

Evaluation Report 2025 • Executive Summary

Serbia/ Western Balkans

Giving young people a voice:
Innovative digital media in the Western Balkans

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Background

DW Akademie's project on media for children and youth in the Western Balkans, currently in its third phase, runs from 2023 to 2025 and is financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). In this phase, the project collaborates with four partners: Asocijacija medija (AsMedi), representing mainly nationwide media houses in Serbia; Lokal Pres, which unites local Serbian media outlets outside of Belgrade; KOMS, a network of over 100 youth organizations, and the Youth Media Network, newly established with the support of DW Akademie. The Young Media project is within the framework of DW Akademie's regional Eastern Europe programme, which focuses on

tackling disinformation. In parallel to the BMZ-funded Young Media project, DW Akademie currently implements two other projects in the Western Balkans.

The goal of the Young Media project is to establish quality journalism for and with young people, improve the viability of media and build up a (regional) community. The expected outcome is: "Young media professionals strengthen the resilience of media for children and youth through a regional network." It has three associated outputs.

The evaluators analyzed relevant project documents provided by the DW Akademie team. These included

administrative documents, and a small number of materials related to the outputs of the DW Akademie projects. The lead evaluator attended the Brave New Media Forum (BNMF) in Belgrade on November 1–2, 2024. She also participated as an observer in a meeting of the Young Media Network, held on the sidelines of the BNMF. During a field trip to Serbia (Belgrade, Kragujevac and Novi Sad) from February 11–14, 2025, the evaluator spoke directly with young people, representatives of partner organizations and media outlets, and DW Akademie project staff, and visited the premises of partner organizations. Evaluators held 27 evaluation interviews in total and conducted an online survey with the target group of young people. The survey response rate was low: From a target group of around 150 invited respondents, a total of 18 responses were received, of which 16 were valid.

Evaluation results

Relevance

A lack of active involvement of young people in the media space remains a core challenge in the Western Balkans, which underscores the relevance of pursuing the Young Media project objective in the future. The focus of the project on youth and media engaging with young people is widely supported in the region, now even more so, in light of the student protests in Serbia which started on November 1, 2024. While the Young Media project successfully reached out to youth not only in the capital,

but also beyond, more could be done to actively engage disadvantaged youth such as minorities or people with disabilities. The partner organizations and the project team did well in empowering young people and could further enhance impact by involving youth more actively in decision-making processes. The assessment of the relevance criterion is "overall fulfilled."

Coherence

DW Akademie has effectively leveraged synergies between

the Young Media project and the two other projects, which are implemented in parallel together with GIZ, Internews and with the Goethe Institute in the Western Balkans. One of the key synergies is that the projects can draw on a common pool of consultants, trainers and organizations who have been identified, trained and recommended by the Young Media project over the past decade, while the participants in the pool have opportunities to apply their newly acquired skills. Staffing synergies across the three DW Akademie projects in the Western Balkans have strengthened diversity, coherence, continuity and transfer of good practice. Over the past years, the Young Media project has also built-up good cooperation with other donors and media development

actors. The best example of such successful collaboration is the annual conference BNMF, which plays a central role in facilitating exchange, networking and innovation. The assessment of the coherence criterion is “overall fulfilled.”

Effectiveness

The Young Media project’s objectives and corresponding indicators, as set up in the project proposal and log frame, are primarily linked to the Young Media Network (YMN). Since the YMN has not been functioning effectively, the project objectives, in a strict sense, have only been met to a very limited extent. After an outburst of positive energy in the beginning that led to the formal founding of the network in 2023, its performance and popularity declined. Its practical implementation has floundered, with its service catalogue and activities covering only part of what was agreed upon in its financing contracts with DW Akademie. The range of activities implemented under the Young Media project go significantly beyond those of the YMN. The most successful feature of the Young Media project that contributes to its effectiveness is the “cascading” setup of identifying, training and involving young people through a series of initiatives (e.g., in the annual Mediamocracy camps and culminating in the three-year Multipliers Programme). The assessment of the effectiveness criterion is “partially fulfilled.”

