

Young Generations for the New Balkans: Vision 2030; Towards Alternative Horizons

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Young Generations for the New Balkans

Vision 2030

Towards Alternative Horizons

December 2019

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VISION 2030: CONCRETE PROPOSALS

- All six countries of the Western Balkans have a perspective of joining the EU as full members and this perspective should not be taken away but made more credible and tangible. The Western Balkans, politicians and civil society, should be invited to take part in the up-coming discussion on the **Conference on the Future of Europe**.
- In order to remain relevant in the Western Balkans, the EU needs to boost its offer to the region. Therefore, it should consider steps towards **sectoral integration** of the region into the EU.
- Existing mechanisms to recognize and support financially **citizens' initiatives**, as well as **independent and investigative media** should be further extended and new ones should be created. The EU should therefore increase its support for the Western Balkans through, for example, the European Endowment for Democracy. EU officials should be more vocal and critical of the authoritarian tendencies.
- Countries in the region should comprehensively reform their **electoral systems** in order to bring them in line with the European standards. Initiatives to strengthen the role of parliaments could be considered, such as support for the work of the secretariats and their transparency.
- Western Balkan countries should speed up their **fight against corruption and organized crime**. The EU ought to consider setting a clear date (2023) for full alignment with the EU acquis and best practices in the areas of public procurement and state aid. Furthermore, the European Commission should explore venues for the EU Court of Auditors to engage with the Western Balkans.
- In order to boost entrepreneurship and youth employment, introduction of **Youth Guarantees** should be considered, with a particular targeting of the least developed regions where interventions are urgently needed. Furthermore, vocational education and training needs to be extended and streamlined.
- **Education systems** should be reformed in such a way so that education institutions in the region provide applicable knowledge that also corresponds to the regional labour market needs. One aspect of such a reform should address student skills assessed in the OECD's PISA study. Education systems should be designed to encourage independent research, new ideas and creativity, thereby helping young people take responsibility for themselves and their countries and start shaping their respective societies as early as possible.

- The European Commission should develop and offer to all Western Balkan countries a clear roadmap to adopt all the EU environmental legislation and standards and include the Western Balkans in the “**European Green Deal**”. The governments in the region should incorporate the entire EU environmental acquis in their respective legislations by 2030. In return, the Commission should provide necessary feedback, as well as financial and technical support. All six Western Balkan countries should be invited to take part in the EU’s **system to tackle natural disasters (rescEU)** that is fully financed by the EU. In return, the Commission should request development and implementation of the national prevention and preparedness strategies that are in line with the EU’s best practice.
- The Western Balkan societies and authorities should engage in *bona fide* cooperation aimed at **bringing justice for all victims** of the 1990s wars. The EU should be explicit and consistent in insisting on the development of adequate local judicial capacities; it should support and, when necessary, facilitate processes of regional cooperation around humanitarian issues and criminal matters; and it should openly politically support initiatives from civil society, such as RECOM, that aim at achieving progress in the area of justice and reconciliation.
- All Western Balkan states should adopt youth policies, youth action programs, and youth strategies. Information about national and **regional youth mobility programs** should be made more accessible to the youth, in particular to socially and economically vulnerable people. Youth mobility also needs to be tackled through mutual recognition of diplomas.
- Further investment in strengthening the **Regional Youth Cooperation Office** should be a strategic short-term goal, whereas in the longer run, it is crucial to deepen cooperation among the youth, in culture, sports, and through art platforms. University exchanges among students and academic staff are crucial to link higher education institutions within the region.
- Western Balkans states should further work on enhancing **cooperation in infrastructure and economic cooperation**. They should align their actions on **digitalization** and **cyber security** with the EU and work towards removing economic barriers. The end goal of these efforts would be the creation of a regional economic area that is in line with the EU standards.
- The Western Balkans governments, along with the specialized agencies and with the assistance of the EU counterparts, should commit to a comprehensive mid-to-long term **continuous research and analysis of regional migration dynamics**. They should also explore all the aspects of the emigration from the region, along with the possible incentives for citizens to return to their home countries. Research results would directly feed into the future policies and facilitate

development of the region. Effective policies that promote **circular migration** can simplify and foster the progress of the region. Moreover, emigration should be part of any high-level EU-Western Balkans agenda. The governments of the Western Balkans should look for complementary policies within the EU and introduce a set of new policies, thus opening opportunities for their citizens that circular migration can potentially offer.

