

Western Balkans Youth Forum

Berlin Summit 2021



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Online event (29th June, 4th and 5th July 2021)

Regional Youth Agenda

Following the slogan that a better region starts with youth – the Western Balkans Youth Forum as a side event of the Berlin Summit brought together 100 young leaders from the region and Europe. In an interactive way they discussed key challenges and topics such as reconciliation and peacebuilding, volunteering, new skills for future, sustainable development, shifting “brain drain” to “brain gain” and how to increase youth participation.

As a Forum's result, the young leaders developed the Regional Youth Agenda (RYA), which was presented to the WB Summit of Leaders.

The Western Balkans Youth Forum was co-organized by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and the Franco-German Youth Office (OFAJ/DFJW) in cooperation with other regional initiatives and networks. The Forum was supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and co-funded by the European Union.

The recommendations presented below should be developed and implemented through co-creation and co-management principles and with strong youth participation at national and regional levels. Furthermore, special attention should be put on inclusion of NEETs, vulnerable groups and youth from poorly developed areas in the region.

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1. A better region starts with Reconciliation and Peacebuilding

Reconciliation and dealing with the past are different processes yet interdependent. Sometimes, dealing with the past complicates the reconciliation process, makes it more complex and difficult, but without our knowledge of the past, we cannot establish a future. For this reason, the general public needs to be better informed about the concepts of transitional justice, war crimes, individual criminal responsibility, and the issue of missing persons. Political elites of the region should refrain from the politicization of individual criminal responsibility, because this approach puts blame on the entire national/ethnic groups and prevents truthful reconciliation.

Non-judicial dimensions of transitional justice, such as reparations, truth-seeking, memorialization, and victim-centered approach should be at the core of reconciliation efforts. The War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo could provide an example of such an approach. In addition, there should be zero tolerance for hate speech, the denial of war crimes, and the glorification of war criminals by politicians in the region, and that should constitute the part of the EU conditionality towards the region. Regulatory framework for media should reflect zero tolerance policy, act preventively and impose stricter sanctions for the breaches of media standards in this area.

Reconciliation, peacebuilding, and dealing with the past is not only a Western Balkan “problem“, hence building on other reconciliation processes by studying in-depth virtuous practices with a potential of adapting them to the WB6 specific context may well be an asset. An example that can be followed in this regard is the Franco-German reconciliation process and building the shared narrative that shows the importance of dealing with the past is to go from reconciliation to deep, peaceful, and efficient cooperation. Reconciliation and dealing with the past are challenges for all European societies and it should be a permanent topic within the political agenda.

Also, reconciliation could be achieved through intensifying regional cooperation at the level of academic institutions which should be set as a priority for the policy makers throughout the region. The academic community should join forces with civil society in the endeavour of strengthening unbiased research and documentation of the war past. This research could serve as a basis for fact-based history curricula (e.g. facts established by the national and

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international courts), integration of dealing with the past-related topics, and provide for guarantees of non-recurrence of violent past.

Moreover, to build trust connections and be agents of positive change on the path towards reconciliation, young citizens from the WB6 need the opportunity to share their experiences, thoughts, and perspectives with other young citizens from the EU as reciprocal learning. Dedicated exchange programs and not only should be developed for them to expand this European dialogue about reconciliation and dealing with the past. These programs should not be limited but also to involve study visits and memory work. It is important to make young people aware of the key role they play in society.

For decades, Erasmus+ has been connecting people, breaking prejudices, building bridges among cultures, and fostering new social patterns of cooperation among Europeans. While the Western Balkan students are already making use of such exchange schemes to pursue their education in different EU member states, a small number of them aim to do the same, within the WB6 universities. Such a program should be developed in the Western Balkans, where students across the region could go for study and research. Besides semestral exchanges, cross-border Joint Degree programmes among Western Balkan universities should be promoted and intensified. We assess that fostering contacts among youth from the Western Balkans from all backgrounds is of the utmost importance, as it brings ever more depth into their dialogue and sustainable reconciliation efforts.

To this end, existing regional agreements on "Recognition of Academic qualifications in the Western Balkans", ought to be implemented on-the-ground; while visa regimes and other barriers in-between WB6 need to be abolished. All of the above, constitute the prerequisites towards an effective and delivering Common Regional Market, which would boost brain circulation, and foster regional cooperation.

As a better region does not only start with reconciliation and peacebuilding but also with youth, it is really important including youth perspective, and in particular perspective of young women while developing all of the regional programs and projects, but also political agendas. Young people, especially women and girls from WB6, should be consulted through focus groups in the early phases of programs and projects development. There is a

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need for a specific data and perspective of young women that is traditionally missing in the peace and reconciliation processes including the one in the WB6. Furthermore, active engagement of young people in the dialogue and confidence-building processes is recommended through the UN Security Council Resolution 2250, by “recognizing that youth should actively be engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation, and that a large youth population presents a unique demographic dividend that can contribute to lasting peace and economic prosperity if inclusive policies are in place”.

