



# **REGIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP MOBILITY PROGRAMME**

## **MAPPING ANALYSIS OF YOUTH EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

**OPEN SOCIETY  
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WESTERN BALKANS

## **Disclaimer**

This Advocacy Research Report is prepared by Regional Cooperation II Working Group of the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Program 2024 (RYLMP).

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The Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme is a collaborative effort between the Centre for Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV), the Youth Educational Forum (YEF) from North Macedonia, and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) from Serbia with the financial support of the Open Society Foundations in Western Balkans (OSFWB).

The views in this document are solely of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the project cohort nor the Open Society Foundation Western Balkans (OSFWB).

# Introduction

The Western Balkans, a region with a complex history of conflicts and alliances, has experienced significant changes over recent decades. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s resulted in a series of destructive wars, ethnic tensions, and political instability, leaving lasting scars and divisions among the nations. However, the new millennium brought opportunities for reconciliation and cooperation, notably through the establishment of the Berlin Process in 2014. This initiative aimed to promote regional cooperation, economic development, and European integration, paving the way for a more stable and prosperous future.

A major outcome of the Berlin Process was the recognition of youth's crucial role in fostering long-term peace and cooperation. Consequently, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) was created in 2016 by the governments of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. As an intergovernmental organization, RYCO is dedicated to promoting reconciliation, trust, cooperation, and dialogue among young people in the Western Balkans through various youth exchange programmes. RYCO's mission is to empower youth to become agents of positive change, bridging historical divides and building a unified regional identity.

Youth exchange programmes are widely acknowledged as a powerful tool for improving intra-regional relations. Numerous studies have shown that these exchanges significantly contribute to cultural understanding, conflict resolution, and the development of a shared regional identity. By providing young people with opportunities to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds, these programmes help dismantle prejudices, foster mutual respect, and cultivate a generation that values cooperation over conflict.

This paper aims to highlight the critical importance of youth exchange programmes in the Western Balkans. Specifically, it seeks to:

- Emphasize the role of youth exchanges in enhancing regional cooperation and understanding.
- Provide comprehensive mapping of existing youth exchange programmes available in the Western Balkans, serving as a resource for young people seeking opportunities to participate.
- Offer recommendations to stakeholders on how to allocate their efforts effectively to maximize the impact of these programmes.
- Serve as reference for future initiatives aimed at fostering youth cooperation and regional stability.

By exploring these objectives, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and underscore the transformative potential of youth exchange programmes in building a more connected and harmonious region.

# Historical Context of Regional Cooperation in the Balkans

Understanding the historical context of regional cooperation in the Balkans is crucial for grasping the current dynamics and challenges. Historically, the Balkans has been marked by conflicts and divisions due to ethnic tensions, religious differences, and geopolitical interests.

However, the post-conflict era has seen various initiatives aimed at fostering regional cooperation and stability.

Bechev (2006) discusses the European Union as a key actor in fostering stability and enhancing relations between Balkan states. Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans was mainly driven by external actors, including the European Union (EU), the United States (US), and international economic institutions, as a response to the prolonged discord and insufficient cooperation, especially after the Yugoslav succession conflict. Local scepticism about neighbouring countries persisted, viewing them as adversaries rather than allies, which made progress reliant on these external agents.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Balkans Policy Research Group (BPRG) (2021) notes that “new regionalism” arrived late in the Western Balkans due to the events of the 1990s. Initially seen as a peace and security strategy, it was soon bolstered by various regional initiatives, including the Stability Pact and the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), which involved countries beyond the Western Balkans.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, Busek & Kühne (2010) argue that Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe (SPSEE), coined by the European Union in June 1999, obliged the so-called post-Yugoslav states as well as Albania, the membership-aspiring countries, to forge and develop regional cooperation programmes, to further improve the internal Balkan relations.<sup>3</sup>

The first Summit that brought together EU officials and leaders of the Western Balkan countries in Zagreb in November 2000 introduced a change in the EU approach towards the potential accession candidates of the Western Balkans. The Thessaloniki Council from June 2003, encompassed the Second EU-Western Balkans Summit.

According to Petričušić (2005) the commencement of such gatherings confirmed that the EU still regarded the region as a whole; nevertheless each country was given a chance to be rewarded individually for its progress. In other words, the progress of each country would depend on the ability and political will to introduce the necessary reforms and to implement and respect generally accepted rules and standards. Thus, leading the countries of the region to commit themselves at the Thessaloniki Summit to enhanced regional cooperation and the promotion of a series of specific objectives and initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

Building on this historical background, it is important to recognize the report of Balkans Policy Research Group (BPRG) (2018) which explains that the 2003 Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki promised deepening of relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. Yet, the prospect of EU membership did not advance; in reality it stagnated. The failure of the Thessaloniki Summit led Germany to bring a new initiative to the region<sup>5</sup>.

Paszkiwicz (2009) explains that to streamline the flow of information and funds between international organizations and Balkan countries, the Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in 2007. The RCC's primary aim is to support,

coordinate, and consolidate the key areas of regional cooperation in South-eastern Europe. The Council prioritized five fields previously distinguished by the Stability Pact: economic and social growth, infrastructure and energy, justice and internal affairs, security cooperation, and enhancing the quality of human resources. The Council's main task is to promote development in these areas while providing a unified organizational framework for regional cooperation. In addition, the RCC facilitates information exchange between Balkan countries and financial organizations and supports the substantiation of cooperation projects. According to the EU, the RCC plays a crucial role in fostering international cooperation and mitigating the lingering divisions from the Yugoslav conflicts. The Council's work is vital for the region as it manages the distribution of funds for multilateral projects<sup>6</sup>.

Full-fledged regional cooperation in the Western Balkans became feasible only after the agreement on Kosovo's regional representation in 2012 and the 2013 First Agreement on Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia. These developments paved the way for the Berlin Process in 2014, which further advanced regional cooperation among the "Western Balkans Six" (BPRG, 2021).

## Youth Exchange Programmes as a Bright Path for Regional Cooperation

Youth exchange programmes play a pivotal role in promoting regional cooperation and cultural understanding in the Balkans. Programmes such as Erasmus+ and RYCO are designed to facilitate cross-cultural interactions and collaborative projects among young people from different Balkan countries. These initiatives not only enhance participants' intercultural competence but also build networks that contribute to long-term regional stability.

Such programmes have a profound impact on overcoming conflicts in various regions by fostering mutual understanding, empathy, and cross-cultural dialogue among young people. These exchanges bring together youth from different backgrounds, often from regions with a history of tension or conflict, and immerse them in environments where they can share experience, perspectives, and cultures. By living and learning together, participants are encouraged to move beyond stereotypes and preconceived notions, developing a more nuanced understanding of the complexities underlying conflicts. This direct interaction helps break down barriers of mistrust and hostility, replacing them with personal connections and friendships that transcend national or ethnic divisions. Moreover, these exchanges empower young people with skills and knowledge needed to become peace-builders in their own communities. Through workshops, collaborative projects, and cultural activities, youth is equipped with tools for conflict resolution, critical thinking, and intercultural communication. As these young people return to their home regions, they often act as catalysts for change, promoting peace and reconciliation within their societies. Thus, youth exchanges play a critical role in transforming attitudes and behaviour that perpetuate conflict, laying the groundwork for long-term peace and stability in conflicted regions.

