

■ International Workshop in Cologne

## Shaping Young People's Future in the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe

Organizer: Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / SOG)  
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*Report by Gregor Mayer, Belgrade*

□ The recently released Macedonian feature movie "Gospod postoi, imeto i e Petrunija" (God exists, Her Name is Petrunya) <sup>1</sup> has as its main character a young woman in her early 30's, living in a dull and gloomy town called Štip in the de-industrialized backlands of North Macedonia. Petrunya has an M.A. in history, no job, lives with her parents and struggles with over-weight. Though she does apply for jobs, the interviews regularly turn out to be a humiliating experience – not only because of her obvious *skills mismatch*, but also because of the male chauvinist attitudes nurtured in this part of the world. When she applies for a job as a secretary in a sweat-shop-like textile factory, she is not only turned down, but the arrogant boss tells her bluntly, that she would be "too ugly to be f..." by him. After this particular job interview, occurring just at the beginning of a new year, she bumps into a folkloristic event at a bridge over the river Bregalnica. It is the finale of an Epiphany procession, where the local priest tosses a holy cross into the river, and half-naked shivering young men from the town jump into the icy water, as the cross would be possessed by the guy who recovers it. At this point, Petrunya also jumps into the water, and it is her, who gets hold of the cross. Her stunt triggers a veritable scandal, because, as everybody says, only males are entitled to go for the cross. But Petrunya refuses to give it back, insisting on the fact, that there is no law interdicting a woman to compete for the cross. Perhaps for the first time in her life, she is putting up a real fight for a real purpose, resisting the police, the priest, a furious male mob and a Skopje-dispatched state prosecutor. In an amazing act of emancipation, the young woman insists on her rights as an equal citizen. – Still, we are talking about a movie ...

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1 For data on the cast and crew, see <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8054608/>.

Petrunya's labours and struggles epitomize exactly the core issues elaborated and discussed at the workshop "Shaping Young People's Future in the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe" (SEE), held on 5 and 6 September 2019 by the Southeast Europe Association (SOG) in the premises of the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung in Cologne. On behalf of SOG, Claudia Hopf, Tobias Flessenkemper, and Christian Hagemann had invited around 40 scholars to discuss about the related urgent inter-generational and inter-national questions. A basic document for this workshop was the "*Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019*", freshly published by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation. In its Executive Summary and Introduction, one can read: "Youth across the region (...) continue to suffer from high unemployment and experience precarious working conditions, while many young people are without a job. (...) (Y)oung people from SEE are highly dependent on their parents for financial, housing, education-related and other types of support (...) and have to prolong their transitions to independent living and family formation. (...) Policies addressing skills mismatches should be strengthened."<sup>2</sup> As the following report may highlight, a lively and well-informed discourse on these urgent problems evolved during the one and a half days of the workshop, as the well-balanced composition of the participants – experts, researchers, think-tankers and activists from all over the region – not only presented a lot of ideas and examples of already existing good practices, but also enabled productive and competent discussions.

On the evening of the first day, the workshop started with an open event devoted to the topic of youth's perspectives in Southeast Europe. *Mirna Jusić*, a researcher from Sarajevo and one of the authors of the Ebert Youth Study, outlined some of its rich findings: More than 10,000 people at the age of 14 to 29 years across the region had participated in the survey, covering a wide range of topics reaching from education to family, employment, values, attitudes, beliefs, political participation and appetite for migration.<sup>3</sup> As one of the most important findings, Jusić underlined: "The inequality in terms of access to education is quite present." In a number of countries, the educational background of the parents is decisive for young peoples' access to higher and better education. Youngsters from underprivileged social backgrounds are much more prone to become early school dropouts. In terms of educational quality, the picture is quite ambiguous, Jusić said. Compared to the last survey conducted between 2011 and 2015, the satisfaction with the quality of education in Southeast Europe actually increased to some extent. But the data would also reveal "a very salient and increasing perception of corruption within educational systems in the region". As a persisting problem she mentioned the fact that the educational systems are not adapted to the needs of the contemporary labour markets.