- **‘Sticks and carrots’** of the integration process should be spread along the whole way and not be left until its very end. This will make more visible to the public in the region whether their governments are indeed delivering on the promises. It will also establish specific linkage between individual reforms/policies and rewards (or lack thereof) from the EU.
- **Benchmarks** for measuring progress must be specified by the EU in order to prevent ‘ticking boxes’ on paper with no real changes in the lives of the citizens.
- **Transparency** is crucial throughout the process. **Civil society** should be meaningfully included in all sorts of debates and consultations during the policy formulation and implementation as well as throughout the European integration process. It is also important for the EU to intensify its contacts with experts from the region to be able to receive independent from the government assessments of the situation on the ground.
- The discussion initiated by France to adapt the **methodology of the enlargement process**, even though welcome, should not mislead by creating an impression that the methodology itself is the main obstacle. The democratic situation in Hungary and Poland would be the same, regardless of the methodology. The most important issue to address is the **lack of political will** of the governing parties to deliver responsibly on their commitments.
- **Regional cooperation** must be fostered. The Croatian EU presidency and its focus on the Western Balkans can become an important step in this regard, considering that Croatia already is an EU member. In this context, it would be helpful also to get Slovenia more involved in the process - another EU member and neighbor of the region.
- The European Union and the regional governments should jointly look into the ways how to involve **Western Balkans diaspora** in efforts to improve life in their region of origin. Mapping of diasporas in Europe, their organization, set skills and interests would be useful for understanding their potential role in the development of the Western Balkans.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Caught in a vicious circle between old-fashioned backwards oriented politics and nationalisms on the one hand, and lack of economic, educational and social perspectives on the other, young generations in the Balkans seem to be losing patience. Whenever possible, they emigrate to the West in search for a better life. UN agencies and experts speak about a massive demographic revolution in Eastern and Southeastern Europe that is changing society more than a majority of developments in the past. Meanwhile, democracies in the region are vulnerable and the EU integration process is not delivering fast results. 2018 was frequently described as the “Year of Hope” for EU enlargement and for a better future for the Balkans. The EU Commission presented a new enlargement strategy, only to be followed by the Balkans Summit in May 2018. As the country holding the EU presidency in the second half of 2018, Austria worked towards keeping the region a high priority on the EU agenda. Without opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, as well as without granting Kosovo citizens visa-free travel to the Schengen zone, the question remains whether enthusiasm for EU enlargement can be restored. Pressured by the looming democratic and socio-economic crisis, as well as the return to the region of a geopolitical power struggle, it is obvious that a new momentum for enlargement and overall political and socio-economic development is much needed. Western Balkans societies are in dire need of alternatives and progressive engagement and action.

Our initiative/series *Young Generations for the new Balkans 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons* sets the spotlight on youth, their progressive stances and hopes for the future. Together with local and international partners, we discuss the overall socio-political situation in the Western Balkans and, EU and NATO integration through workshops, seminars, panel discussions and policy recommendations. This is done in order to understand the reality on the ground and to set trends for a positive future of our neighbouring region. The project is a common initiative, led by European and regional institutes. It features stakeholders, activists, and young people from the region and the EU.

We brought our ideas to EU capitals, visiting Vienna, The Hague, Berlin, Paris and Brussels. We also went to the Western Balkans, talking to experts, politicians, diplomats and general public in Belgrade, Pristina and Skopje. We took ideas, energy and the network from our individual daily work and streamlined it into a unified initiative that has seen discussions, expert interviews and articles produced as a result. This paper represents an attempt to summarize all that energy and ideas we have collected throughout the last two years.

WELCOME TO 2030

Welcome to the European Western Balkans! That could possibly be the shortest introductory sum-up of the present paper, which sublimes all hopes, distant horizons and shivery dreams for 2030 in one. Notwithstanding desirable outcome, the current EU prospects seem remote and misty, while the situation in the region is rather gloomy than glittery.

At first glance, if one was to describe a young person in any of the Western Balkan Six at the moment, their fears, hopes and preferences are congruent. Surprisingly, according to the latest Youth Study published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the young generation in the nowadays Balkans seems to be optimistic, mobile and well-connected which is not the most intuitive description.¹ Furthermore, young people are more concerned about economic prospects, education quality and environment than the national identity, ever-looming war prospects, or political and security instability. Yet, in stark contrast to these findings stands the fact that Balkans youth leans towards the strong, autocratic leader, as they are distrustful towards political parties, governments and institutions in general. Finally, the young generation vigorously supports the EU membership of the region.

What these data tell us is that after decades of wars, isolation, mass atrocities and omnipresent hatred towards the ‘others’, the youth in the Western Balkans wants to see more concrete action which will have a palpable result on the ground. Despite the latent insecurity and lack of substantial and sincere debate about the legacy of Yugoslav wars (1991-2001), the youth in that part of the European southeast desires to move forward. Indeed, there is a growing need for a deep and comprehensive transformation of the region tackling the areas stretching from education and economic development to environmental and social issues.

A series of debates, reflections and exchanges among young professionals and experts from the region within the scope of this project has demonstrated that the youth in the region has capacity and need to be an integral part to any debate, both at the regional and European levels. The youth’s contribution is both indispensable and meaningful, as it sheds a new light on the upcoming decade and brings fresh ideas for the volatile region.

This publication comes out at a moment when two non-papers on the future of the European Union and the Western Balkans are floating around.

