

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

YOUTH, STRUCTURED DIALOGUE AND EU INTEGRATION

A remarkable and sustainable path

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Structured Dialogue should be a qualitative process where young people get actively engaged based on systematic and inclusive way.



Beyond conceptualization, installation and success of such a process so far, the challenge remains to adapt it in the Albanian context.

Foreword

Young people in Albania should have and do have a particular interest in their country's trajectory towards EU membership. Success and failure in accession and European integration efforts will impact their futures significantly. But they are not only the ones who will live most of the change and whose stakes are high. They should also be the ones with a strong interest to contribute to this positive change.

Albania has just received a green light for starting accession talks after fulfilling a set of conditions. This is an important step but many steps, including extensive reforms, will have to follow in the coming years. This means efforts, efforts that do not only require commitment by decision- and policy-makers and administration. These changes also have to be carried by the Albanian society as a whole and by organized civil society in specific. We believe that in this context a particular role needs to be attributed to youth.

However, inclusion of civil society and more so of young people in policy-making and reform processes does not happen automatically. Of course, there are many different forms, young people can make their voices heard, share ideas and represent their interests. And sometimes the more creative and unexpected ones, the ones that do not necessarily follow the known routes nor strictly stick to protocol are the more effective ones. Especially young people should explore new avenues and disrupt if necessary. Yet, this does not mean a structural inclusion is not necessary – it is quite the opposite. Policy- or decision-making processes that affect young

people have to allow for an inclusion of the voices the affected and this cannot be a good-will ad-hoc decision, this must be installed reliably. This is not only indicated from a normative point of view because it is “right” but also because it produces better results. Consulting those who know best about their own circumstances necessarily brings insights to a policy or reform deliberation which lead to better informed decisions.

Structured Dialogue is a very good example in this regard, connecting young people and decision-makers as it is part of the EU's youth policy-making. It is an effective way to allow for serious and impactful communication and constructive consultation. It is an example which is worth exploring and we very much hope it can help policy dialogue on Albania's EU accession path, too.

We would like to thank the authors Dafina Peci and Ergys Gezka for this excellent introduction of the concept of Structured Dialogue to the Albanian context.

In solidarity,
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Introduction

The Albanian youth, despite being associated with the worrying migration phenomenon over the recent years, statistically speaking, continues to be ranked the first in the region, in terms of its numbers in proportion to the country's overall population. According to INSTAT, the population under the age of 30 represented about 45.6% of the total population of Albania in 2019, while young people (15-29 years old) make up for about 28.4% of the total population. The same source reports that for the same period about 49.1% of young people are females and 50.9% are males. These figures do clearly show that young people in Albania deserve a central role, because when it comes to their figures, they lead the country and, not only that, but they do also fall under the remit of the age group with the highest perspective and weight for the development of the Albanian society as a whole.

In efforts to stick to the focus of this article, which aims to present a logical flow that focuses on the Albanian youth, decision-making and opening negotiations for Albania's integration into the European Union, it should be noted from the outset that the Structured Dialogue remains a basic concept that should be borrowed and adapted as soon as possible by the Albanian institutional structures and civil society.

Structured Dialogue is presented as a good practice of past dialogue processes, aiming to involve more decision-makers and young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, in decision-making processes and in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy.

In this paper we will try to traverse an itinerary, which ultimate objective is the connection of youth, Structured Dialogue and the process of negotiations for Albania's integration into the European Union, making some stops, which we consider necessary to give a uniform and logical feature to the entirety of the analysis presented herewith.

Structured Dialogue, which emerges as part of the European Union's youth policy-making, makes it possible to communicate and consult with young people and youth organizations, including policy makers, decision-makers, as well as experts, researchers and other relevant civil society actors. It can be considered as a concept or methodology which integrates certain groups of society in a transversal way, as it is comprehensive, but also goes beyond gathering the opinions of identifiable individuals within formal structures, institutions or vertical hierarchical bodies. In order for the reader to create a clearer idea about it, let us walk you through an excursus of Structured Dialogue.



Definition and scope of activity

Structured Dialogue was given birth to as a result of the White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth (2001)¹, which underscores the importance of consulting with young people in the areas of policies that directly affect them.

In 2005, a Resolution of the Council of the European Union called upon the European Commission and the Member States to engage in a structured dialogue with young people and youth organizations, with experts on youth issues and with public decision-makers. The biggest impetus for its implementation came with the renewed framework of European cooperation in the field of youth (2010-2018), adopted in 2009, through a Council Resolution, recognizing young people as key actors in society. The framework mentions the importance of protecting the right of young people to get involved and participate in policy making affecting them, through a permanent structured dialogue between decision-makers, youth and youth organizations.

Structured Dialogue is a way to make the voice of youth heard in the process of formulating European policies. It is an advisory process, implemented by the European Commission, aimed at increasing cooperation with civil society and receiving first-hand con-

tribution from young people. The process is named "Structured Dialogue" because it takes place in a very concrete framework set by the European Commission together with the European Youth Forum, containing orientation and reforming features, in order to take into account the definition, formation and implementation of EU youth policies.

