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Albanian young people towards Europe

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Abstract

Albania experienced one of the harshest communist regimes in Europe and self-imposed isolation until '90. She has also experienced a long and slow transition process as compare to other countries. This transitional processes was hard and brought forward numerous social, economic, and political challenges most of which are still experiencing complex and burdensome transformations even as many as two decades after the fall of communism.

Consequently, young people in Albania became marginalized – socially, economically and politically, thus becoming one of the most vulnerable social category to a large extent affected by the delayed transition to democracy. Challenges – such as high levels of youth unemployment are seen as a direct consequence of the Albania's difficult economic context, but equally so of its outdated educational systems that fails to deliver to the needs of the labor market. Demographic changes and a youth 'brain drain' are some of the pieces that make up the situation of youth in Albania difficult. In order to improve her chance of European Union accession and to secure her citizens a more prosperous future, she need to address the problems facing her youth, who hold the key to such a future. (EP, 2017)¹

In June of 2014, after several attempts and difficult efforts which came as a result of the aggravated political climate in the country, Albania was finally granted the official candidate status by the European Union which on its turn recognized the calm and proper conduct of the general elections of June 2013. The 2011 Population and Housing Census recorded 704 thousand people aged 15 to 29, making up 25 percent of total Albanian population. In absolute numbers, the youth population increased between the 1979 and 1989 censuses, and reached a highest number of 921 thousand. (Institute of Statistic, 2011) With a mean age of 30 and 25 per cent of the population in the 15-29 age groups, Albania is one of Europe's youngest countries (after Kosova).

In order to create the big picture about young people vision and worries in Albania, in this study we seeks to give answer to the following questions: *How do young people imagine their future? What visions and worries do young people have regarding the future of Europe? What are the major societal challenges faced by them in everyday life? How will Europe look like in 2038 and how can Europe help them to achieve their goals and wishes?*

This study is based on quantitative and qualitative research. For accurate data and reliable results, first the researchers conducted a qualitative pre-study with some Albanian young people. Some students of Master of Science, department of Social Work and Social Policy, were involved in conducting this pre-study with 11 young people aged 18 to 24 years old from different cities of the

¹ European Parliament (2017). Youth challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans. Breafing.

Retrived from: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017>

country. Based on the qualitative interviews a comprehensive list of future visions and worries was developed and integrated in quantitative survey. The quantitative survey was conducted with a total number of 179 students, between 16 to 26 years old. The age range 15-26 is often selected for statistical purposes at EU level.² The questionnaire guideline consisted of three main parts: 1) Short and long-term personal future: hopes and fears, visions and worries; 2) short and long-term future of Europe: hopes and fears, visions and worries, and 3) the relation between the personal future and the future of Europe.

In this study we have showed that the top five priorities regarding future for Albanian youngsters are: being healthy, being employed, having a career, having a good education and having a harmonious private relationship.

According the concerns related to the future youth in Albania are more concerned about issues such as crime and violence, unemployment, increased morbidity to conclude with poverty and inequality. Top five priorities regarding worries are: terrorism, unemployment, corruption, poverty, and injustice. For Albania young people the most priorities that Europe should have are: children's rights, security, health care, unemployment and education. While less important: the rights of LGBT, the reduction of the number of states that are involved in the European Union, the return of power to state governments as well as religion.

Keywords: youth, vision and worries, Europe

Introduction

The long transition in Albania altered with deep political and socio-economic crisis in the last 15 years brought dramatic changes: immediate opening of the country, clashing values and beliefs, deterioration of educational and social services, increasing unemployment and poverty; all these put the Albanian society and Albanian youth in particular to new and complex challenges. (Albanian Association of Psychologists, 2008)

The Western Balkan societies share both common heritage and common challenges. Conflicts of the past decades have brought with them different forms of prejudice and intolerance, while its aftereffects have continued to be underlined by a lack of opportunities for youth resulting in massive youth unemployment figures and heavy brain-drain across the region. Additionally, young people are facing numerous obstacles often created as a consequence of administrative barriers and mental barriers caused by lack of trust, lack of information, and existing prejudice. Time has shown that only through joint action in promoting tolerance, solidarity, mobility and cooperation we, as a region, can progress. (RYCO, 2015)³