¹Friedrich Ebert Foundation, “Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019”, 2019. <https://www.fes-soe.org/features/youth-studies/>

The first non-paper is the French non-paper on the future of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans. It is noteworthy that this non-paper reaffirms the full EU membership perspective of the region, as well as its basic principle of ‘more for more’ and focus on the rule of law. However, adoption of all ideas from the non-paper would not contribute to a more effective process that brings benefits for the EU and the region.

The second non-paper is a French-German one on a Conference on the Future of Europe from 2020 to 2022 and guiding principles of the Conference, which should be focused on EU policies, including a possible change of EU treaties, and institutional issues. It is to be welcomed that the EU wants to discuss its future in a process that should lead to concrete changes and decisions on the EU. Since the future of the Western Balkans is closely linked to the future of the EU, both politicians and the civil society from the region should be included in activities and debates. They should be given a fair chance to argue and present their interests and vision.

The youth’s vision for 2030 is the European Western Balkans. Furthermore, ‘European’ is understood not solely in institutional but equally in value-based terms. Thus, fairer and just societies which embrace and cherish all differences and are members of the European Union is the overarching vision of the Western Balkans in 2030. For that to happen in ten years from now, the Western Balkans should become part of the European programs and common initiatives already today. Rome was not built in one day, nor will the ‘Balkan 2030 vision’ be realized immediately. The youth requires concrete actions, policies and support in order to finally break the vicious circle of non-reforms and non-progressing. Liberal democracy, youth employment, reconciliation programs and fight against climate change need to ought to start being dealt with as of today in order not to remain just a far-flung prospect.

This paper offers a list of effective, clear-cut, policy-oriented recommendations which blaze the trail for the European engagement with the young generation of the Western Balkans. It paves the way for a reinvigorated and substantial commitment that ensures a more prosperous, EU-oriented vision of the region in the coming decade.

1. LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES WITH ENGAGED CITIZENS

Vision: By 2030, the Western Balkans are the interconnected space with market economies and liberal democracies based on the rule of law. Institutions in each of the six countries are strong, independent and professional. The understanding of the civic engagement has developed in a direction where citizens are aware of their civil rights and power of civic initiatives. They are also conscious about the need to protect free media and independent institutions, as those make the democratic societies stronger and sustainable.

Today, fragile democracies in the Western Balkans are under attack. The process of democratic elections has been compromised through direct interference of the governments in power, there is misuse of public funds, judiciary and security services are politicized, corruption in the institutions is omnipresent, and citizens' awareness about the possibility of political change in the elections is low. Our societies are deeply divided and fragile, institutions are captured and political instability is pervasive.

Furthermore, media are under pressure and politicians use hate speech against all those with a different opinion, from journalists and civil society representatives to political opposition. Delegitimized by the authorities with the help of pro-regime media, the opposition is targeted as the enemy of the state acting on behalf of foreign interests.

In order for the 2030 vision to turn into reality, the key change that needs to happen is for political elites and citizens to become aware that they are the owners of the reform and institution-building processes that also lead to EU membership. This is why it would be important to create and increase funding mechanisms to recognise and support initiatives of citizens, their activism, as well as independent and investigative media. The EU has already lent substantial support to grassroots initiatives and investigative and free media in the Western Balkans which, however, should be further increased, for example through the European Endowment for Democracy.

If the EU wants to remain relevant in the Western Balkans, it will need to boost its offer for the region. It could consider steps in the direction of gradual integration of the region into the EU, as it was done through the Energy Community and the Transport Community. This should be used to insist on bringing to the EU level the fight against corruption and improvements in areas such as public procurement and state aid.

Furthermore, the EU should be more open and critical of the authoritarian tendencies in each of the countries in the region. This should help civil society and free media to create an environment for dialogue, reduction of tensions (which render the outcomes of democratic processes unfair) and even fair competition in the election race.

Countries in the region should as a matter of priority work on introducing changes to their electoral systems that create an environment in which the process is brought in line with the EU and international standards. Such a change would see members of the parliaments less estranged from their voters and therefore able to better represent the interests of citizens, rather than serve their personal and party interests.

2. ECONOMIES THAT DELIVER TO (YOUNG) CITIZENS

Vision: By 2030, the Western Balkans have reached equal participation of youth in the employment, while active labour market measures are targeting the employment increase and contribute to the schemes which support young entrepreneurs.

Today, considerable gaps in labour market participation and school-to-work transition have not been adequately addressed in the Western Balkans. The youth unemployment rate in the region is among the highest in Europe, varying from around 25 percent in Serbia to almost 55.4 percent in Kosovo. Meanwhile, the percentage of youth in the category known as NEET (people who are not in education, employment, or training) is rising. Thus, young people and recent graduates are not well integrated into the labour market and their employment level is still below the region's potential.

The direct linkage with the issue of youth unemployment is the continuing trend of brain drain, including young people with particular skillsets. Given the negative demographic trends, it risks aggravating labour shortages in the future. Hence, unless something is undertaken urgently, the region will put in jeopardy the proper functioning of the public sector and service deliveries.

