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France, the Western Balkans, and the European Union

Boosting Societal Cooperation



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Introduction

Although the relations between France and the Western Balkans (WB) have a long history, the intensity of French engagement in this region has varied over time and today there is arguably space for improvement. In fact, after two decades of modest interest in the region, France has recently signalled its intention to intensify its engagement in the Western Balkans. Over the last several years, France has actively supported the creation and development of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO),¹ extended the mandate of the French Development Agency to the countries of the region,² and adopted the National Strategy for the Western Balkans.³ Considering that France holds the presidency over the Council of the EU in the first half of 2022, at a time when there is an apparent enlargement impasse, France has an excellent opportunity to increase French, but also the EU’s, level of impact in this region in the upcoming period. For this reason, how and to what extent France will engage with the Western Balkans is expected to become a matter of increasing importance in the eyes of governments, experts, think-tanks, and other civil society organisations.

Bearing in mind the favourable circumstances for taking decisive action, this paper will identify the potential for boosting societal cooperation between France and the Western Balkans. As this aspect of cooperation is often neglected in the general analyses, this paper will examine where these relations currently stand and what is their potential for development. It will be structured around three main areas, namely covering civil-society organisations (CSOs), youth and education, and cultural ties in the context of strengthening public diplomacy. By providing detailed

¹ Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, “The Regional Youth Cooperation Office for the Western Balkans (RYCO)”, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/europe/western-balkans-62918/article/the-regional-youth-cooperation-office-for-the-western-balkans-ryco>

² AFD, “Western Balkans”, <https://www.afd.fr/en/page-region-pays/western-balkans>

³ French Strategy for the Western Balkans was presented by the French President Emmanuel Macron in 2019 after the Berlin Summit with the aim of increasing French influence in the region and providing support for political, economic, social and security issues, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/europe/western-balkans-62918/>

yet succinct analysis in each of these sub-areas, the paper will provide recommendations on how boosting societal ties can become the basis for deepening economic and political cooperation and thus for greater French influence in the region.

Getting the Experts’ Feedback

Alongside the aim of the French Strategy for the Western Balkans of achieving greater commitment in stabilising the WB6 in terms of economic and social development and strengthening the rule of law, building stronger relations between France and the Western Balkans can be seen as another corollary of the Strategy. For that reason, the European Policy Centre (CEP) and partners stepped up and organised a panel discussion titled *France, the Western Balkans, and the European Union: Boosting Societal Cooperation* in Belgrade, in July 2021, with the aim of exploring the ways France can re-engage with the region at the societal level. The discussion included 14 speakers and more than 40 participants – i.e., experts from all the countries in the Western Balkans and France. Their contribution represents the foundation for this policy paper.

Besides the qualitative input from the event’s participants, in order to acquire a quantitative picture of experts’ opinion of the analysed matter, CEP also organised and conducted a survey (prior to the event) with relevant experts from WB and France, racking up 57 respondents. Most respondents were from the Western Balkan region, 45 of them or 79% of the total pool, while 12 were from France, which represents 21% of total respondents. Out of the total number of respondents, 40% were men and 60% were women, with an average age of 35, working in the field of civil society/think tank community (60%), culture (10%), youth and education (9%) and other related areas (21%). In the first part of the survey, respondents gave a general assessment of the societal cooperation between France and the Western Balkans, and in the second, they assessed the three thematic areas. Insights provided by the survey and the debate constitute a foundation for an analysis of WB - France relations and providing recommendations for strengthening them in the context of the French Presidency over the Council of the EU.

Key Findings

The expert-based survey conducted in the framework of this project points to a very average level of societal cooperation between France and the countries of the region (2.7 on a scale from 1 to 5).⁴ Nevertheless, the survey also indicates a strong potential for furthering societal cooperation (3.9 out of 5).⁵ Moreover, respondents tend to think that investing in societal cooperation would enable France to reach wider goals in the Western Balkans (3.9 out of 5).⁶ Given French ambitions in the region and beyond, this type of cooperation can be seen as fertile ground for maximizing French re-engagement.

