

YOUTH RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE INEQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION, PROJECTS AND MOBILITY

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“Education is our passport to the future, tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today” is a thought attributed to Malcom X, an American Muslim and human rights activist. Today’s young people represent the society of tomorrow. If they grow up in a society that doesn’t provide them space and opportunity to continuously gain knowledge and skills that they need to succeed in life, the future of the country will not be bright.

Education is the key for development of any society. This is in particular true for societies like Albania that are stuck between European aspirations and their communist past. In Albania, over a quarter of the population are youth (25.2 percent).¹ They are the biggest asset that the country has for its democratic, economic and social development. But how do the young people in Albania live today?

According to the official data almost a quarter of 15 to 29 year old are unemployed (23.1percent).² Six out of ten young people (63 percent) are convinced that the education system is not meeting the needs of the current labour market.³ In 2018 there were no young ministers in the government and only 4 from 140 members⁴ of the parliament were young (4.9 percent).⁵ In 2019 a positive increase could be observed, albeit small and slow. Furthermore, among adults in Albania (25 to 64 years old) participation in formal or non-formal education and training is extremely low, in particular compared to the EU average (in 2017 - 0.9 percent - according to the labour force survey’s methodology and 9.2percent - according to the adult education survey’s methodology).⁶ Consequently, in Albania young people encounter difficulties in accessing quality education, decent employment, social protection and civil and political rights. This is a shared conclusion from the most recent studies published by various monitoring organizations⁷, but also of the latest European Commission’s report for 2019. In everyday life qualifications of young people, their

¹INSTAT, CENSUS POPULATION AND HOUSING 2011, 2012.

http://www.instat.gov.al/media/3058/main_results_population_and_housing_census_2011.pdf

²European Commission, “Albania 2019 Report”, August 2019.

<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>

³FES, “ALBANIAN YOUTH 2018- 2019”, 2019.

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/15257.pdf>

⁴ Republika e Shqipërisë, Kuvendi, 2019. <https://www.parlament.al/>

⁵Partners Albania for Change and Development, “Monitoring Report on Political, Social and Economic Participation of Youth in Albania, January-June 2018”, 2018.

<https://partnersalbania.org/publication/monitoring-report-on-political-social-and-economic-participation-of-youth-in-albania-january-june-2018/>

⁶European Commission, “Albania 2019 Report”, August 2019.

<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>

⁷ See more:

Monitor, Anketa: 285 mijë të rinj planifikojnë të ikin nga Shqipëria, 40% e totalit, September 2019 <https://www.monitor.al/https-www-monitor-al-wp-admin-post-phppost226091actionedit/?fbclid=IwAR2ejcBCFEfdzV74prQryjirNIHxHQDBswMal1CwNFPQrLQwdF4DI51orGs>

Milva Ekonomi, Gjergj Filipi, Albanian Youth Challenges Toward Unemployment – Recommendations, <http://connecting-youth.org/publications/publikim20.pdf>, March 2008

willingness, energy and vision are very often not appreciated or taken into consideration. This causes limitations for development of their competences, skills and potential. If they would be provided with support, inspiration, knowledge and skills, they could have a positive impact in the country and beyond. All these difficulties are related with youth rights⁸ to empower, participate, have a decent life, and on a broader scale with human rights.

It is therefore not surprising that within the described context, young people in Albania do not consider the future of their country in a bright light. Migration is a trend in all the Western Balkan countries, but for Albania recent trends of moving to Germany show high percentage. As many as four out of ten (40 percent) of the young people from Albania want to leave the country.⁹ Europe is their favoured destination. This is for two main reasons: employment and education.¹⁰ This explains why as many as nine out of ten (92 percent) young Albanians consider EU as positive and want Albania to become a full member of the EU.¹¹ For them the European Union is linked to a better living standards, higher opportunities for employment and hopes for a better future.

If young people are offered a better quality of education it will be translated into more employment opportunities and, on a large scale, into higher living standards. This was the main reason why more than three thousand students across Albania rallied against the government during protests that took place in December 2018. In my opinion, their coming together was more than just a political protest; it was their request to build a better future for their country. This was the biggest protest that the country had seen in years. It also had its creative and funny side. Through memes, pan carts, songs, the students presented their request for a better quality of education. They made fun and were ironic about the current system. They compared the education and employment in the European Union and Albania. They denounced corruption in higher education but also requested the government to move the country closer to the EU. They spoke out about the high numbers of people leaving the country. They also spoke about the low youth opportunities for employment, and many other issues.

In this protest young people raised their voice about most pressing problems they encounter in the education system and, in particular, about corruption in the higher education system. In addition, they raised their voice about their needs, not just in terms of resources, but also knowledge and skills they are provided with for their future and the labour market. All the demands were in line with the results of PISA testing that took place in 2015. Young Albanians were tested in science literacy, in mathematics and in reading. In these exams 15 year old students have shown lower performance than their peers in Europe that put Albania among the lowest PISA-participating countries and economies in terms of score, compared to the average in OECD countries¹². This has been a further proof of the lack of quality in education. As a conclusion, the

⁸ European Youth Forum, "Human Rights and Young People", 2019.

https://tools.youthforum.org/youth-rights-info-tool/human-rights-and-young-people/?fbclid=IwAR14pCb7yBAatqnf_vLRSRqbtwv_PllkaGOgDsUN_idLdCz5P4M4oLhBhyM

⁹FES, "ALBANIAN YOUTH 2018- 2019", 2019.

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/15257.pdf>

¹⁰FES, "ALBANIAN YOUTH 2018- 2019", 2019.

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/15257.pdf>

¹¹FES, "ALBANIAN YOUTH 2018- 2019", 2019.

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/15257.pdf>

¹²OECD, PISA 2015, 2018.

<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>

main message of the protest was to improve the education system, and, with it, improve the country.

In such situation, this vicious circle could be broken in two ways. The first, by government being more flexible and adopting tailor-made policy interventions. The policies should tackle education quality more specifically the corruption on higher education. They should properly promote the Erasmus Plus program to reach smaller cities and even more rural areas. The development of platforms to tackle the gap between unemployment and opportunities. The second, by making available more comprehensive EU programs dedicated to young people such as “Erasmus Plus”, “European Parliament, European Charlemagne Youth Prize”, “European Solidarity Corps” but also programs such as “Europe for Citizens”, Horizon 2020, COSME, Culture – Creative Europe, Media – Creative Europe, EaSI that should increase youth NGOs participation. Some adjustments of the EU policies towards Albania that could tackle the gap between education (formal and non-formal) and labour market, could bring considerable impact. The last one can be realized through the programs mentioned above.

By being involved in more projects – and in particular mobility projects – young people would access knowledge they would not access otherwise, learn new languages or improve the ones they already know. The participants involved in mobility projects showed 7 percent higher results in tested proficiency.¹³

They could also get in touch with new realities, meet new people, and experience life in EU countries. This is also one of the key findings of the research report about the impact of Erasmus Plus. The report states that more than 90% of young people involved in Erasmus reported an improvement in their soft skills, such as knowledge of other countries, their ability to interact and work with individuals from different cultures, adaptability, foreign language proficiency and communication skills.¹⁴

This is why the EU should – within the next Multiannual Financial Framework – consider increasing the support for programs that focus on young people. The programs should be made more accessible to young people in order to achieve equality in opportunities in education, mobility and projects. The latter is also related with the recommendations delivered from the European Western Balkans Youth Meeting, held in Ljubljana in 2016 on the framework of the “Positive Agenda for the Youth in the Western Balkans.”¹⁵ These recommendations, among else, address the promotion and accessibility of the existing programmes and the establishment of closer links between formal and non-formal education. They are in line with conclusions and recommendations from other events such as “Connecting Youth Conference in Paris”¹⁶ and from the “Poznan Summit.”¹⁷ So, enhancing the support for programs leads to the implementation of

¹³European Commission, Report from the commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee Of The Regions (Mid Term Evaluation of the Erasmus + programme 2014-2020), January 2018.

¹⁴Erasmus Student Network, 2019:

<https://esn.org/erasmus-impact-study>

¹⁵MOVIT, “Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting: Connecting Youth Work and Youth Policy: Action Plan for Youth Work and Youth Policy”, September 2016.

<https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3438/Action%20plan%20EWBYM.pdf>

¹⁶ European Commission, “Connecting Youth Western Balkans Youth Conference – Paris, 4 July 2016”, July 2016.

<https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3467/Final%20WB%20Youth%20Conference%20conclusions.pdf>

¹⁷Western Balkans Summit Poznań. Chair’s conclusions, July 2019.

https://www.premier.gov.pl/files/files/chairs_conclusions.pdf

the recommendations coming out from several gatherings about young people on Western Balkan on the framework of the Berlin Process. No one expects the fast development of Albania or other Western Balkan countries, if young people, who are the driving energy of these countries, do not have equal opportunities for development and comprehensive policies. At the moment, however, the EU programs do not achieve their full potential. Many young people in Albania cannot take the advantage and be inspired, gain knowledge or be motivated by the experience.

Erasmus Plus is among the most successful and most effective programs that target youth, education, training and sports.¹⁸ This program has three actions that have different scopes, activities, funding opportunities and eligibility criteria. The countries, which are eligible for this program, are divided into three groups: program countries, partner countries and other partner countries. As a partner country, Albania is not eligible to apply for all segments of the program.

