



European Economic
and Social Committee

OPINION

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Youth Policy in the Western Balkans, as part of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans

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(own-initiative opinion)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 Acknowledging the progress in developing sound youth policy frameworks, the EESC invites Governments of the Western Balkan partners to further invest in evidence-based youth policies addressing youth development challenges. In order to ensure successful sustainable development in local communities, the EESC believes it is crucial that institutional, programme and policy developments are grounded in young people's views on human development. Furthermore, the EESC is convinced that sufficient and transparent budget allocations for youth policy development are a prerequisite for facilitating positive changes and improving the situation of young people.
- 1.2 The EESC invites Western Balkans national governments to follow key youth policy documents of the European Union (EU), to further develop national youth policies and to enable young people to participate in the design of policies.
- 1.3 The EESC believes that systematically collected high-quality youth sensitive data are a prerequisite for informed policies and support measures for young people, especially vulnerable groups of young people. In particular, the system for collecting and processing data related to the social dimension of youth participation needs to be significantly improved¹.
- 1.4 In addressing the fight against poverty and improving the quality of education, the EESC is of the view that it is key to involve social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs) in order to deliver a broader reform to improve social rights and the prospects of young people. Social partners and other CSOs should have a greater role in the dialogue on social and economic reforms. Direct support from the EU should ensure the views of social partners and CSOs are taken into account.
- 1.5 The EESC calls for the reinforcing of EU programmes and regional structures, with the aim of reaching more young people in the Western Balkans by providing them with the opportunities for education, mobility, volunteering and employment.
- 1.6 The EESC calls for a stronger focus on vocational education and training, by combining apprenticeship schemes with academic learning at secondary and tertiary level. The Committee believes that close collaboration between education and training policy and the business community must be enhanced and focus should be placed more on competences than qualifications.
- 1.7 The EESC welcomes the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans, calling for the improvement of labour market participation, especially of young people and women, disadvantaged groups and minorities, in particular Roma. The implementation of the EIP should maximise the benefit for young people.

¹ [Youth Participation Index for 2020, Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation](#), page 31.

- 1.8 The EESC calls for the Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans to be implemented following the Council recommendations on a reinforced Youth Guarantee².
- 1.9 In order to implement a Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans, the EESC calls for increasing the capacities of the public employment services (PES) and their staff in the countries of the region.
- 1.10 The EESC draws attention to the importance of cooperation between various partners to address the issue of youth unemployment. Partnerships should be established across all levels of government, between Youth Guarantee providers and relevant stakeholders, such as social partners, educational and training institutions, youth organisations and other CSOs.
- 1.11 The EESC believes that attention and support should be given to the capacity building of social partners and the development of social dialogue and collective bargaining in order to mitigate precarious working conditions and improve the quality of jobs. The EESC also calls on the social partners of the Western Balkans, at national and sectoral level, to actively involve young people in all their activities, including collective bargaining.
- 1.12 Taking into account the possibilities of the European Year of Youth proclaimed for 2022, the EESC is convinced that addressing the challenges facing young people and bringing Europe closer to young people should be an approach not limited only to young people living in the EU; it should also apply to young people from all Western Balkans partners.
- 1.13 The EESC encourages the EU and our partners from the Western Balkans, in line with the EU Youth Strategy, to introduce a youth impact assessment tool, so-called Youth Test. This Youth Test would ensure that young people are considered during policy-making processes, it would enable to create better targeted policies and to identify any mitigation measures necessary to avoid negative impact on young people.
- 1.14 The EESC believes that efforts are required from the Governments of Western Balkan partners in setting regional cooperation as a policy priority. In supporting this transformation and advancing regional cooperation as a policy priority, the EU should support the Western Balkans in identifying key areas and avenues which could foster changes for citizens of all Western Balkans, especially for young people.
- 1.15 The Conclusions of the 2021 Western Balkans Summit in Berlin of the Berlin Process³ underline the need for strengthening youth organisations and networks. The EESC invites the European Commission to further examine ways to support relevant youth structures e.g. national youth councils and youth umbrella organisations in the Western Balkans, on a regional level, allowing for regional youth policy dialogue.