Very high unemployment among young people aged 18-24 (31 percent in 2018), including university graduates, points to a problem in aligning the education and training system with the needs of the labour market and a weak business environment that is still significantly underdeveloped to generate employment. Overall, young people seem to lack necessary skills to find work. Skills mismatch also hinders a more sustained labour market expansion. The 2018 PISA test results were far below the OECD average. They show that a large proportion of young people do not have the basic skills to enter the labour market, in addition to other reasons such as low mobility, unattractive wages and working conditions. The latest tracer studies on vocational education and training (VET) and higher education graduates show that young people are rarely well-matched to the jobs they hold early in their career.

Furthermore, new opportunities for job creation are scarce and localized, while labour mobility both within the countries and overall inside the region is low. If the Western Balkans governments intend to

change negative trends in emigration, substantial work must be done to facilitate labour mobility within the region. Along with the labour mobility, favourable conditions for starting a business are essential. Young start-uppers and entrepreneurs face complicated procedures due to unharmonized regulations. Active measures, such as the abolition of numerous para-fiscal fees and charges emanating from overlapping administrations, would encourage young entrepreneurs to start their business in the Western Balkans.

There are also significant disincentives to work in the region. One such problem are the relatively high social security contribution rates that create high tax wedge on low-wage earnings. In addition, social expenditure is largely concentrated on categorical benefits and pensions, with limited investments in human capital. Another pressing issue is the high level of informal economy, whose share in total employment is significant (for instance, around 30 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Informality has numerous adverse effects. It creates unfair competition for formal businesses, limiting their opportunities for expansion and further investments in their development, innovation and productivity. According to surveys, competitors' informal activity is seen as the major obstacle to doing business in the region.

Tackling high youth unemployment should be a national priority for all Western Balkans Six. The first and most urgent measure should be the introduction of Youth Guarantees with priority for the most underdeveloped regions. The Youth Guarantee includes activities to reach out to non-registered NEETs in their direct environment and to connect them to individual services such as counselling, mediation and training. Some 100,000 young people (aged 15-29) are expected to benefit from the Youth Guarantee in the most underdeveloped parts of the Western Balkans. Furthermore, transferable skills should be tackled. In order to conduct a successful school-to-work transition, the youth in the region needs a set of transferable skills to be acquired during their primary education.

Training programs should be fundamental in addressing employment gaps and high levels of unemployment. With the contribution of employers and national employment agencies, this could increase the level of entrepreneurial skills and economic literacy. Furthermore, VET needs to be extended and streamlined.

Supporting the legislative/regulatory and institutional framework for integration into the regional market would finally contribute to higher mobility and youth employability throughout the region. While the focus should be on creating a single space where ideas, people and capital can flow, it will substantially open the path to creation of new and better-paid jobs.

3. EDUCATION THAT PROVIDES BASIS FOR A STABLE LIFE

Vision: By 2030, the Western Balkans Six have reformed their education systems in a way that they shape, connect and keep young people in touch with the real life and that they provide further development opportunities. This is best seen through sharp and continuous improvements of the PISA ranking of these countries. Furthermore, the education systems enable knowledge transfer about democratic values, civic rights and liberties, critical thinking skills, and understanding of individual responsibility and teamwork.

Today, access to education is not a challenge in the region, but access to quality education is considered a privilege. The education system fails to support young people and countries find themselves at the bottom of the international PISA ranking. Western Balkans students do not understand sufficiently what they read and learn to use it in practice and are barely functionally literate. The educational system leaves about four years of studying without any particular effect on the students, meaning that even though the first 11.8 years of schooling are mandatory, effective gain from the education is reached only after 6.8 years of schooling.²

Recently, some positive changes in the region could be observed in North Macedonia regarding changes in the civic education curricula. Until a couple of years ago, students were taught to obey the government and the rules, to be humble to whatever is provided to them by the state system. Today, curricula are more supportive and provide a surrounding that motivates the students to learn and explore the boundaries of their civic rights. Nevertheless, regionally speaking, critical thinking remains a skill not accounted for in formal education. In addition, youth participation both at school and local levels is dependent upon the good will of the schools in most of the Western Balkan countries. There is no systematically secured support for this process. This leaves young people out of social processes on daily basis, especially out of the policy creation and decision-making processes.

