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Youth Cooperation in the Serbian-Hungarian Context

Policy Recommendations

1. Regional organisations should collect information on existing youth projects (e.g. the Regional Youth Cooperation Office and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights) and relevant funding possibilities to better disseminate the available information to a broader audience within the EU and across the Western Balkan region. These organisations should also act as contact points for interested audiences.
2. Fostering reconciliation, dismantling old animosities, and establishing trust by providing exchange possibilities, needs to be further promoted. The ERASMUS Programme should fully include all Western Balkan countries, hence changing the status to programme countries for all.
3. The focus of the Interreg-IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme Hungary-Serbia should move to areas that are of main importance for fulfilling the technical requirements for the EU accession process, such as the rule of law, and providing information on the main logic of democratic processes.

Abstract

The policies of the European Union (EU) regarding the enlargement process focus not only on the political elite but also try to create bottom-up processes of adapting to the EU's values and behaviours (e.g. EU-isation) by involving and supporting the population in cross-border or regional

cooperation projects. Especially, the younger generation in the accession countries receives more attention from the EU, as they are considered to be better able to overcome old animosities and are more open to new ideas and perspectives.



Youth Cooperation in the Serbian-Hungarian Context

This Policy Brief looks at the activities concerning youth empowerment in the EU and the Western Balkan region in general, addresses the activities on a regional level, and assesses selected projects in the context of the Interreg-IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme Hungary-Serbia (Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia) from 2014-2020. The second part focuses on activities and exchanges of youth between both Serbia and Hungary as an example, whereby the concrete finance possibilities of activities in the frame of the EU's cohesion fund are discussed.

Youth within the EU and the Western Balkans

The EU has launched an EU Youth Strategy, which provides the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for the period of 2019-2027.

2022 has been declared the Year of the European Youth. The measures and restrictions taken as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic had a drastic effect on the lives of young people over the last two years; therefore, the European Commission has decided to "honour and support the generation that has sacrificed the most during the pandemic". Topics relevant to the younger generations are highlighted such as digitalisation, environmental protection, and green energy. Young people from all backgrounds are encouraged to become active citizens and make their voices heard through political participation. The development of young people's potential by promoting the EU's opportunities is supported, especially in the area of training and education. The overall aim is to raise awareness and strengthen the young generation's support for European values.

Moreover, the EU has launched an EU Youth Strategy, which provides the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for the period of 2019-2027. The strategy consists of three main clusters based on the keywords "Engage, Connect and Empower". The main areas of cooperation focus on connecting young people, fostering equality, practising inclusion, supporting constructive dialogue, raising awareness of wellbeing, ensuring participation for everyone, sustainability and environment, youth organisations, learning, rural youth, and more aspects relating to youth.¹

Youth has also become a target group for EU policy in Western Balkan countries. In 2016, the prime ministers of the six Western Balkan countries launched the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)² at the Paris meeting of the Berlin Process. The aim of RYCO is to facilitate youth exchange programmes, whereas the EU

1 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education (2019): Youth, Sport and Culture, Engage, connect, empower: EU Youth Strategy: fresh opportunities, new discoveries!, Publications Office. Available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/36759> (last accessed 27.03.2022).

2 RYCO (n.d.): About RYCO. Available at: https://www.rycwb.org/?page_id=152 (last accessed 26.09.2022). RYCO (n.d.): Superschool. Available at: https://www.rycwb.org/?page_id=11934 (last accessed 26.09.2022).



as the main financial supporter of the activities, is hoping that cooperation and reconciliation can be promoted youth cooperation in the region. The priorities of RYCO are to support youth regional cooperation in the region, foster exchange and mobility, engage in dealing with the past, empower young people to influence policy, and strengthen the capacities of the youth in the region. RYCO has for example launched the Superschools programme in 2021, which awarded grants to 30 school exchange programmes. In total 60 schools were involved, 805 students and 118 teachers exchanged and the project was supported by 10 mentors. The second cycle of the Superschool exchange programme opened for applications in October 2022.³ The thematic priorities of the exchange programmes focus on intercultural learning and dialogue, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Apart from the Superschools RYCO supported projects on social entrepreneurship (RISE) and cross-border volunteering (Route WB6). RYCO has a main office in Tirana and further offices in all six participating countries, which makes the organisation more easily accessible.

Youth has also become a target group for EU policy in Western Balkan countries.

