In times of crisis, many find it difficult to break cycles of disadvantage and improve their income and quality of life, and social exclusion in all its forms is often perpetuated and passed on from one generation to the next. Early intervention measures therefore need to be reinforced in order to provide equal life and development opportunities to all from a very early age. Whole Europe and in particular the South East Europe (SEE) region needs to find a social model that protects and upskills.

At EU level, there is a growing need for a social Europe. Therefore in its Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions, the Commission launched a process of dialogue and consultation to prepare the ground for an Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. This objective involves, first and foremost, eliminating discrimination of any kind, addressing, as a priority, the needs of vulnerable groups and ensuring a social standard as high as possible for all citizens.
More prosperous and more deeply integrated SEE is only of use if it improves the life of each citizen. With poverty and social exclusion unacceptably high, Europe must address widening inequalities and invest in education, culture, skills for the jobs of the future. At the same time, we must strengthen the social dimension, with special attention paid to the full participation of women and young people to ensure that no one is discriminated against, both in the economy and in society as a whole.

Social strategies are as individual for each SEECP PA Participant as they are global for the regions and the whole continent, which are united by common goals. These strategies include empowering people through opportunities for all throughout the lifecycle: investing in skills in order to attain high levels of employment; fighting poverty and thus building a cohesive society; and sharing the growth widely. For growth to be inclusive, labor markets need to be modernized, education and social protection systems shall be adjusted to help people to anticipate and manage technological transformation and more frequent labor market transitions.

In its Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020 Strategy and EU 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, the EU anticipated the particular risk attached to the ageing population and the need to make the fullest possible use of the labor potential to sustain growth and prosperity. In this context promoting gender equality and facilitating the inclusion of people with disabilities is as much a measure of support for the growth potential, benefiting all, as it is a matter of principle aimed at improving the lives of the individuals concerned.

Parliaments, as the only legislative authorities, enjoy the prerogative of representing the citizens through the act of governing and by the implementation of public policies on a large scale. Thus, a lot of constituencies through which the parliamentary elections are organized, leads to the conclusion that the representativeness of the members of the parliament (or the parliament in general) is in line with the will of the citizens. In this context, the Parliament can actively contribute to the improvement of the process of social inclusion. Through their specialized bodies, parliaments have an important role to play in monitoring the quality of life of persons with disabilities in the field of disability allowances, social security measures – all part of social protection schemes – and also they have a crucial role in monitoring the implementation of strategies and laws in order to improve them.

Respecting and strengthening the fundamental rights for all citizens, without barriers and without discrimination, providing equal opportunities, combating poverty and promoting social inclusion are the basis of a just and responsible society.

The social inclusion policy as a horizontal policy includes goals, measures and activities from different sectoral policies, therefore the experience shared by the SEECP parliaments shows that the development of such policies is based on a comprehensive strategy.

- The Bulgarian National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020 complies with the established strategic and operational national documents in application of the countrywide policy to improve the quality of life of the vulnerable groups of Bulgarian
society and to create the conditions for their fulfillment by reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion. The implementation of the Strategy is realized by developing and implementing of two-year action plans. Among the key policy priorities that are set out in

3.

the document are: ensuring equal access to quality education and healthcare, ensuring sustainable and adequate social payments, improving the housing conditions for vulnerable groups and supporting the homeless people, providing opportunities for employment and increased labor income through active labor market inclusion.

The implementation in the field of policy of social inclusion is monitored by the National Council on Social Inclusion – a body in charge of coordination, cooperation and consultation in the whole process. The goal is to monitor the achievement of measurable results of the activity related to fulfillment of the priorities laid down in the strategic document and also to actively involve the stakeholders in the evaluation and monitoring.

- Croatia as all EU member states, has adopted EU policies related to social inclusion. Therefore, it is adopted the National Strategy of Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2017-2020, Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Croatia (2014-2020) and the Plan of deinstitutionalization, transformation and prevention of institutionalization 2018-2020. All those documents are focused on the fight against deprivation and contribute to social inclusion.

To implement various measures and activities for social inclusion, Croatia is using EU funds, (ESF and FEAD) for the financing of various projects. Here, we can point out projects like Together against poverty and Development of the poverty map. It is important to mention several currently ongoing ESF operations focused on the Access to the labor market for persons with disabilities, Spreading network of the social services in the community and Spreading services of personal assistance for persons with disabilities.