2. A better region starts with Volunteering¹

Voluntary activities promote social cohesion, social inclusion and integration, both for the beneficiaries of the actions and the volunteers themselves. They enhance social solidarity, social capital, and quality of life. Volunteering also leads to the direct involvement of citizens in local development and therefore plays an important role in fostering civil society and democracy.

Over the last thirteen years, WB6 has seen significant legislative developments in regulating volunteerism. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have been proactively advocating for recognition and promotion of volunteering in the region. The efforts resulted in adopting the laws on volunteering (starting 2007, when the Law on volunteerism was adopted in North Macedonia; until 2016, with the Law on Volunteerism coming into power in Albania).

The laws, however, did not show high effectiveness and did not contribute to mainstreaming volunteering practice and increasing the number of volunteers and volunteer programs. The practice shows that the general problem of non-effective legislation is threefold:

1. **Legislation is rather focused on the relationship among involved sides instead of focusing on mainstreaming and ensuring a supportive ecosystem for massive quality volunteering that will provide a visible change in society;** This fact influences a low percent of volunteers involved in WB6 (4% - 6% of the population)
2. **Legislation on volunteering in the region is often restrictive, and it either over-regulates the area through administrative, financial and infrastructural burdens for the organizers of volunteering (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and**

¹ The most recent Regional Policy Brief on volunteering in WB6: “Advancing volunteering in the WB6 – what more can be done?” is prepared by the ROUTE WB6 project.

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Herzegovina) or regulates youth volunteering only (Kosovo^{*}) without investing funds in volunteer programs that will support organized volunteering; Those facts cause the less efficient and less-effective implementation of the volunteering policies on the ground, influencing negatively the development of the volunteering and increase of the number of volunteers active in society.

3. **Institutional misinterpretation of the volunteering as a traineeship opportunity and/or part of the active employment measures for youth employment;** the fact is that volunteering indirectly contributes to the youth employability in long-term volunteer programs (1+ year), as through volunteering, youth can grow the human and social capital that will make them more employable on the market.³ Increasing employability is one of many benefits that volunteering has for individuals, however, we should not forget that the ultimate purpose of volunteering is providing time and competencies on goodwill to contribute to the greater good for community development or third party in the community, being more of an active citizenship effort than employability measure, regardless to its contribution to the personal development of volunteers.

Understanding volunteering as an:

- Unpaid activity (no personal financial gain - profit),
- Volunteers are doing it with a free will,
- By investing their time and competencies,
- For the greater good of the community,
- Without replacing paid staff.

The volunteering law does not have a high impact on the community if it regulates the relationship among the involved sides only.

1. **Each of the laws must have various affirmative measures that will support community-driven volunteering and increase the contribution that volunteers bring to the progress of the community, society, and region.** The policies on volunteerism in WB6 have to be redesigned, providing **affirmative measures** for the

^{*} This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence

³ Pro-social dimension of volunteering in BIH (Niskanovic 2011)

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growth of the volunteering sector to the increasing number of active community projects and initiatives from local and national to regional levels, as well as aiming to increase the number of volunteers (active citizens). Currently, the focus of most of the policies is on regulating relationships in a triangle: volunteer – organizer of volunteering – government.

2. **The main priority in reform of the volunteering policy in WB6 needs to be focused on developing the local, national and regional volunteer programs** to create a volunteering opportunity, considering the current programs limit volunteer sector development. In this term, local and national governments are welcome to start the processes of design and establishment of the local, entity, national and regional volunteer programs as an affirmative measure for volunteer sector or volunteer ecosystem development; **It is highly recommended to ensure participation of civil society organizations in co-design** process at local and national level, while at the regional level, we strongly recommend continuous, **long-term support to the implementation of the Regional Cross Border Volunteer Program for peace - ROUTE WB6**, already designed by youth for youth and tailor-made for WB6;

Current policies in the WB6 are limiting volunteering, and their nature is currently overregulating instead of an affirmative one.

1. **We are standing for policy reforms that lead to more relevant, effective, efficient and impact-driven policy solutions in the field of volunteering;** it means that we stand for legislation that has a **budget allocation** for its implementation, an **instrument for investment in volunteer infrastructure and ecosystem** (volunteer services, volunteer clubs, volunteer centers, education for organizers, education for volunteering, local, national and regional volunteer programs and funds, recognition system, quality control system, etc.), has the most **reasonable Line Ministry in charge** that will strategically lead the sector development by understanding core values and principles of volunteering while designing the programs;

Volunteering is not an unpaid job or unpaid traineeship. It is a "non-financial gain" activity that volunteers do with free will, investing their time and competencies for the greater good of society without replacing the paid staff positions.