One of the EU's most successful programmes is the exchange programme ERASMUS⁴, which has, over the last 35 years, enabled students to study for some time in another member country with the result of developing a better understanding of the host country and its culture. The ERASMUS Programme was extended to the countries of the Western Balkans, whereas North Macedonia and Serbia have been fully included, the other four countries are partner countries and require a lengthier application process, which can only be initiated by a full ERASMUS member. The ERASMUS roll-out affirms the EU's idea that persistent remaining identity issues and conflict-related interpretation of history can be overcome by a new generation in the Balkans when exposed to different experiences. According to the European Commission, the ERASMUS Programme in the period from 2015-2020 funded about 2,372 projects to facilitate bilateral partnerships and administrative mobility for over 48,000 students, academics, and administrative staff.⁵

The Austrian-led initiative CEEPUS (Central European Exchange Programme) has been active in the field of student and teacher exchange in the region since 1995. Currently, five Western Balkan Countries are involved in the project, and for Kosovo, some universities can participate.⁶ Moreover, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), which is responsible for regional cooperation projects in the Western Balkan

3 RYCO (August 2022): Superschools Western Balkans School Exchange Scheme; Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Report 1st Cycle of the Superschools Exchange Program Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis, p. 16.

4 Erasmus+, or Erasmus Plus, is the new programme combining all the EU's current schemes for education, training, youth and sport, which was started in January 2014.

5 EU Commission (January 2021): EU-Western Balkan cooperation through Erasmus+, p. 1. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/factsheets/regional/westernbalkans-regional-erasmusplus-2020.pdf> (last accessed 26.09.2022.).

6 CEEPUS (n.d): About us. At a Glance. Available at: <https://www.ceepus.info/content/about> (last accessed 27.03.2022).



region, initiated a Western Balkan Youth Lab Project in January 2020 with the aim to encourage youth to participate in the decision-making processes.⁷

Youth and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), one out of four macro-regional strategies initiated by the EU, includes, apart from the nine EU members, also three of the Western Balkan countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia) as well as Moldova and regions of the western parts of Ukraine (Odesa, Ivano-Frankivsk, Czernowitz, and Zakarpattya). Serbia is considered one of the more active partners in the strategy. The EUSDR has identified several Priority Areas, whereby issues relevant to the youth can be found in the Priority Area 9 - People and Skills - and Priority Area 10, Institutional Capacity and Cooperation. Priority Area 10 has identified the "empowerment of young people for participation in the development of the Danube Region through strategic guidance and the implementation of macro-regional networks"⁸ as an objective.

Under the umbrella of the EUSDR, a number of events for young people are being organised, e.g. Youth Conferences, and the YouthDanube Salon, the Young Bled Strategic Forum, a Danube Youth Council. The activities in the field of youth have been coordinated by the Danube Youth Participation 2019-2021 (Danube Youth Network), a two-year project to establish governance structures for this new organisation. Hungary was not active in this project. In 2014 the EUSDR Youth Platform was launched, which held two meetings in Eisenstadt and Vienna so far. Moreover, a Danube Youth Council Task Force (DYC-TF) was set up in September 2021 to foster the engagement of young people within the activities of the EUSDR.

A central problem of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is to gain an overview of all the activities.

It seems that all these initiatives are established because of available funds at the time, but failing in sustaining their existence and their relevance. The impact seems to be very limited, because of the unsustainable funding base and maybe short-lived motivations. If the EUSDR is serious on supporting youth initiative and in empowering young people than financial support should be for a longer period of time so that an effective and efficient organisation can be built. To fund several parallel initiatives seems to be counterproductive. A central problem of the EUSDR is to gain an overview of all the activities. Not every EUSDR member is participating in the projects, and different countries, in general, two are responsible for a Priority Area. Activities are started but not maintained or challenging to follow up, and accessing information via the EUSDR website is quite challenging.

7 Regional Cooperation Office (2020): Western Balkans Youth Lab Project. It's time to change, time to act - time for youth. Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/youthlab> (last accessed 27.03.2022).

8 EUSDR (n.d.): One Strategy - 12 Priorities. Available at: <https://danube-region.eu/about/priority-areas/> (last accessed 05.12.2022).



Youth and EU enlargement

Montenegro and Serbia are currently engaged in EU accession negotiations. During the negotiations, the countries have to tackle a total of six thematic negotiation clusters, which are subdivided into 35 Chapters. The youth topic is covered mainly in Chapter 26, "Education and Culture", and Chapter 19, "Social Policy and Employment", which are both found in the cluster "Competitiveness & Inclusive Growth". Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are additional principles every Western Balkan country must comply with to be considered for EU membership. States are asked to avoid tensions with their neighbours, try to solve disputes through dialogue, and are encouraged to foster cooperation. Reconciliation requires linking initiatives by the political elite with the grassroots to make it a sustainable process in the region. Bilateral cross-border activities within the frame of regional cooperation are considered to be a tool to facilitate exchange and establish joint projects for people in the region. Young people are an essential target audience also in the area of reconciliation, where they should be encouraged to engage with people from different countries and various backgrounds to foster education and personal development. However, youth in the region is not a homogeneous block of people with a liberal, pro-western, pro-EU, and anti-authoritarian outlook. Radicalisation of young people is a fact and the EU policies with their reoccurring calls for good-neighbourly relations and reconciliation are very likely not to reach this group of youth, who is rejecting the EU and western ideas in general and is feeling self-confidence through national patriotism or even anti-democratic nationalism. Even young people with a more pro-western outlook are already disillusioned by the failed promises of the EU, the weak social and economic situation of their countries, and therefore their limited education and job opportunities. The reason why many leave their countries.

