

Youth challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans

SUMMARY

Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia are all candidates for EU membership, while Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo are potential candidates. To improve their chances of EU accession and secure their citizens a more prosperous future, one of the key priorities these countries need to address are the problems facing their youth, who hold the key to such a future.

Challenges – albeit of a different nature from one country to the next – confront young people across the entire region. Persistently high levels of youth unemployment are seen as a direct consequence of the region's difficult economic context, but equally so of its outdated educational systems that fail to deliver to the needs of the labour market. Deeply entrenched regional stereotypes, a lack of awareness of other cultures, demographic changes and a youth 'brain drain' are some of the pieces that make up this complex regional puzzle.

Raising awareness about these challenges and the need for timely solutions is therefore crucial. The EU has been encouraging dialogue on the future of youth in the region through a number of projects and initiatives, including the Erasmus+ programme. In recent years, a series of conferences, including in the framework of the Berlin process, have given young people increased prominence, drawing attention to the difficulties they face and the opportunities they need to be given. The establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office in 2016 is a tangible development in this respect, seen as a positive step towards promoting dialogue, involving young people in joint activities and changing the regional narrative. Further crucial measures include modernising the educational systems, promoting mobility and exchanges both within the region and with the EU, and encouraging youth entrepreneurial skills and active youth participation in civil society.



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Situation of young people

Young people (aged 15 to 30) are an important resource for the future of the Western Balkans (WB), a region undergoing political and economic transition and striving towards EU membership. Young people have an important role to play in this context: according to the [2016 Balkan Barometer](#), they are more likely to favour EU membership and see its benefits than the average WB inhabitant. A [2016 public opinion poll](#) on the European orientation of Serbians suggests that young people perceive the EU as a source of higher employment, a better future and travel opportunities. They also appear more concerned about unemployment and tend to attribute success in life to good education much more than other groups do. A 2016 paper on '[Youth – social ornament or social capital?](#)', insists on a shift in perceptions about young people, saying they should be seen as 'social capital' worth investing in rather than as 'a social problem to be solved'.

Regional cooperation, which the EU supports through a number of programmes and projects, is considered an effective means to improve the future of WB youth, boost their mobility and promote overall social equity by providing opportunities for youth involvement. However, a 2017 [topical paper](#) by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group finds that systematic youth cooperation and the relevant institutional modes that would enable it have been lacking in the region, and that support for it has mostly come from outside. Nevertheless, recent years have seen some changes: the [Brdo-Brijuni process](#) and the [Berlin process](#) are examples of regional initiatives that have placed youth atop their agendas. Although their objectives need time to materialise, the results of increased youth cooperation are bound to be lasting and beneficial for the whole region.

Youth policy and institutional frameworks

As part of their preparation for EU accession, WB countries have developed youth policies and relevant legislative and institutional frameworks, although the efficient implementation of youth empowerment measures is frequently put into question.

A [recent research paper](#) on youth mobility in the region finds that, broadly speaking, WB countries have similar legal and institutional frameworks for youth policy, and experience similar tendencies with regard to young people. Most have a ministry with 'youth' in the title, a National Council for youth, as well as youth-related laws, national strategies and action plans. A 2016 [comparative overview](#) claims that youth structures and policy are 'quite developed' in [Serbia](#) compared to its neighbours. The paper highlights how in 2007 the [intensive advocacy](#) of youth NGOs led to the setting up of Serbia's Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the inclusion of youth issues among the government's policy priorities. In 2017, the Serbian prime minister also [placed](#) education among the government's priorities. Serbia adopted its first youth law in 2011; the process that led to the development of its youth strategy was [recognised](#) as a [best practice](#) by the Council of Europe, showcasing the successful conduct of active consultations with multiple stakeholders in the field. The country's 2015-2025 youth strategy defines nine strategic goals aimed at improving youth's employability and employment, encouraging their active social participation and enhancing youth mobility, among other things.

BiH, with its complex multilevel governance structure, does not deal with [youth issues](#) at national level, but at the level of its constituent entities, and at local level. While youth laws and strategies only exist at entity level, BiH has a permanent national [Commission for the coordination of youth issues](#).

