

MAPPING OF YOUTH POLICIES AND IDENTIFICATION OF EXISTING SUPPORT AND GAPS IN FINANCING OF YOUTH ACTIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



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Title: MAPPING OF YOUTH POLICIES AND IDENTIFICATION OF EXISTING SUPPORT AND GAPS IN FINANCING OF YOUTH ACTIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS - COMPARATIVE REPORT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	5
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
CHAPTER 1: YOUTH POPULATION DATA	11
1.1 Age and gender	11
1.2. Employment	11
1.3 Youth Migration	12
CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE YOUTH POLICY FRAMEWORKS IN THE WB	14
2.1. Constitutions	14
2.2 Laws on Youth	14
2.3 Target population of Youth Policy	15
2.4 Strategies on Youth	16
2.5 Action Plans on Youth at Economy Level	17
2.6 Institutions dealing with Youth	17
2.7 Other sectors impacting youth	18
2.8 Critical Assessment	19
CHAPTER 3: FUNDING FRAMEWORK	21
3.1 Youth Policy Funding	21
3.1.1 Funding the Youth Strategies and Action Plans	22
3.1.2 Funding youth organisations' projects, initiatives and activities	24
3.2. Key Youth Programmes/Instruments	25
3.3. Critical assessments	27
CHAPTER 4: YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLICY MAKING AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF YOUTH COUNCILS IN WB ECONOMIES	29
4.1 Youth engagement and participation in policy: Key mechanisms and processes	29
4.1.1 Participation at central level	29
4.1.2 Participation at the local level	30
4.2 Evidence-based youth policy	31
4.3 Establishment and functioning of Youth Councils and umbrella organisations	32
4.4 Regional platforms and networks	34
4.5 Critical Assessment	35

CHAPTER 5: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY DONOR INTERVENTIONS IN THE FIELD OF YOUTH IN WB	37
5.1 Key donors in the field of youth	37
5.2 Priority areas for the future in the field of youth	41
CHAPTER 6: GOOD PRACTICES AND GAP ANALYSIS	43
6.1 Good practices	43
6.2 Gaps	45
6.2.1 Gaps Analysis of general background issues	45
6.2.2 Gap Analysis of youth policy frameworks	46
6.2.3 Gaps Analysis of youth policy funding	47
6.2.4 Gaps Analysis of youth participatory mechanisms	47
6.3 Recommendations:	48
References	55

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APIYE	Action Plan for Increasing Youth Employment / Kosovo*
ASCS	Agency for Support of Civil Society / Kosovo*
AYS	Agency for Youth and Sport, North Macedonia
CfY	Council for Youth
CoM	Council of Ministers
CYAC	Central Youth Action Council / North Macedonia
CYAP	Club on Youth Affairs and Policies
EAK	Employment Agency of Kosovo*
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KAS	Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung
KOMS	Youth Council of Serbia
LEPY	Law on Youth Empowerment and Participation / Kosovo*
LYAC	Local Youth Action Council / Kosovo*
LYAP	Local Youth Action Plan / Montenegro
LYC	Local Youth Councils
LoY	Law on Youth
MCA	Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Hercegovina
MCYS	Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports / Kosovo*
MESCS	Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports / Montenegro
MoYT	Ministry of Youth and Tourism, Serbia
NAPY	Action Plan for Youth, Albania
AYA	Agency for Youth, in Albania
AYLO	Association of Local Youth Offices
NAPOR	Association of Youth Workers
NEET	Not in Employment, Education, Training
YANM	Youth Assembly, North Macedonia

** This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.*

NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
SY	Strategy on Youth
YC	Youth Council
YPAB	Youth Policy Advisory Body, North Macedonia
YRO	Youth Representative Organisation in Albania
YSAP	Youth Strategy and Action Plan
OSFA	Open Society Foundation for Albania
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VET	Vocational education and training
WB	Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia)
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This comparative report is focused on the youth policies, funding, participation, and donor programmes across the Western Balkans (WB). It also includes a mapping of donor programmes across the region. The process of creating and renewing the comparative analysis relies on desk and empirical research conducted from August till November 2023. This comparative analysis uses the individual economy reports, examining the current state of youth in each economy, pinpointing existing assistance and deficiencies in supporting youth efforts, and considering youth involvement in decision-making by highlighting best practices and suggestions. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has defined the structure, scope, outline of the reports, and methodological standards based on the need to guide implementation of the Western Balkans Youth Lab and serve the project's stakeholders, including public administrations, donors, youth councils and youth umbrella organisations.

This report also determines that the availability of youth-focused statistical data divided into subcategories continues to be an issue across the Western Balkans, along with an absence of consistency regarding the age range (15-24; 15-29; 15-30) utilised for data gathering by various institutions in the region. Inconsistent youth age ranges across the Western Balkans obstruct cross-economy research and policy collaboration. Adopting the EU's 15-29 youth age range would standardise indicators and policies, enabling better coordination, transfer of best practices, and conformity with EU strategies. A uniform youth definition would facilitate comparability and empower comprehensive regional youth agendas and address alienation with EU. According to Eurostat, the total youth population in the regional economies is 3,611,109 which composes 21.27% of the total population of all six economies. Kosovo* 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 economies, with the male youth population slightly larger: men comprise 51.16% and women comprise 48.84% of the youth population in the WB economies.

Multiple public opinion polls indicate a rising percentage of youth who plan to emigrate in search of improved living standards, mostly to EU. Although legal frameworks related to youth policies vary a lot across the Western Balkan economies, they have all enacted youth laws, aiming to strengthen youth in many aspects. Specifically, such laws seek to empower young people, enhance their social standing, promote youth organisations, and boost youth involvement in tailored decision-making processes. The overarching goal is to improve youth rights and opportunities across the Western Balkans. The existing legal framework is a positive step towards setting a clear framework for youth policies and a sign of commitment towards this important target group.

In terms of the policy framework, WB economies have made continuous progress since most of them have approved and implemented an economy-wide strategy on youth. An exception is Bosnia and Hercegovina which does not have an economy-wide youth strategy, an economy-wide action plan on youth, or any other similar document that strategically deals with youth at the central level,



but the situation varies from one district/entity to another. Meanwhile, in Kosovo* a new Youth Strategy and Action Plan is expected to be adopted soon.

In terms of institutions dealing with youth or youth policies across the Western Balkan economies, youth issues are typically grouped under the purview of ministries dealing with education, sports, culture or a combination of these. Youth policymaking is housed alongside other thematically related areas at the ministerial level in Kosovo*, Montenegro and Serbia. Only Albania has a dedicated Minister on Children and Youth since 2021, exclusively focused on developing policies targeted at young people.

In North Macedonia, none of the ministries cover youth portfolio, but there is an Agency for Youth and Sports which falls under the direct authority of the government. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ministry at the central level is tasked with overseeing youth issues, but it does not have actual competencies in this area. Instead, the substantive authority and responsibilities for youth policies lies at the entity level in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hence, while there is a centralised so-called youth ministry, the real decision-making powers to implement youth programmes and initiatives are decentralised to lower governance levels. Youth policies across the Western Balkans span multiple levels of government and ministries. Municipal authorities drive many youth programmes locally. Various line ministries like employment, education, health, social welfare, justice and security also oversee aspects of youth policy in their domain. Thus, there are many institutional players involved.

The Western Balkan economies have laws and policies that regulate youth engagement and participation in decision-making. However, meaningful youth participation in policy development and dialogue still needs improvement mostly in terms of its standards and alignment with principles of youth participation. Serbia has the most established system for engaging youth representatives and involving them in policymaking. Other WB economies have varying levels of progress but compared with the previous report, notable change has been noticed in Albania. While interest in the youth domain has increased, it is necessary not to develop many overlapping structures and to increase standards of youth participation.

Almost all WB economies have established Youth Councils (advisory bodies to the authorities responsible for youth policies) based on respective laws. The Youth Councils are composed of representatives of youth organisations, local stakeholders, etc. However, their functionality should be further improved and Youth Councils as well as public sector need to show more proactiveness. Meanwhile, all the economies have the necessary legal framework to have youth umbrella organisations/youth councils as associations or unions of youth organisations. Kosovo*, Serbia, and Montenegro have recognised youth unions that bring together youth organisations. Bosnia and Herzegovina has such kind of organisations at entity/district level. Albania and North Macedonia do not yet have such representative associations formally recognised by the government. Albania and North Macedonia have not recognised youth bodies by the respective authorities. Nevertheless, a common struggle for both recognised youth umbrella organisations and those not yet recognised is financial sustainability and sticking to the role of representing the voice of their members (youth organisations) instead of doing activities directly for young people.

There are weaknesses in youth participation at different levels across the WB economies. The scope, status, functionality, outreach, and impact of youth bodies face challenges. For example, Bosnia and



Herzegovina's central-level youth body is not functional, Kosovo*'s council has limited support, and youth representation suffers from lack of cooperation between entity-level ministries in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While legal frameworks exist to register youth councils in WB, more work is needed to establish and formally recognise these representative bodies, make them fully functional, and effectively engage youth in policy dialogue and decision-making.

Weaknesses of youth participation in the decision-making processes are identified at different levels and areas, particularly regarding the scope and mechanisms of established bodies, their status, functionality, communication and cooperation, outreach, and impact. In Albania, a call for applications for a youth umbrella organisation was opened and no one applied. A positive case is Montenegro, which has a functioning umbrella youth organisation - the Association of Youth Network of Montenegro with 43 member youth organisations recognised by the economy. In Kosovo*, the Central Youth Action Council (CYAC) is not fully functional and there is limited sustainable support for its operations. Since September 2020 the Umbrella Youth Council in North Macedonia is a member of the European Youth Forum, however not officially recognised as a body representing youth at the economy level. Worth mentioning is the case of Kosovo*, where in June 2021, the relevant ministry reached an informal cooperation agreement with the Kosovar Youth Council (KYC) NGO on participating in and representing youth voices of Kosovo* in different opportunities and mechanisms. A positive example is Serbia which has three organisations representing different important youth sectors such as the economy-wide Association of Youth Workers (NAPOR), established in 2009, Umbrella Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), established in 2011, and economy-wide Association of Local Youth Offices (NaKZM), established in 2014.

On a general note, positive developments are in place in terms of the legal and policy framework, but the progress efforts should continue, thus consolidating these policies and ensuring a fully functional system where youth as a target group is accepted and understood. Coordination mechanisms between central and local tiers as well as across ministries exist to some extent everywhere but are overall quite limited. The degree of cooperation differs but a commonly noted weakness is the lack of robust coordination and harmonisation of efforts benefiting young people whether at economy-level or below. Ensuring different institutions and levels of government work together and align strategies remains a challenge in crafting comprehensive, integrated youth agendas across the region.

In terms of funding youth policies across the Western Balkans, it derives from different sources. These include central government budgets, provincial/entity or local municipal budgets, international organisations, donor-funded projects and grants. There is no consolidated youth policy fund streamlined across ministries or layers of government. Furthermore, most of the economies of the region lack dedicated budget lines for youth and most policies such as current Action Plans lack dedicated fund for their implementation, which is a major weakness in the youth policy funding framework.

The complicated structure of youth funds shows how fragmented the implementation of youth policies is in the region. Open calls or direct funding is a common way of supporting youth and youth initiatives across the region. Nevertheless, the research conducted in each economy shows that youth organisations cover a broad range of topics, spanning from employment to environment. On the one hand, the complexity of youth funds is positive as it indicates activities in various



domains. On the other hand, a bottom-up approach should be adopted that fully integrates youth organisations' perspectives, secures an enabling operating environment for them, and combines this with international objectives.

In terms of programmes dedicated to youth, most of them focus on unemployment or entrepreneurship. A flagship initiative for the region is the implementation of Youth Guarantee programme. Its implementation is at different stages across the various economies.

Monitoring and evaluating of youth policies remains a major challenge in all Western Balkan economies, and governments are struggling to measure the actual impact of youth programmes. Since good monitoring and evaluation are directly connected to transparency and accountability, it is difficult to understand if policies are effective and how governments can be held responsible for promises given to young people. There are still substantial weaknesses regarding assessing youth policies across the region which also interact with evidence-based policy-making and its level of implementation. There are slight improvements in the evidence-based policy-making process within the framework of consolidating knowledge systems and utilising evidence and research in policy-making, a process that WB economies are currently undergoing.

In terms of donor interventions in the area of youth, positive developments have taken part, promoting youth as part of donors' strategic priorities as well as involving youth to have their say at different important regional high-level meetings. In this regard, initiatives like Western Balkans Youth Lab (WBYL) or Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) have been of paramount importance.

Nevertheless, extended coordination and strategic approach towards youth and youth organisations is needed in WB. While there is an increase in interest and investments towards youth as an important target group in WB population, youth needs to be addressed as a primary audience of different calls or interventions and should have a distinguished focus on youth organisations and organisations which deal with youth. Furthermore, long-term interventions are needed to ensure impact and sustainability of these interventions. On the other side, several good practices have been taking place in WB. For example, civil society groups, including youth organisations, are being consulted whenever governments design youth programmes. Also, the number of small grants and amount of funding for grassroots community groups working on youth issues have increased. This sub-granting helps smaller civil society organisations become financially stable over time.

The report presents recommendations for policymakers, youth organisations, and donors. These recommendations are drawn from the insights provided in each economy report, focusing on evidence-based youth policy and consultation processes, legal and policy framework, institutions and structures dealing with youth, funding mechanisms, inter-institutional cooperation, as well as a cross-sectoral approach. It is strongly recommended that WB governments continue to consolidate their youth policies, allocate increased budgets specifically for youth, integrate youth considerations across all policies, and invest more in evidence-based youth policies and research.



CHAPTER 1: YOUTH POPULATION DATA

This chapter presents statistical information on the demographics of youth in the Western Balkans (WB), encompassing age, gender, employment, and migration. The data for each economy are derived from official statistics, with additional support from publications of international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), International Labour Organisation (ILO), World Bank (WB), and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Eurostat data are also utilised when accessible. However, the lack of readily available youth-specific disaggregated data poses a challenge across WB.

Moreover, the report identifies a lack of uniformity in the age categories (15-24, 15-29, 15-30) used for data collection by various institutions. The report contends that this inconsistency reflects a limited sensitivity to data collection and an inadequate appreciation of the significance of youth research in informing evidence-based policy development. A recommendation is made to harmonise age group categories for data collection, ensuring consistency, and emphasizing the potential benefits for youth research and evidence-based youth policy. Using a consistent definition of youth as those between 15-29 years old across the Western Balkans would also help align with the EU's standards and definitions for youth.

