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Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme

Regional cooperation agenda
and its effectiveness:
The role of local ownership
in economic and youth domains



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Executive Summary

This policy paper addresses the evolving landscape of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, focusing on the interplay between endogenous and exogenous factors that have shaped the region's multilateral and bilateral agreements. The paper emphasizes the importance of "local ownership" within the economic and youth domains, collective problem-solving, and a common regional identity in the Western Balkans.

Examining initiatives within the Western Balkans, particularly the Open Balkans and Berlin Process, from the perspectives of youth engagement and economic considerations, reveals examples of elevated cooperation. These initiatives, featuring the active participation of high-ranking officials, serve as examples of elevated cooperation, thus elucidating their shared dedication to the promotion of integrated regional cooperation. However, domestic debates often overshadow their common goals.

Through 7 interviews and a targeted questionnaire with 162 respondents, the policy paper highlights the youth's role and attitudes toward regional cooperation. The central challenge that demands attention is the absence of ownership within the economic and youth domains, which serves as a critical impediment to the effectiveness of regional cooperation. Consequently, key recommendations emerge, including the need to promote Western Balkan cooperation on an equal and inclusive basis, recognize the essential role of public support for the long-term sustainability of regional initiatives, construct comprehensive roadmaps to enhance transparency and trust, expand the presence of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) to amplify their impact, bridge the gap between the Berlin Process and Open Balkans, and strengthen youth exchange programs to foster mutual understanding and collaboration while nurturing regional identity and integration.

By implementing these recommendations, the Western Balkans can achieve more sustainable regional cooperation and empower the youth in shaping their region's future.

List of Abbreviations

CRM	Common Regional Market
EU	European Union
MAP	Multi-annual Action Plan
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
REA	Regional Economic Area
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SP SEE	Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
TEN-E	Trans-European Networks for Energy
WB 6	Western Balkans Six
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework

1. Introduction

The flourishing of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans was influenced by endogenous and exogenous factors which strengthened interdependence and redesigned the composition of multilateral and bilateral agreements among the member actors (Minić, 2009: 13). While Western Balkans was a more passive actor and the recipient of the exogenous influence in the past period, recent years have been characterized by a more active role of the region. In that sense, although exogenous influences are generally considered as a positive consequence in influencing the development of the Western Balkans regional cooperation, they are expected to be internalized, and later driven by the domestic, locally owned processes.

The central challenge that demands attention is the absence of ownership within the economic and youth domains, which serves as a critical impediment to the effectiveness of regional cooperation.

The term “locally owned” or “local ownership” implies the capacity to act collectively to solve the collective problems (Trimçev, 2009: 31). Required prerequisite is a sense of trust, common ground and a shared vision of the future based on compatibility as opposed to competition (Ibid., 31). With that, local ownership necessitates the construction of the common, regional identity in the Western Balkans. Given the existing ethno-national and emerging state-national identities in Western Balkans, it is necessary to emphasize that this regional identity is of “soft” nature. European examples showed that this type of identity transcends borders, nation-building efforts in favor of the new “imagined community” between the member actors (Ibid., 31). Thus, the policy paper will examine the concept of local ownership within the economic and youth domains in the Western Balkans’ regional cooperation process. Subsequently, it will proceed to analyze the specific contributions and roles that youth can play in realizing this phenomenon.

In engaging these subjects, authors will primarily rely on the framework of “new regionalism”. It will be accompanied by the theoretical analysis of local ownership term and regional identity as its precondition. The mixed-method approach, integrating focused questionnaires and interviews, will entail a comprehensive analysis of regional cooperation within the Western Balkans, stemming from South East European Cooperation Process (SEEC), a more tailored approach in Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and internationally supported Berlin Process. Mentioned analysis will create a suitable basis for the examination of Open Balkans as a locally rooted regional initiative. Specific attention will be directed to the youth’ mindset and attitude towards regional cooperation through a detailed questionnaire concerning their experience in regional exchange schemes as a basis for creating a regional identity of Western Balkans’ youth.



2. The legal and institutional framework around Regional Network

The legal framework for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans primarily revolves around the organizations and agreements that have been established to promote cooperation and stability in the region. The Western Balkans is a complex region comprising multiple countries, and several initiatives have been put in place to foster collaboration and address common challenges. Some of the key organizations and agreements include:

Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe: The Stability Pact was launched in 1999 as a political initiative to promote peace, democracy, and economic development in the Balkans. It aimed to enhance regional cooperation, attract foreign investment, and support the European integration process of the countries in the region.

Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA): CEFTA is a regional trade agreement signed in 2006 among Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, and UNMIK/Kosovo. Its objective is to facilitate trade and economic integration among the member states by removing tariffs and other barriers to the movement of goods and services.

Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEEC): The SEEC is a political initiative launched in 1996 to strengthen political dialogue and cooperation among the countries of Southeast Europe. It focuses on promoting stability, security, economic development, and cultural ties in the region.

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC): The RCC was established in 2008 as the successor of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. It serves as a coordination platform for regional initiatives, aiming to support the European integration process of the Western Balkans countries and foster regional cooperation in various areas, including economic development, infrastructure, energy, and more.

Berlin Process: The Berlin Process was launched in 2014 as a series of annual summits aimed at enhancing regional cooperation and connectivity in the Western Balkans. It focuses on areas such as infrastructure development, energy, youth cooperation, and the rule of law.

European Union (EU) Accession Process: For most Western Balkans countries, the ultimate goal of regional cooperation is to progress towards EU membership. The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) serves as the framework for these countries on their path towards EU accession. It involves the negotiation of Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs), which are designed to bring countries closer to EU standards and regulations.

Among the other of the several institutions and initiatives involved in regional cooperation in North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania, there are these institutions aiming to foster economic, political, and cultural collaboration between the countries in the region. Not mentioned above are:

Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF): The WBIF supports socio-economic development and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania, by providing grants and loans for infrastructure projects and technical assistance.

Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI): SECI is an organization focused on regional cooperation and security in Southeast Europe. It aims to strengthen regional ties, combat transnational organized crime, and promote stability and development in the region, involving North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania, among others.

South East European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC): SELEC is a law enforcement organization that facilitates cooperation and intelligence sharing among its member states, including North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania, to combat organized crime and other security challenges.

All in all, there is an established network of stakeholders (institutions, entities) dealing with regional cooperation in North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania, but also in all the Western Balkan six. What remains to be worked on is setting the agenda in a way to bring these institutions closer to the ordinary citizens, but also to make sure that the existing legal framework is more than a decor and it is functional in practice.

2.1 Berlin Process

Partial results from the transformation of the SPSEE into the RCC in 2008 coupled with the failure of the WB 6 initiative pointed to the lack of desired development level of Western Balkans regional cooperation. (Đukanović & Krstić, 2016: 170). This phenomenon paired with the announced need of EU consolidation and the absence of its further expansion plans, sparked the then German chancellor Angela Merkel to launch a new regional cooperation initiative labeled as the Berlin Process.

