



**TALKING POINTS of the SECRETARY GENERAL of the
REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL (RCC)**

**Closing Panel of Kick Off event of Youth Policy Lab on Mental
Health**

10 December 2021

Dear Miljana and Egzona,

Dear participants, policy makers,

I am very happy to see that as of yesterday the RCC turned on a green light on mental health.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, children and youth were already carrying the burden of mental health conditions without significant investment in addressing them, but the pandemic worsened the situation.

Depression, anxiety, behaviour disorders affect more young people today than two years ago.

Worldwide, at least 13% of people between the ages of 10 and 19 live with a diagnosed mental-health disorder, according to the latest [*State of the World's Children report*](#), published this week by the United Nations children's charity UNICEF.

The Western Balkans is lacking a comprehensive survey of mental health but figures we received from the first round of data collection as part of our Balkan Barometer are concerning.

But one might legitimately ask:

Why did the RCC decided to engage itself on mental health topic through its Youth Lab project?

Everybody knows our primary focus and role is on the socio-economic wellbeing and development of these policies in this region.

Exactly. For us mental health is a policy issue. Western Balkans is not a rich area, we live in developing economies and developing economies do not make mental health a policy priority.

Another reason is youth unemployment. Youth unemployment is an inhibitor of development, but still we do not see how mental illness results and affects the workforce participation, we don't calculate the economic impact of mental and behavioural disorders, or the high economic

burden of the healthcare system that has to provide services for the ones facing mental problems.

Again, we do not calculate how the social conditions of unemployed and uncertainty on what future youth is about to have arouses stress, leads to mental health problems and impacts the economy. Statistics tell us that **two thirds of young people would be willing to emigrate**; that the **total education costs of people who leave the region in one year vary from 840 million to 2.46 billion EUR**; and that **about one fifth are unemployed and nearly a quarter are neither in employment, nor in education or training**.

But figures are more than simple numbers.

They are real-life, everyday experiences which young people face.

Social media keeps promoting the strong, beautiful, rich, even the bullies, but does not provide coping mechanisms, interpersonal skills or ‘psychological distancing’ (that is, encouraging a person to adopt an objective perspective on negative thoughts and feelings).

But why focus on mental health and youth?

Is youth the only social category impacted by mental health challenges?

Certainly not. Adults are no doubt experiencing their own challenges right now.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that the period from age 12 to 25 remains a critical time of brain development and maturation.

Both the experiences our young people face now and the support they receive from us in coping with and navigating these challenges will have profound impacts on their abilities to be successful adults, parents, and citizens for years to come.

The comprehensive transformation of the region cannot take place without youth. If we risk wasting their potential, we are risking the engine of a sustainable regional future.

Around the same time the pandemic kicked in, we rolled up our sleeves and started working on youth labs. Over the last year youth and policy-makers tackled the issue of youth unemployment and successfully co-created initiatives to be beneficial for our young women and men.

It was in consultations with young people that youth mental health was flagged as a policy topic requiring urgent attention.

With the Kick-off of the Second Youth Policy Lab we are looking forward to making the first steps toward bridging the gap between the youth mental health needs and the policy solutions. **I congratulate all participants on the regional recommendations that were prepared, and look forward to seeing a number of them come to life in our six economies.**

Before I leave. I have been working with youth and young people from the first days of my professional life. For some time I was even part of a psychological support counselling team working with traumatised people.

After so many years, I will humbly allow myself to say that leaders and policy makers need to address the situation of mental health across the countries. From increasing investments to using their voices, your voices to promote early mental health screenings and interventions, resiliency and wellness efforts.

What we started and enabled these days makes me think than educating youth about the value of good health, social connection, supporting informal dialogue through shared activities and buddy networks, or in more formal check-in structures through schools, and other networks, increasing awareness of online tools, whether websites or apps, for support and connection for mental health and well-being, offering more individual and group mental health services at schools or bringing additional mental health providers onto campuses and schools to provide screenings, interventions, and referrals, are all of great importance.

We should also help our youth navigate the sometimes challenging process of seeking and accessing mental health care.

Said this, I would like to thank Ognjen and his team for sharing the essence of key regional recommendations co-created yesterday. Kudos to all – 13 of them is to be proud of!

I wish you the best of success and look forward to seeing the first results at the mid-term Conference to be held in June 2022. In the meantime, a lot of work is on your shoulders, but bear in mind that you are the ones working for the benefit of our region.

I would like to **thank the European Commission for their support, as well as our partners in the region** for working with us in amplifying the voices of youth in the Western Balkans and beyond.

And do not forget. Mental illness is human. Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable.