

WHAT YOU (TH) SAID



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Regional Youth Cooperation Priorities and Challenges According to Youth

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) has launched the **largest consultative process** since its establishment in 2016 directly engaging young people in order to hear from them on the types of projects and approaches to intercultural learning they would favor in the RYCO Calls for Project Proposals. The process consisted of an **online survey** and **twelve physical meetings** conducted all across the Western Balkans.

To increase the impact and outreach of the consultative process, RYCO ensured that youth with fewer opportunities take part in the online survey and meetings. In close liaison with the regional civil society organizations (CSOs), RYCO managed to involve youth not in employment, education or training (NEET), Roma, young people with disabilities, LGBTIQ, and youth from rural areas. It is in line with the RYCO mandate to actively strive to **increase opportunities** for youth coming from the most vulnerable groups, accounting to the fact that an increasing number of young people in the Western Balkan region face identity-based discrimination, unemployment, social exclusion, poverty, and marginalization.

The Regional Youth Survey and RYCOnsultations Process

The **Regional Youth Survey** was launched on 23 January 2020 with the purpose to look into the motivation of young people to apply for and participate in youth mobility programs but also identify existing obstacles to their participation in such programs. The survey, which encompassed close-ended and open-ended questions, was available until 12 February 2020 and a total of 1038 young persons from all over the Western Balkans Contracting Parties (CPs) responded to it.

The respondents replied to a series of questions relating to personal information (such as year of birth, place of residence, membership in youth organizations) and more specific and topical questions on youth exchange and mobility in the Western Balkans. Specifically, young people were asked to reply to questions such as¹:

1 A sample of a survey is listed as Annex I to this document.

- Where would you most/least like to travel and why?
- What prevents you from participating in youth exchanges?
- What are the best ways to learn about the topics of intercultural dialogue and learning, reconciliation and remembrance, youth participation?
- How do you usually find information on youth exchange opportunities?
- What do you think about lifestyle and peers in your community?

In conclusion, young respondents, aged 15 to 30 years old, coming from different national, ethnic, religious, gender, and social backgrounds stressed that the Western Balkan youth want to take part in youth mobility programs. Moreover, young people are eager to engage in intercultural dialogue, reconciliation and remembrance by taking part in community activism, youth services, student and school parliaments and associations, sports activities, environmental actions and arts.

Interestingly, an overwhelming majority of over 75% of young people throughout the survey stressed that community activism including peer education and volunteering is among the best ways to learn about RYCO's core thematic areas of work such as intercultural learning and dialogue, youth participation, and reconciliation.

Concerning the obstacles that youth face in terms of participating in exchange programs, the respondents noted the following as the most significant: the complexity of the application process; lack of financial resources to attend; lack of information; and fear they would face prejudice, discrimination or bullying.

In addition, if we combine the different survey findings approximately one third of the respondents were under the impression that the same persons usually participate in youth exchanges. This is seen as a discouraging factor to include new participants in youth exchange activities. Moreover, almost one in four respondents have never heard of any exchange program.

The survey finally showed that young people find information on exchange programs mainly online. Facebook was picked by young people throughout the region as the social media channel where they would get some information on mobility opportunities, followed by peer-to-peer communication and schools.

The Regional Youth Survey was a good foundation for a series of **twelve complementary consultative meetings** that the RYCO Local Branch Offices organized from 11 to 21 February 2020 across the region.² The consultations took place in a youth-friendly environment where the RYCO Local Branch Offices and experienced youth workers cultivated and encouraged diversity, inclusiveness, and respect for the participants and their opinions. The meetings included 308 young people from the region, coming from different backgrounds, eager to participate in youth exchange programs³. The methodologies used for selecting the sample of youth representatives were:

² From 11 to 21 February 2020, RYCO consultations were organized in two cities per each Contracting Party, including Banja Luka, Bijelo Polje, Brčko, Novi Pazar, Pančevo, Podgorica, Pristina, Rahovec/Orahovac, Shkodër, Shtip, Tetovo and Tirana.