Croatian parliament is playing active role in the process of fostering processes of social inclusion. It’s Health and Social Policy Committee has held thematic meetings with relevant stakeholders on the issues like professional rehabilitation and employment of the persons with disabilities. Convention on the rights of the persons with disabilities, public health and food strategy, food donation and several others.

- The Romanian National Strategy “Establishing a society without barriers for persons with disabilities” is designed to allocate financial resources for the transition from institutional to community-based services (deinstitutionalization). The proposed measures are part of strategic vision on how the transition from institutionalized care to community-based care will be achieved, in accordance with the criteria for active inclusion. Among the measures taken at national level are: establishment of social services such as day centers for the deinstitutionalization of persons with disabilities located in old type institutions; improving the regulatory framework for school medicine so as to ensure support for integration into
the school environment of children and young people with chronic diseases and different types of disabilities; supporting of persons with disabilities on the labor market by developing a network of specialists with standard tools and procedures for information and consulting, as well as for mediation.

4.

From the perspective of Romanian’s exercise of the Presidency of the Council of European Union an important step was the completion of the negotiations for the proposal for a Directive on accessibility requirements for products and services. Currently, in the final procedure stages, the proposal aims to support the Member States in fulfilling their national commitments, as well as their obligations under the United Nation Convention on the Rights on Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in terms of accessibility. At the same time the Directive will contribute to both the improvement of the functioning of the internal market and the prevention and elimination of obstacles to the free movement of accessible products and services.

- The Greek model, following EU best practices and through funding from the European Social Fund, is investing on vocational training, Second Chance Schools (for adults that have been school dropouts) and Lifelong Learning Centers. Also, measures implemented with EU and national funds promote the reintegration of the unemployed into the labour market through subsidy programmes in the private sector for different age cohorts and educational level, subsidy programmes in the public sector as well as public Works Scheme programmes, combining jobs placement with skills upgrading of the unemployed.

As is well known, EU best practices consider welfare policies to be a centerpiece of any policy of social inclusion. The Greek government, during the last four years reorganized the structure of the welfare state, introducing new allowances and integrating the agencies responsible for the implementation of welfare: A Guaranteed Minimum Income, a housing allowance and a redesigned child allowance that reaches a large part of low and middle income families.

A Social Inclusion and empowerment program for Roma people has been also put into practice as well as transport free pass for the disabled and the unemployed. “Community Centers” have been established across the country (243 at present) to serve as a “one stop shop” for citizens and families in need. They provide info, support, and counseling, guidance through various social and welfare programs and help in filling in applications. 48 Community Centers have been established especially for the Roma. About 1, 2 million people visited these centers and 400.000 people have been benefiting from their services.

- In line with the EU legislation and practices, Turkish government has given the priority to the different aspects of social inclusion in the 11th Development Plan (2019-2023) approved by the Parliament on 23 July 2019. Besides, National Strategies and Action Plans on eliminating child labor, promoting child rights and supporting Roma people are put into force. Preparatory work for the adoption of National Strategy and Action Plan on the Rights
of persons with Disabilities aiming at mainstreaming disability with all its dimensions in all policies and government programmes for promoting the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is going on.

Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services develops protective and preventive programs for groups requiring special policies like women, children, elderly and citizens with disabilities besides contributing to socio-economic development by strengthening the individuals and family, increasing employment and regulating working life and ensuring equal access to quality and affordable health care through Universal Health Care Insurance.

In addition to the specific employment incentives for women and citizens with disabilities, in the scope of active labor services, vocational training courses, on-the-job training programmes, entrepreneurship training programmes and other courses, programmes, projects and special applications are organized by Turkish Employment Agency in order to help to maintain and increase employment, develop professional qualifications of the unemployed, decrease unemployment and bring the groups that require special policy in the labor market.

On the other hand, there are number of projects funded by national resources or co-financed with the EU by means of the Instrument of Pre-Accession (IPA) under Employment, Education and Social Policies Sectoral Operational Programme (EESPSOP).

Last but not least, Ankara participates the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) programme managed directly by the European Commission to promote a high level of quality and sustainable employment, guaranteeing adequate and decent social protection, combating social exclusion and poverty and improving working conditions.

