WFD case study: Rallying a coalition for change to tackle issues of youth emigration in Serbia

Executive summary:
Youth emigration is a serious concern in Serbia with more than 60% of young people think about emigrating. This human outflow could potentially have a huge economic and social impact for the country. The establishment of a coalition for change rallying government representatives, businesses, education and civil society actors and an important study on the cost on youth emigration, supported by WFD, led to raising awareness on the issue, the inclusion of the cost of youth emigration in the proposal of the government’s Strategy on Economic Migration of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021-27 and the establishing a new and sustainable structures, such as the ‘Returning Point” program.

Context:
Serbia has one of the highest youth emigration levels in the Balkan region, and while the main reasons for leaving are economic, there is a definite correlation with political engagement as the same number which want to leave also expressed no interest in politics. If levels of youth emigration are not addressed urgently then the economic impact will be felt across Serbia. According to a WFD study on youth emigration, the cost to Serbia is estimated to between €1 billion and €1.2 billion. To put this in perspective, profits from exporting information communication services in 2018 were around €1.1 billion.

Youth emigration can be a divisive issue which is weaponised by politicians to level accusations against political opponents. In the minds of many, emigration of youth is linked to lack of economic and political opportunities and corruption of the political elites. However, it can also act as a connector because all major political actors agree on the urgency of addressing it.

WFD program in Serbia has been focusing on the issues of political alienation and youth emigration since 2018 and has aimed at putting these at the top of the political agenda in the country. WFD’s focus was to fill in the gap when it comes to reliable and available data and evidence on the issue of emigration and encouraging the key stakeholders to meet, coordinate and act together on some the most burning issues.

What’s changed?
Encouraging government, parliament and businesses to think about ways to actively include young people is a starting point. In order to sensitize policy makers to this issue, WFD conducted a study research on the Cost of Youth Emigration, which provided new evidence for the societal and political debate on the topic. The evidence laid out in the research attracted the attention of policy makers as well as other important stakeholders, such as political parties, donors, the academia and business community. It attracted over 50 media reports, including several TV and radio shows.

As a result, the research on the cost of youth emigration was included in the proposal of the government’s Strategy on Economic Migration of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021-27; thereby contribution directly to enhancing evidence-based policy-making in this area.

---

WFD latest research (published in May 2020) shows very high level of distrust among the Serbian citizens in the democratic process in the country. The report sets out respondents’ views and the values of Serbian citizens before focusing on the issues of trust in institutions and politicians, political alienation, as well as motives for and causes of an increasingly conspicuous trend of young people’s departure from Serbia. While 80 percent believe that voting will not change the situation in Serbia and 60 percent of the surveyed citizens do not trust any politician in the country, data shows that more than 64.5% percent of young respondents said they occasionally or more seriously consider leaving the country.

The increasing interest in the problem of youth emigration has led to a demand from relevant government institutions for more data, including from the Prime Minister, who has been highly engaged on this topic. Following this request for more data, WFD initiated additional policy studies on three issues of main concern: 1) mapping and analysing existing migration strategies and policies, 2) encouraging employment and start-up programmes for 20-35 year olds, 3) promotion of circular migration and contribution of diaspora to economic development in Serbia. The findings were used to formulating recommendations to reduce inconsistency and develop a more strategic and inter-sectoral approach to youth emigration.

As a result of these awareness raising efforts, WFD supported and facilitated the establishment a coalition for change from more than five different sectors to work on the issue of youth emigration. This coalition has been rallying government representatives, businesses, education and civil society actors to enable policies that provide a better life for young people. The coalition adopted a joint statement expressing their readiness to work on the problem together and reported on a significant number of proposals for activities, research, policymaking and visibility.

The coalition has also contributed to the establishment of new and sustainable structures such as the ‘Returning Point (Tačka povratka) program. The program currently delivers several projects in coordination with Prime Minister’s cabinet, relevant ministries, businesses, and local and international partners. It has already proved its relevance when, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it issued a call for diaspora health workers to return to Serbia to help deal with the crisis and navigated numerous requests from diaspora on their way back to Serbia. The Returning Point team also launched a campaign Work from home, participated in the process of Mapping of Serbian diaspora, initiated several key policy measures, and designed several guidebooks for diaspora. The program is expected to formally register by the end of 2021.

In December 2020, WFD team presented its work on the issues of youth emigration and circular migrations to the MPs of the Serbian Parliament and connect with the members of the Committee on diaspora and Serbs in the region.

**WFD approach to support coalitions for change:**

Coalitions for change are informal ways to gather support to bring about policy changes through existing governance structures. Understanding how to engage with different parliamentary committees, networks and debated through which political parties influence decisions made by those representing them in parliament, is therefore critical to influencing how these policy changes can occur. Coalitions for change are powerful tools that harness the power of individuals and civil society to become change agents and forge alliances. They use different strategies, such as advocacy to influence decision makers directly and campaigning to mobilize the public opinion by influencing their attitudes and behaviours, which in turn might exert influence over decision makers.

The case study of Serbia shows that coalitions for change are effective in advocating for particular policy issues. This assumption can also be made in other counties in the Western
In Montenegro, the coalition of youth from civil society and political parties is quite effective at discussing the political participation of young people and challenging the parties to be more open and accessible. In North Macedonia, the coalition on PWD rights successfully advocated for changes in political party communications practices. Due to this advocacy, almost all political parties have adopted the use of sign language during their press conferences and are in the process of redesigning their web sites.

Facilitating the creation of coalitions for change in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, has led to important results. Establishing coalitions for change that provide topic-driven platforms function much better than general issue ones as discussions on specific policy initiatives are likely to lead to results than more general discussions on women, youth and people with disabilities.