The situation of employment was described by Jusić as very bleak, with a large amount of young people being kept in the so-called NEET status, meaning that they are neither employed nor undergoing any education or training. Youngsters with NEET status tend to originate from underprivileged milieus and families with low education. Present in the region are also precariousness of work, the scarcity of regular jobs and the under-payment of the "working poor", with 42 % of working young people being in jobs which they are not trained for, showing a strong skills mismatch in the region. All this leads to economic insecurity in SEE.

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2 *Miran Lavrič / Smiljka Tomanović / Mirna Jusić*: Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V., Berlin 2019, p. 7-8, 11. Online: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>. – As a kind of reader introducing the topic of the workshop see: *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 56 (2019), no. 05-06, Main Focus: Young People in Southeast Europe.

3 Covered by the survey were the so-called West Balkan Six (Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo, further on: WB6) plus the four EU-member states Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria.

The speaker labelled it as "striking", that respondents from the six Western Balkan states (WB6) – in stark contrast to those from the four surveyed EU member states (Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria) – tagged the affiliation to a political party as an essential criterium for getting a job.

In terms of socio-political values and attitudes, the idea of a strong (welfare-)state, of state ownership for most of the industries, and of democratic socialism turned out to be attractive throughout the region, Jusić explained, "which is not a surprise given the situation on the labour market". This could be related to the phenomenon of "millennial socialism", which seems to attract people who are born between 1980 and 2000. Nevertheless, young people in the region are also overwhelmingly pro-European. Many of the respondents trust the EU more than their national government, with approval rates for EU-membership (in the non-EU countries) ranging from 65 % in Serbia to 95 % in Albania. Meanwhile, young people throughout the region feel themselves weakly represented in politics, requesting a stronger say. At the same time, they report very little interest in politics and demonstrate little knowledge of politics. Although young people in SEE do participate in national elections, they show little knowledge about non-standard political activities like boycotts or protests. But they are also not happy with conventional mainstream politics in their countries. Political and civic engagement correlates with higher educational status and human and financial capital.

Concerning mobility and emigration, there is also a strong difference in attitudes between EU-member and non-member states. In Slovenia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria, young people are the least interested to leave the country for longer than six months, as opposed to the young people from countries that have not joined the EU so far. The strongest motivation is of economic nature, including lack of jobs, low payments, missing career perspectives. Young people who perceive the overall situation in their country as very bad are also more likely to opt for emigration. Another finding: As few young people have experience with living abroad, those who did spend a certain time abroad show substantially more interest in politics and demonstrate a substantially greater knowledge of politics. They are more willing to take up political functions and to engage in non-conventional political and civic action, and they are less supportive of nationalistic ideas. At the same time they are much more eager to emigrate.

*Nicholas Moll*, a Sarajevo-based historian and trainer for intercultural cooperation, quoted other surveys from the region: In one of them, respondents at the age between 16 and 26 had been asked about what would be important in their life. Only 10 % mentioned politics, whereas 80 % replied "to have fun". According to another survey (targeting teenagers at the age between 17 and 19), 30 % identified with authoritarian attitudes, agreeing with statements such as "there should be more repression against non-conformist persons". At the same time, Moll remarked, one should avoid to paint a too dark picture about the situation in SEE and a too shiny one of that in Western Europe, as for instance, the educational inequality in Germany would also be "horrible". As Moll said in German: „Die Stimmung ist schlechter als die Lage“ (the mood is worse than the situation.) Nevertheless, in Bosnia and Herzegovina 70-80 % of the young people want to leave the country. This would be also due to a more recent change in Bosnian society, as over the last years a strong social pressure to emigrate has emerged. Young people nowadays would hear from their parents, family and friends: "You are stupid if you stay! You have to go!"