The ambitious agenda of the process in its first summit in 2014 showed Germany's strong support for the Western Balkans EU path, primarily in terms of financial support, education and the development of mutual economic cooperation, simultaneously with an aim to improve bilateral relations and the multilateral agenda of the WB 6 (Đukanović & Krstić, 2016: 176). Affirmation of these intentions were met in the following Vienna summit, which in addition to the Declaration on Regional Cooperation and the Solution of Bilateral Disputes had put forward the "connectivity agenda" aimed to link WB6 with Trans-European Transport Network and Trans-European Networks for Energy (GIZ, 2018: 9). Moreover, support for the concrete cross-border and regional infrastructure and energy projects through Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) proved to be politically beneficial as it showed to the member actors that regional links were crucial for integration with the EU markets and for further strengthening of the WB 6 competitiveness (Nechev, et al., 2017: 7–8). Digital

aspect of connectivity has been touched upon from 2018 with an intent to increase cybersecurity, deploy eGovernment and help increase digital skills among citizens and boost research and innovation (GIZ, 2018: 9). Valuable step in encouraging regional economic cooperation was made a year earlier with the adoption of the RCC made MAP for the Regional Economic Area (REA), as a space where goods, services, investments, and skilled workers could move freely. The Paris summit in 2016 was marked by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) establishment as one of the most tangible Process' achievements. RYCO foundation presented a major step towards accelerating reconciliation efforts among citizens in the region simultaneously being a regionally owned organization entirely dedicated to youth and youth cooperation, set up in a manner that can contribute towards overcoming past prejudices and nurturing an EU values-oriented mind-set (Nechev, et al., 2017: 7–8).

After 2018, the dynamics of the Berlin Process slowed down considerably. Attempts to revive regional cooperation, although significant and embodied in the Common Regional Market (CRM) establishment and last year's mutual recognition of higher education diplomas and professional qualifications, pointed to two important facts.¹ First is that regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is not and cannot always be a high priority on the international community's agenda. Second, the need for international support to be accompanied by locally owned initiatives of regional cooperation, such as the Open Balkans, was emphasized.

2.2 Open Balkan

The Open Balkan Initiative, based on the needs of the Western Balkan region, was launched on October 10, 2019, originally under the name "Mini Schengen," which was later changed to Open Balkan on July 29, 2021. The initiative emerged following the signing of the "Novi Sad Declaration" by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and the Prime Ministers of Albania and North Macedonia, Edi Rama and Zoran Zaev, respectively. Its primary objective is to establish a common regional market in the Western Balkans, modeled after the European Union's single market (Arnaudov, 2023: 47). This initiative aims to facilitate the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital, akin to the European Union's principles. Since its inception, it has elicited both positive and negative opinions from various stakeholders, countries and international community.

The initial declaration encompassed several key objectives aimed at enhancing regional integration and cooperation within the Western Balkans. These objectives included the removal of border controls to facilitate seamless movement across the region, permitting citizens to travel using only their ID cards, promoting intra-regional employability, mutual recognition of qualifications and diplomas, and fostering collaborative efforts to combat organized crime and provide assistance during natural disasters (RSE). The three leaders' central argument underlying the intensification of regional cooperation in these domains was based on the notion that the European Union currently faces internal challenges, which may delay external

1 CRM for the establishment of which a special Action Plan was adopted for the period from 2021 to 2024, actually foresees four fundamental principles (Đukanović & Krstić, 2021: 16). The first is related to the creation of a regional free trade zone based on the full implementation of the four EU freedoms (freedom of movement of people, capital, services and goods). The second principle is related to the creation of a regional investment area, and the third to the establishment of a regional digital area. And finally, the fourth principle is related to the formation of a regional industrial and innovation area (Ibid, 16).

support in directing and promoting regional cooperation processes. Therefore, it was imperative for the countries in the region to take initiative and proactively work towards improving the quality of life and ease of living for their citizens within the regional context.

The outcome of the following meeting held on November 10, 2019, culminated in the formulation of the Ohrid Declaration. This declaration underscored various priorities aimed at fostering regional integration and cooperation within the Western Balkans. Noteworthy emphases included the imperative to enhance border crossing point procedures and infrastructure, specifically by instituting round-the-clock business hours for all inspections at border crossings. Additionally, the establishment of a “paperless system” for the mutual recognition of documentation accompanying goods was emphasized. Furthermore, the declaration addressed the regulation of social security and employment requirements, with the aim of harmonizing standards across the region. Another crucial aspect highlighted was the need to fortify cross-border cooperation in the field of security to address shared challenges effectively. Finally, the declaration stressed the significance of increasing investments throughout the region, fostering economic growth and development. (Declaration from Ohrid)

The Tirana Declaration from December 21, 2019, “placed significant emphasis on the necessity of promoting cooperation in effectively responding to civil emergencies. This collaboration was envisioned to be in coordination with esteemed entities such as the UN Development Program, the European Union (inclusive of its Civil Protection Mechanism), and other regional and international organizations, which have played instrumental roles in fostering a culture of cooperation and preparedness”. This particular aspect of the agreement was formally designated as the “Durrës Protocol.” The Declaration sought to strengthen the collective ability of the involved parties to address civil emergencies promptly and efficiently through coordinated efforts and established mechanisms for preparedness and response (Declaration from Tirana).

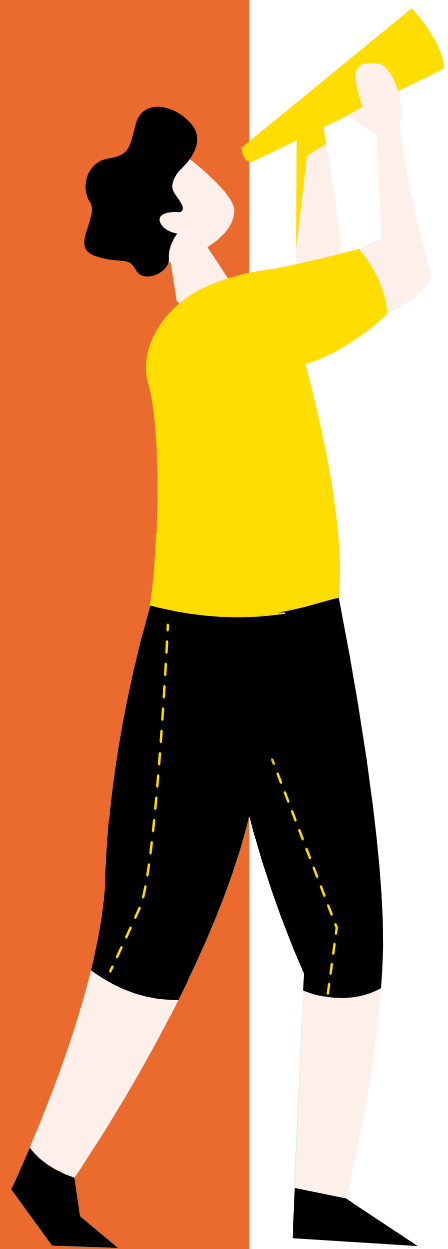
The meeting in Skopje on July 29, 2021, highlighted three crucial points: joint response to natural and other disasters, facilitating cross-border labor mobility for citizens, and streamlining the movement of goods to avoid delays. However, the central feature was the establishment of a unified identification card for the Western Balkan market. This initiative allows citizens of all three participating countries to access the labor market in each other’s economies without additional conditions, thereby granting them equal status with domestic residents (Declaration from Skopje).

