

Strengthening Youth Cooperation within the Western Balkans 6 Participants

- Concept Note -

This concept note will propose ideas for the structure and content of the future Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), as well as recommend concrete steps for its establishment.

Participants in establishing the Regional Youth Cooperation Office will include the following: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo*,¹ Macedonia, and Serbia (hereinafter: WB 6 Participants).

This paper serves as a framework for discussion, and will be sent to all governments and relevant civil society representatives within the region for further consultations and developments.

This concept note is based on various sources, including the outcomes from the Fact Finding Mission,² already existing reports, working papers and recommendations in this field.³ It has been established by the Fact-Finding-Group (FFG) which has been working between June and August 2015 on the topic of the future RYCO, in close cooperation with representatives of youth organizations. The present version of the concept note has been elaborated after a working meeting of the Fact-Finding-Group in Tirana the 31th July / 1st August 2015, which included a meeting with CSOs in the field of youth from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Some parts have been updated after another meeting of the FFG which took place from 26 to 28

¹ Kosovo*: This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence

² Based on an initiative of the Serbian and Albanian governments and organized by the Franco-German Youth Office (DFJW/OFAJ), 5 representatives of the Ministries of Youth of Albania, Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro and representative of the National Youth Council of Serbia participated in a Fact-Finding Seminar in Paris, Berlin and Vienna from 29th of June until 4th of July 2015 to work on proposals and questions related to the development of a Western Balkan Youth Office structure. During the fact-finding-mission this expert group discussed with a number of organizations, governments and member of parliaments to learn more about different aims, organizational form, legal status, experiences, good practices and lessons learned of other similar structures and role of governments and the role of civil society in regard to this initiative. Meetings were held with: Franco-German Youth office in Paris and Berlin, Franco-Quebec Youth Office in Paris, German-Polish Youth Office in Potsdam and Warsaw, Former Baltic Sea Secretariat for Youth Affairs, Coordination Center for German-Czech Youth Exchange in Regensburg. Mr Josip Juratovic, member of the German Bundestag, Commission of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria, Ministry of Town, Youth and Sports of France, Ministry of family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth of Germany, Federal ministry of Family and Youth of Austria, International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany (IJAB), National Umbrella Organization of Youth " Bundesjugendring", Erste Foundation in Austria.

³ Documents used: Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, Berlin, August 2014; Summary Report, DFJW/OFAJ – Participation of Representatives of Youth Ministries of the Governments of the Western Balkans at the DFJW/OFAJ Partner Conference “Daring more Dialogue” in Sarajevo, June 2015; Joint Declaration on Youth Cooperation, Tirana, May 2015; Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Conference Report “Regional Youth Exchange Program”, June 2015; Youth Initiative for Human Rights: Framework for Establishing Western Balkans Youth Office, February 2015; “Joint Declaration on the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans” by the Prime Ministers of the WB6 participants, Vienna, 27.8.2015

August in Vienna, during the Western Balkans Summit in Vienna where was signed the “Joint Declaration on the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans” by the Prime Ministers of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

A. General remarks

1. Context

The Western Balkans share both common heritage and common challenges. Conflicts of the past decades have conceived different forms of prejudice and intolerance, but time has shown that only through joint action in promoting tolerance, solidarity and cooperation we can progress. A new generation of leaders of social development, with the support of established institutions, should be the ones who will show that cooperation is possible and necessary, resulting in social, economic and cultural development of the region.

At present, mobility within the region is low. Young people are facing obstacles—often due to administrative barriers and mental barriers caused by lack of trust, lack of information, and existing prejudices. Additional mobility challenges are related to the recognition of school and university diplomas, which lead to a paucity of employment and academic specialization opportunities for young people.

This initiative puts the concepts of friendship and reconciliation into focus, guided by the experience of the Franco-German Youth Office, along with other successful European youth cooperation projects which established new relationships and significantly improved cooperation. We emphasize that the founding of the Franco-German Youth Office—established by the governments of Germany and France after the Second World War as a mechanism of reconciliation—contributed to fostering cooperation between France and Germany. It even still exists in its original form, as a youth exchange program which annually involves about 200,000 young people from these two countries.

Previous similar initiatives of youth organizations from the Western Balkan region indicate that young people recognize the need for networking and cooperation. Although not all of these initiatives have fully achieved their desired objectives, they transmit another important message: without active institutional support from the highest levels of their governments, they will fail to fully accomplish their missions and goals.