*Miruna Troncotă* from the National School for Political Studies and Administration in Bucharest drew the audience's attention to a new player on the political scene in Romania: Citizens from the diaspora. In the summer of 2018, they had organized one of the biggest

protests against a leftist government, which had been promoting a scandalous condonement of corruption. This influenced the European election in May 2019, leading to the demise (and imprisonment) of Romania's strongman Liviu Dragnea. It would be a movement, Troncotă explained, very pro-European, with people who have not yet decided to return home, but who are very reflective and carefully watching what is happening politically in Romania. In those trends, the speaker identified a certain potential for change, perhaps not only in Romania, but also in other SEE countries with a large number of emigrants, as the diaspora shows maturity and many of its members may consider a return to their home country, resulting in a circular migration. This could contribute to the transformation of the home countries – including reconciliation in post-dictatorial and post-conflict societies. "Diaspora could have a tremendous influence on a new type of historical narrative", Troncotă said, "because they took part in societies that learned how to get over their conflicts without maintaining the formal networks of hostilities and hatred." Though we have not yet arrived there, she added. Also, incumbent social movements in the form of protests and debates in countries like Kosovo and Bosnia have not yet evolved into sustained political action, into new political parties or platforms, which would be able to seriously challenge the status quo.

*Aleksandra Vukčević*, who represented the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) from Podgorica, outlined how unemployment and the shortcomings of an educational system not adjusting to the needs of labour markets motivate young people to leave Montenegro. Young people's interest in politics is low; and politicians are not addressing the problems of young people. "In Montenegro, they involve themselves in political parties only, when it comes to elections and campaigns", she said, "because these are times when the political parties have stories that look promising for young people." But soon after elections are over, those young people would leave politics. There is urgency in the issue, as Montenegro needs its young people, but they are leaving the country; hence "we need solutions now", Vukčević said.

In the following **discussion** amongst the panellists and with the audience, Jusić came back to the findings of the Ebert Youth Study and stated: "The main anxiety (among young people in SEE) is corruption, then followed by poverty, by joblessness and climate change. One can say, that young people are just disillusioned by the political apparatus as such." In reply to the moderator's question about the post-communist legacies of the SEE countries and whether there is a discussion about the past, Moll said, that the 1990s with the wars in former Yugoslavia would be much more relevant than the socialist period. "Because the focus is so much on the 1990s, the discussion about the socialist legacy is much less." He criticized the questionnaire of the Ebert Study as giving the impression that leftist attitudes and the longing for a welfare state would be something negative, since "socialist-like". "The problem is not only the socialist legacy, but how we deal with our neo-liberal present!"

Moll questioned also, at least for the Bosnian case, Troncotă's notion that the diaspora would embody a potential for change in the home countries. In the Bosnian region of Kozarac, an area of brutal ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks and Croats by the Serbian military in the 1990s war, those few who returned after the war are apparently much more pragmatic than those who stayed abroad and still nurture radical views about the Serbs. The more moderate returnees would say: "We have to live with them." – At another point in the discussion, the question came up to what extent the sample of interviewed persons would be truly representative, especially with regard to the youngsters living in remote and neglected rural areas. "I would propose to develop a region-wide methodology for correctly mapping the very heterogeneous young people", Troncotă said. Jusić stressed that the survey was based on representative samples. Minorities had been thoroughly accounted for.

The programme of the following conference day consisted of four panels, broadening and deepening the topics that had been brought up in the opening panel discussion.<sup>4</sup> In the **first panel**, which was devoted to the **educational systems in the region**, activists and researchers from Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, North Macedonia and Kosovo tried to answer the question how to tackle the weaknesses of the region's educational systems. Topics also were how to deal with corruption and clientelism, with the rural-urban cleavages, how to strengthen vocational training and how to tackle skills mismatches.

