

## **House of Commons**

### **Foreign Affairs Select Committee**

#### **The Western Balkans inquiry**

##### **Written evidence from the British Council**

**11 June 2018**

1. Why does the region matter to the UK
2. What is the UK already doing?
3. What are the opportunities in the region for the UK long-term?

##### **Summary**

- Stability, security and prosperity have been the UK's key policy objectives for the Western Balkans. As these overarching goals can be achieved through the EU accession process, HMG has been supporting, and should continue to support the reform agenda and the EU accession path of the region. Commitments have been made at a high level on both sides that Brexit will not affect the UK's relationship with the region.
- The UK can support the Berlin Process long-term by reforming institutions in the region by working with governments and civil servants, by empowering young people across the region, and by creating opportunities for young people through entrepreneurship, developing digital skills, and supporting systemic educational reform. The focus on young people is crucial for long term stability and prosperity of the region as demonstrated by the recently implemented Enhancing Stability and Prosperity in Western Balkans programme which has developed recommendations for the Civil Society and Youth Forum at the upcoming London Summit.
- The British Council, as a cornerstone of the UK's soft power with a 77 year history in the region, permanent offices in all six countries in the Western Balkans, and extensive track record of implementation of both FCO and EU projects in different sector areas, is well positioned to implement further initiatives that both improve the stability and prosperity of the region and bolster the UK's influence. Across the Western Balkans we support governments on the reform agenda, digital transformation of the economy, and professionalisation of the civil service, and we give individuals the skills they need for a prosperous future. As a result of such cross-sector activity we have established close relationships with key government and civil society stakeholders.

## 1. Why does the region matter to UK?

1.1 Since the end of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the UK has been one of the leading contributors to peace building in the region, investing significant efforts over the past three decades in reforms and post-conflict resolution, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo. Consequently, the UK has established strong long-term ties and partnerships across the region with governments, as well as civil society and the private sector.

1.2 The region is experiencing a new phase of instability, with backsliding democracy, shrinking of the political and civil society space and state capture felt across the region<sup>1</sup>, coupled with frequent bilateral tensions and the rise of nationalism. All countries in the region are experiencing high levels of corruption and increasing levels of poverty. Youth unemployment is at one of the highest levels in the world. If the UK were to reduce engagement with the region this would pose an additional threat to its stability.

1.3 Violent extremism is high on the security agenda. From 2012, chains of security incidents in BiH, Kosovo and Macedonia took place and more than 1,000 foreign fighters from the region departed for Syrian and Iraqi battlefields. Though the governments have amended their counter-terrorism legislation, radicalization remains an area of concern.

1.4 The Extremism Research Forum, a project in which the British Council is working closely with the UK Government and HM Embassies, seeks to inform the development of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policies and programming, by understanding of the size of extremist threats emanating from the region, and offering relevant findings to practitioners and policymakers.

1.5 The UK's presence is particularly needed at the time of growing influence of other foreign powers and a mushrooming of influence in the region by Russia, Turkey, the Gulf States, Iran, and China, which are seen by some as seeking to stall EU and NATO accession and undermine democratic transitions of countries in the region.<sup>2</sup>

1.6 In addition to its strategic importance, the region should remain a priority because Euro-Atlantic integration is a long-term strategic goal of all of the 6 countries (Albania and Montenegro are already NATO members and all 6 of the countries are undergoing the EU accession process). This offers opportunities to engage and mobilize UK institutions, organisations and companies which are in demand in the region and can make a positive impact, whilst also promoting wider UK influence and relationships.

1.7 Across the region, the UK is respected for its parliamentary systems, rule of law, creative industries – including music and film - and digital skills. The UK also has a role to play in the security agenda, supporting alternative pathways for young people to reduce their risk of radicalisation. If the UK were to no longer be a partner in the EU accession process, this could result in the UK voice becoming less prominent in the region. One way to overcome this is to continue engaging both on national as well as regional level with issues that could benefit from sharing of the UK expertise.

1.8 Accordingly, the UK has already firmly demonstrated that it intends to keep strong relationships in the region. In May 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May's visit to Macedonia was a first visit to the Western Balkans by a serving UK Prime Minister since 1999. In her speech, the Prime Minister underlined the UK's unconditional commitment to strengthening democracy and supporting progress on negotiations with Greece on the Macedonia naming dispute. During the EU's Western Balkans

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<sup>1</sup> Bertelsmann Transformation Index places the countries in the categories of defective or strongly defective democracies, Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Preliminary findings from the Extremism Research Forum. Six country research reports and regional overview will be publically available in July 2018.

summit in Sofia, the Prime Minister restated the UK's desire to work with European allies in promoting greater stability, security and prosperity across the region. Before this, in 2016 and 2017 the Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson visited Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia, reiterating the UK's unwavering support for these countries and urging the political leaders to implement urgent socio-economic reforms. He also called for continued talks within the EU-facilitated Dialogue on the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. During each visit it was stressed how important it is for any security agenda to embrace the rule of law, democracy and human rights. In line with stated commitments, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has allocated additional funds to Western Balkan countries, which underlines the strategic importance of the region to the UK.

