

Declaration on the Establishment of the Western Balkans Youth Office

We, the young people of the Western Balkans* ,

Stand united aiming to contribute to maintaining peace and fostering anti fascist and European values in our societies, expressing openness for undertaking steps that lead to establishment of the Western Balkans Youth Office.

We seek more opportunities for uninhibited movement in the region and across Europe, for meeting other people of different background and exchange of experience with them. We see that as the best way to overcome the perennial conflicts, obstacles and isolation which are the consequences of events that took place before we were born or in our early childhood, and which were imposed on us as reality by elderly generations. Despite it, we want to meet other cultures and to build joint future together with the youth from other countries in the region.

We want to know what happened in our past and who is responsible for that in order to accept the facts and face them, and to build reconciliation on these foundations. We want to be part of Europe where truth, responsibility, justice, cooperation and reconciliation are respected.

We believe that the socio-political, democratic, economic and any other progress of our societies is closely connected to the respect of human rights. We share common vision of a society in which people equally enjoy inalienable rights and freedoms.

We have a vision of a peace-loving and prosperous region of inclusive societies which cooperate on the basis of trust and mutual understanding.

Our mission is to encourage the reconciliation process in the region through support for cooperation and mobility of young people which will contribute to overcoming prejudices and stereotypes among individuals, peoples and societies.

Therefore, we invite all governments in the Western Balkans to support the establishment of the Western Balkans Youth Office based on the values of peace, trust and inclusiveness.

*The Western Balkans implies Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania.

Framework for Establishing Western Balkans Youth Office (WeBYO)

The Western Balkans Youth Office is to be established as an official mechanism for interethnic and cross-border youth exchanges in the Western Balkans region. This mechanism should be established and funded by the governments in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania.

Due to turbulent history in the Western Balkans throughout 20th century and especially violent process of dissolution of former Yugoslavia, official cooperation among countries in this region is not properly developed. It is influenced by particular governments' interests and lack of sense for regional dimensions of mutual problems and joint efforts for progress. This situation has significant impact on youth generations. It is important to provide young people with tools for creating new ties among post-war generations and gaining personal experience about neighbors that will be free of stereotypes inherited from official narratives, political discourses, media reporting and official educational systems.

Values for the Western Balkans Youth Office:

PEACE as not just the absence of war, but rather a situation of society built on values and mechanisms that make war and violent conflict both instrumentally impossible and socially unacceptable. In this regard, WeBYO should promote an attitude of commitment to non-violence, learning from the past and open approach to socially contested issues.

TRUST Social trust encompasses an attitude of understanding between individuals and social groups alike, both within every society of participating states and among them. In this regard, WeBYO should promote respect and understanding for/of others' rights and perspectives through its programs.

INCLUSIVENESS as a value of an open, democratic and prosperous society that takes active measures to ensure that there are no individuals and groups who are left behind and whose rights are disregarded. In this regard, WeBYO's programs should be inclusive, open and accessible for people from different backgrounds and sections, paying special attention to those with fewer opportunities.

Vision for the Western Balkans Youth Office:

Peaceful and prosperous region of inclusive societies cooperating on the basis of trust and mutual understanding.

Mission for the Western Balkans Youth Office:

Encouraging reconciliation in the region by supporting cooperation and mobility of youth, contributing to overcoming prejudices and stereotypes among individuals, peoples and societies.

Program Guidelines of the Western Balkans Youth Office:

School and Learn which provide participants with chance to gain extracurricular education and skills through programs that gather young people from the Western Balkans;

Creativity and Do which provide participants with opportunity to spend quality spare time and jointly engage in expressing their talents;

Participation and Influence which provide participants with opportunity to gain skills for taking active role in local community and become socially and politically responsible citizens.

In the process of establishment of the Western Balkans Youth Office it is important to follow these criteria:

Governments as founders of the program

Respective governments of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania should establish and support this program. They should be in charge of its functioning and sustainability. This will be a sign that regional governments are dedicated to strengthening regional cooperation and willing to take active role in providing space for young people to tear down existing barriers, break down prejudice and create atmosphere for tolerance that will replace xenophobic attitude of young people in the region of former Yugoslavia towards their neighbors.

The role of civil society

It is extremely important to have regional governments as founders of this program and their dedication to the idea of regional cooperation among young people through certain financial sources that will be invested in the program, but civil society should also play significant role in outlining its mandate and designing its activities. Organizations that have valuable experience in dealing with cross-border programs that involve young generations as well as those that gather great number of young people through their activities should contribute to this process, especially in its initial phase.

Enabling mobility where the obstacles still exist

The role of program should be to inspire mobility of young people and intensify it in circumstances where full mobility is not still obtained. Special focus should be put on the issue of mobility among people from Kosovo and Bosnia and the special focus should be put on finding solution for visa liberalization between these two countries. Additionally, the procedures of getting visas for regional countries which are EU members should be simplified for those that still can not travel freely through Schengen zone. In this regard the issue of enabling foreigners to enter Serbia through Kosovo (instead of traveling through Macedonia) should be solved.

Opening official schooling system for participation in regional exchanges

In order to involve bigger number of people, gain multiple effect and ensure full support for various programs that involve schools in exchanges, special focus should be put on enabling cooperation among elementary and high schools as well as universities with no obstacles.

Ensuring recognition of diplomas in the region

Since the borders in region of the Western Balkans are not ethnical and lot of students are gaining their university degree in some of neighboring countries in their native languages, it is important to create mechanisms for simpler process of diploma nostrification. General diploma recognition might have impact on bigger flow of young people in the region.

Opening space for raising awareness among young people about multi-perceptivity of historical narratives in the Western Balkans countries

The issue of dealing with the past should play important role in this program and may not be ignored. It is not to be applied only for programs whose content is related to this topic, but also to other programs that do not necessarily deal with it. Participants of this program should be inspired to learn about differences among existing perspectives and think in this spirit. This is why this program requires qualified people who will be handling these visits. Awareness on existence of parallel and conflicting narratives might create more understanding in political terms among young people in the region.

Dedication of governments to promote good neighboring relations and serve as promoters of need for enhanced regional cooperation

It is important that in official discourses of regional governments, through synchronized activities of different ministries, media and general spirit in educational system regional cooperation is highlighted as necessary tool for progress and brighter future. The freedom of movement should be especially promoted in areas with existing division in communities and where, despite nonexistence of formal obstacles for mobility, people have psychological barriers to visit neighboring communities.

Program Sustainability

From the very beginning of establishment of this program special focus should be put on its sustainability. It should be secured through precise fundraising strategy, but the financial contribution of regional governments should play significant place in operationalization of regional mechanisms that will enable youth visiting programs.

In the light of above mentioned criteria, Regional Network of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights offices finds mutual interest in advocating establishment of the Regional Youth Exchange Program and commits itself to contribute to the process of establishment of this program in the Western Balkans.