A notable example is the relationship between France and Germany, which was marred by prolonged animosity and wars, most notably the two World Wars. In the aftermath of World War II, Europe was left divided and scarred by deep-rooted hostilities. However, initiatives like Erasmus+ have significantly contributed to healing these wounds by

promoting cross-border cooperation and intercultural understanding. Through student exchanges, collaborative academic programmes, and joint research projects, Erasmus+ has provided young people from France and Germany the opportunity to live, study, and work together. This has facilitated the development of a shared European identity, diminishing nationalistic sentiments and fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding. The programme has enabled generations of French and German students to overcome the historical grievances that once divided their countries. By creating personal connections and shared experience, Erasmus+ has played a critical role in transforming old rivalries into a robust partnership, now seen as the cornerstone of European integration.<sup>7</sup>

As Director of the Franz Vranitzky Chair for European Studies at the University of Vienna Rainer Gries explains: "Youth exchange projects can offer something very rare to post-conflict societies: an open forum and a safe space for young people from (former) adversary communities to meet. Just two to three decades ago, their grandparents and parents might have been at war with each other. Now, young people from the region get to meet, to exchange thoughts, to become friends and to build bridges between their societies again." RYCO (2020).<sup>8</sup>

While both RYCO (Regional Youth Cooperation Office) and Erasmus+ are influential in promoting youth exchanges, it is essential to distinguish between them due to their unique origins, emergence, values, and approaches. RYCO was established in the Western Balkans, a region still grappling with the aftermath of recent conflicts, as a direct response to the need for reconciliation and regional cooperation. Its creation was driven by the region's specific historical context, focusing on healing wounds, fostering intercultural dialogue, and building trust among the youth of formerly adversarial nations. RYCO's programmes are deeply rooted in the region's socio-political realities, addressing the urgent need for peacebuilding and mutual understanding in a post-conflict society.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, Erasmus+ has a broader European scope, emerging from the European Union's long-standing commitment to integration, education, and mobility across its Member-States and beyond. It is built on values of European unity, diversity, and the promotion of a shared European identity, with a focus on academic and professional development, as well as fostering intercultural competence among youth. The Erasmus+ approach is more universal, emphasizing cross-border cooperation within a stable and integrated Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Given these differences, RYCO and Erasmus+ should be analysed and appreciated separately. While both aim to empower youth and promote intercultural understanding, RYCO is specifically tailored to address the unique challenges of the Western Balkans, whereas Erasmus+ operates on a broader, more generalized European platform. Recognizing the distinct missions and contexts of these programmes is crucial for understanding their respective impacts and contributions to youth development and regional stability.

## The Erasmus+ Programme

The Erasmus+ Programme stands as a crucial instrument of the European Union for fostering young people's personal, socio-educational, and professional development. The youth dimension of the Erasmus+ programme provides opportunities for young people and youth workers in the realm of non-formal learning. This dimension is accessible to young individuals, youth workers, and youth organizations from Erasmus+ partners in the Western Balkans, aiming to contribute to regional growth and strengthen ties with the EU. The proposed action will support these Erasmus+ partners in two primary ways: by increasing the number of non-formal learning projects involving organizations and

participants, particularly young people and youth workers, from the beneficiaries; and by enabling organizations from the beneficiaries to act as project coordinators and directly apply for EU grants under the Erasmus+ Programme framework (European Commission, 2014).<sup>11</sup>

## Regional Youth Cooperation Office Programme

Established in 2016 by the governments of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an intergovernmental organization committed to promoting reconciliation, trust, cooperation, and dialogue in the Western Balkans through youth exchange programmes.

By emphasizing youth cooperation, RYCO empowers young people to drive positive change within their communities. Operating in the six capitals of the Western Balkans, RYCO is uniquely positioned to advocate for the region's interests while addressing the diverse needs of all youth. To foster a supportive environment for youth development, RYCO invests in innovative ideas and collaborates with organizations and schools working with youth from various backgrounds. Through grant-making, capacity building, policy influence, and advocacy, RYCO has created opportunities for young people in the Western Balkans to engage in meaningful dialogue about the past, present, and future. This comprehensive approach has showcased the readiness of Balkan youth to discuss and address key issues, paving the way for a more unified and cooperative regional future (RYCO, 2020).<sup>12</sup>

## Impact of Youth Exchange Programmes

Research conducted by the University of Vienna on RYCO's programmes and their impact on youth reveals that young people feel increasingly enabled to build a regional community, enhancing their understanding of each other. According to the After Activity Questionnaires (2020), 90% of participants reported positive experience collaborating with peers from the WB6 region. RYCO's initiatives have been effective in increasing knowledge and capacity of youth and those working with them in areas such as peacebuilding, reconciliation, and addressing historical issues. Specifically, 78.93% of young participants and 85.12% of voluntary and professional workers reported increased knowledge about youth reconciliation, mobility, and cooperation following their involvement in RYCO-funded activities. This has fostered greater peace and cooperation in the region (RYCO, 2021)<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, young people in the Western Balkans are predominantly pro-European and view EU membership as crucial for ensuring long-term peace and stability in the region (RYCO Strategic Plan 2022–2024).<sup>14</sup>

## Overview of Exchange Projects and Experience in the Region

Regional exchange projects for youth have been at the attention of many donors and institutions. As part of this study report, the team researched and looked into all present and past implemented projects, in order to provide the reader with a first comprehensive mapping. This would be very useful for identifying patterns, shortcomings, good practices, and recommendations (which are included in the last chapter on conclusions).

After reviewing all programmes and projects, the team structured and grouped the projects in three main categories, based on the issues or areas they focus on: Human rights and values; Peace building and reconciliation; Empowering youth. Based on these categories, a description of each project, including objective and other details is offered below.

## Human Rights and Values

### Bridging Backgrounds Programme

The Bridging Backgrounds Programme empowers high-school students from Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia to foster tolerance, expand inter-ethnic understanding, and promote human rights in their communities. This programme is youth-oriented, working to foster tolerance, expand mutual understanding, and increase knowledge of human rights among youth in Macedonia.

The programme is divided into two phases: learning and activism. During the twelve-day residential learning phase, participants engage in human rights education activities, restorative practice workshops, community activism training, digital field trips, and discussions with distinguished activists, politicians, and academics. This phase aims to equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective community engagement and human rights advocacy.

In the activism phase, each participant designs and implements their own community-based project, supported by a micro-grant of up to \$250 and sustained mentorship from the organizing team. These projects focus on fostering mutual understanding and promoting human rights within their local communities, engaging at least twenty community members. This hands-on experience allows participants to apply their learning in real-world settings, making a tangible impact on their communities.

The goal of this programme is to empower youth to take action in their communities, fostering a new generation of leaders committed to tolerance, understanding, and human rights in the Western Balkans.

■ <https://bridgingbackgrounds.org/conference-program/>

### Intercultural Exchange in Switzerland by SEGA

The Intercultural Exchange Programme, currently taking place in the Children's Village Pestalozzi in Trogen, Switzerland, aims to equip participants with essential knowledge and skills related to children's rights, intercultural dialogue, anti-discrimination, mutual understanding, and respect for diverse values. This initiative is a part of the larger project "Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Macedonia", implemented by Coalition of Youth Organizations SEGA, with support of the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation.

The current intercultural exchange, which started on 2 October 2019, and will continue until 16 October 2019, involves 80 children – 40 from Serbia and 40 from Macedonia – hailing from five primary schools in Bitola, Kicevo, Gostivar, Skopje, and Kumanovo. This diverse group of participants engages in a series of workshops and activities designed to foster intercultural dialogue and understanding.

Throughout the exchange, participants are immersed in a comprehensive programme that includes workshops on children's rights, principles of intercultural communication,



and anti-discrimination. The goal is to promote mutual understanding and respect across cultures. Upon completing the exchange, participants will return to their schools with the action plans they developed during their time in Switzerland. These plans will enable them to share with their peers the newly acquired knowledge, ensuring that the programme's values are disseminated within their local communities.