- Structural reform 22 in the framework of ERP 2020-2022 (ERP – Economic Reforms Program) is the most important strategic document for the Republic of Serbia in economic dialogue with the European Commission and the European Union member states, which was proposed in the field of social welfare. Document refers to the improvement of adequacy, quality and targeted measures of the social welfare measures by means of introduction of the Register of Social Card, which is aimed to enable fairer distribution of resources allocated to the social welfare by taking into account the user’s social and financial status. The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs of the Republic of Serbia has prepared a Draft Law on social card which will be the basis for drafting the Uniform Register “Social Card”. During 2019 the first stage of the development of the Register was completed and also the internal connecting of the subsystem by establishing data basis for social, child and veteran’s welfare. In addition to that, by appropriate software application the connection will be made among the social welfare institutions and in the first place among the social welfare centers into an integral network (SOZIS). Creation of information system will, except for the impact on fairer distribution of social welfare assistance, also have impact of the reduction of abuse and faster response in case of modification of data which influence the social and economic status but it will also have impact on prevention of poverty and
remedying the consequences of social exclusion. It will also contribute to facilitated exercise of rights of users since in this way they will be enabled to realize their right by means of integrated point of access.

The proposal of the Prevention strategy and protection from discrimination 2020-2025, was drafted with the assistance of experts in the human rights field and it will be put to public debate. It is a continuation of the previous strategic document but only using a different methodology. Goals and measures of this new strategy are divided according to competent sectors, in contrast to the previous case, when they were divided according to the affected groups, which would increase the level of responsibility and clearly define holders and participants of measures and activities.

There are a number of examples of good practices in our region, one of which is the experience of Serbian social services and specifically the Work Engagement of People with Developmental Disabilities (KEC) – a programme for young adults with developmental disabilities in order for them to continue to be challenged and engaged in adulthood, by creating partnerships with the community in order to help them to realize their own strengths, talents and capabilities. The KEC programme includes 4 aspects: a day centre, work placement, social enterprise and advocacy and training. The model also allows for direct contact between beneficiaries and citizens, and vice versa, which reduces barriers and stereotypes in order to create a more integrated society. KEC was recognized as a third place finalist in Erste Foundation’s Award for Social Innovation.

At the Poznan Summit the Republic of Serbia expressed its agreement with the adopted Declaration which is dedicated to Roma integration in the framework of European Union enlargement. Western Balkans obliged themselves by the Declaration to invest additional efforts in order to increase the employment rate, improve the housing conditions and legalize Roma settlements, increase the completion rate in primary and secondary education, primary health insurance coverage, ensure possession of personal identification documents, and continue countering discrimination of Roma population. Social inclusion and poverty reduction team supported the Regional Cooperation Council (Regional Cooperation’s Roma Integration 2020 Action team in Serbia) in preparation of the Declaration text.

The European Commission published in 2019 its assessments of the Economic Reform Programmes of the Western Balkans. For the first time, the European Pillar of Social Rights plays an integral role in the assessments, providing a framework for identifying key priorities. The Social Pillar of the European Integration of the Western Balkans is the project implemented by Center for Social Policy (Belgrade), Finance Think (Skopje) and Economic and Social Analytics (Tirana). Through this project, partners of the network assess on how Western Balkans perform against the recently adopted European Pillar of Social Rights and its indicators, the available European integration instruments for welfare state reforms in the Western Balkans and the proposals for improving governance in the social sector within the EU enlargement process. Through a new reinforced social dimension for the Western
Balkans, the Commission will work to support employment and social policy in the region, encouraging appropriate engagement from all levels of government, social partners and civil society. This will include an increased focus on employment and social reforms through greater monitoring of relevant policies, including in the context of the economic reform programmes.

Last year the first ever EU-Western Balkans Ministerial meeting on social and employment issues took place in Luxembourg. The conclusions of the meeting were that more financial assistance should be provided in the social sector, in particular investment in education and health care to support social inclusion.

The meeting reflects the importance of a new reinforced social dimension in the Western Balkans, with an increased focus on employment and social reforms. It was also noted that, while acknowledging recent progress in increasing employment and decreasing unemployment in the Western Balkans, significant gaps remain with regard to developing inclusive labor markets providing opportunities and incentives to paid work for everyone at working age. It was recommended that the region should be tapping into the potential of young people, women, and long-term unemployed, which is currently underutilised in stimulating further growth in the future.