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1. We are strongly recommending the **advocacy actions, policy interventions and reforms** that move in the direction of ensuring external policy coherence by the consolidation of various traineeship and volunteering policies which will lower the risk of the **misinterpretation and misuse of volunteering** for the purpose which is not connected to the community development and not in line with volunteering principles;

3. A better region starts with New Skills for Future

1. Set the reasonable deadlines for introduction of pilot programs for Youth Guarantee schemes in WB6, based on the current situation and stage of development in each respective society, as well the usage of the know-how of North Macedonia and good practices of the EU;
2. Introduce the measures for incenting self-employment, entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship, by ensuring their legal recognition and harmonization with the EU standards, stimulating the development of resource centers and funding for raising awareness programs through formal and non-formal education for young people in the region;
3. Promote free movement of students, researchers and workforce by working on Recognition of Academic Qualifications in the Western Balkans;
4. Develop a Digital Youth Agenda in line with European Skills Agenda with the aim to enhance employability skills of young people of the Western Balkans, gain new knowledge on digital tools and soft skills, as well as improve access to funding opportunities.

4. A better region starts with Active, Empowered and Loud Youth

Education

1. Combine formal education and non-formal sector by promoting engagement in CSO/youth sectors in education institutions in partnership with student organizations;
2. Conduct quality youth-centred studies and surveys, ensure their visibility among youth as well as decision-makers and political representatives;
3. Support youth wings of political parties with capacity-building, technical assistance.

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Media

1. Promote youth voices from the region on a single platform, in all languages and in different content forms, and encourage channeling on mainstream media.

Decision-makers

1. Promote policy co-creation and co-management between youth and decision-makers;
2. Use Co-management principle in the RYCO Governing Board as an example of youth participation in organizations;
3. Provide institutional and operational support to NYCs/YOUs;
4. Encourage decision-making and projects/activities based also on inputs from youth focus groups;
5. Call on the support from the EU and international partners to include Western Balkan youth in political processes, initiatives and decision-making;
6. Work on quality youth laws, youth strategies and youth local action plans in the region, also by exchanging experiences on the regional level and with the EU;
7. Establish structured dialogue between the EU and WB youth.

5. A better region starts with Sustainable Development

Sustainable development and education

As education is crucial for the advancement of Sustainable Development Agenda, there is a need for changes in school curriculum. In order to educate young generations on sustainable development and sustainable lifestyle, it is important to review and update the curricula which are outdated and do not cover the challenges of the future. The environment, education, active citizenship, the appreciation of cultural diversity and sustainable lifestyle have to be part of this updated curriculum. Moreover, this curriculum has to be on a regional scale. Another important point is the promotion of scientific research which has to be promoted through cooperation between universities and education institutes throughout WB.

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1. Change school curriculum by involving Sustainable Development and Climate Adaption as a separate subject to be taught;
2. Create a school curriculum on sustainable development which will be unified for the whole region;
3. Raise awareness on sustainable development by promoting non-formal education on sustainable development mainly by focusing on youth who live in rural areas and are minorities;
4. Create a regional exchange program for WB6 in which young people can travel and exchange experiences while focusing on nature conservation, transboundary management, climate adaptation, renewable energy sources, education, job creation, economic innovation, etc.

Sustainable Transport

1. Promote sustainable ways of transport through WB6;
2. Invest in public infrastructure to facilitate the use of electric cars and other means of sustainable transportation;
3. Governments should tender electric cars as an example for citizens;
4. Use biofuels and stronger controls on quality of fuels;
5. Invest in public infrastructure in order to facilitate connections and avoid traffic jams;
6. Make reduction of emissions a priority;
7. Improve the quality of public transportation so the citizens are more willing to use it and will have less incentives to use their own cars;
8. Support rail transport by building a wide network of speed trains which would contribute in the reduction of emissions and the use of the cars;
9. Make cities more bike-friendly by making more dedicated roads for bikes.

Organizations, institutions (governmental and non-governmental), politicians and other policy-making bodies are not using their facilities to influence when it comes to sustainability and other urgent topics. We recommend better media presence and influence when it comes to raising awareness, educating, implementing projects regarding sustainability and law-enforcements. Special attention should be given towards including youth and youth infrastructures (schools, educational centers, youth centers), when it comes to implementing new projects.

