

RYDE

Regional Youth Dialogue
for Europe



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Joint Comparative Analysis of Youth Policies in the Western Balkans



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ABBREVIATIONS

CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
ERP	Economic Reform Programme
EU	European Union
EUYD	EU Youth Dialogue
EYF	European Youth Forum
INSTAT	Institute of Statistics
KOMS	National Youth Council of Serbia
KSYAP	Kosovo*Youth Strategy Action Plan
MAEM	Montenegro Agency for Electronic Media
MCEC	Macedonian Civic Education Center
MIL	Media and Information Literacy
ML	Media Literacy
NDS II	National Strategy for Development and Integration
NEET	Neither in Employment nor in Education or Training
NSDEI 20230	National Strategy for Development and European Integration 2030
NES	National Employment Service
NYA	National Youth Agency
NYCM	National Youth Council of Macedonia
NYSAP	National Youth Strategy and Action Plan (Albania)
NYS	National Youth Strategy
ODAS	Organisation for Dialogue and Affirmation of High School Students
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RYCO	Regional Office for Youth Cooperation
RYDE	Regional Youth Dialogue for Europe
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
WB	Western Balkans
WBYL	The WB Youth Lab Project
YGIP	Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan

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1

INTRODUCTION



1. INTRODUCTION

The Comparative Analysis of Youth Policies in the Western Balkans (WB) was conducted within the framework of the **Regional Youth Dialogue for Europe (RYDE), a project funded by the European Union from 2023 to 2026.** Led by the Center for Democracy Foundation from Serbia, in collaboration with partnering civil society organizations from across the WB, including the Academy of European Integrations and Negotiations (Albania), Youth Act Center (Albania), Kosovar Stability Initiative (Kosovo*¹), Network of Progressive Initiatives (Bosnia and Herzegovina), NGO Info Center Foundation (North Macedonia), and the Regional Academy for Democratic Development (Serbia), this project aims to strengthen participatory democracy, European integration, and regional cooperation in the WB countries. The project's primary objective is to enhance the influence of civil society organizations (CSOs), especially youth organizations, in promoting democratic values and the political, economic, and social benefits of European integration for the WB societies.

This analysis aims to provide a detailed comparative insight into youth-related public policies across the WB, including policy documents such as strategies, action plans, and laws. It assesses the coherence of measures outlined in these youth policies with other related policy areas and evaluates the alignment of these policies with youth concerns, sustainable development goals (SDGs), and the need for building social resilience. The study also formulates policy recommendations for each public policy field covered by the Analysis.

The project anticipated that a comprehensive comparative desk study would be conducted to reflect the youth policies in the EU and how these policies serve as a framework for youth-related strategies in the Western Balkan economies. The European Union's youth policies, with their emphasis on social inclusion, employment, education, and active citizenship, provide a foundational reference point for the WB countries as they strive to align their own youth policies with EU standards and practices.

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo*declaration of independence.

The Analysis provides a country-specific examination of the main challenges facing youth in each WB economy:

- **Albania:** Young people in Albania face high unemployment rates, with significant challenges in transitioning from education to the labour market. The mismatch between education and job market demands, combined with limited opportunities for quality vocational training, exacerbates these issues.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina are confronted with one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe, compounded by political instability and ethnic divisions that hinder effective policy implementation. Corruption and lack of trust in public institutions further alienate young people from the political process.
- **Kosovo*:** Kosovo* has the youngest population in Europe, yet faces substantial challenges in providing adequate education and employment opportunities. High levels of emigration among youth are driven by dissatisfaction with local prospects and a perceived lack of future opportunities.
- **Montenegro:** Young people in Montenegro struggle with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, often working in jobs that do not match their qualifications. The education system's alignment with labour market needs remains a significant issue.
- **North Macedonia:** Despite some progress, North Macedonia continues to grapple with high youth unemployment and underemployment. The education system faces challenges in providing the skills necessary for the modern job market, and many young people express dissatisfaction with their economic prospects.
- **Serbia:** Youth in Serbia face significant barriers to employment, including high unemployment rates and a lack of quality jobs. Political instability and economic uncertainty contribute to a challenging environment for young people seeking to establish themselves in the labour market.

This context highlights the critical need for targeted, effective, and well-coordinated youth policies in the WB. By drawing on the experiences and frameworks provided by the EU, this Analysis seeks to offer actionable recommendations that will help to address these challenges and support the development of more resilient, inclusive, and youth-friendly policies across the region.

The methodology of the Analysis was collaboratively developed among the partners, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach. The Academy of European Integrations and Negotiations (AIEN) from Albania coordinated the research process, which focused on three key areas identified as particularly relevant to youth in the WB context:

- 1. Socio-economic field:** Addressing employment, education, and SRH of youth. This area examines the specific challenges young people face in entering the workforce, the quality and relevance of educational systems, and access to comprehensive SRH services.
- 2. Youth participation:** Covering civic and political engagement, social inclusion, and the involvement of youth in decision-making processes. The analysis looks into the barriers to youth participation in governance and public life, as well as strategies to enhance their engagement and representation.
- 3. Media culture and the digital world:** Focusing on youth media and digital literacy, fostering critical thinking, representation of young people in the media space, visibility, and media affirmation of marginalized youth, and youth participation in creating integrative and inclusive cultural policies.

The analysis includes a comprehensive review of public policy documents from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. An expert team of **11 members, including three team leaders and eight researchers**, conducted the research and data analysis within the framework of these areas.

The recommendations formulated in this Analysis are intended for discussion among experts, policymakers, political party youth forums, national youth councils, youth organizations, and other CSOs **during the "policy lab" workshops**. These workshops will be organized at both national and regional levels, creating a dynamic and collaborative environment for stakeholders to engage directly with the findings of this study. **The policy labs are designed to facilitate an interactive platform where participants can critically evaluate the current state of youth policies, share experiences, and co-create solutions that are tailored to the specific needs of young people in different Western Balkan economies.**

Through these labs, stakeholders will have the opportunity to explore innovative approaches to policy-making, ensuring that youth perspectives are integrated into all stages of policy development. Additionally, the workshops will focus on fostering partnerships across sectors, enhancing advocacy skills among youth organizations, and developing actionable strategies for mainstreaming youth policies into broader national agendas. The objective is to move beyond theoretical discussions and towards practical implementation, thereby bridging the gap between policy and practice.

The conclusion of this Analysis emphasizes the need for a continuous, inclusive dialogue between youth organizations and policymakers across the WB. By integrating youth perspectives into all stages of policy development and implementation, the Analysis aims to ensure that youth voices are not just heard but are central to shaping the future of the region. This document seeks to provide actionable recommendations and serve as a foundation for ongoing advocacy efforts, aimed at creating more equitable, resilient, and youth-friendly policies throughout the Western Balkans.



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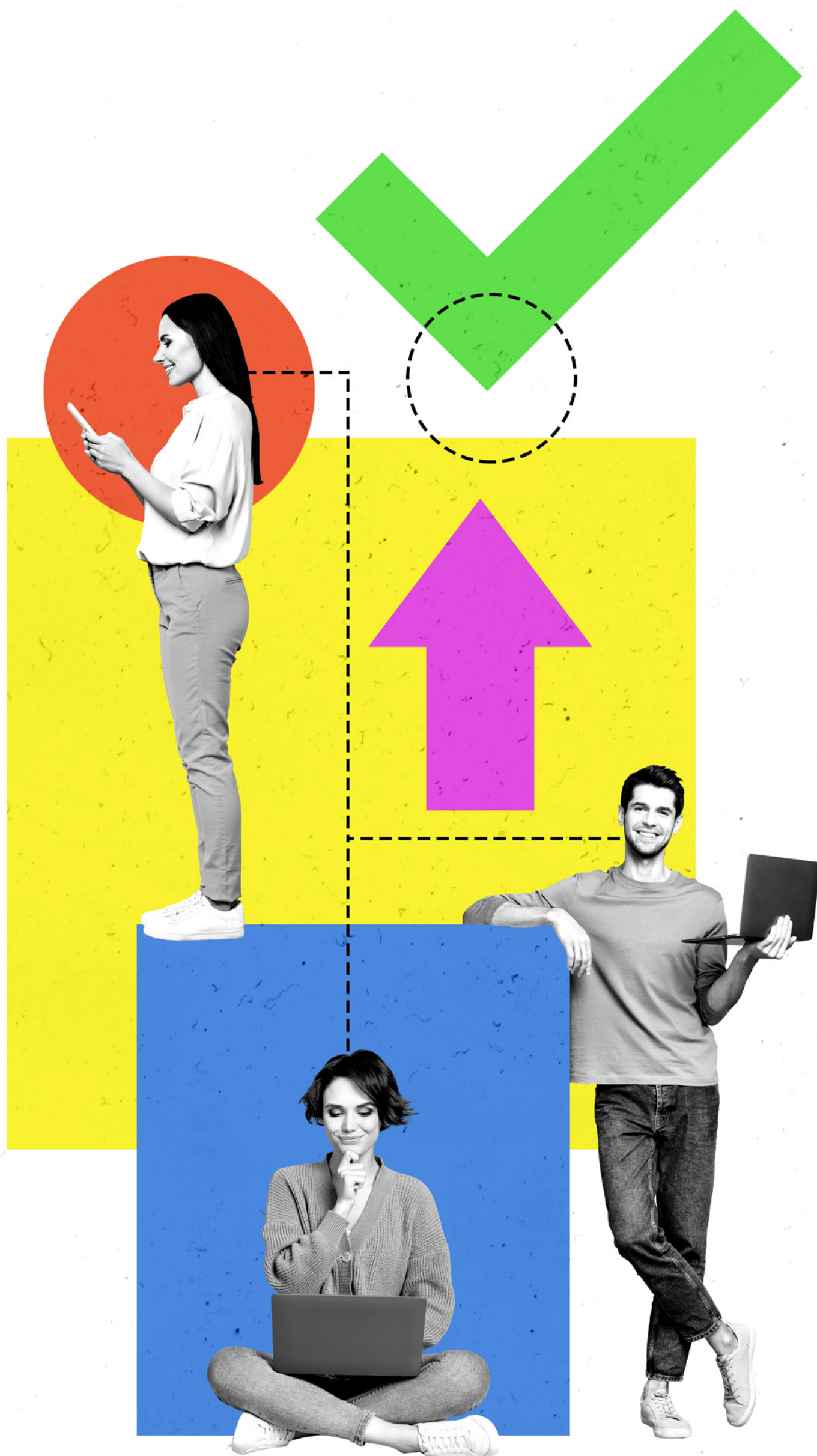
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SOCIO-ECONOMIC FIELD