The Intercultural Exchange Programme in Switzerland, organized by SEGA, has been conducted several times over the years. However, the 2019 exchange is notable for including participants from Serbia, making it a uniquely diversified experience. This expansion underscores the programme's commitment to fostering cross-cultural dialogue and understanding among youth from different backgrounds.

By participating in this intercultural exchange, children from Macedonia and Serbia gain invaluable experience that contributes to their personal growth and the promotion of intercultural understanding in their communities. The programme not only educates participants about children's rights and anti-discrimination but also encourages them to actively apply these principles in their daily lives, thereby creating a ripple effect of positive change.

<https://www.sega.org.mk/en/blog/15-youth-participation/198-intercultural-exchange-in-children-s-village-pestalozzi-trogen-switzerland>

### Youth Trail: Promoting OSCE Values in Western Balkans

The Youth Trail project aims to empower young people from the Western Balkans by promoting the values of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The initiative seeks to foster regional connectivity, peace, and security by engaging youth in discussions and activities centred on human rights, democracy, cooperation, and countering violent extremism.

The Youth Trail is an annual programme organized by the OSCE Presence in Albania, in partnership with the Municipality of Tirana, the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). It provides a week-long immersive experience for young people from across the Western Balkans, focusing on promoting OSCE values. The programme includes a blend of interactive sessions, simulations, and outdoor activities designed to engage participants in critical discussions on activism, youth engagement, gender equality, the fight against corruption, and countering violent extremism and radicalization.

Each year, around 40 participants aged 18-24 from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia come together in Tirana. The programme combines indoor workshops with outdoor explorations, including visits to significant cultural and historical sites in Tirana, such as the House of Leaves Museum. These activities provide participants with a comprehensive understanding of the OSCE's mission and values, fostering a sense of regional cooperation and mutual understanding.

The programme also emphasizes experiential learning, where participants engage in role-playing and simulations to better understand the complexities of human rights, democratic governance, and social justice. This hands-on approach is complemented by sessions led by OSCE experts and partners, providing in-depth insights into various themes such as anti-corruption, human rights, and civic engagement.

Youth Trail has a profound impact on its participants by providing a platform for learning,

exchange, and fun. It enables young people to discover neighbouring countries, traditions, and cultures through informal learning, which broadens their perspectives and fosters mutual understanding. The programme promotes creative thinking and problem-solving skills, encouraging participants to think outside the box and develop innovative solutions. By making new friends and engaging in diverse activities, participants enhance their sense of community and collaboration, which are vital for regional reconciliation and cooperation.

<https://www.osce.org/presence-in-albania/346636>

<https://www.rycowb.org/osce-and-ryco-bring-western-balkan-youth-together/>

## Peace-building and Reconciliation

### Mir Paqe Мир

The programme "Mir Paqe Мир" has been implemented through civil society training aimed at peace-building between formerly warring peoples. So far, it has been organized seven times. The training is also known as "Introduction to Peace-building". Although there is no age limit for participants, young people are equally important participants in these trainings. During the years when the training were organized, 17 best applicants were selected. The training is a result of collaboration among three organizations: Peace Action Prilep - Tetovo, Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution from Skopje, MKD, and Centre for Nonviolent Action Sarajevo - Belgrade. Participants come from North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia, and the working languages are Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian-Macedonian and Albanian, conducted on the territory of North Macedonia. The goal of the training is to establish dialogue between participants, mutual understanding, as well as confronting one's own past.

<https://nenasilje.org/en/seventh-mir-paqe-%d0%bc%d0%b8%d1%80-peacebuilding-training/?highlight=mir%20paqe%20mir>

### Memory and Coexistence

The programme "Memory and Coexistence" is aimed at young people between 18 and 25 years old from Serbia and youth from Tuzla (a city in Bosnia and Herzegovina), who also take on an informal hosting role for young people from Serbia. The programme includes visits to Tuzla and various activities with young people, focused on learning and exchanging knowledge on wartime history of Tuzla. In addition to commemorating the war, participants become familiar with the social and political landscape of Tuzla, with a focus on life in a truly multi-ethnic community. However, the main event during this visit is the commemoration of war crime at the Tuzla Gate. The Tuzla Gate massacre was a war crime committed on 25 May 1995, when a grenade fell in the middle of a promenade in Tuzla, perpetrated by the Army of Republika Srpska. This programme has been repeated for several years under different names for the exchange itself, but not its essence. In Serbia, it is organized by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights.

<https://yih.rs/bhs/konkurs-za-studijsku-posetu-tuzli-secanje-i-suzivot/> (only in Serbian)

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## Reconciliation with the Past - Second Generation Perspective

The programme "Facing the Past – Perspective of the Second Generation" took place in Vukovar, Croatia, with participants from Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The age limit for participants was between 18 and 26 years old. The programme was designed to enable young people from former conflict areas to confront the past from their own perspective, the perspective of young individuals. It consisted of various workshops, lectures, discussions, and a conference. The programme was organized by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights.

<https://yih.rs/bhs/program-suocavanje-sa-prosloscu-perspektiva-druge-generacije-u-vukovaru/> (only in Serbian)

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## The Past Continues and Shared Narrative

The programme "The Past Continues" began implementation in 2018 although originally scheduled to conclude by April 2019, culminating with the publication of "Common Narratives" book. The programme consisted of three phases. It commenced with the conference "Bring Your History" held in Belgrade, followed by 120 young people from Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina having the opportunity to visit sites of sufferings in the region during study trips aimed at assisting them in their writing during the third phase. The third phase involved working on narratives in formerly conflicted states and crafting a shared narrative. The organization behind this programme was the Youth Initiative for Human Rights from Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The programme was implemented with the assistance of the fellowship programme "Alliance for Historical Dialogue and Accountability" of the Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University in New York, USA and with the support of YIHR in collaboration with PAX for Peace from the Netherlands, supported by the Robert Bosch Foundation from Germany and the European Commission.

<https://yih.rs/en/open-call-for-participating-in-the-past-continues-initiative/>  
[https://yih.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/SHARED-NARRATIVES\\_ENG.pdf](https://yih.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/SHARED-NARRATIVES_ENG.pdf)

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## Traveling School on Nationalism

The "Traveling School on Nationalism" is designed for young people aged 19-24 from Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. The school accommodated 15 young individuals who already have some knowledge of the wars during the 1990s in these regions. It was held across Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, aiming to provide a deeper understanding of the wartime past to the youth. The working language of this school was English. The organizer of the school is the Youth Initiative for Human Rights.

<https://yih.rs/bhs/putujuca-skola-o-nacionalizmu/> (only in Serbian)

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## Across Borders: From Knowledge of War Crimes to Peace

This program was implemented during October 2022 and was aimed at young people (18-30 years old) from Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The exchange

was held under the title "Intercultural Dialogue for a Common Story of the Past and Reconciliation", and it took place in the towns of Pljevlja, Priboj, and Sarajevo. The program involved learning about human rights protection methods and visiting sites of war crimes in the border regions of these three countries. The program was carried out by the YIHR offices in Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of the project "Intercultural Dialogue for a Common Story of the Past and Reconciliation", supported by the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) and the European Union.