At the Summit in Belgrade in November 2021, it was agreed to concretize the guidelines for the implementation of collaboration in facilitating imports and exports. A detailed plan for the implementation of trade facilitation measures was also approved, with the process being closely monitored by the Regional Chamber of Commerce of the Western Balkans. During the meetings that followed throughout 2022, a series of agreements were reached with the aim of achieving the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital.

It can be inferred that significant progress has been made towards the implementation of the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital within the Open Balkan Initiative. Certain efforts have been achieved in advancing regional cooperation among Serbia, Macedonia, and Albania. However, consistent implementation and comprehensive development of all documents remain lacking. It is important to bear in mind that this initiative represents a coalition of willing states with shared objectives. The lack of institutionalization allows member states the flexibility to ease certain procedures and enhance mobility within the region according to their needs and preferences. Consequently, recent statements by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, suggesting the practical completion of the Open Balkan Initiative, should not be

construed as its definitive conclusion, as the absence of institutionalization enables states to exit and rejoin the initiative if they choose to do so.

All regional initiatives share the common goal of enhancing regional cooperation in economic, political, and other aspects to improve the daily lives of the region's citizens. The key strength of the Open Balkan Initiative lies in its local ownership, as it originated from within the region's states, reflecting the willingness of those who took a step forward and demonstrated readiness to push the region forward in alignment with the values and standards underpinning the European Union. Conversely, the major drawback is the non-participation of other Western Balkan countries due to existing mistrust and differing interpretations of certain states' ambitions, despite the huge potential for improved economic integration of the region, which would lead to a stronger positioning of the region in relation to the European Union.



3. An Overview of the Regional Cooperation

Since the 1990s, the Western Balkans has been subject, or part of an array of European and regional initiatives, aimed at ensuring stability, promoting democratization, maintaining security, and/or furthering cooperation in the region, and its members with the European Union. Sub-regional groupings and integrations have long shaped the continent's post-WWII political landscape: Following examples including: Benelux, Nordic Council – post-cold war regional cooperation in Europe developed through forums mainly among the states of Eastern Europe, such as: the Baltic Assembly (1990), the Council of the Baltic States (1992) etc. Central Europe's predominant form of regional cooperation since 1991 has certainly been the Visegrad Group, (Gyarfášová & Mesežnikov 2016). These examples of cooperation developed over the long term – in addition to European Union and NATO membership – showcase how regional integration may help construct new and shared political realms.

Back to the Western Balkans, most prominently, the Open Balkan, which officially came about in July 2021, as a locally driven initiative of the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia; and the Berlin Process, which has developed as form of intra-regional and EU-WB cooperation framework since 2014 – are two initiatives that largely shape the present public discourse and policy processes on a regional level. While the former constitutes the leading regionally owned process, the latter stands out as the broader framework under which various EU programs to the region are promoted.

The two initiatives are widely perceived as competing visions for the Western Balkans (Nemèth, 2022), thus polarizing the public discourse in the region (Beshku, 2023). Nonetheless, both of them strive for an integrated region, where freedoms of movement of people, goods, services and capital are ensured. (Kamberi, 2021). With tense political discourse focusing so much on the different origins of these “agendas”, they tend to neglect their similar end goals, as well as, the complementary nature of such initiatives. While the Berlin Process enjoys the financial backing of the European Union and its Member States, and a well-established institutional framework at the regional level, the Open Balkan stands out as a locally owned initiative (Nemèth, 2022), which embraces the political will of Albanian, North Macedonian and Serbian governments.

As a new political idea, owned by three countries in the region, it strives to compete with existing and more established processes, such as the Berlin Process, which enjoys the financial backing, and institutional

resources of the European Union. While the Open Balkan was constituted and is pushed forward by the present governing coalitions in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, it has increasingly become a subject of tense domestic political rhetoric in these countries. These partisan views in each country regarding the initiative have divided the public, thus putting its long-term sustainability into question. In particular, the youth community in these countries, particularly due to its general mistrust on the local institutions and political elites, has displayed low levels of confidence on the Open Balkan initiative. Such questionable levels of bottom-up support vis-à-vis this vision, threaten its relevance and resilience. Therefore, generating more support to its guiding principles and objectives, remains fundamental to its long-term success, a locally owned initiative.

3.1 Approach and methods

This policy paper utilized desk research, interviews, and a targeted questionnaire as key research methods. Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, including high-ranking officials and experts in the field. Desk research was employed to supplement primary data, incorporating existing knowledge and literature on regional cooperation from secondary sources such as books, scholarly articles, reports, and websites. This process facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the historical context, current trends, and challenges in regional cooperation.

In order to gain a comprehensive overview, 7 in-depth interviews² were conducted with prominent stakeholders from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Using a semi structured format, these interviews allowed for a comprehensive investigation of stakeholders' perspectives on regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The insights derived from these interviews serve as a valuable foundation for informed policy recommendations.

To gather further insights, a targeted questionnaire was administered to young people, students, and young professionals. The questionnaire aimed to assess the perceptions and experiences of participants who have either participated or not yet participated in exchange/mobility schemes within or outside the Western Balkans. The primary objective was to determine whether their perspectives on regional cooperation had changed as a result of their exchange experiences.

The questionnaire was distributed through social media and personalized email invitations, resulting in 162 respondents. By analyzing the collected data, significant trends and changes in participants' perspectives towards regional cooperation can be identified, providing valuable guidance for policymaking and fostering enhanced regional collaboration.

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- 2 Mr. Denis Piplaš, RYCO Deputy Secretary General,
Mrs. Odeta Barbullushi, advisor to the Albanian Prime Minister and National Coordinator for Regional Cooperation
Mr. Sokol Dedja, General Political Director at the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs in Albania
Mr. Julian Vasallo, Deputy EU Ambassador in North Macedonia
Mr. Georgi Tasev, advisor to the Prime Minister of North Macedonia for Youth Policies
Mrs. Ivana Antonijević, Deputy Minister of Tourism and Youth in Serbia
Mrs. Suzana GRUBJEŠIĆ, Former Minister for European Affairs in Serbia

3.2 Merits and limits

The policy paper faces several limitations that should be taken into account for more in-depth analysis and interpretation of the presented findings. Firstly, the response rate to the distributed questionnaire is significantly lower than expected, reducing the representativeness of the gathered data. Moreover, the voluntary nature of participation introduces a bias favoring individuals with favorable attitudes toward regional cooperation, potentially excluding skeptical viewpoints and leading to a potential underrepresentation of their viewpoints and limiting the generalizability of the findings.