The Structured Dialogue process was reviewed after its 3rd cycle of its implementation, in order to increase its efficiency, comprehensiveness and coherence. The new updated process contains as follows:

- One cycle lasts for 18 months;
- Each cycle has a thematic priority over which dialogue shall take place;
- Each cycle includes a steering Presidency with rotation between the three parties;
- Each cycle has a political end: a Council Resolution based on the outcome of the process of the 18-month-long dialogue. As a result, for each cycle of the Structured Dialogue, the youth and decision-makers should meet to reflect on the outcome of the on-line consultation and to organise joint recommendations on the topic/s at hand.

¹ Available at: <https://www.youthforum.org/white-paper-new-impetus-european-youth>



Leading principles of Structured Dialogue

Meaningful Youth Participation: Structured Dialogue should be a qualitative process where young people engage in meaningful conversation with decision-makers and with each-other. Activities run by national working groups and youth non-governmental organizations should aim to foster a qualitative commitment of young people. Young people participating in the dialogue should actively follow what is happening in the policy cycle regarding their ideas and contributions on issues that concern them at all levels.

Inclusive of even more distant voices: Structured Dialogue should be open to all young people and focus its efforts on reaching and engaging with young people who are less active and who come from a marginalized background. There is an opportunity to explore the implementation of Structured Dialogue in schools/universities/communities to ensure that all voices are heard equally.

Contribute to drafting local, national and EU policies: Ideas that can be implemented immediately at the local and national level should be brought to local and national authorities and implemented together with young people, but should also serve as a basis for requirements for the highest decision-making levels at the international level.

Important ideas for the European level should

be channelled into and discussed with at youth conferences organized in cooperation with or by EU institutions.

A youth-led process: The EU Youth Dialogue should be a youth-led process, with a strong involvement of a national umbrella organization, Local Youth Councils and other relevant youth actors.

Friendly implementation with the participation of youth: The process should be as meaningful, simple, fun and engaging as possible for both young people and decision-makers.

The Structured Dialogue should benefit from an adequate methodology, a language which is friendly to youth, fun activities and simplicity in communication.

The Goal of Structured Dialogue are to:

Develop youth skills for ensuring active citizenship and a sense of belonging: young people, through EU Youth Dialogue, develop skills and attitudes that shape their views and interest in participating, listening to others and engaging in meaningful and constructive conversations. Dialogue also develops a sense of their belonging in their communities and in Europe at large.

Enable youth to participate in decision-making processes: The EU Youth Dialogue should inform young people about their right to participate and engage young people. The collected ideas should be conveyed to and implemented by the decision-makers together with the young people, from the local level up to the European level.

Objectives of Structured Dialogue are to:

- Ensure that all young people have their voices heard to the EU structures, in accordance with Article 165-2 of the Treaty On the Functioning of the European Union, to create an active and committed society in the future²;
- Achieve a larger number and wider range of young people, including working with schools, social institutions and non-governmental organizations, etc., to reach unorganized youth;
- Ensure that youth policy reaches other policy areas given its cross-sector character, but also by remaining independent for issues that should be their priority;
- Have a meaningful impact on European, national, regional and local policies;
- Create a new and updated political culture, giving priority to participation, diversity and, above all, youth in this venture.

This new culture must bear in its philosophy the recognition of youth, non-governmental and active structures as key partners with certain responsibilities (extension, engagement in consultation and implementation)

and rights (support, recognition, legitimacy) throughout the policy-making process.

The Process

Structured Dialogue also serves as a forum for continuous joint reflections on the priorities, implementation and extension of European cooperation in the field of youth. The pursued process is based on the principle of free speech and on consultative features. Each 18-month cycle of Structured Dialogue should focus on one of the main goals or objectives, as defined under the Youth Strategy (at the European, national or local level). It is important to conduct a preliminary online consultation and online voting process with young people, in order to choose the purpose of the cycle and to identify its specific topic. A total of 6 cycles have been developed so far. Each cycle focuses on a different thematic priority (as determined by the Council of Youth Ministers). The current thematic priority is "Creating opportunities for youth." The current cycle runs from January 2019 to mid-2020, time during which the EU Presidency was held by Romania, Finland and Croatia.³



² Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT&from=EN>

³ Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy/euyouthdialogue_en

Phase I

- By virtue of respecting the bottom-up approach and starting from the local level, as well as further advancing the topic to other levels, discuss various challenges and ideas for potential solutions;
- Discussions and consultations should take place between the decision-makers and the interested party, so that previously non-exchanged information is covered and potential solutions for the issues raised are discussed;
- At all points within the process, youth and decision-makers are encouraged to render tangible inputs, pledge or formalize the implementation of their ideas by partnering and dialoguing not only at the beginning of the discourse, but also throughout the problem-solving process.

In parallel, the kick-off meetings start at the European level, where each Member State is represented by the representative national youth organizations, and attended by international youth organizations. The topic is widely discussed, providing a complete overview of the current situation and bringing to the discourse the challenges and problems related to the situation, seen from different perspectives, but, in the end, placed in the continental picture.

Note: In all parts of the first phase, the follow-up approach and methods, which provide for an active audience and meaningful and substantial participation, should be taken into account.