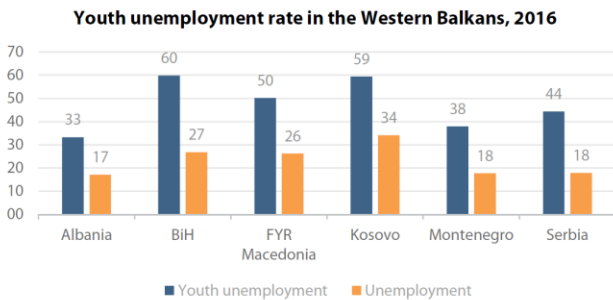
Balkan countries are dealing with complex and interrelated issues which involve various marginalized groups. In Albania, young people are considered as vulnerable group dealing with multiple issues which basically prevent them to be an active part of the society and to contribute

² Under the Erasmus+ programme, various opportunities are available for young people aged 13 to 30

³Retrieved from: <https://rycowesternbalkans.org/>

in decision-making processes (Council of Europe, 2012).

Based on the 2016 progress report of European Commission, the unemployment rate of young people is still very high in Albania which automatically represents the most common problem that young people are facing. (see the Figure below) (European Commission, 2016). Related to that we can mention: difficulties of finding job and its sustainability, especially in the relevant profession; lack of meritocracy; concern that were burdening the family with expenses for studies, and the involvement of politics in every area, especially of professional life. Issues which were also highlighted through the qualitative research.



Source: [SEE Regular Economic Report 10](#), World Bank, 2016. Average percentage for 2014 – 2016.

High unemployment rates along with low labor force participation and low employment rates characterize the Albanian youth labor market. The employment rate of young Albanians (15 – 29 years old) stood at 42.8 per cent in 2011 as compared to 68.1 per cent for the 30-64 age group, while their unemployment rate of 21.5 per cent is double that of the adult population (Table 1). Youth labor market outcomes also differ by gender: unemployment rates are 2.9 points higher for women and their employment rate is 10.7 points lower.

The labor force participation rate also shows a high discrepancy between adult and youth groups: the youth participation rate stands at 54.5 per cent only, as compared to the 76.3 per cent for the 30 – 64 years old individuals. A great part of the difference in participation rates can be attributed to school attendance as well as to the lower labor force participation rate of young women - 46.5 per cent, as compared to 62.1 per cent for young men. (Youth employment and Migration, 2011)⁴

Albanian youth have limited participation and representation in politics and decision-making processes. Their rates in elections as voters have decreased, especially when it comes to rural and remote areas (CRCA, 2015). This is due to several reasons that lead them into this dramatic situation. Youth apathy and their lack of confidence in the power of voting is one of the main challenges. Many of them think they're vote cannot make a difference, having as a result a low voter registration and turnout rate for youth. Lack of trust in the political system, with lack of opportunities for youth to participate, discourages them to stay in their countries and make a difference.

Somehow the high rate of unemployment is also connected with the deficiencies in educational systems which do not equip young people with the necessary skills that the labour market request

⁴ Retrieved from: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp

(INSTAT, 2016). Only 50 per cent of youth aged 15 to 29 have completed secondary education, while education levels often play a role in determining employment status. The highest incidence of unemployment is among Albanian youth with low levels of education. (Youth Employment and Migration, 2011). These problems are reflected in the high rates of Albanian youngsters who are leaving their countries for a better future. Many young people are leaving their countries to never return again, and many others drowned in pessimism are desperately looking for a way to leave. This indicates a growing trend of brain drain phenomena and migration crises which leads to destructive long-term consequences. In a situation where everyone is looking for a way out, this country needs a generation of motivated young people, united in their commitment to build a better future.

The age groups 20-24 and 25-29 were the most numerous among the number of persons that were estimated to have emigrated between the 2001 and 2011. Together with the 15-19 year olds, the number of youth that has emigrated in this period amounts to around 225 thousand people, almost half (47 percent) of the total emigrant population in this period. In 2014 survey on return migration and re-integration in Albania realized from INSTAT in collaboration with IOM estimated that around 46 thousand Albanian citizens aged 18- 29 years returned to Albania during the period 2009-2013. ⁵Economic considerations constituted the predominant reasons behind the initial emigration of young Albanians: lack of employment, better job opportunities and better income prospects were the three main reasons to emigrate. Overall, economic issues constitute the predominant reasons behind the migration intentions of young Albanians.