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Environmental education (theoretical and practical)

1. Usual lessons (mathematics, geography, etc.) should go in parallel with sustainable topics;
2. Put the knowledge into practice (recycling at school, reusing, composting);
3. Promote sustainable means of transport;
4. Collaborate with CSOs, environmental associations;
5. Campaign to promote healthy food;
6. Use renewable energies (solar panels);
7. Implement good practices (toilet flush, garbage on the streets).

6. A better region starts with Shifting from “Brain Drain” to “Brain Gain”

Establish regional network of civic education centers to enhance democratic future of WB societies

1. Citizens of the Western Balkans should have space and time to think and debate the democratic future of their societies. Democracy is not only a form of government but also needs to be experienced and debated in the daily lives of citizens. Civic education is an important element of democracy which increases qualifications for political commitment, the assumption of political tasks, and offers orientation and information. Democracy thrives on the participation of informed citizens.

Invest in collecting and analysing data on brain drain in WB to better understand the needs of talent in the society and those who left.

1. Effective measures/policies should be designed around a robust knowledge base. This process involves stages that include awareness of the situation, defining target groups

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and understanding their expectations. Use the findings to define strategies for supporting the talent in society but also in WB diaspora and achieve brain gain.

Strategically create new and support existing mechanisms to use social, knowledge and investment capital of diaspora in WB

1. Governments should develop strategic plans and mechanisms how to use diaspora potential in economic and social development of WB6;
2. Public, civil and private sector should work together and create a pool of experts composed by WB diaspora and local experts (connecting WB diaspora experts and linking with local experts in WB)⁴.

Support brain circulation (mobility) in a strategic manner in the Western Balkans and between WB6 and the EU member states (education, employment and entrepreneurship). Focus on mitigating administrative barriers (visa regime)

1. Brain circulation should be enhanced. Both in terms of helping people come back and go again, but also trying to attract talent from other sources if people from our society leave. (Increase Regional Mobility Schemes);
2. Mobility and brain circulation is necessary to improve education (easier administrative procedures of accepting foreign diplomas of our students, employment (clear policies on employment of highly-skilled people, talent schemes to attract successful individuals back) and entrepreneurship (as a platform to help our students to return);
3. Free movement is needed to pragmatically address the structural impediments/barriers that may prevent the immigration of talent, especially both in the WB region and between the EU and WB.

Reform Educational Systems in terms of curriculum, mobility programs and academia-industry cooperation

1. Mobility Programs

⁴ Example of BH Futures Foundation in Bosnia and Herzegovina: <https://www.bhfuturesfoundation.org/get-involved>

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- a. Enhance education quality by creating industry/public funded mobility programs for all level of studies with simplified procedures;
2. Curriculum Development
 - a. Industry should be required by law to provide certain number of internships for high school and university students to improve their practical skills;
 - b. Paid internships should be available in all sectors and integral part of formal education;
 - c. Critical thinking skills should be a key part of learning outcomes.
3. Academia-industry co-owned projects
 - a. R&D projects should be co-designed, co-funded and co-implemented by industry and university representatives to enhance technology and skills development;
 - b. R&D should be a way to attract talents who can accelerate the economical and technology development of the region.

Improve the image of the WB, both in the WB and the EU, through specific initiatives (regional inter-university cooperation, town twinning cooperation and media coverage)

1. How do we see ourselves?
 - a. Regional platform could be developed by an inter-university cooperation: the aim of this project is to let talents know about individual job opportunities in the region (existing career opportunities and internships). This initiative could also organise events where students can share their stories and address remarks to the region, and about how the authorities can support them and improve their living and studying conditions.
2. How others perceive WB6?
 - a. Initiate town twinning program between WB6 and other EU member states (tourism, culture, historical heritage, education). It could lead to decentralised cooperation, meaning cooperation on a local level.
 - b. Cooperation between Universities from WB6 and other EU member states should be enhanced. It should continuously tackle challenges from WB6 (education, technology, culture, tourism, etc.)
 - c. Continue promoting cultural exchanges and the visibility of WB6 in the media to raise the profile of the Western Balkan region in European countries.

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Invest in digital transformation in the WB and boost the positive impact it has on administrative procedures (corruption, connectivity, and clearly making the lives of citizens easier).

1. Invest in digital transformation in the Western Balkans because it can help achieve higher growth. Boost the positive impact digitalisation can have on administrative procedures, including reducing the space for corruption, increasing regional connectivity, and clearly making the lives of citizens easier;
2. It could include built in mechanism to invest in young talent based on science, research and technology;
3. Invest in creating knowledge and exploit sectors and develop sectors;
4. Create new sectors in the economy (digitalisation and technology development).

A Better Region Starts with Youth

www.rycowb.org