Current societal cooperation between France and the Western Balkans can be assessed as:

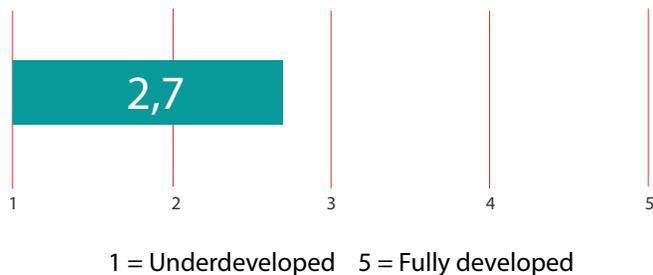


Figure 1 Current societal cooperation between France and the Western Balkans

III.1 CSOs as a Pillar of Strategic Cooperation – The Role of the Civil Sector in Boosting Cooperation Between the Western Balkans and France

The reduced engagement of France in the region was evident at the turn of the 21st century, with a seemingly minimal level of cooperation between French and WB civil society organisations (CSOs) remaining a constant. Building upon this premise, this paper confirms the fact that CSO cooperation is indeed perceived to be at a relatively low level. Namely, experts assessed the activity of France in the domain of cooperation with CSOs from the Western Balkan region as 2.4 out of 5,⁷ which showcases that overall cooperation with civil society is only partially utilised. In fact, this is recognised both by experts from the Western Balkans and France. What they also agree on is that there is plenty of room for further development of relations in this regard, as CSOs are seen as actors which have an important role to play when it comes to promoting France’s image in the Western Balkans (4.0 out of 5).

How would you assess the current engagement of France in the field of cooperation with civil society organisations (CSOs) from the Western Balkan region:

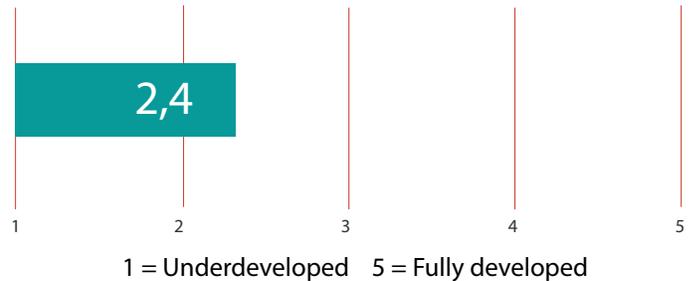


Figure 2 Engagement on France in the field of cooperation with CSOs from the WB

When it comes to strengthening relations between the French and WB CSOs, experts designated influencing EU decision makers as the most preferred way to do it, primarily by launching joint initiatives based on which they can voice their concerns and provide solutions. To that extent, the majority (cautiously) expects that CSOs will start cooperating more actively during the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. Besides the potential impact that French and WB CSOs can have on policymakers, there is a wide field of identified areas for boosting relations among themselves. This can be done by engaging in joint educational activities and exchanging experiences in proposing public policies. Meanwhile, finding ways to engage the Western Balkan diaspora in France is seen as another important yet often neglected aspect which requires attention.

Yet, in order to be able to cooperate among themselves, the precondition is for them to start getting to know each other in the first place. In that regard, the survey showcases that as many as one third of surveyed experts from the Western Balkans cannot cite a single CSO from France, while others may be familiar with the work of one or just a few. With such unfavourable figures, breakthroughs in terms of CSO cooperation are not to be expected if nothing is systematically done to change the situation on the ground. This lack of knowledge is problematic, and it is reciprocal. Only a few French CSOs focus on the region. However, in the survey, those French CSOs that are active in the Western Balkans typically demonstrate a formidable knowledge of the work of CSOs from the region. This limited and yet genuine interest is a strong signal that there is potential for boosting civil society cooperation.