The audience heard encouraging reports about initiatives and projects: In Bosnia, an Academy for Young Leaders in Civil Society<sup>5</sup> has been established. 30 young people undergo a two-year curriculum in order to develop critical thinking, which is generally not promoted in Bosnian schools. The stated goal of the Academy is to eliminate communal hatred, xenophobia, homophobia and extremism, to contribute to reconciliation inside the country, to reduce social and ethnic divisions inside the society. As the presenter stressed, the participants are recruited from a diverse pool: Welcomed are not only open-minded people, but also so-called haters, as this mixture mirrors the society. This approach is supposed to be risky, but people might also change during the two years and give up their prejudices. "Somebody, who at the beginning would say, he hates homosexuals, would be at the end the best friend with the homosexual members of the group", she said.

In Kosovo, the local Youth Council developed, with the support of the German GIZ (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), a toolkit for schools as a blueprint for complimentary activities to raise personal, psychosocial, emotional and intellectual competences. Under the acronym HHH (Head – Heart – Hands), trainings and workshops for students in 20 primary schools in Kosovo are carried out, beginning in October 2019, whereas the HHH toolkit in addition is distributed to schools, which show interest in it. The Head dimension refers to the development of cognitive skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, communication and decision-making. The Heart dimension refers to the attitudes and values behind the work, it deals with ethics, emotional intelligence, social equity and conflict management. The Hands dimension refers to the practical skills, including the implementation of ideas, capacity-building and presentation techniques.

A speaker from Serbia stressed the need for a complete reform of out-dated and out-worn educational institutions in her country. This should start with the elementary schools and gradually reach the levels of higher education. A crisis of values would have to be tackled as it has a negative impact on the quality of the educational system. There is also corruption, as high-ranking politicians would decorate themselves with fake-diplomas. Practical skills are not sufficiently taught. Enrolment into higher education is not correlated to the needs of the labour market. Having obtained a degree is not a guarantee for getting a job: "In the future, there should be established some kind of regional youth guarantee programme", she added.

A speaker from a youth forum in Skopje gave a picture of a relatively optimistic young generation in her country. More than 60 per cent would be sure that North Macedonia will join the EU, mostly even believing, that this will be the case before 2025, which is completely unrealistic.

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4 As from that point on, the workshop was subjected to Chatham House Rules; the presentations and debates during this part of the event are summarized here without attributing contents and quotes to specifically named speakers or discussants.

5 See the homepage of the Academy: <https://shl.ba/lat/akademija>.

This lack of realism, though, would only tell us the frustration of young people about the living circumstances in their own country. "They have trouble of becoming independent persons, who are going to live by themselves, to work for themselves, to develop by themselves." All of those who shared an optimistic outlook would have participated in non-formal education and in public action, they would have started a project on their own. "This tells us that the educational system fails to become a stable base for the lives of young people." Her organization, she summed up, would pressure for educational reform by empowering young people primarily affected by its failures and by helping them to become active citizens.

A speaker from Zagreb, who had been involved as an expert in the latest attempt to radically change the Croatian system of education (2014-2017), stressed that this reform move had been "a democratic process, involving all social actors", including teachers, religious and youth associations. "It caused positive feelings among the population, it caused enthusiasm about the progressive ideas, and it caused protests, two years in a row", he described the highly charged atmosphere around the reform effort. As one of the few strengths of the old socialist system had been equality, this aspect could be maintained, he said. Education is still highly valued by the families and young people, paired with low levels of early school dropouts. "All of that could be a foundation for establishing education as a pivotal point of all progressive political structures." Not only in Croatia, but also in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, education could be a tool for re-shaping society, but in order to achieve this, "we need wisdom, time and patience".<sup>6</sup>

The last speaker of the panel on education, a student from Pristina, stated a certain degree of improvements in Kosovo's secondary school system, adding though that "mentality has not changed". Although the government has lately launched marketing campaigns for secondary education, it missed the opportunity to cooperate with the private sector, e.g. offering internships. By that way, the image of secondary education could have been elevated, the stigma of being a second-class tier (of being "plan B schools" for those who don't make it into higher education) could have been removed. But in higher education, too, there are factors, which keep students stagnating in acquiring adequate skills and knowledge. "We have professors who have established their place in faculties and universities, who refuse to follow the standards though they have clear orders from the directorates, etc. that they need to follow them." There are a lot of organizations offering the missing perspectives in a non-formalized way, but their presence is limited to urban centers, especially Pristina. It would be necessary to extend their activity to the villages in order to be able to reach the people there.

