Action Plan for Youth Work and Youth Policy.

¹⁷ Sladana Petković, *Recent Achievements and Current Challenges in Youth Policies in the Western Balkans (WB6)* (Pool of European Youth Researchers PEYR, 2018), Accessed: 16 October 2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2gv7lyp>

¹⁸ These opportunities are also open to recent graduates.

sensible objective. The most recent EU Youth Strategy also indicates the need for making Erasmus+ program to be truly inclusive, and this should not only reflect on the EU Member States but all countries that are part of the Erasmus+ activities, such as the good practices of Serbia and North Macedonia.

6. Develop a regional education exchange scheme

Description:

A comprehensive regional education exchange scheme, fostering cooperation and opportunities for learning, should be established for the region. Building on the established infrastructure of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and complementing the work of other regional partnerships, networks and initiatives in the realm of education, a program similar to ERASMUS+ could be developed for the region. It should be based on supporting student exchanges between universities, as well as between VET schools in the WB region, with the possibility of gradually developing other schemes for education, training, youth and sports (as in the ERASMUS+ program). As part of such regional exchange schemes, special attention should be given to facilitating access to a variety of programs to students from underprivileged backgrounds by providing them with guidance and different types of financial assistance.

Examples of good practice:

The organizational structure and processes could be similar and related to that of the ERASMUS+ program¹⁹. The European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci program, focusing on VET,²⁰ may also provide a source of inspiration.

Argumentation:

Depending on the aspect we take into consideration, there are numerous benefits to learning mobility, both in terms of enhancing the chances of young people to acquire new skills and competences, but also in terms of strengthening their political and civic engagement and increasing their levels of tolerance. A regional program of educational exchange would also be very beneficial in terms of boosting reconciliation and cooperation processes in the region.

7. Western Balkans youth empowerment fund

Description:

The idea is to develop a regional fund for stimulating and supporting youth grassroots initiatives that could be translated into projects co-financed by the Global youth empowerment fund (GYEF). GYEF provides grants to community-based projects working towards advancing one or more of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development. Founded in 2016, the Fund has granted over \$65,000 to youth-led organizations advocating for the Global Goals. The WB youth empowerment fund should (1) stimulate youth across the region to take part in the activities supported by the GYEF, (2) offer support in preparing applications for funding, and (3) also provide small grants to support projects in this realm. An exemplary initiative that could be supported by the Fund is the "Neću da idem" in Montenegro.²¹

¹⁹ For more, please see: <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/>

²⁰ The program first started in 1995 and ended in 2013. For information is available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/2007-2013/lip/leonardo-da-vinci-programme_en

²¹ See: <https://fosmedia.me/infos/drustvo/kampanja-necu-da-idem-motivisati-mlade-da-srecu-grade-u-svojoj-zemlji-ne-pod-tudim>

Examples of good practice:

Organizational structure and processes could be similar and related to those of the GYEF.²²

Argumentation:

The fund would increase the level of civic participation of young people, which is, as also results of the YSEE2018/19 suggest, crucial for raising their levels of knowledge and interest in politics, and thus, contribute towards more effective political engagement of youth. It would address some of the most crucial and persistent issues related to youth policy such as the issues of capacities, qualifications and lack of financial resources. The suggested measure would also offer young people who are temporary not in any kind of employment, education or training (NEET) an opportunity to actively participate in the society and to develop their human capital.

8. Include all WB countries in the Youth Wiki project

Description:

The Youth Wiki is Europe's online encyclopedia in the area of national youth policies. The platform is a comprehensive database of national structures, policies and actions supporting young people. It covers eight main fields of action: education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, health and well-being, participation, voluntary activities, social inclusion, youth and the world, and creativity and culture. So far, 29 countries have joined the Youth Wiki project, including North Macedonia as the only country from the WB6.