² [Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee OJ 2020/C 372/01, 4.11.2020.](#)

³ [Western Balkans Summit of the Berlin Process, Berlin Summit 2021, chair's Conclusion.](#)

- 1.16 The EESC believes that further efforts to strengthen the political education and representation of young people are needed, both through mainstream politics and through youth structures e.g. national youth councils, local or municipal councils. The EESC therefore invites the institutions of the EU to further support the Western Balkans in improving youth participation.
- 1.17 The EESC welcomes the fact that the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans envisages further actions to support their involvement in all EU's programmes covering research, innovation, education, culture, youth and sport. Taking into account the positive correlation of educational or training mobility with the civic and political engagement of young people, further efforts in this regard may lead to the advancement of youth participation and engagement.
- 1.18 The EESC reiterates the importance of young people for the future of the Western Balkans and therefore the importance of taking concrete measures to turn the region into a place with future prospects and opportunities for young people, enabling them to stay and prosper⁴. Timely involvement of young people in the design and implementation of social and political changes is extremely important.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 According to Eurostat⁵, the total youth population in the Western Balkans is around 3.6 million, which makes up approximately 21% of the total population. Kosovo^{*6} has the highest share of youth in the total population (26.29%), followed by Albania (23.4%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (20.37%) and North Macedonia (20.32%), Montenegro (19.49%) and Serbia (16.8%). The ratio of men and women in the youth population is similar in all Western Balkan partners, with the male youth population being slightly larger – 51.16% of the youth population are men and 48.84% are women in the Western Balkans⁷.
- 2.2 Western Balkan partners have made considerable progress in terms of further establishing and consolidating their youth policy framework, by adopting relevant laws, strategies, and action plans. However, a fully functional youth system that ensures effective youth empowerment, engagement and participation in decision-making has yet to be developed. There are various weaknesses ranging from wider political issues and a lack of willingness to prioritise youth as an inter-institutional and cross-sectorial policy, to very specific types of difficulties in the systematic monitoring and evaluation of youth policy development and implementation, data collection, and publication⁸.

⁴ [Final Declaration of the 8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum](#).

⁵ [Basic figures on Western Balkans and Turkey, Factsheet](#), 2022 edition.

⁶ * this designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

⁷ [Regional Cooperation Council, Mapping of youth policies and identification of existing support and gaps in the financing of youth actions in the Western Balkans – Comparative report](#), January 2021, page 4.

⁸ Idem.

2.3 With the aim of promoting the well-being of young people, attention should also be given to upholding the rights of the child. Sustainable policy actions in this regard boost the well-being of children and further support the quality transition into adolescence and young adulthood.

3. Human capital development

- 3.1 The level and relevance of education is key to young people's employment prospects, career development, and social inclusion in the region. Nevertheless, the education systems still reveal shortcomings as regards catering for all students and equipping young graduates with relevant skills. Insufficient or inefficient links with other policy strands such as employment, economy, social services and social protection leave many children and young people at risk of dropping out of school early, social exclusion and poverty⁹.
- 3.2 In order to build a dynamic economy, the Western Balkans need to invest in knowledge and developing young people's skills. Reforms to the education system are crucial for advancing development efforts¹⁰. The Western Balkans still need to improve their performance and ensure young people acquire foundational skills, and they need to lower the gap in performance with the EU.
- 3.3 Emigration from the Western Balkans has been a long-standing problem caused by economic, social and institutional issues, threatening the development prospects of the region. Emigration is likely to continue in most of the region for the foreseeable future but this should not inhibit the adoption of appropriate policies to keep young people in the region. People choose to leave for various reasons, but these often centre on the difficulties of achieving a high quality of life for themselves and their families should they remain in the region. Brain drain is reducing the regions' human capital, which is necessary for economic growth, while existing social infrastructure is failing to improve the living conditions of those who stay behind. Appropriate measures on the national level must also be taken to redirect the "brain drain" to "brain circulation".
- 3.4 The outflow of people remains a central concern for most Western Balkan countries, as it impacts the economic, social, and political prospects of a region still economically lagging behind the EU. The total number of people who have left the region is difficult to capture accurately. Data shows¹¹ that people are continuing to leave the region. Between 2012 and 2018, on average, annually, 155 000 people left the region for an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country; in 2018 alone, that number stood at 175 000 people¹².

⁹ European Training Foundation (ETF), *Unlocking Youth Potential in South Eastern Europe and Turkey: Skills development for labour market and social inclusion*, 2020.

¹⁰ The results of the [OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) for 2018](#) show high levels of underachievement (students who are failing Level 2 on the PISA scale in reading, mathematics and science) in key competences in nearly all of the Western Balkans.

¹¹ Council of Europe Development Bank: [Social Infrastructure in the Western Balkans- Increasing the region's economic resilience, enhancing human capital and counteracting the effects of brain drain](#), November 2021.

¹² The accuracy of migratory figures for the Western Balkan Region is plagued by various issues that limit the scope for comprehensive cross-country comparisons.