In the **debate** following the education panel, one participant put up the question whether the often-stressed criterion of employability would be applied at the cost of promoting critical thinking. Another one asked the Croatian panelist about the lessons from the Croatian educational reform process and what improvements it has generated. He stressed that "educational reform is a progressive and comprehensive idea". Change has to be made – inclusive, participative, bottom-up, including also the teachers in small villages. Questions were raised about the actors and stake-holders of reforms, their out-reach to neglected rural areas in SEE, the sustainability of reforms, about the value of knowledge in a region, where connections and diplomas as such seem to be decisive. Again and again, the importance of non-formal

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6 For a detailed account of the mentioned educational reform attempt in Croatia, mostly driven by civic pressure and marred by political meddling, see *Jose Miguel Calatayud*: „Croatia's Education Reform: a roller coaster", at <http://politicalcritique.org/cee/2019/croatias-education-reform/>.

education as a corrective to the shortcomings and failures of the educational systems in transitional countries were stressed.

The **second panel** addressed the **labour market situation** for young people in SEE. Again, examples of good practice were presented, alongside analytical statements about singular countries. A speaker from the German Eastern Business Association reported about the organization's Zoran Djindjic Internship Programme, named after Zoran Djindjić, Serbia's outstanding reformist Prime Minister of the post-Milošević era, who had been assassinated in 2003. The programme started first in Serbia and has successively been extended to the WB6 and Croatia. In cooperation with the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the programme facilitates internships with German companies for a duration between three to six months. It is currently very popular, as the organizers collect 1,500 applications for 75 places each year. Participants are being selected in a lengthy procedure with interviews and questionnaires. Selectors are looking for the potential in the mostly inexperienced applicants, for their ability and willingness to change things. Returning from the internships, after three to six months in Germany, most participants find a decent job at home. A useful spin-off is the large alumni network, including around 700 people in the SEE region.<sup>7</sup>

Participating at this panel was also a representant from Risi Albania, an unconventional agency supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), which aims at creating job opportunities for young people, aged from 15 to 29 years, in a socially inclusive and sustainable way. The agency assists companies in identifying potential for growth and job creation. It helps young people to improve their skills in response to the needs of the labour market. It offers labour market services and it intervenes to ensure inclusiveness of vulnerable and socially excluded young people. Returnees from abroad, as those from the Zoran Djindjic Internship Programme, are considered to be a valuable asset, as the panelist underlined. Surveys would also show that returnees are more civilly engaged.

A representative from EKO Greece, a non-profit organisation with the aim of creating an inclusive society free of prejudice and discrimination, partly through combatting youth unemployment, spoke about the unprecedented economic crisis that affected Greece ten years ago. This economic melt-down caused extremely high rates of youth unemployment, currently staying at 52 %, and a devastating brain-drain (and brain-waste) of half a million highly educated young Greeks having left the country. The speaker mentioned the European Commission's Youth Guarantee Programme, which had been first introduced in 2014 and will be extended into 2020. A full evaluation of it is still not available, but as it turned out, the Greek state as the local partner behaves as a quite centralised, bureaucratic and inflexible system. Improvements have been made by the introduction of a training voucher programme for jobless youngsters, which also led to the development of an information system beefing up the mentioned programme and containing a large number of stakeholders.