Phase II

- Proposals for the most reasonable and innovative potential solutions, bringing on board the local and national features as well, are presented in the Progress Event. This event serves as an "opinion agora", taking inspira-

tion from others to further improve the original ideas for each participant in their own context.

- After the Progress Event, the review and elaboration of ideas in local and national consultations will continue by going one step further with improving the approach.

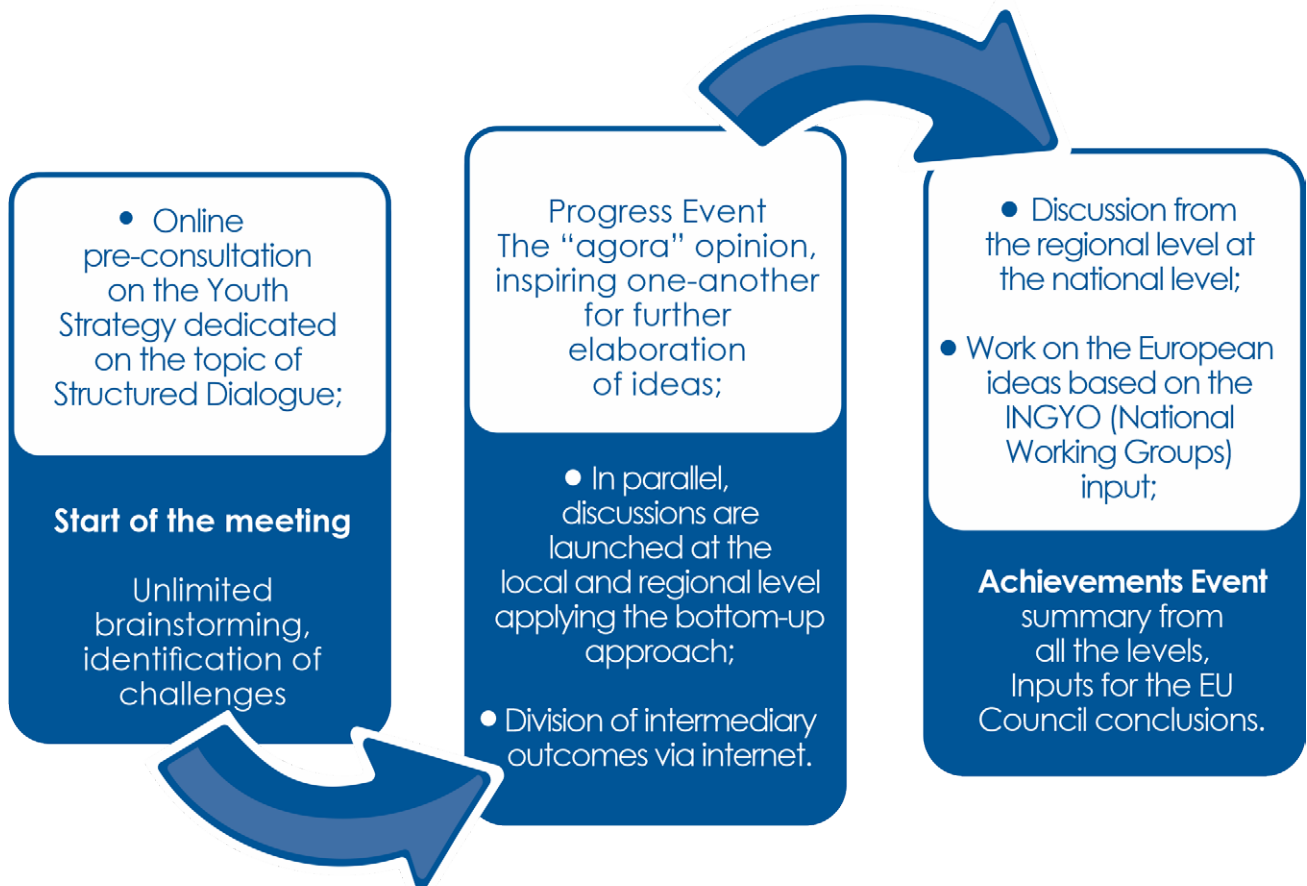
Phase III

- During this phase, the final preparations and activities of national consultations are developed, giving priority to ideas and their materialisation vis-à-vis the overall goal, objectives, stages of activities, outcomes and mechanisms;
- International Youth Organizations are also invited to develop structured ideas in all countries where they are located and operate. Moreover, their expertise and geographical coverage with their branches bring an added value in building the basis and argument for the European decision-makers;
- In the final event called the Achievement Event, as with all three Presidency Conferences, European decision-makers will join the Dialogue with youth representatives from each country. They will provide national feedback and recommendations in order for them to be taken into consideration, be further developed and supported at the European level. These will become part of the Council Outcomes package, together with the intermediate results from the Progress Event;
- After the Achievement Event, up until the end of the cycle is reached, there will be summaries of ideas, best practices, and sharing of the progress of their implementation from the local and national level, as well as reflection and analysis of the Council Conclusions at the European Level.