Establishment of a formal regional youth exchange program was initiated at the Conference on the Western Balkans in Berlin in August 2014.

2. Mission

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an institutional mechanism for sustainable regional cooperation among young people, established by regional governments to promote reconciliation,

mobility, participation, active citizenship and intercultural learning, in an European spirit and within the European integration process of the region.

3. Values

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office should be established on values: peace, trust based on mutual understanding, respect for human rights, solidarity and cooperation, non-discrimination, tolerance, respect and acceptance of diversity as the basis of democratic progress in modern society. Everyone should be allowed to actively participate in such a society, applying an inclusive approach without making distinctions on any basis.

4. Goals

This initiative aims to: achieve reconciliation; enhance regional mobility and participation; and intercultural learning of young people.

The process of establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office will join efforts of the institutions responsible for youth and education, representative bodies of young people and youth associations. These efforts hope to create conditions for the promotion of young peoples' regional cooperation, raise quality of life standards in the Western Balkans, and support a common European future.

Each government should provide the necessary coordination between the Youth Ministry and all other Ministries which are relevant for the implementation of the programs, in order to insure the best possible functioning of the RYCO and to address potential obstacles concerning the implementation of the exchange programs.

The aimed mechanism will build capacities of young people who will, based on experience gained through participation in regional projects, contribute to the promotion of democratic values and human rights, and fight against the racism, xenophobia, hate speech and discrimination (based on ethnicity, religious, gender and mother tongue) that is still present in our region. The establishment of the sustainable regional cooperation among youth and institutions for young people, on long-term basis should result in stability and progress of the region, as well as build a platform for further development of cooperation between the parties involved in mobility, education, research, innovation, professional practice and employment.

This platform for exchange of young people, organizations and institutions should ensure active participation, and respond to the real needs of young people. At the same time, it should provide them with the opportunity to both improve and progress, thus contributing to the overall development of the Western Balkans and overcoming existing prejudices among individuals, nations and societies.

Regional youth cooperation has also the aim to contribute to the improvement of the relations between young people of different communities *within* the different WB 6 Participants.

5. Establishment and Legal Status

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office is an independent international organization established by WB 6 Participants as guarantees of its functioning and sustainability. It is essential to define means in order to secure the independence of the RYCO. Civil society should play a significant role in outlining the mandate of the RYCO and designing its activities.

6. Members/Participants

Participants include: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo*, Macedonia, Serbia.

Even if Croatia and Slovenia did not sign the “Joint Declaration on the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans” the 27.8.2015 in Vienna, it is not excluded that both countries might join or participate at the RYCO after its establishment.

7. Timeframe

The necessary working documents for the functioning of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office should be elaborated until 1st March 2016, and adopted by the governments in spring 2016.

Official opening of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office should happen at the August 2016 Conference of the Western Balkans in Paris.

Regional Youth Cooperation Office should become operational with pilot programs in September 2016 and fully operational (with annual budget) in January 2017.

B. Establishment of a Working Group for the implementation of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office

1. Composition and general aim

The governments will establish a Working Group which is tasked to develop concrete proposals for the mission, structure, activities and financing of the future Youth Office. During its working period, the Working Group will coordinate the organization of national consultation activities in the WB6-Participants plus Croatia and Slovenia in order to inform stakeholders and the general public about the future Youth Office and to exchange with them about the initiative. The Working Group will also initiate the process of developing an action plan for the implementation of the future programs of the RYCO.

The Working Group is composed of 2 persons per WB 6 Participants : one representative from Youth Ministry/Directorate for Youth / National Agency for Youth, and one representative from Youth organizations. For the purpose of the continuity of the work, it is recommended that the members of the Fact Finding Group will become members of the Working Group, insuring institutional memory and integration of new members in the Working Group.

The Fact Finding Group strongly recommends that process of nomination/selection of the CSO representatives in the Working Group should be done in transparent and democratic way, respecting the current setting and framework of national youth policy in each participant, as well as the criterion of representativity.

Decision-making process in the WG is to be done in line with basic principles of co-management and structural dialog, through consensus of all participants.

The Working Group will associate external experts and relevant organizations and institutions during its working process.