Coming from Montenegro, an activist from the NGO "*Neću da idem!*" (I don't want to go!) talked about ways to stop the outflow of young people from a country that has just 500,000 citizens. Surveys show that every second young person would like to leave the country, with 72 % of them justifying this wish with economic reasons. Only 3.5 % of the young people live

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7 For a more detailed overview, see *Jens Böhlmann*: „Brückenbauer und Netzwerker“, at <https://ostexperte.de/zoran-djindjic-stipendienprogramm/>.

in their own apartment. "Everybody knows that, but politicians don't talk about it, they pretend, that there is no problem." The NGO is running a scheme for student jobs, in cooperation with the state's labour office, which is taking over a share of the employed students' salaries. This should enable students to study and work, whilst becoming independent from their parents. Another project is helping students setting up their own start-up business.

A speaker coming from the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in Sarajevo explained the role of his organisation, which was set up in 2008 by the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) as the successor of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. RCC engages in sharing good practices, it looks into youth employment programmes and issues recommendations. A participant from North Macedonia, representing the local Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), underlined the huge extent of a grey labour market that puts young people often into precarious situations. There is a need of more inspections, he added. There is a trend of decreasing unemployment, but this is to be attributed to migration out of the country. – An academic from Sofia told the audience about a newly established mechanism with neighbouring Romania to share and exchange good practices from each other. Previously, this kind of knowledge transfer had happened only from the West. As other initiatives realized in Bulgaria, he mentioned a Youth Mentor Initiative for vulnerable young people under 29, steps leading to a reform of the educational system, an Erasmus-Plus programme with Greece, enabling Bulgarian students to work in Greece's tourism sector, and a medical internship programme by the city of Sofia, enabling students of the medical faculties to work in hospitals during their studies.

In the following **debate** on the labour market situation, the question was raised to what extent the offering of internships in well-paying Western countries would inspire the interns to stay there, thus contributing to the generally deplored brain drain. The representative from the Zoran Djindjic Programme admitted that many interns would have the intention to stay in Germany. At the same time, during their stay abroad for many the perspective would change, many becoming aware of the fact that they are missing their home country with its language, its flavours, its people. "So, most of them return und give it a try", she said, as most of them would find a decent job within three months time. – This is a different situation compared to those who finish their studies abroad, for example through Erasmus, and are more prone not to return. The RYCO-official from North Macedonia said that his organisation's role is to make space for those young people who want to come back. At the same time, there is not much space for those who like to return as entrepreneurs launching their own business. As a youth organisation aiming at changing this, "we should start to think in programmes, not only in small projects, which are gone once they are finished". Systematic approaches, wider strategies are needed, but still missing.

The **third panel** was discussing the ways to deal with obstacles to **political participation** of young people and with the challenges resulting from **migration**. As an input out of the world of media production, a leading editor of German TV broadcaster Deutsche Welle presented its Internet platform "Let's face it!". In the languages of the Balkans, the platform depicts the fates of young people who decided to strive for a better life abroad, but also portrays those who choose not to leave and to work and fight for a better life at home.<sup>8</sup>

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8 For the opening page of the Croatian version, see <https://www.dw.com/hr/teme/lets-face-it/s-41751315>.



The seemingly omnipresent dilemma of "should I stay or should I go?" would be a result of the downfall of communism 30 years ago, an academic with Romanian background explained. In the transition countries, the labour market and the economy fundamentally changed. Young people at that time were able to take up positions in areas, which just didn't exist before the end of communism, like market research or certain trade and IT-activities. But opportunities were not equally spread: A huge gap opened between those who could benefit from living in highly dynamic urban environments and those who were condemned to live in rural areas, which virtually annihilated their chances to benefit from the transition. These people had – and have up until today – basically three options, which the speaker summarized under the terms exit, voice or loyalty. Exit means to leave the country and to go abroad in order to look for better opportunities. Voice means to protest and to urge the given government to initiate changes. Loyalty, however, means to adapt to the framework of the given country by atoning oneself to the ways in which things are done – which includes adapting to corruption, to clientelism, to membership in the governing party.