## **2. What is the UK already doing?**

2.1 The UK has invested substantive funds over the past three decades in reform and post-conflict resolution in the Western Balkans. However, we will limit this answer to cover the work of the British Council, which not only demonstrates results in sector areas relevant for the EU accession such as youth empowerment, digital skills, regional cooperation, public administration reform and justice reform, but also ensures collaboration with UK expertise and builds greater trust in the UK.

### ***Recent achievements in area of youth empowerment, employability and digital skills***

2.2 The Western Balkan countries face a range of challenges, culminating in a common set of issues which can be addressed through improved economic growth opportunities, especially for young people. The problem of "jobless growth" - a gap between job creation and the number of people seeking employment- has risen dramatically and the average unemployment rate in the region is 25 per cent.<sup>3</sup> The labour market is suffering from a severe skills mismatch, and six countries register some of the highest youth unemployment rates globally (BiH is ranked as number one with 62.8 per cent, Macedonia as fourth with 53.1 per cent, Serbia as seventh with 49.9 per cent and Montenegro as eleventh with 41.1 per cent<sup>4</sup>). However, in Serbia in particular there is evidence of empty positions that employers are unable to fill positions needing digital skills.

2.3 As a result of limited job prospects and the lack of accountability of state authorities, young people feel isolated and frustrated and are in danger of radicalisation<sup>5</sup>. To counteract such a trend, the British Council's recent regional project Enhancing Stability and Prosperity in Western Balkans, funded by the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) and implemented in 2017/2018, had a two-fold focus: Active Citizens, a youth led community engagement programme, which spans the six countries in the region; and the Digital Cities project, which aims to enhance the region's digital capability by connecting UK tech start-ups, digital and creative hubs and digital micros with the region.

2.4 Active Citizens seeks to empower young people to take an active role in the society by giving them the skills to secure a better future. 35 civil society representatives from 6 countries were trained and later carried out cascade training in 20 communities, training 509 young people to become new leaders in their communities. Policy events were organised in 20 communities where representatives of local authorities, CSOs, and representatives of HM Embassies developed recommendations to shape the delivery of a new programme in the area of youth participation and employment. A further 18 social action projects will be implemented in the second half of 2018, which strengthen the base of existing community-led social development projects supported by the British Council.

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<sup>3</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly Economics and Security Committee (ESC) Draft Report [074 ESCTD 17 E] by Richard Benyon (United Kingdom) – An Assessment of the Economic Transition in the Western Balkans. April 2017. Available at: <http://www.natopa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=4517>

<sup>4</sup> US Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, 2016

<sup>5</sup> Preliminary findings from the Extremism Research Forum. Six country research reports and regional overview will be publically available in July 2018.

2.5 In March 2018, a Western Balkans Youth Conference was organized by the British Council in Pristina, in cooperation with the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), a flagship initiative of the Berlin process, where representatives from 65 different youth organisations and CSOs, as well as FCO and EC representatives discussed concrete recommendations to feed into London summit. Some of the CSOs will be present at the Civil Society and Youth Forum of the London Summit.

2.6 Digital Cities, which the British Council implemented in partnership with Creative England and Culture Code has brought together 226 professionals from 41 cities, 22 from Western Balkan countries and 19 from the UK through policy dialogue, skills development, city to city links, business to business collaboration projects, and a mobility scheme.

2.7 An evaluation of the region showed that city administrations in the 22 Western Balkan cities participating in the programme did not have digital policies prior to the programme and were interested in putting them in place. The UK has extensive expertise in this area which gave an opportunity for collaboration. A peer-to-peer network across the region was initiated, resulting in mobility and exchange of knowledge beyond the scope of the project. The British Council worked on developing entrepreneurial skills and developing international hub partnerships, complementing other efforts leading up to the London Summit to increase partnership, links and trade between the UK and the Western Balkans with a focus on digital sector growth.

2.8 In 2017, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools, a flagship initiative of the British Council developed in partnership with ministries of education of the Western Balkans and the Micro:bit Foundation improved the digital literacy and coding skills of 22,972 pupils aged 10-14 at 60 public primary schools in the region. In addition, we provided 450 teachers in 60 schools with training on teaching core skills and digital literacy and distributed 18,000 micro:bit devices.

### ***Recent achievements in public administration reform, regional cooperation, judicial reform and education***

2.9 Regional cooperation in public administration as well as in other sectors remains an important aspect of the EU accession process. In 2016 the European Commission, within the Berlin Process and the EU Connectivity Agenda for the Western Balkans launched a pilot project called 'EU Scheme for Young Professionals in the Western Balkans'. Implemented by the British Council, the project included training for thirty young civil servants from 6 countries split between The College of Europe in Belgium and Sciences Po in France, with an exchange element. As part of the exchange component, participants could share good practice in terms of reconciliation efforts in the region. The pilot had a positive impact on two cornerstones of the EU accession process in the Western Balkans – public administration reform and regional cooperation, and following the presentation of results at the 2017 Trieste Summit, the decision was made to extend the project for two more years.

