



**Strengthening Bonds
between
Alienated Neighbors
in the Region:
Greece, Bulgaria,
North Macedonia**

Policy Paper



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

Greece and Cyprus

ATHENS - DECEMBER 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword 3

About the Partners 4

Participant Organizations 5

Introduction 6

First meeting 7
Thessaloniki (6-8 May 2022):
“Education and employment”

Second meeting 11
Skopje (24-26 June 2022):
“Human rights, anti-discrimination and gender issues”

Third meeting 14
Sofia (21-23 October 2022):
“Natural/civil environment and sustainability”

Suggested trilateral activities 17

Conclusion 19

FOREWORD

The aim of the project “Strengthening bonds between alienated neighbors in the region: Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia” was to bring together the youth of the three countries in an environment of cooperation and mutual understanding. The project involved civil society organizations from all three countries in three separate meetings, where all sensitive and essential youth issues were discussed; education and employment, human rights, anti-discrimination and gender issues, and natural/civil environment and sustainability. This document includes the policy recommendations and all important points made during the entire process of the project, followed by common proposals and a brief plan for future trilateral action.

We would like to thank the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom for its support and trust and especially Eleni Siapikoudi and Alona Tatarova.

The project “Strengthening bonds between alienated neighbors in the region: Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia” was made possible with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. Views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

Greece and Cyprus

ABOUT THE PARTNERS

→ SEE In Action

SEE in Action is a non-governmental organization whose aim is to connect young people from South-East Europe and the wider European region and create an impact by promoting and addressing issues of public concern. SEE in Action is determined to take action and implement positive, result-oriented social changes targeting the eradication of inequality, poverty, and marginalization while promoting cooperation, solidarity, and reconciliation in the region.

→ Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom is the foundation for liberal politics in the Federal Republic of Germany. It aims to promote the principles of freedom and dignity of all people and in all areas of society, both in Germany and abroad. Through civic education and dialogue programmes, sponsorship of the talented, research and political consultation and archive-work, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation contributes to shaping the future in a liberal way. It supports human rights, rule of law and democracy in more than 60 countries form the core of our work. Furthermore, it assists in the sustainable development of democratic and constitutional structures by supporting liberal parties and groups.

PARTICIPANT ORGANIZATIONS



Eduact



INNOVA LAB
Center for Educational and Development Initiatives
Bitele



ЛИБЕРАЛНО
ДЕМОКРАТСКА
МАШИНА



МЛАДА



НАЦИОНАЛЕН МЛАДЕЖКИ
ФОРУМ



YOUTH
ALLIANCE



Δ/OTIMA
CENTRE FOR GENDER RIGHTS
& EQUALITY



iHR



Асоциация Деметра
0700 40 150
ЗАЕДНО ЗА СВЯТ БЕЗ НАСИЛИЕ



EUROPEAN
WOMEN'S LOBBY
BULGARIAN PLATFORM



ЕКО



СЪРЖЕНИЕ
зелени



ЕКО
ЖИВОТ



ЗЕЛЕНИ
БАЛКАНИ
greenbalkans.org



Club
Sustainable
Development
of Civil Society



ДЕМ
ДВИЖЕНИЕ НА ЕКОЛОГИСТЕ НА МАКЕДОНИЈА



Learning Seed



Blue Green
NGO



ManEco

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia have been alienated due to political developments and the prevalence of toxic and divisive rhetoric as a result of bilateral disputes. To date, this condition of multi-directional lack of trust and respect in public affairs has had a negative impact on the youth of all three countries. So far, young people of the region already had limited opportunities to meet and cooperate with each other. Nowadays, existing stereotypes and ignorance further widen the gap between them, making it impossible for them to work, create and advocate for their rights at a joint basis.