1.1 Age and gender

According to Eurostat¹, the total youth population in the Western Balkans is around 3.6 million, which makes up approximately 21% of the total population. Kosovo* 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% men and 48.84% women.

1.2. Employment

In terms of employment the situation is different from one economy to another but finding unified information about it is challenging. Therefore, below data are based on the research conducted in each economy. Unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, remains a persistent economic challenge across the Western Balkans. In Albania, the latest 2023 data from the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) indicates an overall unemployment rate of 22.3%.² Meanwhile in Bosnia and Herzegovina, World Bank figures show a youth unemployment rate at the economy level of 33.47% in 2022³ - the lowest level in recent years yet still elevated. Similarly, high rates plague other economies in the

1 EUROSTAT, 2022, Basic figures on Western Balkans and Turkey — Fact sheets — 2022 edition, accessed 20 November 2023, <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-catalogues/-/ks-05-22-089>>

2 INSTAT, 2023, Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Q2 – 2023, accessed 24 September 2023, available at: <<https://www.instat.gov.al/media/12504/quarterly-labour-force-survey-q2-2023.pdf>>

3 World Bank 2023, World Development Indicators, available at: <<https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators> (Accessed 1 October 2023)>.



region. In Kosovo*, a study by the European Office in Kosovo* pegged current youth unemployment at 29%⁴, exceeding 30% for women and marginalised groups. Montenegro has witnessed some recent improvement but still grapples with significant joblessness among young people, with youth unemployment standing at 17% as of Q2 2023 after topping 30% in Q4 2022⁵. North Macedonia faces comparable struggles, with the Statistical Office documenting a 32.5% youth unemployment rate in the 15-24 age range, though the 2022 European Commission report indicates this has fallen steadily from 30.9% last year⁶. Finally, Serbia saw some 372,436 total unemployed persons as of August 2023 per its Employment Service, of which a sizable 67,131 or 18.02% were youth.⁷

1.3 Youth Migration

All the economies of the region are facing demographic challenges. The data gathered in each economy reveals high migration trends, which may contribute to demographic challenges in the near future. In Albania, 71%⁸ of youth are considering emigration in their short and mid-term plans. In 2022, approximately 46,460 Albanians emigrated, the majority of these emigrants, numbering around 36,000, were young individuals⁹. According to the 2021 UNFPA study on youth migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina, almost a quarter of respondents have seriously considered leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina permanently and an additional 23%¹⁰ of them think about temporary migration, as the pursuit of better living standards and new perspectives is a major driving force for migrants¹¹. In Kosovo*, aspirations for migration remained prevalent with 53% of young individuals claiming they were or likely considering emigration¹².

In Montenegro, more than a third of young people express the desire to permanently move to another economy, while about 29.2% are open to the possibility, depending on the economic opportunities¹³. In North Macedonia, a significant majority, accounting for 58% of the youth surveyed¹⁴, express a

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- 4 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2016). IFES Kosovo* Works to Engage Youth in Political and Electoral Processes. Accessed on 28 October 2023. <<https://www.ifes.org/publications/ifes-kosovo-works-engage-youth-political-and-electoral-processes>>
 - 5 LFS for 2021, 2022 and 2023. All available at: <<http://monstat.org/cg/page.php?id=1671&pageid=1671>>.
 - 6 North Macedonia Report 2022, accessed 24 September <<https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf>>
 - 7 Национална Служба за запошљавање. Август 2023. Месечни Статистички Билтен Незапосленост и Запошљавање у Србији. <<https://rb.gy/lgrsb>. / Employment Service. August 2023. Monthly Statistical Bulletin Unemployment and Employment in Serbia. <https://rb.gy/lgrsb>>
 - 8 Westminster Foundation for Democracy & Civic Resistance, 2021, Survey: Young People and Politics in Albania, accessed 24 September 2023, <https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/national-survey_young-people-and-politics-in-albania-final.pdf>
 - 9 The Conversation, 2023, Albania's brain drain: why so many young people are leaving and how to get them to stay, accessed 24 September 2023, <<https://theconversation.com/albanias-brain-drain-why-so-many-young-people-are-leaving-and-how-to-get-them-to-stay-207455>>
 - 10 United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 2021, Survey on Youth Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, accessed 1 October 2023, <https://ba.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/youth_emigration_survey_in_bih_eng_final_0_0.pdf>
 - 11 United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 2021, Survey on Youth Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, accessed 1 October 2023, <https://ba.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/youth_emigration_survey_in_bih_eng_final_0_0.pdf>
 - 12 Kelmendi, F 2023, May 10, Kosovo*s youth: Overcoming challenges and creating opportunities. Österreichische Gesellschaft Für Europapolitik. accessed 3 November 2023, <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/kosovos-youth-overcoming-challenges-and-creating-opportunities/#autorenbox_bottom>
 - 13 Civic and Political Participation of Youth in Montenegro, CEDEM, 2020, pg. 48. accessed 21 August 2023, <<http://www.cedem.me/publikacije/istrazivanje/politicko-javno-mnjenje/send/29-politicko-javno-mnjenje/1962politicka-i-gradanska-participacija-mladih-u-crnoj-gori>>
 - 14 Gjorgjiovska, J and Galevski, M, Socio-Political Participation of Young People 2021, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, accessed 9 September 2023, <<https://mof.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Studija-Socio-Politicko-Ucestvo-na-Mladi-2021-MK-sml-1.pdf>>



willingness to emigrate, if presented with the opportunity. Out of this group, a mere 6.9% would consider returning. In Serbia, in 2023, 23.6% of young people said they already had plans in progress to move abroad, while 25.6% mentioned currently being in the planning phase but had not yet started the actual process. Over half of them (54.8%) would prefer to move to (Western) Europe¹⁵.



CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE YOUTH POLICY FRAMEWORKS IN THE WB

This chapter examines the youth policy, scrutinising its legal and institutional framework. In addition to outlining the relevant strategic documents, action plans, laws, and bylaws, a critical assessment identifies achievements, challenges, and persisting gaps.

2.1. Constitutions

Constitutional provisions on youth rights vary across the Western Balkans. Albania and Montenegro guarantee youth rights and protections in their Constitutions. North Macedonia regulates some key youth rights, even though not explicitly. Constitution in Serbia does not specifically reference youth, apart from the workplace protections. Due to its complex political structure, youth issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina are delegated to entities - Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, and Brčko District. Kosovo*'s Constitution grants voting rights to individuals once they turn 18, with no other specific youth provisions. Though approaches differ, most economies in the region have taken steps towards constitutional youth protections.

2.2 Laws on Youth

All of the WB economies have approved laws on youth, and their implementation is at different stage, depending on the time of approval, progress, and governmental plans for the future development of youth policy.

In Albania, the Law on Youth was approved in November 2019 after a broad consultation process, and its implementation is progressing. The Law on Youth in Albania enables the creation of Youth Council, Local Youth Council, and economy-level Youth Representative Organisation (NYRO) as the youth umbrella organisation, while envisaging a dedicated fund for youth grants from the central budget.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the lack of economy-level youth law, both entities and Brčko District have prepared and adopted their own youth laws: Law on Youth of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Law on Youth Organising of Republika Srpska, and Law on Youth of Brčko District.

In Kosovo* the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth (LEPY) was approved in 2009. The Law serves as the legal basis for the establishment of Local Youth Action Councils (LYACs), and the Central Youth Action Council (CYAC), and facilitating youth participation at both central and local levels¹⁶.

16 OSCE, 2013, A guide for new Local Youth Action Council. Participatory Handbook. accessed 2 November 2023, <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/9/110054.pdf>>



In June 2016, the Montenegrin Parliament passed the Law on Youth (LoY), marking the first regulation of youth policy and activities in Montenegro. Since then, the law has undergone several changes, including in 2019 and other years. Nevertheless, the Law is in force and it envisages a set of mechanisms on youth participation at local and central level.

In North Macedonia, after a series of advocacy processes from civil society stakeholders, the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies was adopted in 2020. The Law distinguishes between types of youth organisations, requiring the Agency for Youth and Sport to register them. It also defines key youth terms for the first time, while establishing central and local mechanisms to involve youth in policy/decision-making processes.

Serbia has a more consolidated experience in terms of legal framework on youth. The Law on Youth was formulated through a broad participatory process and was adopted in July 2011. At the end of 2018, the Youth Council of Serbia, Association of Youth Workers and Association of Local Youth Offices reached an agreement on common and priority goals of amending the Law on Youth and the Law on Volunteering to improve the institutional framework and create the preconditions for quality systemic care for young people.

All the laws are intended to regulate different matters related to youth, ensure youth empowerment, improve their socio-economic position, support youth organisation, and improve their participation in decision-making. Legislation of all economies contain similar definitions of youth related main terms, such as youth organisations, the rights and obligations of youth, etc. Also, the aforementioned laws regulate similar youth-related matters, such as legal protection and provisions for youth rights, youth work, role of youth councils, etc. Additionally, they envision mechanisms and instruments through which young people can address issues of their interest and concerns.

2.3 Target population of Youth Policy

Definitions of youth vary across the Western Balkans. In Montenegro and Serbia, youth encompass individuals aged 15-30. Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted a nuanced approach, with Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Brčko District defining youth as ages 15-30, while Republika Srpska classifies youth of age 15-29. North Macedonia and Albania consider youth to be 15-29 years, while Kosovo* categorises youth as individuals between 15 and 24 years. Despite these differing age ranges, the majority of economies in the region generally characterise youth as spanning from age 15 to the late 20s or early 30s. The adoption of a harmonised definition would enhance the comparability of data analysis and research on youth across the region and even more across the EU Member States. Furthermore, this kind of approach would help the respective economies in the approximation with EU standards and definitions, where young people are defined as those between 15 and 29 years old¹⁷. Adopting this uniform age range would facilitate comparability of youth-related statistics, policies and outcomes across Western Balkans and EU members. Approximation of laws, regulations, programmes and monitoring policies related to youth issues, using EU framework which stipulates youth under 15-29 age category, would help in standardisation of indicators, evaluations and

17 Eurostat, Youth Overview, accessed on 5 November 2023

<<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/youth#:~:text=Young%20people%20are%20defined%20as%20those%20between%2015%20and%2029%20years%20old.&text=Start%20discovering%20this%20topic%20and%20consult%20our%20information%20on%20data%20page>>



reporting, policy exchange and transfer of best practices between Western Balkan economies and EU Member States. This will empower comprehensive youth agendas, enabling easier coordination, increasing conformity with EU youth strategies, etc.

In short, institutionalising the EU-aligned youth-age of 15-29 years would provide for more uniformity, compatibility and integration between Western Balkan economies themselves and with the EU on the other hand.

2.4 Strategies on Youth

In terms of strategies on youth, almost all economies of Western Balkans have adopted a strategy except Bosnia and Hercegovina, which does not have an economy-wide strategy but depends on entity's strategies.

In Albania, the new Youth Strategy 2022-2029¹⁸ was adopted in 2022, after extensive consultations. It aims to encourage active youth participation in society, prioritise youth well-being and inclusion, and provide opportunities for Albanian youth on par with European standards.

In Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite efforts for almost one decade, the Youth Strategy has not been adopted yet. Meanwhile, cantons can implement their own youth strategies independently. Currently, Republika Srpska is implementing its 2023-2027 youth policy which was adopted in January 2023¹⁹. In February 2023, Brčko District also adopted its own youth strategy.²⁰

In Kosovo*, the key document outlining youth policy implementation is the Kosovo* Strategy for Youth and Action Plan 2019-2023 (KSYAP)²¹. The Strategy's goal is to enhance the youth situation in Kosovo* by fostering collaboration between youth organisations and the government. In May 2023, the drafting process of the Strategy for Youth 2024-2032 was presented but there is no clear information about its stage of development.

The economy-wide Youth Strategy of North Macedonia (2016-2025) was adopted in February 2016, and it covered the following thematic areas: youth participation, youth information, local youth work, education, employment and pre-employment support, culture, sports, health and quality of life.

The new Youth Strategy 2023-2027 of Montenegro was adopted on 19 October 2023. The top priorities of the strategy are: providing economic and social security, quality education, active participation and empowerment in decision-making, healthy development and support systems, access to cultural content, and effective regulatory frameworks.

18 Youth Strategy 2022-2029, accessed 15 September 2023, <<https://riniafemijet.gov.al/strategjia-kombetare-e-rinise-2022-2029-tashme-miratar/>>

19 Government of Republika Srpska, 2023, Usvojena omladinska politika Republike Srpske od 2023. do 2027, accessed 1 October 2023, <<https://shorturl.at/pzLP8>>

20 Brčko District Assembly, 2023, Usvojena strategija za mlade za period 2022-2026. godina, accessed 1 October 2023, <<https://skupstinabd.ba/index.php/ba/3703-usvojena-strategija-za-mlade-za-period-2022-2026-godina.html>>

21 Kosovo* Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Mobilising Youth for Participation, Representation and Active Citizenship, accessed 15 September 2023, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.mkrs-ks.org/repository/docs/Strategy_for_Youth_2019-2023.pdf>



In Serbia, the new Strategy for Youth in Serbia (SfY) for the period 2023-2030²² was adopted on 26 January 2023. Unlike the old strategy with nine strategic goals, the new SfY 2023-2030 has one general goal: to improve the quality of life of young people.

2.5 Action Plans on Youth at Economy Level

Considering Action Plans are crucial documents for implementing laws and strategies related to youth, the situation is similar across the entire region. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the exception, lacking central-level youth policy documents. Entities and some cities have adopted local youth strategies and action plans. However, adoption of youth frameworks across government levels remains limited.

Albania adopted a new economy-wide Youth Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2029 in October 2022, and before that, it lacked a central strategy or action plan for almost two years. Serbia approved the Action Plan 2023 -2025 of the Youth Strategy 2023-2030 on 6 July 2023. Montenegro lacked a comprehensive youth policy framework for nearly two years before adopting a new Youth Strategy 2023-2027 in October 2023. Together with the strategy an annual Action Plan 2023-2024 was approved as well. This aims to establish an inter-sectoral support system for youth by 2027. North Macedonia adopted the Action Plan 2023-2025 with NYS in September 2023, and outlined specific measures and activities, in line with its strategic goals. Kosovo* is expecting to have a new Youth Strategy and Action Plan, but in the meantime, the Youth Action Plan 2019-2023, outlined as a distinct document within the strategy, is in force.