Speakers from different SEE countries further elaborated on the mentioned dilemmas. As a participant from Bosnia underlined, 250,000 people have left Bosnia in the last ten years, but 52,000 of them only in the last year. Similar tendencies of an even accelerating migration can be observed in the other non-EU WB6 countries. On the panel, there was a broad consensus that winning young people over for participation in the politics of their communities and countries could be a way to slow down the dynamics of migration. A participant from Bosnia presented a successful community-based project to support young people in small municipalities around the Northwestern Bosnian town of Bužim. A representative from RYCO in Podgorica stressed the importance of enabling civic participation in his organisation's work. In its framework, young people taking part in it are acquiring the necessary skills to put forward proposals and to develop projects.

Otherwise gloom and doom prevailed: "In our societies, we miss a debate on democracy and human rights", said a representant from the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Serbia. This would also be a reason for migration, driven by the impression that something bad and wrong is going on in one's own country. "Young people are probably the biggest victims of the system, of a corrupt and a dysfunctional government", a project coordinator from Bijeljina, a town in the Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina said. "As young people cannot fully understand the phenomena, they want to leave a society full of uncertainty, fear, hatred, mistrust", he added. A representative from YIHR in Zagreb gave a devastating picture about the potential of participation for young people. Political parties would be joined only either by opportunists or by delusional illusionists. There would be no chances for changing them from within. "Young politicians are happy to become old politicians", she said. Bright and active minds that would like to make a difference are joining NGOs. But this also would often end up in self-referential circles. When her organisation trains young people for NGO work, which includes applying for EU funds, "we are creating an army of people who know how to get money from the EU – and we radicalize them".

In the **debate** on political participation, the stark pessimism shown by the last speaker of the panel was rejected. As another participant from Croatia stated: "We want to speak about positive values. You cannot go and professionalize them, whilst being so pessimistic." Also, the limits of civil society were brought up in the debate. As one participant said: "The role of civil society is not to lead the change, but to support change. A political change should be achieved through elections. Our job is to nurture those values outside the political sphere." The academic with Romanian background talked about a considerable success of those people in Romania

who raised their voice: "Political movements and protests have changed the institutional framework. They have received the results that they were asking for when they asked for a mining project to be blocked, for shale-gas exploitations to be stopped, for a certain legislation to be brought back." This has another positive effect, he added: Being successful with their voice, people would be strengthened in their belief that they can have an influence. They begin to look for more and more options to exert their influence. In Romania, out of this new political parties came into life, further improving the democratic quality of the state and of the society.

The **fourth and final panel** attempted to draw **conclusions** from the rich and competent contributions of the previous sessions. A researcher from Belgrade illuminated the contradiction, supported by survey data, that young people in Serbia show a dismally low interest in politics, but at the same time a very strong desire for effective governance and true democracy. As a consequence, she said, efforts have to be made to increase the knowledge and the interest of young people. The central questions would be how to strengthen their critical thinking, how to raise media literacy, how to fight disinformation, which is very strong in the Western Balkans and particularly in Serbia. Resolving these tasks would empower the young people to become responsible citizens who know what they can expect from their political representatives in order to hold them accountable. As she concluded: "We have to support local activities and local media as a key for raising participation. In Serbia, there are still people who, despite all the mistrust, engage on a local level. And we should mobilize people in a careful way, around realistic goals, in order to avoid disillusion."

For a speaker from a Western think-tank in Sarajevo, negative developments could connect to the transition from socialism to democracy following a unilateral model. As he said: "A certain language used by Brussels' bureaucrats leads to a situation where nobody talks about equality, about the universality of social security." Neo-liberal capitalism would not create democracy. What democracy needed is the social-economic model of "Soziale Marktwirtschaft" that has been established in Western Europe after 1945. Why is there not more money allocated to the social sector, he asked. Finally he underlined the potential of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) as initiator of so-called "silver bullet ideas" like the region-wide recognition of diploma or the inclusion of the Balkans into an EU-wide volunteering service.