This high percentage of young people within Albanian society indicates the importance of their visions and worries for the future of Albania and its integration into European Union. The way they think and behave towards the social issues and current challenges, somehow will shape the future of their contributions in Albania and its progress. This new epoch also requires young and visionary people. Recent changes in society and dynamics of current development require the energy and the will of young people to integrate the Republic of Albania as a state with democratic goals.

Young people are a great potential and a wonderful human resource for improving life in Albania and for fast country progress. As an official candidate to become a member state of European Union while the Euro skepticism is becoming predominant, there is an essential need to evaluate and identify the overall approach of Albanian young people towards: the way they think about the future, visions and worries, societal challenges, European integration. In order to improve her chance of European Union accession and to secure her citizens a more prosperous future, Albania need to address the problems facing her youth, who hold the key to such a future. (EP, 2017)⁶

Youth policies towards European integration standards

Most of the policies in Albania follow the standards and directions of European Union institutions. Due to that, Albania has been for a couple of years in continuing harmonization of national

⁵ INSTAT. (2015). Youth in Albania: Challenges in changing times. ISBN: 978-9928-188-32-8

⁶ European Parliament (2017). Youth challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans. Retrieved from: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017>

institutional framework with EU legislation and institutional framework. Also in the field of youth current strategies, policies and actions are in line with the National Strategy for Development and Integration (2014-2020).

In addition, there are annual progress reports conducted by European Commission which analyze the progress of Albania towards the priorities and conditions to become a member of European Union. In this annual report there is a particular chapter on “Education and Culture”, where is also indicated the situation of youth and the supportive policies for them. Based on the recent progress report 2016, there are several achievements highlighted and many directives to improve the situation of youngsters in Albania. European Commission recognizes the steps forward the pre-university education strategy adoption and its implementation. However, they suggest a better evaluation and improved quality on education needs. This becomes even more important in a situation of youth emigration in developed countries, even though the skills of young people are quite high but the job opportunities are lower. Education is considered as a high risk sector for corruption and political influence, especially in higher education (European Commission, 2016). The new law on VET, related implementing legislation and quality assurance mechanisms are yet to be adopted. The lack of a modernized VET legal framework is a major constraint for implementing a number of measures in the jobs and skills strategy effectively. Private sector involvement in designing and implementing labor market and VET policies remains a critical need. Employment and VET services need to be extended to rural areas and the most vulnerable groups.

Methodology

Study goals and research questions

The aim of this on-line study was to explore on the beliefs and attitudes of Albanian youth towards their future and the future of Europe. The objectives of this study are:

- Objective 1: To assess the visions and worries of Albanian youth regarding their future and the future of Europe.
- Objective 2: To assess the level of their knowledge on European Union and the status of Albania towards it.
- Objective 3: To identify what young people consider as priorities social challenges in Albania and Europe.

Procedure

In order to accomplish the above-mentioned objectives, the study was essentially descriptive. As a first step, a qualitative pre study was taken with 11 young people of age group 18 to 24 years old from some cities of the country.

As a second step a quantitative online survey was conducted. The method of data collecting was an online questionnaire that was distributed to young people via social network Facebook. This type of questionnaire was selected because it can be conducted fast, the responses are automatically stored in a software, providing hassle free handling of data and a smaller possibility of data errors, and the participants can answer at their own pace, time and preferences leading so to a higher response rate.

The participants have been made clear from the outset that their data will automatically be stored in a software program, while guaranteeing their anonymity and use only for scientific purposes. This was to ensure to the participants the respect of ethical norms and confidentiality.

Sample

The total number of participants in the study is 179 out of which 96 were females (53%). The vast majority of them claimed that they have Albanian citizenship (n = 177) with 96 percent who declared that they were born in Albania. All participants in the study (%) claimed that mothers were born in Albania versus (98%) who said the same about dads. As far as private affairs are concerned, 116 of them (65%) stated that they were not in a relationship as opposed to 45 (25%) who claimed to be involved in a private relationship. Of the respondents, 78 percent (n = 139) stated that they are continuing to study, 12 percent (n = 23) reported being in a job search, where it is worth mentioning that only 23 percent of participants (n = 41) have a university degree

Main Results

The way in which young people look at their future in 2038 is the typical wishes of a person of their age. They distinguish as the most important things to have a harmonious private relationship, to be employed and to live healthy and in a clean environment, the latter also expresses the growing concern associated with the growth of various diseases and the need for young people to be vital.