While most of the Western Balkan economies have recently made efforts to renew youth strategies as shown in subchapter 2.4 Strategies on Youth, including action plans, comprehensive and coordinated policy frameworks are still in a developing phase. Action Plans timeframe and their monitoring remains subject to consideration within the framework of the policy cycle stages.

2.6 Institutions dealing with Youth

Over time, dedicated institutions which deal with youth have further developed and in general youth as a policy sector is included together with education or sports. Still, new developments are in place. In 2021, Albania appointed a Minister for Youth and Children (MSYC) to formulate youth policies that protect the rights of young people and promote their active participation in society. The Youth Agency under MSYC authority is the implementation body of youth policies and administers youth grants. The Parliamentary Youth Club is another related body. Local authorities also carry out youth programmes and work with the Local Youth Council.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional setup for youth policy and the youth sector is organised as follows: The economy level includes the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MoCA) with its Department for Mobility and Youth, within the Education Sector. The entity and the district levels include the Federal Ministry for Culture and Sport and its Department for Youth; Ministry of Family, Youth, and Sport of Republika Srpska and its Department for Youth; and Department for Expert and Administrative Matters of Brčko District. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina level

22 Strategy for Youth in Serbia for the Period from 2023 to 2030, accessed November 2023, <<https://t.ly/7X2Q2>>



includes seven ministries that have departments for youth or added jurisdiction for youth policy within the ministry authority. Three cantons (West Herzegovina Canton, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, and Canton 10) still do not have a Youth Department within any of their ministries.

In Kosovo*, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (MCYS) serves as the paramount governmental entity tasked with the formulation and implementation of youth policies. Within MCYS, the Department of Youth assumes a multifaceted role. The strategy and work plan for the youth sector are being executed, with an in-depth analysis of the sector's current state, legal frameworks, institutions, programmes, and activities. Municipal offices promote local young citizen initiatives.

Montenegro's Ministry of Sports and Youth and its Directorate for Youth develop laws and oversee economy-level strategy. Municipal secretariats fulfil local youth duties set by law. The Ministry also establishes regional youth centres. According to the Law on Youth, the Ministry or municipality, within their respective jurisdictions and capabilities, ensures the necessary conditions for the functioning of youth services.

North Macedonia lacks a Ministry which focuses on Youth. The Agency for Youth and Sport leads youth policy efforts, reporting directly to the Government. Other ministries implement employment and education initiatives. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister's Youth Advisor coordinates across institutions. Municipal youth offices deliver local services.

In 2021, Serbia restructured its institutional framework, establishing the Ministry of Tourism and Youth. Within the Youth Sector, there are specific internal units: Department for Strategic, Normative, Legal, and Operational-Analytical Affairs and Section for Collaboration with Associations and Youth Offices. The Youth Sector is responsible for tasks related to the system, development, and improvement of youth policy²³. The Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth monitors and supports the work of youth-led and youth-oriented organisations, their associations and local youth offices in AP Vojvodina.

In conclusion, institutions dealing with youth differ from one economy to another, but there are similarities in terms of involving local government units (depending on the administrative division of the economy), education ministries, or having in place agencies dedicated to youth. Considering the nature of this target group, other ministries such as social protection, health, tourism, etc. also have youth-policy related policies. Despite positive developments, a common feature of the WB youth policy framework over the years is the limited inter-institutional coordination and cross-sectorial harmonisation.

2.7 Other sectors impacting youth

Apart from the youth policies that are in place, there are also other sectors which impact youth. Employment and skills development impacts youth to a great extent. In Albania, an important law for the youth policies and youth development is the Law on Voluntarism which seeks to establish legal provisions for volunteer engagement. Economy-wide Employment and Skills Strategy (NESS) 2023–

23 Сектор за омладину/Youth Sector n.d. Gov.rs, accessed on 21 September 2023, <<https://t.ly/8xj4B>>



2030²⁴ is developed and will build upon achievements and lessons learnt from previous policies. Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a central employment strategy at the economy level, and thus youth employment is targeted through other policy measures. Generally, it is implemented at entity level. In Kosovo*, the Education Strategy 2022-2026 indicates a government allocation of 3.5 million euros designated to facilitate professional practice for students in vocational education and training schools, encouraging among others, girls to pursue technical profiles and boys to engage in deficit profiles. North Macedonia has several policies such as Law on Student Standard, which regulates and defines the student standard, as well as the establishment, organisation, functioning and management of the institutions for the student standard as part of the educational system. Law on Internships regulates the procedure and conditions for the implementation of an internship. The Strategy on Mental Health for Youth 2023-2026 in North Macedonia is an innovation policy action and is the first of its kind in the region. In Serbia, there are a few key policies that impact youth, including the Law on Volunteering which regulates the volunteerism framework, Employment Strategy 2021–2026, and Strategy for Education and Upbringing Development. Montenegro has several policies which affect youth. Montenegro's Inclusive Education Strategy 2019–2025, which provides a more social justice-oriented approach and highlights the importance of inclusivity in education, can be seen as a positive initiative.

2.8 Critical Assessment

All WB economies have approved laws on youth to empower young people. Compared with the previous years there is progress in consolidating the legal and policy frameworks. All WB economies have enacted youth laws to boost their social standing, promote youth organisations, and facilitate youth participation in tailored decision-making process. This sets a foundation for improving youth rights and youth empowerment which should be further enriched and consolidated. Almost all economies have adopted economy-wide youth strategies, only Kosovo* will adopt the new one soon and in Bosnia and Herzegovina the situation varies, as the youth strategies are implemented on entity level. An issue that needs further attention in all economies, and is also a common weakness, is the lack of creation of synergies among domestic laws.

As per policy design, the institutions in charge at central level are different in each economy. Still, there are some new bodies emerging, focusing thoroughly on youth, such as the case of Albania which has a Minister for Youth and Children since 2021 focused on youth policies which is a positive example for the region. Meanwhile Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo* have youth attached with other policy areas such as tourism, sport or culture which can hinder youth considering the given attention on these policy topics. Institutions dealing with youth issues exist, even though youth policy is usually grouped under education, sports or culture ministries rather than dedicated youth ministries. Therefore, having dedicated institutions at policy level can be a good start to increase coordination among different levels of governance and secure the needed youth cross-sectoral mainstreaming. Recent efforts were made to renew strategies and action plans in Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro, although comprehensive and coordinated frameworks are still developing. Ensuring continuity and follow-up on youth plans already completed should be as much of a focus

24 Regional Cooperation Council, Performance of Western Balkan economies regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights 2022 Review on Albania, accessed on 11 September 2023, <<https://www.esap.online/docs/196/rcc-esap-2-performance-of-western-balkan-economies-regarding-the-european-pillar-of-social-rights-2022-review-on-albania>>



as drafting ambitious new ones. Gaps persist between the impact at the strategic level and on-ground implementation, which is associated with the insufficient consideration of all stages of the policy cycle, particularly in terms of policy monitoring and evaluation.

Meanwhile, in terms of institutions in charge of the implementation of youth policies, there are generally agencies or similar entities. In the case of Albania and North Macedonia, there are youth agencies in place. In the case of other economies, there are other kinds of administrative units which are in charge of youth such as directorates or departments. At the local level, there are municipal youth programming bodies or other dedicated youth entities. However, complexity persists, especially in decentralised systems where competencies are sometimes unclear due to the lack of synergies among different policies or even a lack of understanding of youth participation principles. A common weakness in Western Balkan economies in this regard is the poor implementation of youth institutions, specified in various laws, hindering their further consolidation and operation in line with the relevant principles.

Definitions of “youth” differ widely, typically encompassing ages 15-30s in all economies, besides Kosovo* that uses 15-24 group age. Even though there are improvements in terms of youth data, WB institutions still do not have this target group as an integral part of their data collection methodologies in place. A harmonised 15-29 youth age group would enable better data analysis, statistics, integration between Western Balkan economies themselves and the EU youth development domain. It would facilitate regional cooperation, standardisation of policies and tracking of results over time across the enlargement process.

In summary, compared with the previous report and development through the years there are more institutions in each economy which deal with youth, and more youth related policies have been developed at domestic level. Nevertheless, limited inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral coordination on youth programming and policies persists. Legal mechanisms are stipulated in laws, but strategic cooperation is missing. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks, which track implementation and impact of youth laws, strategies and public spending, are still nascent in most of the economies. This hinders transparency and accountability in the youth sector and makes it impossible to monitor progress or regress. The building blocks of economy-wide youth agendas are advancing across the WB region, but there are still critical areas that need to be improved in order to create integrated, evidence-based policies that empower young people and make them recognised policy target group.



CHAPTER 3: FUNDING FRAMEWORK

The chapter analyses youth policy funding and presents some key interventions and WB government programmes in the youth area, including a critical assessment of the above.

3.1 Youth Policy Funding

Across the Western Balkans, youth programming funding originates from various sources, although comprehensive and dedicated funding remains a challenge. Only Kosovo* has an identified budget line at the central level dedicated to youth.

Albania's Law on Youth defines potential funding streams for youth policy implementation which include: central and local budget allocations; income generated through youth organisations' activities; donations from philanthropic organisations or companies; sponsorships from corporate entities; other legal monetary sources. The 2022 Mid-Year Budget report showed an allocation of 3,770.23 EUR, including youth and sports activities, but does not specify the division across the two sectors. Additionally, the 2022 Reserve Fund, established by Law No. 115/2021 on the Budget, stipulates "projects for children and youth" as a key area but without indicating precise amounts for youth initiatives versus other programmes in this budget category.

In the governance system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the primary focus for youth policy funding responsibilities and resource planning is at the entity/district levels. The entities' Ministry and departments focus specifically on youth matters or youth-related issues, and distribute budgets downward to their constituent units through transfers or grants. A noteworthy mechanism employed for financing youth organisations and initiatives involves the issuance of public calls for project proposals, a practice administered by these Ministries at both the entity and other hierarchical levels. Nonetheless, the budget documentation and reporting procedures across governance lack spending categories or budgetary lines directly earmarked for youth programming. A recent exception to this prevailing trend in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the Ministry of Culture and Sport which has allocated EUR 200,000 for youth policy and representation bodies in the 2022-2024 work plan. In Republika Srpska, the legislation generally imposes an obligation at each level of governance to allocate segments of their comprehensive budgets towards the pursuit of objectives outlined in the Youth Policy of Republika Srpska. Nevertheless, the exact scope and amounts designated for the youth sector from these budgetary allocations remain unclear, as discerned from the prevailing reporting and monitoring systems.

In Kosovo*, following the advice of the Parliamentary Committee for Education, Science, Technology, Culture, Youth and Sports, a distinct budget code for youth was established at the local level. This measure was taken to ensure that the funds allocated for youth were utilised appropriately, preventing municipalities from diverting these funds for other purposes. Prior to this reform, budget allocations granted municipalities the flexibility to reallocate funds according to their discretion. The Law on Budget Allocations of Kosovo* for the year 2021 designates 34,305,708 EUR for the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, with 2,209,546 EUR allocated specifically for the Youth Programme.



The legal framework in Montenegro shows the responsibility for securing and funding youth policy activities, assigning this duty to both the central budget and the budgets of individual municipalities. Nevertheless, in addition to the Ministry of Sports and Youth, several other ministries and agencies allocate portions of their budgets to initiatives, projects, and programmes related to youth, though without specific tracking or reporting mechanisms for youth-directed expenditures. Examinations of recent budgeting and spending patterns highlight widespread inconsistencies in resourcing mechanisms, uncertainties regarding funding flows, and a noticeable lack of prioritisation for the youth sector in resource allocation decisions. For example, only EUR 419,899 (equivalent to approximately 0.01% of Montenegro's total 2023 central budget) was directly earmarked for youth programming across the government.

In North Macedonia, the Agency of Youth and Sports faces constraints due to its limited youth budget, resulting in restricted funds for youth civil society organisations. On an annual basis, the Agency of Youth and Sports launches a call for grants, supporting projects in line with the Youth Strategy objectives. Since 2021, a prerequisite for obtaining a grant from the Agency is the organisation's registration in the Agency's Registry of youth organisations, organisations for youth, and youth umbrella organisations²⁵. Based on the Agency's approved budget for 2023, the annual allocated budget to support third parties in the field of youth is EUR 90,932 (MKD 5,600,000)²⁶. Compared to previous years, in 2021, the allocated budget to support third parties in the field of youth was EUR 64,938 (MKD 4,000,000)²⁷, which increased in 2022 to EUR 95,784 (MKD 5,900,000)²⁸, before dropping again in 2023.

Serbian legislation stipulates that the funding for youth policy implementation is to be sourced from the central budget of the Government of Serbia, the budgets of Autonomous Province, local self-governments, and other unspecified funding sources. Nevertheless, the presence of comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanisms seems restricted, thereby limiting transparency concerning the specific amounts allocated to the youth sector across various budget categories and levels of governance. Estimates indicate that approximately 0.03% of Serbia's total annual central budget is allocated to youth programming activities of the Ministry of Tourism and Youth. In comparison, the proposed 2023-2025 Youth Action Plan outlines over RSD 10.6 billion (EUR 90.8 million) in required financing, with over RSD 3.2 billion (EUR 27.3 million) expected for 2023 implementation.

3.1.1 Funding the Youth Strategies and Action Plans

In several WB economies there is a notable absence of a dedicated budget to implement the economy-wide Youth Strategy and its corresponding Action Plan in the youth sector. This deficiency not only represents a significant weakness in the funding framework for youth policies but also poses a challenge to their effective implementation.

25 Agency of Youth and Sports, 2022, Call for Financial Support to Civil Society Organisations, accessed 17 September 2023, <<https://ams.gov.mk/public-call/oglas-za-finansiska-poddrshka-na-zdruzenija-i-fondaczii>>

26 Agency of Youth and Sports, 2022, Annual Budget of Agency of Youth and Sports for 2023, accessed 17 September 2023, <<https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/budhet-za-2023.pdf>>

27 Agency of Youth and Sports, 2020, Annual Budget of Agency of Youth and Sports for 2021, accessed 23 October 2023, <https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/budhet_2021_2-1.pdf>

28 Agency of Youth and Sport, 2023, Annual Financial Report of Agency of Youth and Sports for 2022, accessed 23 October 2023, <<https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/godishen-finansiski-izveshtaj-za-2022.pdf>>



In Albania, in total ALL 5,570,086,793 (EUR 53,275,764)²⁹ are planned for the implementation of Youth Strategy 2022 -2029 Action Plan. The prevailing approach has involved funding youth projects through the Youth Agency and economy-wide programmes. There is no designated budget line for youth policies in the central budget.