2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FIELD

2.1. GENERAL INFORMATION

Of the nearly 18 million people living in the WB, approximately 3 million are young. The WB labour force involves roughly 7.5 million people (15-64), and only approx. 30% of the Western Balkan's youth (15-24) are active in the labour markets, which is lower than the EU average of 37.8%, according to the *Study on Youth Employment in the WB*² published by the RCC from Sarajevo. The same source indicates that the average regional youth unemployment rate is 35.1%, more than double that of 14.5% in the EU³. There is also a significant gender gap in youth labour force participation between activity rates for young men, averaging 36.5%, against the rate for young women, which is 23.3%. Youth in the WB are frequently employed through temporary employment contracts, with a disproportionate share of part-time contracts, informally, and suffering from 'underemployment' (working in jobs below their skill level). Underemployment may result in anxiety due to lack of job security, adverse effects on productivity, especially in high-skill sectors, lower earnings, etc. Long-term unemployment, or remaining unemployed for over 12 months, affects more than half of young, unemployed people in the WB. Data show that 23.7% of young people in the WB are NEET, which is an increase of 2.4% from 2019 and compares poorly with the 11.1% in the EU.

The level of education affects young people's position in the labour market – the activity rate of young people with a low level of education (primary school or less) is below 10% in WB economies, except Albania, according to the RCC's *Study on Youth Employment in the WB*. The average employment rate for youth with a low level of education (except Albania) is 7.2% - less than half of the EU's 18.5%. Although much better (41.4%), the WB⁶ employment rate for highly educated youth still significantly falls behind the EU average of 57.3%.

According to the findings from a Youth study Serbia conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung⁴, the differences between a person's occupation and their profession are frequent. Approximately half of youth work in fields unrelated to their educational background. The occupations of the respondents and their educational backgrounds don't match. Up to one fourth of respondents work in positions that demand less education

2 Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans, RCC, 2021, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/573/study-on-youth-employment-in-the-western-balkans>, visited on March 11, 2024

3 Youth unemployment rate in the European Union for 2022, Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tesem140/default/table?lang=en>

4 The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, YOUTH STUDY SERBIA 2018/2019, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15269-20190411.pdf>

than they have. When it comes to accepting a job, pay, job security, and free time after work are the factors that matter most. Expertise and educational attainment are seen as secondary to social capital and political connections when it comes to employment. Merely one-third of the participants who disclosed their weekly work hours adhere to the legal minimum, which is 40 hours per week. While there are no exact data to confirm these trends across other Western Balkan economies, it is reasonable to assume similar patterns may exist given shared socio-economic contexts.

Furthermore, according to the same Study, young people from Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo* have a slightly higher perception of corruption in the educational system, compared to other Western Balkan economies. Such opinions undoubtedly contribute to the general perception that educational accomplishments are devalued and discredited, in addition to making people unhappy with the educational system. Young people's satisfaction with the educational system as a whole is higher than their dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, a sizable portion of youth concur that instances of corruption exist in colleges and/or universities, where test scores and marks can be purchased. Finally, the majority of youth believe that education in schools and universities fails to adequately prepare them for the demands of the modern workforce.

As concerns about corruption and dissatisfaction with educational systems persist, they intersect with broader societal issues, such as access to quality healthcare services. During the recent pandemic COVID-19, the deprioritization of some existing healthcare services has deepened. The pandemic also uncovered weaknesses within healthcare systems and exposed that WB6 economies are unprepared to deal with health emergencies. Further, the pandemic hurt the delivery of vital SRH⁵ care, including maternal health and family planning, for women and groups with vulnerabilities, including young people. Finally, stigma and discrimination, socioeconomic factors and geographic distance make it difficult for vulnerable groups within society, including youth, to access health services and seek help.

2.2. BEST PRACTICES FROM THE EU

In terms of socioeconomic policies aimed at young people, the most significant reference that may serve as an example of a policy that should be aimed at is the **Youth Guarantee**. The EU introduced the Youth Guarantee in 2013⁶, pledging all EU Member States to provide all youth under 30 with a high-quality offer of employment, further education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within 4 months of either dropping out of school or loss of employment. Approximately 1.7 million fewer young people in the EU were unemployed, not in school, or receiving training in the seven years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

By February 2020, the rate of youth unemployment has dropped to a historic low of 14.9%, ahead of the EU-wide lockdowns prompted by the pandemic. While the macroeconomic environment improved, it is clear from the data that **the Youth Guarantee had a significant transformative impact**. An offer of work, further study, an apprenticeship, or a traineeship was extended to more than 24 million youth who had previously

5 SRH refers to physical and emotional wellbeing and includes the ability to remain free from unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, STIs (including HIV/AIDS), and all forms of sexual violence and coercion (Council of Europe, 2004).

6 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=14404&langId=en>

been enrolled in Youth Guarantee programmes. Young people now have opportunities thanks to the Youth Guarantee, which has also served as a strong catalyst for innovation and structural changes.

In 2020, **the EU strengthened its Youth Guarantee**.⁷ This programme contributes to creating youth employment opportunities, promoting youth entrepreneurship and help to harness the opportunities arising from the digital and green transitions. It also help to reduce persistent labour market scars from the severe slowdown by encouraging firms to hire unemployed youth, including those who were unemployed prior to the pandemic, and by providing training that facilitates the matching of unemployed and inactive youth to vacancies. A reinforced Youth Guarantee should ensure that all young people receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. It should also strive to support young people in gaining valuable work experience and developing the right skills for a changing world of work. Finally, it is recognised that the quality of apprenticeships plays an important role in this respect.

Green jobs among the youth are significant focuses within the European Union, as they align with the EU's goals of promoting sustainability and combating climate change. Introduced in 2019, the European Green Deal⁸ is the EU's flagship initiative aimed at making the EU economy sustainable. It encompasses various policies and measures to promote green growth, including investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable transport, and circular economy practices. Additionally, the European Skills Agenda⁹, launched in 2020, aims to ensure that the EU workforce is equipped with the necessary skills for the green transition. It focuses on upskilling and reskilling initiatives, including programs specifically targeting young people to prepare them for green jobs. Several EU agencies and initiatives play a role in promoting youth employment and green jobs. The European Semester¹⁰ is an annual cycle of economic policy coordination within the EU. It includes a review of Member States' employment and social policies, with recommendations aimed at promoting sustainable and inclusive growth, including the promotion of green jobs and youth employment. The European Environment Agency provides data and analysis on environmental trends, while the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) supports the development of vocational education and training policies.

In a Council Recommendation in October 2020, **all EU members committed to the enhanced implementation of the Youth Guarantee**. As part of the Youth Employment Support Package, the Commission drafted a proposal the basis of which was this Recommendation. It meets the needs of millions of young people who are unemployed and unable to enter the modern workforce while also reaching out to the most difficult-to-reach people who may have been putting up with several barriers for a long time. All of this is made possible through the enhanced Youth Guarantee's individualised, customised approaches, which give young people the right amount of coaching and assist them in finding boot camps or crash courses if upskilling is what is required. Such approaches acknowledge the opportunities presented by the increasing digital and green transitions while taking into account local labour market intelligence de-

7 Official Journal of the EU, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en>, visited on March 11, 2024

8 European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en, visited on March 11, 2024

9 European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en>, visited on March 11, 2024

10 European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/european-semester_en, March 11, 2024

financed by COVID-19 implications. Significant EU funding from *NextGenerationEU*¹¹ and the EU's long-term budget support the recommendation. In order to assist Member States in bolstering the framework and policies for the enhanced Youth Guarantee, the EU offers policy support and mutual learning opportunities. The EU also keeps tabs on developments among its Member States.

The Erasmus program stands as a beacon of successful international cooperation in education. Erasmus+ is the largest European educational programme that deals with the financing of mobility and cooperation projects in the field of education, training, youth and sports¹². The general goal of the Program is to support the educational, professional and personal development through lifelong learning. It was created in 2014, and in 2021 it entered a new seven-year implementation period that will last until 2027. In this regard, the new programme emphasizes inclusiveness, green initiatives and digitalization as key and most important priorities that supports through financial mechanisms, then strengthening civic values, dialogue of cultures, tolerance and understanding of social, cultural and historical heritage.

2.3. COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

Almost all Western Balkan economies have adopted **National Strategies for Youth, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina**, where there is no unique national strategy and depends on each entity separately. Kosovo* is in the phase of the approval of a new strategy. Regarding the **National Action Plans on Youth**, the situation is generally consistent across the entire region. Bosnia and Herzegovina stands out as an exception, lacking national-level youth policy documents. Some sub-state entities have adopted local youth strategies and action plans and the adoption of youth frameworks across governance levels still needs improvement.

Further, **Albania and Montenegro** explicitly guarantee youth rights and protection in their **Constitutions**. Certain essential youth rights are regulated in legislation in North Macedonia, albeit not explicitly. Further progress in Youth Guarantee Fund implementation remains crucial. In the legislative aspect, all economies have consolidated laws in employment, education, and SRH; however, economies should work on the implementation and treatment of workers in the workplace.

