

Connecting Youth

Western Balkans Youth Conference – Paris, 4 July 2016

Conclusions by the Working Groups

Within the context of the Berlin Process and the Western Balkans Summit, 150 young people, youth workers, youth representatives and policy makers from the Western Balkans and the European Union met for the "**Connecting Youth - Western Balkans Youth Conference**" to look into ways to strengthen youth cooperation between the Western Balkans and the EU.

The Conference was organised by the European Commission and the Government of the French Republic and supported by the European Youth Forum and the SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre.

In four working groups, participants addressed the following topics:

- education and mobility
- employment and entrepreneurship
- youth engagement and participation
- youth and the media

The outputs of these discussions were presented to and discussed with policy makers from the EU-Member States and the Western Balkans.

A. Youth on the move, education on the move - Education and mobility for young people

The discussion focused on the European exchange programmes, student mobility schemes, and opportunities for vocational education and training available to the Western Balkans. Options were explored with regard to what more could be done in the region to maximise the potential of those programmes and how to promote mobility in the region more effectively.

Conclusions of the participants

- *Enhance promotion of and accessibility to existing programmes (reach out to newcomers, small or remote organisations, marginalised groups, "organisations with fewer opportunities") through e.g. providing training activities and mentorship, sharing experiences and good practice, supporting a regional alumni network and existing structures and Erasmus+ contact points.*
- *Develop joint/double/multiple degrees in the region by reducing administrative procedures and facilitating automatic recognition.*
- *Open up primary and secondary education in the region by organising school visits (school-to-school; formal and non-formal), e.g. through exchange of teachers, pupils and/or youth workers.*

B. Knocking on job market's doors - Employment and entrepreneurship for young people

The working group discussed what more can be done to address youth unemployment, and what the Western Balkans can learn from programmes tackling youth unemployment within the EU. The discussion also examined whether or not youth entrepreneurship is an effective tool for countering youth unemployment, and explored what more can be done to motivate young people to become entrepreneurs and open new businesses.

Conclusions of the participants

- *Address skills gap by providing bigger support to VET, compulsory integration of internships in schools and defining quality standards according to EU developed norms.*
- *Access to finance and entrepreneurship by diverting funding from subsidising large companies, considering micro-financing policy and supporting better promotion of existing support or infrastructure.*
- *EU Programs and policy making to encourage active participation of youth in policy design; promotion of peer role models; training staff and teachers, and evaluating implementation and outcomes of policies and/or strategies in the field of youth employment.*

C. Not just another brick in the wall - Youth engagement & participation

The participants debated what can be done to increase the number of young people actively engaging in political and societal life. They also discussed how the role the European Voluntary Service can play in further promoting civic engagement and contributing to democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms in the Western Balkans. Another point tackled in the discussions was the prevention of violent radicalisation among youth, and understanding how local communities, civil society & national authorities can better reach out to the youth, particularly those who are or feel marginalised.

Conclusions of the participants

- *Strengthen civic education both in formal and non-formal education settings.*
- *Encourage greater national allocation of core financial support directly to youth organisations, complemented by existing EU funding programs.*
- *Develop and recognise national youth councils in their role of connecting young people and building bridges with political institutions at the national level. Fully integrate the national youth councils in the EU Structured Dialogue.*

D. Get up, stand up, speak up! - Youth and the media (follow up to the Speak Up! Conference)

The group discussed the challenges in strengthening free & robust media in the Western Balkans (and in the EU), and whether young people in the EU and in the Western Balkans have access to a variety of objective, high quality, and independent information. The talks also focused on what more can be done to further support professional journalism and the training of journalists at national / European level, and how young journalists can be instilled with a sense of professional and ethical journalistic standards.

Conclusions of the participants

- *RYCO to establish a Young Journalists' Initiative which would foster networking, education, mentorships between Western Balkans journalists and European media, advocacy for media laws and funding for young journalists of the region.*
- *Decision-makers of the region to introduce media literacy in school curricula to educate future generations on how to look at the media critically and ensure implementation of laws on access to public documents, freedom of information as well as laws on protecting whistle-blowers throughout the region.*
- *The EU to create a funding tool that would support alternative media start-ups, new media entrepreneurs, and new media outlets in the region which aim to push for more accountable, unbiased and citizen-linked journalism.*

EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S SUPPORT

- A **follow-up conference on youth**, organised by the SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre will take place in Ljubljana at the end of September 2016. Its objective will be to identify an action plan to further develop the Positive Agenda for the Youth.
- The European Commission will use funding available from the WB Youth in Action Window from the IPA II programme in synergy with the aims and activities of the **Regional Youth Cooperation Office**.
- The European Commission will launch an **EU financed regional pilot scheme for young civil servants** to offer the possibility for young civil servants from the Western Balkans to participate in an executive programme at Sciences Po in Paris, followed by a short-term exchange programme in the region.
- The European Commission is adding a section dedicated to the Western Balkans on the **European Youth Portal**. In the first phase, Western Balkan focused articles have been uploaded to the existing Portal. The second phase will involve full integration of the Western Balkans in the upgraded European Youth Portal which should be ready in early 2017, including the languages of the region.