From the questionnaires it turned out that the boys (M = 3.83, SD = 1.01) gave more importance to possessing goods like cars and compared to girls (M = 3.45, SD = 1.09), $t(153) = -2.26, p < .05$. This expresses the general culture in Albania where the boy is seen as the main person who should provide the best for his family. By singling out this fact which is statistically significant, no differences were found between girls and boys.

Table 1 Visions regarding the future

Imagine yourself in 2038, which of the following things are most important to you?

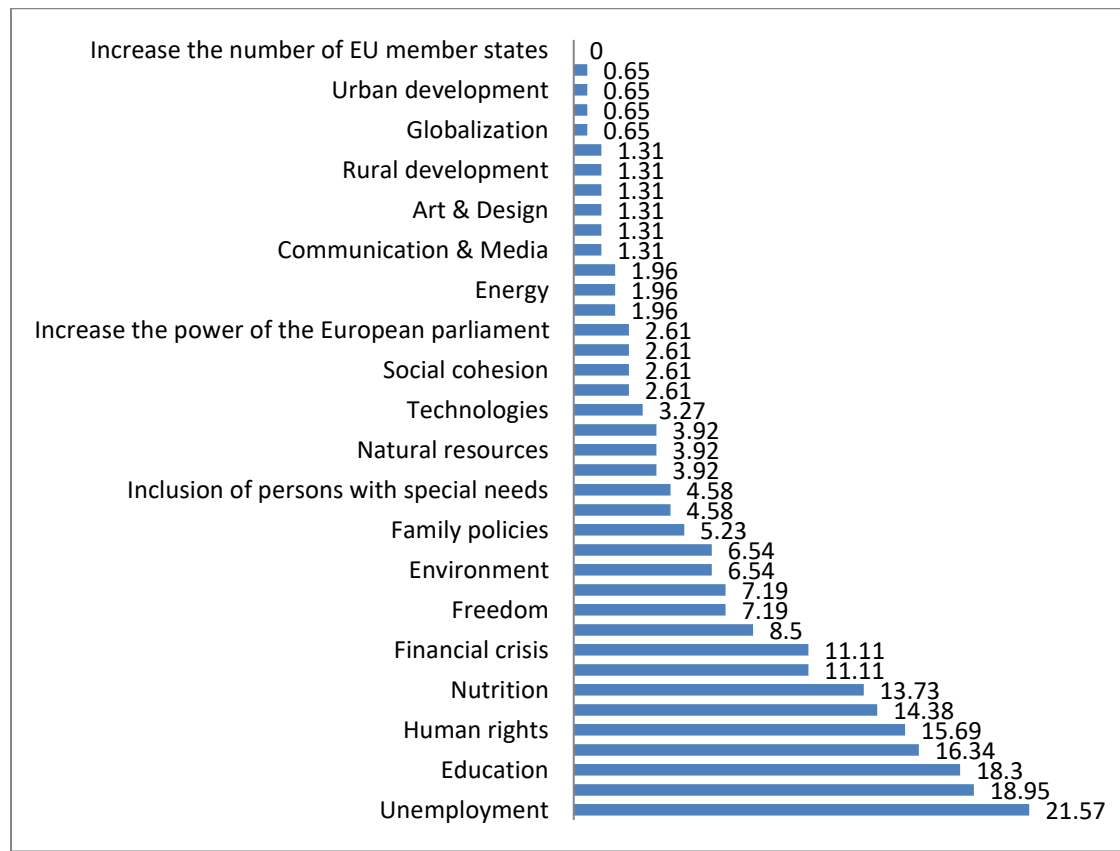
Variables	M	SD
To be healthy	4.87	0.45
To be happy	4.81	0.52
To have a happy private relationship	4.75	0.48
To be employed	4.73	0.58
To live in a healthy environment	4.72	0.54
To have a good education	4.66	0.68
To feel safe in my country	4.6	0.68
To combine a job with having a family	4.46	0.86
To have a good social life	4.45	0.68
To have a career	4.44	0.84
To live in a more environmentally friendly way	4.43	0.72
To feel valued in my country	4.42	0.78
To live where I want to	4.36	0.81