Follow-Up

The process foresees as well the selection of a group of youth decision-makers, who will continue to monitor the outcomes and their continuous implementation beyond the cycle, and will begin their work since the first steps of the process. This team will go through a

capacity building cycle to ensure their performance quality and will also be responsible for the overall coordination and continuous monitoring of implementation at the European level.



Clarifications about the stakeholders

The process must follow 18-month cycles, with a thematic advantage for the cycle related to one of the priorities of the future EU Youth Strategy and one of the goals of EU youth. Priority is given to the European Steering Committee, taking into account EU policy-making processes. Based on the goals of young people, the continuity of efforts is ensured via emphasizing a wide variety of topics that affect the lives of young people, including education, employment, participation and democracy, as well as climate change, environment, security, and others.

At the national level

The work of the National Working Groups should be closely linked to the work of the European Steering Committee and aims to achieve common objectives, respecting the subsidiarity principle and different national contexts. National Working Groups should consist of representatives of the Ministry responsible for youth, the largest umbrella organizations representing youth, other international youth organizations with branches in the country where the Structured Dialogue is implemented, National Youth, Information Youth Office, young people from trade unions, young researchers and academics, as well as ministries directly related to the topics covered by the process, namely employment, education, health, etc. as well as other relevant actors.

At the European level

The process should be governed by the European Steering Committee, composed of three-partite Presidency teams (representative of the Ministry responsible for Youth, representative of the National Youth Council and

representative of the National Agency for Youth), the European Commission and the European Youth Forum. Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, EURODESK, ERYICA and any other actor or expert that the European Steering Committee identifies relevant is an inherent feature of this process. The involvement of EURODESK and ERYICA is an important strategy to improve the scope and visibility of the process, ensuring that national stakeholders are mobilized to reach young people who are not active and are more difficult to engage.

Analysis on effectiveness

The Structured Dialogue process, despite its successes and the experience gathered so far, is still not reaching its full potential. While it has undoubtedly been one of the most influential tools of the current youth cooperation framework, Structured Dialogue has several key challenges to overcome, such as the lack of local involvement and the low persistence of youth issues in the systematic focus of the European level. However, Structured Dialogue has already established long-term structures that serve the purpose, as well as a sustainable framework, which is likely to align cross-sector cooperation in the future. That said, the latest proposal from the European Youth Forum focuses on a more curated approach to Structured Dialogue, ensuring the continuity of aspects that have been realised well and inclusion of issues that have not been adequately addressed in the past. This change is based on the bottom-up approach, where ideas are developed at the local level and progress to higher levels of policy-making and decision-making if there is a need for further intervention, either at a political context, or legislation-wise.

What this means in other words is that if an idea emerges in a local discussion and is more important to the local context, it will move forward toward immediate implementation by the local decision-making level by bringing the issue into exhaustion making use of local competencies. Therefore, issues that are important to young people in their context at the local community can also be addressed as part of this framework, connecting decision-makers with young people as a necessary binomial in order to come up with a scenario that resolves the issue.

together a multitude of stakeholders in the youth sector, including the governments, youth organizations, youth work organisations, the National Agencies for Erasmus+ (hereinafter "the National Agencies") and much more, which have the knowledge, means and resources to outreach and to work with different groups of young people in the ground.

The answer as how to reach the youth at the periphery, or the youth coming from a marginalised background can be found at the local



The EU Structured Youth Dialogue, proposed by the European Commission in its Communication on the EU's Future Youth Strategy for the period 2019-2027, should be built on the achievements of the Structured Dialogue with Youth. Undoubtedly, as mentioned above, Structured Dialogue has not yet reached its full potential, and further improvements in the new EU Youth Dialogue are vital to the impact and quality results of the process. This is why some reforms need to come at the right time, giving an opportunity to reflect and critically advance this mechanism of youth participation for the next generation.

Anyway, Structured Dialogue has created functional structures at the European level – National Working Groups, which have a fundamental importance for the dialogue of young people with the relevant institutions, in order for them to be successful in policy-making. These structures are crucial as they bring

level, by engaging as many local actors involving young workers, youth organisations, schools, youth services and the likes, in their daily activities as much as possible. The principle is for those actors to be brought together, to have sufficient sources of support in their work and have them address the youth in a systematic pattern, not making them wait endlessly up until they find these opportunities themselves.

Open questions

Do National Umbrella Organizations have enough skills to carry out such an ambitious consultative program?

How can the process be further supported to better manage the envisaged responsibilities?

How can the capacity to raise funds be increased in order to build the capacities of the actors involved in the process?

Albanian Youth, Structured Dialogue versus Negotiations for the European Integration Process

Taking into account the information and the development of the above concept, the attention evolves and focuses on another very interesting development, that of negotiations.

Negotiations with Albania, after a journey featuring not few efforts, opened on March 25, 2020⁴. The announcement of this news, which was expected for several months, was influenced by several different developments, which were finalized with the opening of negotiations, but only when 15 preconditions were met. The process of opening of negotiations aims to prepare the ground for the work for harmonizing the Albanian legislation with that of the EU legislation, known as *Acquis Communautaire*⁵. In the course of this process, it is considered necessary that the chapters that directly and indirectly involve youth be treated on the basis of best practices and are based on some fruitful experiences. The success of the EU Structured Dialogue depends on the direct involvement of young

people and youth organizations. During the 18-month-long work cycle, each EU country conducts a national consultation with youth and youth organizations. This comprehensive process, which takes place in each country, is organized by National Working Groups through representatives of Ministries of Youth, National Youth Councils, youth organizations, youth workers, researchers and young people of various profiles.