Secondly, due to the complex nature of the Berlin process, which is often used as a political framework, encompassing already existing EU funds and mechanisms, as well as newly established ones, this paper is limited in its capacity to accurately distinguish Berlin Process implications from the rest. The Open Balkans Initiative, subject to controversies from its inception and facing impending conclusions, introduces uncertainties that cast shadows on its ongoing significance and value.

Finally, the paper's focus on the Open Balkans as an illustrative case, rather than a central analytical subject, is a constraint attributed to both the paper's limited scope and temporal alignment, especially given recent indications of its potential conclusion. These limitations collectively underscore the necessity for nuanced interpretation and careful extrapolation of the paper's findings to inform well-grounded policy recommendations.

In addressing the limitations encountered during our data gathering process, several solutions were implemented to enhance the quality and representativeness of the collected information. Firstly, in response to the lower-than-expected response rate to our distributed questionnaire, several reminders were sent to encourage individuals who may have forgotten or procrastinated to participate. Also, verified distribution channels were used such as email, social media, and other relevant channels.

In addition to these survey-related measures, a thorough analytic analysis of Berlin Process and Open Balkans was done. Interviews were done to explore the initiative's complexities and implications deeply. This approach helps us understand the initiative better and aids in informed policymaking.



4. Findings and Analysis

In order to comprehensively address the complexities surrounding the Regional Network, a diligent examination of the legal and institutional framework is imperative. This analysis aims to clarify the complexities of Regional Cooperation by exploring important aspects of the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans initiative. Additionally, to gain insight into the perceptions of young people regarding regional cooperation, a questionnaire was distributed and subsequently analyzed.

4.1 Research findings

The Western Balkans' regional cooperation landscape has been shaped by two key initiatives: the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans. The German-led Berlin Process, launched in 2014, demonstrated strong financial support and an extensive agenda centered on education, economic ties, and improved relations. Notable successes include the creation of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and agreements for economic integration. Challenges have arisen, with the Berlin Process slowing down after 2018, highlighting the need for locally driven initiatives due to the fluctuating priority of regional cooperation on the global stage.

Furthermore, the Open Balkans Initiative, launched in 2019, aims to create a shared regional market. As Suzana Grubješić, Former Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, noted, this initiative has contributed to improved bilateral relations between Serbia and North Macedonia. Grubješić highlighted the historic significance of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama's visit to Belgrade in November 2014, the first official visit in 68 years, which marked a pivotal moment for political and societal rapprochement. This initiative has notably enhanced relations between the two countries in various aspects, particularly economic and political realms. However, despite its positive impact, the Open Balkans Initiative encounters challenges in terms of consistency and inclusivity, as certain countries have not participated. Both initiatives exemplify progress and fragmentation, illustrating the intricate path toward cohesive regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

4.2 Youth perception towards Regional Cooperation

A questionnaire was used to gather information from young people regarding their participation in exchange programs and their perception of regional cooperation. Out of 162 respondents, 63.6%

were women, 35.2% were men, and 1.2% identified as other. The majority of respondents identified as Serbian (44.4%), followed by Albanian (32.7%), and Macedonian (17.9%). This diverse ethnic composition emphasizes the need for inclusive regional cooperation initiatives. The age distribution shows that targeting higher education institutions effectively engages youth, with 43.2% falling in the 19–24 age category and 34.6% in the 14–18 age category. Exchange programs have great potential for academic and professional development, fostering a network of skilled and motivated young individuals committed to regional cooperation. To build a sense of shared regional identity and strengthen youth cooperation, it is essential to create an inclusive environment that promotes dialogue, understanding, and collaboration among diverse ethnicities.

While a majority of the survey participants (51.2%) have not taken part in such programs, a significant portion (19.8%) has engaged in exchanges within the Western Balkans Six (WB6) region, indicating a notable level of mobility and collaboration within the region. Moreover, 16.7% of respondents have participated in programs outside the WB6 region, highlighting their inclination towards international exposure and opportunities beyond their immediate vicinity. Notably, 12.3% of respondents have experienced both WB6 and non-WB6 region programs, revealing the diversity of experiences among the participants.

Among the survey respondents, the majority (51.2%) have not participated in these programs, but a considerable proportion (19.8%) have taken part in exchanges within the Western Balkans Six (WB6) region. This indicates a significant level of mobility and collaboration within the region. Additionally, 16.7% of participants have engaged in programs outside the WB6 region, demonstrating their interest in international exposure and opportunities beyond their immediate vicinity. It is worth noting that 12.3% of respondents have had experiences in both WB6 and non-WB6 region programs, highlighting the diverse range of experiences among the participants.

4.3 Analysis of the Participants and non-participants experiences, challenges and perceptions

4.3.1. Analysis of non-participants

Reasons for not participating

By analyzing the answers of non-participants, we can reveal how common are the different reasons behind their decision not to participate in mobilities and exchange programs, by calculating their frequency. The most prevalent reason, selected by 65.9% of the respondents, is the lack of opportunity. This indicates that a significant proportion of potential participants faced external barriers preventing their involvement, such as not being informed. Although chosen by a far smaller proportion of participants, the second most chosen option is the reluctance to step out of the comfort zone, with 14.8% of the non-participants mentioning it as a contributing factor. This suggests that personal comfort and familiarity impacted the decision to participate of these respondents. An even smaller portion of individuals of 9.1%, cited a lack of interest or willingness to participate in such programs, as their main reason for not getting involved. This highlights that some potential participants simply did not find the initiative appealing. Lastly, 10.2% of non-participants cited other reasons, which might encompass a wide range of factors not covered by the three previously mentioned options. It indicates a need for further exploration and understanding of the other

reasons that might play role. In conclusion, this analysis of reasons for not participating shows that the majority of non-participants with more than two thirds, would participate if given the opportunity, or when they will be ready to step out of their comfort zone. The results also show that the division of the main reasons of not participating between the lack of opportunity, not being ready to step out of the comfort zone and simply not being interested in participating, is accurate, as only a few proportions of participants selected other reasons.

Distribution of motivation:

The distribution of motivation levels among the non-participants put into the above-mentioned categories, provides valuable insights into their potential interest and participation in future exchange programs. Among those who so far didn't have an opportunity to participate in exchange programs, the majority, accounting for 74,1%, expressed a high level of motivation to participate if given the chance. This suggests a strong interest in future exchange programs. Furthermore, 22,4% of the respondents indicated a somewhat motivated stance, while only 3,4% claimed not to be motivated at all. For those individuals who cited their reluctance to get out of their comfort zone as the reason for their non participation, a considerable 61.5% demonstrated a high level of motivation. This indicates a willingness to step out of their comfort zone in a possible future participation in exchange programs. Meanwhile, 23.1% expressed a moderate level of motivation, and 15.4% claimed not to be motivated. Among those who stated that they didn't want to go, 12.5% showed a very motivated attitude toward participating in future exchange programs, with an additional 37,5% being somewhat motivated. However, the majority of this group, at 50%, were not very motivated to join such initiatives. Finally, regarding the participants who cited other reasons, the motivation levels were almost evenly split between 55,5% being somewhat motivated and 44,5% very motivated. Overall, these results reveal a generally positive outlook, with a significant proportion of non-participants expressing a high level of motivation to participate in future exchange programs, especially among those who didn't have an opportunity and those who were initially reluctant due to their comfort zone.