Concerns regarding the future of Europe: top five priorities

The global problems facing the world today are also the main concerns that our youth perceive as problems in their future. They are more concerned about issues such as crime and violence, unemployment, increased morbidity ending with poverty and inequality. All of this can be seen as a failure of internal governance to cope with challenges such as employment, the efficient healthcare system, the fight against criminality, nepotism, etc. It is worth mentioning those current political issues such as rising of far left and right parties, nationalism in Europe, the militarization of the European borders, and the inflictions that the influx of refugees did not pose any concern in their minds so those were rather less important. The boys ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .97$) gave higher estimates of the lack of social services than women ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(131) = -2.29$, $p < .05$.

In percentage terms, the five main priorities of the Albanian youth regarding their visions about the future of Europe are: unemployment, health care, education, economy, and human rights.

Figure 1 . Your visions regarding the future of Europe (top five priorities)



Attitudes toward Europe

Participants in the study expressed a positive approach about the fact that Europe is a good place to live and compared to other countries in the world it is more advantageous in many aspects. As a result of this young Albanian they declare that they are satisfied with their identification as a European and part of Europe. So among the subscales used to measure attitudes towards Europe,

the average score of the “sense of belonging” subscale ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .60$) was higher than other subscales. This subscale was followed by “satisfaction” and “adherence to group norms” subscales.

Women ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .72$) assigned lower scores to the “solidarity” subscale than men ($M = 4.06$, $SD = .72$), $t(142) = -2.63$, $p < .05$. Women ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .86$) assigned lower scores to the “exploration” subscale than men ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .79$), $t(142) = -2.19$, $p < .05$.

There were no other statistically significant differences between women and men.

Table 2 Attitudes towards Europe / Sense of European

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>N</i>
Solidarity	3.89	.73	1.67 – 5	144
I feel a bond with Europeans				
I feel solidarity with Europeans				
I feel a strong affiliation with Europeans				
Satisfaction	4.04	.65	1.67 – 5	144
I am glad to be European				
It is nice being European				
Being European gives me a good feeling				
Centrality	3.78	.84	1.67 – 5	143
I often think about the fact that I am European				
The fact that I am European is an important part of my identity				
Being European is an important part of how I see myself				
Superiority	3.65	.87	1.33 – 5	144
Other groups of people can learn a lot from European people				
Relative to other groups of people, Europeans have a higher sense of morality				
Europeans are better than other groups of people in all respects				
Adherence to group norms	4.02	.72	1.67 – 5	144
All Europeans should respect European customs, institutions and leaders				
It is disloyal for Europeans to criticize the customs and behaviour of European people				
European rules and regulations should always be respected				
Sense of belonging	4.12	.60	2.67 – 5	144
I think Europe is a nice place to live				

Europe is an attractive part of the world to live in				
Compared to other places, Europe has many advantages				
Exploration	3.72	.84	1.33 – 5	144
I try to find out a lot about being European				
I often reflect on being European				
I often talk with other people about being European				

Beliefs and attitudes about EU

Though Albanian young people believed in their personal efficiency to understand and give a thought about the issues that concern Europe today and they themselves, they state that a collective collaboration between youngsters can influence decision making, social and political situation and the future of Europe, this fact is rated even higher than the fact that European Union and their leaders are making the best to figure out what the young people want. Among the subscales used to measure beliefs/attitudes, the average score of the “collective efficacy” subscale ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .57$) was higher than the scores of “internal efficacy” and “external efficacy” subscales.

Men ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .66$) scored higher on the “collective efficacy” subscale than women ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .70$), $t(137) = -2.25$, $p < .05$. There were no other statistically significant differences between women and men.