The next annual EU-Western Balkans Ministerial meeting on employment and social affairs in 2020 will be during the Croatian Presidency of the EU Council and it will discuss the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Today Western Balkans are facing numerous obstacles and challenges that require a social response with clear guidance and guidelines on the possibilities of support in developing sustainable social policies aimed at the needs of vulnerable groups. In the foreground is the need for a comprehensive agenda which combines research and development, innovation, education, employment and social inclusion policies as we cannot continue focusing on economic growth strategy without addressing the Human Capital Development.

According to the World Bank report “Western Balkans Labor Market Trend 2019”, the high prevalence of permanent and full-time jobs in the Western Balkans, while a positive indicator of job quality, suggests that labor markets are not offering the type of contracts that are more suited to some groups and thus underutilizing a large pool of potential workers.

While permanent and full-time jobs are generally considered “good quality”, part-time or temporary jobs may also offer a channel to enter the labor market for workers who would otherwise be excluded from participating, such as women and the young. (1)

In most of the SEECP members there are members of one of the recognized European organizations – The European Association of Service Providers for People with Disabilities (EASPD), in which the inclusion of the organizations in the rest of the SEECP participants would be of great benefit to their citizens.
EASPD is a member of European Commission’s newly formed Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The Working Group is established to support EU Member States providing a platform for them to exchange experience and good practices, learn from each other and develop targeted policy guidance. EASPD is also a part of the High-Level Group on Disability and has the opportunity to raise issues such as the relevance of the EU funds support to the social services development, the need of better investment into inclusive employment models and the relevance of social economy enterprises and the relevance of person-centred technology to promote independence of persons with disabilities.

Social inclusion is a problem and a strategy with a very wide scope as it affects many aspects of people’s social activity. We will not say anything new if we confirm that an adequately functioning economy provides real opportunities for active participation of every citizen. The link between these two components is a reciprocal process that must be developed strategically and in the long term. In order to successfully achieve and realize benefits for the economy and for society as a whole, focus should be placed on:

- Developing skills and including them in school curricula from an early age as well as in vocational education and training with a focus on life-long-learning;
- Improving the business climate for SMEs, micro-enterprises, social enterprises and start-ups, without prejudice to worker rights and standards;
- Fostering growth in areas such as e-Commerce, e-Health, e-Governance, digitalisation of traditional industries, open innovation;
- Fostering sustainable growth in cultural and creative industries, that have proved their resilience to the economic crisis and are well-placed to grow further.

In this process **social economy enterprises** are key social economy actors as they combine societal goals with entrepreneurial spirit. These organizations focus on achieving wider social, environmental and/or community objectives, rather than just on generating income and on creating sustainable jobs, for example for the long-term unemployed.

While some form of legal recognition for social economy enterprises exists in many SEECP PA Participants, it is not universal. Many social economy enterprises operate in the form of social cooperatives, some are registered as private companies limited by a guarantee, some are mutual and a lot of them are non-profit-distributing organizations like provident societies, voluntary organizations, charities or foundations.

Over the years social economy enterprises have developed high expertise in the field of vocational education and training and in the adaptation of work processes and work stations.

The experiences in various European countries show that a combination of facilitating legal frameworks and a set of other conditions allow to create a win-win situation for both the
employer and the employee and generates a context of increased inclusion and participation in the community for many individuals who struggle to find job opportunities in other settings.

A major contemporary problem at EU level that is also affecting our region is **youth unemployment** and the challenges associated with overcoming it. Many strategies of the SEECP PA Participants are developed according to EU legislation and youth policies but without the perspective at all levels of the government so most of them do not always comply with the needs of youth. Although each of the SEECP PA Participants has legislation governing the collection of data, in some of them there is lack of systematically collected data on youth, which could be used towards designing high quality support measures for youth, especially on vulnerable groups of young people. Collecting data on young people in each country from a political, economic and social aspect can be an asset to sustainable and efficient policy measures in tackling youth issues.

In May 2019 the Regional Cooperation Council published its research on “Western Balkans Youth Employment in Numbers” which shows that the region has been on a path of solid economic growth and job creation in the recent years. Although in the last seven years more than 700 thousand new jobs were created, only 4,3 percent of these are taken by youth under 24 of age. Youth employment has followed a moderately positive trend; however youth unemployment remains stubbornly high as youth are more than twice as likely as the general population to be unemployed.