<https://yih.rs/bhs/poziv-na-program-razmene-preko-granica-znanjem-o-ratnim-zlocinima-do-mir-a/> (only in Serbian)

### We are important

The program "Važni smo mi" is designed for young people aged 18 to 27 who can communicate in English and come from Kosovo and Serbia. Forty young individuals gathered in Belgrade to share their experiences and narratives from their communities, and had the opportunity to learn more about formal and media research. Some of the important topics covered included post-conflict reconciliation, peacebuilding, law, history, and politics. The organizer of the program is the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in collaboration with the Initiative for Peacebuilding.

<https://yih.rs/bhs/kosovo-srbija-program-za-mlade-u-beogradu-vazni-smo-mi/> (only in Serbian)

### From Conflict to Reconciliation - Stories of Young People from Serbia and Kosovo

The programme "From Conflict to Reconciliation – Stories of Young People from Serbia and Kosovo" will give an opportunity to its participants to work with peers from Serbia/Kosovo and to share experience, perspectives and narratives they grew up with, and ones they are still fighting against in their own communities. Being that the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is something we encounter daily in the media, and that we are constantly introduced to the negative stereotypes of the "Other" in the public discourse, regional cooperation and dialogue between young people from Serbia and Kosovo is much needed in order to achieve Peace.

<https://hajde.media/opportunities/115>

### Yupeace' Peace Camp

The Peace Camp is a multi-year project funded by the Committee for Democracy and Human Rights from Cologne, aimed at youth from Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The camp lasts for 7 days, during which young people have the opportunity to learn about solidarity, hate-speech, media manipulation, as well as topics such as wartime rape crimes and the genocide against the Bosniak population, known as the "Srebrenica Genocide". The camp also includes workshops with drama and dance sessions.

<https://link.org.rs/yupeace-mirovni-kamp/> (only in Serbian)

## Empowering Youth

### Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme

RYLMP builds upon the pilot seven-month project developed jointly by the Centre Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV), Albania, and the Centre for Education Policy (CEP), Serbia, targeting young individuals wanting to actively participate and contribute to change in society and/or local community and have the capacity to influence societies in the future. The implementation of the RYLMP in 2021 and early 2022 paved the way for the continuation and scaling up of the programme, including North Macedonia into the programme. Learning from the strengths of the initiative that broke barriers and gave participants the flexibility to work and build their capacities in small groups and by providing mentorship, the project partners have advanced the programme in a multiyear project with a 3-year duration of 2022-2025 that includes three project partners from three countries with the support of Open Society Foundations. In the new iteration 2023-2024, RYLMP welcomes a new partner from Serbia, namely the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), thus strengthening outreach to youth and stakeholders working on youth empowerment.

The Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme (RYLMP) 2022-2025 enables around 40 young researchers from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia to develop data-driven advocacy plans in fields related to regional cooperation and European integration, education and employability, migration and brain-drain, youth participation and youth actions in the dual transition: digital and green. This programme helps youth in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia improve their competencies and knowledge on how to develop evidence-informed/data-driven advocacy action at the local and regional levels through capacity-building, research mobility, mentoring, and data-driven advocacy actions. The current RYLMP 2023-2024 is implemented jointly by the Centre Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV) from Albania, the Youth Education Forum (YEF) from North Macedonia, and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) from Serbia. RYLMP is supported by the Open Society Foundations.

RYLMP specifically targets youth interested in active participation in solving youth-related challenges and creating new solutions through data-driven advocacy. This includes recently graduated students, MA or Ph.D. students, young researchers, and youth activists in civil society from Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia interested in the above-mentioned topics. Candidates should also be able to work in English (both spoken and written), be willing to spend designated time in another country, work in a team, be keen on regional cooperation, and be engaged in decision-making processes through evidence-based activism and data-driven advocacy.

The selected participants (RYLMP-fellows) will be offered tailored capacity development activities through the e-learning and mentoring programme to improve further their competencies and knowledge on how to develop evidence-informed / data-driven advocacy actions, actively participate in policy development, and relevant methods for participation at the local and regional levels. Implementing partners will facilitate effective collaboration among youth in Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia. They will also have an opportunity to spend a two-week research mobility in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and experience how their peers live there and gain intercultural experience. During this time, participants will work with designated mentors to support the teams through the process and with the selected topic. The programme will organize several joint events, such as opening and closing events and workshops, regional advocacy actions, and

cultural activities for RYLMP-fellows during their mobility period.

The first cycle or cohort of the RYLMP Phase II (2022-2023) was completed in October 2023 with 19 RYLMP-fellows from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia successfully completing their research mobility schemes, finalizing policy documents and research advocacy reports and carrying out evidence-based advocacy actions and awareness raising campaigns on regional cooperation, youth participation, migration, and brain-drain and employability. In the second cycle or cohort of the RYLMP Phase II (2023-2024), we seek to attract 21 young activists, researchers, PhD students, and professionals from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The target group is youth (from 21 to 30 years old) from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

The programme encourages participants to propose data-driven advocacy actions in the following priority thematic areas:

- Regional cooperation and European Integration
- Education and employability
- Migration and brain-drain
- Youth participation
- Youth action in the dual transition: digital and environment

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## Balkathon

Balkathon is a regional online competition organized annually by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) that encourages Western Balkans (WB) collaboration, co-creation and real-life change, with the idea to help the region, businesses and citizens to strengthen their resilience to global challenges. Balkathon brings together young innovative people, start-ups, digital innovation centres, science parks, universities, small and medium enterprises, etc. from the Western Balkans in order to trigger digital innovative and practical business solutions in different areas.

In July 2020, RCC organized the first-ever regional competition in digital smart solutions Balkathon, as an agile solution to support the region to recover from the effects of COVID-19 pandemic. So far, four Balkathon editions have been successfully organized, and reached over 300 registrations since the beginning of the competition. As of March 2023, Balkathon is officially the trademark of the regional competition in innovative digital solutions. The fifth edition of Balkathon focuses on innovative digital ideas and solutions in various thematic areas, setting the stage for this year's competition. Balkathon 5.0 emphasizes business-oriented digital solutions applicable to different sectors, including transport, green energy, tourism, smart cities, artificial intelligence, and robotics. As with previous competitions, the digital solutions must incorporate innovative technological ideas with a clear explanation of their implementation and sustainability in one of the mentioned areas.

Balkathon 5.0 is open to teams composed of individuals up to 35 years old from Western Balkan economies. Teams are encouraged to include qualified members such as students, representatives of legal entities (including start-ups), and individuals from non-governmental and educational institutions.

All short-listed participants in Balkathon 5.0 undergo a two-day mentoring programme with experienced experts. These participants have the opportunity to pitch their ideas

regionally and compete for one of six €7,000 awards. Winners will also have the chance to present their ideas at the Western Balkans Digital Summit.

To further support youth innovation, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is providing two additional special recognition awards of €4,000 each to the best-ranked high-school teams. Depending on the quality of the ideas received, the RCC reserves the right to award more than two special recognition awards.

■ <https://www.rcc.int/balkathon/about>

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### **Dare, because it Concerns You Actually Be Bold: It's up to You**

"Be Bold: It's up to You" is a programme aimed at young leaders from Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, aged between 18 and 30. Through this programme, forty young individuals had the opportunity to gain skills in writing, advocacy, activism, networking, as well as acquiring more knowledge about politics and arts. The organization that setup this programme is VII Academy from Sarajevo in collaboration with the Youth Initiative for Human Rights. The goal of the project is for young people to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for writing projects, planning, and budgeting, which they will undertake during the programme. The programme was implemented with the support of the Embassy of the United States within the framework of the BOLD programme.