After a period of several years of implementation of this process, outreaching as many young people in different areas of the continent as uniformly as possible has often turned out to be a weakness of the Structured Dialogue. For this reason, after series of consultations and proposals, the European Youth Forum proposed a methodology for ensuring a Structured Recurring Dialogue, which focuses on a bottom-up approach, where ideas are developed locally and progress upwards reaching up to the appropriate level in order for them to be implemented. For example, if an idea appears in a discussion at the local level and is more relevant to the local context, it can be addressed immediately and steps can be consequently taken to move forward towards implementation (while staying) at that level. Therefore, issues that are relevant to young people at the local level can be resolved in this context, by approaching decision-making (the responsible person, the representative of the relevant institution) closer to young people and addressing the problem in the most efficient way possible. This will embrace the idea of the implementation that is expected to happen immediately or in the very near future, without the need for prior approval at the European level.⁶

⁴ Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_519

⁵ Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/acquis.html>

⁶ <https://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/Proposal-for-a-new-Structured-Dialogue.pdf>

While within the territory of the European Union the Structured Dialogue implementation process is being reviewed, involvement of as many young people in the consultation phases and reduction of time for the construction of youth policies and their implementation are still on stand by in Albania, awaiting for the official opening of negotiations, which will scrutinise each chapter and guide the process of aligning the Albanian legislation with that of the EU. In this situation, the questions that naturally arise are the following:

- What should the Albanian youth do in the meantime?
- Should some concrete steps be taken in preparations to become part of the negotiation process?

In order for us to have a clear picture of this situation, we should be familiar with some recent development, which do directly affect opening of the negotiations.

Following the recent elections for the renewal of the governing structures of the European Union, Brexit and the exit of Great Britain from the European Union it has become clear that reforming, or "reformatting the European Union" as the process has been defined in other occasions, is in the very heart of Brussels' agenda. As a result of this rational, the enlargement process, its importance or ranking in the list of priorities of the European Union at this stage has been widely discussed. However, after several months of on-going statements coming from various European powers, or even from representatives of certain EU Member States, Brussels has renewed its commitment and has stated that enlargement will be cast the necessary attention, but the negotiations methodology will no longer be the same. Following France's proposal for a new enlargement methodology, the European Union presented on 5 February 2020 the final version of the enlargement methodology, which replaces the previous methodology for countries such as Albania,

which have not yet opened the negotiation process. Unlike Albania or Northern Macedonia, Western Balkan countries that have already opened various chapters will be given the opportunity to choose whether to continue the process with the previous rules, or to embrace the new methodology⁷ instead.

The new enlargement methodology is based on four principles:

- **More credibility** – In order for the membership process to regain credibility on both sides and ensure its full potential, it must be based on strong, mutual trust and clear commitments from both parties;
- **Stronger leadership at the political level** - European Union accession is a process that seeks and supports fundamental reforming and political and economic changes in countries wishing to join the EU, but also demonstrating the ability to assume shared responsibilities as a EU member state. This means that both parties need to show more leadership and implement their respective commitments. Given the objectives of this process, it is time to clearly define the political nature of the process and to ensure a stronger leadership and commitment of a high level by the Member States;
- **A more dynamic process** - It is necessary to inject further dynamism into the negotiation process and to promote work efficiency. Unlike the previous methodology, dynamism will be ensured by dividing chapters into thematic groupings. *These groupings pursue broad topics such as good governance, the internal market, economic competition, and so on. More specifically, the chapters will be divided into six thematic groupings:*
 1. Foundations
 2. Internal market
 3. Competition and comprehensive growth
 4. Green agenda and sustainable connection

⁷ Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_208

5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion
6. Foreign relations.

- **Predictability, positive and negative conditioning** - Based on the requirements of the Member States, as well as of the countries of the Western Balkans for a more predictable process, which provides for greater clarity in what the European Union expects from the Western Balkan countries in different stages of the process, the idea under this requirement is that there is a need to know what the positive and negative consequences of progress or lack of progress will be. In other words, the essential element of the merit-based membership process is its conditioning. However, to achieve that, the conditions must be clear from the outset. It is important that candidate countries recognize the comparative standards their performance will be measured against and that Member States share a clear understanding of what exactly is required of the candidate countries.

The new methodology aims to bring a new spirit and build a new relationship between Member States and candidate countries, as well as pave a clearer path, based on clear and measurable criteria. The reaction of Albania and Albanian institutions in relation to the numerous processes that will have to be undertaken to achieve the expected results is aimed to be under the same lines. Consequently, the journey of the Albanian youth should be proportionate to the endeavour and resemble the good European practices, respecting the processes already operating in Europe vis-à-vis ensuring cooperation between decision-making sectors and the country's youth.