In an effort to achieve cooperation and common action at a trilateral level, SEE in Action, supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, undertook the project “Strengthening bonds between alienated neighbors in the region: Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia”. The aim of the project was to create bridges of communication, strengthen the existing ties and create fertile ground for new relations between the youth of the three countries in an environment of cooperation and mutual understanding. The project involved civil society organizations from all three countries in three separate meetings, where all sensitive and essential youth issues were discussed; education and employment, human rights, anti-discrimination and gender issues and, finally, natural/civil environment and sustainability.

In the consultation cycle, the main focal point was the role of civil society in empowering youth and advocating for common problems in the three countries. Not only did the organizations have the opportunity to share their experience and stress out the weaknesses of their societies, but they also managed to come up with targeted recommendations for tackling the existing issues while promoting trilateral cooperation and action. This document includes all the important points made during the entire procedure, followed by common proposals and a brief plan for future trilateral action.

FIRST MEETING

Thessaloniki (6-8 May 2022):
“Education and employment”

How can we enhance the digitization process and address the lack of digital skills of both teachers and students?

Education needs to be aligned with the digital developments and advances in science and society. All three countries are generally slow in the digitization process, thus the pace of the progress made during the pandemic must be maintained. However, attention has to be paid also on the practical problems and shortcomings that have arisen, such as the lack of equipment and expertise on the part of educational staff. Additionally, the acquisition and development of a student’s digital and social skills is essential for the proper socialization as well as the preparation for the next step towards higher education and the labor market.

The civil society of the three countries agrees that:

- ▶ States and the private sector need to work together to provide all the necessary tools and equipment for both teachers and students to transition smoothly, yet quickly into the digital age.
- ▶ CSOs must be involved in order to help identify the diverse needs of both students and teachers while ensuring that informal ways of learning and education will not be left behind during this transition.
- ▶ Redistribution of funds from the governments to the digitalization of schools and further training of educational staff is more than necessary.

How can we involve teachers with more technical skills in the educational process?

The pandemic crisis brought on the surface how crucial it is for teachers and educational staff to adapt to contemporary technological needs. In this way, not only will educational institutions be further developed and facilitated with additional working tools, but also students’ interest in the educational procedure will be restored, as they are increasingly experienced in the use of new technologies from a very young age.

It is proposed that:

- ▶ More young teachers are involved in the educational procedure, either as interns, or as additional, supplementary staff, with a special duty to use alternative teaching methods based on technology and sustainability. Greek and Macedonian educational institutions could follow the Bulgarian example of the “Together in the classroom” program, which promotes the integration of young teachers.
- ▶ SMEs, corporations and CSOs could plan special workshops, tutorials and online seminars for students and educational staff, for informing them on recent technological trends, good practices and future needs of the market, in the context of building career pathways.
- ▶ Civil Society can be actively engaged in the educational process by cooperating with educational institutions, for the empowerment of all relevant beneficiaries.

Involvement in social work, workshops on tolerance and democratic values, as well as engagement in voluntary work could be a starting point.

How can we avoid the politicization of education?

The education system of the countries should remain unaffected by the political developments within a country, mainly the frequent change of power. Thus, the work of the institutions related to education and life-long learning should be safeguarded from politicization.

It is suggested that:

- ▶ All three states create an independent institutional body responsible for the educational system, which will cooperate with youth representatives and civil society organizations and whose work will not be undermined and change based on the party that is in power. This body will operate independently from the Ministry of Education and will be funded by European, state and private funds. Its budget will not be part of the Ministry's budget and organization chart. This will guarantee its independence, de-bureaucratization and de-centralization. This body would follow the operating footsteps of independent authority bodies in Greece such as the Independent Authority of Labour Inspectorate and the Hellenic Data Protection Authority.

How can economic sustainability and compliance be achieved?