Examples of good practice:

The remaining WB countries could follow the basic model as featured here: <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/youthwiki/countries>

Argumentation:

The YSEE18/19 study clearly showed that virtually all young people across the region regularly use the internet, also for accessing information. On the other hand, youth across the region admit to having very low knowledge in politics. The suggested measure would enable young people to find information relating to youth in their country in an easy manner and thus enable them to improve their political knowledge. Even more importantly, Youth Wiki would significantly help the stakeholders in youth policy (governments, NGO and others) to make more informed decisions. While the EU-CoE youth partnership has generated contributions to the EU Youth Wiki by including contributions on Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of the Youth Wiki for the region since 2016,²³ expanding the information to all policy area covered by the Youth Wiki would prove an instrumental resource for the region. The importance of such platforms and WB countries being included in them is that it serves to facilitate exchange and accumulation of useful information, for example, the way the European Commission utilizes Youth Wiki as one of the references for reporting and evaluation, alongside Member States' input and EU set of indicators.²⁴

²² For more information, see: <https://gyefund.org/projects/>

²³ For more, see: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/contribution-eu-youth-wiki>

²⁴ European Commission, Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy, COM(2018) 269 final, Brussels 22 May 2018. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

9. Participatory budgets for youth at the level of municipalities

Description:

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a mode of participatory democracy in which ordinary people directly decide about the allocation of a certain share of a public budget. PB processes are typically designed to involve social groups that are often left out of traditional modes of public engagement, including youth. When it comes to participatory budgeting processes for young people (PBY), initiatives are usually implemented by those who proposed them, whether these are informal or formal groups of young people or a youth organization. In comparison to ordinary PBs, a PBY process usually has much smaller levels of funding and does not concern investments in public infrastructure. Within the NDWBY, each participating country could ensure that at least five per cent of municipalities introduce PBY for at least two consecutive years in the period 2021-2027.

Examples of good practice and existing frameworks:

Within the EU, the practice of PBY has already been tested in several EU cities and there exists an open-source framework for European cities in implementing participatory budgeting processes.²⁵

Argumentation:

According to the YSEE2018/19, the vast majority of young people in the region feel poorly represented in politics and believe that they should have a stronger say. At the same time, other than voting, young people have little experience with political and civic participation. Even when their participation is envisioned through existing legislatures, it is often nothing more than symbolic consideration. Youth are lacking the instruments and knowledge that would help in combating the perceptible apathy towards engagement, as most of them in fact admit low political knowledge and disinterest in politics. PBY's could be a great tool to stimulate civic engagement of young people. Existing analyses²⁶ suggest that PB tends to result in more equitable public spending, increased levels of public participation, and democratic and citizenship learning.

10. Democracy workshops for youth in parliaments across the region

Description:

The concept of the Democracy Workshops was established by the Parliament of Austria in October 2007 and has provided a place for young Austrians to learn about parliamentary democracy and related topics. More than 50,000 young Austrians successfully completed the workshops from 2007 until the end of 2012. In 2012, democracy workshops were also introduced in Montenegro. The program is envisaged as a program of informal civic education for pupils in the final years of primary schools. In Montenegro, the workshops are implemented in three subjects: "Democracy and Parliament" "European Union", and "Human Rights". Within these subjects, participants learn about parliamentary democracy, adoption and implementation of laws, active citizens, values and history of the European Union, and universal principles translated into the human rights and the rights of children. Within the workshops on

²⁵ See: see: <http://comoneurope.org/>. Also see: http://www.in-loco.pt/upload_folder/edicoes/1279dd27-d1b1-40c9-ac77-c75f31f82ba2.pdf.

²⁶ See: http://comoneurope.org/uploads/resources/resources_Id5VKx_ComOnEurope-WhitePaper_ParticipatorBudgetingYouth.pdf

the subject "Democracy and Parliament", workshop participants can visit the building of the Parliament and find out on the spot how laws are adopted, and often to watch the sittings live from the citizens' box. Within the program, the students have the opportunity to meet and converse with the members of the Parliament of Montenegro and other foreign and domestic officials, and to get answers from them regarding the subject of the workshop they are attending, as well as regarding the duties they are performing. The students transfer the acquired knowledge and experiences into newspapers, video or radio features, which they can watch or listen at the very end of the workshop, and which are later published on the internet. The Democracy Workshops are considered to be very successful, attracting up to 70% of primary school children in Montenegro. A similar model could be adopted by all the countries/parliaments in the region.