The first thing that needs to be properly addressed in the education systems in the region is the consecutive passing from one to another education level without using the knowledge in practice and getting familiarized with the labour market before finishing university. Numbers say that one quarter of university students in North Macedonia fake their obligatory work practice while studying, and, unfortunately, this is valid also for the other countries of the region.³ This is partially due to the lack of

² The World Bank, “If FYR Macedonia Acts Now, Children Born Today Could Be Healthier, Wealthier, More Productive”, October 2018. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/11/if-macedonia-acts-now-children-born-today-could-be-healthier-wealthier-more-productive>

³ Youth Educational Forum Research on Student Practice, 2016

preparedness, but also lack of connectivity between the academic curricula, labour market's needs and the private sector in particular. It is disappointing that even though above 90 percent of the young people participate in higher education, they grade it with a low 2.62 on a scale from 1-5. In accordance with this, they are also not satisfied with the skills they get from the education system and how they match with the demands of the private sector and labour market.⁴

When considering the education system and social surrounding of young people in the Western Balkan countries in general, it is important to look at their social capital. Currently, the rate of youth unemployment in North Macedonia is significantly higher, equalling 47 percent (dropping only 2 percent from 2015 -2019), than in the neighbouring Albania where it stands at about 22 percent (latest figures of first semester of 2019). A common feature in both countries is a significant number of young people that have never been to cinema or theatre. While national sources of information regarding the brain drain are virtually non-existent, we can rely on the alarming data from the recent World Bank report (2019) that states that already 500,000 people have left Macedonia, most of them young, well-educated and well-qualified. Having this insight, one can conclude that there is a need to increase the support for young people from within the education system, but also from their surrounding so that they can find ways for civic activism and participation in the labour market.

Instead of being a repetitive and rather theoretical experience, the education system in the region needs to be adjusted, upgraded, and aligned with European best practices, so that it is in accordance with the social context in which young generations grow. Instead of putting the students in a passive listening position in the classrooms, we must support their independent research, ideas and creativity so that they start shaping their respective societies as early as possible. The education system should be supportive of students, encouraging, instead of suppressing, their critical opinions and demands, preparing them for the life that comes. Education should not be seen as a goal in itself but rather as an empowering mechanism for social changes. Lastly, learning from peers across countries must become a common practice in the region as it is in the European Union. Instead of study visits that often become an eye opening experience about where and how young people live nowadays (and thus to an extent contribute to the brain drain from the region), learning from peers needs to become a sustainable educational practice and a positive model for cooperation and development of the region.

⁴ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, "Youth Study North Macedonia 2018/2019", 2018.

4. SOCIETIES THAT PROTECT THEIR ENVIRONMENT

Vision: By 2030, all Western Balkans countries are fully in line with the EU environmental standards. As a result, the number of premature deaths caused by exposure to air pollution is brought down to the EU average. The region’s ability to react to natural disasters is enhanced and fully integrated with the EU. The environmental agenda for the Western Balkans – financially and technically supported by the EU – contributes to the economic growth and creation of jobs. The European Commission extends the “European Green Deal” to include the Western Balkans.

Without breathing the oxygen, humans cannot survive long. Often, however, breathing can also cause human death through exposure to air pollutants, such as fine particular matter (PM_{2.5}).⁵ In the EU, only in 2015, this fine particular matter caused 391,000 premature deaths. Air pollution is also a major health hazard for people in the Western Balkans. According to data of the World Health Organization (WHO), quoted in the Guardian, half of Europe’s ten-most-polluted cities are in the Western Balkans.⁶ In 2015, exposure to PM_{2.5} alone was estimated by the European Environment Agency (EEA) to have caused more than 25,000 premature deaths in the Western Balkans (WB6).⁷ This means that on every 100,000 people in the Balkans 137 have died prematurely because of fine particular matter alone. This is two times more than in the EU28 (77) and six times more than in Ireland (24).

In order to improve the environmental situation in the Western Balkan countries, the region will need to have credible analysis of the current situation. In 2018, the EEA has for the first time included all Western Balkan states in its “Air quality in Europe report.”⁸ The report provided information on concentrations of air pollutants at country level and allowed for a credible comparison with the rest of the EU. Such credible data is essential and should continue to be provided.

Furthermore, the European Commission should offer to all countries in the region a clear roadmap to all the EU environmental legislation and standards. The governments should commit themselves to adopt and implement the entire EU environmental acquis by 2030. In return, the Commission should provide necessary feedback, as well as financial and technical support.

⁵ US Environmental Protection Agency, “Particulate Matter (PM) Pollution”, 2019.

<https://www.epa.gov/pm-pollution/particulate-matter-pm-basics>

⁶ The Guardian, “Pant by numbers: the cities with the most dangerous air – listed”, 13 February 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/datablog/2017/feb/13/most-polluted-cities-world-listed-region>

⁷ European Environmental Agency, “EEA Report No 12/2018”, 2018.

<https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2018>

⁸ European Environmental Agency, “EEA Report No 12/2018”, 2018.

<https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2018>

At a time when the European continent is confronted with more complex and frequent natural disasters, the capacity of the Western Balkan countries to respond is far below that of the EU. Many natural disasters in this decade – such as floods in May 2014 – showed lack of effective cross-border cooperation among the Western Balkan countries as well as with their EU neighbours. Due to the geographic position, these disasters affect not just the region but the EU as well.