Advocacy towards a more robust and financially sustainable educational system is necessary. There is no official data on GDP expenditure for education in North Macedonia since 2002, however, Bulgaria and Greece are currently below the EU average (5%), spending approximately 4% and 4,5% respectively for all levels of education (Eurostat, 2022). In Bulgaria, funds are distributed mainly on secondary education, while in Greece funds are equally distributed to primary, secondary and tertiary education. However, the allocation procedure should be more transparent, while funds should be invested mainly on infrastructure and equipment with a switch to fulfilling the SDGs and the UN Agenda.

As far as tackling youth unemployment is concerned, decision makers should implement a special system for fostering youth entrepreneurship and start-up businesses, providing flexible loans for starting a business and offering tax reliefs, especially during the first two years of the function of a youth-led business, thus allowing its development and market integration. Besides, tax reliefs should be awarded to businesses and private institutions which employ young people (aged 18-24) for at least one year, or hire young people in at least 15% of their job positions on a steady basis, thus contributing to the building of a skilled and experienced youth personnel.

Finally, it is essential that CSOs, governments and private institutions should collaborate in tackling the mismatch between the demand for high-quality jobs and the supply of skilled labor. Digitalization and sustainability policies which are prevalent in the EU agenda have the capacity to transform the labor market.

It is needed that:

- ▶ The state regulates in a way that businesses which are actively engaged in digitalization and sustainable development processes are rewarded (i.e., being

preferred in public procurement procedures and open calls). In that way businesses would be mobilized in implementing certain policies compatible with the SDGs in order to gain benefits.

- ▶ CSOs undertake monitoring activities for securing transparency and compliance of all educational institutions with the SDGs.
- ▶ Assessment procedures on the quality and sufficiency of educational institutions should be implemented by all beneficiaries on an annual basis.
- ▶ Tax incentives are provided to SMEs for encouraging employment of young people, as described above.
- ▶ Finally, it is necessary that education is not affected by further cuts and reforms. Policymakers should be well advised to rely on quality research to guide the choices they make regarding education finance.

How can we address the poor labor conditions & limited access to the labor market?

The legal framework needs to be strengthened and adjusted to the current needs associated with new forms of work (e.g., hybrid, virtual, remote) in order to ensure the fair treatment and respect of the employees' rights. Especially on youth employment, it is noted that there are multiple examples of seasonal work with no health insurance, unpaid overtime, lack of official contract, even in cases of jobs with high physical demands.

It is essential that:

- ▶ Monitoring mechanisms are established, both by decision makers and by active CSOs, which would conduct frequent checks to ensure the compliance with the legal framework and will secure the safety of young employees.
- ▶ Business Unions should establish an evaluation platform, where all negative experience of employees is recorded, so that the businesses with the lower score are excluded by the union. In this way, businesses will be pushed to comply with the legal framework and be held accountable for any disobedience to the applicable law.

How can we deal with the issue of brain drain?

South East European countries mark the highest rates of human flight and brain drain in the entire Europe. Brain drain, meaning a large number of educated and skilled people leaving their country in search of better standard of living and quality of life, is driven, among others, by unemployment, poor labor conditions and limited access to the labor market. All three weaknesses are evident in Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia. All the proposals given above should improve at a certain level the educational and working conditions which might stimulate brain drain towards more developed EU countries. However, our countries should invest in education and training opportunities for young people that will help them become productive and engaged citizens and will secure the future workforce and its long-term prosperity.

We recommend that:

- ▶ A platform that connects the labor market and tertiary education is created, including a separate section for students from rural areas, thus facilitating their employment in their hometowns.

- ▶ Universities and businesses apply for additional funds for securing the offer of paid internships.
- ▶ More efficient professional orientation advisory should be provided in schools, including workshops, skill tests, training trips and voluntary projects. In the same context, interactive activities for promoting agricultural and other manual jobs should be facilitated, for eliminating the high demand of specific professions across students.
- ▶ Further investments in tertiary education are needed in order to improve the quality and diversity of the offered fields of study and available research resources and equipment. This will create favorable conditions for aspiring highly educated and skilled individuals to pursue their academic goals without having to migrate.
- ▶ Businesses should cooperate with EU and private institutions for securing special funds for graduate traineeships and scholarships for facilitation of employees who intend to continue their studies and boost their knowledge on their work field.