For the current distance between the French and Western Balkan CSOs to be bridged, more substantial financial support and practical engagement from France is expected. This is particularly warranted considering that the Western Balkan CSOs are more limited in terms of their capacity to reach French audiences and attract French CSOs with whom they could potentially cooperate. In fact, many WB CSOs struggle with common structural problems such as lack of financial sustainability, adequate skills for project writing, adequate training on EU policies, and proper capacity building. Considering France’s level of ambition, there is room for it to step in and provide support for those projects that would facilitate knowledge and experience sharing between the French and WB CSOs. To that extent, there is a potential for French embassies and French institutes in the

4 The research included a scale from 1 to 5, where: 1 - underdeveloped; 5 - fully developed.
 5 The research included a scale from 1 to 5, where: 1 – no potential; 5 significant potential.
 6 The research included a scale from 1 to 5, where: 1 - totally disagree; 5 - totally agree.
 7 The research included a scale from 1 to 5, where: 1 - insufficient; 5 - sufficient.

Western Balkans in order to ensure facilitation of dialogue, coordination of activities, and providing the support to those CSOs from France and WB willing to further engage with each other.

III.2 Youth and Education – Opportunities for Young People Arising from Enhanced Cooperation Between France and the Western Balkans

In the analysis of potential for the development of societal cooperation between the Western Balkans and France, it is warranted to explore how to increase the level of opportunities for citizens from the Western Balkans for education at French universities and specialisation at French companies. The French educational system and the competencies it provides after completing the programmes is widely regarded favourably. The results of the survey show that 90% of respondents would likely pursue studies or specialisation in France if given the opportunity. In fact, the two key advantages of education and specialisation in France that were singled out were the high quality of the offered programmes and the possibility to widen one's network of contacts – networking.⁸ France could seek to capitalize on this demand from the region and attract more effectively high-potential students and young professionals. This would boost the image of France as a land of opportunity.

Despite a high demand, the availability of study and specialisation programmes for Western Balkans citizens is seen as moderate, with a survey rating of 2.9 out of 5.⁹ This implies that there are certain limitations that have yet to be overcome in order to build a sustainable and welcoming system for citizens from the region. When it comes to identifying obstacles for studying/specialising in France, respondents highlighted financial constraints as the key obstacle given the significantly higher costs of living in France compared to the Western Balkans. Related to this is the perception that there are insufficient scholarships to study in France. Insufficient promotion of educational programmes, as well as cultural and language barriers, were highlighted as other important limitations. Therefore, the areas in which conditions could be improved are student scholarships, access to undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD studies in France, financial affordability of summer schools and camps in France, as well as student exchange programmes between French and Western Balkan universities.

⁸ The interactions between French and Western Balkan students is also seen as a valuable basis for communication and cooperation in later stages of life, paving the way for building long-term relations. When it comes to other benefits, the perception is that education in France allows returnees to contribute to the local community upon their return to the country in terms of knowledge transfer, but also to become more competitive in the job market. Improving language skills and learning about French culture and mentality are also cited as significant reasons for going to study in France.

⁹ The research included a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 - not available; 5 - fully available.

Assess the availability of study/specialisation programmes in France for the citizens from the Western Balkans?



Figure 3 Availability of study/specialisation programmes in France for the citizens from the WB

When summarizing the findings in the field of education, French educational institutions are interpreted as a high-quality environment for acquiring knowledge and a better position in the labour market. However, the necessity to improve the financial availability of programs at French universities, as well as the number of scholarships to study in France were recognised as highly relevant issues that need yet to be addressed if the aim is to use the education as a way to boost societal relations and the overall French influence in the region. In that regard, France has yet to turn into a country which is seen as a synonym for available and affordable high-level education in the eyes of the Western Balkan citizens, like it is already the case with Germany, for example. For this to happen, stronger systemic engagement by the French institutions will be needed in order to rethink France's current approach to the WB in that regard. Demand is there, albeit opportunities have yet to arrive.