The motivation among different subgroups

For the persons living in remote areas with limited or no access to social structures and youth services, as well as for those with developmental challenges, the main reason for not participating was not having the opportunity. Although a smaller proportion of participants identified as gender minority, their main reason for not participating, as well was not having the opportunity. For the LGBTQ persons, and the ethnic minorities, the reasons were mostly distributed between not being ready to get out of the comfort zone and not having the opportunity. Those who felt that they belonged to some of the groups of minorities, but couldn't explicitly state which ones, had answers with various reasons for not participating, being almost equally split between not having the opportunity, not being ready to get out of their comfort zone, or simply not wanting.

4.3.2 Analysis of participants

Distribution of Mobilities

Participants engaged in exchange programs across various locations, with the European Union being the most favored destination, accounting for 29,1% of all mobilities. This indicates a strong interest

in exploring opportunities within EU countries, possibly driven by the appeal of diverse cultures and professional opportunities. Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina emerged as significant destinations for exchange programs, with 15,0% and 13,4% of participants choosing these locations, respectively. This regional focus could be attributed to geographical proximity and cultural similarities, making it convenient and appealing for participants. Among other notable locations, the results are split between 7% and 10% for each option. Concretely, Montenegro represented 9,4% and North Macedonia 8,7% of mobilities, while Albania 7,9% and Kosovo 7,1%. Finally, 9,4% of the answers were for other countries.

Types of mobilities

The majority of participants, comprising 67,4%, opted for short-term exchanges, defined as mobilities for a duration of up to two weeks. On the other hand, 18,5% of participants engaged in long exchanges, or exchanges that lasted more than two months, indicating a significant proportion seeking more extended and in-depth experiences. Medium exchanges from two weeks to two months, were chosen by 10,9% of participants, providing a balanced option that allows for substantial cultural exchange without the longer commitment required in long-term programs. Finally, a smaller percentage, 3,3%, participated in other types of exchanges, reflecting a more diverse range of specialized or unique mobility opportunities that participants might have pursued. In this analysis, the dominance of short-term exchanges underscores participants' desire for impactful yet time-efficient mobility experiences, but it might also indicate that these types of exchanges are the most common. These findings can aid in tailoring future exchange programs in the region to better meet participants' preferences and maximize the benefits of cross-cultural learning and personal development.

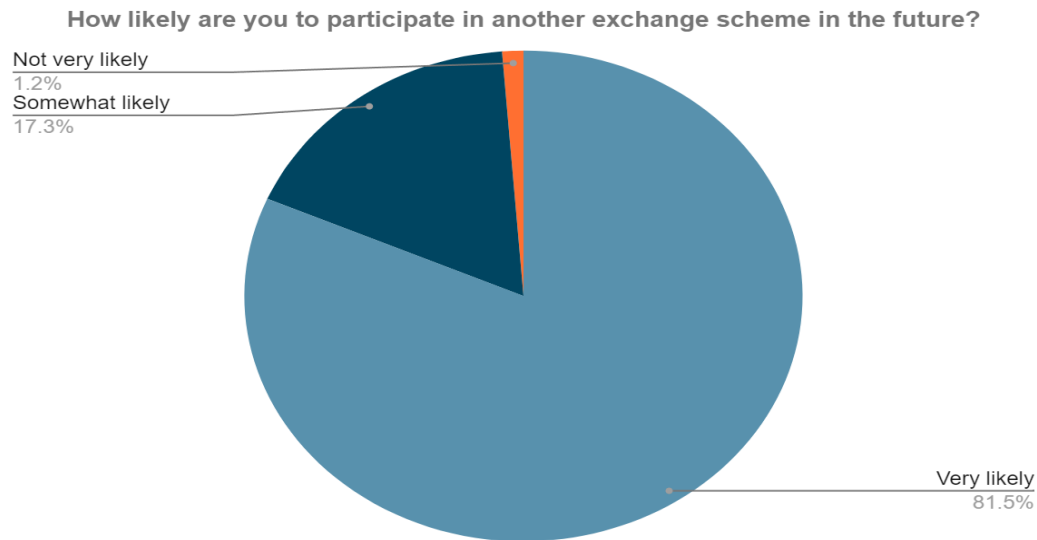
Expectations met

The analysis of participants' expectations and their fulfillment during the exchange program highlights a highly positive experience overall. Participants held diverse expectations, with a strong emphasis on learning about new cultures (27,36%), making new friends (18,9%), and travel and exploration (17,9%). Additionally, a significant percentage (15,8%) sought to strengthen their academic know-how. The developing of further professional and language skills was chosen as a motivation by (13,7%) and (9,5%). The exchange program proved to be a resounding success in meeting these expectations, with an impressive average satisfaction score of 4,58 out of 5. The majority of participants (67,9%) reported high satisfaction levels (rating it with 5 on a scale from 1 to 5), indicating that the program has fully met or even exceeded their primary expectations. This demonstrates that the exchanges are effective in delivering its promises and providing participants with rewarding and fulfilling experiences encompassing a wide range of personal and professional growth opportunities.

Likelihood to engage in another exchanges

The analysis of participants' likelihood to engage in another exchange scheme, reveals overwhelmingly positive sentiments. A significant majority of 81,5% expressed a very high likelihood of participating in another exchange scheme in the future, which is highlighting the success of the exchange programs in fostering interest and enthusiasm for further cross-cultural experiences, while creating a positive impact on participants' future aspirations and engagement in exchange initiatives.

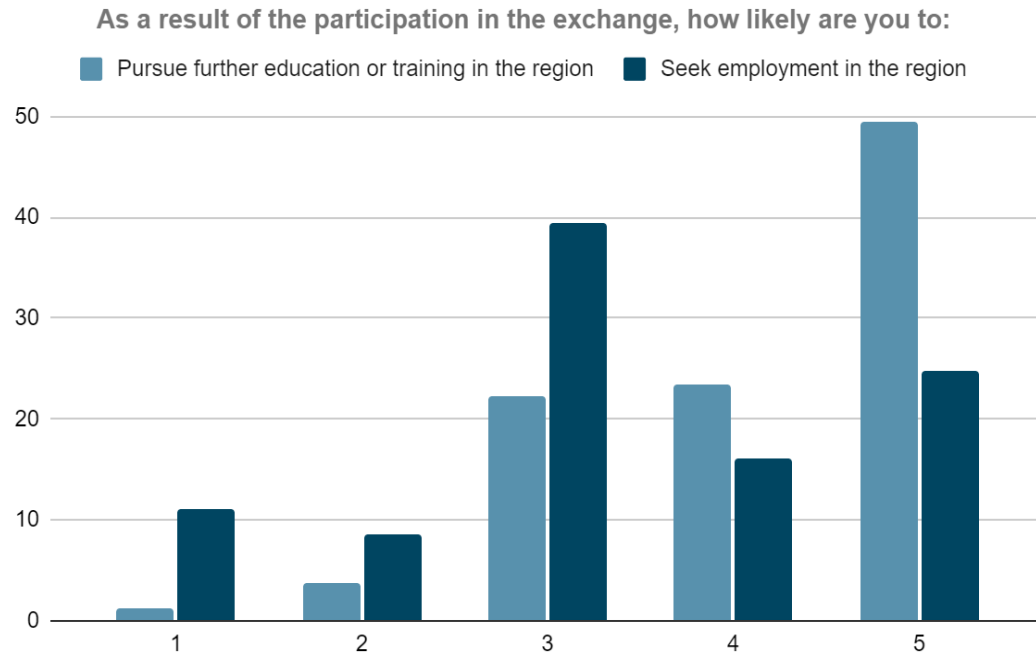
Figure 1. How likely are you to participate in another exchange scheme in the future?