All six Western Balkan countries should be invited to take part in the EU system to tackle natural disasters (rescEU). Recently established, it is fully financed by the EU and assists countries “in responding to disasters, when national capacities are overwhelmed.”⁹ In the same way as for the EU member states, the Commission should also provide support for “the adaptation, repair, transport and operation costs of their existing resources.” In return, the Commission should request from the Western Balkans Six to develop and implement national prevention and preparedness strategies.

The new European Green Deal announced by the Commission President in December 2019 pledges to make the EU climate neutral by 2050. This plan is commendable but should include and be extended to the Western Balkans. The Western Balkans are in the immediate geographical proximity to the EU. As climate change knows no borders, the environmental situation in this region should be of immediate concern to the EU.

5. WITH A SHARED COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS

Vision: By 2030, the Balkans is a peaceful region of democratic and open societies. It is built on a shared rejection of ethnic nationalism, a common appreciation of every human life, and a shared commitment to justice for every victim.

Over the past several years, regional cooperation among the countries of former Yugoslavia regarding prosecution of war crimes has been stagnating or even deteriorating. On the national level, there is a somewhat consistent progress observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Prosecution office continues active operation, even against mid- and high-ranking officials, and in Kosovo with the establishment of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office. However, in other countries, local judiciaries are demonstrating both the signs of political pressure and of inability to adequately prosecute persons responsible for war crimes. Croatia has seen significant regress in this process after becoming a member state of the EU, after the pressure of EU accession negotiations faded.

⁹ European Commission, “rescEU: a new European system to tackle natural disasters”, November 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/resceu-new-european-system-tackle-natural-disasters-2017-nov-23-0_en

Serbia, to date, has failed to prosecute high-ranking officials. Both countries engage less and less in regional cooperation, for example, in exchange of information and evidence.

These developments, or the lack thereof, are coupled with the denial and relativization from the top levels of governments, each providing exclusive, one-sided narratives that reject facts established at the ICTY and other courts to date. Such interpretations are exerting severe pressure on regional cooperation. Even humanitarian processes, such as locating and identifying missing persons, are heavily burdened by these verbal conflicts.

The EU is in a problematic situation when it comes to transitional justice processes in the Balkans, although they are supposed to be a key part of the acquis and accession negotiations. The fact that Croatia became a member — without accepting the findings of the ICTY, without following-up on them at the level of local judiciary, without significant investments in regional cooperation in criminal matters, without building sufficient capacity on a national level to enable its judicial system to adequately prosecute persons responsible for war crimes — makes it hard but even more necessary to be clear about the expectations from other countries. There is a clear sense that the countries in the region do not see the potential for benevolent cooperation in establishment of justice. This is due to widespread identification with and glorification of war criminals. This demonstrates that the nationalist ideology still reigns in the Balkans.

Unfortunately, this is in accordance with nationalistic trends in many EU member states and beyond the EU. Some EU representatives are ready to accept the violations of basic fundamental rights – like media freedom – in order to achieve political aims. One example is the negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo, which led to neglecting of unacceptable domestic political developments in both countries. Liberal forces in the EU and its member states as well as the Western Balkan countries must fight together against a revisionist tendency among the political elites. The European project can only be successful if recognition of one own's crimes and reconciliation with former enemies are going hand in hand.

At the same time, no democratic nation can exist without a viable system that helps it to build a system of accountability. A functional, independent and unbiased justice system is a *conditio sine qua non* of a democratic state. And in the Balkans, the ability to effectively prosecute war crimes, alongside the ability to prosecute (political) corruption, is the indicator of how (under)developed, (un)biased and (in)dependent a judicial system is. Differently put, former Yugoslav nations will never be stable and peaceful democracies if significant investments are not made to strengthen their justice systems and enable them to prosecute those responsible for the most heinous violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

As for reconciliation, it simply cannot be forged on the basis of denial and evasion of responsibility. It cannot be forged if each side sees pain only in their own victims, if each side finds excuses for inexcusable crimes committed by those who wore their flag. There will only be a possibility of reconciliation when there is a recognition of humanity in the ‘other’.

In order to remedy the current situation, the Balkan societies and leaders must acknowledge the injustices, regardless of who they were committed by, and engage in bona fide cooperation aimed at bringing justice for all victims. The EU, on the other hand, should be explicit and consistent in insisting on the development of sufficient local judicial capacities; should support and, when necessary, facilitate processes of regional cooperation around humanitarian issues and criminal matters; and should openly politically support initiatives from civil society, such as RECOM, that aim at achieving progress in the area of justice and reconciliation.

6. EMPOWERED YOUTH THAT COOPERATES

Vision: By 2030, programs and instruments to empower youth of all genders have expanded significantly. This is achieved through youth mobility programs to facilitate young people’s participation in decision-making processes on local, national and regional levels.