How can we boost regional cooperation?

The majority of the young citizens from Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia have not even considered the possibility of working in the region. To a certain extent, this is the result of lack of information. Therefore:

- ▶ It is important to support the work of cooperation channels. One successful example is the initiative “Cooperation for a Common Future” in which SEE in Action is a partner and promotes and advocates for the establishment of bilateral youth offices in Greece and North Macedonia following the footsteps of Germany and France and the successful example of the Franco-German Youth Office (OFA).
- ▶ Grassroots campaigns.
- ▶ Youth exchanges and bilateral, trilateral and multilateral seminars, workshops, and conferences must be encouraged and supported in order to boost regional cooperation on the youth level and increase the flow of information for available educational and employment opportunities in the Balkans and the wider South-East Europe.

SECOND MEETING

Skopje (24-26 June 2022):

“Human rights, anti-discrimination and gender issues”

How can we boost cooperation between the state and civil society?

It is important to build bridges and open active channels of communication between the state institutions and the authorities and civil society based on a mutual understanding of the work and limitations of each one. The exchange of expertise and knowledge will be beneficial and create the right conditions for the state and civil society to step into where the other cannot and cooperate in succeeding in creating safe, tolerant, and diverse societies. Mutual compromises will allow the cooperation between civil society and state institutions on the protection and promotion of human rights to flourish; human rights should not be an issue of politicization for either side.

CSOs hold the state accountable and fill the gap created by the state’s lack of active engagement and that is why the strengthening of the civic and political space in all three countries needs to be supported on every level. Apart from the above, it was discussed the need for:

- ▶ A comprehensive and binding action plan; the state, alongside civil society and non-state actors need to cooperate under this action plan that will promote fundamental freedoms and the rule of law and will protect economic, social, cultural and labor rights.

How can we address the poor protection of minorities and marginalized groups?

In all three countries, significant parts of the society are alienated by the rest of the society on multiple levels. As a result, the efforts to counter discrimination in all forms and on any ground and protect marginalized individuals, groups and communities are hindered.

- ▶ Laws and safety nets must be introduced into the countries’ legislation that will safeguard the rights of every citizen, especially the right to quality education, healthcare, and housing.
- ▶ Training programs, workshops, and seminars for professionals dealing with marginalized groups and minorities must be introduced sooner than later.
- ▶ The role of civil society is critical; CSOs and NGOs have a better understanding and knowledge regarding the needs, demands, and unique characteristics of the marginalized members of our societies given the fact that a significant part of their work aims to create equal, tolerant and inclusive societies.
- ▶ Channels of communication and exchanging of ideas and know-how between the state and civil society must be created in order to ensure that the relevant institutions will utilize all the available tools in the work on protecting the ethnic, religious and social minorities.

- ▶ The scope of cooperation between the state and civil society can be expanded to joint campaigns, research and monitoring of the progress of the protection of marginalized groups.
- ▶ The establishment of a trilateral platform of advocacy can also be introduced so that CSOs can be informed and updated about changes in legislation, successful examples, and positive changes in each of the three countries while also offering advice, expertise and training on activists and CSOs working with marginalized groups.

Finally, it is vital to include in the discussions the marginalized individuals, groups and communities themselves. CSOs and individuals must be good allies and create the right environment and conditions for ethnic, religious and social minorities to represent themselves, take the floor in order to promote their demands and needs and feel empowered and allowed to express their opinions without fear of retribution.

How can we achieve higher levels of social inclusion?

Structural exclusion and discrimination hinder the societies' prosperity as a whole. Social inclusion is necessary in order to create societies that offer equal opportunities to individuals regardless of their circumstances. The civil society of the three countries must be active in lobbying, advocating, and putting pressure on the governments and decision-makers in order to ensure that access to basic services such as health care, education, housing, transport services, and employment is available to all members of the society.