Likelihood to pursue education, training and employment in the region

Participants were asked to answer the questions on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest, and 5 is the highest likelihood. The analysis of participants' likelihood to pursue further education or training in the region following their youth exchange program experience reveals a highly positive outcome with an average of 4,16. Almost half of the participants, or 49,4% expressed a strong inclination to do so, with a rating of 5, indicating that the exchange program played a significant role in motivating them to continue their education or training within the region. Similarly, the analysis of participants' likelihood to seek employment in the region, as well indicates positive outcomes, but with a more balanced perspective and median answer of 3.37, where a notable proportion of 39,5% of the participants rated it with 3. Furthermore, nearly one-fourth of the participants 24.7% expressed a high likelihood and a rating of 5, of seeking employment in the region, confirming the positive impact of the exchange programs.

Figure 2. Likelihood to pursue education, training and employment in the region



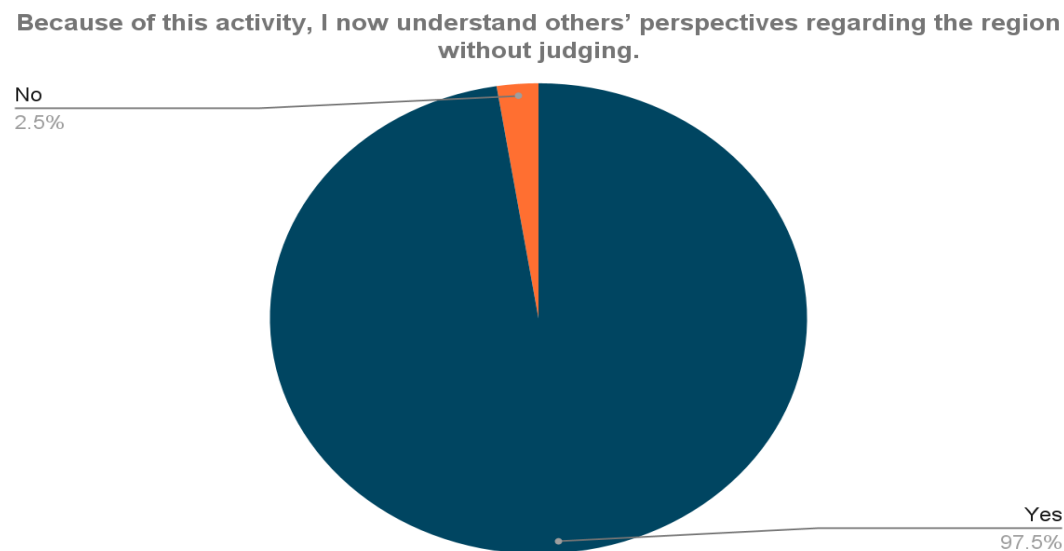
If we take into consideration only the ratings 4 and 5, as positive, we will have 72,8% of the participants willing to pursue further education and training in the region, and 40,7% to seek employment. These figures go as much as 95,0% for education and 80,2% for employment if we consider the rating 3, as positive, which can be a ground for further analysis on the correlation, given the fact that according the data from Balkan Barometer, 71% of young people are considering leaving their home country, assuming that this also means moving from the region.

The overall data suggests that the exchanges effectively encouraged participants to consider continued education and skill development, reflecting the program's impact in inspiring participants to seek further personal and professional growth, thus contributing positively to the region's human capital development. From the analysis on the likelihood for pursuing employment in the region, we can again conclude a positive impact of the exchange programs, motivating many participants to consider future career opportunities within the region.

Measuring the perception:

The analysis of participants' responses regarding the impact of the exchange scheme experience as well reveals positive outcomes. An overwhelming majority of participants, or 97.5% expressed that the exchange scheme helped them understand others' perspectives regarding the region without judgment, indicating a heightened sense of intercultural sensitivity and mutual respect. The fact that all participants interacted with young people/students from other countries during the exchange scheme emphasizes the program's successful facilitation of cross-cultural communication and collaboration, as well as the intercultural understanding. This also highlights the positive effects of the exchange programs in promoting empathy and open-mindedness.

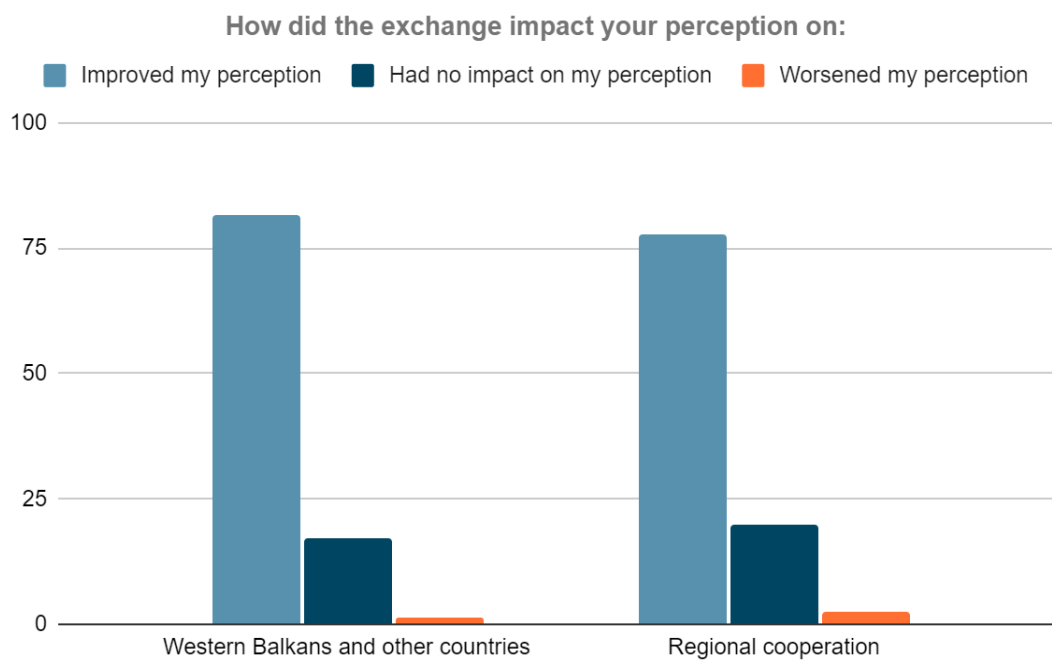
Figure 3. Impact of the exchange scheme on understanding others' perspectives regarding the region without judging



A significant proportion of 81,5% mentioned an improved overall perception of the Western Balkans and/or other countries they visited, demonstrating the program's success in promoting cultural appreciation and positive impressions of diverse nations. Moreover, a substantial majority of 77,8% of the participants reported that their perception of regional cooperation had improved as a result of the program. These results are showcasing the exchange scheme's efficacy in fostering a positive outlook on the region itself, but also on collaboration and mutual understanding among its countries.