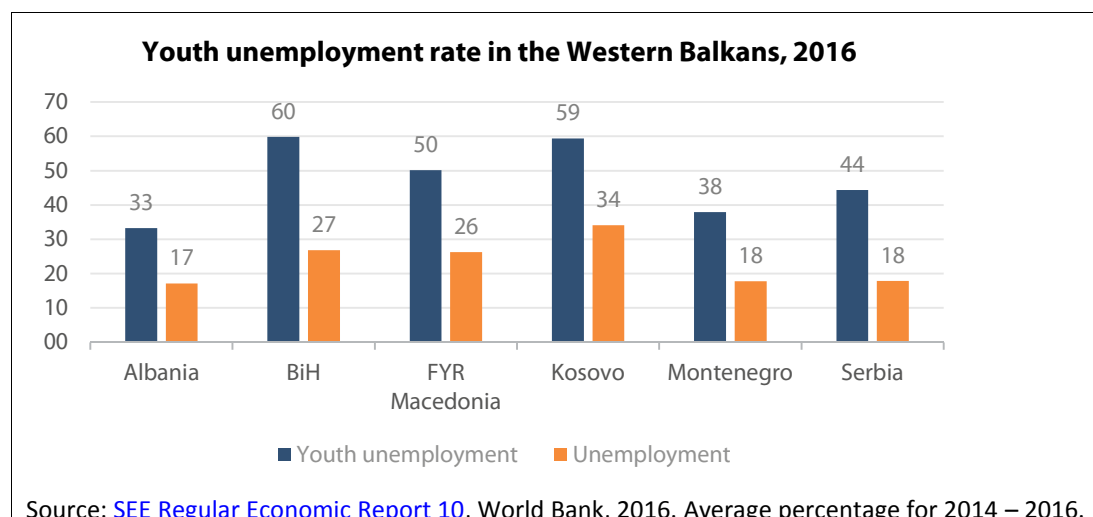
FYR Macedonia has yet to adopt a [youth law](#), after a first draft was [shelved](#) in 2011 for being [controversial](#). In early 2016, the country adopted a National youth strategy for the 2016-2025 period, but the National Youth Council and many NGOs do not recognise it. Albania [does not have](#) a national law on youth; the 2015-2020 national youth action plan is its most relevant document. Kosovo has a 2009 law on empowerment and participation of youth and a 2013-2017 Strategy for youth, as well as a network of youth centres in different municipalities. In June 2016, Montenegro became the latest country to adopt a [youth law](#), followed in September by a youth strategy for the 2017-2021 period.

Common challenges

Amidst an ongoing political and economic transformation of their societies, WB youth face a situation where deep-rooted prejudices and intolerance continue to influence intraregional dynamics and might stand in the way of the opportunities that the EU integration perspective and related reforms are expected to spur. Affected by the 2008 global financial crisis, the region's economies have been slow to recover; this has led to soaring youth unemployment and a scarcity of job opportunities. Educational systems have been slow to adapt to the changing labour markets, leaving WB youth with an inadequate set of skills. Many of them see the difficult transition to work as a [common challenge](#). Weak incentives to stay in the region have made emigration a [popular option](#), resulting in a brain drain. [Poorly performing](#) political institutions and endemic corruption have long bred cynicism and alienation; in recent years, radicalisation has also emerged as a [problem](#), particularly in [Albania](#), [BiH](#) and [Kosovo](#), which have large Muslim communities. Violent extremism has gained visibility due to concerns of ISIL/Da'esh-inspired terror (the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters being trained in Syria and Iraq and returning to their countries). Although their numbers from the WB region have not grown since 2015, a [2016 regional study](#) warns that radicalisation remains a threat.

Labour market and unemployment

The '[Western Balkans Labour Market Trends Report 2017](#)', produced by the World Bank and the WIIW research institute, highlights that youth, women and the low-educated are among the worst affected labour market participants and have high inactivity rates. According to the World Bank's [SEE Regular Economic Report No 10](#), nearly 25 % of the region's young people are inactive, meaning they are not in employment, education, or training. High youth unemployment varies across the region: Albania and Montenegro have the lowest rates and BiH and Kosovo the highest. Although some EU Member States, such as [Greece and Spain](#), have similar high levels of youth unemployment, the [EU-28 average](#) of 18.7 % is much lower than in the Western Balkans. As in many EU Member



States, high youth unemployment in the WB reflects the difficulties labour markets are going through.