Youth is seen as involved indirectly in some chapters of the negotiation process, but is directly covered by the constituent segments of Chapter 19 - Social and Employment Policies and Chapter 26 - Education and Culture. In this context, in addition to harmonizing the relevant legislation, it has already become clear that the process is moving in several

parallel directions. In the first place, the negotiation process includes the adaptation to the territorial context, where it is developed with different indicators of economic, social and cultural nature of the candidate country. According to the enlargement, these aspects, which are often taken into account through the inclusion of a system of not only of quantitative and qualitative rules or indicators, but, above all, of principles on which the whole process is based, cannot be ignored.

While carefully observing these elements for the lens of the Albanian youth, we would like to bring to your attention some principles constituting the basis of the Structured Dialogue:

- **The Bottom-Up Approach:** ideas come from the lowest level to the highest level. Involvement of young people at the local level is a great and crucial potential;
- **Feedback:** thanks to consultations at the local level and the several-tier system, it will be much easier for the young people involved to generate feedback, in a short period of time, so that they can see the impact of their for the proposed Structured Dialogue;
- **Engagement:** while implementation is encouraged to begin immediately, young people and decision-makers are more likely to engage in improving policies and realities together and to contribute to creating a more participatory culture;
- **Fieldwork - communication and awareness raising:** Acting locally and in a structured way, it is easier to involve a wider group of young people. There is considerable potential to conduct consultations only with schools/universities/communities, to ensure that all voices are heard accordingly and equally;
- **Implementation and monitoring:** clear plan and continuous progress. The outcomes can be constantly identified and made visible during meetings and events;

- Cross-sector features: policy experts from other fields will be invited to attend all conferences and events that will be organized. Those who will be selected as guests will be chosen based on the objectives and arguments of the work cycle;
- National aspect: Young people across the EU have a sense of belonging, commitment, feel part of a broader national process;
- Online-offline: online spaces and instruments will be used to get wider inputs, for example over arguments, but also to keep all those who participated in offline activities in a way engaged and active throughout the cycle and beyond. This allows young people to constantly consider their ideas and suggestions throughout the process, making their final impact more visible.

If we agree that Structured Dialogue is our

choice to be protagonists for building efficient and comprehensive youth policies, to be fellow travellers as Albanian citizens on the path of Albania's integration into the European Union, then we will need to consider the above-listed principles at every step of the way and, through them, to identify different ways of involving young people in this journey.

There is no doubt that, it is fair to acknowledge that the involvement of young people in the negotiation process requires political will, on the one hand, and efficient coordination of all youth groups, on the other hand. This comprehensiveness should define the representative structures and the chapters that see the youth in the front line should be first identified. It is under this perspective that the chapters that are most relevant to youth have been long identified now.



Connection
Inclusiveness
Empowerment

Chapter 19: Social Policies and Employment ⁸

If we were to summarize the content of this chapter we would say that approximation of the legislation in the social field aims to boost employment, improve working and living conditions, create social protection mechanisms of appropriate standards, promote social partner dialogue, and human resource development in order to provide sustainable employment, fight poverty and social exclusion, as well as provide equal opportunities for men and women alike.

In order to accelerate the European integration process, executive and legislative institutions need to undertake a series of political, economic and legal reforms. The reforms undertaken in this context are also those on social and employment policies. European Union rules on Social Policy and Employment include minimum standards for health care, vocational education, pensions, social inclusion, labour rights, gender equality, health, occupational safety and non-discrimination. EU Member States participate in the European dialogue at the European level and in the EU policy processes in the areas of employment policy, social inclusion and social protection. The European Social Fund is the main financial instrument through which the EU supports implementation of its employment strategy and contributes to social inclusion efforts.

Albania has made progress towards aligning its legislation with the EU acquis, mainly through the labour safety reform. There is still much work to be done, mainly on issues such as social protection and employment. According to the EU recommendations, amendments have been made to the Labour Code, where

issues such as health and safety at work, non-discrimination, the relationship between employers and employees have been harmonized with EU Law. Recently, Law On Employment Promotion has been supplemented with the new Law On Jobseekers. Health and safety at work have also been improved in the context of the Labour Code with regards to issues such as the work of women, children, the protection of pregnant women at work, the protection of employees in heavy industry, etc. The 2014-2020 Employment Strategy has been drafted, but mechanisms for its monitoring have not yet been set up. Also, the 2015-2020 Action Plan for Youth 2015-2020⁹ has as well been adopted.

Regarding social inclusion, there are problems not only in infrastructure, but also regarding its budgeting. The most vulnerable group are people with disabilities. The Pension Reform is adopted by a Decision of the Council of Ministers, establishing criteria and procedures for social pension. The establishment of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination has brought about a decrease in the level of discrimination, mainly in the field of employment, such as the employment of persons of over 50 years of age, Roma, etc. As far as the Law On Gender Equality is concerned, much remains to be done still, and the 2016-2020¹⁰ Gender Equality Strategy is currently under preparation.