As for Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina³⁰ a total of approx. EUR 200,000 is/will be allocated for the period 2022–2024 including the following specific items: policy and project support intended for young people in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (approx. EUR 150,000); support to the Youth Council in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (approx. EUR 20,000); development and adoption of strategic documents (approx. EUR 20,000); establishment and work of local youth councils (approx. EUR 10,000). Nevertheless, this budget is directly allocated to youth and is not earmarked for specific strategies or existing youth policies. The reason is that this entity does not have an adopted strategy or action plan in place. The legislation of Republika Srpska entity defines that each level of governance allocates parts of their budgets to follow and implement programmes specified in the Youth Policy of Republika Srpska. To enact this measure, multiple ministries in Republika Srpska allocate funds specifically for the youth population, students, and youth-led non-governmental organisations, including support for the Youth Council of Republika Srpska. According to the Law on Youth in Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the District's Government is obliged to provide financial resources for conducting research and developing youth policies. In the 2024 budget proposal, Brčko District plans to invest approx. EUR 250,000 for building a youth centre in Grčica, one of the most populous local communities in Brčko. This marks the continuation of a project for which approximately EUR 100,000 was already allocated in 2023.

In Kosovo*, the comprehensive evaluation of Youth Strategy 2019-2023 indicates the total cost of implementing activities over the course of five years of |EUR 11,661,900. The funding necessary for the implementation of Youth Strategy Action Plan 2019-2023 is expected to be sourced from both the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and Development Agencies. Allocations for Kosovo* for the year 2021 designate EUR 34,305,708 for the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, with EUR 2,209,546 allocated specifically for the Youth Programme. Notably, there have been no substantial changes in the allocated funds over the past three years³¹ but what is of concern is the fact that the last three Kosovo* budgets reveal significant unused youth funds, potentially hindering the implementation of Action Plan's activities due to their carryover from previous fiscal years.

In Montenegro, budget allocations for youth policy during this three-year period are strikingly low, representing only a minimal fraction of the overall annual central budget. In 2021, only EUR 692,831.13 was allocated for the implementation of youth policy, which represented approx. 0.03% of the overall annual budget for 2021³². In 2022, EUR 484,899.39 was allocated for the implementation

29 Youth Strategy 2022 – 2029, accessed on 10 November 2023, <<https://riniafemijet.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Strategjia-Kombetare-e-Rinise-2022-2029-1.pdf>>

30 Ministry of Culture and Sports of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022, Trogodišnji plan rada Federalnog ministarstva kulture i sporta za period 2022. - 2024. godina, accessed on 15 November 2023, <https://fmks.gov.ba/images/2022/TROGODI%C5%A0NJI_PLAN_RADA_FMKS_ZA_PERIODE_2022-2024.pdf>

31 Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, accessed 17 September 2023, <<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://mf.rks-gov.net/desk/inc/media/1F14DA73-6925-49B6-883E-014550C6E3C8.pdf>>

32 Law on Budget of Montenegro for 2021, accessed 11 September 2023, <<https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/f575125f-358c-4d91-9fdd-df8726df6b31>>



of youth policy, which represented approx. 0.02% of the overall annual central budget for 2022³³. In 2023, only EUR 419,899.39 was allocated for the implementation of youth policy, which represented approx. 0.01% of the overall annual central budget for 2023³⁴.

In North Macedonia, youth policies still lack a dedicated budget line in the central budget, posing a challenge in effectively tracking expenditures on youth policy. The Agency of Youth and Sports (AYS) allocated a budget of 502,810,000 Denars (EUR 8,164,632) for 2023, of which only 4.3% (21,750,000 Denars) were allocated for the youth sector of AYS, which includes support to youth civil society organisations and youth policy, while the rest is for sport-related activities.³⁵ Similarly in 2019, the budget for youth was approx. EUR 401,411.00 (MKD 24,728,000.00) or 4% of the total budget of the Agency of Youth and Sports approx. EUR 9,608,163.00 (MKD 590,902,000.00) where dedicated to youth. In terms of the budget's growth in recent years, it reached its peak in 2022. However, it subsequently began to decline once more and the greatest percentage of the budget goes for sport.

In Serbia, the proposed budget for the implementation of the Action Plan 2023-2025 of the Youth Strategy 2023-2030 was RSD 10,648,263,494.00 (approx. EUR 90,812,238.67) while in 2023 a total of RSD 3,201,116,142.00 (approx. EUR 27,300,275.13) was allocated. When it comes to the provincial level, the total funds allocated in the 2023 budget of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (APV) for youth policy are RSD 42,000,000 (approx. EUR 358,338), which represents an increase of three million RSD (approx. EUR 25,595) compared to 2022. However, the share of youth policy in the total budget of APV has decreased from 8.4% to 6.1%.³⁶ The total funds in the budget of APV for youth policy in 2020 amounted to RSD 27,000,000 (EUR 230,360) which was 6% of the total funds allocated for the Provincial Secretariat for Youth and Sports.

3.1.2 Funding youth organisations' projects, initiatives and activities

The most common way of supporting youth is through open calls, transfers, and subsidies for youth organisations. The absence of a comprehensive system for data collection and fund management makes it impossible to accurately estimate the total funds dedicated to or expended to youth and youth-related issues, both on an annual basis and over extended periods. In all WB economies, funds (central and local budget) for youth policy and youth issues are disbursed through public calls, transfers, or subsidies (of ministries in charge of youth) targeting non-governmental organisations. Several economies in the Western Balkans region have introduced dedicated funding mechanisms to support youth organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs) working on youth issues.

In Albania, the new Law on Youth establishes a youth fund for youth and CSOs to access through central government funding. For 2023, Albania maintained grant funding of EUR 540,066 for youth organisations and youth infrastructure, with additional support from UN agencies. The 2023 call for proposals aligns with the Youth Strategy implementation. Similarly, Serbia allocated EUR 874,138 in 2023 towards programmes and projects supporting its 2030 Youth Strategy and Youth Are the Law

33 Law on Budget of Montenegro for 2022, accessed 11 September 2023, <<https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/2f8db36e-479b-42aa-88c9-ec1ee86245b2>>

34 Law on Budget of Montenegro for 2023, accessed 11 September 2023, <<https://www.gov.me/clanak/zakon-o-budzetu-crne-gore-za-2023-godinu>>

35 Agency of Youth and Sports, 2022, Annual Budget of Agency of Youth and Sports for 2023, accessed 11 September 2023, <<https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/budhet-za-2023.pdf>>

36 Budget of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina for 2023, accessed September 2023, <<t.ly/8hQYe>>



programme goals. North Macedonia also has an annual call for grant proposals from the Agency of Youth and Sports supporting the Youth Strategy. However, available funds are limited at around EUR 90,932³⁷ for 2023. Grant eligibility requires registration in the Agency's registry of youth CSOs from 2021. In contrast, Montenegro's Ministry of Sports and Youth ceased issuing calls for proposals to CSOs regarding youth issues after providing EUR 800,000 in the period 2017-2020. The interruption of crucial financial support jeopardizes the advancements achieved in empowering youth through impactful partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs). Restoring responsive funding mechanisms is urgently required. Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina allocates approximate EUR 200,000³⁸ annually in four youth areas. However, funding is still limited for youth CSOs. In Kosovo*, there is a specific budget allocated for supporting youth initiatives through subsidies and transfers. These funds are distributed through public calls, which focus on specific strategic measures outlined in the strategy, following thematic criteria rather than programme-based allocations.

In conclusion, while some Western Balkan economies have established funding pools for youth CSOs, support mechanisms remain limited overall and face sustainability issues in certain cases. Promising initiatives recognise the vital role CSOs play in furthering youth development. Compared with 2020-2021 there is an increase in funds allocated to youth CSOs but mainly as an implementation tool for the strategies and actions plans in place.

3.2. Key Youth Programmes/Instruments

The most common programmes in all Western Balkan economies are those related to employment, supporting entrepreneurship, or skills development for young people. While the importance of youth economic development is recognised by all stakeholders, it is necessary to have a more holistic approach in the programmes offered by the governments, thus addressing various areas that are essential to support the quality of life for youth. Below is a summary of programmes in place in each economy which will be further critically assessed.

In Albania, the Excellence Fund provides financial support to exceptional students attending the top 15 universities in the world, but in the official mediums of communication of the respective institutions there is no clear information if this programme is still ongoing. Through the economy-wide Programme on Work Placement and Internships, successful young people are offered one-year job contracts by the organisations where they completed their internships. The Coding Programme supports youth technology skills and complements the goals of the Youth Strategy. The economy-wide Programme of Extracurricular Activities (ECA) aims to enhance pro-social and community orientation among children and youth, transforming schools into community life centres. The Sports Teams Programme aims to promote a healthy sporting lifestyle, diverting young people from unhealthy habits, and encouraging meaningful extracurricular engagement.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, youth employment is in focus. Republika Srpska is implementing the Together to Work co-financing programme for employment and self-employment in 2023. Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is running the Start Up 2023 Self-Employment Co-Financing

37 Agency of Youth and Sports, 2022, Annual Budget of Agency of Youth and Sports for 2023, accessed 11 September 2023, <<https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/budhet-za-2023.pdf>>

38 Ministry of Culture and Sports of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022, Budget, accessed 3 October 2023, <https://fmks.gov.ba/images/2022/Program_utro%C5%A1ka_sredstava_za_2022.pdf>



Programme and the Employment Co-Financing Programme 2023. Brčko District introduced the programme of co-financing of self-employment of young unemployed persons up to 35 years of age in 2023. Canton Sarajevo catered the Self Employment Co-Financing Programme for young people up to the age of 35 to encourage employment in 2022.

In Kosovo* in February 2023, the Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers introduced the Superpuna platform, aiming to provide employment opportunities for both young men and women while offering salary subsidies for employees placed in businesses³⁹.

In 2023, the Programme for Balanced Regional Development (BDP) Grant Scheme was launched aimed at supporting new businesses and developing businesses with growth potential and reducing unemployment through the creation of new jobs, with an emphasis on young people⁴⁰.

In Montenegro, the European Youth Card (EYCA) aims to help students financially. The Investment and Development Fund of Montenegro (IDF) aims to promote and facilitate Montenegro's economic development, with a particular focus on initiatives relevant to young people. The Programme for Improving the Competitiveness of the Economy supports young entrepreneurs. The Ministry of Culture provides support to organisations engaged in youth cultural projects through public calls. The Ministry of Science and Technological Development published a series of public calls aimed at bolstering researchers and young scientists.

In North Macedonia, the European Youth Card strives to enhance the daily lives of young individuals, with a primary focus on financial support. Through the Support to Young Farmers programme they receive up to MKD 600.000 (approximately EUR 10,000) to be motivated to engage in agriculture. Youth allowance aims to encourage the employment of young people in production activities after graduating from high school. Subsidised student meal⁴¹, a systemic solution, significantly improves the student standard by providing financial support in the monthly amount of 40 euro for 9 months.

In Serbia, the government launched a youth employment incentive programme titled My First Salary in 2020, aimed at enabling young people under the age of 30, registered with NES, to gain their first work experience within 9 months window of finishing education⁴². EU Youth Dialogue (EUYD) is a continuous process of consultation between young people and decision-makers to jointly define and implement policies relevant to youth at all levels, based on the model of EU Member States.

In October 2020, the European Commission approved the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans. This plan aims to foster the region's enduring economic recovery by promoting initiatives related to environmental sustainability and digital transformation. It also emphasizes the importance of regional collaboration and closer ties with the European Union. In 2022, the European Commission recognised the limited progress made within Chapter 19: Social Policy and Employment by taking steps to gradually establish the Youth Guarantee scheme⁴³. This programme is to be implemented as a proven successful initiative in tackling youth NEET and unemployment.

39 More information about the platform <<https://superpuna.rks-gov.net/>>

40 Ministry of Regional Development, 2023, Call for Proposals for Startup and existing businesses, accessed on 2 November 2023. <<https://mzhr.rks-gov.net/page.aspx?id=1,6>>

41 Law on Subsidised Student Meal, 2020, accessed 18 September 2023, <<https://www.pravdiko.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Zakon-za-subvencioniran-studentski-obrok-10-02-2020.pdf>>

42 Accessed September 2023, <<https://mojaprvlakata.gov.rs/>>

43 European Commission, 2022



This scheme is one of the most important initiatives for youth in all Western Balkan economies. However, its implementation is at different stages across WB. In North Macedonia, the scheme is fully implemented, demonstrating good results. In contrast, other economies are in various stages of implementation or planning phase. In Albania, its implementation was launched in October 2023, and in other economies, the steering committee, coordination body, action plans, or other envisaged structures are still being established.

3.3. Critical assessments

Youth policies in the Western Balkans are funded through contributions from their respective economies. Additionally, there are available funds from international organisations, as well as donations, sponsorships, etc. The most common areas of support are entrepreneurship, employment, innovation, and skills development. Most of the economies of the region have dedicated funds for youth organisations and programmes to support youth in different stages of their activity. The implementation of Youth Strategies also involves the practice of issuing dedicated open calls. Given its inter-sectoral nature, youth initiatives can leverage support from various ministries and institutions. However, a consolidated approach to map and track that support is lacking in all economies.

Positive developments and exemplary instances in terms of youth policy funding do exist within the region, showcasing a commendable commitment to nurturing the potential of young individuals. Albania, for instance, has not only increased the budget for youth but has also streamlined the procedures for calls for applications by aligning them with EU funding mechanisms. In Kosovo*, a dedicated budget line in municipalities specifically allocated for youth activities not only facilitates transparent fund tracking but also enhances monitoring and evaluation processes. In 2023, Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina launched a programme aimed at co-financing self-employment for individuals up to 35 years of age, providing a significant avenue for their development and growth and contributing to lifelong learning as well. Additionally, Montenegro boasts a dedicated programme for young scientists and researchers, demonstrating a forward-looking approach. North Macedonia stands out with several programmes focusing on improving the quality of life for students, underlining a commitment to holistic youth development. Serbia, with its Youth Strategy, benefits from a robust funding framework, where the law mandates a consistent allocation of funds through the central budget. This not only supports the Strategy but also ensures an enduring commitment to achieving long-term strategic goals.