Table 3 Beliefs/Attitudes

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>N</i>
Internal efficacy	3.74	.63	2.33 – 5	140
I know more about European issues than most people of my age				
When European issues or problems are being discussed, I usually have something to say				
I find most European issues hard to understand				
Collective efficacy	4.28	.57	1.67 – 5	140
By working together, young people can change things for the better regarding the social and political situation within Europe				
By working together, young people are able to influence the decisions which are made by European politicians				
By working together, young people can successfully influence the future of Europe				
External efficacy	3.88	.69	2 – 5	139

The European Union is doing its best to find out about what young people in Europe want				
The powerful leaders in the European Union are truly interested in the opinions and social problems of European people				
In the European Union, a few individuals have a lot of political power, while the rest of the people have very little to say in how the European Union is run				

Conclusions and Recommendation

The current situation of the young in Albania is difficult. The young generation living under prolonged transformation of societies, caught between the past and the future, between backward looking and forward looking perspectives is facing numerous obstacles, both administrative and mental barriers.

Leaving Albania has become the only future alternative for many as a lot of study show this, while over the past couple of years Albania is facing a historic level of the brain-drain – of young educated people. Another main concern is related to unemployment and labor market deficiencies. Considering the economic issues as a consequence of unemployment, there are higher chances for youth to get classified as a vulnerable and excluded group within our society. Furthermore, the educational system is considered as dysfunctional, and there is no link between education and convenient jobs in the labor market. That’s why their future career represents one their biggest concerns.

The transition from education to the labour market has become more difficult, involving longer jobless periods, higher likelihood of getting only temporary contracts or a job below qualifications, and low pay. This situation leads to delays in starting independent lives and a lack of motivation to start a family or to participate actively in society. In the long run, it results in lower earnings, higher risk of poverty and a loss of social recognition or even dignity. Individualism is also rising among young people.

As we have showed form the study all this difficulties make the young people to distinguish as the most important things to have a harmonious private relationship, to be employed and to live healthy and in a clean environment. The top five priorities regarding future for Albanian youngsters are: being healthy, being employed, having a career, having a good education and having a harmonious private relationship.

According the concerns related to the future youth in Albania are more concerned about issues such as crime and violence, unemployment, increased morbidity to conclude with poverty and inequality. Top five priorities regarding worries are: terrorism, unemployment, corruption, poverty, and injustice. For Albania young people the most priorities that Europe should have are: children's rights, security, health care, unemployment and education. While less important: the rights of LGBT, the reduction of the number of states that are involved in the European Union, the return of power to state governments as well as religion.

Their main concerns are related to unemployment and labor market deficiencies. Considering the economic issues as a consequence of unemployment, there are higher chances for youth to get classified as a vulnerable and excluded group within our society. Furthermore, the educational system is considered as dysfunctional, and there is no link between education and convenient jobs in the labor market. That's why their future career represents one their biggest concerns.

In the study young girls and boys expressed low levels of trust towards the local and national government. This shows their fears and hopeless state in the situation improvement and potential solutions. Particularly, they don't consider themselves as part of the decision-making processes to further develop the youth policies and to make their voices be heard. Creating this way an apathetic condition and forming a major non-active group of the society we live in.

If we make a review on their visions and concerns, most of them should be addressed with macro-level policies which should provide practical solutions and interventions. On the other hand, youngsters are aware that such issues can be solved only by the macro-level policies. This situation makes them feel powerless and discouraged to make something and act to change it.

Recommendations

- In a context where most of young people are looking for a better future outside the borders of Albania, the brain drain phenomena cannot be ignored due to its long term negative consequences. Such emerging issue requires immediate preventive interventions to decline the high rates of young people going abroad with no wish to come back. This is a problem which cannot be solved only by focusing in a particular area, contrariwise it requires an integrated approach dealing with gaps in education, labor market, career guidance, health care system, etc. By creating an overall system which gives emphasis on young people as an active part of the society, would encourage them to plan their future in Albania. It is recommended to conduct raising awareness activities which aim to make young people aware on the importance of their contribution within the country.
- Support and encourage young people to be involved in decision-making and policy making processes by giving them the opportunity to be represented at every political level, not only at the party base but also at the higher structures starting with local government, both in municipal councils and in parliament. By being represented in decision-making processes, youngsters would arise in them the sense of ownership and becoming influential in different areas.
- Unemployment has led young people to poverty and social exclusion segments, by seriously threatening their autonomy and self-sustain. Macro-level policies should create opportunities for young people to fully participate in the society. Measures on labor market needs are highly recommended in order to establish an orientating system for young people. Also, it would contribute to the reduction of gaps between education and employment. There should also be initiatives which encourage alternative options of employment such as enterprises and free lancing.

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