III.3 Cultural Ties as the Foundation of Societal Cooperation

France is a country with significant levels of soft power, which allows it to project its power worldwide. What plays a key role in that regard is its cultural heritage, coupled with the French language. In the context of assessing the current cultural ties between France and the Western Balkans, they are perceived as moderately developed - with an average grade of 2.9 out of 5.¹⁰ Having this in mind, there is a consensus among experts on the fact that there is a potential for an increased level of French activities in this area to contribute to solidifying France's overall image in the region.

Although the French language is offered in many elementary and high schools across the region, it is still not prevalent to the sufficient extent for it to become widely spoken. When considering the current level of promotion it gets, it is rated with an average score of 2.4 out of 5, indicating that there is space to make significant strides in this field. When compared to other languages (excluding English), experts agreed during the panel discussion that there is an existing rivalry between the German and French languages in the Western Balkans.

Due to the popularity of the German language as a stepping-stone towards developed European states such as Germany,

Austria, and Switzerland, French is often cast in its shadow in the Western Balkans. So far, the fact that French is spoken in more than 30 countries¹⁰ around the world, including Switzerland, Belgium, and Monaco in Europe, as well as the fact that it is still the language of diplomacy and is the official language of many international and intergovernmental organisations, has been insufficient to nudge more citizens to start learning it. Considering such a context, the promotion of the French language is another field that requires a greater investment of financial resources and careful advertising.

Current cultural ties between France and the WB can be assessed as:



Figure 4 Current cultural ties between France and the WB

Meanwhile, another potential foundation for building stronger cultural ties that was recognised by the experts is the celebration of common cultural and historical events. They mostly agreed that anniversary celebrations of these types of events can promote relations between France and the Western Balkans, evaluating it on average at 3.8 out of 5.¹¹ This thesis was confirmed when Western Balkan leaders were invited to commemorate the end of WWI in Paris in 2018, which marked a turning point in relations between France and other Western Balkan states. The following year, French President Emmanuel Macron paid a visit to Belgrade, where he cleverly visited the Monument of Gratitude to France in the Serbian capital and even prepared a speech for the locals in the Serbian language. On top of that, subsequent bilateral talks with the leaders of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo were held in Paris in 2019,¹¹ on the margins of the second Paris Peace Forum – dedicated to the 101st anniversary of the end of World War I. Considering these developments, tying diplomatic meetings to the relevant historical events only reaffirms the potential for strengthening cultural relations by using the celebration of common historical anniversaries as a steppingstone. That is why France should indeed continue with its work in that regard, as it has so far proven to be a fruitful yet costless strategy.

In short, culture is often seen as the best ambassador of states, as it allows different actors to send messages not usually possible through other ways of communication. In order to revitalize French activities in the Western Balkans in this regard, it is important to take into account the assessment of the perception of the Western Balkans in the eyes of French citizens. Although experts point out that France is well perceived by Western Bal-

kan citizens, with an average score of 3.3 out of 5,¹² there is an assumption that French citizens do not reciprocate this at all – with a score of only 2.1. Such an unfavourable result was nevertheless expected, having in mind all the negative connotations, such as the negative legacy from the conflict period of the 1990s, corruption, and crime that the Balkans is usually associated with.¹³ Therefore, not only should France increase its promotional activities vis-à-vis the region, but also towards its own citizens when it comes to the overall rhetoric on the Western Balkan and enlargement.

Conclusion

It is evident that France tries to project itself as a major power player in the EU, yet it fails to establish itself as so in the Western Balkans. French influence and activities are disproportionate in the Western Balkans compared to the rest of Europe. Considering that France is expected to play a more significant role in shaping the EU’s policies and possible future development given the retirement of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as the fact France takes over the Council of the EU in the first half of 2022, now is the perfect opportunity for France to use its full potential and situate itself as a credible partner to the Western Balkans. The French Strategy for the Western Balkans has signalled France’s renewed interest for this region, yet, as this paper has shown, there is significant room for further improvement of engagement in all three analysed sub-fields of societal cooperation. Considering France’s recent comeback to the region, such intensification of societal relations could also lead to deepening economic and political relations – thus contributing to fulfilling the overall French interests in the Western Balkans. As France is well perceived among the Western Balkan states, the ball is now in its court to take concrete steps forward.