Efficiency

One program director, three part-time projects assistants in Germany and four part-time local staff members in Serbia work for the BMZ-financed Young Media project. A large part of their working time is spent on financial management and the organization of the BNMF. The project has made minimal use of digital tools for project management, capacity development

and cooperation. Establishing a structured knowledge management system to document training materials and formats would ensure consistency, continuity and scalability by making existing formats and training easily accessible for others to use or adapt. The collaboration with the partners is formally implemented primarily through annual grant contracts, with administrative processes that were criticized as rigid and discontinuous. The assessment of the efficiency criterion is “partially fulfilled.”

Impact

The evaluation has found a strong impact on the target group of young people. Project beneficiaries were very pleased with the training and practical professional development opportunities. Many describe the experience as life-changing, influencing not only their professional, but also personal development. The project’s attitude has been carried forward by target groups, promoting values such as individual dignity, critical thinking, creativity, pluralism, diversity, and responsible action. As a result, there are plausible contributions to higher-level development outcomes as evident in the media coverage of student protests. Target groups have a more effective capacity to communicate advocacy efforts on youth issues. Impact at the partner organization level was more prominent during the project’s first two phases. The BNMF format, in particular, provides a platform for exchange, upscaling, and innovation at the organizational level. The assessment of the impact criterion is “comprehensively fulfilled.”

Sustainability

The individual impact on target groups’ personal and professional development fosters a community of like-minded individuals who engage

with media and civic initiatives and defend democratic values. Some multipliers and trained young people are now working as newspaper editors, journalists or at university departments, which further ensures knowledge transfer. On the one hand, the choice of the four associations as partner organizations is very good for identifying and supporting young journalists and young activists via their members and through personal contact, including beyond the capital. On the other hand, associations often face their own funding challenges, which by default creates a sustainability issue. The current phase of the project was designed with sustainability anchored in the YMN, which appeared a plausible approach when the project application was developed but now engenders a significant risk. The challenge of how to provide continuous capacity development as a new cohort comes of age and how to provide continuous training to adapt to new external challenges and technologies is not solved. The assessment of the sustainability criterion is “partially fulfilled.”

Selected lessons learned

1. Youth empowerment requires stimulation of active involvement and decision-making power.
2. In-person events play a crucial role for exchange and innovation.
3. Solutions to connect a community beyond donor-financed activities must be found.
4. Network development needs organizational support.
5. Digital tools can enhance project management, capacity development and collaboration.
6. Projects that target individuals can have broader societal impact.

Selected recommendations

1. DW Akademie and its partner organizations should keep the focus on youth and make efforts to broaden the diversity of backgrounds of children and young people, as is already being done successfully in the BNMF.
2. DW Akademie and its partner organizations should continue empowering young participants by not only involving them, but by giving them more control and responsibilities over the design, implementation and assessment of truly youth-led activities and collaboration.
3. DW Akademie and its partner organizations should engage, connect and stimulate the Young Media community in a more continuous way.
4. The Young Media Network needs organizational development support during the remaining project phase.
5. DW Akademie should reconsider the project management and team structure and division of tasks to make better and more continuous use of valuable resources within the Young Media team.
6. The Young Media project should extend outreach beyond the closed circle of partners.
7. DW Akademie headquarters should streamline project management processes that allow better knowledge sharing.

DW Akademie

is Deutsche Welle's center for international media development, journalism training and knowledge transfer. Our projects strengthen the human right to freedom of expression and unhindered access to information. DW Akademie empowers people worldwide to make independent decisions based on reliable facts and constructive dialogue.

DW Akademie is a strategic partner of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. We also receive funding from the Federal Foreign Office and the European Union and are active in around 60 developing countries and emerging economies.

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