These positive results where the vast majority of participants have a positive perception on the Western Balkan and the regional cooperation can be a great indicator that the participation in mobilities abroad can impact the opinions on such questions, especially if we compare these results with those from Balkan Barometer, where 1 in 5 citizens of Western Balkans associate the region with hope and cooperation.

Figure 4. How did the exchange impact your perception?



5. Improving Regional Cooperation

Within the intricate dynamics of the Western Balkans, key recommendations emerge. These proposals provide a strategic framework for enhancing integration and collaboration among members. They prioritize inclusive initiatives that garner widespread support. By acknowledging the pivotal role of politicians as intermediaries and emphasizing the necessity of comprehensive roadmaps, these recommendations aim to cultivate transparency, foster trust, and facilitate sustained progress in the region.

5.1. Conclusion

The Western Balkans region has been subject to a variety of European and regional initiatives all aimed at bolstering stability, democratic progress, security, and cooperation among its members as well as with the European Union. Notable among these initiatives are the Open Balkan and Berlin Process frameworks, which have significantly influenced the present discourse and policy deliberations at the regional level. While these two initiatives are often perceived as competing visions, their shared objective is to cultivate an integrated region where the unhindered movement of people, goods, services, and capital is ensured.

While the Berlin Process benefits from financial support and a solid institutional framework, the Open Balkan Initiative stands out as a preeminent locally owned endeavor, underpinned by the collective political will of three regional countries. However, regardless of the initiative, there remains a need to bridge the gap between regional institutions and the ordinary citizens and to ensure the practical functionality of existing legal frameworks.

In the realm of academic and professional development, exchange programs have showcased considerable potential in fostering regional youth cooperation. The participants' motivation to engage in such initiatives is robust, notwithstanding the various reasons cited by non-participants, such as a lack of opportunities or hesitation to step out of their comfort zones. The findings reflect a promising inclination among potential participants to seize opportunities for personal growth and cross-cultural engagement.

Undoubtedly, the youth exchange programs have had a transformative impact. They have not only encouraged participants to explore further educational and professional avenues but have also contributed to an enhanced perception of regional cooperation and the Western Balkans as a whole. These programs have proven successful in nurturing positive attitudes, promoting mutual understanding, and shaping a brighter outlook for the region's future collaborations.

The achievement of progress and the attainment of successful accession to the European Union are inextricably linked to the establishment of effective and fruitful regional cooperation. The pivotal role of sustainable regional collaboration stands as the cornerstone of achieving success in this endeavor. Consequently, slowly merging the Open Balkan and Berlin Process could be a positive step in achieving better results when it comes to regional cooperation. Furthermore, the engagement and empowerment of the younger generation within this cooperative framework emerge as a catalyst for crafting an enhanced and promising future within the region.

5.2 Recommendations

- Promote Western Balkan cooperation on an equal and inclusive basis with the aim of faster integration between the member actors through locally owned regional cooperation initiatives.
- Public support towards regional initiatives remains essential to ensure their sustainability. As politicians are intermediaries between political ideas and the society, they should rally around such initiatives, to make them appealing and long standing.
- In the process of devising and executing local and regional initiatives, it is essential to construct a comprehensive roadmap that spans the entire collaborative journey. This meticulous approach ensures the inherent transparency of the process and building trust.
- Despite Open Balkans dominating the discourse of political leaders in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, when it comes to regional cooperation, there is a need for a clearer written and articulated vision of this initiative.
- Further develop, but also utilize more the existing legal and institutional framework for regional networking and cooperation. The RCC as a main pillar of the mentioned framework should consider opening info point(s)/office(s) in more than just one city of the Western Balkans in order to be physically more present and known on the ground.
- Despite their opposite approaches to coming to life, both initiatives share a common vision, and complementary tools to achieve it. The Berlin Process possesses the financial and human resources, as well as, a well-equipped Secretariat and bureaucracy to support it. Meanwhile, the Open Balkans enjoyed the domestic governmental backing of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania –with the latter retrieving its support since July, 2023 – as well as, a broader public awareness on it. Therefore, more political will should be exercised, and actions shall be taken to bridge the gap among both these initiatives.
- Recent statements from Albania, claiming the end of the Open Balkans initiative, puts into question the resilience of regional cooperation efforts in the Western Balkans. As a result, people’s trust on these processes, and the institutions guiding them, risks to be diminished. Rather than closure, a better approach would be the slow merging of both the Open Balkans and Berlin Process.
- Strengthen and expand youth exchange programs and mobilities within the region as a pivotal strategy in order to foster mutual understanding and collaboration among young people. This should be done through facilitating, supporting and promoting cross-border mobilities through NGOs and educational institutions, nurturing increased regional identity and integration.

5.3 Taking action

In the pursuit of fostering inclusive and resilient regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, and expediting integration among member states, our advocacy campaign will focus on generating stakeholders support towards our recommendations. To this end, an Online Roundtable will be organized, bringing together six invited Experts and policy stakeholders (two per country: Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia), and the authors of this paper. Taking place by the beginning of October, this roundtable will be structured as an open fora, under the theme: “Way Forward: Building A Common Paradigma for Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans”.

1. This event will feature a presentation of the Policy Paper, with a focus on its recommendations. Throughout it, the participants, will tackle these questions:
2. How to bridge parallel regional initiatives in the Western Balkans?
3. How to foster local ownership vis-à-vis regional cooperation in the Western Balkans?
4. How to strengthen the role of youth as beneficiaries, as well as, stakeholders in regional cooperation?
5. How to develop a stronger crossborder public opinion in favor for regional cooperation, in order to ensure its resilience ?

Building on its outcomes, the roundtable aims to develop support towards this Policy Paper. Its insights will be shared with the Project Team, and will further inform their long-term efforts to influence decision makers, in building sustainable and inclusive regional cooperation mechanisms and processes.



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ANNEXES

Activity Questionnaire for Young People

We are excited to present this questionnaire as part of the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme (RYLMP). RYLMP is being implemented by the Center Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV), Albania; Centre for Education Policy (CEP), Serbia; and Youth Educational Forum (YEF), North Macedonia.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information from young people/students/young professionals who have, or have not yet participated in exchange/mobility schemes in the Western Balkan or outside of it, and to measure whether their perceptions towards the regional cooperation have changed as a result of their exchange experience. Your input will be valuable in helping us understand the impact of exchange programmes on regional youth cooperation.