The Franco-German Youth Office will provide the Working Group with technical assistance.

The Working Group will regularly report about its work to the respective governments.

The Working Group will start working in October 2015 and present its proposals until 1st March 2016. Three working meetings of a duration of at least three days each are foreseen within this period.

2. Tasks

2.1. Developing proposals for the structure of the RYCO

The working group will develop proposals for the structure of the RYCO, with respect to: legal framework; the principle of efficiency, transparency and accountability; multilateral approaches; and youth participation in the decision-making process, with special reference to the uniqueness of this program. OFAJ as a model is not relevant when it comes to the structure as it is a bilateral relation while RYCO has a multilateral character.

It is recommended that RYCO has a structure which is avoiding too much bureaucracy and large structural costs.

This structure should involve representatives of governments, institutions, civil society, and experts. Principles of co-management should be respected.

One possibility for the bodies of the Youth Office could be:

- Managing Board: Composed of Government and Youth representatives;
- Advisory Board: Composed of experts, civil society, institutions;

- Secretariat: Is operational, professional, independent body;
- Contact points in eight capitals.

2.2 Developing proposals for activities of the RYCO

The working group will develop concrete proposals for program areas and activities. This involves the development of guidelines for structuring the work of RYCO; definition of the eligibility criteria for the applicants ; development of pedagogical tools specified for the region; and trainings for trainers in the process of establishment of RCYO.

Among the possible domains of activities figure:

- Education and Research: This program could support exchanges of elementary and high schools, universities, young scientists and researchers, as well as internships, fellowships, trainings and apprenticeships. This program area covers non-formal education, youth workers, and professional exchanges.
- Culture and Sports: This program could support joint activities and coproduction in fields of arts and culture, as well as exchanges in amateur sports.
- Participation and Activism: This program would enhance and foster the development of active citizenship and youth participation in the decision making processes, as well as different volunteering programs.
- Capacity-building for all persons who are involved on the institutional level and on the program development and implementation level, in order to insure the competences of the involved persons and the quality of the implemented programs

The Working Group will have to find appropriate approaches to address the linguistic question concerning the functioning of the RYCO and the implementation of the programs.

2.3 Developing proposals for the Administrative Procedures and Resources

The working group will define proposals for the development of administrative procedures, examination of legal frameworks of taxing and finance, assessment of necessary resources, exploration of funding opportunities, and—accordingly—suggestion of approximate annual budget and funding strategy.

The budget should be based on a clear binding agreement, which obliges the WB 6 Participants plus Croatia and Slovenia to allocate funds as annual financial contributions for the work of RCYO. Additional funding may be provided by other donors.

Criteria for financial contributions could be developed based on GDP, number of inhabitants, and similar criteria in order to insure proportional responsibility.

2.4. Organization of information and consultation activities to prepare stakeholders and general public to the RYCO

The Working group will coordinate national information and consultation events, for example one-day-conference, in order to introduce the RYCO to the wider public and to associate interested stakeholders in the working process. This will be done in cooperation with the CSOs of the respective WB 6 Participants, in order to insure visibility, awareness and dissemination of the process of the establishment of the RYCO.

3. Budget

The estimated budget for the Working Group for the period from September 2015 until February 2016 is 75.000 Euro (on the basis of travel and accommodation costs for five three-day working meetings for members of Working Group plus invited experts, fees for external experts, translation of documents, and other costs).

The financing should be provided by national governments, European Union and other donors.

4. Action Plan / Timeline

After adopting the Vienna Declaration on Regional Youth Cooperation, the Working Group will realize the necessary preparations for the establishment of RYCO.

Deadline for all the preparatory work is 1st March 2016, leaving enough time for WB 6 Participants to reach consensus on key questions. The necessity of a five-month preparatory work cannot be underestimated, keeping in mind the complexity of the process and the long-term importance of this initiative.

The Working Group will foresee five working meetings of a duration of at least three days each.

For a detailed working plan see the document *“How to continue after Vienna? Proposals related to the Working Group which will establish the concrete bases of the future “Regional Youth Cooperation Office” of the Western Balkans”*, elaborated by the Fact-Finding-Group during its working meeting in Vienna, 26-28.8.2015

Elaborated after the working meeting in Tirana, 4th August 2015, and updated after the working meeting in Vienna, 26-28.8.2015

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