- 3.5 In addition to better economic prospects abroad, studies have also highlighted the important role that quality and trustworthy public institutions play as a motivating factor for emigration. An IMF analysis¹³ (2016) showed that, while all types of migrants seek better economic opportunities abroad, higher-skilled individuals were also motivated to move due to institutional quality at home (corruption and nepotism to obtain employment), and lower-skilled individuals were also drawn to the larger and more reliable social benefit systems abroad¹⁴. A high level of corruption in the region is a key determinant of migrant outflows, which is exacerbated by the fact that 63% of individuals in the region do not trust the judiciary or legislative branches¹⁵.
- 3.6 Young people in the region have a strong desire to move abroad to attain better opportunities, contributing to a highly skewed proportion of young people in the total emigration numbers. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Albania, over 50% of young people desire to live and work abroad for a period longer than 20 years, signalling a potentially significant long-term loss to the demographic and economic future of the region¹⁶. The high level of youth migration from the Western Balkans stems, in particular, from young people's inability to access quality education (and the limited economic opportunities once a degree is obtained), compelling many to seek education opportunities abroad. In 2018, .6% of university age students in the region undertook their studies in a foreign country (the EU average was 3%).
- 3.7 The Western Balkans social infrastructure does not sufficiently support the region's ability to develop and maintain a robust human capital base, particularly in the context of the outflow of human capital via brain drain. Most countries' education sectors face funding and resource shortages that result in sub-optimal education access and outcomes. Insufficient education outcomes, in turn, fail to provide the necessary skills that future generations need to meet the requirements of existing businesses and to help develop new ones.
- 3.8 Maximising the value of human capital is vital to increasing competitiveness and to tackling unemployment. Today's workforce needs to be equipped with a range of transferable skills, a capacity to adapt, and an entrepreneurial attitude while ensuring adequate social security.
- 3.9 Current educational systems and curricula need to reform and strengthen employability amongst the younger generations by promoting vocational education and training (VET), digital education and entrepreneurship subjects.
- 3.10 Entrepreneurial capacities of young people should be encouraged and promoted. Policy makers need to ensure a favourable environment for young people to start their own business and become entrepreneurs and support and provide easier access to finance for start-ups.

¹³ [Emigration and Its Economic Impact on Eastern Europe](#), 2016.

¹⁴ Social benefits in the Western Balkans can be spotty in coverage and benefit transfers can be delayed.

¹⁵ [Regional Cooperation Council, The Balkan Barometer: Public Opinion Survey 2020](#).

¹⁶ [Lavric, Tomanovic, & Jusic, FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/19](#).

- 3.11 In today's fast developing world, the fight against climate change, new business models, research and innovation capacity and the development of new technological solutions for the green transition are essential. To that end it is important to increase the number of young people, particularly young women, with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) capabilities and digital skills.
- 3.12 The green transition is transforming existing jobs, destroying some, and creating new jobs requiring new green and digital skills. The education and training system has to adapt to the growing demand for new skills. Education and training programmes should align with evolving business needs and the twin green/digital transition.

4. Youth employment challenges in the Western Balkans

- 4.1 The main challenges facing youth employment policy in the region are in: coordinating stakeholders at different levels of government and in different policy fields (employment, education, housing health services); weaknesses in the quality of the education systems and shortcomings in the teaching of skills demanded by the labour market; inefficiencies in the job search process leading to skills mismatches and lengthy transitions from school and university to work; the prevalence of precarious employment in some economies; the scarcity of available jobs for young people; a shortage of child-care facilities to support women returning to work and the high level of informality.
- 4.2 Young people in the Western Balkans have an unfavourable position on the region's labour markets. In 2020, the youth employment rate for the 15-24 age group was below 27% across the whole Western Balkans Region, while the youth unemployment rate for the 15-24 age group was above 26% (compared to just 16.8% in the EU-27, for the 15-24 age group), reaching almost 50% in Kosovo¹⁷.
- 4.3 The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) for the 15-24 age group averages 23.7% in the Western Balkans, ranging from 15.9% in Serbia to 37.4% in Kosovo, compared to just 11.1% in the EU for the 15-24 age group¹⁸.
- 4.4 Long-term unemployment affects almost two-thirds of young unemployed people in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, and two thirds of unemployed young women in Montenegro.
- 4.5 The youth labour force participation rate (activity rate) was also lower than in the EU and there is a large gender gap in labour force participation, partly reflecting a shortage of childcare facilities for young mothers who wish to join the labour market. The gender gap is also reflected in female youth employment rates, which are below the male youth employment rates everywhere in the region. Where youth unemployment rates are highest (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia) the female youth unemployment rate exceeds

¹⁷ [Regional Cooperation Council, Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans 2021](#).

¹⁸ [Regional Cooperation Council, Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans 2021](#).

the male rate. In contrast, in Albania and Montenegro the female youth unemployment rate is below the male rate, as is the case in the EU.

- 4.6 Young people face a precarious position on the labour markets. Young people in all economies in the region have a higher share of temporary contracts than in the EU, especially in Kosovo and Montenegro where more than three quarters of employed young people hold this type of contract, while in Serbia more than half do. Precarious employment of this type can adversely affect individual well-being and the productivity of the economies.
- 4.7 Addressing the needs of the young population should become a priority, not least given the high number of NEETs. The need for measures based on the example of the EU Youth Guarantee must be highlighted, even more so in times of crisis. This will help to provide young people with an offer of employment, further education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship, thereby also offering solutions and prospects for young people and contributing to tackling brain drain.