Examples of good practice:

The example of Montenegro is described above.²⁷ Another example can be found in Kosovo under the title 'Demos – Ti.'²⁸

Argumentation:

According to the YSEE2018/19 results, young people have little know-how and actual practice with political and civic participation, as well as self-evaluating their political awareness (including knowledge and interest) as very poor. Democracy workshops appear to be a great tool to enhance democratic and citizenship learning and to stimulate civic engagement of young people.

11. Western Balkans Youth Portal

Description:

Establish an online portal with all information on opportunities offered to Western Balkan youth. It would be a webpage where young people from the region could find all relevant opportunities, offered by international and national actors, presented in one place in a transparent manner. Such opportunities should be presented in English and in all local languages, structured by key areas of youth policy (e.g. employment, education, international exchange, volunteering, civic and political engagement), and regularly updated.

Examples of good practice:

European Youth Portal: https://europa.eu/youth/EU_en

Argumentation:

Our short desk research of youth policies has revealed that there is a great number of different initiatives and opportunities for young people in the region. However, it is very hard, even for a researcher, to navigate through the jungle of different organizations and initiatives. On the other hand, the YSEE18/19 study clearly showed that virtually all youth across the region regularly use the internet, also for accessing information. Even across entire Europe, there are important possibilities in making participation and information accessible through the most common meeting place for all youngsters – the virtual world. Having youth involved in the creation and maintenance of such a portal would help improve IT skills, as well as prompt

²⁷ Please see: <https://www.efc.be/good-practice-post/democracy-workshops-montener/>

²⁸ Please see: <http://toka-ks.org/En/demos-ti/>

critical thinking, media and political literacy. It would differ from specialized platforms that require statistical data in the sense that it would allow a centralization of information, easier navigation and involvement – in essence, having everything in one place on the Internet. This portal would also represent a very important promotional tool for programs within the policies under the New Deal for Youth in the Western Balkans.

12. Annual regional report on the state of youth

Description:

In order to improve evidence-based policy across the region, a regional body of experts should be created with the task of preparing standardized yearly reports on the basis of EU indicators in the field of youth.²⁹

Examples of good practice:

As part of the EU Work Plan for Youth 2019-2021, developed for the purpose of implementing the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, an Expert Group on indicators will be formed. Such a body could inform the work of a similar team tasked to monitor the state of youth in the region. There are also others, topic-specific analyses such as PISA testing, that are useful for evaluating improvement or lack thereof. Considering that all WB 6 countries are included in the PISA testing³⁰, this information should be included in national reporting.

Argumentation:

Relevant indicators on youth, which pertain to different aspects of young people's lives, not limited to education and training, employment, health, social inclusion, culture and leisure time, political and civic participation, are invaluable in order to be able to make informed policy decisions and to monitor progress in individual policy areas. The WB region suffers from a lack of quality statistics, including the above-mentioned areas; since it may not be possible to provide the data for all the indicators that are included in the EU Dashboard (and will continue to be updated in line with the new EU Youth Strategy), the regional expert team should find the best possible set of indicators on the basis of the available data (including national sources of individual countries). The importance of this annual reporting is to assess the current status of youth-policies and adequately adapt future steps. It would target key challenges in national-level policy development, such as lack of cross-sectoral governmental and interdisciplinary expert cooperation, the involvement of youth voices in policy development, as well as showcase larger commitment from governmental structures in addressing key concerns of youth. ³¹

13. Regional "No child left behind"³² initiative

Description:

Prepared by a group of regional experts, a regional initiative should be launched in order to stimulate governments to ensure certain minimum standards in terms of equity in education. The proposed measures should involve access to early childhood education, grant schemes that

²⁹ Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/youth/data/eu-dashboard>

³⁰ For more information, please see: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

³¹ Slađana Petković, *Recent Achievements and Current Challenges in Youth Policies in the Western Balkans (WB6)* (Pool of European Youth Researchers PEYR, 2018), Accessed: 16 October 2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2gv7lyp>

³² Title inspired by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a federal law implemented in the US.

are not based solely on achievement but also take factors of social status into account, measures for preventing dropouts by identifying at-risk students early on, and measures of reintegration of early school leavers in education. Regional governments could commit to a joint set of objectives in terms of facilitating greater enrolment and completion rates in all levels of education, and in terms of reducing early school leaving.