³ Please refer to Annex III, at the end of this report, for further information on the consultative meeting's location, time and exact number of participants in each of them.

- 1 Online Registration Form, published on the RYCO's website, which was accessible and open to be filled in by every interested young person.
- 2 Collaborating closely with different CSOs, whose focus group is youth coming from different communities, areas, backgrounds and socio-economic status, which, in their turn, have disseminated the information to their organization's members.

The majority of the participants had not previously participated in any youth exchange activity nor had they heard of RYCO. In spite of this, the participants were open to learn more about new youth mobility opportunities in the Western Balkan region. Some of the participants had previously heard of the organization but did not have any deeper knowledge of its mandate and activities. Most of the participants perceive the idea of youth exchanges across the Western Balkans as an experience they are keen to try.

The Regional Youth Survey and the consultative meetings give young people a direct say on how they imagine RYCO's programs to fit better to their needs. Young people offered valuable and diverse perspectives and opinions. Their input was key in examining the current landscape for youth in identifying ideas for future frameworks of RYCO's general programming.

The collected information was used for the development and design of the RYCO's 4th Open Call for Project Proposals, ensuring it is appropriate to the needs of youth. Apart from having a significant impact to RYCO's work, the results presented below can serve as a solid basis for applicant organizations and schools, primarily for the organizers of youth exchanges, to adopt a participative approach and involve young people adequately in their projects' design and implementation phases.

The document presents the most important conclusions from the survey, consultative meetings, the interests and needs of youth, as well as the noted obstacles to their participation in regional youth exchanges and programs.

What Youth Desire

Capacitate Youth to Partake in Project Implementation and Design

"We need more trainings and seminars in order to motivate the youth," one survey participant from Brcko stated.

While expressing willingness to be active in the project and design-making processes, the consulted youth predominantly never had an opportunity to participate in the project design process. Participants explicitly stressed the need for more guidance and practical training on the following topics: **project writing and management, intercultural dialogue, reconciliation, remembrance, and youth participation.** Lastly, youth noted the need that RYCO develops and offers **more non-formal education opportunities**, perceived by young people as a more interesting way of learning.

A Participative Approach

"Young people are eager to participate if they are motivated in the right way," one participant from Novi Pazar communicated in the survey.

Youth should also be offered an opportunity to engage in the project design and management processes. Without this, increasing their capacities will have limited effects only.

Involving youth at an early stage of a project's concept idea development is the right approach to determine how relevant a project idea is to young people. Youth participation should present a more viable and qualitative design of planned project activities. **The majority of participants believe that involving them in consultations on project development** would result in a satisfying way of youth engagement. Furthermore, young people are in favor of **more opportunities to get involved in the implementation of RYCO supported projects**, too.

Culture and Understanding to Bring the Region Together

"...if you respect others for who they are, you will be mutually respected as well, no matter where you come from or where you were born" a survey participant from Rahovec/Orahovac stated.

The participants affirmed that they do not consider sharing a common living environment with other nationalities, ethnicities, and religions as an issue.

Organizing regional exchanges will contribute to learning more about different cultures and improving their understanding of “the other”. Such activities can strengthen youth cooperation, increase respect for other cultures and lead to the acceptance of regional diversity. Young people wish to visit the rest of the Western Balkans, **make friendships, explore nature and architecture, break prejudices, network with colleagues and create new opportunities.** Moreover, part of the participants would like to take part in cultural activities and exchanges with other youth from the region, **such as in music, theatre, sports, and arts.**

Diversification of Means to Access Information

The Western Balkan youth generally obtain information on youth exchange opportunities through social media — mainly Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Besides this, they are informed about youth exchanges by their peers, professors, schools or universities, student organizations, youth centers, and local CSOs.

The participants agreed that **social media platforms** remain the most effective way for them to access and be informed on the RYCO messages and news. Additionally, young people would like to get information on youth exchanges and other opportunities from RYCO through (1) **major outreach activities in educational institutions and youth community centers** and (2) **awareness campaigns through various creative means and channels such as banners, posters, informational videos, leaflets, etc.**

Obstacles that Youth Face

Prejudice Remains Alive

"It is so obvious that we are so close to each other, yet we are so alienated from each other and we have a lot of negative prejudices. In line with this is the most recent exchange where I hosted people from my own place. They were positively surprised by my hometown [Novi Pazar], telling me they expected something totally different" another participant from Novi Pazar added in the survey.