■ <https://yih.rs/bhs/otvorene-prijave-za-program-za-mlade-odvazi-se-je-ter-te-se-tice/> (only in Serbian)

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### **Design Your Job 4 (Erasmus + K2 Project)**

"Design Your Job 4" is an innovative project funded under the ERASMUS+ programme of the European Union, designed to equip young people with essential skills in the rapidly growing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector. This initiative is a collaborative effort between three key partners: the Centre for Youth and Social Development "RES POLIS" and EIPIX ENTERTAINMENT from Serbia, and the Association for Sustainable Development, SFERA Macedonia from North Macedonia.

The project focuses on providing comprehensive training in basic 3D modelling and computer game animation to 12 young participants – 6 from Serbia and 6 from North Macedonia. The programme is divided into two main educational phases. The first educational phase, lasting seven days, will be held in North Macedonia and will cover foundational knowledge and hands-on experience in 3D modelling and game animation. The second phase, extending over nine days in Serbia, will build on the skills acquired in the first phase and emphasize advanced techniques and practical applications. Participants will not only gain valuable knowledge required in the labour market but also receive certificates for their work experience, which can be showcased on an online CV featured on the project's website.

The ICT sector is experiencing significant growth and a pressing need for skilled workforce. Despite the large number of unemployed young people in Europe, there is a notable gap in ICT skills training within formal education systems. "Design Your Job 4" seeks to bridge this gap by retraining and prequalifying unemployed individuals for roles in the ICT sector. This project not only addresses the immediate needs of the ICT industry but also contributes to reducing unemployment and mitigating the migration of young talent from less developed European countries.

"Design Your Job 4" is part of a broader "Design Your Job" initiative, which aims to develop short, cost-effective, and replicable ICT educational programmes. These programmes are intended for use by National Employment Services or similar support systems to retrain or pre-qualify individuals who are unemployed or seeking new opportunities. The initiative also aims to enhance digital competencies and promote lifelong learning across the target populations. By creating educational programmes with detailed manuals for developers of computer or mobile games and similar 3D content, "Design Your Job 4" supports the growth of the ICT sector while addressing broader socio-economic challenges in Europe.

The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission, highlighting its importance and the support it receives from European institutions dedicated to addressing youth unemployment and fostering sustainable development.

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### **Engage, Connect and Empower Youth for a Sustainable Green Future**

The primary goal of the project "Engage, Connect, and Empower Youth for a Sustainable Green Future" (Fast Forward) is to build the capacity of young people in the Western Balkans to address environmental degradation, climate change, and sustainability issues. By translating European Union (EU) practices into tangible tools, the project aims to fast-forward the green transition in the region. The focus is on two key European Youth Goals: quality learning and a sustainable green Europe.

The Fast Forward project spans 15 months and is coordinated by the Build Green Group in Albania, with the involvement of several key partners: Eco-Logic from Macedonia, AlbanianSkills from Albania, Balkan Forum from Kosovo, Brigaid Connect from Spain, and BRAVO from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The project is designed to provide comprehensive capacity building through a series of well-structured activities. The Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions are conducted to equip youth trainers and workers with essential skills in environmental education. Youth exchanges are facilitated to encourage cross-border learning and collaboration among young activists. In addition, toolkits and manuals are developed to offer practical resources for environmental awareness and action, while workshops and seminars are hosted to educate participants on topics such as climate change, environmental digitalization, and sustainability. These activities are strategically designed to spill over into non-formal learning settings, benefiting not only the participants but also the staff, youth, and key stakeholders involved in the process.

The Fast Forward project aims to create a significant positive impact on both local and broader scales. Through the enhancement of skills and knowledge, youth trainers and workers will be better equipped to educate others about environmental issues. Participants will gain a deeper understanding of climate change, environmental justice, and sustainability, which will increase awareness and foster a culture of environmental responsibility. The development of practical tools such as toolkits and manuals will provide ongoing support for environmental education initiatives. By facilitating youth exchanges and workshops, the project will strengthen networks and partnerships among young activists across the region, promoting collaboration and the sharing of best practices. Furthermore, the project supports several Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to climate action and quality education, thereby contributing to global efforts for a more sustainable future. Through these comprehensive and influential activities, the Fast Forward project not only addresses immediate environmental concerns but also empowers the next generation with the knowledge and skills needed to drive the green transition in the Western Balkans and beyond.

■ <https://ecologic.mk/fast-forward-kick-off-meeting/>



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## Youth Camp "Youth Start-up for Reconciliation and Cooperation in the Western Balkans"

The Youth Camp for Reconciliation and Cooperation aims to foster understanding, collaboration, and friendship among young people from North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. The initiative is part of the broader Youth Start-up for Reconciliation and Cooperation in the Western Balkans project, which is implemented by the Coalition of Youth Organizations SEGA in North Macedonia, Women's Network Equality in Decision Making from Albania, and ZANA NGO from Kosovo. The project seeks to create interactive spaces for youth aged 15-29 to enhance collaboration through knowledge exchange, networking, and active participation.

The Youth Camp, held from 8-10 November 2018, brought together 90 young participants, with 30 representatives from North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania respectively. The camp's structure emphasized informal learning, enabling participants to discover neighbouring countries' traditions and cultures. Through various activities, such as workshops, group discussions, and creative exercises, participants developed creative thinking skills, learned innovative problem-solving techniques, and gained a deeper understanding of each other's backgrounds. The camp also provided ample opportunities for making new friends and enjoying recreational activities, fostering an entertaining and engaging environment.

<https://www.sega.org.mk/en/blog/15-youth-participation/73-thirty-young-participants-from-macedonia-participate-in-youth-camp-in-tirana-albania>

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## Youth Bus

"Youth Bus" was a programme implemented in 2013 as a cross-border cooperation project between Serbia and Montenegro. Over 6 days, young people visited 6 cities with the goal of promoting youth activism, inter-culturalism, and multi-culturalism through public actions. The project included three modules of preparation and actions that participants carried out in their own cities. The project was organized as part of the IPA project "Active Youth for Active Communities" and was funded by the Delegation of the European Union in Montenegro.

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## Regional Summer Camp "Youth in Action: SHAPE THE FUTURE 2024"

The Regional Summer Camp "Youth in Action: SHAPE THE FUTURE 2024" aims to bring together young people from the Western Balkans to foster a collaborative environment for learning, idea generation, and networking. Following the success of last year's camp in North Macedonia, the programme continues its mission to empower youth through engagement and education.

Scheduled to take place in Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> July 2024, this year's camp focuses on gender equality through sport and intercultural education. The programme is designed to offer a diverse range of activities including:

- **Engaging Discussions:** Participants will engage in meaningful conversations about gender equality and intercultural understanding.
- **Exciting Sports Activities:** Through various sports activities, the camp aims to promote gender equality and teamwork.

- **Innovative Tools for Active Participation:** Workshops and sessions will provide participants with new tools and methods for active participation in their communities.
- **Networking Opportunities:** The camp will facilitate the creation of new connections and networks between young people from different backgrounds.

The camp is open to young individuals aged 16 to 22 from North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo\*, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. All costs for accommodation, food, and transportation are covered by the organizers, ensuring accessibility for all participants.

The Regional Summer Camp is supported by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH (on behalf of the German Government and the EU), and forum ZFD. These organizations are dedicated to fostering regional cooperation and youth empowerment in the Western Balkans.

By focusing on gender equality and intercultural education, the camp aims to instil values of equality, respect, and active citizenship in the participants. The programme's activities are designed to inspire young people to take action in their communities and shape a better future through cooperation and understanding.

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### **Youth4Regions - the Programme for Aspiring Journalists**

Youth4Regions, an initiative of the European Commission, aims to educate journalism students and young journalists about the impact of the European Union in their regions. This programme provides in-depth understanding of EU affairs, fosters professional development, and encourages the next generation of journalists to engage with EU-related topics.