The Western Balkan economies have implemented a diverse range of employment development strategies, few of which have been especially designed to target early school leavers or youth in general. Some economies are attempting to reestablish connections between vocational schools and the business sector by adopting dual education systems, as vocational schools frequently fail to provide students with the necessary skills required on the labour market (Montenegro, Serbia). The reason for this is the lack of work experience and many postsecondary graduates find it challenging to move into the workforce. In response, **governments in all WB6 economies—aside from Bosnia and Herzegovina— introduced paid internship programmes**. Each economy has traineeship support initiatives in place. Nevertheless, **none of the Western Balkan economies have yet im-**

11 Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) - an instrument that provides grants and loans to support reforms and investments in the EU Member States, Next generation EU, https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en, visited on March 12 2024

12 Erasmus plus, <https://erasmusplus.rs/about-the-programme/>, visited on March 12 2024

plemented apprenticeships with a contractual arrangement between the apprentice and the employer. For young individuals who are registered with the Public Employment Service, several economies offer informal training. These trainings are offered as quick courses covering a range of topics, from teaching specific skills in demand on the job market, including information technology abilities, to training in job search techniques; they often don't incorporate any aspect of work-based learning.

Support for self-employment, job subsidies, and the direct development of public works projects and programmes are the ways in which employment support is provided. Wage subsidies have been employed in a number of Western Balkan economies (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Serbia) to assist in the creation of jobs for youth. Usually, subsidies cover salary costs up to the minimum wage as well as the employers' social security contributions. The majority of economies, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, have established special initiatives to support young people in transitioning to self-employment. Young people with either a low or medium degree of education typically opt for this type of work, which entails the title of sole proprietor. Only Serbia approaches direct job creation for youth through public works employed as a youth employment policy. A significant component of the youth employment programmes is youth entrepreneurship. The institutional environment for youth entrepreneurship is far from perfect, though. Due to their lack of experience, young people have difficulty overcoming administrative and bureaucratic obstacles and are unable to obtain financing for their business. There is a small amount of assistance offered by CSOs and government initiatives.

The Total Public Employment Service caseloads per staff member in North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo* are significantly higher than the EU average, and they are also higher than caseloads in Croatia and Slovenia, two peer economies. This implies that more Public Employment Service employees are required, particularly in the case that the implementation of a Youth Guarantee causes a greater number of NEETs to come forward and sign up for the programme. In a number of economies over the past 10 years, the proportion of young, registered job seekers participating in active labour market policies has declined (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia). North Macedonia stands up as an exception, having implemented a Youth Guarantee in 2018.

The field of SRH of youth is still newer than the field of employment and education. This reflected in less strategies, action plans, programmes, laws and regulations in all WB economies.



2.4. HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REGION

When it comes to youth in the WB, several regional initiatives and projects focus specifically on addressing the needs and aspirations of young people. **The WB Youth Lab** (WBYL) is a project funded by the EU and carried out by the RCC, beginning in January 2020 with the goal of involving young people in decision-making processes in the WB. It seeks to establish a sustained regional dialogue between youth organizations and national administrations, aiming to collaboratively devise policies that enhance youth participation in decision-making, improve socio-economic conditions, and boost youth mobility across Western Balkan economies through various activities. Comprising four interconnected components, the WBYL project includes: WB Youth Policy Labs; strengthening the National Youth Councils in the WB; participation of Western Balkan youth in regional and international events; and mapping of Youth Policies and Identification of Existing Support and Gaps in Financing of Youth Actions in WB. For young people in the WB, the project offers opportunities to interact with policymakers, raise topics relevant to their interests, and contribute to policy-making processes. Through participation in Youth Labs, they can select areas of involvement, such as the newly launched Mental Health Youth Lab, addressing a significant challenge for the youth. Additionally, Youth Councils receive support to enhance their activities and engagement efforts.

RYCO is a unique initiative aimed at promoting reconciliation, dialogue, and cooperation among youth in the WB region. Established in 2016, RYCO operates as a platform for young people from different ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds to come together, exchange ideas, and work towards common goals. RYCO organizes various youth exchange programs, including cultural exchanges, educational activities, and volunteer projects. RYCO also provides training, workshops, and resources to youth organizations, activists, and educators to strengthen their capacities in areas such as project management, intercultural communication, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. Further, RYCO advocates for youth rights, participation, and inclusion at the regional and international levels. It raises awareness about the importance of youth cooperation and dialogue as essential components of peacebuilding and reconciliation in the WB. By engaging with policymakers, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders, RYCO works to ensure that youth voices are heard and taken into account in decision-making processes.

When it comes to employment, there are a number of successful initiatives across the WB. **The Serbian Business Development Programme**¹³ offers self-employment subsidies, mentoring, training in business development, and specialised one-day seminars in addition to consulting services. Programmes designed to foster entrepreneurship among marginalised populations particularly target the Roma (2014); assistance is also given to women's and young people's entrepreneurship (2014-2019). Also, within a few NES branches, Special Business Centres for Entrepreneurship Development have been established.

In addition, unemployed graduates without professional work experience in their field of study are the target audience for the **Internship Programme for Youth with Higher Education**¹⁴. Employer pressure is placed on programme participants who also receive a government tax benefit. Participants in the scheme must work for a minimum of twelve months; in 2020, 530 paid internships were completed. There is also an internship plan for secondary school graduates, called the Internship Plan for Unemployed

13 Government of Serbia, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/en/130021/development-projects-.php>, visited on March 12, 2024

14 Ministry of Youth and Sports of Serbia, <https://www.mos.gov.rs/storage/2022/06/wbyl-youth-entrepreneurship-neet-short-en.pdf>, visited on march 12 2024

Persons with Secondary Education, which runs for a maximum of six months (590 funded internships took place in 2020). When an employer requests training subsidies, they must plan to hire at least half of the taught individuals.

To promote youth employment, the Government of the Republic of Serbia created the RSD 2 billion **My First Salary**¹⁵ project in August 2020 for first-time employees. The project is managed by the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, the National Employment Service, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, and the Office for IT and e-Government. It gives young individuals who have finished their secondary or postsecondary academic training the chance to have their first job experience. A portion of their salaries in the public or private sectors are paid for by the government. Employment that is subsidised must be held for a minimum of nine months with RSD 20,000 monthly pay for individuals with only a secondary level of education or RSD 24,000 per month for those who have acquired a higher education.

Parallel to this, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 420 contracts worth a total of BAM 2,799,459 were signed with employers as part of the **First Work Experience 2019**¹⁶ programme by the end of 2019 with the aim of hiring 626 young people without work experience in higher education and the workforce, 357 of whom were women (53%). Persons who received co-financing were typically 25 years old and had been jobless for 14 months on average.

Additionally, through the **Entrepreneurship for Youth 2019 initiative**¹⁷, by the end of 2019, 407 young people had signed contracts worth a total of BAM 1,907,253, of which 243 had registered the activity and 164 were engaged in it. From the total number of individuals covered by this measure, 140 or 34% were women. Co-financed individuals were 27 years old on average, and had been jobless for 24 months on average.

There are also a significant number of successful initiatives in the field of SRH. For instance, education support for the SRH of the Egyptian, Ashkali, and Roma communities in Kosovo* during the COVID-19 epidemic¹⁸, as part of a UNFPA-supported project, included a survey led by five learning centre coordinators that focused on health issues (pregnancy rate, antenatal care, STIs, cervical cancer, breast cancer, Covid-19, family planning, HIV, people with diabetes, people with disabilities, people with respiratory health issues, hypertension, cardiovascular problems). Also, five youth clubs with learning centres were established to allow youth to discuss and address issues related to SRH as well as general health issues caused by the pandemic. Finally, participation and empowerment of a minimum of 20 young people from the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities in health-related activities, included a three-day SRH-related training course, home visits to approximately 1,500 families to increase awareness of STIs and Covid-19, and in-person visits to pregnant women to increase awareness of healthy pregnancy, family planning, STIs, protection from Covid-19, and the wellbeing of babies.

15 OECD, <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/my-first-salary/> , visited on March 14, 2024

16 Council of Europe, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/bosnia-and-herzegovina/36-integration-of-young-people-in-the-labour-market> , visited on March 14, 2024

17 Ibid.

18 Balkan Sunflowers, <https://www.balkansunflowers.org/en/what-we-do/past-projects/supporting-the-roma-ashkali-and-egyptian-communities-in-the-situation-created-by-covid19/> , visited on March 14 2024

2.5. STATE OF PLAY – STRATEGIES, LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK IN THE WB

2.5.1. ALBANIA

In the past few decades, Albania has seen significant demographic shifts, marked by factors such as population movement, economic changes, declining fertility rates, and aging. Despite an overall population decline, the number of youths aged 15 to 29 has remained relatively stable¹⁹. However, the proportion of children and elderly has shifted drastically, with a decrease in the former and a doubling of the latter. These changes have profound implications at various levels, impacting individuals, households, and society as a whole. The youth population holds a crucial position amidst this transformation, especially considering the shift towards an older population. Youth are pivotal in driving population changes, primarily through declining fertility rates and migration patterns. Most births occur within the 15-29 age group, contributing to a decrease in the total fertility rate. Migration, both internal and international, is predominantly driven by young adults seeking better opportunities abroad. Emigration has been a significant factor in Albania's population decline, particularly among young, with a notable trend towards gender-balanced migration. The labour market presents challenges for youth, exacerbated by high unemployment rates and underemployment. Despite improvements in educational attainment, many young people struggle to find decent work, with education levels sometimes mismatched with job requirements. Additionally, a considerable proportion of youth are not engaged in education, employment, or training, posing risks of social and labour market exclusion.

The main institutions responsible for employment policies in Albania include the **Ministry of Finance and Economy**, the **Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare**, and the **National Employment Service**. Albania's education system is overseen by the **Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth**. SRH services are provided through the **Ministry of Health and Social Protection**, particularly through its **Department of Public Health** and the **Institute of Public Health**.