Furthermore, all WB governments have started the implementation of the Youth Guarantee programme while they contribute financially to important programmes and regional initiatives, including the Erasmus+ Programme and Regional Youth Cooperation Office.

Despite the presence of positive examples and notable progress, a critical assessment reveals significant gaps in both resources and transparent systems necessary to support impactful youth policies. While positive measures are evident, achieving meaningful progress requires systematic interventions to enhance youth funding frameworks.



Youth issues currently lack a distinct and robust presence within the budget frameworks of most economies, with a general absence of dedicated allocations. Given the inter-sectoral approach, mapping, monitoring, and evaluating progress become challenging. Another weakness spotted is the data collection and publication of youth budgets. Frequent legislative changes additionally affect the funding framework, including disbursement of funds, institutional memory, and accountability and transparency.

The critical assessment of economy reports noticed that while call for projects for youth organisations are considered positive, more efforts are needed by governments in terms of project implementation, including increasing their standards, improving procedures in place, and supporting youth organisations in capacity building and proper planning. Transparency and accountability should be increased in all these processes.

Meanwhile, most programmes in place focus on youth economic development, thereby overshadowing the importance of programmes in mental health, social inclusion, etc. According to information available from the economy reports, there were no programmes dedicated to the Roma and Egyptian communities or youth with disabilities. Therefore, the programmes in place should be diversified and have an increased focus on marginalised youth. This approach does not contribute to the creation of societies that operate on the principles of social justice and provide equal opportunities for everyone.



CHAPTER 4: YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLICY MAKING AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF YOUTH COUNCILS IN WB ECONOMIES

This chapter analyses the existing mechanisms of youth participation at both the central and local levels, providing additional information about their functionality, identifying existing gaps, highlighting positive developments, and outlining necessary steps to further consolidate them to ensure full participation of youth in governance.

4.1 Youth engagement and participation in policy: Key mechanisms and processes

The WB economies have a youth legal and policy framework in place that states, in principle, the importance of youth engagement and participation in decision-making; Albania, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have economy-wide laws on youth, whereas Bosnia and Hercegovina does not have an economy-level law, but each entity has adopted its own law on youth. Youth showcase they can organise themselves across the WB economies through informal groups, networks, associations, non-for-profit organisations, non-governmental organisations, youth councils, students' councils, and other associations or organisations in the areas of culture, art, sports, and others. However, actual youth participation in decision-making varies from one economy to another, as outlined in the following section where the mechanisms in place are briefly mentioned and further assessed in subchapter 4.3 Establishment and Functioning of Youth Councils and Umbrella Organisations.

4.1.1 Participation at central level

Albania's Youth Law foresees establishment of a set of structures at central level such as the Umbrella Youth Council. Its key role is advising economy-wide youth policies, budget priorities, and strategic directions. Operating under the Minister for Youth and Children, it serves as a body that ensures youth participation in central decision-making. An economy-wide Youth Representative Organisation is foreseen to be created as a youth umbrella organisation. Together they aim to amplify youth perspectives in economy's policies and programmes.

Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have an economy-wide youth law, youth policy, youth council or any youth representative body representing youth at the central level. The youth issues at the central level are under the jurisdiction of the Commission for Coordination of Youth Issues in Bosnia



and Herzegovina, which due to political reason does not operate as prescribed. Meanwhile, other levels of governance have youth commission or youth councils.

In Kosovo*, according to the Law on Youth there are two main bodies which represent youth voices and youth organisations. The Central Youth Action Council (CYAC) which, based on Article 8 of the Law in Youth, should be an advisory body for youth issues that represents the interests of youth organisations to central government institutions and international youth mechanisms, and Youth Action Council which should be a representative youth body, composed of representatives of non-profit youth organisations at both central and local levels.

In Montenegro, the law envisions establishment of the Council for Youth as an expert and advisory body, tasked with promoting development of youth policy. Meanwhile, civil society organisations implementing youth policy may establish an alliance. A representative alliance (umbrella youth organisation), within the meaning of the law, is an alliance that includes at least 30 civil society organisations implementing youth policy, from at least six municipalities, two of which are from the coastal, central, and northern regions each. The ministry determines the representativeness of the alliance of civil society organisations for a period of one year by issuing a certificate of representativeness.

North Macedonia has some representative bodies at the central level: the economy-level Youth Assembly is a body of youth organisations that elects youth representatives in the Advisory Body for Youth Policies; economy-level Youth Assembly is foreseen to be convened by an initiative board of at least two thirds of youth organisations from the Register of the Agency for Youth and Sports⁴⁴. It serves as a collaborative platform between youth representatives and public administration bodies. It has an advisory and supervisory role in the implementation of youth policies and youth activities. Council on Youth within the Agency of Youth and Sports has a purely advisory role and provides opinion to the Director of the Agency regarding youth policy or programmes⁴⁵.

In Serbia, the Youth Advisory Council (YAC) competences are to encourage and coordinate activities related to the development and implementation of youth policy as well as to propose measures for its improvement. The Provincial Secretariat monitors regional youth organisations and councils. In addition to the mechanisms outlined in the existing law, Serbia has two noteworthy initiatives that enhance youth participation in policymaking, fostering direct engagement between youth and decision-makers. One is the Youth Dialogues with the Prime Minister.

Another successful initiative is the EU Youth Dialogue (EUYD), a continuous process of consultation between young people and decision-makers to jointly define and implement policies relevant to youth at all levels which is implemented by KOMS based on the EU model.

4.1.2 Participation at the local level

Legislation and policies throughout the Western Balkans require the establishment of formal youth participation bodies at the municipal level, facilitating youth involvement in local decision-making processes.

44 Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, 2021, accessed 2 September 2023, <<https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/zakon-za-mladinsko-ucestvo-i-mladinski-politiki-2019.pdf>>

45 Representative of the Agency of Youth and Sports, 2023, Interviewed by Filip Kulakov, 20 September, Skopje.



For example, Kosovo*'s instruction requires Local Youth Action Councils engaging in budgets and Municipal Assembly sessions⁴⁶. Similarly, Albania recently introduced local youth councils (LYCs), serving as advisory entities to mayors under the new Law on Youth. During 2023, Albania advanced significantly in establishing LYCs in 59 out of 61 municipalities. Nevertheless, the practical challenges lie in the pace and consistency of implementing these youth structures at the local levels. In Montenegro, despite the legal framework, formation of functioning Local Councils for Youth has been irregular across municipalities, hindering youth inclusion. In the context of North Macedonia, although local youth councils and strategies were established by municipalities in the past, the majority were perceived as unsustainable or lacking transparency. According to the most recent laws, only 19 out of 81 municipalities have established councils⁴⁷. In Serbia, there are 78 youth councils and 140 youth offices at the local level. About 20 local action plans for youth are presently being prepared, and there are currently 43 active ones. Local councils are established at municipal level across Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. During the past years, the entity-level youth councils have been assisting local organisations in forming youth councils in their local communities.

Beyond establishment, the appropriate constitution and operation of these local youth entities also raises concerns in terms of selection processes dominated by political factors, as well their limited advisory role and impact. Instead of functioning as participatory platforms, some of these local entities resemble non-formal youth groups with limited influence over substantive policy matters, budget allocations, and service delivery. While formal structures may be in place, transforming Local Youth Councils into genuinely empowered and influential advisory bodies requires addressing gaps in consistency, resources, youth capacity building, and establishing channels for direct youth input on decisions that impact their lives at the local level. Regional cooperation and EU integration momentum can provide valuable support accelerating these needed interventions. The restructuring is designed to emphasize both policy advancements and common practical shortcomings and barriers that hinder municipalities from effectively enabling meaningful youth participation across the Western Balkans. A more systemic approach matching legal obligations with practical implementation, monitoring and empowerment support, appears vital to the consolidation of youth engagement at local level.

4.2 Evidence-based youth policy

There have been some improvements over the years in evidence-based policy, monitoring, and evaluation. These improvements are evident in the general legal framework, which facilitates citizen and youth participation in decision-making, and in the progress made towards EU reforms. Nevertheless, there is an overall lack of comprehensive, consistent research and data on youth at the economy level, which would help to inform effective, responsive policies. Usually, lower governance levels conduct more regular youth analyses.

Montenegro's 2017-2021 Youth Strategy was developed through extensive consultations with youth stakeholders aimed at ensuring policies respond to young people's needs. A working group

46 Administrative Instruction no. 9/2010 on Responsibilities and Procedures of Establishment and Functioning of Youth Action Councils in Kosovo*, 2010, accessed on 1 November 2023. <<https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=7899>>

47 Kulakov, F 2023. Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies for 2023, Youth Council of North Macedonia, accessed 4 September 2023, <https://nms.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Monitoring_Izvestaj_Broshura_2023_ENG.pdf>



composed of representatives of different stakeholders was established to work on the strategy through a series of one-day and multi-day meetings and consultations. In addition, in Albania, the drafting of the Law on Youth and the Youth Strategy 2022-2029 was done with a broad consultation process with various youth stakeholders, organisations, and networks. Meanwhile, institutionalised mechanisms for cooperation of decision-makers and research community are very limited in North Macedonia, but there is a positive example where the Agency of Youth and Sports has conducted Youth Trends Survey for development of present economy-level strategies.

Governmental institutions sporadically conduct youth research rather than providing a continuous and systematic approach. Institutions responsible for data should adopt more cohesive systems for gathering and identifying youth in all research endeavours as mandated by law. This approach would facilitate aggregation of comprehensive data on youth. Studies on youth-related issues are conducted sporadically rather than systematically, leading to a gap in youth data. This gap poses a challenge for development of evidence-based youth policies. More systematic, standardised research instruments and centralised data platforms are required for robust evidence guiding strategic investments that address real challenges faced by youth in the Western Balkans. The summary highlights uneven, ad-hoc approaches to evidence-based youth policymaking. Despite the existence of positive examples in participative, data-driven youth strategy design, achieving impactful policies requires development of more harmonised youth data ecosystems and enhanced research capacities dedicated to informing youth programming.

4.3 Establishment and functioning of Youth Councils and umbrella organisations

The Western Balkan economies have established the legal framework for developing youth umbrella organisations and youth councils as associations of youth organisations. However, such organisations are neither established nor recognised by central authorities in charge of youth policy in all WB.

For instance, Kosovo*, Serbia, and Montenegro have established economy-level youth umbrella organisations recognised by the authorities. However, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia do not yet have a youth representative association at the central level recognised by respective authorities.

Albania established an economy-wide Youth Council in 2020. Its main function is to present to Minister for Children and Youth the priorities of youth policy, budget and activities in the field of youth. The second cohort of members was selected in November 2023. Enhancing its functionality is imperative, and in accordance with legal provisions, this necessitates concerted efforts from both parties involved (government authority and youth representatives). The Youth Council, chaired by the Youth Minister, comprises 16 members including representatives of local self-government support agencies, youth organisations (selected through an open call), student councils, and Youth Agency. Also, Article 13 of the new Law on Youth foresees the establishment of economy-level Youth Representative Organisation, which is expected to be established as a non-for-profit organisation which will act as youth umbrella organisation. The criteria for NYRO were specified by a CoM' decision No. 274 dated 12.05.2021⁴⁸ and a call for applications was launched on 31 May 2021, but no

48 CoM' decision No. 274 dated 12.05.2021., accessed September 2023, <<https://rinia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/VKM-nr-274-date-12.05.2021-Per-percaktimin-e-kriterive-qe-duhet-te-permbushe-OKPR.pdf>>



applications have been received. Compared to 2020, there have been Council of Ministers' decisions establishing application calls and criteria for all the envisioned youth participatory structures.

Meanwhile in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are three main bodies at the entity and district levels such as the Youth Council of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Youth Council of Republika Srpska established in 2004⁴⁹ and Youth Council of Brčko District. Since all three were established in different periods and act in different context, each has its development and organisational challenges. Thus, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet found a way of adequately developing an economy-level youth council.

The situation is different in Kosovo*, where considering the lack of functionality of the Central Youth Action Council (CYAC) for a numerous of reasons, in June 2021, the ministry reached an informal cooperation agreement with the NGO Kosovar Youth Council (KYC) for participating and representing youth voices of Kosovo* at different opportunities and in various mechanisms. This agreement marked the central government's recognition of the Council's importance. Meanwhile, there is no clear information on the functionality of the Youth Action Council.

Montenegro's 2019 Law on Youth defines establishing an Umbrella Youth Organisation associating youth NGOs. Accordingly, youth NGOs initiated the Youth Network of Montenegro in March 2020, which the Ministry of Sports and Youth immediately started cooperating with. The Network was officially founded in September 2020. In November 2020, the Ministry issued a one-year Certificate recognising the Youth Network of Montenegro as the representative association of youth policy NGOs. Nowadays it has 45 members. Meanwhile, the Law on Youth mandates the creation of an advisory Council for Youth comprising representatives of civil society and the government. However, four years later, authorities have yet to implement this body, which was designed to guide collaborative youth policies. The delay signals limited commitment to substantive youth and civil society participation from decision-makers.

According to the latest update of the Agency of Youth and Sport' Registry of youth organisations of North Macedonia, organisations of youth and youth umbrella organisations, there are 3 organisations registered with youth umbrella organisation's status⁵⁰ – the Youth Council of Macedonia, Coalition SEGA, and Scout Association of North Macedonia. Although none of these organisations holds official recognition as the economy-level Youth Council, they are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in policy-making processes through mechanisms such as the economy-level Youth Assembly and the Advisory Body on Youth Policy. Meanwhile compared with 2020 when no council existed, the Agency of Youth and Sports established this advisory body as a response to the existence of the Council on Sports in the same institution. The Council advises the Director and the Youth Sector of the Agency on youth issues.