- ▶ Mobilization at a grassroots level can be very successful in encouraging community participation in social, cultural and political events and everyday life in general.
- ▶ Training, seminars, exchanges, conferences, and workshops must include members of the marginalized groups of our societies. CSOs must ensure that the space which they operate is open and inclusive for everyone.
- ▶ Modifications or adaptations should be considered in order to achieve the highest levels of inclusion. Roles should be designed in such a way that they will ensure everyone's active engagement.
- ▶ Inform about the benefits and importance of social inclusion through social media campaigns, community discussions and activities.

How can we respond to the high rates of gender-based violence (GBV) and hate crimes?

One major step towards eradicating GBV as well as hate crimes is grassroots and civil society level mobilization by creating mechanisms and safety nets that will protect the vulnerable, namely older persons, persons with disabilities, adolescent girls, children, LGBTIQ+ persons, and female heads of household. Keeping in mind that victims of GBV and hate crimes usually lack the financial means to survival and do not have access to services and information. Thus, grassroots and civil society mobilization aiming towards information and awareness raising is extremely important. It is important for all actors involved to operate based on age, gender and diversity approach. Special attention should be given to the protection of motherhood and the creation of inclusive shelters for victims.

The representatives proposed the following:

- ▶ Specific programs and seminars can take place aiming towards addressing issues such as how survivors can access justice and healthcare through formal and informal mechanisms, and how they can become financially independent.
- ▶ Create safe spaces for survivors.
- ▶ Civil society can organize programs where men and boys will understand concepts like “toxic masculinity” and unlearn norms and behaviours that contribute to or condone violence. These programs can also be included in initiatives of informal education.
- ▶ Workshops and seminars from local CSOs will support women and girls to be leaders in their communities and enjoy the same benefits as men and boys. Gender norms and unequal power relations are one of the causes of GBV.
- ▶ Companies and institutions need to be legally bound to corporate social responsibility policies and code of conducts that will ensure that workplaces will become safe and tolerant places for all where diversity is respected and protected.
- ▶ Finally, SCOs need to create the right conditions, find the right tools and engage the right decision-makers and stakeholders in order to protect and empower marginalized individuals, groups and communities. Community-based protection is the key in this discussion; the seminars, programs, workshops and activities should focus on the persons of concern while involving the communities in order for them to become the force of change that will embrace the needs of all its members including the marginalized ones.

THIRD MEETING

Sofia (21-23 October 2022):

“Natural/civil environment and sustainability”

How can civil society and local authorities cooperate on the issue of sustainability?

The role of local authorities and municipalities is extremely important because they are aware of their region’s unique characteristics and can mobilize the public to support initiatives aiming towards reaching satisfactory levels of sustainability. The CSOs can provide the expertise, know-how and innovation while the local authorities can support through logistical initiatives and programs whose goal is capacity building capacity, stimulating investments, and supporting the implementation of policies focused on environmental protection, energy efficiency, and small-scale renewables.

It is suggested that:

- ▶ Civil society and local authorities can cooperate through mutual campaigning, training, and approaching local communities in order to inform them and promote the benefits of being sustainable while actively and openly supporting the transition to a circular economy and protecting and improving the quality of natural resources, including air, soil, and water among others.
- ▶ Social entrepreneurship and young businesspersons in agriculture must be supported. Training, seminars, and access to experts should be provided by local and state authorities in cooperation with CSOs. The evolution of agriculture must look to the future with respect to the needs of the environment and society, without overlooking and overpassing the older generations of farmers and agriculture workers of all kinds.
- ▶ Safeguarding policies and mechanisms need to be created in order to support populations affected by the transformation and evolution of the field.
- ▶ Vocational training, independent rights assessments and impact analysis on a grassroots and medium scale level needs to be implemented in creating the right conditions for the gradual and inclusive transition.

