NECE 2018 Marseille

Desperately seeking... A future for solidarity in Europe
New tasks and ideas for citizenship education.

Round Table, 7 September 2018

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I.   The signifier „Western Balkans" embraces a region as complex and heterogeneous as could be. The post-socialist transition and post-conflict societies of the former Yugoslavia together with Albania are young multi-ethnic democracies with more or less viable state structures, and a contested division of powers. There are still border issues to be resolved (i.e. Serbia and Kosovo), which resonate in other parts of the region and fuel inner conflict. Each Western Balkan country is determined and on its individual pathway to becoming an EU member – following the so-called regatta principle. Visa-free travel to the EU is possible for years –except so-far for Kosovo. The perspective of EU membership was reconfirmed with the Berlin process in 2014 initiated by the German government, and in 2016 at the Paris summit, and again this year. Still, it may not be overlooked that the evident enlargement fatigue amongst European Union member states reverberates in the region today as accession fatigue. And there is growing concern that with populism and nationalism in Europe, with Brexit, the Trump government, with conflicts in the neighborhood and the lackmus test over migration the EU will disengage further in the Western Balkan region and leave the terrain to players such as Turkey, Russia, or China.

There is progress in a range of areas, and regional cooperation crucial for economic development has solidified in fields such as infrastructure and sector development (though a common regional market is still far away). Considering the hosts and organisers of the 2018 NECE conference in Marseille it should be stressed that there is now a Regional Youth Cooperation Office for the Western Balkans (RYCO) which was established in 2016, following the example of the Franco-German Youth Exchange Office. Such transnational initiatives through their activities bear the chance to build lasting ties and thus to convey that regional integration and cross-border cooperation is beneficial for all.

Still, a sense of stagnation, of being stuck in transition prevails: bureaucracies are inefficient, welfare structures crumble, corruption is widespread, political polarisation is slowing down reform processes which are crucial for the future particularly of the young generation, and esp. youth unemployment rates are staggeringly high. With time passing the young are starting to pack their bags and leave; there is no more time for them to loose until the promise of EU accession becomes a reality. Particularly those with tertiary education and able to afford it are seeking their chances outside the country today rather than tomorrow. The brain drain runs like heat waves through public discourse in Southeast Europe and the Western Balkan region in particular. It has the potential of widening the reality and perception of the development and power-gap between European centers and peripheries.
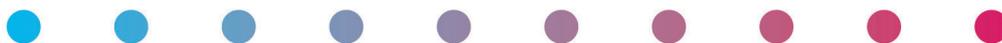
II.   The neighboring EU-members Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the Union in 2007, and Croatia, a member since 2013, are still entangled as well in transition struggles, and they know the brain drain all too well. But not only Southeast Europe, also East Central European EU members such as Poland, have experienced that with EU accession the outflow of migrants and particularly of the skilled has further and dramatically increased. Evidently, EU accession accelerates and intensifies rather than reverts the emigration of skilled workers and experts and fuels the brain drain.

Emigration continues to be and has been applied as a strategy to support economic development in poorer societies, and remittances have proven to be resilient to economic downturns, since they directly and swiftly reach the recipients. The Former Yugoslav countries have a long history of emigration and labour migration and diasporas spread all over the world.

Global migration trends also prove valid for Southeast Europe; just to name two (European Political Strategy Center, 10 Trends shaping migration):
- The socio-economic factors that motivate people to search for a better life abroad – dim economic or career prospects, unemployment, inequality and discrimination, lack of infrastructure, corruptive systems, quality of life standards - at the same time limit mobility. With economic development progress and raising prosperity the ability and propensity to emigrate increases.
- Student mobility and high skilled migration is of raising importance worldwide; with globalisation and the pursuit of knowledge based economic development strategies, the competition for and mobility of high-skilled migrants works globally. Programs such as the EU Blue Card Directive try to meet the skills shortage by targeting highly qualified workers outside the EU (i.e. from the Western Balkans and Eastern partnership countries; still, Europe is „an underachiever in the global competition for talent").

Mobility – ideal and reality:
As a core principle of the value system we share in the European Union mobility entails the promise of unhindered access i.e. to employment, services, educational opportunities and so forth. And it suggests a win-win for all: that those who move and those who receive and those who let go will benefit. Indeed and in short, the labour migrations of the 1960ies and 70ies were able to lift pressure from domestic labour markets of the sending countries, they addressed and met labour demands in receiving economies, and migrant remittances were crucially helping local communities in the countries of origin. Of course, the picture was and is much more complex and ambiguous. Not only is equal access one of the most contested issues within our societies and between them, but also the gains for some are often the losses for others, thus spurring inequality.

In the light of demographic change and population shrinking processes all over Southeast Europe the sustaining of basic welfare structures is severely jeopardized when the ones in productive age are leaving. There is noticeable panic in the countries of origin, in the Western Balkans and beyond, that investment in education is lost and gone. The

disappearance of the young and well educated can have far-reaching effects on communities at home, if there is no return. Migration from peripheries to centers – be it internal / inner-state, or transnational – accelerates the decline of peripheral areas. Without policies that back-up, re-attract and incentivise return or circulation, and also new-coming, the spiral of economic, social and cultural decline will keep spinning further.

Migration and mobility not only is a fact but a crucial instrument for opening up chances and horizons of individuals and societies. But the downsides and losers must be taken into consideration as well. Ongoing brain drain has the potential of turning attitudes against the EU and resentments against EU policies, as it fuels the sense of being stuck in transition, at the periphery, of being trapped in the spiral of decline.

III.   Role of civil society and actions to take - suggestions:

• Contribute to informing and rationalizing the discourse on migration:
A fact-based and perception-sensitive, multi-perspective debate is needed which addresses the migration & development nexus by looking into economic, socio-cultural and political development simultaneously, and from different angles (of sending and receiving societies); the focus needs shifting from debating loyalty rather than efficiency and solidarity, in a reflexive and well-informed way.

• Contribute to open up changes for return, for circular and for immigration:
Not only the discourse but the supporting of mobility through adequate policies need to based on solid information, facts and figures; what data is available and how should it be read? In order to discover and open up changes for circulating, return and immigration we need to look into mechanisms that impede the coming in from outside (obstacles to the entry into local job-markets, prevention of competition, clientelism and closed local networks, low salary levels, lack of family schemes, local perceptions etc.)

• Building alliances cross-sector to challenge the logic of closing:
-         Civil society
-         Individual migrants and migrant associations
-         Public administration
-         Companies and business associations
-         culture / creative industries

Statements against open societies resonate in local discourses all over the region (see the recent movements against the signing of the Istanbul convention). They must be challenged and counter-argued:

"In today´s open-society Europe there are no borders; European people can be readily replaced with immigrants; the family has been transformed into an optional, fluid form of cohabitation; the nation, national identity and national pride are seen as negative and obsolete notions; and the state no longer guarantees security in Europe" (Victor Orban).