In Serbia there are three main youth policy stakeholders, often referred to as the “three pillars of youth policy”. These are: Association of Youth Workers (established in 2009), Youth Council of Serbia – KOMS (established in 2011), and Association of Local Youth Offices established in 2014. Established through a grassroots approach, the activity of all three has received backing from the Ministry of

49 Youth Council of Republika Srpska, 2023, O nama, accessed 3 October 2023, <<https://omladinskisavjetrs.org/o-nama/>>

50 Agency of Youth and Sports, 2022, Registry of youth and umbrella organisations of the Agency for Youth and Sports, accessed 11 September 2023 <<https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/registar-na-organizaczi-zakluchno-so-15.12.2022.pdf>>



Youth and Sports, with each playing a role in fostering the participation of young people. On 20 July 2020, the Youth Council of Serbia was recognised as having the status of the umbrella association by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, in accordance with the Law on Youth. The Youth Advisory Council (YAC), chaired by the Minister of Tourism and Youth, was established in 2014 to coordinate activities related to youth policy development and improvement. Currently it has 44 members, including government authorities, provincial authorities, economy-wide councils, youth offices, and experts.

4.4 Regional platforms and networks

RYCO is an independently functioning institutional mechanism, founded by the Western Balkan economies, aiming to promote the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region through youth exchange programmes. The Agreement on the Establishment of RYCO was signed by the WB Prime Ministers at the WB Summit held in Paris, on 4 July 2016. RYCO has established a good example of decision-making and youth participation. The Governing Board, which is the highest decision-making authority of RYCO, is comprised of two representatives of each Contracting Party: one Government representative in direct charge of youth policy and one youth representative. In that way, key stakeholders in the youth sector are directly influencing the setting up of intervention goals.

RCC's Western Balkans Youth Lab is a regional project funded by the EU and implemented by the RCC. Its overarching objective is to empower the youth of the Western Balkans, while the central goal of the project is to reinforce both formal and informal mechanisms for youth engagement in decision-making processes. Anticipated outcomes included an increased level of involvement of youth in policymaking and greater collaboration in the development of policies that are pertinent to their concerns, such as mental health and unemployment. The project's beneficiaries encompassed youth in the Western Balkans region, public administrations, and umbrella youth councils. The initiative works on establishing a structured regional dialogue between youth organisations and economies' administrations, with a particular focus on co-creating policies that enhance youth participation in decision-making and ameliorate the socio-economic conditions and opportunities available to young people across the Western Balkans.

SALTO-YOUTH is a network consisting of seven Resource Centres focused on European youth field priorities. This network provides non-formal learning resources for youth workers and leaders, conducts training sessions, and organises networking activities to support organisations. For example, SALTO-YOUTH contribute to youth of Montenegro by facilitating the transfer of knowledge and skills, enhancing the capacities of youth organisations, and improving the quality of youth work in the region. Furthermore, it serves as a platform for sharing best practices and exchanging valuable experiences.

Connecting Youth (CY) is a grassroots regional youth platform implemented by the Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI), together with the umbrella youth organisations from the WB - Youth Congress of Albania (KRK), Youth Council of North Macedonia (NMSM), Youth Council of Serbia (KOMs), Youth Network of Montenegro (MMCG), Kosovar Youth Council (KYC), Youth Council of Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina (VMFBiH), with the support of Hanns Seidel Foundation. With the aim to promote youth connectivity, CY offers a unique and tailor-made space for youth



from the WB to meet, plan, organise, implement and voice their actions. CY also offers a wide array of existing central, regional, and EU-supported initiatives that target youth and cover the Western Balkans.

Young European Ambassadors⁵¹ is a platform of 180 YEAs from Western Balkan economies. Despite different backgrounds, all are interested in learning about the EU values, connecting and engaging with their peers both online and offline, pursuing their talents and passions and being the voices of their generation. Most importantly, YEAs are open to sharing ideas and inspiring change within their communities, the WB region, and across the EU. They are involved in activities such as webinars, online learning platforms, virtual events, conferences, and cultural events. They participate in study trips across the EU and WB and get involved in all kinds of creative and social action projects.

4.5 Critical Assessment

In general, there is a legal and policy framework in place across the Western Balkans, emphasizing the significance of involving youth in decision-making processes. These legal provisions provide a clear framework on youth participatory mechanisms and structures to be established. Based on provisions in place, WB economies have made progress in the implementation of these participatory mechanisms that ensure youth voices in policymaking processes. However, actual meaningful participation and influence varies across economies.

At the central government level, most economies have structures for youth input, such as economy-level Youth Councils. Youth advisory bodies exist at central level in Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo*. In Montenegro, despite legal provision in place, the Council for Youth has not been established yet and Bosnia and Hercegovina does not have a structure at the central level, while the representation of young people suffers the lack of cooperation of entity-level ministries. The functionality and impact on policies of the existing structure are questionable and vary from one economy to another. Likewise, legislation mandates the creation of local youth councils and strategies to facilitate grassroots participation, but there is a lack of consistency in establishing these participatory bodies. When in existence, their establishment may become politicised, and their role often remains primarily advisory or activism, lacking genuine influence over budgets or policies. Therefore, while participative structures exist, turning these into truly empowered, influential bodies remains a key gap. Capacity building focused approach is needed for members of these entities and sometimes even for the institutions themselves. This would elevate the standards of these structures, ensuring their alignment with the criteria of youth participation established by the Council of Europe. It aims to authentically amplify the voice of youth, ensuring meaningful representation in policy-making and decision-making processes.

Another important aspect is the functionality of youth umbrella organisations. Official recognition of representative youth umbrella groups at the central level is still pending in some economies. While Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo*, and Bosnia and Hercegovina show positive development in terms of recognising these umbrella organisations there is no development in Albania or North Macedonia. This hinders the consolidation of youth interests within economies. Furthermore, there

51 Young European Ambassadors. n.d. WeBalkans | EU Projects in the Western Balkans. European Union, accessed 20 September 2023, <<https://tly/pfsDC>>



is a need to have a clear definition and transparent criteria regarding the aim and role of these organisations to avoid duplicating work with youth organisations and to represent the interests of the union of youth organisations.

In the realm of youth research, there is a related and significant deficiency in the availability of systematic, disaggregated youth data ecosystems to inform evidence-based policies. While consultative policy design is evident in some cases, the pervasive issue of lacking regular youth analyses for responsive targeting remains a significant concern. A positive example in this regard is the youth survey developed by North Macedonia to gather youth input. Nevertheless, the desk research conducted for economy reports in each economy revealed a lack of data or inconsistency from both official data institutions and other sources. Addressing this issue is crucial, as it would contribute to the development of more comprehensive youth policies and ensure that the needs of youth are properly acknowledged and addressed.

In summary, despite legal provisions, translating youth participation principles into meaningful, sustained platforms with policy/budgeting powers persists as a central challenge in the Western Balkans. Genuine political will for mainstreaming youth voices through strengthened structures and evidence appears crucial to progress.



CHAPTER 5: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY DONOR INTERVENTIONS IN THE FIELD OF YOUTH IN WB

This chapter provides an overview of international donor assistance in the field of youth in the Western Balkans. Drawing from the donor mapping conducted for each of the Western Balkan economies, this chapter presents a comparative analysis, identifying synergies, overlaps, and gaps. Donor Mapping was conducted by reviewing relevant reports, evaluations, and analyses carried out in the field of youth and youth-related areas. In-depth interviews were also held with some major donor organisations in each economy, and their strategic documents were consulted. In addition, a general web search was undertaken on each donor organisation, looking at specific websites focusing on youth and youth-related issues. Wherever available, statistics have been included, such as those from the OECD Official Development Assistance Reports.

5.1 Key donors in the field of youth

There are no recent reports about active donors or donor coordination in Western Balkans. The most recent one is from 2019 which was used as a baseline for the first comparative report Mapping of Youth Policies and Identification of Existing Support and Gaps in Financing of Youth Actions in the Western Balkans⁵². This activity continued with the Informal Donors Coordinating Meeting coordinated by RCC's EU-funded WBYL project. Moreover, on 15 August 2023, a survey was launched by Catalyst Balkans as part of a research initiative dedicated to exploring effective strategies and practices in bolstering civil society, achieving SDG 2030 goals, and emphasizing regionalisation of donors' assistance. At the time of writing this document, there was no available information regarding the release status of the report⁵³.

As per Balkan Civil Society Development Network publication donor support⁵⁴ can be clustered in three main dimension:

- a. Political approach which largely includes: (i) institution building (including support for political elites and political parties); (ii) capacity building and technical assistance for government and agencies.
- b. Developmental dimension focused on socio-economic development, local community development, or aspects of democratic consolidation: (i) economic and private sector development; (ii) assistance for local community organisations / CSOs and CSO networks

52 Open Society Institute, Report, 2019, People on the Move, Lives on Hold: A Mapping of Donors Active in the Western Balkans (2016-2019), authored by Aleksandra Vesić, Julia Szanton and Zorica Rašković

53 Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), Mapping of Donors Active in the Western Balkans, accessed 15 November 2023, <<https://balkancsd.net/cfa-mapping-of-donors-active-in-the-western-balkans-deadline-extended-20-august/>>

54 Ibid



- (iii) strengthening civil society – core funding, institution building (block grants rather than just project funding); (iv) environment; (v) minority rights and inter-ethnic cooperation; (vi) infrastructure development; (vii) youth and education; (viii) service provision.
- c. Governance-oriented strategies include measures and initiatives designed specifically to build the partnership between sectors and to deliver a shift in hierarchies and the augmentation of the roles of non-government actors so as to increase their deliberative power and influence: (i) training ministries to engage non-government and private stakeholders; (ii) training civil society to engage government agencies.

A noteworthy improvement from the 2021 report is the identification of youth as a specific target area of intervention, signalling an increased interest in fostering their engagement. This conclusion arises from various developments and challenges that WB economies are grappling with, spanning from security issues to demographic challenges. Nevertheless, there is a dominance of funding opportunities that are not directly targeted towards youth or do not prioritise them as primary beneficiaries. The information extracted from the reports of WB economies reveals that youth, employment, skills development, and entrepreneurship are already identified as primary areas of intervention by donors in the region.

Furthermore, this report reconfirms that governments and the youth civil sector in the WB economies rely on donors' support to a large extent.

Diverse forms of donor support for youth in the Western Balkans are evident in the variations in approaches, financial contributions, and timeframes. Nonetheless, donors usually support youth in three main ways:

- a. Directly targeting youth policy and legal framework by providing financial and technical assistance to the Governments and related bodies. For instance, development of youth strategies, youth action plans, and youth laws. Support to legislative youth policy development and youth participation in policy and decision-making comes from OSCE and UN agencies and it varies from one economy to another.
- b. Indirectly targeting youth by providing financial and technical assistance to the Governments and related bodies for youth-related policy areas such as education, social inclusion, health, and employment (GIZ for employment, SDC for VET, USAID on participation in decision-making).
- c. Addressing issues of interest to youth by providing either financial, technical, networking, or other support to youth organisations. Some key issues include participation, civic engagement, intercultural dialogue, reconciliation, peacebuilding, education and mobility, employment and VET training, and entrepreneurship. Interventions targeting matters of interest to young people are supported by RYCO (all WB economies), through different EU programmes (all WB economies), UN agencies/programmes (all WB economies), SDC (Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia), OSCE (Montenegro and North Macedonia), GIZ/BMZ (Albania, Serbia), USAID (Kosovo*, North Macedonia), US Embassy (Albania, Kosovo*), embassies of EU and other economies (Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro), WFD (Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia), SIDA (Serbia, Albania). The most prominent donors in the region, such as the EU, GIZ, and SDC, primarily



support education, employment, VET and entrepreneurship, and recently the environment, sustainable development, and youth. While US Embassies and USAID have allocated funds to support youth engagement in civic and political activities, fostering inter-ethnic relations and peacebuilding, and addressing security concerns associated with radicalisation and extremism have also been a priority.

The mapping shows that so far most of donor attention and funding at the regional level has been focused on:

- a. Civil and political participation of youth (supporting youth CSOs, youth groups, and CSOs working with youth, as well as policy-level changes in creating an enabling environment for youth);
- b. Intercultural dialogue, inter-ethnic relations, reconciliation, and peacebuilding;
- c. Education and VET;
- d. Employment and entrepreneurship, including returned migrants.

Additionally, there is an increased focus on the realm of environment and media. Meanwhile, it is observed that there are limited initiatives to support education and awareness in gender-based violence, human rights, and minority rights.

Through different programmes EU focuses on raising the education level and employability of youth, strengthening participation of civil sector in decision-making, strengthening participation in democratic culture in Europe, and promoting democratic values. Some of the programmes in place are Youth Guarantee, Human Rights, Democracy and Civil Society Facility, etc. The EU implements programmes across WB. IPA cross border/boundary calls have youth as part of their specific objectives and directly target them. However, youth remain a core mission in programmes such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, SALTO, and the European Union Erasmus+ Youth Programme.

The focus of UN agencies varies across the WB economies. It covers issues such as strengthening support to the development of strategic and legislative framework for youth (in Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia), and raising youth employability and skills development (in Albania, Kosovo*, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and North Macedonia). A good example of regional cooperation is supported by UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) which is partnering with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women), and UNESCO in the Empowering Youth Against Hate Speech in the Western Balkans project. The objective is to promote trust and create inclusive online spaces for young people, empowering them to actively oppose hate speech and contribute to fostering a safer digital environment in the Western Balkans. Regional Programme for Local Democracy in the Western Balkans 2 (ReLOaD2), funded by the EU and UNDP, aims to strengthen participatory democracies and EU integration in the Western Balkans by empowering civil society, fostering partnerships between local authorities and civil society, and improving service delivery in local communities through transparent project funding of CSOs.



The Swiss Embassy and SDC direct their funds to raise employability (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia and Serbia). For example, in Albania, SDC addresses vocational education and training challenges, such as quality and status, financing, labour market orientation, and private sector engagement. SDC is also working on the social inclusion and health sector.

OSCE has supported different initiatives in North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro focused on youth participation in policymaking processes, such as Local Youth Councils, Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), etc. In various economies, the process of creating a legal framework for youth or other related actions with policy design and decision-making has been supported. Some of the OSCE missions in the region have made efforts to create Youth Advisory Bodies. While the initiative is very positive in increasing youth input in their work, it is important to adhere to the principles of youth participation.

RYCO is a regional initiative that supports youth work and youth cooperation and is present in all WB economies. RYCO's intervention should be mentioned as an example of good practice. One of the flagship initiatives of RYCO is Super Schools: Western Balkans School Exchange Scheme co-financed by the European Union and German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The project is implemented across the Western Balkans by RYCO and GIZ⁵⁵. Superschools scheme aims at providing the ground for creating strong and sustainable bonds between secondary schools within the region and building long-term partnerships.