Examples of good practice:

Regional experts may rely on a variety of resources on measures that are implemented in EU member states in order to foster greater social inclusion or reduce shares of early school leavers, such as the EU's Education and Training monitors, as well as the work of the working groups dealing with matters of educational equity as part of the Education and Training 2020 strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training.³³

Argumentation:

The YSEE2018/19 paints a picture of inequality in terms of access to education. In most countries of the region, education systems do not promote social mobility and thus do not create sufficing opportunities for young people to achieve levels of educational attainment higher than those of their parents. Young people with no or low levels of education are disadvantaged in many ways, including having much bleaker job prospects than their more educated peers. Young people from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely to leave school early and have lower educational aspirations. Early school leaving is also linked to having a "not in education, employment or training" status (NEET). Reducing the reproduction of social inequalities through the education systems and achieving greater educational equity should be high on the agenda of governments of the region. Based on comparative experiences, applying a variety of measures to facilitate access to education for children and youth from poor households, belonging to minority groups such as the Roma, having a disability or residing in rural areas would be crucial to that end.

14. Regional network of digital youth centers

Description:

A regional online platform for digital youth work could be developed, together with basic guidelines for individual WB countries to set up their national digital youth centers. These centers would offer online chat counselling for children and young people, create useful online publications/videos, as well as organize online workshops for professionals, students, and parents across countries.

Examples of good practice:

A good example to draw on is the Danish Centre for Digital Youth Care.³⁴ The Digital Youth Work Project also features a set of good practices.³⁵ Another example is the commitment of the European Union towards digital youth work that would use technology and pedagogy through focusing on the implementation of a Youth Work Agenda for quality, innovation and recognition of youth work.³⁶

³³ For more, see: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework_en

³⁴ See: <https://cfdp.dk/cfdp-english/>

³⁵ See: <https://www.digitalyouthwork.eu/good-practices/>.

³⁶ European Commission, Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy, COM(2018) 269 final, Brussels 22 May 2018. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

Argumentation:

YSEE2018/19 shows that young people in the SEE region are more comfortable in a digital environment and that significant portion of their time is in fact portioned out to their online presence. Improving youth work in the region through the use of digital technologies could help expand the outreach of such activities and involve a greater number of young people.

15. Regional standards for youth representative bodies

Description:

A regional body of experts should create recommended and/or minimum standards concerning the representativeness of youth bodies (youth councils, youth parliaments, youth boards, student councils/unions, etc.) at the level of primary schools, high schools, universities, different levels of government, as well as political parties. WB governments should commit themselves to implement these standards in their countries.

Examples of good practice:

A range of good practices can be drawn on when it comes to establishing a dialogue with and representation of interests of members of bodies such as youth councils,³⁷ representative youth advisory bodies at the local level,³⁸ or students' unions.³⁹

Argumentation:

YSEE2018/19 points to a general disillusionment of youth in SEE with mainstream politics, with young people holding the dominant view of not being represented in decision-making processes; at the same time, the majority of youth reports little experience with different forms of civic and political participation, including through non-governmental organizations and political parties. Strengthening the representativeness of bodies such as youth councils, parliaments, boards and youth structures within political parties may increase young people's trust and interest in such bodies, increase their legitimacy as partners to public authorities and ultimately foster greater levels of participation. However, such strengthening would require significant efforts to be pooled in standardizing these representative bodies and building them from bottom up, while bearing in mind possible obstacles posed by legislative provisions and political systems in respective countries.