One of the conclusions is that widespread prejudice for others unfortunately still exists across the Western Balkan societies. Nonetheless, some of the participants pointed out that sometimes just getting acquainted with people outside of their communities is a satisfying experience:

"because at the end of the day we are the future, and we need to work together towards a more prosperous one, despite our differences," one of the participants from Pristina underlined. Getting to know each other through youth exchanges is the best way to fight against prejudices in the region.

The obstacle to be aware of is that youth are sometimes reluctant to visit and explore other Western Balkan places due to the fear of prejudice and of facing unpleasant situations or feeling a lack of safety due to their identity, origin, religious belief or ethnicity.

Parents Concerns on Youth Exchanges

"Parents often don't allow their kids to travel within the region. I personally participate in sports competitions and I was unable to make a sports team to travel with me due to this issue," one participant from Pančevo mentioned.

Young people singled out that they are often faced with parents' lack of support to participate in youth exchanges due to stereotypes and prejudices for the "other" and fears for the safety and well-being of their kids. In most of the cases, parents and teachers in the region consider formal education a top priority. According to the participants, parents and teachers often consider youth mobility a "waste of time" and a high risk in terms of safety.

"Sometimes it's just the wrong mindset of someone from our circle that restricts our participation," a participant from Tirana outlined.

Considering that parents' attitudes present significant obstacles to the participation of many young people, it is crucial to **organize info sessions with parents to present RYCO and its activities to influence their attitude and perspectives while taking into consideration the needs of youth.** Moreover, organizing these info sessions will make parents more aware about

youth exchanges in general but also about their goals and importance for youth empowerment and cooperation in the region.

Lack of Information and Accessibility

"I do not usually find a trusted source where the information is provided and a call is open for all target groups," a survey participant from Shkodër addressed in the survey.

Participants stressed their concern about the lack of information and accessibility of youth mobility programs. **The lack of information is one of the most critical factors that prevent young women and men from taking part in exchanges.** While in most cases young people are willing to participate, they do not have sufficient information or lack details about youth exchanges that are being organized. Some of the participants were concerned that the **announcements related to youth exchange opportunities are not sufficiently inclusive** and are communicated primarily to young people already involved in organizations that deal with exchanges.

Fear of Discrimination and Lack of an Inclusive Approach

"I think I will be discriminated against and not selected because of my ethnicity," one participant from the Roma community from Shtip emphasized in the survey.

Youth from marginalized communities in the region, such as Roma, LGBTIQ, youth with disabilities, and youth belonging to other ethnic and religious minorities are reasonably afraid of discrimination based on their previous negative experiences. A participant identifying with the LGBTIQ community felt that he would not be accepted because of his sexual orientation, whereas a participant with a physical disability expressed concern he might be excluded from youth exchanges and mobility programs because of it.

Another reason that adds to exclusion from activities is distance from the capitals and lack of a well-developed and connected infrastructure in the region. Youth from small towns and rural areas pointed out that they do not benefit from youth exchanges and programs to the extent that youth coming from major cities do.

"Youngsters that live in bigger cities are more involved and better informed than the young people in villages and smaller cities," a participant from Prishtina stated.

It is necessary to celebrate diversity and to ensure stronger representation of marginalized groups of young people beyond the parameters of excellent grades and relations with educators. **A more inclusive approach has to be**

adopted, ensuring that the environment and selection criteria encourage marginalized youth to partake in youth exchanges. Lastly, it is important to pay attention to the fair geographical distribution of participants.

Low Self-esteem and Highly Demanding Participation Criteria

“Every time I apply for an exchange program, I’m always asked for my previous experience,” a participant from Pristina stated.

“I am afraid to try, to challenge myself if no one around encourages me to do so,” one participant from Albania pointed out.