How can we achieve further engagement of civil society in creating sustainable and resilient societies with respect to human rights and a focus on regional cooperation?

Sustainability and human rights are interconnected and complementary to each other. CSOs need to further engage in promoting this interconnection and avoid the dissociation of the two. The process of being sustainable should also be community-centered as well as region-centered with a focus on specialization and special research and the collection and use of data that will address human rights issues as well as the SDGs. Cooperation must be multi-level. The civil society of a country needs to cooperate with the country’s authorities while also cooperating with CSOs from neighbouring countries.

It is mentioned that:

- ▶ NGOs that organize workshops, training groups, educational programs, and seminars at schools that focus on human rights must incorporate sustainability in the discussion.
- ▶ CSOs from the three countries need to put pressure on their governments to engage in regional cooperation regarding the environment and focus on how to make our region sustainable through regional cooperation.
- ▶ Bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral campaigns and increased engagement on social media and the media is necessary. During the event, it was discussed the need for a long-term platform at trilateral level that will include important information, a map of CSOs involved in the process, updates on national, regional, and European events, information and continuous updates on the most urgent needs of each country, and national good practices on grassroots, medium scale and high politics level.
- ▶ Support from the states in close cooperation with the private and business sector is more than necessary in these cases, both for legitimacy and for logistical support. Advocating and lobbying in favor of the allocation of public and private funds towards such initiatives may be a hectic process, but is vital.
- ▶ Finally, CSOs should focus on implementing bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral Erasmus+ projects focusing on human rights and aspects of sustainability and their interconnection. Youth exchanges should be encouraged and continued.

How can we incorporate recycling in our daily life?

In Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia, recycling is not popular among the average citizen. Certain initiatives that can be implemented through the cooperation between civil society and the state must be supported and promoted on all levels while being adjusted to engage and mobilize citizens regardless of their age and background.

- ▶ One idea that was discussed was “You recycle-You save the environment-You are rewarded”. Motivate people to recycle by offering them rewards for doing so. Rewarding people who recycle with deals and discounts will result in boosting recycling.
- ▶ Moreover, separate bins for recycling should be put in every neighborhood where they will be accessible to everyone. For the majority of people, if something seems inconvenient, they decide against spending time or energy to follow through. For that reason, recycling bins should be placed in areas where people gather such as parks, malls, parking lots or bus stops.
- ▶ Another recommendation by the participants was the mobilization of young people. Children are keen learners; learning to recycle at an early age will probably stick with them for the rest of their lives while their enthusiasm and engagement will probably have a positive impact on parents, friends, and relatives.
- ▶ CSOs and principals and teachers can cooperate in introducing lessons and workshops on recycling, as well as going a step further and collaborate with the students and their parents in creating green spaces on the school’s grounds.
- ▶ In addition, schools can cooperate with the local communities to provide safe access to the school’s green spaces outside of school hours. The education community together with civil society can advocate for the support of the local

authorities and the private sector to provide technical and financial support to create safe and accessible green spaces.

How can we promote agritourism?

Agritourism has been one of the fastest-rising forms of tourism over the last few years. The participants came up with certain recommendations that can mobilize and engage a greater number of people.

The organizations agreed on:

- ▶ The on-farm dining experience can be a very attractive option; not only it brings people out to rural environments, but it also provides them with high-quality meals. Farm stays promoting alternative and traditional ways of living seem very popular to people from the cities who are looking for an escape from their everyday lives. Farm stays and tours allow people to see your farm up close, ask questions, and learn how sustainable farming works while being introduced to special products as potential buyers.
- ▶ They can also host educational events such as workshops or school field trips and deliver messages about sustainability and organic farming.
- ▶ Finally, farms can offer a complete experience to the visitor, and customers are looking for the experience.

In which ways can we support, promote and implement the EU's green policies and strategies?