As another example of good practice, an executive from "Schüler helfen leben" (Students help to live), a German self-help network of students in secondary education, reported on how the organisation extended its operation to projects in the Balkans. On so-called Social Days, pupils are switching from the school to a paid job donating their payment to projects benefiting pupils in Southeast Europe and the Middle East. He mentioned a project supporting the Union of High School Students in Montenegro, empowering it to stand up for young peoples' rights. The network also encourages self-help and promotes good practices: At the last Social Day for Montenegro, 5,000 students took part so that pupils in need could be helped.

A speaker from Albania praised RYCO, established in 2016 as a WB6-created platform for genuine cooperation between governments and civil society in youth policies, as "one of the most inspiring examples" of good practice. "Today, it's real, it's delivering; it became a player in policy-making". Through systematic work and engagement, RYCO is enabling an environment for young people of the six Western Balkan countries to get closer to politics, to participate, to have their voice heard. It also enhances regional cooperation and thus brings young people from the region together.

In the **final debate**, the question of migration out of SEE came up again. It became a more or less agreed position that, no matter how damaging migration may be for the affected countries and societies, it should not be seen only in its negative dimension. In some countries like Romania, a caring diaspora turned out to be an important catalyst for a positive political development. Somebody mentioned the benefits of circular migration, referring to the transfer of knowledge and civic and democratic attitudes through emigrants who later decide to return to their home country. Or, as another participant coined it, the point is to find a way to reap the benefits of mobility and, at the same time, to manage its costs.

A recurring theme was the perceived neo-liberalisation of societies in the transition countries. Their convergence to the consolidated Western societies would be measured exclusively in economic terms like GDP, budget deficit, trade balance and so on, one discussant said. In Montenegro for instance, all the parties – those in government as well as those in opposition – would define themselves as social-democratic, whereas their economic policies would be strictly neo-liberal. Some rejected the label "liberal" when – for example in Serbia – there would be nothing like a liberal society. Somebody clarified that "neo-liberalism" rather denotes a discourse conditioning a trajectory by which the society cuts out all the good parts of socialism and adapts the bad parts of capitalism.

Some of the participants focussed on proposals and ideas that had been voiced during the workshop. Amongst them was the request to raise media-literacy in order to immunize young people against hate-speech and fake-news. The importance of exchange programmes for young people was repeatedly stressed. Young people are mostly open and keen to meet young people from other countries in the region, but also from the West. Knowledge of and experience with "the others" would reduce prejudices and contribute to more realistic expectations in relation to the wealthy part of Europe. A researcher from Belgrade pointed to the fact that most initiatives would be somehow isolated: "We need inter-sectoral cooperation, also from donors", she said. What is happening on a local level often is not known outside those localities. On the other hand, when the EU or the international community provide help it is often not visible on the local level.

A representative from the organizing team of the workshop on "Shaping Young People's Future in the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe" concluded the event with an appeal to "invest in bricks and water as young people need places to meet where they don't have to pay for a coffee". In relation to the destructive effects of fake-news, he underlined, that it was more the old people who would be susceptible to fake-news, whereas young people could be engaged to fight them.<sup>9</sup> All in all, he considered the workshop "both fascinating as well as frustrating, sometimes circular", but there are "the nuggets, the silver-bullet ideas" on which future strategies and policies can be built.

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9 As detailed in the *Council of Europe's* extensive report about identifying and combatting "informational disorder", meaning the spreading of fake-news and their amplification through algorithms and social media, confining people to filter bubbles and echo chambers: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>. The speaker also mentioned teaching material for primary and secondary schools, which experts of the Council of Europe had put together and which would help pupils to acquire competences needed for a democratic culture. Download: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>. Equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all are also among the Sustainable Development Goals of the *United Nations*, as described at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>.