Youth4Regions offers a comprehensive package of opportunities designed to enhance participants' journalistic skills and knowledge of EU affairs. The programme includes:

- Training on Journalism and EU Cohesion Policy
- Mentorship by Established Journalists
- Participation in EU Regions' Week
- Visits to EU Affairs Media Headquarters and Institutions
- European Commission Press Trips

The Youth4Regions programme not only enhances the professional skills of aspiring journalists but also deepens their understanding of EU activities and policies. By providing mentorship and practical experience, the programme equips young journalists with the tools needed to report accurately and convincingly on EU-related topics. The inclusion of visits to media headquarters and EU institutions, along with participation in EU Regions' Week, ensures participants to gain a broad perspective on how EU policies are communicated and implemented.

Since its inception, Youth4Regions has been dedicated to fostering a new generation of journalists who are well-informed about the EU's role and impact in their regions. The programme targets journalism students and young journalists aged 18 to 30 from EU Member-States and neighbouring countries, reflecting the European Commission's commitment to support youth and promote journalistic excellence. The initiative is inclusive, inviting participants from a diverse range of countries including those from the

European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), EU candidate-countries, potential candidates, countries from the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and the UK.

[https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/communication/partnership-with-media/youth4regions\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/communication/partnership-with-media/youth4regions_en)

## The EU-Balkan Youth Forum

The EU-Balkan Youth Forum (EUBYF) is an opportunity for young people from the Western Balkans (WB) and EU Member-States to come together and shape the future of Europe. As a highly vibrant conference, the EUBYF serves as a platform for discussions on European integration, offering a unique space for European youth to exchange ideas, foster mutual understanding and contribute to developing a shared European perspective by meeting and debating together.

The first edition of the EUBYF – guided by the question “What is Europe?” – yielded some notable results, namely the creation of a transnational network of young people from the Western Balkans and the EU and the identification of crucial priorities and recommendations, channelled to the “Conference on the Future of Europe”.

These outcomes have set the stage for the EUBYF Second Edition, which aims to build onto the momentum of existing youth mobilization efforts and ensure continuity with the commitment of youth delegates to bring an enlarged European perspective forward. Building onto the results of the first edition, the three-day conference will equip participants with tools and knowledge to impact their communities and raise awareness of the relevance and concrete opportunities stemming from an enlarged Europe. This will culminate in the drafting of Conference conclusions by the EU-Western Balkans young delegates, to be presented to the Italian, EU, and RCC authorities on the Forum's Final Conference. The Conclusions will trace the progress made in the Forum towards a shared future for the EU and the WB, serving as a basis for further steps of cooperation within and beyond the EUBYF network.

Launched in 2021 by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the EU-Balkan Youth Forum is an opportunity for young people from the Western Balkans and EU Member-States to unite and shape Europe's future. This vibrant conference serves as a platform for discussions on European integration, offering a unique space for youth to exchange ideas, foster mutual understanding and contribute to the development of a shared perspective through interactive discussions and debates.

The 2023 edition of the Forum, titled “Western Balkans Futures: How Can You(th) Shape Europe?” is funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and will be organized by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The goal is to empower young activists by equipping them with the tools and knowledge needed to make a positive impact in their communities and raise awareness on concrete opportunities offered by the European Union (EU). This will be achieved by focusing on three key areas: regional integration, environmental protection, and human capital. Divided in three working groups, participants will explore how the EU and regional cooperation can drive and inform positive changes in these fields, and how youth can benefit from these perspectives and related instruments.

The discussion will be based on three working groups, all connected to the Western Balkans future. Each working group will specifically address a central issue in these areas: regional cooperation, environment, and human development capital.

<https://www.eubalkanforum.org/>

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## Swedish Institute Academy for Young Professionals (SAYP) Western Balkans

The Swedish Institute Academy for Young Professionals (SAYP) is a specialized training programme designed to enhance the skills and capabilities of young professionals in the Western Balkans. The programme focuses on building networks, expanding knowledge, and implementing practices that promote transparency, efficiency, and resilience in public administration. SAYP aims to strengthen individual capabilities to meet the demands of modern governance structures.

SAYP is a collaborative initiative between the Swedish Institute (SI) and various Swedish universities, each responsible for developing and organizing specific training modules. These modules utilize a blend of modern teaching methods, emphasizing interactivity, collaboration, and problem-based learning. The training may include webinars, interactive lectures, small-group discussions, study visits, and other learning activities designed to deepen and apply participants' knowledge.

- For 2024, the following thematic modules are available within SAYP:
- Collaborative Governance in a Digital Era
- Perspectives on Multi-level Governance, Decentralisation & Human Rights
- Gender Equality Education for Practitioners, From Theory to Policy Implementation:
- Sustainable e-Government for Resilient and Innovative Democratic Public Administration (SeGRID)

Eligible participants for SAYP must be citizens or residents of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Serbia. Applicants should have a good command of English language, relevant higher education (minimum of three years), and be between 25 and 40 years old. In addition, applicants must not hold a permanent residence permit in Sweden and should be employed in one of the following groups: policymakers, public servants, civil society workers, or private sector leaders. The professional profile of the applicants should be relevant to the thematic content of the chosen module and the Western Balkans region.

SAYP aims to provide participants with the opportunity to develop professional skills and gain tools that can be applied within their organizations and local contexts. The programme focuses on imparting knowledge about sustainable modern governance and fostering cross-sectorial work environments. Participants will also benefit from an expanded personal and professional network and gain lifelong membership in the SI Alumni Network, which offers exclusive access to tools for continued learning.

<https://si.se/en/apply/si-leadership-programmes/si-summer-academy-for-young-professionals-sayp-western-balkans/>

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## Young European Ambassador

The Young European Ambassadors (YEA) programme is a dynamic network of young activists from the Western Balkans, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The platform aims to unite this diverse group of individuals under a shared vision of promoting activism, learning about each other

and the European Union (EU), fostering social change within their local communities and beyond.

Launched in 2020 as part of the EU Regional Communication Programme for the Western Balkans – WeBalkans.eu, the YEA network is a non-political, activist initiative. The programme selects young individuals who are passionate about various fields such as art, human rights, environmental issues, cultural expression, and creativity. The network consists of 180 YEAs selected between 2020 and 2022, all of whom actively participate in a range of activities designed to enhance their skills and broaden their impact.

YEAs engage in numerous initiatives, including:

- Activism and Community Projects
- Skill Development
- Networking and Social Media Engagement

The YEA network aims to share EU values, raise awareness about the EU's cooperation with Western Balkan partners, and showcase the tangible results of this collaboration. By contributing to policy dialogue, increasing civic activism, and working together for a better future, YEAs inspire change within their communities, the Western Balkans, the EU, and beyond.

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## Berlin Process and WB Youth Forum

Since its inception in 2014, the Berlin Process has aimed to enhance regional integration and accelerate the Western Balkans' alignment with the EU. One of its significant achievements is the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), which plays a pivotal role in connecting youth across the region.

The WB Youth Forum, co-organized by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and supported by the German and Albanian governments, will serve as a critical pre-summit event. Scheduled for 16<sup>th</sup> October, the forum aims to bridge the gap between young people and decision-makers, fostering meaningful youth participation in the EU integration process of the Western Balkans. The forum will leverage the Berlin Declaration of the WB Youth Forum 2022 to bring youth voices and perspectives to the forefront of high-level discussions involving WB and EU actors.

