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Newsletter

[FOCUS ARTICLE] Youth strategies, policies and initiatives - the EYY 2022 and the Western Balkans

The Situation of Youth in the Western Balkans

The field of youth in the Western Balkans has found itself in a dynamic progress since the beginning of the last century. Today, the status of young people in the region is either regulated by a specific law, such as laws on youth or youth participation, specific national strategies or other strategic documents. The age range for defining young people lies between 15 and 30. In comparison with the EU, and with about 21.27%, the Western Balkans have a larger percentage of youth population with regard to the total population.

Young people in the EU and the Western Balkans continue facing ongoing challenges such as accessing the labour market. In 2020, the youth employment rate for the 15-24 age group was below 27% in all WB economies, while the youth unemployment rate for the 15-24 age group was above 26% (compared to only 16.8% in the EU-27, for the same age group), while reaching almost 50% in Kosovo*. The [2022 Balkan Barometer](#) survey revealed that 67% of Western Balkan youth would consider going to work abroad due to concerns of 'being unemployed', 'being poor', and 'corruption'.

At the same time, through the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people are amongst the hardest hit groups and are bearing a large part of the massive economic consequences of the pandemic. An examination of the share of young people who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) shows just a glimpse of young people's overall vulnerability in this economic situation.

Large gender disparities are also a feature of the regional youth labour markets. Existing activation policies are trying to alleviate the difficulties challenging youth labour markets of the region, but they are scattered and underfunded. With that said, a more coherent approach is needed enable skills and qualifications to match the demands of the labour market and motivate youth to get involved with S&T and R&I. Young people expect education programmes to provide wider skillsets and inclusive learning environments, and they hope to have the support of policymakers, parents, teachers, social workers, and community leaders.

Education and training systems in the Western Balkans need to modernise to address persistent youth unemployment, close the skills gap, and harness all the talent in the region, and . EU funding instruments such as the Instrument for [Pre-accession Assistance \(IPA\)](#) and [Erasmus+](#) can be used to stimulate the innovation and acceleration of successful practices. In addition to various achievements at the national level, the Western Balkans have taken



important steps towards harmonisation with the developments in European youth work and youth policy.

Western Balkans Youth Strategies and Policies

Youth policies in the Western Balkans are largely structured around the current situation concerning young people. One of the most common features in all the economies (except Albania) is for a law to define the area of youth policies and guide the measures related to it (Law on Youth, Law on Engagement or Law on Youth Policies). The second tier is the national strategy, which usually is realised through a comprehensive long- term document with specific targets and goals for improving the situation of young people. This is most often regulated with youth strategy documents and national youth actions plans.

In general, youth in the Western Balkans is defined around the age group of 15-30. The development of Laws on Youth in different WB economies has largely started around the 2010s. National Youth Strategies followed approximately five years later for a five to ten-year period.

While youth laws provide the framework and conditions for supporting young people in organising, social activities and developing and realising potential for personal and social benefit, they can also define the structure of the youth sector, their competencies, rights, obligations and responsibilities. National Youth Strategies on the other hand provide a comprehensive document outlining the priority objectives, the implementation of which should contribute to an active and equal participation of young people in various areas of social, political and academic life. These strategies and their action plans aim at regulating the implementation of youth activities at the local and national levels. They also aim to encourage co-operation between youth organisations whose activities relate to youth, as well as between central and municipal bodies, to help strengthen youth policies and programmes. Their strategic objectives are mobilisation of youth for participation, representation and active citizenship, providing skills and preparing youth for the labour market, as well as a healthy and safe environment for young people. The Strategies further aim at bringing the WB youth closer to the best European principles and practices, in particular concerning their own needs.

Regional and European dimension of Youth Policy and ongoing support

In cooperation with Western Balkan partners, the EU invests in youth through programmes in many areas - education and vocational training, entrepreneurship, culture, research and innovation, science and technology, inclusion, cooperation and reconciliation, civic activism, and a number of exchange programmes for learning and personal development. The EU also encourages active participation of young people - to get involved in policy-making, R&I activities and shaping and grassroots activism, and take the future into their own hands.