Despite a slowdown expected in 2023, Albania's ERP predicts a rebound in 2024 and 2025. In 2022, GDP growth remained strong at 4.8%, driven by private investment and consumption, despite a deceleration in economic recovery. Inflation surged to 7%, leading to monetary policy tightening. The ERP anticipates growth to slow to 2.6% in 2023 due to external factors and uncertainty from geopolitical events. However, a rebound to 3.9% is expected in 2024, mainly supported by private consumption, investment, and exports. Fiscal consolidation has accelerated, aiming for a positive primary balance from 2023 onwards. Challenges include enhancing tax revenue, improving social services, and addressing connectivity and climate change issues. While progress has been made, there's a need for better alignment of policy responses with identified needs, particularly in fiscal frameworks and sectoral analyses. Additionally, measures to enhance the quality of higher education are lacking. As the NYS is the main framework for youth in all areas, in the context of youth employment policies, the **NYS** in Albania was linked at the **Employment and Skills Strategy 2019 – 2022 (NESS)**²⁰. As the future of employment transforms, the National Employment and Skills Strategy is interconnected with

19 Connecting Youth, <https://connecting-youth.org/publications/publikim8.pdf>, visited on March 12 2024

20 National Employment and Skills Strategy of the Republic of Albania 2019 – 2022 https://www.financa.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Publikim_EN_Strategjia-Kombetare-per-Punesim-dhe-Aftësi-2019-2022.pdf, visited on March 14, 2024

the Green Agenda for WB6 economies. Green jobs, as part of the green transition, are identified as the main challenges of NSDEI 2030, constituting at the same time one of the long-term priorities, along with tourism, agriculture and digitalisation.

The **National Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030**²¹ is the primary strategy covering employment in Albania. Adopted in December 2022, this document is a successor of the previous 8-year plan that expired in 2022. The process is part of the strategic long-term framework of **Albania's NSDEI 2023 (NSDEI 2030)**²² and cross-cutting with the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda (SDGs). The Strategy aims to reduce skill mismatch across all occupations, increase the level of mastery of women/men of working age, promote better functioning of the labour market, develop support programmes for effective and inclusive employment, and ensure decent work for everyone, everywhere.

In April 2023, the Albanian government adopted the **YGIP**, as an annex to the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030. The Youth Guarantee Programme focuses on the training and employment of young people aged 15-29 who are NEET and are registered for up to four months in employment structures. In the Youth Guarantee Scheme, young people are offered employment and continuing education or professional practice within four months of registration with the respective employment office. This scheme will be initially implemented in three municipalities and will target 18,000 young individuals aged 15-29 who are not currently engaged in employment, education, or training. The programme includes 3 to 6 months of vocational training followed by at least 6 months of employment, aiming for long-term youth employment. It is supported by state and EU funds with the Ministry of Finance and Economy in charge of implementation.

In 2020, the implementation of the NDS II 2015-2020, the Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education 2014-2020 and several other critical national policies related to development in the field of education ended. As a result, Albania's Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth drafted the **National Education Strategy 2021-2026**²³, which integrates the subsectors of pre-university education and higher education. However, professional training is not included in this Strategy. The primary policy document for the education subsector and professional training remains the **National Strategy for Employment and Skills 2019-2022**.

The **National Education Strategy for 2021-2026**²⁴ is Albania's primary education strategy. Initiated in 2004, each plan was updated on several topics. This strategy governs educational activity at all levels, such as the pre-university and higher education systems. The latest version of the document was approved at the end of 2021. Pre-university education predicts several changes in teacher development, inclusiveness, ICT development, and other essential challenges for the years to come. This Strategy complies with the Sustainable Development Goal 4: ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities.

21 National Employment and Skills Strategy of the Republic of Albania 2023-2030, https://financa.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/National-Employment-and-Skills-Strategy-2030_EN.pdf, visited on March 14, 2024

22 National Strategy for Development and European Integration of the Republic of Albania 2030, https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2023-05/2022_albania_sdg_final_narrative_report.pdf, visited on March 14, 2024

23 EU, National reforms in school education in Albania, last update 27 November 2023, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/albania/national-reforms-school-education>, visited on March 14, 2024

24 National Education Strategy of the Republic of Albania for 2021-2026, <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/en/2021/draft-strategjia-kombetare-e-arsimit-2021-2026-7176>, visited on March 14, 2024

Albania had the **National Contraceptive Security Strategy from 2017 to 2021**²⁵. This plan ensured that all Albanian men and women could choose, obtain, and use high-quality family planning services and contraceptives whenever they wanted to plan their families. The last year of the Reproductive Health Strategic Document was 2021. This document was essential regarding family planning and provides a framework for contraceptive security by providing contraceptive and accessible family planning services for everyone who needs them across the entire territory.

Additionally, Albania has made significant progress in recent years in recognising the rights of LGBT+ persons; it has a consolidated and active community defending their rights. Many governmental documents and actions are oriented toward raising public awareness, one of the challenges of advancing LGBT+ rights. Albania has a **National Action Plan for LGBT People 2021 to 2027**²⁶. The programme is the first of its kind in the economy and focuses on protecting rights, raising awareness, and reducing people's refusal levels. This will be achieved by measures against discrimination and hate crimes against the LGBT community in Albania.

The Labour Code of the Republic of Albania²⁷ is the central umbrella that regulates employment conditions, payment, working methods and time, and other related aspects. The implementation of the Law gives responsibility to both employers and employees. The code was adopted in 1995 and has been amended several times through the decades. Although documents and legislation are legislation intended for employment, employment intersects youth-related actions in many areas. The Labour Code, for example, gives general provisions and mentions young people only in particular cases. As such, youth needs and support are specified further with other laws.

This includes **Law No. 15/2019 on Employment Promotion**²⁸, which regulates the employment of all citizens seeking a job. Adopted in 2019, the Law has been amended several times. The amendments were oriented toward identifying appropriate incentive policies for young people and special groups, mainly persons with disabilities, ensuring efficient labour market policies, promoting inclusion and social cohesion, and strengthening the labour market. This law establishes and regulates the activities of the National Agency on Employment and Skills. In line with this, the Law on Employment Promotion was recently supplemented with Article 11, including the Youth Guarantee Fund. This law also paved the way for establishing a Social Employment Fund as a public financial instrument for the employment of people with disabilities.

Albania has the **Law on Inclusion of and Accessibility for People with Disabilities**²⁹. The Law was recently amended, and on July 2023, it was adopted by Parliament. The amendments consist of improvement in employment policies relating to young people and special groups, defined as "jobseekers disadvantaged in the labour market".

One of the main laws is **Law No. 69/2012 on the Pre-university Education System**³⁰ in the Republic of Albania. This Law covers the education of citizens on four levels, starting with pre-school at Level 0 to Level 3, which includes youth in high secondary education.

25 National Contraceptive Security Strategy of the Republic of Albania 2017-2021, <https://albania.un.org/en/46613-albanian-national-contraceptive-security-strategy-2017---2021>, visited on March 14, 2024

26 National Action Plan for LGBT People of the Republic of Albania 2021-2027, <https://rm.coe.int/lgbti-nap-2021-2027-en-final-2022/1680a584cf>, visited on March 14, 2024

27 Labour Code of the Republic of Albania, <https://euralius.eu/index.php/en/library/albanian-legislation/category/116-labour-code>, visited on March 14, 2024

28 Law No. 15/2019 on Employment Promotion, <https://legislationline.org/albania>, visited on March 14, 2024

29 Law on Inclusion of and Accessibility for People with Disabilities, <https://legislationline.org/albania>, visited on March 14, 2024

30 Law No. 69/2012 on the Pre-university Education System, <https://legislationline.org/albania>, visited on March 14, 2024

According to this Law, initial instruction is mandatory for all children from the age of six through sixteen. Even at these levels, the Law stipulates various forms of education, such as full-time, part-time, and distance education. The types of high secondary education are gymnasium, secondary vocational education and oriented secondary education. However, given the complexity and scope of vocational education, this form of education should comply with **the Law on Vocational Education in the Republic of Albania**³¹. Secondary vocational education is, according to this Law, included in the Law on Vocational Education in the Republic of Albania and in the Albanian Frame of Qualifications.

Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania³², sets the mission to provide everyone with equal opportunities to benefit from higher education and lifelong learning. **Law No. 15/2019 on Employment Promotion**, establishes and regulates the activities of the National Agency on Employment and Skills. The Agency is the responsible public entity for implementing the provisions of law on employment. The National Agency on Employment and Skills is the totality of administrative institutions and providers of employment, self-employment, education, and professional training services, an integral part of the ministry system responsible for employment and skills development.

Law no. 8876 on Reproductive Health³³ was approved in 2002. In addition to regulating the organisation and functioning of all reproductive health-related activities in private and public health institutions, this Law protects the reproductive rights of individuals and couples. Further, the Law assures that the reproductive rights of every individual will be covered in conformity with national policies and regulations and other recognised international principles. Being one of the primary laws in the frame of SRH in Albania, Article 19 implies that "adolescents and youth enjoy the right to information and services concerning reproductive health, to information and programmes that aim to prevent unwanted pregnancies and abuse, and for all else related to their active sexual conduct, in conformity with their age".

2.5.2. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Youth unemployment rates in Bosnia and Herzegovina are among the highest in Europe, with many young people struggling to find stable and decently paying jobs. Despite a slight decrease in youth unemployment, persistent issues like low wages continue to dampen job satisfaction and curb enthusiasm for entrepreneurial endeavours³⁴. Bosnian youth are voicing widespread discontent, particularly when it comes to employment opportunities and the prevalence of corruption. Trust in public institutions is notably lacking, leaving many feeling neglected by society. While interest in emigration has seen a decline, a positive attitude towards relocating abroad still prevails. Although there's been some improvement in interethnic trust, divisions among ethnic groups

31 Law on Vocational Education in the Republic of Albania, <https://legislationline.org/albania> , visited on March 14, 2024

32 Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania, <https://legislationline.org/albania> , visited on March 14, 2024

33 Law no. 8876 on Reproductive Health in the Republic of Albania, <https://legislationline.org/albania> , visited on March 14, 2024

34 USAID, <https://www.usaid.gov/bosnia-and-herzegovina/reports/national-youth-survey-BIH-2022#:~:text=HIGHLIGHTS,in%20public%20institutions%20is%20low> , visited on December 10 2023

still heavily influence media consumption habits and shape perceptions of the past. The persisting challenges in the job market, such as low wages and obstacles in job searches, have led many young Bosnians to contemplate entrepreneurship, although financial and experiential barriers remain significant hurdles.