The consulted youth cited low self-esteem and the lack of previous experience in writing application forms or CVs as some of the reasons preventing them from applying in the first place. Furthermore, the criterion of previous participation in youth exchanges or extracurricular activities were singled out as additional reasons of high and hard-to-meet participation requirements.

Notable challenge identified by the participants is also the language barrier, which prevents some of the interested participants from learning about and participating in youth exchanges. The stated barriers imply the lack of English language proficiency or not knowing the language of the place they would travel to.

Some of the above-mentioned obstacles prevent young people from applying or participating in youth exchanges. They also make youth apathetic in regard to regional exchanges.

Reflections and Conclusions

“More RYCO is what we need”

“You [RYCO] seemed to be really interested in our needs and thoughts, and you were really listening to us, this is what happened to us for the first time” a participant from Bijelo Polje added in the survey.

The conducted meetings have shown that young people appreciate being asked for their opinion. According to many of the consulted, for them this was the very first time an organization approached them and asked about their needs and wishes in relation to regional youth cooperation.

The young people made an invaluable contribution to RYCO consultative meetings across the Western Balkans. RYCO considers young people’s participation at the consultative meetings as a core value of its 4th Open Call design process. What is more, the youth left the process empowered and increasingly aware of youth mobility, with more social and networking opportunities, and a rewarding sense of regional togetherness.

RYCO will maintain this unique and novel approach. It will maintain and create new spaces for young people to be heard. In the time to come, it will continue creating opportunities for young people in the Western Balkans to participate in developing the RYCO Open Calls for Project Proposals and empower them.

Furthermore, it will be necessary to reflect and find a proper balance between responding to the needs of youth and promoting the mission, values, and the vision of RYCO. Nevertheless, one of the first steps is to ensure the fair and adequate representation of marginalized youth in the exchanges for more youth inclusion and participation.

In conclusion, the young people were delighted to participate and hear of opportunities that RYCO provides to them. They also noted the need for stepping up such opportunities. As one of the participants summarized: **“More RYCO is what we need.”**

Annex I

Survey

Personal information

What's your name and surname? *

Year of birth?

M / F / Other *

Where do you come from? (your village/town/city) *

Are you a member of any youth organization or youth club/youth office?

Leave us your e-mail if you want to receive information from RYCO on youth mobility and other activities: _____

- 1 Below are some statements related to your community and lifestyles of you and your peers. On the given scale mark to what extent you agree or disagree with the statements:

Scale mark:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
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- A There are limited number of cultural events in my community
 - B There are few opportunities for engaging in sports activities
 - C There is a lack of youth clubs/centres
 - D Young people of different religions rarely spend time together
 - E There are plenty of opportunities in my community for young people to spend quality time
 - F There is peer violence in my community
 - G Young people of different ethnicities rarely spend time together
 - H Our opinion is valued by decision-makers (state and local authorities / institutions, schools, etc.)
 - I There are no opportunities for employment
 - J Young people are leaving my community
 - K My community celebrates diversity
 - L My family supports my decisions
 - M We cannot afford to travel
 - N Me and my friends are not interested in being active in my society
 - O Something else _____
- 2 RYCO works on the following topics: intercultural dialogue and learning, reconciliation and remembrance, youth participation. There are many ways to learn about these topics. Select up to 5:
- Students or schools' parliaments/associations/clubs;
 - Youth services (youth clubs/centers, youth councils...)
 - Youth wings of political parties
 - Community activism (festivals, events, debates, peer education, volunteering...)
 - Arts
 - Music workshops
 - Theatre workshops
 - Environmental actions

- Interfaith dialogue
- Interethnic dialogue
- Sports activities
- Something else _____

3 Where would you most like to travel: (listed options from the Western Balkans, RYCO Contracting Parties)

Why? _____

4 Where would you least like to travel: (list from the Western Balkans, RYCO Contracting Parties)

Why? _____

5 What prevents you from participating in youth exchanges? Select up to 3.

- No one invites me;
- The application process is too complicated;
- I don't have money to pay for it;
- The same people always go to these activities;
- I am not interested in participating;
- My grades are not good enough;
- I don't speak English;
- Exchanges are not adapted for people with disabilities
- I am afraid I would face prejudice / discrimination / bullying
- I don't feel like leaving my family
- I've never heard of any exchange;
- I don't have a passport
- Other _____