A distinctive feature of this year's forum will be a unique train journey (Balkan Youth Express) involving 36 young representatives and 18 decision-makers from the region. This journey, lasting from Elbasan to Durres, provides an opportunity to assess the progress since the WB Youth Forum's 2022 declaration and to propose concrete actions and initiatives to bring those aspirations to fruition. Additional regional decision-makers will join the discussions alongside youth participants, adding context to the proposed actions and fostering collaboration between both parties.

The primary participants of these events include youth from the Western Balkans and decision-makers in the youth sector, such as Youth and Education Ministers, young parliamentarians, and officials from National Youth Agencies. Young participants are selected from RYCO youth activities based on their interests and suggestions for actionable points. This summit and forum series not only underscores the region's commitment to integration but also empowers its youth and strengthens collaboration among decision-makers.

<https://www.rycowb.org/tirana-to-host-the-summit-of-the-berlin-process-and-wb-youth-forum-2023/>

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## Balkan Youth Talents

The Balkan Youth Talents initiative, jointly developed by Beldocs International Documentary Film Festival and Al Jazeera Balkans Documentary Film Festival (AJB DOC), aims to discover and nurture young filmmaking talent across the Western Balkans. This programme is dedicated to supporting young filmmakers who aspire to create compelling and visually striking short documentary films.

The initiative seeks to select eight young talents, aged 18 to 30, from the Western Balkans. These individuals will participate in an intensive programme designed to foster creativity, facilitate knowledge exchange, and encourage networking among emerging documentary filmmakers.

The Balkan Youth Talents programme spans three sessions, beginning with a three-day intensive workshop during Beldocs Industry Days in Belgrade, Serbia, from 23-25 May 2024. This initial session will include lectures, panels, and one-on-one mentoring to provide participants with the theoretical and practical techniques needed to develop their short documentaries.

Throughout the summer, participants will continue to develop their projects under the guidance of experienced mentors. The final session will take place in September 2024 during the Al Jazeera Documentary Industry Days at AJB DOC in Sarajevo where participants will present their projects to a group of international documentary film professionals, with the possibility of screening their finished films on Al Jazeera's platforms as short formats.

[https://www.beldocs.rs/balkan-young-talents/?fbclid=PAAaZcLWTK17tBNGQ9mm\\_oSVy1s8XDS4Cpk-L-iHUKoXp5Y35DzvPvkCI0LrU\\_aem\\_AWTOxTUs2yoCr4tQMjblSemXo1qHUI4nUDkLeE8Hbh4K7xTGZz-ws6a\\_ibW\\_Vg9sWDroWoozP51S7PjsEAlaNz3](https://www.beldocs.rs/balkan-young-talents/?fbclid=PAAaZcLWTK17tBNGQ9mm_oSVy1s8XDS4Cpk-L-iHUKoXp5Y35DzvPvkCI0LrU_aem_AWTOxTUs2yoCr4tQMjblSemXo1qHUI4nUDkLeE8Hbh4K7xTGZz-ws6a_ibW_Vg9sWDroWoozP51S7PjsEAlaNz3)

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## Route WB6

Route WB6 is a transformative project implemented across the Western Balkans 6 (WB6) with the aim of empowering young people to become drivers of reconciliation and societal reconstruction. This initiative, led by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and supported by several partner organizations, commenced on 1 January 2019, and concluded in December 2021. It focuses on fostering European values, initiating intercultural dialogue, and enhancing regional cooperation to support socio-economic and democratic development in the WB6 region.

The project is a collaborative effort involving numerous organizations from the WB6 region, including Beyond Barriers, South East European Youth Network, Institute for Youth Development KULT, Lens, Youth Cultural Centre Bitola, Association for Democratic Prosperity Zid, and Young Researchers of Serbia. Together, these organizations form a consortium under the leadership of RYCO to implement the various activities and objectives of Route WB6.

The overarching goal of Route WB6 is to empower youth from the WB6 region to actively participate in reconciliation processes and societal rebuilding. This is achieved by enabling them to adopt and promote European values, lead intercultural dialogues, and foster regional cooperation. The project aims to create a foundation for long-term peace and development through the engagement of young people in meaningful volunteer activities.

Route WB6 has three primary outcomes:

- **Volunteering Policy Reform:** This outcome focuses on establishing a regional policy framework for volunteering. Partner organizations, particularly National Volunteer Services (NVSs), utilize this framework to advocate for policy reforms across the WB6 region. The goal is to create a cohesive regional policy that supports and promotes volunteerism.
- **Establishment of the Regional Volunteer Service and Programme:** Route WB6 coordinates the efforts of National Volunteer Services in the WB6 region to create a Regional Volunteer Service. This service aims to facilitate regional volunteering practices, advocate for volunteering policies, promote cross-border volunteering for peace and reconciliation, and provide capacity building for civil society organizations (CSOs) and youth participants. The regional programme also includes monitoring and evaluation components to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability.
- **Scaling Up the Regional Volunteer Programme:** The project seeks to expand the newly designed regional volunteer programme through RYCO's first granting round for volunteering. This allows organizations and schools in the WB6 region to participate in long-term and group volunteer exchanges. Approximately 50 individuals will engage in long-term exchanges, while around 400 young people will participate in group volunteer activities, thereby broadening the impact of the initiative.

Route WB6 targets several key groups, including National Volunteer Services, civil society organizations, youth from the WB6 region, and public institutions responsible for volunteering policies. By engaging these groups, the project aims to build a robust support system for volunteerism and youth activism in the region.

<https://www.rycowb.org/building-capacity-and-momentum-for-ryco-2-2/>

## Rise

The RISE (Regional Incubator for Social Entrepreneurs) project is a dynamic initiative aimed at fostering the growth of social entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans. Celebrating its regional approach, the RISE Expedition recently commenced, offering young social entrepreneurs an enriching experience through a 3 to 7-day mobility programme. This expedition allows participants, known as Risers, to explore concepts in the social economy sector, engage with their peers, and form valuable partnerships.

The RISE Expedition is designed to be a transformative journey for young social entrepreneurs. By traveling across the Western Balkans, Risers will meet like-minded individuals and potential partners, exchanging experience and discussing innovative solutions. This interaction not only broadens their vision but also enhances their knowledge of the social economy sector in the region. The expedition serves as a platform for networking, learning, and developing a support system among social entrepreneurs.

Participants in the RISE Expedition will visit various locations within the Western Balkans, gaining insights into different approaches to social entrepreneurship. They will meet members of local incubators, organizations, established social enterprises, and local RYCO offices. These interactions provide a comprehensive understanding of the sector and inspire new ideas and strategies for their projects. The exposure to diverse experience and practices fosters empathy, tolerance, and cross-cultural skills, which are crucial for social entrepreneurs.

## Mirai

MOFA and RYCO are organizing the youth exchange programme "Western Balkans Meet Japan: A Bridge into the Future", under the MIRAI programme since 2018, aiming to deepen participants' understanding of Japan and its policies, to promote mutual understanding and reconciliation through intellectual and cultural exchange, and build basis for future friendship and cooperation between Japan and the Western Balkans. MOFA started the programme to support socio-economic reforms and facilitate reconciliation and cooperation in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. MIRAI stands for Mutual Understanding, Intellectual Relations and Academic Exchange Initiative.

The primary goals of the MIRAI programme are to: deepen participants' understanding of Japan's policies, culture, and society, to promote mutual understanding and reconciliation through intellectual and cultural exchange, to build a foundation for future friendship and cooperation between Japan and the Western Balkans.