Employment policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina are primarily managed at the entity level. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, **the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy** is responsible for employment-related matters, while in Republika Srpska, the **Ministry of Labor and Veterans' Affairs** oversees similar initiatives. Additionally, there are cantonal and municipal-level agencies that may be involved in implementing employment programs and initiatives. Education is also decentralized, with responsibilities divided between different levels of government. Each entity has its own **Ministry of Education**. Also, there are separate ministries or departments overseeing higher education and vocational education and training. Sexual and Reproductive services are provided through the healthcare system, which is managed at various levels of government. The **Ministry of Civil Affairs** at the state level may coordinate overarching health policies, while entity-level ministries of health oversee the implementation of healthcare services, including SRH programs.

The Programme of Economic Reforms of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023-2025 (ERP) foresees a slowdown in economic growth in 2023, followed by a moderate recovery driven by investment in 2024-25. Despite a robust post-pandemic rebound in 2021, economic growth slowed in 2022 due to a worsening global environment and rising inflationary pressures. The ERP predicts GDP growth to ease to 1.7% in 2023 before picking up in the final two years, supported by an improving international outlook and increased investment. While domestic factors may boost growth in 2024-2025, the ERP forecasts a decline in the current account deficit. However, political stalemates and external risks, particularly from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, pose challenges to growth. Within the framework of critical obstacle 1, insufficient efficiency of the labour market, demanding access to the labour market of young people, women and persons in a vulnerable position stand out. The reform measure related to increasing the efficiency of the labour market through effective employment policies and strengthening the role of mediation envisages activities to improve the position of young people in the labour market: a) The development of an implementation plan for the **Youth Guarantee Programme**, which will include three pilot projects; b) Monitoring the implementation and evaluation of the **Youth Guarantee Programme** for 2023 and 2024; c) Implementation of the YGIP. In the field of *education and skills*, implementation of the reform measure to improve the connection between education and the labour market is planned, which includes activities relevant to the field of youth employment: a) The introduction of critical competencies in curricula with focus on digital competencies; b) Development of quality assurance systems in secondary professional and higher education, as well as links between the education and training sector and work and employment; c) Development of occupational standards and qualification standards for vocational and higher education.

The Labor Law of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina³⁵ regulates the relationship between employers and employees, covering a wide range of issues related to employment. This law governs the conclusion of labour contract, working hours, salaries, termination of labour contract, exercise of rights and obligations arising from employment, conclusion of collective agreements, peaceful settlement of collective labour disputes

35 Labour Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://advokat-prnjavorac.com/legislation/Labour-Law-FBiH-2015.pdf>, visited on December 10 2023

and other matters arising from labour relations. Very similarly, **the Labor Law of RS**³⁶ regulates the methods and procedures for the conclusion of employment contract between employers and employees, working hours, vacations and leaves, salaries and other labour based reimbursements, protection of rights deriving from employment, conclusion and implementation of collective agreements, peaceful settlement of labour disputes between employees and employers, participation of workers and trade unions in protection of employees' rights, termination of employment contracts and other issues deriving from employment on the territory of the RS.

The **Employment Strategy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023-2030**³⁷ highlights the transition from education to work and informal employment as a critical issue for young people. Within outcome 1.2. the adult training system has been strengthened and contributes to improving the alignment of workforce skills and qualifications; the number of young people who have completed school and are employed in jobs that match their qualifications is expected to increase by 20% until 2030.

The **Employment strategy of the Republic of Srpska 2021-2027**³⁸ within the first strategic goal of increasing the employment of a more productive workforce by matching supply and demand on the labour market, it sets 'strengthening youth employability' as one of its priorities. This priority should be realised through the following measures: a support programme aimed at the employment of young people with a higher education, a vocational training programme for persons with a higher education, a support programme aimed at training young people for employment in creative industries, with focus on programming and an incentives programme for young people in business process outsourcing. The strategic document **Youth Policy of the Republic of Srpska 2023-2027**³⁹ sets two priorities in the field of youth employment: support of youth employment and support of youth entrepreneurship. In green transition, a reform measure of climate change mitigation and energy efficiency is planned in the WB.

The joint framework relative to education in Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of Priorities for the Development of Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016 - 2026⁴⁰ and the document **Improvement of the Quality and Relevance of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) - Based on the Riga Conclusions 2021-2030**⁴¹, etc. The strategic document **Youth Policy of the Republic of Srpska 2023-2027** for the implementation of the priority *Improvement of Professional Orientation and Education for Young People* foresees the following measures: a) Establishing an effective professional orientation system, career counselling and competence acquisition; b) Support developing and integrating entrepreneurial learning programmes into formal and informal education and career planning; c) Improving the attractiveness and quality of education.

36 Labour law of Republika Srpska, <https://advokat-prnjavorac.com/legislation/Labour-Law-of-RS.pdf>, visited on December 10 2023

37 The Employment Strategy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023-2030, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA769649980&sid=sitemap&v=2.1&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon~6a682f43&aty=open-web-entry>, visited on December 10 2023

38 The Employment Strategy of the Republic of Srpska 2021-2027, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/C_2022_9167_F1_ANNEX_EN_V2_P1_2359829.PDF, visited on December 10 2023

39 Youth Policy of the Republic of Srpska 2023-2027, https://www.vladars.net/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/mpos/Documents/%D0%9E%D0%BC%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%A0%D0%B5%D0-%BF%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B5%20%D0%A1%D1%80%D0%BF%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B5%202023%20-%202027_062374987.pdf, visited on December 10 2023

40 Priorities for the Development of Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016 - 2026, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/he-report-bih.pdf>, visited on December 10 2023

41 Improvement of the Quality and Relevance of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) - Based on the Riga Conclusions 2021-2030, https://oead.at/fileadmin/Dokumente/oead.at/KIM/BIKO_Ost_und_Suedosteuroopa/Strateski_dokument_engleski.pdf, visited on December 10 2023

The **Strategy for Improving SRH and Rights in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2010-2019**⁴² focuses on young people in two strategic priorities. The priority *promoting sexual health and reproductive rights* aims to promote SRH in the context of healthy lifestyles, to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, premature conception or accepting different attitudes in the field of sexual reproductive health. The second priority, *continuous education*, aims to ensure a higher level of knowledge in terms of SRH through formal and informal education.

The **Strategy for the Improvement of SRH in the Republic of Srpska 2019-2029**⁴³ singles out young people as a particular group in the analysis of the situation, stating that young people lack appropriate services adapted to their unique needs and the vulnerable period of life they are currently going through. Furthermore, education on sexuality in formal education does not exist, and peer education and programmes implemented by CSOs lack continuity. It says that the issues facing young people are unplanned pregnancies, underage pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections. Several planned measures for the implementation of particular goals targeted young people. These measures have been set to reduce the risk of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, through continuous education of the population; strengthen evidence-based formal education of youth about SRH; organise peer education on SRH.

The joint regulatory framework relative to education in Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of the following documents: **Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina**⁴⁴, **Framework Law on Secondary Vocational Education**⁴⁵, **Fundamentals of the Qualification Framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina**⁴⁶. The ministries of education are responsible for secondary, higher as well as adult education: in the Republic of Srpska, the Ministry of Education and Culture of the RS; in the Federation, ten cantonal ministries of education; and in Brčko District, the Department of Education. Legal grounds for the implementation of secondary and higher education, as well as adult education, are the laws and by-laws within the jurisdiction of the institutions above.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina two state-level laws relevant to the field of SRH are the **Law on Conditions and Procedures for Termination of Pregnancy** and the **Law on Medicines**⁴⁷. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska regulate healthcare separately via the **Law on Health Insurance** and the **Law on Healthcare**⁴⁸.

42 Strategy for Improving SRH and Rights in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2010-2019, https://ba.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/inquiry_on_sexual_and_reproductive_health_and_reproductive_rights_in_bih.pdf, visited on December 10 2023

43 Strategy for the Improvement of SRH in the Republic of Srpska 2019-2029, https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/board-documents/CPE_Final_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina_Programme_Evaluation_Report.pdf, visited on December 10 2023

44 Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://aposo.gov.ba/sadrzaj/uploads/Framework-Law.pdf>, visited on December 10 2023

45 Framework Law on Secondary Vocational Education, http://fmon.gov.ba/Upload/Dokumenti/b75fc8cd-8699-4a74-ae2d-3a1172d43da7_Okvirni%20zakon%20o%20srednjem%20stru%C4%8Dnom%20obrazovanju%20i%20obuci%20u%20Bosni%20i%20Hercegovini.pdf, visited on December 10 2023

46 Fundamentals of the Qualification Framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina.pdf>, visited on December 10 2023

47 Law on Conditions and Procedures for Termination of Pregnancy and Law on Medicines <https://www.ohr.int/laws-of-bih/>, visited on December 10 2023

48 Law on Healthcare <https://www.ohr.int/laws-of-bih/>, visited on December 10 2023

2.5.3. KOSOVO*

Kosovo* has the youngest population in Europe which is potentially a great advantage as their numbers, exuberance and creativity could be a strong force for development. However, Kosovo* faces significant challenges, with the highest general unemployment rate and youth unemployment rate in the region⁴⁹. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, disproportionately affecting young people economically, as they were more likely to be in precarious employment and faced higher unemployment rates. In addition to unemployment challenges, Kosovo's youth face emigration due to issues such as inadequate education quality, limited opportunities for social and political engagement, and insufficient support services. Concerns about education quality are particularly pronounced, with only slightly more than one fifth of respondents expressing satisfaction with available educational opportunities.

Employment policies in Kosovo* are primarily overseen by the **Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare**, and **The Employment Agency of Kosovo**. Education is managed by the **Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology**, while SRH services in Kosovo* are primarily overseen by the **Ministry of Health**.