In the field of civil society relations, the main identified problems refer to the limited engagement of France, which results in insufficient financial support to the civil sector. As the CSOs from France and the Western Balkan states barely know of each other, despite the fact they often share the same topics of interest and vision, the French government has the potential to act as an intermediary, by offering more institutional and financial support for bridging the gap between them. Not only would this create space for CSOs to jointly pursue advocacy, but would also enable France to increase the number of contacts and level of interaction with CSOs from the region. Although investing in CSO cooperation would, to a moderate extent, require additional financial expenditures, this would nevertheless be a cost worth paying. Considering that CSOs are the key allies to those promoting rule of law reforms and democracy consolidation in the context of the EU integration process, France would also be in a better position to project its own power in these areas as well.

When it comes to the field of youth and education, judging by the opinion of experts, there is a mostly positive attitude from the Western Balkans towards the French educational system and the prospects for career specialisation. The key advantages of the French educational system are the competences students and professionals acquire in the labour market after attending the programmes and expanding one’s network of contacts and

10 World Population Review, “French Speaking Countries”, available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/french-speaking-countries>

11 European Western Balkans, “Leaders of the Western Balkans meet with Macron in Paris”, 2019, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/12/leaders-of-the-western-balkans-meet-with-macron-in-paris/>

12 The research included the scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents negative and 5 positive assessment.

13 Todorova, Maria, “Imagining the Balkans”, Oxford University Press, 2009.

acquaintances which could be useful at a later stage of professional development. Yet, the essential shortcomings in this field are of a financial nature for citizens from the Western Balkans, given the significantly higher cost of living in France. This stems from the fact that there are an insufficient number of scholarships available for supporting those seeking to pursue higher education or specialisation in France. On top of that, France's lack of promotion of these opportunities in the region, i.e. lack of adequate visibility, is another hurdle standing in the way of closer cooperation in this area. This stands in contrast to universities from Germany, for example, which are very well known in the region as they often offer numerous opportunities for education and specialisation. Considering the high regional demand, France should consider raising its level of support for those seeking these opportunities if its aim is to boost its soft power in the long-run.

Culture is an area that allows France to outmatch other competitors with little effort. In the region, the French culture is already widely respected and seen in a positive light. Nevertheless, its spill-over effect is, for the time being, limited as the cultural activities of France have yet to take on a strategised shape. This means that France has to make a concerted effort, including in its strategic documents, to outline how to further popularise the French system, both through the official educational system and through extracurricular activities. Although how the former is tackled depends on cooperation with regional state institutions, the latter can be dealt with through the organisation of study trips for those interested in not only the French language but also its history, art, literature, etc. For this to work, experts recognise that more funds need to be dedicated to the promotional activities of the French Institutes, embassies, and other French stakeholders in the Western Balkans. Projects of cultural exchange, cooperation between museums and theatres, as well as mutual engagement of artists in national projects also deserve attention to achieve greater engagement in the future. The cultural sphere of societal relations is equally important as the other two sub-topics and should not be neglected.

Overall, France is in good position to work on boosting its soft power in the region. To that extent, the key element that can be used to mark a new chapter in France's relations with the Western Balkans is its take-over of the Council of the EU. Although France is expected to work on developing political and economic relations with the region, the development of societal ties should not be neglected if the goal is to better position France in the long run to capture the "hearts and minds" of the citizens of the region. To that extent, this paper has shown that there is plenty of room for strengthening cooperation in the field of civil society, youth and education, and culture.