The '[10 key messages](#)' of the World Bank's above-mentioned SEE report show that the region is still struggling with the after-shocks of the 2008 financial crisis. High youth unemployment and inactivity remain among the most formidable challenges, limiting prospects for economic growth and eroding the quality of labour supply now and in the future. There is also a gender gap in employment, with young women's activity rates falling behind. The findings show that labour regulation constrains youth employment. For example, labour tax rates are high for low-wage and part-time workers, who are, more often than not, young people. The report concludes that, while all job-seekers are experiencing problems on the labour markets, it is the young in particular who face the biggest challenges in getting a job.

Education

Unemployment is also linked to the region's educational systems, whose modernisation could improve access to the labour market. A [2016 report](#) on 'Higher education provision and labour market needs in the Western Balkans' points out that higher education systems 'are facing serious challenges'. Despite holding a university degree, many young people remain unemployed and more needs to be done to match the skills and competencies they obtain to labour market demand. A rethinking of university admission criteria and the modes of cooperation between employers and universities on curriculum design and recruitment are possible paths to pursue in search of solutions.

In general, the following are identified as basic needs in education: joint efforts with employers to adjust curricula and provide students with practical experience (for example, through internships), improved teaching methods, a smaller intake of students, addressing corruption in university selection procedures, improved career guidance services, and targeted scholarships for priority subjects, such as science and IT, and entrepreneurial learning.

Youth participation

Recent [surveys](#) among WB youth have shown that many do not consider participation in community or politics-related initiatives and activities as important. Another set of [studies](#) show that young people are largely dissatisfied with the level of democracy in their countries. [Political parties](#) are the institutions young people trust the least, and most feel under-represented by them. The resulting disengagement and lack of interest are a challenge for the positive transformation of any society. Youth participation, however, is a [fundamental principle of youth development](#): the more active young people are, the stronger their civil awareness and the more varied their set of skills will be. The [European Association for Local Democracy](#) works together with its regional Balkan network on projects to build a culture of regional dialogue and youth participation, at the same time as making public authorities and decision-makers more aware of the social, educational and economic needs of youth.

Youth mobility among the WB countries

Youth mobility among the WB countries is considered to have a positive impact by boosting productivity, generating more jobs and reducing the skills mismatch. However, deeply ingrained prejudices and stereotypes on the one hand, and a lack of clear information about labour rules in neighbouring countries and difficulties with the mutual recognition of degrees, hinder such mobility. A 2015 '[SEE 2020 strategy study on labour mobility](#)' finds that labour market liberalisation has not advanced much. Although

conditions for intra-regional mobility exist, finding a job in the region is not easy or does not offer sufficient incentives, and mobility is directed outside the region. As a 2015 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung [publication](#) points out, the express intent of a high number of young people to leave the region poses a 'real hazard for the future human capital of SEE'. In 2016, [tens of thousands](#) of young people sought to move to the EU or the USA.

Regional cooperation and other attempts to address youth issues

Joint action in promoting tolerance, mobility and cooperation is highly valuable, especially in a region where youth have been identified as pivotal for achieving reconciliation, restoring [faith in democracy](#) and advancing EU integration. Attempts to place youth on the regional political agenda have been made in high-level fora, such as the Brdo-Brijuni process and the Berlin process, both of which aim to foster regional cooperation. Some tangible results have already been achieved, but more efforts are needed at regional and national level to address the above-listed challenges.

Brdo-Brijuni and the Positive agenda for youth

In the framework of the Brdo-Brijuni process, initiated by Croatia and Slovenia as an informal high-level platform for dialogue among the WB leaders, a [Positive agenda for youth](#) was launched at an April 2015 summit in Brdo. Aware that 'educated young professionals with a positive approach towards their personal future and future of their societies could help achieving lasting political, economic and social stability of the region' and could also benefit the EU negotiation processes, they committed to giving more opportunities to the young to gather varied experiences by developing new programmes, scholarships and projects, at the same time as raising awareness of existing ones. In June 2015, WB leaders [reaffirmed](#) their support for joint university and exchange programmes within the region and the EU.

The Berlin process: Vienna, Paris, Trieste

The Berlin process, launched on a German initiative in 2014 to give new impetus to regional cooperation, identified youth issues among its priorities and addressed them at three consecutive summits. At the [2015 Vienna summit](#), WB prime ministers agreed to establish a Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) as a regionally owned structure that would lead and coordinate youth cooperation. At the 2016 Paris summit, the leaders [signed](#) the agreement for its establishment. A '[Connecting Youth](#)' Western Balkans youth conference took place on the sidelines of the summit, looking into topics such as education and mobility, employment and entrepreneurship, youth engagement and participation, and youth and the media. Its [conclusions](#) highlighted the need to promote existing youth programmes, reduce administrative procedures and facilitate recognition of degrees. Suggestions were also made as to how to improve the labour market situation of young people and encourage their engagement. Activities that RYCO could undertake in the future included the launch of the Young Journalists' Initiative, to be funded by an EU tool supporting alternative media start-ups, new media entrepreneurship and new media outlets. At the Paris summit, the EU [Young Civil Servants scheme](#), offering study and exchange opportunities for young professionals from the region's public administrations, was launched as a pilot.