The ERP 2022-2024⁵⁰ recognizes the intricate economic landscape of Kosovo* and the myriad hurdles obstructing its growth trajectory, and the primary emphasis has been placed on orienting structural reforms towards cultivating a robust market economy and bolstering competitiveness, in line with the overarching objectives outlined in the Government Program spanning from 2021 to 2025. Central to this endeavour is the steadfast commitment of the Government to facilitate economic recovery and enhance prospects for employment. The ERP policy framework embodies a multifaceted approach, comprising three main components. Firstly, an economic recovery program has been designed to provide essential support for post-pandemic recovery efforts. Secondly, a rules-based fiscal policy framework has been devised, prioritizing the stabilization of public finances while leveraging available fiscal space to stimulate economic growth through strategic capital investments and increased funding for pivotal development sectors. Furthermore, a suite of priority structural reforms has been delineated, specifically tailored to address the key impediments to economic growth, foster the development of competitive economic sectors, and ensure that the trajectory of economic growth is not only sustainable but also inclusive, thereby enhancing overall welfare.

The **National Development Strategy 2030** in Kosovo*⁵¹ covers employment under the second pillar, with a focus on various age groups including youth, aiming for increased rates of employment in the near future. However, the Strategy of Employment is still developing, as the previous Sectoral Strategy for Employment covered the period 2018-2022. As the main governmental plan, the **National Development Strategy 2030** is a long-term guiding document that all ministries and institutions in Kosovo* are included in and which belongs to their scope of work. It provides a vision for sustainable development, focusing on economic development, social welfare and quality of education, among other things. Within four pillars, education's challenges, obstacles, and opportunities for growth are included in Human Capital, under the second pillar.

49 UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ks/YouthChallengesandPerspectivesinKosovoENG.pdf>, visited on December 20 2023

50 Government of Kosovo, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Economic-Reform-Programme-2022-24.pdf>, visited on December 20 2023

51 National Development Strategy 2030, Kosovo*, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/national-development-strategy-2030/>, visited on December 20 2023

In full compliance and parallel with the NDS is the **Strategy of Education 2022-2026**⁵² as the primary document for developing the education sector in Kosovo*. The primary purpose of this document is to define the medium-term strategic objectives of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in achieving education's strategic goal. The strategy is divided into different levels of education and of high importance to youth—the 3rd area is Vocational Training and Adult Education, and the 4th area is Higher Education. One objective is the harmonisation of VET with dynamic developments in technology and the labour market.

In July 2021, Kosovo* endorsed the WB Declaration⁵³, committing to gradually implement a **Youth Guarantee** for young people aged 15-29. The Ministry of Finance, Labour, and Transfers will oversee implementation, with the Kosovo* Employment Agency responsible for service delivery and monitoring. Other stakeholders, including government agencies, social partners, and CSOs, also contribute. YGIP in Kosovo* was adopted in November 2022. Various ongoing initiatives support up-skilling and employment, and the restructuring of the Employment Agency are planned, thus enabling it to provide more efficient services. Kosovo's* Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers has launched the Platform **Superpuna**⁵⁴. Through this platform, the government guarantees employment in the private sector for young people aged 18-25.

Kosovo's* **Programme for Gender Equality 2020-2024**⁵⁵ is supported by the Kosovar Agency for Gender Equality. Health is one of the four objectives of this programme, making it essential for women. The document sets a number of critical challenges faced by women, such as prevention, environment and education, access to services in rural areas, marginalised groups, reproductive health and family planning.

The institution responsible for regulating the labour market along with active measures was the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. With the Prime minister's decision in 2021, the Ministry merged with the Ministry of Finance. The primary law regulating the rights and obligations deriving from employment relationships is **Law No. 03/L-212 on Labour**⁵⁶. The law sets the age of eighteen (18) or above as the age to establish an employment relationship and the period between fifteen (15) and eighteen (18) years when youths "may be employed for easy labour that does not represent a risk to their health or development and if any law or sub-legal act does not prohibit such labour".

A separate law in Kosovo* that determines the rights, conditions, and employment of people with disabilities is **Law No. 03/ L-019 on Vocational Ability, Rehabilitation and Employment of People with Disabilities**⁵⁷. The main aim of the law is legal and institutional support for the integration of PwD in an open labour market according to general and special conditions based on principles and equal treatment, including gender possibilities. The Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo* remains an essential institution for youth employment.

52 Strategy of Education 2022-2026, Kosovo*, <https://konsultimet.rks-gov.net/>, visited on December 20 2023

53 EU-Western Balkans Summit Brussels Declaration, July 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/eu-western-balkans-summit-brussels-declaration-13-december-2023_en?s=225, visited on December 20 2023

54 Superpuna Platform created within the Youth Job Guarantee scheme, <https://superpuna.rks-gov.net>

55 Programme for Gender Equality 2020-2024, Kosovo*, <https://abgj.rks-gov.net/assets/cms/uploads/files/AGE%20Kosovo%20Program%20for%20Gender%20Equality%202020-2024.pdf>, visited on December 20 2023

56 Law No. 03/L-212 on Labour in Kosovo*, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

57 Law No. 03/ L-019 on Vocational Ability, Rehabilitation and Employment of People with Disabilities in Kosovo*, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

Law No. 03/L-145 on Empowerment and Participation of Youth⁵⁸ is explicitly directed toward youth. According to this law, the right to volunteer is guaranteed and is an essential period for youth before obtaining official employment. This law is further supplemented by administrative instruction **No. 01/2016 on Youth Voluntary Work**.⁵⁹ Important added specifics remain on the certificate of recognition of voluntary work as an electronic document issued by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The administrative instruction sets the establishment of a Platform and Database for Volunteerism (PDV) as a tool for verification of voluntary work.

In the **Plan of the Government of Kosovo* 2021-2025**⁶⁰, education has been identified as a significant opportunity and resource for Kosovo's* sustainable economic and social development. In general, education is regulated by separate laws depending on the level. **Law No. 04/L -032 on Pre-university Education in the Republic of Kosovo***⁶¹ holds pre-university education and training from ISCED levels 0 to 4. According to the law, "no person shall be denied the right to education". The case for functioning and providing quality higher education in compliance with European standards is established by **Law no. 04/L-037 on Higher Education**⁶².

Youth remains the target group for **Law No. 04/L-138 on Vocational Education and Training (VET)**⁶³ and **Law No. 04/L-143 on Adult Education and Training**.⁶⁴ The purpose of the Law on Vocational Education and Training (VET) is to regulate the national vocational education and training system according to the needs of the economic and social development of Kosovo*, including financial and technological changes, demands of the labour market and the requirements of individuals during the transition towards a labour market. However, the gap between acquired skills and those required by the market remains large, and a need for greater cooperation between the education system and the private sector is evident. Law no. 04/L-143 on Adult Education and Training regulates the entirety of adult education processes as an integral part of the education system.

The primary law establishing legal grounds for the protection and improvement of the health of the citizens is **Law No. 04/L-125 on Health**⁶⁵. The law guarantees inclusion and non-discrimination: equal healthcare for all citizens and residents by ensuring standards, while fulfilling healthcare needs at all levels and assuring healthcare without discrimination. Youth as a group is not specified in any other article.

Regarding SRH in Kosovo*, termination of pregnancy and artificial sterilisation are briefly emphasised in Chapter XVII of the Law on Health. **Law No. 02/L-76 on Reproductive Health**⁶⁶ regulates the organisation, functioning and supervision of all activities in

58 Law No. 03/L-145 on Empowerment and Participation of Youth is explicitly directed toward youth in Kosovo*, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

59 Administrative Instruction No. 01/2016 on Youth Voluntary Work, https://www.mkrs-ks.org/repository/docs/UA_01-2016_per_punen_vullnetare_te_te_rinjve.pdf, visited on December 20 2023

60 Plan of the Government of Kosovo* 2021-2025, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/3-PKZMSA-2021-2025-miratuar-nga-Kuvendi-ENG.pdf>, visited on December 20 2023

61 Law No. 04/L -032 on Pre-university Education in the Republic of Kosovo, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

62 Law no. 04/L-037 on Higher Education, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

63 Law No. 04/L-138 on Vocational Education and Training (VET), <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

64 Law no. 04/L-143 on Adult Education and Training, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

65 Law No. 02/L-76 on Reproductive Health in Kosovo* <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

66 Ibid.

the field of reproductive health. The law accordingly protects the reproductive rights of individuals and couples, including the right to be informed and access necessary services. According to the law, the Ministry of Health organises and coordinates activities in reproductive rights, information, education and advice on SRH during all life cycles, safe maternity and family planning, prevention and appropriate infertility treatment and safe pregnancy interruption-stoppage.

Law no. 03/L-110 on the Termination of Pregnancy and the Law⁶⁷ specifies further the process of pregnancy termination and gives the right to each girl and woman to decide freely on the termination of pregnancy according to the criteria defined by this law. The law was amended in 2021 and was supplemented with stricter fines on legal and health institutions in the event of violations of the law. Although Article 87 Assisted Fertilisation is mentioned in Article 87 of the Law on Health, in 2023, Kosovo* is drafting a separate **Law on Reproductive Health and Medically Assisted Conception**⁶⁸. This law aims to guarantee the reproductive rights of the individual when the desired pregnancy is not achieved naturally.

2.5.4. MONTENEGRO

The socio-economic situation of young people in Montenegro is precarious across various dimensions. They face high vulnerability due to economic marginalization and exclusion, primarily driven by structural unemployment, which arises from a mismatch between the skills offered by the educational system and the demands of the labour market⁶⁹. This disconnect is exacerbated by the overarching economic crisis. Moreover, there is a trend of de-professionalization, where even highly educated individuals often settle for jobs that do not match their qualifications. The prevalence of temporary employment further compounds these issues, leading to prolonged economic dependence on parents and impeding the transition to adulthood. Furthermore, the socio-economic standing of young people is intricately linked to the cultural and material capital of their families. Those from more privileged backgrounds tend to have better opportunities for advancement. However, the pervasive issues of corruption and nepotism in society undermine the meritocratic principles that should govern access to employment and educational opportunities. These systemic challenges create significant barriers for young people in Montenegro as they strive for economic independence and social mobility.