Today, young people of the Western Balkans face a lot of challenges in their countries, starting from high unemployment rates, low-quality education, lack of conducive environment for volunteering and participation in different activities outside the region. This is due to the visa issues, migration and different social-economic inequalities. There is also a lack of opportunities for young people to become part of decision-making processes and have a say in policymaking, even when it comes to processes that concern young people directly, such as the education system. Considering that education should be tailored to the needs of the youth, excluding them from consultations on reform processes contributes to their lack of motivation to be active participants in their societies.¹⁰

Fortunately, some initiatives to encourage regional cooperation and youth mobility have already been undertaken. There is a decision to increase youth mobility by doubling Erasmus+ funding. The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) as an independently functioning institutional mechanism was founded by six participating countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) with an aim to increase youth exchanges through promoting reconciliation, trust and cooperation.

¹⁰ Civil Society and Youth Engagement in the Western Balkans, “Policy Brief 05/19”, 2019.

To improve the status of the youth, more can be done, however. Governments should create possibilities and conditions for young people to address their needs notwithstanding the field of interest. To achieve that, each of the respective Western Balkan countries should address the position of the youth in the broader society by adopting youth policies, youth action programs and youth strategies. In this respect, most of the Western Balkan countries, except North Macedonia and Albania, have passed a law on the youth. However, one should always monitor the quality of its implementation. Furthermore, continuous support should be given to young people with regard to their mobility in order to raise their participation on the national level as well. Youth mobility also needs to be tackled from the perspective of mutual recognition of diplomas.

In order to identify the challenges and overcome future problems related to youth cooperation, Western Balkan countries should survey the young people themselves. It is necessary to gain an input from those youths people who have been part of various mobility programs or other platforms. This would help understand the benefits but also drawbacks of those programs and to improve their quality.

Young people lack information about youth cooperation opportunities. It is essential to make this information more accessible to youth in innovative and creative ways. Mobility programs should be made more accessible to people from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds as well. Moreover, financial issues are another obstacle that prevents youngsters from becoming mobile. In this regard, donors and institutions should address the programs that they already support or find a better formula that could make them more inclusive. For example, support to educational mobility incentives and more scholarships should be given.

Further legislative and institutional frameworks in the area of mobility would have a significant impact on strengthening youth cooperation. A well-implemented framework will provide support to local and national mobility programs as well.

7. MIGRATION WITH BENEFITS

Vision: By 2030, all Western Balkan states have introduced EU comparable policies on emigration and circular migration. The *formal circular migration programs* in the Western Balkans attract the region's diaspora that only a decade earlier was a single untapped potential and global asset for the region.

Today, one of the biggest challenges for the Western Balkans is the large number of people leaving their countries every year in pursuit of a better life. According to the recent Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) survey in the Western Balkans, nearly one in two respondents contemplated looking for a job

abroad. Every year, thousands depart from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia (EU member state) – among them, many highly educated. The scope of this emigration is best understood when compared to worldwide trends. While overall the share of sourced population in countries that are living overseas is only about 3 percent, in the Western Balkans, it is 31,2 percent. Evidently, such mass emigration has a severe impact on the public sector (health care primary, as well as higher education, science, public administration); however, what remains untold is that emigration also brings much necessary vigour, human capital exchange, transfer of know-how and so much more.

The evidence shows that many emigrants would be willing to contribute to their home country – in some cases, even return for a certain period or permanently, given that conditions back home improve, primarily socio-economic but also political. Circular migration schemes are rare and often overlook the real potential that diaspora can generate. Western Balkans lacks systematic evidence about emigrants, their skills sets, locations, preferences, competences and agendas. But the available data shows that the returning emigrant commands a 7 percent premium in salary relative to people with similar qualifications and experience who have never lived abroad.

Emigrants from the Western Balkans tend to work hard and are well regarded by both employers and their host country, possess invaluable qualifications that make them instrumental for the labour market and economy back home. If Western Balkans policies were even partially designed to attract people back home, offering meaningful incentives and decent opportunities, in the short run, the region would be able to rebuild valuable communities. Currently, there is very little understanding of where to look for answers on emigration.

Engaging with diaspora is critical not only to help consolidate the regional economic outlook, bring the latest cutting-edge technologies into the region and deepen know-how, but even more importantly it can profoundly challenge current political narratives and help to bring about much-needed energy and change. Questions like “What are the experiences of the emigrants?” “Under which conditions would they consider returning to the region?” and, ultimately, “What policies could bring a meaningful change in the medium term?” need to be answered. Credible research and chronic lack of solid data on emigration is one of the key impediments to any sound policies or future roadmaps on emigration and circular migration.

To overcome such limitations, the Western Balkans governments, along with its specialized agencies and with an assistance of the EU counterparts must commit to a comprehensive mid- to long-term continuous research and analysis and explore all the aspects of the emigration and possibilities to attract their citizens back. Research results will directly feed into the future policies and facilitate development of the region.

Effective policies that promote the circular migration can simplify and foster the progress of the region. Moreover, emigration must be part of any high-level EU - Western Balkans agenda and the governments of the Western Balkans must look for complementary policies within the EU and introduce a set of new policies, thus opening opportunities for their citizens.