As a follow-up to the Paris summit, Slovenia [hosted](#) a conference on '[Connecting youth work and youth policy](#)' in September 2016, proposing an [Action plan for youth work and policy](#). The benefits the action plan aims to bring to young people include strengthening their civil society education, fostering their entrepreneurship and active participation in

policy design, developing their media literacy and enhancing their awareness of and access to relevant existing programmes.

In April 2017, the Civil Society Forum in Tirana issued [recommendations](#) on youth cooperation, pointing out that mobility within the region and with the EU should be increased by abolishing visa regimes and allowing mutual recognition of diplomas. It also highlighted the usefulness of promoting intercultural learning at all levels of education and focusing on improving vocational training and skills.

In his [address](#) to the 2017 Trieste summit, Enlargement Commissioner, Johannes Hahn, highlighted mobility as vital and urged young people to engage actively at regional level, to become entrepreneurs and to boost the vitality of their societies. Another event that also took place in Trieste was the '[Connecting Youth – Moving Forward](#)' EU-WB Youth Forum. Four parallel working groups addressed the [key topics](#) of mobility, inclusion, entrepreneurship and youth participation. The plan to develop a regional economic area, agreed in Trieste, is expected to benefit young people by creating better and sustainable economic opportunities for all.

Existing initiatives for regional cooperation and mobility

There are a number of regional initiatives for youth cooperation, some of which have been developed and financed by the EU. The Regional Cooperation Council, a WB-owned framework for cooperation and promotion of the region's Euro-Atlantic integration, has developed a [Southeast Europe 2020](#) strategy, aimed at promoting the creation of jobs and prosperity and strengthening the WB's EU perspective. The [WB steering platform on research and innovation](#) aims to help enhance the region's integration into the European Research Area. The [Western Balkans platform on education and training](#), launched in 2012 on the EU's initiative, [aims to prepare](#) the region for full participation in the EU education programmes. It has helped organise several ministerial meetings and has also initiated the [first structured dialogue](#) on creating a WB regional alumni association, whose launch is [planned](#) for 2018.

The [Balkan regional platform for youth participation and dialogue](#) has the specific objective to create a regional local democracy network aimed at strengthening regional youth's capacities for active citizenship, while also raising awareness of the EU standards applicable to youth participation and of the regional impact of EU programmes for the 2014-2020 period.

The challenge for the region is to launch more locally owned initiatives, in addition to the EU-encouraged and financed ones. The [Regional Youth Cooperation Office](#), the first such regionally owned organisation, was created in December 2016 in Tirana, to support regional youth exchange and to put the concepts of friendship, reconciliation and cooperation at the forefront. Still not fully operational, it is expected to function in a transparent and accountable way, create synergies with other youth initiatives and programmes, and expand its outreach beyond the WB capitals to also make a difference in the smaller towns and provide opportunities to more disadvantaged youth groups. In 2015, the WB countries also established a [Western Balkans Fund](#) to fund activities that strengthen regional cohesion particularly in the areas of cultural cooperation, scientific exchange, educational research and cooperation, youth exchange and sustainable development.

Further attempts to create opportunities for youth

Curbing youth unemployment, which, as a recent London School of Economics [article](#) notes, 'produces multiple scarring effects', requires timely and effective policy responses, as it is damaging not only in the present, but is bound to have lasting effects for all of society. Reforms in labour and tax laws, joint measures on the part of higher education institutions, employers and governments to ease the study-to-work transition, and [effective support](#) (career guidance) to job-seekers are seen as some of the most relevant measures to this end.

In its 2016 country reports, the European Commission highlights some of the steps already taken: [Montenegro's](#) new law on youth and new youth strategy; [Albania's](#) new law on higher education, pre-university education strategy, and gradual progress in establishing vocational education and training multifunctional centres; [Kosovo's](#) 2015-2020 strategy and action plan to prevent violent extremism and radicalisation; [Serbia's](#) ongoing higher education reform and its Office for the Recognition of Foreign Diplomas, created in 2015.