Recommendations

Insight into the findings of the research on societal relations between France and the Western Balkans leads towards a key and all-encompassing conclusion: **the French Government should renew its Strategy for the Western Balkans by placing stronger emphasis on the need to deepen societal cooperation.** The Strategy states that the aim is to support and complement the work of the EU to support the region's convergence with Europe, particularly by complementing the work of the Berlin Process. As such, it recognizes the importance of supporting

gender equality projects, reconciliation and young people across the region. This approach, which is consistent with French global and European priorities, implies engaging with organizations in the area of civil society, culture and youth in the Western Balkans. Cooperation in these areas is, after all, one of the key elements of soft power. However, much remains to be done in order for France to foster the full potential in these areas in the Western Balkans.

The following recommendations for deepening French societal ties with the Western Balkans are divided into three subsections, following original areas of research.

V.1 Engaging Civil Society Organizations

- **France should update its Western Balkans Strategy in order to place stronger emphasis on civil society cooperation.** The current strategy makes no mention whatsoever of any CSO or think tank. Societal cooperation seems to be side-lined in favour of an overly securitized strategy. Although the strategy refers to the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), any update should reflect better how France plans to engage with regional civil societies in a more comprehensive and meaningful manner.
- **Tapping this potential would involve committing financial resources to CSOs from France and for the region to intensify interactions, expand mutual knowledge and build common projects.** The return on investment of such support would go beyond civil society cooperation. It would be key to sustaining the empowerment and professionalization of CSOs from the Western Balkans, which in the end are key allies in promoting rule-of-law reforms and democracy. French engagement in this area could thus have far-reaching implications in promoting good governance.
- This engagement should, however, not be limited to CSOs operating in capitals. **French embassies and other stakeholders should keep a close eye on CSO activities outside WB capitals that reach out to French counterparts, and be ready to support their projects.** Some CSOs outside WB capitals have developed considerable expertise, but their survival is even more fragile than that of those operating in capitals, due to more difficult access to funding partners. As the Western Balkan countries are quite centralised, the ability for CSOs from outside the key centres to have their voices heard is quite limited; by engaging with them as well, France would be able to decentralize its approach, anchor its influence on a broader basis and gain a wider perspective on the issues that Western Balkan countries face.
- An approach that could bring consistency to French engagement in this area would be to **rely on existing foundations and their deployment of activities in the Western Balkans, or else support or establish such foundations, both political and non-political.** These foundations could act as key intermediaries between French and Western Balkan CSOs while supporting cooperation with French authorities and embassies. They would also benefit the reputational and operational anchoring of French think tanks across Europe, e.g. through advancing partnerships with Western Balkan think tanks, and the international diffusion and decentralization of their influence. This would help to

positively shape the overall image of France as a country that is able and willing to engage with the Western Balkans in a multi-layered manner.

- To increase French responsiveness – a *sine qua non* to strategic engagement – **the autonomous financial pool of French embassies in the Western Balkans should be allocated more funds**. Embassies should be given more leeway in their engagement with civil society, in order to make the French approach more effective and proactive. This would lead to quicker and more effective project development, application, and implementation of future projects. By demonstrating the advantages of less bureaucratic approaches, this would also offer a counterpoint to China and Russia's parallel and increasing engagement with local citizens.
- With its Presidency of the Council, France has a unique opportunity to send a strong signal in favour of civil society cooperation. In the Western Balkans, this could be done by responding favourably to countless calls from France and the region to **include Western Balkan CSOs and think tanks in the final stages of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Also, civil society cooperation should be emphasized at the Western Balkans Summit** that will be held under the French Presidency of the Council in June 2022. Although Western Balkan CSOs, with the support of EU think tanks, have already organized and registered events on the official Portal of the Conference,¹⁴ their contribution remains insufficiently appreciated, despite very progressive ideas.¹⁵ France could repair this anomaly at little cost during its Presidency while taking credit for extending discussions with the Western Balkans beyond the sheer horizon of accession.
- Finally, **France should consider endorsing the original think-tank initiatives, such as the model of staged accession**. What is innovative about the model is that it aims to break the current enlargement impasse by envisioning two accession and two membership stages,¹⁶ with gradual economic and institutional incentives laid out while safeguarding the EU's integrity. As the eventual implementation of this model is expected to bring benefits to the citizens of the region, France's endorsement of this initiative would also help to solidify its image as a proactive player in the eyes of regional citizens.