## Findings

This study provides an in-depth analysis of youth exchange programmes across the Western Balkans, revealing several critical patterns and challenges that require attention:

**Overlap between donors and projects:** Our review of various youth exchange programmes indicates a significant overlap in objectives and activities among multiple initiatives. While this overlap ensures that a broader range of youth can participate in similar projects, it also highlights lack of coordination among donors and implementing organizations. This redundancy can lead to inefficient use of resources and potentially dilute the overall impact of these programmes. Without a strategic approach to collaboration, these overlaps may hinder the ability to address the unique needs of different youth groups across the region.

**Excessive focus on reconciliation:** A substantial portion of youth exchange programmes in the region are designed around the theme of reconciliation, reflecting the region's history of ethnic conflict and ongoing tensions. While reconciliation is undoubtedly a crucial goal, the disproportionate focus on past conflicts risks keeping youth anchored in the past rather than preparing them for the future. This approach may inadvertently perpetuate divisive narratives instead of fostering a forward-looking mind-set that emphasizes shared opportunities and collective progress. A more balanced approach that also considers the current and future needs of youth is necessary to ensure sustainable peace and development.

**Lack of sustainability and follow-up mechanisms:** Sustainability remains a significant concern for youth exchange programmes in the Western Balkans. Our findings show that most programmes do not have a clear sustainability plan or effective follow-up mechanisms to ensure positive outcomes achieved during exchanges over time. Without these, the initial impact of the programmes can quickly dissipate, leaving participants without ongoing support to apply what they have learned. This gap in sustainability planning undermines the long-term effectiveness of these initiatives and the potential for enduring change in the region.

**Imbalance between individual-based and institutional exchanges:** The current structure of many youth exchange programmes heavily favours individual participation, often at the expense of institutional involvement. While open calls for individuals ensure broad access, this approach misses the opportunity to leverage the influence of youth organizations, associations, and institutions. Individuals affiliated with these entities are better positioned to disseminate the knowledge and skills they acquire, creating a ripple effect within their communities. The lack of institutional exchanges limits the potential for widespread impact and hinders long-term sustainability of programme outcomes.

**Insufficient support for long-term regional youth networks:** A critical finding of this study is the lack of support for establishing and sustaining long-term regional youth networks. While many youth exchange programmes create valuable connections among participants, these networks often dissolve once the programmes conclude due to the absence of structured follow-up activities or ongoing support. Without these networks, the collaborations and relationships formed during exchanges are unlikely to endure, diminishing the overall impact of the programmes and limiting opportunities for future cooperation.

**Absence of a centralized youth platform:** There is currently no centralized platform that aggregates data, feedback, and best practices from youth exchange programmes across the

Western Balkans. This absence represents a significant gap in the regional infrastructure for youth exchanges, making it difficult for stakeholders to access comprehensive information about existing programmes and their outcomes. As a result, valuable insights and lessons learned from previous initiatives are often lost, and the potential for cross-programme collaboration and continuous improvement is severely limited.

**Limited hands-on approach in programme design:** Many regional exchange programmes prioritize theoretical knowledge transfer through training sessions, lectures, and similar activities, with limited opportunities for practical engagement. This approach, while useful in some cases, fails to fully engage participants in meaningful ways that foster a sense of ownership and active participation in regional processes. The lack of hands-on components, such as workshops, group projects, and field visits, reduces the practical value of these programmes and their ability to equip youth with the skills necessary for real-world challenges.

**The role of inherited narratives and stereotypes:** Inherited divisive narratives and stereotypes remain significant obstacles to peacebuilding and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. A key challenge identified is that young people frequently cite their parents and other family members as their primary sources of information about other ethnic and national groups in the region. This intergenerational transmission of biases perpetuates deep-rooted stereotypes, hindering efforts toward mutual understanding. Additionally, social media plays a critical role in shaping these perceptions, often reinforcing existing prejudices. Perhaps even more entrenched than these general stereotypes are the divergent narratives surrounding the shared but contentious history of the Western Balkans, particularly the memories and interpretations of past conflicts.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the team has formulated the following recommendations for action:

**Improve coordination among donors and projects:** Donors and actors involved in youth exchange projects should establish regular meetings or mechanisms to coordinate and streamline efforts. Creating synergies and implementing joint activities can increase the impact of these programmes and ensure better outreach among youth in the region. This should be a short-term action with immediate steps taken to organize coordination meetings.

**Adopt a future-oriented and practical approach in programme design:** While reconciliation remains important, there is a need to shift focus towards addressing the current and future needs of youth in the region. Programmes should incorporate more hands-on components, such as practical workshops, group projects, and field visits, which foster active learning and engagement. By emphasizing practical approaches and ideas, youth can develop the skills necessary for regional cooperation and development. This shift from a solely reconciliation-focused agenda to one that includes practical, future-oriented activities should be reflected in the redesign of programmes within the next funding cycle, with an emphasis on immediate implementation of these hands-on elements.

**Enhance sustainability through the establishment of regional networks and a centralized platform:** Sustainability must become a core element of youth exchange projects. Donors and stakeholders should prioritize the establishment and support of long-term regional youth networks, which can maintain the relationships and collaborations formed during exchanges. Additionally, a centralized online platform dedicated to youth exchange programmes should be created. This platform would serve as a comprehensive repository of programmes, best practices, and participant feedback, enhancing transparency, coordination, and continuous improvement. While some initiatives for such platforms exist, they are either underperforming or limited to small local levels. It is crucial that these platforms collaborate and integrate to achieve a greater regional impact. The development and integration of this platform should be a priority, with short-term goals for launching and long-term goals for sustained support and improvement.

**Promote institutional exchanges alongside individual ones:** Programmes should introduce a combination of individual and institutional exchanges. This approach would enhance the dissemination of knowledge and skills, increase sustainability, and generate a spill over effect within institutions and associations. Immediate adjustments to application criteria should be made to include institutional affiliations.

**Support long-term regional youth networks:** There is a need for sustained investment in developing and maintaining regional youth networks. These networks should be supported to ensure that the connections and collaborations formed during exchanges continue beyond individual projects. This should be a medium- to long-term action, with ongoing funding and support for network-building activities.

**Strengthen peer education programmes:** Promote and expand peer-led education initiatives focused on peacebuilding and reconciliation. These programmes should aim to develop interpersonal skills, intercultural understanding, and competencies like conflict analysis. Empowering young people through peer education will enable them to effectively challenge stereotypes, transform conflicts, and prevent violence.

**Support capacity-building projects:** Invest in capacity-building projects that enhance the

awareness, knowledge, and skills of youth and youth-led organizations. These projects should include peacebuilding initiatives, advocacy campaigns, and educational workshops that equip young people with the tools needed to reshape narratives, dismantle systemic discrimination, and foster regional cooperation.

**Enhance collaboration with civil society and schools:** Encourage and support collaborations between youth organizations, civil society groups, and educational institutions. RYCO's partnership model, which facilitates cross-border understanding, exchange, and mobility, should be further developed to maximize its impact on peacebuilding efforts throughout the region.

**Promote cross-border exchanges and mobility:** Increase opportunities for youth to participate in cross-border exchanges and mobility programmes. This experience exposes young people to different cultures and perspectives, enhancing their understanding of complex regional issues. Such exposure fosters the development of counter-narratives that can challenge prejudice and nationalism.

**Facilitate youth advocacy and leadership:** Encourage youth to articulate their needs and advocate for feasible, effective solutions to regional challenges. By enhancing their skills and cultural awareness, youth is better positioned to contribute to an enabling environment that reduces prejudice, strengthens resilience, and promotes peacebuilding.

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