The institutions responsible for implementing reforms in the field of social policy and employment are the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, subordinate institutions such as the State Social Service, the Labour Inspectorate, the National Employment Service, etc.,

⁸ The acquis Chapters, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership/chapters-of-the-acquis_en

⁹ Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth (2015), 2015-2020 National Youth Action Plan, available at: http://www.sociale.gov.al/files/documents_files/plani_kombetar_i_veprimit_per_rinin_e_shqip.pdf

¹⁰ 2016-2020 Gender Equality Strategy, available at: <https://www.un.org.al/sites/default/files/SKGJB-AL-web.pdf>

line ministries, and ministerial working, inter-ministerial, institutional and inter-institutional working groups. The main objectives of this chapter are education systems, which improve the skills of the workforce, improve the involvement of groups and develop the human resources needed to support growth and development.

The main challenge is the further development of the country's human resources, via training, acquisition of competencies and qualification in accordance with the needs of the labour market. Improving access and quality in education and vocational training of young people and adults should be linked to the objectives of economic and regional development. Another challenge is increasing labour market participation, especially for women. Health and social services and infrastructure in support of the groups in need, especially minorities and other groups, such as people with disabilities, are insufficient. Currently, local government lacks the capacity and infrastructure to carry out the tasks and challenges mentioned above. Coordination between ministries and local government is insufficient.

EU technical and financial assistance has prompted the implementation of many programs and projects to improve social and employment policies. In terms of social protection and inclusion, as well as a more active labour market integration policy, the EU envisions close cooperation with other donors, to provide support to groups in need and to promote employment, productivity and growing opportunities.

Youth transversely affects many of the above priorities and is presented as a basic tissue of this chapter. Currently, young people are absent in the tables of technical or thematic discussions of public administration bodies, or civil society. They will have to coordinate the preparatory work now so that later, once negotiations for this chapter start, they will be at the centre of the negotiation process.

The unclear representation of young people at the national level and the advancement of the legislation alignment process to precede, to some extent, the negotiations, made the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, following several months of activities at the national level, through an info-tour presentation of the draft-law On Youth and through a process of controversial and unclear consultations regarding the methodology used, submit the draft-law to the Parliament's Law Committee. After some recommendations by the civil society, which were only partially considered, the draft-law was voted in the Parliament and the legislation is currently known as the Law No. 75/2019¹¹ On Youth.

Looking at the path transversed by this law, it becomes instantaneously clear that there are significant shortcomings and that, to some extent, it is a law put together by copying and pasting parts of laws of the same type of other Balkan states and some European Union states. Although this law embodies significant shortcomings and has issues that will need to be reconsidered in order for it to better approach the Albanian reality, we can nonetheless say that its voting remains a success for the representation of young people and their recognition as a category of society, which deserves special attention.

¹¹ Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_208

Chapter 26: Education and Culture

This chapter turns out to be very broad and poses a significant challenge to the negotiation process and the approximation of Albania's legislation. At the implementation level, this chapter should reflect the following norms and principles:

Education, youth, sports and cultural policies are mainly the competence of Member States, while the EU aims to promote cooperation within the framework of common policies, such as increasing the quality of education, guaranteeing education, employment, cultural dialogue, preserving cultural heritage, joint cultural heritage and strengthen and support cooperation activities between Member States.

The cooperation framework for education and training policies aims to approximate national policies and achieve common objectives through an open coordination method, which gave birth to the "Education and Training" Program, and integrates all initiatives in the fields of education and training at the European level.

In terms of cultural diversity, the Member States need to ensure that their international commitments enable the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity. Member States should have a legal, administrative and financial framework, as well as the necessary implementing capacity to ensure good financial management of the European Union's education, training and youth programs (currently macro Erasmus + Programme, Creative Europe, Europe for Citizens, etc.).

Policies in the field of education, training, youth and culture, are the responsibility and competence of each state. The challenges the European states are faced with in these areas are the same. In the framework of the European Union, in order to coordinate national policies towards the common objectives of European countries, a joint interaction program has been prepared, which combines all initiatives in the field of education, culture, training and youth.

Developments in education, research and innovation play an important role in the training of human capital and employment as important requirements for the sustainable economic development of the country. The European Union's education and training activities are focused on coordination policies between the European countries, in order to promote the exchange of positive experiences between the countries and ensure the spread of education throughout Europe. The main program of the European Union in the field of education and training is Erasmus+, aiming to promote the role of education and training in Europe, creating educational opportunities for every age group.

Albania's objective in the field of vocational education and training, in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy, is to increase the level of general education and vocational training, provide access to all levels of education and training without discrimination, improve education and training structures, as well as encourage participation in the community programs.

In the field of culture, EU policies encourage collaborative initiatives and concrete actions aimed at promoting cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, promoting culture as a catalyst for fostering creativity, increasing knowledge and spreading culture, preserving and protecting cultural heritage, cultural exchanges and literary and artistic creativity including the audio-visual sector.

The main EU program in the field of culture is Creative Europe. It financially supports joint

initiatives between artists, actors, musicians from different European countries. At the national aspect, in the field of culture, the promotion and development of cultural and tourist industry in the country have been defined as priorities, seen as closely related to the functioning of national cultural heritage, strengthening national identity, as well as encouraging and promoting art and culture.