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The Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia 2014-2020

The Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020 was the fourth period of cross-border cooperation programmes between the two states. The cooperation during this period took place under the motto: "Good Neighbours Creating Common Future", based on the principle of a "shared management system" for both participating countries. The programme aims to promote strong cooperation between the countries, especially in the border regions. Such cooperation leads to the strengthening of economic and security ties and the maintaining of collective identity and heritage. The main criterion is that the respective project needs to be implemented on both sides of the border. Therefore, cooperation leans on joint blueprinting, workforce, and budgeting.⁹

9 Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary-Serbia (n.d.): Overview of the programme. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/programme/overview-of-the-programme/> (last accessed: 05.04.2022). Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary Serbia (n.d.): Programme objectives and priorities. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/programme/programme-objectives-and-priorities/> (last accessed: 05.04.2022).



Closer research into the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia reveals that 113 projects were launched in this period, and the primary focus of 46 projects was on young people. By translating these numbers, it is apparent that 40% of those projects actually target young people in one way or the other.¹⁰ This is a clear indicator of the importance of the younger generation; young people learn first-hand what moves peers from the other side, the approach needed to bring pre-accession countries closer to integration into the EU.

An example of the Interreg-IPA, CBC Hungary-Serbia programme is the project “BEE – Student – Building Entrepreneurial Ecosystem – Student entrepreneurship beyond borders.” The project was launched on 11 November 2020 and finished on the 30 April 2022. Cooperating partner institutions are the Faculty of Technology of Novi Sad from the Serbian side and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Csongrád County from the Hungarian side. The programme encourages students, young researchers, and professionals to engage in the field of entrepreneurship with training and workshops conducted by mentors who gained hands-on practice. The project’s sustainability shall be ensured by creating a student centre for innovation called SCI-Food, which indicates an institutionalisation of the project to ensure that later student generations can also benefit from the project.¹¹

Closer research into the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia reveals that 113 projects were launched in this period, and the primary focus of 46 projects was on young people.

Another project within the IPA CBC Hungary – Serbia programme is the “Youth-Together – Youth working together in protecting the nature, promoting healthy lifestyles, cultural heritage and promotion of tourism through cross-border cooperation and exchange of examples of good practice” which was implemented by The Economics Secondary School in Sombor from the Serbian side and the Vocational Training Centre in Kiskunhalas from the Hungarian side. The objective was to enhance the participation of young people in tourism; hence the project partners organised cultural and sports events to introduce the participants to the cultural heritage and environment, which are the basis for developing tourism in the border region.¹²

These projects match the bilateral cooperation profile between both countries, Hungary and Serbia. Just at the beginning of April 2022, Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Hungary, emphasised during a joint press conference that both countries maintain “excellent relations”, especially within the bilateral trade relations – according to Szijjártó, trade turnover has doubled in January 2022.

10 Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary Serbia (n.d.): Projects. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/projects/> (last accessed 05.04.2022).

11 Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary-Serbia (n.d.): BEE-Student – HUSRB/1903/43/0012. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/projects/bee-student-husrb1903430012/> (last accessed 06.04.2022).

12 European Commission (10.04.2019): Involving young people in promoting tourism on Hungary-Serbia border. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/Hungary/involving-young-people-in-promoting-tourism-on-hungary-serbia-border (last accessed 27.04.2022). Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary Serbia (n.d.): Youth-together – HUSRB/1602/32/0085. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/projects/youth-together-husrb1602320085/> (last accessed 27.04.2022).



Further, Szijjártó has mentioned that Serbia “should have been admitted into the EU yesterday”.¹³

Despite these excellent relations, it is difficult to predict, if more will be done to support cross-border activities and other activities to support young people in both countries.