Instructions for filling out the questionnaire:

- Please fill in the form by yourself – try to think how you feel, not how others feel.
- The time to fill in the questionnaire is not more than 5 min.
- This evaluation form is anonymous and the information you will provide will be confidential.
- Your feedback will only be used for internal purposes.
- WB6 refers to the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia

*By submitting this form, I hereby consent to the collection, processing, and storage of my responses for the sole purpose of the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Program. I understand that my responses will not be shared with any third-party organizations and will only be used for the specific purpose mentioned above.

1. I identify as: (single choice option)
 - Woman
 - Man
 - Other

- Prefer not to say
- 2. I am: (single choice option)**
 - 14–18 years old
 - 19–24 years old
 - 25–30 years old
 - Other
- 3. What is your current educational status?**
 - Undergraduate student
 - Graduate student
 - Employed
 - Self-employed
 - Unemployed
 - Other (please specify)
- 4. I am of the following ethnicity: (single choice option)**
 - Albanian
 - Bosniak
 - Croat
 - Kosovar
 - Montenegrin
 - Macedonian
 - Serbian
 - Roma
 - Turkish
 - Greek
 - Hungarian
 - Bulgarian
 - Aromanians
 - Other: _____
- 5. I come from: (single choice option)**
 - Albania
 - North Macedonia
 - Serbia
 - Other/Outside of the WB6 Region
- 6. I live in a: (single choice option)**

Please choose the option that best fits your place of residence.

- Rural environment (village, small city/town)
- Urban environment (capital, city, town)

7. I feel I belong to the following communities: (multiple choice option)

Tick all that apply to you. The intent behind this question is to learn whether our activities are accessible to different youth groups, so that we enable equal access to all youth.

- Persons with physical disabilities
- Persons with developmental challenges
- Gender minority
- Ethnic minority
- Religious minority
- Roma
- LGBTQ
- Living in poverty
- Living in remote area with limited or no access to social structures, youth services
- Living in remote area without internet connections
- Immigrants or refugees
- Youth not in employment, education and training
- Youth without parental care
- Youth exposed to conflict, violence and/or bullying
- Youth involved in conflict with the law
- Youth discriminated on basis of race
- Other _____
- I feel I belong to some of these groups, but I do not want to notice which one
- Prefer not to answer
- None of the above

8. My experience in participating in exchange/mobility programs in the region (such as Erasmus+, regional exchange), before this activity can be described as: (single choice option)

- I have never participated in an exchange/mobility program
- I have participated in an exchange/mobility program in the WB6 region
- I have participated in an exchange/mobility region outside of the WB6 region

Those who answered the first option on the 8th question – Section 1

9. Why haven't you participated in a mobility abroad?

- I didn't have an opportunity
- I wasn't ready to get out of my comfort zone

- I didn't want to participate in such a mobility
- Other (please specify)

If given the chance, how motivated are you to participate in an exchange scheme in the future?

- Very motivated
- Somewhat motivated
- Not very motivated
- Not at all motivated

Section 2

Those who answered the second or the third option on the 8th question – Section 2

10. Location of the exchange/mobility:

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo*
- Montenegro
- North Macedonia
- Serbia
- European Union
- Other

11. What type of exchange program:

- Short exchange program (up to one week)
- Medium exchange program (up to two months)
- Long exchange program (more than two months)
- Other: _____

12. What was your exchange program? (Open Question)

- School /Academic exchange
- Non-formal education
- Professional /business exchange
- Emigration experience
- lther (please specify)

13. What were your expectations before the exchange scheme? (select all that apply)

- Improve language skills
- Learn about new cultures

- Strengthen your academic knowhow
- Gain professional experience
- Make new friends
- Travel and explore new places
- Other (please specify)

14. How did the exchange scheme meet your expectations? (1 to 5)

15. Did you interact with young people/students from other countries during your exchange scheme?

- Yes
- No

16. Because of this activity, I now understand others' perspectives regarding the region without judging.

- Yes
- No

17. How did your exchange scheme experience impact your overall perception of the Western Balkans and/or other countries you visited?

- Improved my perception
- Worsened my perception
- Had no impact on my perception

18. How did your exchange scheme experience impact your perception of regional cooperation?

- Improved my perception
- Worsened my perception
- Had no impact on my perception

19. How likely are you to participate in another exchange scheme in the future?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not very likely
- Not at all likely

20. How likely are you to pursue further education or training in the region as a result of your participation in the youth exchange program? (1–5)

21. How likely are you to seek employment in the region as a result of your participation in the youth exchange program? (1–5)

22. Do you have any additional comments or feedback on your exchange scheme experience? (open-ended response)

Section 3 (Even for the students who responded no to the question 8)

23. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1– I don't agree at all / 5– I completely agree

23.1 I have prejudices towards the people of another country of the region

23.2 I believe I share stereotypes towards the people of another ethnicity /country of the region

23.3 I believe that I generally have positive opinion towards the people from other ethnicity/country of the region

23.4 I feel comfortable having friends from another ethnicity/country of the region, and share similar interests with them

23.5 I would be comfortable having a best friend/neighbour/colleague from another country of the region

23.6 I am willing to travel and explore the other countries of the region

23.7 I often communicate with people from the other countries of the region

23.8 There are more similarities that can unite us to cooperate than differences among the people in the region

23.9 There are more differences to divide us than similarities for cooperation among the people in the region

23.10 I believe that a better regional cooperation would be beneficial for everyone in the region

Thank you for letting us know your opinion!

B. Interview guidelines for semi-formal interviews

During these semi-formal interviews, our aim is to engage in discussions with different stakeholders in the three countries where our mobility programs will take place. The main topic of discussion will be the landscape of regional cooperation, with particular attention to the pressing issue of ownership within the realms of economic and youth initiatives. To commence, we will seek insights into their respective roles and duties concerning regional cooperation. The ensuing questions will provide a foundational framework but will be adjusted as necessary based on the interviewee's unique background, position, and the flow of the conversation.

1. How do you perceive the current state of regional cooperation in the Balkan region, particularly regarding economic and/or youth-related initiatives?
2. In your view, what are the key benefits of regional cooperation, and how can it contribute to the development of the Balkan countries?
3. Are there any successful examples or best practices from your experience or your country's experience that could serve as models for enhancing ownership in regional cooperation?

4. How can governments, organizations, and stakeholders work together to address the issue of ownership and promote effective regional cooperation in the economic and youth sectors?
5. How can countries in the Balkan region foster stronger collaboration and partnerships to overcome challenges and promote regional cooperation effectively?
6. What role do you believe international organizations and external partners, such as the European Union, should play in supporting regional cooperation efforts?
7. Are the motives for establishing the Open Balkans contained in domestic primacy over regional cooperation in the Western Balkans?
8. To what extent has regional cooperation improved interstate relations between Serbia and North Macedonia; Serbia and Albania; Albania and North Macedonia?