Boosting and integrating the implementation of the EU's policy objectives for halting and reversing loss of wildlife habitats and species across all sectors, as well as the Biodiversity Strategy objectives for 2030 is more than necessary. The long-term benefits outweigh all the financial shortcomings that will arise during the implementation process. The benefits include healthy and affordable food, fresh air, clean water, healthy soil and biodiversity, and longer-lasting products that can be repaired, recycled, and reused. Moreover, renovated, energy-efficient buildings and more public transport will be available to everyone. Finally, the European industry will be globally competitive and resilient with cleaner energy and cutting-edge clean technological innovation, while future-proof jobs and skills training for the transition will also be provided.

It was agreed that:

- ▶ Civil Society should engage in continuous and productive lobbying and advocacy in favor of the country's implementation process of the aforementioned policies and strategies.

SUGGESTED TRILATERAL ACTIVITIES

→ Joint Facebook group

The first direct action will be the creation of a joint Facebook group where participants will have the opportunity and responsibility to update partners and followers on recent trends, news, activities in tackling all issues mentioned regarding education and youth employment, human rights and sustainability.

→ Bring more CSOs and activists on board

The expansion of the trilateral network beyond the persons, NGOs and institutions that participated in the project by inviting, introducing and involving more CSOs in joint activities is encouraged and supported.

→ Podcasts and online informative sessions

A series of podcasts and online informative sessions focusing on the aforementioned issues will be created. Good practices of local businesses, formal and informal education institutions and communities from Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia will be shared hoping to inspire and engage the audience and promote regional cooperation and communication.

→ Corporate social responsibility and code of conduct

Advocacy towards businesses and stakeholders for developing internal policies of compliance is vital. Internal policies of compliance identify risks and reduce them to an acceptable level. Human rights, namely gender issues and equality, should lie at the very core of values of any workplace and business environment. Responsible and lawful conduct needs to be established in our region's corporate culture. Businesses, corporations, organizations and institutions need internal control mechanisms in order to ensure the integrity of financial statements, promote ethical values and operate with transparency.

→ City-twinning

Our countries share common geographical features (mountains, rivers, and lakes). Regional cooperation could prove to be the key to many regional issues. Thus, organizations should encourage local authorities to come closer with their similar neighbors in order to create step-by-step the right conditions for implementing actions and policies towards creating a sustainable natural environment as well as sustainable channels and bridges of regional cooperation and communication.

→ Long-term fund-oriented actions and projects

Organizations need to be willing to undertake funding actions in order to facilitate the implementation of their proposals. Some of the actions recommended include the planning of a series of trilateral campaigns focusing on the topics in hand; education and youth employment, human rights, and sustainability. The aim of these

campaigns will be to raise awareness of the issues and mobilize the citizens of the three countries, especially the youth, to reach out to their representatives and the relevant decision-makers at the local, national and regional level and demand change. An additional development that could be interconnected with the previous action as well as with every relevant action is the creation of a trilateral platform for information and advocacy on the aforementioned issues. This up-to-date platform can become the go-to source for activists, NGOs and CSOs and education institutions engaged in projects, activities, and actions on these issues with a special focus on trilateral cooperation and the ways that it can be successful and sustainable. Finally, SEE in Action will promote and engage in further cooperation in Erasmus+ Projects, or other EU-funded activities for training experts working on various sectors, raise awareness among young people and facilitate activities of local communities with particular emphasis on the aspect of regional multi-level cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The targeted policy recommendations were the most integral part of the work of the participants in the three meetings that took place. The policy recommendations work on multiple levels (grassroots, medium scale and high policy level) and towards different stakeholders. The focus of the participants was equally on addressing specific issues on a national level as well as on a regional level, with emphasis on building bridges and channels of cooperation and communication between the alienated youth of Greece, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia. The dissemination of the results and policy recommendations of this project will be implemented by SEE in Action's network of partners and associates.

The project “Strengthening bonds between alienated neighbors in the region: Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia” was made possible with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. Views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