Employment policies in Montenegro are primarily overseen by the **Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Welfare**. This ministry is responsible for developing and implementing strategies to address unemployment, promote job creation, and improve labor market conditions. **The National Employment Agency of Montenegro** also plays a significant role in facilitating employment opportunities and providing support to job seekers and employers. Education in Montenegro is managed by the **Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports**. SRH services in Montenegro are overseen by the **Ministry of Health**.

67 Law no. 03/L-110 on the Termination of Pregnancy and the Law in Kosovo*, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

68 Law on Reproductive Health and Medically Assisted Conception, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

69 Fridrich Ebert Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15267.pdf>, visited on December 20 2023

The **Strategy for Youth 2023-2027**,⁷⁰ as part of the measure to *create an interdepartmental set of activities to improve opportunities for the development and realisation of the full potential of young people* and foresees activities related to the revision, improvement and establishment of specific and targeted activities to support the employment and independence of young women and men. This measure will be implemented through the cooperation of the Ministry of Economy and Tourism, the Ministry of Labour and Social Care, and inclusion of the Center for Professional Information and Counselling, the Employment Bureau, the Center for Social Work, and other institutions. In the area of Green Transition, ERP through Sustainable Green Tourism (structural measure 15) and investments directed towards the development of agriculture and the rural regions (structural measure 16) are expected to positively impact the employment of women and young people above all.

Montenegro's ERP⁷¹ anticipates a slowdown in GDP growth from 2023 to 2025, following two years of robust economic expansion. The economy benefited from a thriving tourism sector and strong private consumption, resulting in double-digit growth in the first half of 2022. However, inflationary pressures, driven by high global food and fuel prices, began to dampen growth later in the year. The ERP expects GDP growth to average 4% annually during 2023-2025, driven by a continued recovery in tourism, increased private investment, and positive albeit decelerating private consumption. Montenegro faces several challenges, including the need for strong fiscal consolidation to address high deficits and impending debt repayments. Improvements in fiscal governance and public investment management are crucial, along with reforms to enhance the regulatory environment and reduce the size of the informal economy. Structural labour market challenges persist, necessitating further efforts to increase labour market participation, especially among women and youth, and reform the social protection system. Implementation of policy guidance from the May 2022 Economic and Financial Dialogue has been limited, with some progress made in areas such as social transfers and tax reductions. However, significant steps are needed in adopting a comprehensive medium-term fiscal strategy, improving public investment management, and advancing tax expenditure review.

In Montenegro, the **National Employment Strategy 2021-2025**⁷² prioritises solving the needs of the young population, especially considering the large number of young people who are NEET. Operational objective 2 - *Creating Knowledge and Competencies for the Labour Market in the Digital Age*), refers to the improvement of the supply of work and qualifications, addressing structural weaknesses in the education and training system while taking into account youth unemployment and long-term unemployment. Within the framework of operational objective 2, two measures have been formulated which target youth groups: a) *providing IT education and training for the digital economy to all*; b) *improving the quality of professional and higher education through the improvement of practical teaching to increase employability*.

Operational objective 3 - *Improving the position of unemployed persons on the labour market* through the efficiency of labour market services, active employment policy measures, strengthening social inclusion and reducing poverty, includes the measure *Implementation of services and standards of the active employment policy to*

70 Montenegro Youth Strategy 2023-2027, <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/9b5ab6d4-46eb-4b6a-ab57-9c6b1c7439f5> , visited on november 22 2023

71 Montenegro Economic Reforms Programme of the Republic of Montenegro 2022-2024, <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/53abfa01-43ff-46dd-b720-126ba805fcd> , visited on November 22 2023

72 National Employment Strategy 2021-2025 of the Republic of Montenegro, <https://www.gov.me/en/article/cabinet-adopts-national-employment-strategy-until-2025> , visited on November 22 2023

improve the position of young people on the labour market, which should be realised through an individualised approach by providing support to young people when joining the labour market and introducing the Youth Guarantee.

The **Montenegro ERP**⁷³, aims to respond to key challenges such as *increasing employment, especially for women and young people, and solving long-term unemployment*. Three reform measures have been defined that should improve the position of young people in the labour market: introduction of the Youth Guarantee programme in Montenegro (reform measure 2), development of an integrated approach to increasing the quality and inclusiveness of education (reform measure 3); digitisation of education and development of digital skills (reform measure 4).

To address the high youth unemployment, in July 2021 the Government committed to launching and pushing forward the Youth Guarantee scheme, in line with flagship number 10 of **the Economic and Investment Plan**⁷⁴. Together with the EU, the ILO and the ETF support the country in this endeavour. The Ministry of Economic Development has set up a working group that includes ministries, NGOs, and social partners. Trade unions and young people are invited to join the group. Furthermore, in October 2021 the Government has launched a programme to encourage youth employment with state funding, and in preparation of the YGIP. Support and cooperation with the private sector will be encouraged. Plan of Implementation of the Youth Guarantee 2025-2026 was adopted in July 2024.⁷⁵

Montenegro requires a more comprehensive education strategy. There is no single, all-encompassing strategy for the entire education system; rather, the strategic framework in education consists of individual strategies tailored to specific segments of the system. Several public policies have been adopted to improve the education system, of which the following are currently valid: **Strategy for Early and Preschool Education and Education in Montenegro 2021-2025**⁷⁶, **Strategy for the Development of Professional Education in Montenegro 2020-2024**⁷⁷ with an **Action Plan for the Period 2020-2021**, the **Strategy of Inclusive Education in Montenegro 2019-2025**⁷⁸ and the Strategy of Adult Education 2015-2025.⁷⁹

The **Youth Strategy for the Period 2023-2027**⁸⁰ within the framework of the operational goal "*Development of a sustainable and quality system of services and programmes to support young people during the transition to adulthood*" envisages a measure related to the education of young people to create and implement inclusive programmes aimed at youth work and non-formal education. The plan is to design and implement comprehensive and diversified programmes aimed at youth work and the informal education of young people in all municipalities, connecting teaching staff and CSOs

73 Montenegro Economic Reforms Programme 2022-2024, <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/53abfa01-43ff-46dd-b720-126ba805fcd> , visited on November 22 2023

74 European Union, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/CFI_Montenegro_2021.pdf , visited on November 22 2023

75 See: <https://mina.news/mina-business-ekonomске-vijesti-iz-crne-gore/privreda/usvojen-plan-implementacije-programa-garancija-za-mlade/> , visited on November 22 2023

76 Strategy for Early and Preschool Education and Education in Montenegro 2021-2025, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/strategija-ranog-i-predskolskog-vaspitanja-i-obrazovanja-2021-2025-sa-akcionim-planom> , visited on November 22 2023

77 Strategy for the Development of Professional Education in Montenegro 2020-2024, <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/3f8ece83-b549-4c84-8ae9-a8620ff67928> , visited on November 22 2023

78 Strategy of Inclusive Education in Montenegro 2019-2025, <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/reports/montenegro-inclusive-education-strategy> , visited on November 22 2023

79 Strategy of Adult Education 2015-2025, <http://nasedoba.me/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/5-Strategija-obrazovanja-odraslih-1.pdf> , visited on November 22 2023

80 Montenegro Youth Strategy for the Period 2023-2027, <https://www.gov.me/en/article/cabinet-adopts-youth-strategy-for-2023-2027> , visited on November 22 2023

for planning an open curriculum in schools, continuously informing young people and their parents about the importance of informal education, motivating informal education providers to license programmes, development of the recognition and verification mechanism of non-formal education through EUROPASS, as well as the development of instruments for recognition and evaluation of non-formal education.

In Montenegro, in the **Healthcare Development Strategy 2023-2027**⁸¹ with the **Action Plan for the Period 2023-2024**, the analysis of the situation points to issues in the area of providing access to universal sexual and reproductive care services. This document has no measures/activities in response to the stated challenge. The Youth Strategy 2023-2027 encompasses *creating an interdepartmental set of activities for the improvement of the health and well-being of young people*. It foresees the following steps: informing young people about SRH through youth services programmes and formal education (primary, secondary, and higher education).

The Law on Youth⁸², adopted in 2019, regulates the manner of determining and implementing youth policy, as well as measures and activities undertaken in order to improve the social position of young people and create conditions for meeting the needs of young people in all areas. Ministry of Sports and Youth is the main institution at the national level responsible for youth issues.

The regulatory framework relevant to the education of young people in Montenegro consists of the **General Law on Education and Upbringing, Law on Primary Education, Law on General Secondary Education, Law on Vocational Education, Law on Higher Education, Law on the Education of Children with Special Educational Needs, Law on Adult Education, Law on National Professional Qualifications and Law on the National Framework of Qualifications**⁸³.

The field of SRH in Montenegro is regulated by the following laws: the **Law on Healthcare, Law on Conditions and Procedures for Termination of Pregnancy, Law on Patients' Rights, Law on Patient Healthcare, Law on Treatment of Infertility with Assisted Reproductive Technologies, Law on Health Insurance** and Law on Medicines⁸⁴.

2.5.5. NORTH MACEDONIA

The youth population in North Macedonia confronts significant challenges, including limited career prospects, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, skills mismatches for available jobs, and limited avenues for career progression. With the country ranking fifth globally in youth unemployment at 47.2%, more than double the overall unemployment rate of 22.3%, North Macedonia faces a substantial loss of potential⁸⁵. Additionally, recent studies indicate a high underemployment rate of 57.1%, suggesting that many employed youths work fewer hours than desired, hold insecure positions, are overqualified, underpaid, on temporary contracts, or lack written agree-

81 Montenegro Healthcare Development Strategy 2023-2027 https://extranet.who.int/economyplanningcycles/sites/default/files/planning_cycle_repository/montenegro/montenegro.pdf, visited on November 22 2023

82 The Law on Youth of the Republic of Montenegro, <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/e1ac770f-706f-4ba9-99e3-790b64ba464f>, visited on November 22 2023

83 OSCE Database, <https://legislationline.org/Montenegro>, visited on November 22 2023

84 Ibid.

85 UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/adolescents-and-young-people>, visited on November 30 2023

ments, highlighting a discrepancy between skills and market demand. The education system's inadequacy significantly contributes to these challenges. North Macedonia ranks among the lowest-performing countries in learning outcomes according to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015, second to last among participating nations, with over half of students lacking basic competencies. Of particular concern is the declining performance trend, contrasting with improvements seen in neighbouring countries. Despite high internet usage among 94% of young individuals aged 15 to 24, traditional participatory methods often exclude them from developmental processes aimed at enhancing their lives.