8. INTERCONNECTED REGION

On the eve of 2030, during the EU-Western Balkans Summit, all six Western Balkan countries are launching the “*Balkanenum*”, a regional office that will represent the interests of the Western Balkans within the EU. Cooperation among the countries in the region is gradually being rooted in socio-political and economic spheres. The political elites are now convinced that regional cooperation indeed is a rightful method for solving bilateral issues and for reaching agreements in the most notorious open issues. It also does not require the heavy involvement of external actors in the process. This regional cooperation is not in contradiction to a common European perspective. On the contrary, it helps to build a stronger European Union.

The aftermath of the Prespa Agreement – despite all hurdles – had a positive spill-over effect. Its impact was extensively reflected on the Kosovo–Serbia EU facilitated dialogue, paving the way for the Comprehensive Normalization Agreement that is to be reached at the end of 2020. Both parties have since been committed to the effective implementation with the external assistance provided by the EU. Solving the political dispute between Kosovo and Serbia served as an initial step to overcome the challenges of cooperation between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, the five EU non-recognizers have gradually reconsidered their approach toward Kosovo. This also unlocked the EU perspective for the country, enabling it to catch up with others in the region.

Cooperation between the six Western Balkan countries is now an essential element serving as a driving force toward stability in the region, good neighbourly relations replaced nationalism discourse and intolerance, thus paving the way for wider societal development within the region. The new constellation and removed obstacle within the region have created a favourable atmosphere in which all countries committed to working jointly with the EU to strategically pursue the goal of EU membership through multi-frontal proactive and mutual support.

With the bilateral disputes out of picture, the long lasting “stabilitocracy” deeply imbedded in the relations between EU and the Western Balkans countries became irrelevant. Free from populism and nationalism, all six countries committed to working together in delivering tangible results in Chapter 23 and 24 by joining efforts in the fight against corruption and organized crime in the region. This would

mark the last round of reforms before closing these chapters to further proceed completing the EU membership process.

The improvement of rule of law with focus on transparency, accountability, and effectiveness, followed up by regional cooperation contributed to creating a solid environment for economic development. Furthermore, it attracted foreign direct investment – mainly from the EU, thus making the Western Balkans a competitive region in Europe. By 2030, all countries in the region are trading freely with each other, thus impacting positively trade between the region and the EU. Countries are actively working on breaking the last barriers hindering regional cooperation, such as infrastructure projects on transportation. Further, they are jointly co-funding – with the help of the EU – the railway linking Pristina and Belgrade, thereby connecting the entire region with the EU.

With improved freedom of movement, people to people communication also increases. Mobility of students and workers made the region attractive for the young people, but it also started to stimulate brain-gain. All government are working on further strengthening the “Balkanus” scholarship and exchange program for the students studying in all Western Balkans. Many joint projects are ongoing, aiming to positively contribute to this new Western Balkans Six reality.

As it stands today, it is important for the countries in the region to understand that regional cooperation should be enhanced for the benefits of the six Western Balkans and their citizens and not to be used as a tool to please Brussels, nor as another ‘tick-in-the-box’ in the EU integration. The leaders ought to understand that even after joining the Union, the Balkans will remain a region within the Union – similarly to the Visegrad Four – and as such, it is important to strengthen regional cooperation prior to entering the EU.

The political elites of the region must understand that solving all open bilateral disputes is the key to the success of the region and individual countries particularly. Following the example of Greece and North Macedonia, it is crucial that countries take full ownership in solving bilateral disputes with support from the EU throughout the process. They should further work on enhancing economic and infrastructure cooperation. The connectivity agenda should remain as a top priority for all Western Balkan countries, including transport, energy, digitalization and mobility, and be recognized as the crucial element behind regional development. As such, all six Western Balkan countries should invest and generate funds to support connectivity agenda, while seeking support from the EU to make this a Pan-European agenda. The Berlin Process is a necessary forum for fostering regional cooperation. All countries should use this high-level platform to keep political ties solid within the region and with the EU, but also to further

improve regional cooperation in terms of infrastructure. In line with this, countries should proactively work on removing economic barriers and jointly contributing to the creation of a regional economic area.

Investments in the youth education and exchanges are required. They would gradually establish the already missed connections among young generations in the Balkans. In addition, further investment in strengthening the RYCO will be a strategic short-term goal, whereas in the longer run, it is crucial to deepen cooperation among youth, in culture, sports, and art platforms. University exchanges between students and academic staff are significant as they link higher education institutions within the region as well. There is a need to further support free and independent civil society sector (including NGOs, think-tank community and experts) in all countries and to solidify cooperation among already existing civil society networks. Moreover, the EU should be invited to continue supporting the civil society sector in the region as a way to ensure transparent, accountable, and effective political process.

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In this project, young people from all six Western Balkans states participated in meetings, brainstorming sessions and public events we have organized. This paper was drafted by some of them and reflects parts of discussions led and ideas that emerged since the project started.

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