240 000 youth aged up to 24 years are unemployed but actively looking for a job in our region. Overall unemployment is more than 35 percent (in comparison, the EU average youth unemployment rate in 2018 was 15,2 percent). Job search takes an average of 22 months and the transition from school to work can be a long and demanding process for the young people in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, over the past 7 years 10 percent of the young people has neither been in a job nor looking for one.

The recommendations this study concludes with are: 1. Promoting quantity and quality of jobs; 2. Improve the design and targeting of Active Labor Market Policies; 3. Enhance the relevance of education and skills to labor market needs. (2)

In the recent years, EU Member States have successfully implemented a youth work approach known as the **Youth Guarantee**.

The steps taken by the Bulgarian Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare in the context of this scheme are several key points applied in dealing with unemployed youth, namely: **a**/ making a proposal to every young person within 4 months of being unemployed or leaving the education system, and **b**/ making a quality proposal that is tailored to the young person’s profile. The services that young people receive from the Labor Offices are: an individual action plan, mediation for employment in the real economy (more than 35 thousand young people up to 29 years of age have started work only in 2018), and also for subsidized jobs (more than 20,000 young people for 2018), professional qualification training. Another
successful tool for attracting and activating young people is the so-called labor exchanges conducted by the Employment Agency. The data show that the youth integration policy implemented in this way is effective - there is a constant reduction in the youth unemployment rate over the last 5 years, which is currently 8% compared to 15.2 for the EU.

North Macedonian government first among non-EU countries commits to the introduction of a fully fledged Youth Guarantee. The implementation of the Youth Guarantee has received a

10.

high level of priority in the Government Plan (2017-2020). This is a smart move to catalyze energy and resources around this policy.

A 10 million Euro Youth Guarantee scheme was launched for the Western Balkans by the European Commission together with the European Investment Fund at the beginning of 2019. The scheme will support youth employment in the Western Balkans and is expected to leverage investment of at least EUR 60 million for the young people in the region to strengthen their entrepreneurial capacity and provide job opportunities.

However, there are still many challenges in this area and the main problem remains the emigration of young people. Increased efforts are needed in order to provide opportunities for youth that would encourage participation and entrepreneurship, modernize education, increase job specific skills and employment opportunities, and encourage brain circulation and social and economic inclusion.

Various models and steps have to be sought and implemented to enhance the social inclusion of the young people among which:

- Promoting equal opportunities for all young people, including through the validation of the non-formal and informal learning as a way to empower them to participate actively in lifelong learning and enhance their employability.

- Promoting cooperation between education authorities, youth organizations and other relevant stakeholders to strengthen the links between informal and non-formal learning and formal education in order to strengthen young people’s key competences for life and foster their active participation in society.

- Promoting equal access of young people to rights and to opportunities in order to allow them to fully participate in society. Reforming the legal framework to facilitate and promote volunteering and internships, as well as providing opportunities for youth (through their representative bodies) to be consulted in law drafting and strategies

Another type of measure and care requires the common problem for Europe and the region - the demographic crisis and the aging population. Through a series of measures and incentives for the companies, flexible employment, and investing in health and safety at work, the unemployment rate in Bulgaria for the age group 55+ is 4 percent for the first quarter of 2019 and decreased by 1.3 percent down from 2018.
In conclusion:

Social inclusion should be treated above all as a matter of principle. It is what progressive policies and policy of social justice and equality strive for. But it is also a key factor to any decent, stable, democratic society. What one should look for when examining welfare policies is not only their function as a safety net for the most vulnerable. Welfare policies should be designed in a way that they act as an empowerment mechanism interacting with employment and education policies. A well-functioning Welfare State serves to prevent immiseration of the excluded but also assist to their reintegration into society.

As key actors in the social inclusion process, parliaments should be attentive to the fact that workers work under decent wages and their labor rights are being respected. If that is not the case, we end up with “working poor” and just another form of social exclusion.

Last but not least, as it was recommended at the Berlin Process’ Poznan Summit, and as it already is in practice of most EU member states -EU Member states from the SEE should advocate transparent and inclusive cooperation with the Civil Society Organizations in the policy design to be able to tackle inclusion challenges. It could be beneficial to establish cooperation and meetings of the policy makers with the representatives of other relevant actors.

Sources and Links


2. “Western Balkans Youth Employment in Numbers” Regional Cooperation Council