¹⁴ An example is a conference organized in October 2021 by the European Policy Centre (CEP) with the title "Europe Complete". See: <https://cep.org.rs>

¹⁵ See for example the idea to develop and introduce a model of staged accession. M. Emerson, M. Lazarević, S. Blockmans and S. Subotić (2021), "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", European Policy Centre (CEP) and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2021, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/>

¹⁶ The proposed stages are as follows: I Initial accession stage; II Intermediate accession stage; III New member state stage; IV Conventional membership. The crucial passage from Stage II to Stage III for the new member states, given especially their access to QMV voting rights in the Council and right to have elected members of the European Parliament with voting rights, would require a Treaty of Accession based on Article 49 TEU. This would provide a sufficient legal basis for such institutional steps since the Treaty of Accession has the same top-level legal status as the EU's founding treaties (Lisbon). See: M. Emerson, M. Lazarević, S. Blockmans and S. Subotić (2021), "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", op. cit.

V.2 Investing in Youth and Education

- The lack of own financial resources for citizens from the Western Balkans to study/specialise in France due to higher living standards can be overcome **by increasing the number of French scholarships for citizens from the Western Balkans**. The currently available scholarships are insufficient both in value and in number to meet the needs of students from the region, considering that most of them sponsor short-time student mobility. Such an increase should not come at the cost of French contribution to EU programmes.
- France should, with the governments of the region, work to **ensure strategic cooperation between French and Western Balkan universities**. The aim should not only be to promote French education among Western Balkan students, but also to encourage students from France to go to the region. not only be to promote French education among Western Balkan students, but also to encourage students from France to go to the region. Another positive step in that direction would consist of organizing promotional activities where alumni students could share their experiences and help other students interested in studying abroad.
- To target high-potential young professionals from the Western Balkans, **France could open up its internship schemes to Western Balkan students more broadly**. For instance, to date, only citizens of the EU and European Economic Area (EEA) are allowed to apply for participation in the programmes of *Volontariat en entreprise* (VIE) and *Volontariat en administration* (VIA). The inclusion of Western Balkan citizens – with a corresponding budget increase for the VIE and VIA programmes – would boost France's positioning as a knowledge-based economy.
- **France could also build on the success of its Regional Incubator for Social Entrepreneurs (RISE) programme**. French institutes, together with their partners, are supporting this project, which aims to empower young people in the Western Balkan region to develop innovative ideas that contribute to reconciliation and cooperation. The RISE programme, which covers the entire Western Balkans, focuses on both youth reconciliation and youth social entrepreneurship. The idea of this initiative is to financially support young entrepreneurs in developing social business ideas through workshops, mobility programs and financial assistance. The success of this initiative, piloted by France, could inspire new similar programmes, perhaps in the field of renewable energy, where French enterprises demonstrate leading engagement.
- On the EU level, **the French government could use the Presidency of the Council to suggest that the European Commission include the Western Balkans in the ALMA programme**. Recently announced by the Commission, ALMA (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) is a new Erasmus-style placement scheme aimed at helping youth find their way into the job market by combining support for education, vocational training or employment in their home country with work placement in another EU country. Considering

that young people from the Western Balkans are equally, if not more, subject to the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market as compared to their EU counterparts, extending ALMA to the Western Balkans would expand specialization opportunities for the region's citizens.

