

**European Future of the Balkans, Bilateral Seminar at the Austrian Embassy in
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**Some Reflections on Topic II – The Citizens’ Needs: Economy, Civil Society
and Related Cooperation: Perspectives for Economic Development
and Investment, Civil Society, Use and the Role of the Media,
Scientific and Academic Cooperation**

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In my function as Chairman of the NGO “World University Service” (**WUS Austria**), which is committed to the right to education worldwide, but was particularly involved in the Western Balkans since 1992 (see www.wus-austria.org) I keep good memories from our cooperation with a French association and colleagues in Sarajevo during the war in 1994 and after, when we had a close cooperation with French universities like the University of Lyon in order to help with the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the system of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other war-affected countries of the region. One focus of WUS Austria is assisting “people”, the young generation neglected in their educational opportunities and needed so dearly for building the human capital necessary for the economic and political development of the countries of the Western Balkans (see, for example, Wolfgang Benedek (ed.), *Impact of Higher Education and Human Capital on the Economic and Political Development in Kosovo, Der Donauraum (The Danube Region)*, 1/2010).

Building the human infrastructure is necessary for a prosperous country and region. Although there have been important initiatives and contributions, both from the national as well as the European side, schools and universities in the region are still not at the necessary level. We are still confronted with out-dated curricula, ex cathedra teaching methodologies, which do not stimulate analytical skills, the lack of opportunities for practical experience (partly addressed by the clinical education programme supported by USAID), the lack of relevant masters programmes and Ph.D-studies, generally of quality education although some efforts have been made, like the creation of

accreditation agencies, which, however, have difficulties to deal with the mushrooming of private universities often lacking minimal standards. Often, universities **lack** a meaningful **research** component necessary to allow for research-based teaching and they also **lack the administrative capacities** to participate in research opportunities on the European level. The lack of capacities is also one of the reasons why the universities do not benefit fully from existing Tempus-programmes or from the few IPA-projects in the field of education, which, however are also limited by the particular IPA-approach.

In addition, there is the problem of **politisation** and sometimes also **corruption** in the higher education system, which still is structured in a very hierarchical way and does not have enough incentives for emerging talents. The region has now a significant number of young people who have been educated in prestigious master and even doctoral programmes, but they find it difficult to return home into meaningful positions. The situation is aggravated by high unemployment rates in particular for the young generation in Western Balkan countries.

Under this conditions it cannot come as a surprise that there is still a significant **brain-drain** to EU countries and that efforts towards “brain-circulation” and brain-gain have only had limited results. NGOs like WUS Austria have in the past with the support of the Austrian Government successfully countered some of these problems by **assisting universities to reform their educational systems** to introduce the Bologna process, to create a research infrastructure and new master programmes responding to the needs of the market and society at large. WUS has also managed the so-called Dzindzic internship programme, which allowed students from Serbia to get practical experience through internships in Austria as well as the prestigious **Balkan Case Challenge**, which brought together students from all South-East European countries for a European Council simulation, a Business Case Challenge, a Law Moot Court etc. This event in particular showed that there is a large number of high potentials in the region, which are also of interest to the companies ready to invest in the region. With the help of One-Month-Grants, researchers could work at Austrian universities and develop partnerships between their home institutions and these universities. Unfortunately, most of these programmes have been terminated recently for a lack of funding.

In the **field of civil society** its role needs to be emphasized and is also recognized by the European Union and its programmes. However, civil society is rarely appreciated by local governments, which tend to consider its members as opponents, because they often speak out critically as it is their role. They hardly receive any local funding which makes them dependent on international

support. This again makes them suspicious to the governments which sometimes have introduced very strict NGO laws in order to bring NGO institutions more under their control. In this context, it is important that the International Community is not only speaking to those governments, often taken for granted because they were elected, but also look at the legitimacy of those governments derived from their performance in practice, which is often very low. In order to strengthen civil society, the international visitors should meet not only with governmental officials, but also with civil society in order to strengthen them and improve their standing. Certain important initiatives like the Regional Commission for Establishing the Facts about the War Crimes and other Gross Violations of Human Rights committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia (**RECOM**) should be actively supported. This initiative is based on the conviction that truth and reconciliation have to take place on a regional basis, which is difficult, but seems to be the only way in view of the desired reintegration of the region.

The International Community should not only be concerned with security matters to be addressed by troops but also with **human security**, with the security of people in their daily life's, which includes their civil and political as well as economic social and cultural rights. In this respect, the visa liberalization process was an important gesture for the citizens of the Balkans and it would be important that also the citizens of Kosovo are included in this liberalization as soon as possible. However, the European Union should go further by also allowing young people from the region to work in the European Union for at least three months per year in order to gain practical experience and also some money to contribute to overcome unemployment at home. Such policies would complement political activities on a diplomatic level in the sense of public diplomacy taking people's needs more into account.

Generally more should be done in terms of **human rights education and training** on all levels for which purpose human rights centers established with the help of Austrian and European institutions at the universities of Sarajevo, Prishtina or Podgorica, but also the Belgrade Center for Human Rights could be used. The **Manual on Human Rights Education** produced with the support of the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the past is now translated into Albanian, Croatian, Macedonian and Serbian and there is a big demand for it.

The **Freedom of the Media** is another important concern because with the taking over of full local responsibility there is a tendency of regressions regarding the independence of the media as can be seen from efforts of a stronger control over the independent media agencies created with the help of

the international community, mainly OSCE. More needs to be done to equip media and journalists with the necessary skills to promote freedom of expression and other European values, which are also part of universal human rights.

Also the independence of other relevant institutions like the **Ombudsmen** needs to be preserved as they are often the first institutions to which citizens turn about violations of their rights.

Accordingly, people's and citizens' needs should be more in the focus and the improvement of their human security would reduce the still prevailing tendency that politicians and parties are elected out of fear rather than of hope. Conditionality will still have an important role to play, but it should be a "**smart conditionality**", which is not on the expense of the people.

Additional efforts are necessary to create **opportunities for exchanges, mobility, partnering** etc. in order to address the prevailing feeling of exclusion in particular among the youth, which easily can result in radicalization or internal or external immigration. A "new deal" is also needed with regard to building human infrastructures, improving educational opportunities together with human rights, democracy and the rule of law.