Several key European and regional initiatives have been launched during the last years, especially for the WBs, in order to bring the region closer to the EU, but also to strengthen the cooperation among young people. The EU remains the main strategic partner of the region, providing funds and support through various programmes ([IPA](#), [Erasmus+](#), etc). The [Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](#) sets the blueprint moving forward. This substantial investment package offer many opportunities for young people in areas such as:



- **Job creation** - Primarily by facilitating access to finance for young entrepreneurs and small businesses. By providing guarantees for local banks, they can more easily lend to young entrepreneurs or SMEs, creating jobs for young people.
- **Skills investment** - Through schemes such as Erasmus+, vocational education and training (VET), and investing in digital to help close the skills gap in the technology sector. A [Youth Guarantee](#) scheme, which already exists across the EU, aims to guarantee that all young people under the age of 29 years old receive a quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.
- **Active participation and reconciliation** - Through projects such as the [Western Balkan Youth Lab](#), which stimulates conversations between young people and policymakers, and through support to the [Regional Youth Cooperation Office \(RYCO\)](#), a regionally-owned structure that leads and coordinates youth cooperation in order to promote the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the Western Balkans by means of youth exchange programs.

In addition to that the [Young European Ambassadors network in the Western Balkans](#) also offers inspiring examples of young people leading change and stepping up to participate, sharing EU values and to raising awareness about the EU's cooperation with its Western Balkan partners.

As part of the European Commission's Training Strategy, [SALTO-YOUTH](#) and [SALTO South-East Europe](#) provide **non-formal learning resources for youth workers and youth leaders** and organises **training and contact-making activities** to support the process of building capacities in the region and facilitating dialogue among various actors in the WB youth field and their other European counterparts. There are [several open calls](#) at the moment, and more are opening, for activities where participants from Western Balkans can take part.

The impact and legacy of all activities and engagement opportunities should be long-lasting, beyond 2022. While existing EU programmes dedicated to youth, like Erasmus+ and the [European Solidarity Corps](#), obviously play a central role in the implementation and funding of the activities, the [European Year of Youth 2022](#) aims at being cross-sectoral and building on all EU policies.

Under the motto "Make your voice heard!" the European Year of Youth 2022 is shining a light on the importance of European youth to build a better future - greener, more inclusive and digital. With plenty of opportunities to learn, share your vision, meet people and engage in activities all over Europe, the European Year of Youth is the moment to move forward with confidence and hope in a post-pandemic perspective.

All young Europeans are invited to participate in the numerous engagements, initiatives and actions to make their voice heard and to inform the decisions to be taken for their future.

How can youth get involved?

By staying in contact with the appointed National Coordinator responsible for the coordination of relevant activities on the European Year of Youth at national level

By uploading events and activities on the [European Year of Youth page](#) of the [European Youth Portal](#) using the new button functionality



By spreading the word and helping us reach every corner of the EU, raising awareness within your community, school, among your friends about the Year

By using the EYY logo and the dedicated hashtags for the future communication materials

If you are devoted to become one of the young game-changers in the Western Balkans, and tell your peers more about the opportunities in your community, your region, and the EU - for education, skills development, travel, advocacy and research, take your chance, learn more about and connect with projects within the Western Balkans under the following links:

[Danube Youth Council](#) - a platform for institutional involvement of young people in all [EUSDR bodies](#) to make ideas and viewpoints of young people heard and considered on a political level

[Regional Programme on Local Democracy in the Western Balkans 2 \(ReLOaD2\)](#) - to enable better collaboration of local governments and civil society organizations, establish concrete partnerships

School Exchange Scheme: [Superschools](#) (RYCO) - to provide the ground for creating strong and sustainable bonds between secondary schools within the region

[WEBalkans](#) - portal Funding opportunities, jobs, internships, training courses and more for people in the Western Balkans

For more information on news and opportunities for youth in the Western Balkans, visit the Western Balkans Info Hub portal within the [Youth - Science - Society](#) section!