The long-troubled relationship between the countries could be improved by a number of cultural projects, such as the renovation of the Synagogue in Subotica¹⁴ in the frame of the Interreg-IPA CBC Programme 2007-2013. The Synagogue was re-opened by both the Serbian President and the Hungarian Prime Minister in person on the 26 March 2018.¹⁵ The renovation of a secondary school in Zenta (Senta) was jointly financed by the Serbian and Hungarian governments and reopened in 2019. Both sides describe the Zenta School Project as a “Hungarian, Serbian Government Cooperation Model”.¹⁶ Furthermore, Hungary and Serbia signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in September 2021, which includes the facilitation of cooperation between young farmers, cooperation in the area of technology, agreement on mixed patrols along the common border, technical and professional assistance regarding Serbia’s EU accession process, training of diplomatic staff, fast passenger ships that will operate between the two countries and the regulation of the joint use of embassies and diplomatic and consular missions.¹⁷ The cooperation and coordination on the political level are maintained by hosting annual joint sessions of the two governments, organised since 2014. An inter-parliamentary partnership between both countries was agreed in July 2021.¹⁸ The Hungarian government under the leadership of Viktor Orbán and the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić have established a very close relationship over the years. These bilateral activities have helped to improve the status of Hungarians in the Vojvodina but have also opened up business possibilities for Hungarians in the northern region of Serbia. Despite these excellent relations, it is

- 13 Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister. About Hungary (07.04.2022): FM: Serbia should have been admitted into EU yesterday. Available at: <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-serbia-should-have-been-admitted-into-eu-yesterday> (last accessed 27.04.2022).
- 14 Republic of Serbia Ministry of European Integration (n.d.): Subotica Synagogue. Available at: <https://srbija-projektieu.rs/en/subotica-synagogue/> (last accessed 07.03.2022).
- 15 Homepage of the Hungarian Prime Minister (28.03.2018): Viktor Orbán’s speech at the inauguration of the renovated synagogue in Subotica/ Szabadka. Available at: <https://miniszterelnok.hu/viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-inauguration-of-the-renovated-synagogue-in-subotica-szabadka/> (last accessed 06.03.2022).
- 16 MTI / Hungary Today (04.04.2019): Zenta School Project ‘Model’ of Hungarian, Serbian Govt Cooperation. Available at: <https://hungarytoday.hu/zenta-school-project-model-of-hungarian-serbian-govt-cooperation/> (last accessed 27.04.2022).
- 17 Republic of Serbia. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (08.09.2021): Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between Serbia and Hungary. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/news/strategic-partnership-agreement-signed-between-serbia-and-hungary> (last accessed 27.04.2022).
- 18 Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister. About Hungary (06.07.2021): Hungarian and Serbian speakers sign framework agreement on inter-parliamentary partnership. Available at: <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/hungarian-and-serbian-speakers-sign-framework-agreement-on-inter-parliamentary-partnership> (last accessed 27.04.2022).



difficult to predict, if more will be done to support cross-border activities and other activities to support young people in both countries.

With the current development, a successful EU accession might only be fulfilled with a new generation of decision-makers, because current negotiations indicate there is still a long way to go.

Against this backdrop, projects such as “BEE students” ensure that also future generations of leaders continue to build strong economic links, which seem to be the backbone of the Hungarian-Serbian bilateral relations. By promoting young entrepreneurs, both countries educate leaders of tomorrow, potentially fulfilling Hungary’s demand for Serbia to join the EU – that implies that mainly a solid economic development is sufficient for Serbia’s EU accession. With the current development, a successful EU accession might only be fulfilled with a new generation of decision-makers, because current negotiations indicate there is still a long way to go.

Young people need also to learn how to deal with sensitive issues, such as corruption in the judicial system of Serbia.

Considering that the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia contains more than 40% youth projects, the EU, Hungary, and Serbia need to support cross-border projects in the area of political participation, justice, and the rule of law, beyond the collaboration in terms of economy and culture. Cooperation in economy and culture is very valuable, and any kind of youth cooperation wakes the interest of young people to engage in the bilateral relations. Yet, young people need also to learn how to deal with sensitive issues, such as corruption in the judicial system of Serbia. For Serbian institutions, it would be crucial to have the opportunity to send, for example, young law students to court internships within the EU and EU students to Serbia to learn about their judicial system, which needs to be adapted to the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. Students should be introduced to the EU’s clear understanding of the rule of law. Learning such values as a young person would help develop tomorrow’s leaders, fight against corruption, nepotism, and state capture, creating a political system based on democratic standards. It is important to raise awareness among young people of the consequences of failing to address the democratic deficiencies in their country, as the EU accession of Serbia will not be conducted solely on, e.g. economic and cultural cooperation, but if democratic standards have been reached.

Policy recommendations:

- Regional organisations should collect information on existing youth projects, e.g. the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), and relevant funding possibilities to better disseminate the available information to a broader audience within the EU and across the Western Balkans. These organisations should also act as contact points for interested audiences.
- Fostering reconciliation, dismantling old animosities, and establishing trust by providing exchange possibilities, need to be further promoted. The ERASMUS Programme should fully include all Western Balkan countries, hence changing the status to programme instead of the partner countries for all.
- The focus of the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia should move to areas that are of main importance for fulfilling the technical requirements for the EU accession process, such as the rule of law, and providing information on the main logic of democratic processes.



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About ÖGfE

The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a non-governmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has a long-standing experience in promoting European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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