2.10 In Montenegro, the UK is currently the leading international partner when it comes to capacity building in the public administration sector, which is one of three major pillars of social and economic reform in the region. The British Council has successfully implemented the UK funded project ProAccession which provided capacity building to civil servants who are involved in the EU negotiation process through a specifically designed training programme and has developed extensive local knowledge and networks. Since 2011, strengthening the capacities of civil servants has been a prominent aspect of our work in Kosovo, where we have been managing the Young Cell Scheme project, which builds a professional, accountable and apolitical civil service by supporting public administration reform through a Masters Scholarship programme for over 150 participants, creating an alumni network of highly professional civil servants.

2.11 Ten of the British Council's projects which were competitively awarded £12 million from EU pre-accession funds implemented from 2015 onwards have created tangible impact in the region across different sectors, particularly in the judiciary. In Serbia, within the Judicial Efficiency project, the British Council's work has helped to resolve a chronic backlog of 750,000 old enforcement cases in 30 courts. Our novel approach was to deploy non-expert assistance to deal with the backlog. Working

with Court staff, this innovative approach enabled 965,239 cases to be closed during the life of the programme, which was one of the priorities under the EU Accession Chapter 23. Another justice project, Judicial Academy, succeeded in bringing the Serbian judiciary closer to the European Convention of Human Rights through the establishment of a network of 30 judges and prosecutors specialized in the European Convention on Human Rights. A series of capacity building activities took place, including creating methodologies for improving the expertise knowledge of judges. Over 2,300 judges, prosecutors, deputy prosecutors, judicial and prosecutorial assistants and police officers were trained.

2.12 In the education sector, we successfully completed 3 IPA national scale reform projects in BiH, Macedonia and Montenegro during 2017. These were aimed at modernising education systems to respond to labour market requirements and improving Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools' syllabi through developing new occupational and qualification standards, and modular curricula. This included conducting a series of teacher trainings on the new VET courses.

2.13 The use of new technologies in teaching and learning has become an imperative in the delivery of education services. Last year 6,000 people attended the British Council's NewTech in Education conference and fair including 50 exhibitors from across the globe, including UK and Western Balkan tech companies. The regional conference provides professional development opportunities for teachers and school principals and provides opportunities for policy dialogue on advancing the digital agenda in education.

### **3. What are the opportunities in the region for the UK long-term?**

3.1 As we work across a range of sectors across the region the British Council is able to identify plenty of opportunities for the UK to engage with the region. Taking a leading role now will secure important relationships and opportunities for the future. Long term opportunities should build on some of the current initiatives described above to support the Western Balkans path to EU membership.

3.2 Weak institutions are a key risk factor for instability in the region, and the UK can share expertise of its world-renowned institutions. Over the past 10 years the British Council has worked closely with the six governments in numerous policy areas, both in individual countries, as well as on regional level. Several years of experience of capacity building with civil servants as well as leading in policy formulation processes have enabled us to have close relations with individual line ministries. Our continuing work in public administration and justice reform impacts significantly on the stability and prosperity of the region and the UK's influence and standing in the region.

3.3 The British Council has initiated a unique platform for collaboration where it is possible to bring stakeholders from different backgrounds and sectors together around the digital, creative industries and education agendas. Last year, the British Council reached 8 million people across the Western Balkans. With permanent offices all six countries, dating back to 1940 when we opened the Belgrade office, and extensive networks of partners and contacts, we are uniquely positioned to further assist in growing UK's profile by driving innovation and creating a demand for the UK expertise. These assets are important to factor in when considering how the UK can play a prominent role in comprehensive reform projects after Brexit.

3.4 Given the need for 21<sup>st</sup> skills, the UK should continue investing in digital skills as this has proved invaluable for youth employment and could have huge potential in terms of the future engagement between the Western Balkans and the UK. In mid to long run, this could help contribute to closing the skills gap in the information technologies sector, which is another important policy concern of the six governments. The UK can also provide expertise in entrepreneurship to give young people the skills to create opportunities for themselves and support wider economic growth as well as develop the creative industries in the Western Balkans. Developing the capacities of hubs, start-ups and small to medium enterprises working in the creative industries, technology and education in the Western

Balkans, along with the sharing of UK expertise in the creation of sustainable business models has the potential to have a positive impact on prosperity in the region.

3.5 Security remains a high concern in the region, and the UK should play a part in the response. The regional research hub established under the Extremism Research Forum has significant analytical expertise across the six countries, and should be further utilized and reinforced to map out broader security concerns and the shifting threats. This way national, regional, UK and EU decision makers would be provided with a strong evidence base for the development of effective policies countering radicalisation and strengthening resilience.