Beyond conceptualisation, installation and success of such a process so far, the challenge remains to adapt it to the local context and, above all, what is most valuable in such processes, is the post-process legacy itself, which aims at positive injections of political thinking and behaviour into its culture. The countries of the Western Balkans, to which we refer for comparative purposes for the sole reason that we are more contextually related to them, unfortunately suffer from the same symptoms in terms of active, substantial and persistent multilateral engagement -- three undeniable components of a possible successful dialogue. After a reflection on the idea of the process inherent principles and phases, we come to understand that elements of this Dialogue, or pieces of it, are

implemented in Albania, too, aiming to promote dialogue, bilateral insistence and prioritisation of youth issues. What is needed is a commitment first and foremost by committed youth themselves, by youth organizations and youth, youth forums, informal groups, as well as those coming from legally regulated installations, such as Student Governments, Student Councils, Local Youth Councils, as well as the National Youth Council, which is provided for under the newly approved law On Youth. Secondly, their union under the coordination of an existing and independent umbrella, already having the appropriate experience and knowledge on practicing political activities to strengthen and unite young people in selected causes with priority for them, is of a crucial importance.

Thirdly, the identification and mapping of all institutions at local and central level both morally and practically obliged to follow the process until the realization of its strategic objectives. Where should the strands come from? It should come from a deep awareness campaign on the importance of principles, while a thorough preparatory exercise would be a necessary step not only to adapt to the process, but first and foremost to attain real recognition of our organizational and instrumental handicaps as a prerequisite to fix them in the longer run.

Youth organizations and organizations working for young people at large, as integral part of civil society, have an important role to play in designing and implementing policies, especially in the context of the European integration process. Through this comprehensive feature we wish to note that the importance of cooperation with civil society is highlighted by the introduction of Article 11 in the European Union's Treaty of Lisbon, which mentions the importance of civil dialogue, as well as EU conditionality for Western Balkan countries to promote such dialogue so that civil society can exercise its role in this process and increase the level of democratic representation of society. In this regard, based on the above-mentioned path, we are of the opinion that the Albanian youth should be considered and, consequently, involved in any negotiation process regarding Chapters 19 and 26. It is clear that the negotiation process is a long and very technical journey and that the youth is not an integral part of the body of technicians or groups dealing with specific legal and bureaucratic aspects, but, at the end of the process, the impact should be concrete and pragmatic, tangible for Albanian citizens and, in particular and for the purpose of our discourse, for the Albanian youth.

Therefore, the process must be conceived from the bottom and find its way up, as relevant, setting up a Structured Functional and Comprehensive Dialogue, away from influences of polarizations of the political spec-

trum. Establishing a legislative approximation process based on consultations and adapting European legislation while also taking into account the Albanian context, would be one added element for the Albanian youth not to think about migration as the way to solve their problems, but to instead think of how to create an enabling environment for the development of an active and independent youth. In order for us to achieve such a stage, we need to be heard more and be present at every step of this journey. Beyond this excursus we wish to call upon the relevant ministries, departments, working groups of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the head negotiator for Albania to include all youth structures in this process and make the implementation of the Structured Dialogue happen in the preparatory stages for opening of negotiations for Chapters 19 and 26.

At the end of this overview, we wish to emphasize that the involvement of civil society, in particular of organizations and any kind of existing structure representing young people, in this process should never be considered a dichotomy of roles or institutional and democratic competencies, on the contrary, it should be clearly understood that Structured Dialogue guarantees certain important principles, which lay the foundation for the values of European Union -- inclusiveness, sustainable development, coordination and transparency.

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YOUTH, STRUCTURED DIALOGUE AND EU INTEGRATION

A remarkable and sustainable path



Definition and scope of activity. Structured Dialogue was given birth to as a result of the White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth (2001), which underscores the importance of consulting with young people in the areas of policies that directly affect them.

In 2005, a Resolution of the Council of the European Union called upon the European Commission and the Member States to engage in a structured dialogue with young people and youth organizations, with experts on youth issues and with public decision-makers. The biggest impetus for its implementation came with the renewed framework of European cooperation in the field of youth (2010-2018), adopted in 2009, through a Council Resolution, recognizing young people as key actors in society.



Leading principles of Structured Dialogue. Meaningful Youth Participation: Structured Dialogue should be a qualitative process where young people engage in meaningful conversation with decision-makers and with each-other. Activities run by national working groups and youth non-governmental organizations should aim to foster a qualitative commitment of young people. Young people participating in the dialogue should actively follow what is happening in the policy cycle regarding their ideas and contributions on issues that concern them at all levels.

Inclusive of even more distant voices: Structured Dialogue should be open to all young people and focus its efforts on reaching and engaging with all young people.



Embracing Structured Dialogue in Albania, a concept idea. Beyond conceptualisation, installation and success of such a process so far, the challenge remains to adapt it to the local context and, above all, what is most valuable in such processes, is the post-process legacy itself, which aims at positive injections of political thinking and behaviour into its culture. The countries of the Western Balkans, to which we refer for comparative purposes for the sole reason that we are more contextually related to them, unfortunately suffer from the same symptoms in terms of active, substantial and persistent multilateral engagement -- three undeniable components of a possible successful dialogue.

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