USAID focuses on youth empowerment through education and educational initiatives. Two of the biggest projects USAID is supporting in North Macedonia are YouthThink⁵⁶ and Youth Actively Create Opportunities (YACO)⁵⁷. USAID North Macedonia puts special focus on youth, as demonstrated by its 5-year development strategy. According to the "Country Development Cooperation Strategy 2020 – 2025"⁵⁸, a special objective is Youth Contributions to Society Increased. The Strategy priorities are to accelerate youth contributions to society, both economically and socially, making it a very positive example in the realm of donors. USAID Kosovo* Country Development Cooperation Strategy 2020-2025 is an example of an integrated approach to addressing youth issues, which considers education as a leverage to improve the situation of the youth in Kosovo*. Across the region, USAID and US Embassy have supported active citizenship, youth engagement, and participation in decision-making.

German donors (GIZ) support youth employability, VET and integration of migrant youth/returnees in the labour market. For example, Youth, Employment and Skills in Kosovo* (2021–2024) project supported by BMZ aims to improve employability of young people between 15 and 35 years, considering the specific needs of returned migrants, all ethnic groups and minorities. In Serbia, they support the "Vocational education and training for better employability of young people in Serbia - Dialogue on Employment Creation, Initiative and Dual Education" (2020 - 2023) implemented with political sponsorship from the Ministry of Education.

55 RYCO Superschools, 2023, Make your school a Superschool, accessed 17 October 2023, <<https://superschools.net/>>

56 USAID, 2022, YouThink Factsheet, accessed 25 September 2023, <<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/YouThink%20JULY%202022%20%281%29.pdf>>

57 USAID, 2023, YACO Factsheet, accessed 25 September 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/YACO%20March%202023_1.pdf>

58 USAID North Macedonia, 2020, Country Development Cooperation Strategy 2020-2025, accessed 25 September 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/CDCS_North_Macedonia_External_2025.pdf>



Additionally, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy which has offices in Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, sees youth mainstreaming as a priority and is dedicating a great deal of effort to include youth in all aspects of the programmatic work. The foundation has undertaken a series of initiatives which focus on youth legal framework or parliament.

The French Development Agency has started to operate in the Western Balkans, starting with Albania, focusing on youth issues related to digital skills, climate change, and development although there is no clear information about other projects in the region.

The UK Embassy and FCDO are increasing their support to WB region. Their projects are mostly focusing on youth and organised crime and prevention of young people from embarking on this path through employment and education. Additionally, the 21st Century Schools is another regional project run by British Council which supports digitalisation and skills development among youth in the region.

SIDA has just launched a programme focused on arts and culture for youth, but it is available only for Albania in the pilot phase. In Serbia it is supporting the ECO SYSTEM programme (2020 to 2024). Additionally, partnered with HELVETAS, SIDA regionally supports RECONOMY programme, which aims to facilitate regional inclusive and green economic development. One of the main objectives of the programme is to increase income and secure decent jobs for youth.

5.2 Priority areas for the future in the field of youth

In terms of gap provisions, regional priority areas identified by the mapping can be classified into three groups. It is noticed that the clusters priorities are changing year to year.

a. Ongoing priority areas already receiving support, but still highly relevant:

- youth employability, particularly NEET, returnee youth, refugee youth, marginalised youth;
- education and mobility entrepreneurship and income generation: VET
- youth and innovation: startups, digital skills
- intercultural dialogue, inter-ethnic relations, reconciliation, and peacebuilding

b. Emerging priority areas

- youth migration and brain circulation
- social inclusion, empowerment, and social protection of youth (returnee youth, refugee youth, marginalised youth, LGBTIQ)
- civic and political engagement of youth and participation in decision-making
- youth and sustainable development and environment
- youth and security issues: extremism, radicalisation, organised crime
- youth and climate change



- literacy programmes dedicated to youth: media, data and digital literacy

c. Areas where almost no funding is provided, but it is becoming a priority area

- rural youth
- youth and science
- sports
- youth access to social and health care services
- youth and diaspora
- youth cooperation beyond WB

Depending on evolving priorities, the focus of international support for the Western Balkans region has shifted. Considering high migration trends among WB youth, support in the realm of economic development has intensified. However, given the complex historical background of the region, increased attention on economic initiatives should go hand-in-hand with enhanced civic education and political education for youth.



CHAPTER 6: GOOD PRACTICES AND GAP ANALYSIS

This chapter presents an overview of good practices in youth-related policy and programmes as well as gaps in financing mechanisms in WB as each economy report outlined. The chapter provides recommendations which address identified gaps.

6.1 Good practices

Acknowledging the importance of sustained investment in youth, despite the comprehensive insights provided in this report, it is crucial to recognise and commend the positive practices and advancements that have also emerged. Some good practices that exist in the region are listed below.

In terms of legal framework, all economies of the WB region have a full legal infrastructure in place, except Bosnia and Hercegovina which has a more complex legal landscape.

While recognising the potential for improvement, it is worth highlighting the observed cross-sectoral approach in the formulation of recent youth policy documents. The youth strategies implemented in Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro stand out for their extensive consultation processes, serving as good examples of active youth involvement in the policymaking process and demonstrating citizen engagement in consultation processes. Laws in place define key concepts such as young person, youth organisation, etc.

In Serbia and Albania, the strategies in place were developed on an evidence-based approach and in an inclusive manner. These documents also set specific goals, indicators, actions and budgets for their implementation. This kind of approach can overcome challenges related to monitoring and evaluation of youth policy development and implementation. Moreover, Serbia's adoption of a Youth Action Plan for the new 2023-2030 Youth Strategy is a good practice. This strategic move is noteworthy for its potential to enhance the manageability of strategy implementation.

Serbia is a good example in terms of economy-level youth policies, bringing different perspectives and avoiding centralisation of opportunities. There are three main associations of organisations that play a significant role in youth policy and are commonly referred to as the three pillars of youth policy. These organisations are the Association of Youth Workers, established in 2009, Youth Council of Serbia (KOMs), established in 2011, and Association of Local Youth Offices, established in 2014. Since 2019, two more associations emerged as relevant for the institutionalised approach to youth policy: OPENS, established in 2016, and Scout Organisation of Serbia (SIS), established in 1911.

Two positive examples in terms of mental health and social services are from Albania and North Macedonia. North Macedonia has drafted a comprehensive Strategy on Mental Health and Youth



(2023-2026) that articulates clear objectives. These include promoting the significance of mental health and well-being among youth, mitigating risks associated with young people's mental health, and establishing and implementing high-quality services for the mental well-being of young people. In Albania, the commitment to addressing the needs of young people in policymaking is evident through the drafting of two strategic documents. Notably, the Need Assessment on Youth Mental Health Services and the inclusion of Youth Component in the Mental Health Strategy 2023-2026 mark significant milestones, representing the first instance of such inclusion in Albania. Both initiatives developed by the working group of each economy are positive examples contributing to the topics which are quite new for the region. Both initiatives have been part of the Western Balkans Youth Policy Lab and have been addressed through its support.

Another positive example is the Roadmap for Youth Transition from Education to the Workplace from the first edition of WBYL focused on unemployment which became integral part of the Youth Strategy 2022-2029 of Albania, as well as creation of Amendments to the Law on Youth in Montenegro, and Law on Employment and Insurance in case of Unemployment in North Macedonia.

Regarding budget allocation, Kosovo* has established dedicated budget lines within local government, enhancing the traceability of youth funds. This initiative not only facilitates transparency but also contributes to accountability in the allocation and utilisation of resources for youth-related initiatives.

At the institutional level, the appointment of a Minister for Youth and Children in Albania signifies a positive stride. This step not only amplifies the significance placed on the youth demographic but also contributes to a clearer and more defined institutional framework.

In the realm of youth programmes, North Macedonia has the most diverse portfolio, featuring numerous initiatives that support students throughout their educational journey. Notable programmes include the European Youth Card, Subsidised Student Meals, and Youth Allowance, reflecting a comprehensive approach to student support. Another important programme is Young Farmers focused on rural development.

Development of youth participatory structures such as Local Youth Councils, economy-wide Youth Assembly, Youth Councils or Youth Advisory Groups by different international organisations is a very positive step of bringing youth perspectives to policy-making processes.

In terms of donors, USAID North Macedonia represents a good example as it puts special focus on youth, as demonstrated by its 5-year development strategy. According to the Country Development Cooperation Strategy, 2020 – 2025⁵⁹, a special objective is Youth Contributions to Society Increased. The Strategy priorities are to accelerate youth contributions to society, both economically and socially.

59 USAID North Macedonia, 2020, Country Development Cooperation Strategy 2020-2025, accessed 25 September 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/CDCS_North_Macedonia_External_2025.pdf>



6.2 Gaps

6.2.1 Gaps Analysis of general background issues

The challenges of politics, security issues, and economic crisis pose significant systemic barriers to youth development and engagement across the Western Balkans. The general impression is that many of the WB governments do not prioritise youth. The key challenge of youth policy is the lack of prioritisation of the youth field and lack of systematic and continuous implementation of mechanisms.

Various dimensions related to the systemic and structural issues encountered in youth policies in the Western Balkans area will be shortly listed below.

Demographic challenges. Many of the WB economies are facing decline of youth population due to high emigration rates leading to potential labour shortages and brain drain. This not only affects the ability to develop robust, long-term youth policies but also indicates a labour shortage.

Economy. Weak rule of law, high unemployment rates and the pandemic recession have exacerbated the precarious socio-economic conditions confronting youth across the region. Young people disproportionately face protracted transitions to economic autonomy, with NEET rates being the highest in Europe. Insufficient funding hampers effective programmes and participation.

Ineffective institutional mechanisms. While legal frameworks formally facilitate youth participation, the practical mechanisms often fall short, lacking coordination across diverse policy domains. Furthermore, frequent institutional changes, as in the case of Albania and Serbia, or government changes, as in the case of Montenegro, affect timely implementation of existing laws and consolidation of youth structures. This also opposes problems in institutional memory. Additionally, lack of trust in institutions does not help the functionality of the mechanisms in place. There is a pressing need for more robust institutional structures.

Fragmented approach. Youth is not yet fully understood and recognised as inter-sectoral target group where policy domains and budget framework need to be coordinated among different line ministries or institutions. This is further reflected in terms of budget and research.

Partnership Limitations. Public-private partnerships, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and other modalities engaging non-government stakeholders appear to be underutilised as potential funding streams for the youth sector. Additional enabling conditions must be established to foster a closer engagement between the private sector and youth development initiatives. None of the economy reports provided examples of such partnerships.



6.2.2 Gap Analysis of youth policy frameworks

There are many gaps in governance, monitoring, and public understanding of youth as a target group. These gaps ultimately limit the impact and reach of funding for youth empowerment initiatives. Although all the Western Balkan economies have laws, strategies, and action plans for youth, a systematic approach is needed to ensure progress.

Incomplete policy coverage and weak inter-sectoral coordination. Youth policies may not holistically address the multidimensional issues facing young people. Key issues like health, poverty reduction, entrepreneurship, etc. may lack coherent policy focus. There is a need to change the approach to how youth is considered in all policy-making processes, thus providing a more inspectorial approach. With youth issues spanning multiple sectors, coordination gaps between governmental bodies often undermine consistent policy implementation. Numerous ministries and agencies, beyond those specifically focused on youth, allocate funds for programmes relevant to youth. However, this cross-sectorial spending is seldom systematically tracked or transparently reported. A need for streamlining is evident.

Limited youth participation. Despite legal provision, youth engagement in shaping policies and overseeing implementation remains weak in practice across programmes and all levels of governance. There is a set of participatory mechanisms which are not fully established (Montenegro, Albania).

Inadequate budget allocations. Funding for dedicated youth policies and programmes is limited, affecting the scope and quality of interventions. Policy plans need clear budget promises as in the case of Kosovo*. Very limited budget allocations explicitly indicated for youth programming in central budgets signal the low prioritisation and value attached to investing in youth across the Western Balkans. Significant awareness raising of youth's role in sustainable development is needed.

Absence of Monitoring and Evaluation. Many economies lack effective monitoring and evaluation systems to track youth policy impacts and areas that need correction. Most of the time, Youth Strategies do not plan for specific indicators or specific means of monitoring. This hampers accountability, impact assessment and future policy interventions. Some of the economies (Albania, Serbia) have provided for monitoring and evaluation in their respective policies while North Macedonia has implemented the Youth Trends Survey which has resulted in a positive example of qualitative data gathering on youth.

Weak role of Local Governments. The participation of local governments in securing and providing funding for youth initiatives is encouraged in many laws, but de facto contribution is often vague or minimal. There is a pressing need to enhance both local budget transparency and the allocation of resources specifically directed towards youth initiatives, including human resources dedicated to youth. Furthermore, local governments should recognise the importance of youth so that they properly address it in their policies and actions. Despite the progress notice in some economies in the increased number of Local Youth Councils (Albania) their proper functionality based on the principles of youth participation is lacking in all WB economies.



6.2.3 Gaps Analysis of youth policy funding

While there have been positive funding initiatives for youth, there are significant gaps in systematic, evidence-based budgetary allocations for impactful and transparent youth policies. Insufficient resources, dispersed funding across various sectors, inadequate information, and uncertainty in regulations collectively pose challenges to the effective functioning of financial support systems for young people.

No systematic youth budget allocations. Youth lacks budgetary priority across sectors and governments. This is noticed in the case of many economies where youth is budgeted with sports as in the case of Albania or North Macedonia. Funding is often small-scale and scattered across institutions. Not having dedicated youth budget line as in the case of Kosovo* makes it difficult to properly monitor youth investments. This hinders strategic, impactful use of resources addressing root challenges. This funding fragmentation is even more noticed at the local level. As youth issues span across education, employment, health, and other areas, the absence of integrated planning and expenditure tracking mechanisms undermines coordination, hindering the achievement of consolidated outcomes. There No WB economy implements mapping to properly assess youth findings across different ministries.

Insufficient resources. Considering all the crises going on in various sectors, youth is commonly facing budget shortage compared to other sectors as shown in the case of Serbia, Montenegro or North Macedonia where youth budget was decreased over the years compared to Albania which has shown an increase in youth budget, benefiting from other sources as well.