- Still on the EU level, **France could advocate for the inclusion of Western Balkans countries in the EURES targeted mobility scheme.** The EURES (European Employment Services) is envisioned by the Commission as an initiative that promotes professional mobility, tackles intra-EU mobility challenges and supports jobseekers. Including the Western Balkans in the scheme would increase opportunities for the professional development of workers from the region. As EURES is already open to non-EU citizens (from Norway and Iceland), including Western Balkan citizens should not be insurmountable.
- Finally, **France should continue promoting the Erasmus+ Programme through the Campus France offices in the Western Balkan countries.** Although these offices have information on their websites about this study programme in France and EU countries in general, there is scope for stronger promotion. The key issue here remains that only Serbia and North Macedonia are programme countries within Erasmus+, while Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro are only partner countries. The difference in status lies in the fact that only Serbia and North Macedonia can fully participate in the implementation of the action plan of the programme. This is not the case with the other four countries, which have a lower level of cooperation within the Erasmus+ network. By supporting the remaining four countries in levelling up their status from partner countries to programme countries, the region would gain an invaluable opportunity to expand its access to education at French and European universities in general.

V.3 Tapping the Potential of Cultural Cooperation

- To instil a new dynamic, **French embassies and French institutes could step up their support for organizing cultural events, such as exhibitions, festivals, concerts, cultural exchanges and "journées françaises".** One interesting project, for instance, would be to launch a French School Festival in the Western Balkans, bringing together pupils from France and the Western Balkans. The festival could be supported by a French-Western Balkans' Penfriend Programme, encouraging Western Balkans pupils to learn French and experience French culture. Such programmes could include short-term exchanges (up to two weeks, for example). Inspiration for launching such a programme could be found in the EU-Serbia "Joy of Europe" programme (a cross-European dance festival with a long tradition).
- **Initiatives of this kind could be supported by a communications campaign in the media promoting French-Western Balkan friendship and cultural cooperation.** Other countries readily use national TV stations to shape their image. For instance, in Belgrade, the US embassy regularly communicates in the media on positive aspects of Serbian-American cooperation (in commemorating the WWI

partnership, the anniversary of the Halyard Operation, or the group of Serbian Americans who worked on the Apollo moon-landing programme in the 1960s and 1970s).

- **To promote French language education in the Western Balkans, French institutes could offer more affordable language courses so that learning French from the best would be not a privilege but a sustainable choice.** This should not, however, be limited to capital cities. Such promotion should take place in different urban and rural areas, relying on schoolteachers with a professional track record. Schoolteachers could also be enticed to offer courses to adults by joining an adult-teaching vocational training programme in France. Using schoolteachers as multipliers would allow French culture and language to penetrate more broadly across the whole Western Balkans.
- On the EU level, **cultural organizations from France could be further encouraged to take part in the EU's programmes aimed at boosting cultural cooperation with the Western Balkans.** In that regard, the Creative Europe programme, for which France provides substantial funds, can be singled out. Although an EU-based programme, it applies to the Western Balkan countries, which is why it can serve as a valuable platform for mutual cultural exchanges. As of now, French organizations participate in such programmes to a limited extent. Yet, the fact that the Programme's "culture strand" supports areas such as architecture, cultural heritage, design, literature and publishing, music, and performing arts means that the possibilities for cooperation offered by this programme are vast. Support for cross-border connections and platforms for cooperation between artists, representatives of the creative industry, and cultural workers, opens the door for French cultural stakeholders to go to the Western Balkans, and vice versa.
- More generally, **the French government could use the Presidency of the Council and Conference on the Future of Europe to launch the idea of a "European Youth Month", allowing pupils under 18 from all over Europe (including the Western Balkans) on a given month to spend one month in a school located in a different country and be hosted by local families.** Pupils from the Western Balkans and EU member states would have the chance to study and live in a different country for one month at a crucial age in their life, to familiarize themselves with the lifestyle and culture of fellow Europeans, and to practice a new language. The time would be right for this proposal, particularly as the European Commission recently proposed to make 2022 the Year of European Youth.

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