6 How do you usually find information on youth exchange opportunities?

*choose two that you use most frequently

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Twitter
- Mailing list
- Non-governmental organizations
- Peer-to-peer
- School / schools information boards / teachers
- Info points / centers
- Parents
- Religious institutions
- Educational websites / youth portals
- Other _____

Annex II

Statistical data on the total number of respondents to the survey and gender:

1. Albanian language survey – 360 respondents:

- * 68.6 Female
- * 30.8% Male
- * 0.6 Other

2. Bosnian language survey – 152 respondents:

- * 64.5 % Female
- * 35.5 % Male
- * 0% Other

3. Macedonian language survey – 162 respondents:

- * 61% Female
- * 39% Male
- * 0% Other

4. Montenegrin language survey – 174 respondents:

- * 75.3% Female
- * 23% Male
- * 1.7% Other

5. Serbian language survey – 171 respondents:

- * 61.4% Female
- * 37.4% Male
- * 1.2% Other

6. Croatian language survey – 19 respondents:

- * 63.2% Female
- * 36.8% Male
- * 0% Other

Annex III

Data on the location, time and number of participants to the Consultative Meetings:

In Albania, the consultative meetings were organised in the city of Shkodra (on 18.02.2020) and Tirana (on 17.02.2020) and there were in total 41 participants, 14 CSOs;

In Kosovo*, the consultative meetings were organised in the city of Pristina (14.02.2020) and Rahovec (18.02.2020) and there were present 45 participants, 6 CSOs;

In Bosnia and Herzegovina the consultative meetings were organized in Brcko (14.02.2020) and Banja Luka (on 19.02.2020) and there were a total of 31 participants, 17 CSOs present;

In Montenegro the consultative meetings were held in Podgorica (13.02.2020) and Bijelo Polje (11.02.2020) and a total of 57 participants, 7 CSOs attended them;

In North Macedonia the consultative meetings were held in Shtip (20.02.2020) and Tetovo (21.02.2020), with the participation of 90 persons;

In Serbia the consultative meetings were held in Novi Pazar (on 18.02.2020) and Pancevo (20.02.2020) and were attended by a total of 44 participants.

* 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.

Annex IV

Aggregated data of responses to each question of the Survey:

Question: RYCO works on the following topics: intercultural dialogue and learning, reconciliation and remembrance, youth participation. There are many ways to learn about these topics. Select up to 5:	Albanian language survey:	Bosnian language survey	Macedonian language survey	Montenegrin language survey	Serbian language survey	Croatian language survey
Students or schools' parliaments/associations/clubs	56.9%	33.6%	50%	55.7%	35.7%	57.9%
Youth services (youth clubs/centers, youth councils...)	74.2%	53.3%	63.6%	52.9%	56.7%	57.9%
Youth wings of political parties:	26.4%	19.1%	21%	8.6%	7.6%	26.3%
Community activism (festivals, events, debates, peer education, volunteering...)	81.7%	86.8%	74.7%	78.7%	87.7%	94.7%
Arts:	41.1%	47.4%	32.1%	39.7%	40.9%	26.3%
Music workshops	13.9%	23%	25.9%	22.4%	33.3%	26.3%
Theatre workshops	15.3%	34.9%	31.5%	29.3%	31.6%	15.8%
Environmental actions	46.7%	30.9%	40.7%	43.7%	33.3%	31.6%
Interfaith dialogue	12.5%	34.9%	13%	28.7%	30.4%	21.1%
Interethnic dialogue	26.7%	25.7%	19.8%	24.7%	36.8%	47.4%
Sports activities:	43.1%	52.6%	44.4%	54%	48%	52.6%
Question: Where would you most like to travel?	Albanian language survey:	Bosnian language survey	Macedonian language survey	Montenegrin language survey	Serbian language survey	Croatian language survey
Bosnia and Herzegovina	36,7%	6,6%	24,1%	27,6%	32,2%,	
Montenegro	17,8%	19,1%	40,1%	1,7%	21,6%	31,6%
Kosovo	15%	8,6%	3,7%	7,5%	9,9%	10,5%
Serbia	14,7%	23%,	26,5%	36,2%	8,8%	36,8%
Albania	11,9%	20,4%	4,3%	5,7%	14%	
North Macedonia	3,9%	22,4%	1,2%	21,3%	13,5%	21,1%