Albania has shown positive progress compared to previous years. During the last call, from 32 projects approved for the Western Balkan, EACEA has granted 14 projects to Albanian organizations under the Erasmus Plus YiA program.¹⁹ This is positive progress of Albanian organizations compared with the previous year. Regarding the Erasmus Plus program for the KA2+ (CBHE), the last approved projects have also shown an increase in the number of participating universities, both as coordinators and as lead applicants.

There is some important data about the teachers and the learners that have been part of Erasmus Plus mobility's during the year 2015/2016. Only 367 teachers and learners have come to Albanian universities through mobility programs during 2015/2016.²⁰ This low number is mostly related with the lack of infrastructure and the need of Albanian universities to modernize and open up to European programmes. 760 teachers and learners went to EU during the year 2015/2016 through the mobility program.²¹ This number has been increased during the following years. All this mobility helps both learners and teachers to demand more accountability back at home. An additional important consequence of the programs is the improvement of quality education in Albanian universities.

After the Erasmus Plus experience, Albanians participants are more likely to build better careers back home and, therefore, contribute to the local economy.²² The Erasmus Plus experience also helps build networks between nations that go beyond an abstract level of identity and politics but based on a concrete level of personal relationships. By facing new approaches, participants can

¹⁸ Erasmus Programme, June 2019.

<https://www.erasmusprogramme.com/>

¹⁹ Erasmus+ Programme Call EAC/A03/2018 - Key Action 2 Capacity Building in the field of Youth – Western Balkans, September 2019.

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/cby_wb_2019_publication_of_results.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1HbG4bVgHQFqEE6Krrwa3UkID-rjiEPwrejlwET5SVFSRJAXvPLIDOL58

²⁰ EMA, "EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN WESTERN BALKAN REGION: An assessments of countries' experiences and their performance in EU funded programmes (Case study: Albania, Kosovo and Serbia)", 2019.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EQkauEvri03MFbthKblq-3o83gEgToNI/view>

²¹ EMA, "EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN WESTERN BALKAN REGION: An assessments of countries' experiences and their performance in EU funded programmes (Case study: Albania, Kosovo and Serbia)", 2019.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EQkauEvri03MFbthKblq-3o83gEgToNI/view>

²² Austrian Institute of Technology (AIT) , Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission) , Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), "Study on the impact of Erasmus+ higher education partnerships and knowledge alliances at local, national and European levels on key higher education policy priorities", May 2019.

<https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9369267b-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

better understand the idea of being a European citizen. Furthermore, the experience has contributed positively to the life of beneficiaries and indirectly to the entire society and country. The ultimate aim is to engage people and youth to be responsible, active citizens and participate in civil society and democratic life through education, trainings and sport, and, by doing that, contributing to the creation of a stronger and a more democratic Europe.

Young people in Albania do not have the right to participate in all the actions of Erasmus Plus despite the positive outcomes that are shown by those that have already taken part in other actions. This has an impact on their future development, as well as the adoption of the European values and their active citizenship.

This program cannot achieve the most optimal results and fulfil its mission if young people of the countries that aspire to be part of the European Union are not fully involved. This is why the Erasmus Plus should open all its programs to the Western Balkan countries, including Albania. Another aspect that should be taken into consideration for the situation described above is the lack of quality of education. Seeking states to improve their higher education standards is another intervention that can be taken by the EU.

Another program that is very useful for the further development of young people from Albania and for their education with European values is the "European Charlemagne Youth Prize." This is one of the projects that the European Parliament is developing together with the 'Foundation of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen.' Through this project, young people from 16 to 30 years old, from any EU member state, are offered a chance to submit projects that promote European and international understanding, foster the development of a shared sense of European identity and integration provides role models for young people living in Europe and offer practical examples of Europeans living together as one community.²³ It is available only for young people from EU member states. Since 2008 when this program was launched, in total 33 young people have been part of youth exchanges, activities in the fields of sports, arts or culture with a European dimension, by meeting new people from all over the EU member state and sharing their vision about Europe with policymakers. This project would be a good opportunity for young people from Albania to better understand European values, to foster and develop a sense of European identity and the European Union by being involved on a European level and by getting a hands-on experience. For a country that aspires to become a full member of the EU, opening this project for Albania would be a good signal and could benefit young people.

To conclude, youth in Albania is confronted with many challenges and all the programs that target them should be comprehensive. It is in the interest of both the EU and Albania to have as many educated, experienced and inspired young people. It is both in the interest of the EU and Albania to increase the number of countries and outreach of the EU projects. Only by investing in equality of opportunities for education, projects and mobility for young people, can the EU build a sustainable future for the region.

²³ European Parliament, European Charlemagne Youth Prize, 2019.
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charlemagneyouthprize/en/introduction.html>