5. **Young people in the Western Balkans as an important force in regional cooperation and promoting European integration**

- 5.1 The prosperity and convergence with the EU should be based on the principles of inclusivity, trust and cooperation. The EESC points out that in pursuing EU-driven reforms and implementing investment plans, the Western Balkans governments committed themselves to the core European values of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, as well as reconciliation¹⁹.
- 5.2 The EESC agrees that regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is essential for the enlargement process, and should be further strengthened in order to drive transformation. A credible accession perspective is the key incentive for and driver of transformation in the region. It is a key tool for promoting democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, which are also the main engines of economic integration and the essential anchor for fostering regional reconciliation and stability²⁰.
- 5.3 The EESC acknowledges that several key European and regional initiatives have been launched during the last few years, especially for the Western Balkans Region, in order to bring it closer to the EU, but also to strengthen cooperation among young people. The EU remains the main strategic partner of the region, providing funds and support through various programmes (IPA, Erasmus+, etc.). Furthermore, building upon the successful example of the Franco-German Youth Office, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) was launched in 2016 in order to promote a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the young people in the region by means of youth exchange programmes.
- 5.4 The RYCO has an important role in enhancing cooperation and reconciliation among young people in the Western Balkans. The support of the EU in streamlining regional youth

¹⁹ REX/184 - [Final Declaration of the 8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum](#), p. 3.

²⁰ [REX_533 - Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#), p. 6.

cooperation, as an essential element in reaching peace and stability in the region, has been vital. The role of young people in advancing the prospects of the region should not only be reinforced through the efforts of the RYCO.

- 5.5 The European Youth Capital is a title awarded by the European Youth Forum. It is designed to empower young people, boost youth participation and strengthen European identity in cities. In 2022, the European Youth Capital is Tirana. Operating under the slogan "Activate Youth", the main aim of the title is to encourage active participation focusing on the needs of young people, today and tomorrow. The programme features activities aimed at promoting volunteerism, empowering youth organisations, and creating networks and synergies among young people from all over Europe.
- 5.6 Stronger cooperation and mutual learning activities organised jointly by EU institutions and Western Balkans youth policy stakeholders should further support the successful implementation of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans.
- 5.7 Efforts made to involve the Western Balkans in EU youth programmes should be coordinated with the ongoing programmes offered by the RYCO. The EESC invites the European Commission to assist the Western Balkans in pursuing ways to establish new intraregional mobility schemes.

6. Amplifying the voice of young people from the Western Balkans

- 6.1 The political agenda of the EU with regard to the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans is to facilitate evidence-informed policymaking²¹. Having reliable and transparent statistics is a major request from the EU to all the countries in the pre-accession phase²².
- 6.2 The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 aims to encourage and promote the inclusive democratic participation of all young people in democratic processes and society, to actively engage them, support youth representation at local, regional and national level and explore and promote the use of innovative and alternative forms of democratic participation e.g. digital democracy tools²³.
- 6.3 The EU Youth Dialogue is a well-established dialogue mechanism between young people and decision-makers. The EESC welcomes the Commission's proposals to build on this mechanism and introduce it in the Western Balkans regional cooperation framework, ensuring the views and needs of young people and youth organisations are taken into account when defining youth policy priorities. Furthermore, existing participatory processes and mechanisms in the Western Balkans where youth are involved should be encouraged and promoted.

²¹ [Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport](#).

²² [European Commission – Chapters of the acquis/negotiating chapters](#).

²³ [Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy](#), COM(2018) 269 final.

- 6.4 According to the Youth Participation Index²⁴, young people in the Western Balkans are still vastly under-represented in political life. Recent data shows that a vast majority (78%) believe that young people should have a greater say in politics²⁵.
- 6.5 The EESC strongly supports the involvement of young people in decision-making processes on issues that affect them. In addition to individual participation, the role of youth organisations is vital in advancing the position of young people in the political, economic and social arenas. Therefore, as emphasised by the Regulation on IPA III and the Enlargement Methodology, it is necessary to note the significance of funding and support to CSOs in order to cater to the needs of young people.
- 6.6 Socioeconomic status and educational attainment are considered to be important predictors of individuals' propensity to vote or take part in other types of political engagement. Statistical analysis at regional level paints a consistent picture of socioeconomic inequalities inherent in young people's engagement in the Western Balkans Region²⁶.

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The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

²⁴ [Youth Participation Index for 2020, Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation](#).

²⁵ FES (2019), [Jusic, Political alienation of a precarious generation, p. 5](#).

²⁶ Idem.