Question: Where would you least like to travel?	Albanian language survey:	Bosnian language survey	Macedonian language survey	Montenegrin language survey	Serbian language survey	Croatian language survey
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8,3%	39,5%	10,5%	4%	4,7%	31,6%
Montenegro	5%	4,6%	8%	20,1%	10,5%	5,3%
Kosovo	13,9%	17,1%	38,3%	24,7%	22,8%	31,6%
Serbia	37,8%	13,8%	11,1%	9,8%	14,6%	10,5%
Albania	23,6%	15,8%	17,3%	31,6%	43,9%	15,8%
North Macedonia	11,4%	9,2%	14,8%	9,8%	3,5%	5,3%
Question: What prevents you from participating in youth exchanges? Select up to 3.	Albanian language survey:	Bosnian language survey	Macedonian language survey	Montenegrin language survey	Serbian language survey	Croatian language survey
No one invites me	40%	48,7%	50,6%	52,9%	50,9%	52,6%
The application process is too complicated			39,5%	31,6%	15,2%	
I don't have money to pay for it	54,7%	39,5%	38,9%	23,6%	36,8%	52,6%
The same people always go to these activities	35,8%	23%	50,6%	25,9%	20,5%	15,8%
I am not interested in participating				19%		
My grades are not good enough						
I don't speak English						
Exchanges are not adapted for people with disabilities						
I am afraid I would face prejudice / discrimination / bullying			19,1%			
I don't feel like leaving my family						
I've never heard of any exchange;	36,1%	24,3%			20,5%	21,1%
I don't have a passport						

Question: How do you usually find information on youth exchange opportunities? * choose two that you use most frequently	Albanian language survey:	Bosnian language survey	Macedonian language survey	Montenegrin language survey	Serbian language survey	Croatian language survey
Facebook	60,3%	50,7%	53,7%	29,9%	43,9%	42,1%
Instagram	25,8%	33,6%	16,7%	52,3%	34,5%	21,1%
Snapchat						
Twitter						
Mailing list						
Non-governmental organizations	26,1%	36,8%	20,4%		37,4%	
Peer-to-peer	18,6%	30,9%	35,2%	29,9%	36,3%	
School / schools information boards / teachers		30,9%	26,5%	20,7%	27,5%	31,6%
Info points / centers						
Parents						
Religious institutions						
Educational websites / youth portals				20,1%	26,9%	31,6%

Disclaimer

This study was published by RYCO with the financial support of the European Union. The information and views set out in this study are derived from the on-line survey on youth perceptions described in this study and the consultative meetings launched by RYCO, and they do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of RYCO and the European Union.

On RYCO

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an international organization, founded by the Western Balkans governments, aiming to promote the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region through youth exchange programs. Find more about our work at the organization's website: www.rycowb.org.

On “Enhancing Youth Cooperation and Youth Exchange in the WB6” project

Through the Enhancing Youth Cooperation and Youth Exchange in the WB6 project, the European Union is supporting RYCO to create a more enabling environment and new opportunities for young people to travel and explore the region, get to know their peers, as well as cooperate on shared projects in the field of community activism, culture, sports, environment, and many more.

The project builds upon RYCO's previous experience in grant-making and innovates it by making it more youth participatory. It aims to include young people in informing the priorities of RYCO work, increase their awareness about opportunities for youth participation across the region, and work on strengthening the capacities of CSOs in the Western Balkans for the implementation of regional youth mobility projects.

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