Donor coordination and funding. Coordination is largely missing and, in some economies, it even shows regress (Albania). Donor calls for proposals do not directly address youth, so organisations submitting projects must get creative in tailoring their approaches and programme designs to focus on youth. Some positive examples exist in Serbia, Kosovo*, and North Macedonia where youth is clearly included in the respective economy reports or direct support is given to certain youth organisations.

6.2.4 Gaps Analysis of youth participatory mechanisms

Youth participatory mechanisms are in place, as all WB economies have laws regulating them, showing positive development. However, their functionality should be further improved.

Tokenistic engagement. Although youth councils and other youth bodies exist, their actions do not consistently align with the principles of youth participation. Most of the time this comes as a lack of capacities on both sides regarding the role of these advisory bodies. This has led to youth having limited voice in setting agendas, priorities, and influencing actual policy decisions. Youth Councils (advisory bodies) exist in almost all economies except Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but more staff capacity is needed to increase their functionality. Furthermore, the members themselves should have a more proactive role. Youth umbrella organisations are recognised in Serbia, Kosovo*, and Montenegro, in comparison to Bosnia and Herzegovina which has separate youth councils for each entity, Albania where a call for applications was issued and no one applied, and North



Macedonia where none of the umbrella organisations are recognised. In this realm, it is worth mentioning the aim these entities should have to work on securing a more favourable ecosystem for youth organisations to operate.

Meanwhile, tokenistic engagement is even more present at the local level, where youth local structures exist but their role is sometimes confined to symbolic representation (Albania) or they exist in very small numbers (North Macedonia). In addition, the lack of dedicated human resources is another problem encountered at the local level, and addressed in all reports, minimising the opportunities for youth engagement.

Membership diversity. Participatory bodies frequently lack diversity, failing to include youth from marginalised backgrounds such as minorities, LGBTQ+, vulnerable groups, etc. None of the economy reports mentioned programmes or participation targeting the above groups.

Weak legal frameworks. Despite the positive developments in legislation, regulations, and structures, there is a need to further consolidate efforts to enforce substantive and regular youth participation across various governance levels and even more at local level as already mentioned.

Limited outreach. An important challenge of youth participation is the narrow outreach of youth entities beyond the circle of activists and organisation leadership. This limited penetration especially persists at the local levels.

6.3 Recommendations:

Recommendations for policy makers:

Youth data and statistics

- The WB economies should institutionalise the EU-aligned 15-29 youth age group across youth legal frameworks. This would provide for more uniformity, compatibility and integration between Western Balkan economies themselves and with the EU in the youth development domain. It would facilitate regional cooperation, standardisation of policies and track of results over time across the enlargement process.
- Unifying the process of data gathering at the domestic level, thus embracing a top-down approach. This would help in unifying methodologies in place on data gathering, standardising the age ranges used to define “youth” or age groups across different data collection efforts, etc.
- Enhancing the administrative capacities of central and local institutions on data collection and publication in terms of availability of data, open access, reliability, and transparency. The data published by public institutions both at the central and local levels regarding youth should be in line with the open data standards of the Open Government Partnership (all WB economies have joined OGP).



- Despite efforts and developments, youth as a target group is not fully recognised across ministries and local government units. Therefore, more initiatives should be undertaken so that each institution provides youth-specific disaggregated data. This would provide data on number of population, distribution of population (rural/urban), employment, education, unemployment, NEET, and much more.

Evidence-based youth policy and consultation processes

- Enhancing current endeavours for evidence-based youth policy-making is imperative. This can be achieved through the systematic utilisation of data, evidence, and research, coupled with structured and ongoing dialogues and collaborations involving youth, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders in a participatory and inclusive process.
- All WB governments should step up their efforts for conducting a genuine and meaningful consultation process with youth and not simply consider consultation as a formalistic, tick-the-box exercise. In this sense, Youth Structured Dialogue (Youth Lab methodology) should be established and reinforced across all WB economies, considering the process of EU integration.
- Establishing more systematic and standardised research instruments, coupled with centralised data platforms, is essential for generating robust evidence. This evidence should guide strategic investments aimed at addressing the actual challenges faced by youth in the Western Balkans.
- Incorporating monitoring and evaluation components into every youth policy, coupled with specific objectives and indicators, is crucial. This approach not only facilitates effective implementation but also enhances the evaluation process.
- It is very important to establish a resource centre, with backing from international donors, partners, and stakeholders in the youth sector. This centre should serve as a robust database, an evidence and research hub, providing comprehensive and up-to-date information based on open data standards. It would encompass details about programmes, institutions, policies, procedures, and finances related to youth (including data on funds allocated and/or at a project's disposal, public calls for funds dedicated to youth and youth organisations, and expenditures for all youth institutions). The online database will guide policy planning in the field of youth and will be a useful tool for the donor community, academia, and researchers.

Legal and policy framework

- WB Governments should continue to work on the improvement and consolidation of the current youth legal and policy framework. This should be accomplished by recognising the interdisciplinary nature of youth issues and by integrating and prioritising youth as a cross-sector policy concern. Doing so positions youth as a domestic and regional priority in shaping the future development of our societies and economies. It is important to strengthen trust in youth legal and policy-making processes and relevant institutions, and



to invest in increasing the standards of youth structures in place through improving rules and procedures and increasing transparency of youth budgets, etc.

- Provide a more enabling environment for youth organisations by facilitating taxes and other dimensions based on their financial annual turnover;
- Create more policies and mechanisms to incentivise business support and engagement with the youth sector, including implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. This could involve public-private partnerships, tax incentives or credits, awards programmes, or policy guidelines to integrate youth-focused CSR into core business strategy. The objective should focus on increasing private sector commitment to programmes that offer skills training, employment opportunities, entrepreneurship development, and improved access to education for young people.

Institutions and structures

- Development of youth-friendly mechanisms for ensuring youth participation and permanent structured dialogue (Youth Structured Dialogue) between decision-makers, young people and organisations dealing with youth at the local and economy level.
- Parliaments across WB should consider increasing their efforts in holding governments accountable in terms of development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of youth policy framework. The setting-up of formal or informal mechanisms of youth engagement with the legislative branch for improving legal and policy framework on youth is also suggested.
- Increasing the standards of youth participatory structures in place through avoiding youth tokenism and working more in line with the youth participation standards set by the Council of Europe.
- Governments in the Western Balkans should enhance their backing for the participatory mechanisms outlined by the law. This involves establishing an enabling environment that encompasses space, infrastructure, resources, capacity development, coordination, and outreach to facilitate their effective operation.
- Throughout all economies in the Western Balkans, local structures dedicated to youth and youth-related issues need fortification to accomplish long-term goals. This entails establishing an enabling environment that encompasses space, infrastructure, resources, capacity development, coordination, and outreach.
- The model of the Structured Youth Policy Dialogue by considering achievements and challenges in the case of Serbia is the only one in WB that shows progress in terms of Structured Youth Policy Dialogue. There is a need to support youth engagement in the knowledge square or Quadruple Helix by funding their cooperation with academia, research, civil society, media, policy and business sector.
- Further increase the number of established Local Youth Councils and improve their functionality, addressing concerns such as tokenism, selection process, and other issues that enhance their advisory status and increase their capacities.



- Allocating a specific budget for youth umbrella organisations is an important tool to ensure their financial sustainability and operation. This should be accompanied by an increase in the standards of operation of these youth umbrella organisations, focusing on lobbying for a more enabling ecosystem for youth organisations, accountability, transparency, and member engagement.
- Creating separate youth budget lines makes it possible to track youth investments and increases transparency and trust in the respective institutions.
- Develop more donor coordination activities at domestic level to secure alignment of investment with economy objectives and problems on the ground.

Funding mechanisms

- Sustain direct support for youth while also amplifying such assistance, especially in emerging priority areas. Furthermore, institutional funding for the youth sector, including organisations, associations, groups, networks, and other entities, is necessary to ensure the sustainability of operations. This involves providing financial resources and facilitating skills development.
- Define specific budget allocation for youth across government departments and programmes. Ad-hoc, small-scale, and scattered allocations hinder strategic and impactful use of resources to implement policies.
- Increase coordination mechanisms for expenditure, tracking youth budget in education, employment, health, etc.
- Continue strengthening the funding mechanism for youth projects and youth organisations, thus improving the existing procedures, increasing budget and transparency.
- Enhance youth fund allocations for grassroots youth organisations, youth groups, and youth non-governmental organisations in rural areas. Further support should be provided through capacity building for project proposal writing and implementation, enabling these entities to maximise the benefits from the youth fund.
- Public institutions responsible for managing youth funds should increase staff and capacity-building efforts. This is essential for development of standard operating procedures concerning grant administration, encompassing aspects such as issuing calls for applications, project selection, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and management of youth project data.
- Provide sustainable and continuous funding for youth policy through investing in human resources and funds for long-term projects and programmes implemented by youth and for youth (core institutional funding), but also create more flexible mechanisms for financing youth-led initiatives, keeping in mind the needs and demand (individuals, activists, informal groups, networks). The amount of funds allocated for youth policy-related projects and programmes of civil society organisations, especially in the areas of non-formal education, volunteering, and participation of youth (social, economic, and political both offline and online), needs to be increased.



- The public institutions directly responsible for youth should better coordinate the policy needs at central level and development assistance in the field of youth in order to harmonise donor practices and coordinate funding for effective aid delivery.

Accountability and transparency

- Accountability and transparency mechanisms for youth policy and funding should be reinforced. It is essential to ensure a transparent, fair and competitive granting process which finances youth programmes, initiatives, activities and youth organisations.
- Institutional and individual capacities must be strengthened for monitoring of youth policy implementation at the economy and local levels, and focused indicator-based and performance-based reporting by all relevant stakeholders that implement youth policy must be encouraged. The increased usage of digital tools for monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and procedures should be promoted.
- Increase transparency and accountability in the selection process of members of youth structures, Youth Representatives in the Governing Board of RYCO from each WB economy, etc.
- Develop more reports and other sets of mechanisms on the donor investments in each economy.

Inter-institutional and cross-sectorial approach and coordination

- Across the WB region, better coordination between formal (central and local government, donors, business sector, nongovernmental organisations, media, academia) and non-formal stakeholders (families, youth groups, community leaders) should be ensured.
- Enhancing coordination and fostering the inclusion of pertinent stakeholders at all levels of governance in the Western Balkans is imperative for comprehensive youth development. The youth would benefit from a harmonised inter-institutional and cross-sector approach on youth policy and funding. Institutions should unify the approach and implementation of youth policies. Better coordination between the central and local government is encouraged.
- There is a need for a more comprehensive sector-wide approach, improved coordination among various relevant ministries regarding youth-related policies, and cross-sectorial cooperation. Implementing flexible mechanisms that cut across sectors is also crucial for the effective implementation of youth policy.

Regional cooperation

- WB Governments should continue their investment in regional cooperation in the field of youth (funding RYCO, Erasmus+ Programme, WBF and other initiatives) and increase efforts in implementing all commitments of the EU-Western Balkans Summits particularly regarding mobility, recognition of qualifications, tackling brain drain and participation of young people through initiatives such as Western Balkans Youth Lab.



Donor coordination

- Public institutions directly responsible for youth should better coordinate the policy needs at central level and development assistance in the field of youth in order to harmonise donor practices and coordinate funding for effective aid delivery.

Recommendations for donor community:

- Continued support to the WB Governments and associated bodies dealing with youth and youth-related policy areas is needed, with a particular attention to the provision of support in the following dimensions:
 - Structured Youth Policy Dialogue by engaging policy-makers at the central and local levels, youth organisations and civil society organisations in the field of youth.
 - Continued enhancements in the legal and policy framework, establishment of relevant institutions, and reinforcement of transparency and accountability through improved monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential.
 - Emerging priority areas: social inclusion, empowerment, and social protection of youth (returnee youth, refugee youth, marginalised youth, LGBTIQ); civic and political engagement of youth and participation in decision-making; youth and security issues: extremism, radicalisation, organised crime.
 - Evidence-based youth policy, making use of data and digital technologies.
 - Monitoring, evaluation and learning, capitalisation of knowledge and promotion of good models at central and local levels.
- Allocate institutional funding to the youth sector, including organisations, associations, groups, networks, and other entities, to ensure operational sustainability. This support should be provided flexibly, encompassing financial means and skills development.
- Intensify efforts to strengthen and enable an environment that fosters sustainability of youth civil society organisations (CSOs) through a bottom-up approach. This strategy should prioritise assessing Youth CSOs within the context, taking into account their operational and administrative needs in light of inflation.
- Support the creation of a donor coordination database in the field of youth to enhance monitoring and comprehensive evaluation of projects or programmes.
- While acknowledging the necessity of developing reports and other verification means, it is crucial to balance the requested documentation with the need to invest more time and effort in impact development. Therefore, some donors should consider simplifying procedures to avoid burdening youth organisations with paperwork.
- Consider development of dedicated programmes aimed at supporting new youth organisations, with a particular emphasis on small municipalities. This approach ensures targeted assistance to grassroots initiatives, fostering growth and impact in areas that might



be underserved rather than allocating resources predominantly to larger organisations that may not be directly engaged in these specific locales.

- Encourage mandatory participation of youth organisations in relevant consultations to ensure their perspectives are considered.
- Explicitly identify youth as a direct target group in calls for proposals rather than categorising them as indirect beneficiaries.

Recommendations for youth organisations / civil society / youth

- Youth organisations should enhance efforts towards networking, cooperation, and partnership building with one another and other civil society actors.
- Well-established youth organisations and networks should provide peer-to-peer support, guidance, and mentorship for smaller, grassroots organisations and youth initiatives from rural and remote areas.
- Youth organisations should identify new streams of financial resources to become financially sustainable and break the cycle of donor-dependency.
- Youth organisations must be more proactive in communicating with relevant government institutions responsible for youth issues.
- Organisations should strive to reach a wide spectrum of youth, particularly rural youth, marginalised youth, those living in periphery or in dire economic situation.
- Youth organisations participating in various advisory bodies should take a more proactive approach to addressing existing sectoral challenges. Initiating and organising meetings and similar initiatives can enhance institutional trust in their work, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship and trust between the organisations and the institutions involved.
- Despite the necessity for financial support, youth organisations should adopt a more proactive approach to addressing challenges related to securing funding and meeting donor requirements.
- Youth organisations, and others as well, should adopt a more proactive approach towards consultation meetings by collaboratively addressing existing challenges and proposing potential solutions.



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