16. Application of the online digital and mobile participation toolbox OPIN

Description:

OPIN is a European toolbox for youth eParticipation projects, designed to be easily embedded in the web presence of youth organizations or public administrations⁴⁰. The idea is to upgrade

³⁷ See, for instance, the work of the Danish Youth Council:

https://en.duf.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/Editor/documents/Om_DUF/DUF_organizational_presentation.pdf; see also the work of the Finnish Youth Co-operation – Alliansi: <https://www.alli.fi/meista/allianssi-pahkinakuoreessa/english>.

For useful resources, see the European Youth Forum: <https://www.youthforum.org>

³⁸ See, for instance, reports published as part of the Europe Goes Local project: <https://www.europegoeslocal.eu>

³⁹ See the work of the European Students' Union and its members: <https://www.esu-online.org>; see also the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions: <https://www.obessu.org>

⁴⁰ More on OPIN: <https://www.euthproject.eu/project/opin/>

the tool in terms of local languages in the region, and to promote it among youth organizations across the region, as well as, optionally, to stimulate the implementation of several cross-national projects using it.

Examples of good practice:

For examples of how OPIN can be used to foster youth participation, please have a look at the OPIN toolbox.⁴¹

Argumentation:

The online generation is truly that – consistently in present in the virtual space more so than the public one, as pointed out by some of the previous policy recommendations and findings from the YSSEE 2018/2019; at the same time, they have low willingness for involvement and previous engagements with civic and political participation through online platforms or civic education in general. Using OPIN may facilitate young people's participation in online projects and events, such as to collect ideas, asking for feedback, mobile polling, and other activities.

17. Incentives for private businesses to hire young people for internships

Description:

A regional model of incentives implemented through national government bodies should be developed. For example, employers could have the opportunity to receive a 'wage subsidy' for taking on young unemployed people, which would pay for the costs of their social insurance contributions. The measure could be also expanded beyond internships or traineeships to include employment.

Examples of good practice:

See, for instances, incentives for hiring young people introduced by the UK government.⁴²

Argumentation:

YSEE2018/19 shows that a substantial share of youth in SEE have not had the opportunity to engage in internships through the course of their education. Those that have had such an opportunity are more likely to be employed. Most of those who would like to leave their countries cite unemployment and other economic reasons as their main motivation. Incentives for private businesses to hire young people for internships could promote practical aspects of education and increase young people's opportunities to access employment, and ultimately, to prevent brain drain from the region.

18. Improving career guidance in primary, secondary and tertiary education

Description:

Governments of the region would commit to introducing new career guidance and counselling services and strengthening existing ones within primary, secondary and tertiary education, in order to allow young people in the region to make informed choices regarding their professional future.

⁴¹ Available at: <https://www.euthproject.eu/project/open-call/opin-toolbox/>

⁴² See: <https://www.fpb.org/incentives-hiring-young-people/>

Examples of good practice:

Governments from the region can draw on the standards in this realm, such as the EU Council's recommendations and resolutions or the EU Parliament's resolutions in this area,⁴³ and the resources produced by initiatives and networks implemented in this realm.⁴⁴

Argumentation:

YSEE2018/19 points to the presence of significant anxiety among young people in the WB region regarding a prospect of not finding a job; as well as the precarity of work young people engage and the presence of skills mismatches throughout the region. Countries in the region generally have underdeveloped career guidance and counselling services within schools, especially in primary education. Given that young people finishing primary school and pursuing secondary education already have to decide between technical schools and gymnasiums, thus ultimately determining their pathways in terms of the pursuit of higher education and career prospects, introducing counselors at the level of primary schools (especially grades 6 and up) would be more than necessary. Strengthening existing and establishing new services in secondary and tertiary education would also be merited to allow young people to make informed career decisions. At the same time, such guidance could also be conducive to preventing early school leaving.

[19. Government support and commitment to youth work in the region](#)

Description:

Governments of the region should commit to increasing funding for youth work initiatives in the region and spelling out clear objectives in terms of what they would like to achieve in the realm of youth work; as well as financially supporting a regional exchange of youth workers as to allow for cooperation and mutual learning.