As regards mobility and participation, the above-mentioned 2016 [comparative overview](#) of the challenges and future perspectives in the WB highlights that mobility, being an 'opportunity to move and make choices', should be stimulated by creating favourable conditions for it both with regard to the EU and within the region. This requires building up infrastructure and services for youth; improving relevant legislation; encouraging volunteering and non-formal education through a better policy framework and the subsequent recognition of the knowledge gained. Tackling challenges, such as youth radicalisation and xenophobia, and addressing old ones, such as reconciliation, is also key to building sustainable peace.

Turning youth cooperation into a stable and long-term practice in the region requires to first of all recognise young people as a valuable part of society and as a human potential that needs to be developed with all necessary means. No less important is to address the possible [setbacks and challenges](#), as identified in the 2016 Action plan for youth work and youth policy, such as the lack of political will and monitoring, the shortage of adequate financing and the need to ensure effective implementation, among other things.

What the EU is doing

Youth, their mobility and non-formal education are among the EU's priorities. While respecting individual countries' overall responsibility for youth policy, the EU's [Youth strategy 2010-2018](#) aims to provide more and equal opportunities for youth in education and work and to encourage their active participation in society. A number of [policy documents](#) add to the strategy and define the EU's role in the field.

The EU has been providing [support for youth education](#) and training through a variety of programmes and funds, particularly its 2014-2020 education, training, youth and sport programme, [Erasmus+](#) (a merger of seven previous programmes in related fields, in which the six WB countries participate). As Commissioner Hahn said in [Trieste](#), in 2016 alone Erasmus+ enabled over 20 000 WB and EU youth to work together on different projects.

The EU supports reforms in enlargement countries through the [Instrument for pre-accession assistance \(IPA\) II](#), building up their capacities throughout the accession process. A substantial contribution to increased regional mobility of young people has been achieved through the Cross-border cooperation programmes, an IPA II component. One such example is the [Western Balkans Youth Window under Erasmus+](#), a multi-country action programme for the 2015-2018 period that offers new financing opportunities for projects, benefitting¹ Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia. The WB Youth Window [supports](#) capacity-building activities (conferences, workshops, meetings, youth events) and mobility activities (such as youth exchanges and the European Voluntary Service). The Commission will [also use funding available](#) from the WB Youth Window in synergy with the aims and activities of RYCO. It is already financing the regional pilot scheme for young civil servants, launched in Paris and extended in Trieste. Under the [Civil Society Facility](#), the Commission also finances the [Balkan regional platform](#)

[for youth participation and dialogue](#). WB countries also take part in other programmes, such as [Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs](#), [Creative Europe](#) and [Europe for Citizens](#).

European Parliament

The EP [supports](#) close cooperation between its Member States in the youth field and plays an active role in the formulation of youth policy. In its 2017 annual resolutions on the Commission's reports, the EP [commends Albania and Serbia](#) for their commitment to improving regional cooperation, especially through the RYCO. The EP [urges](#) governments to consider the impact that their reforms may have on youth and to modernise their education systems with a view to building a more inclusive society and giving youth a more competitive set of skills. It also emphasises the importance of IPA II support for education, employment and social policies and welcomes the setting up of the WB Fund. It encourages youth participation in the democratic political process and calls on the competent authorities to strengthen existing laws, introduce active labour market policies targeting young people and develop programmes to [prevent youth radicalisation](#).

Some of the EP's recent contributions include its [input](#) through the [Young political leaders programme](#) to the youth conference within the Trieste WB summit, and the [conference](#) on 'Better future for the youth in the Western Balkans', which it hosted in June 2016.

Main references

['From university to employment: higher education provision and labour market needs in the Western Balkans'](#), European Commission, 2016.

['Youth Mobility in the Western Balkans the present challenges and future perspectives'](#), Balkan regional platform for youth participation and dialogue, 2016.

['Youth cooperation in the Western Balkans'](#), BiEPAG, 2017.

['Lost in democratic transition?'](#), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015.

['Youth Participation, more than a catchword?'](#), Western Balkans Institute WEBIN, 2014.

Endnotes

¹ Erasmus+ [differentiates](#) between [programme](#) and [partner](#) countries as regards modalities and participation; FYR Macedonia is the only programme country from the Western Balkans, the rest of the countries being partners.

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