Examples of good practice:

In terms of formulating objectives with regards to youth work, the EU's 2015 *Quality Youth Work: A common framework for the further development of youth work* can serve as a guide.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Action Plan for Youth Work and Youth Policy, agreed upon at the Europe-WB Youth Meeting, already provides objectives and activities that can be supported by governments of the region.⁴⁶ Activities by RYCO, the Western Balkans Youth Cooperation Platform⁴⁷, and other regional initiatives may provide examples of the types of exchanges between youth workers that WB governments may choose to support. Experiences of well-organized local financing of youth work in the SEE region include Slovenia.⁴⁸

⁴³ See, for instance, the Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies (2008): https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/educ/104236.pdf; See also the the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults (2016): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224%2801%29&from=EN> or the Resolution on skills policies to fight youth unemployment (2016) by the European Parliament:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0008_EN.pdf?redirect

⁴⁴ For instance, see the work of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network: <http://www.elgpn.eu>

⁴⁵ See: https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/reports/quality-youth-work_en.pdf

⁴⁶ For more, please see: <https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3438/Action%20plan%20EWBYM.pdf>

⁴⁷ See: <http://www.connecting-youth.org/home.php>

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Dunja Potočnik and Dragan Stanojević (2019), Quality Development of Youth Work in South-East Europe, available at: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262583/Quality+Development+of+Youth+Work+in+South-East+Europe.pdf>

Argumentation:

While the situation differs between individual countries in the WB6 region, a number of research papers on the state of youth work in the region point to the need to increase government funding, especially in view of ensuring sustainability and departing from a project-based approach only, as well as to improve the quality of youth work activities.⁴⁹ Providing sustainable and adequate sources of funding for youth work at different levels of government, and jointly committing to finance peer-learning events and exchanges between youth workers would foster the development of such activities throughout the region, and ultimately contribute to young people's learning, career prospects, and civic and political engagement.

20. Grants for young scholars that study or work abroad encouraging them to conduct research in their home countries

Description:

Under this scheme, young scholars who are studying or working abroad (both nationals of individual WB6 countries and foreigners), would be provided with a research grant to conduct research within a country from the region. WB6 governments may also create joint research schemes, awarding grants to scholars conducting research in various WB6 countries to engage in collaborative projects.

Examples of good practice:

The HOMING Program of the Foundation for Polish Science, which provides postdoctoral fellowships to young doctors living abroad (both Polish and foreign), to conduct research in Poland, may serve as an example.⁵⁰

Argumentation:

YSEE2018/19 results show that brain drain remains a key concern for countries of the region. At the same time, governments of the region allocate modest shares of their budgets for research.⁵¹ A scheme providing grants to young scholars studying or working abroad would have multifaceted positive effects, not limited to enabling knowledge transfers, increasing research excellence, fostering collaborative activities, or generating innovation. Such a scheme would be in line with existing strategic documents in this realm, such as the SEE 2020 Strategy or the Western Balkans Regional R&D Strategy for Innovation.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, papers on youth work published as part of the EU-CoE Youth Partnership: <https://pip-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/activities> or the SALTO SEE: <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/berlinprocess/>

⁵⁰ For more, see: <https://www.fnp.org.pl/en/oferta/homing/>

⁵¹ See, for instance, SPHERE, Harnessing the potential: Research Capacity in the Western Balkans, 2017, available at: https://supporthere.org/sites/default/files/western_balkan_report_final - 2018_07_02.pdf

Conclusion

The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd president of the United States of America

As previously described, the findings of the FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019 point to an overwhelming lack of prosperity and opportunity. They also evoke the demand by youngsters to live in a decent future. Education, employment and the enhancement of civic and political participation as well as the dissatisfaction and rising anxiety of youth require a determined course of action.

It is our hope that the entire WB region should benefit from less socio-economic insecurity and more (e)quality in education and, last but not least, circular migration. The findings of YSSEE 2018/2019 should be used to this end. The twenty policy recommendations compiled in this paper are a mere starting point for more evidence-based policymaking. They are meant as an invitation to experts and policy-makers to engage with the full SPSS dataset, which is available for download at <https://www.fes.de/en/youth-studies>.