Employment policies in North Macedonia were primarily overseen by the **Ministry of Labour and Social Policy**. Since 8th June 2024, with the adoption of the amendments and additions to the Law on Organization and Work of State Administration Bodies, the reorganised **Ministry of Economy and Labour** is responsible for employment policies, while the reorganised **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth**, formerly the **Ministry of Labour and Social Policy**, will be responsible for youth policies. The **Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia** also plays a crucial role in facilitating employment opportunities and providing support to job seekers and employers. Education is managed by the **Ministry of Education and Science**. This ministry is responsible for developing educational policies, curricula, and standards, as well as overseeing the administration of schools and educational institutions. SRH services in North Macedonia are provided by the **Ministry of Health**. This ministry is responsible for ensuring access to a range of SRH services, including family planning, prenatal care, and reproductive health education.

In the aftermath of a growth slowdown in 2022, triggered by the substantial impact of soaring global energy prices on North Macedonia's economy, the ERP envisions a gradual resurgence in growth spanning from 2023 to 2025, propelled by amplified public and private investments.⁸⁶ Throughout 2022, economic activity waned as domestic demand faltered, leading to a notable decline in GDP growth to an estimated 2.1%. The surge in inflation, primarily fuelled by elevated global energy and commodity prices, further exacerbated the economic strain. Compounded by the nation's heavy reliance on energy imports, this scenario precipitated a marked deterioration in the current account. The ERP's fundamental scenario anticipates a growth uptick driven by augmented foreign demand and a substantial surge in investment, notably bolstered by intensified public capital expenditure coupled with measures to enhance implementation capacity. Despite this optimistic growth trajectory, significant downside risks persist, including uncertainties surrounding geopolitical events, fluctuating global energy and commodity prices, domestic inflationary pressures like escalating wage growth, and notable implementation and management risks concerning both private and public investment endeavors.

The **NYS 2023-2027**⁸⁷ arises from the obligations defined by the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies⁸⁸ and serves as a critical mechanism for advancing youth policies and recognising the needs of young people in the economy. It covers the following eight key areas: youth participation, youth information, youth work, education, culture, health, entrepreneurship and support prior to employment, and security (violence). It

86 Economic Reform Programme (ERP) North Macedonia, <https://finance.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Draft-Economic-Reform-Programme-2021-2023.pdf>, visited on November 30 2023

87 Council of Europe, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261557/National_Youth_Strategy-Macedonia.pdf/e426f97b-3fba-4c85-9a0d-526ef8eaab65?t=1377517708000, visited on November 30 2023

88 North Macedonia Agency for youth and sports, <https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/law-on-youth-participation-and-youth-policies.pdf>, visited on November 30 2023

is stated that entrepreneurship and pre-employment training can help address unemployment and contribute to the improvement of the economy and the labour market by providing the skills and resources necessary for starting and succeeding in one's own business and employment. Implementing strategic goals and activities in the thematic area 'Entrepreneurship and Pre-employment Support' aims to promote long-term financial stability and professional growth for young individuals.

North Macedonia is the most successful economy in the WB when it comes to the implementation of the **Youth Guarantee**. The Employment Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia began the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in 2018. A new Implementation Plan for Youth Guarantee 2023-2026 was adopted by the authorities in March 2023. The set goal that would evaluate the Youth Guarantee as successful is that at least 30% of the people involved in the activities of the Guarantee exit it successfully, as employed, re-involved in the educational process or included in active programmes and employment measures within a period of four months. In 2021, of the total number of people who entered the Youth Guarantee process (19.322), 8.064 young people up to 29 years of age, or 41%, secured employment or acquired skills that improved their employability⁸⁹. One of the main achievements of the Youth Guarantee implementation process has been the establishment of coordination and governance structures at the national, regional, and local levels. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has led the implementation process, and a Youth Guarantee Coordination Council has been established to oversee the initiative's implementation. Implementing the Youth Guarantee has also led to the establishment of new support services for young people. Implementing the initiative requires significant financial resources, and the government has faced challenges securing the necessary funding to implement the guarantee in its entirety.

The **Education Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia 2018-2025**⁹⁰ and its Action Plan were developed with the financial and technical support of the European Union. **The Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education 2023-2025**⁹¹ aims to implement a total of five programmes and fifteen subprogrammes dedicated to improving the quality of teaching in primary and secondary education, enhancing educational infrastructure, reforming the financing system, ensuring the quality and efficiency of higher education by European best practices, accelerating economic development through investments in science and innovation, and supporting the non-formal education system.

The **Ministry of Education and Science Annual Work Plan for 2023**⁹² is geared towards achieving the Government's strategic priorities and critical goals. **Annual Report for the Year 2022**⁹³ on Implementing the Action Plan of the Education Strategy 2018-2025. Some of the envisaged indicators were achieved before the set deadline, but for some, implementation deadlines have been extended partially due to the health crisis and the need for broader consultations with stakeholders to implement the reforms. In December 2020, UNICEF North Macedonia announced the launch of a new programme for children aimed at advancing environmental education and addressing climate change. Encompassing preschool, primary, and secondary education, one aspect of

89 EU's Progress Report on North Macedonia 2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/28a9322a-3f18-434e-89d2-0890c90b2f96_en?filename=SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf, visited on December 1 2023

90 Education Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia 2018-2025, <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/en/2018/education-strategy-2018-2025-and-action-plan-6622>, visited on December 1 2023

91 Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of North Macedonia for the Period 2023-2025, <https://assets.gov.mk/files/269809/4632479a-353e-4e38-b8ee-ad46feaed2b1.pdf>, visited on December 1 2023

92 Ministry of Education and Science Annual Work Plan for 2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf, visited on December 1 2023

93 Annual Report for the Year 2022 on Implementing the Action Plan of the Education Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia 2018-2025, <https://macedonia2025.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Annual-Report-2022.pdf>, visited on December 1 2023

the programme involves providing teachers with the resources and skills they need to introduce engaging content and activities to students in support of environmental education.

The **NYS2023-2027**⁹⁴ is a strategic document that establishes mid-term goals and priorities for the development of youth policies and the advancement of the interests of young people in the Republic of North Macedonia. The Strategy's primary imperative is to improve young people's position in society by setting fundamental principles of action, goals, and measures that provide a reform framework for institutions and other stakeholders in enabling young people to realise their rights, needs, and interests.

United Nations Population Fund-Economy program document for North Macedonia (2021-2025)⁹⁵ contributes directly to ending preventable maternal deaths and the unmet need for family planning. In the area of reproduction and contraception, the **National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030**⁹⁶ ensures several rights and means to achieve them for girls and women. It is the first time that this Strategy stresses education on sexual and reproductive rights as a separate, specific objective. This instrument empowers women of all ages and girls in all their diversity.

In North Macedonia, the **Youth Allowance Law**⁹⁷ aims to enable young people to engage in the labour market through productive activities, to secure employment for a more extended period, and to improve their economic situation; the Youth Allowance Law was enacted in January 2020. The Youth Allowance is a monthly supplement paid by the Budget of the Republic of North Macedonia, amounting to 3,000 denars for full-time employment, on which income tax is levied. According to official information provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, by 31 December, 2022, 5,596 young individuals, up to 23 years old, were covered by the Youth Allowance, with 2,790 benefiting from the Youth Allowance for the first time.

The **Law on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education**⁹⁸ in the Republic of North Macedonia aims to regulate and standardise the selection, determination, production, distribution, and use of textbooks for primary and secondary education in the economy. The **Law on Higher Education**⁹⁹ regulates the autonomy of university and academic freedom, the conditions and procedures for the establishment, status changes, and termination of higher education institutions, their activities, the system for ensuring and assessing the quality of higher education, the principles of organisation, management, development, and financing of higher education activities, the rights and obligations of students, the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications, and the supervision of the work of higher education institutions.

The **Center for Vocational Education and Training**¹⁰⁰ was established by the decision of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia in 2006 as a public institution. Its role is to harmonise and integrate public interests and the interests of social partners

94 NYS of the Republic of North Macedonia 2023-2027, <https://dejure.mk/zakon/nacionalna-strategija-za-mladi> , visited on December 1 2023

95 United Nations Population Fund-Economy program document for North Macedonia (2021-2025), www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/portal-document/DP.FPA_CPD_MKD_2_-_N_Macedonia_CPD_-_FINAL_-_16Dec20.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1XoNo-yw4HAhS0rLFTTypRPbTwnl-KciBeDjJtlc2MfRjXdGeLHiY88C8 , visited on December 1 2024

96 National Strategy for Gender Equality of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021-2030, https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/GRBMagazine_Issue1Winter2022-1.pdf , visited on December 1 2023

97 Youth Allowance Law, <https://rm.coe.int/second-report-on-non-accepted-provisions-of-the-charter-concerning-nor/1680ab9efa> , visited on December 1 2023

98 Law on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education in the Republic of North Macedonia, <https://legislationline.org/North-Macedonia> , visited on December 1 2023

99 Law on Higher Education in the Republic of North Macedonia, <https://legislationline.org/North-Macedonia> , visited on December 1 2023

100 Center for Vocational Education and Training, <https://cdi.mk/vocational-education-and-training/> , visited on December 1 2023

in vocational education and training. Additionally, it coordinates collaboration with international institutions and organisations in vocational education and training. The **Bureau for Development of Education**¹⁰¹ is an administrative body within the Ministry of Education and Science, functioning as a legal entity. It performs professional activities of significance to developing and improving education in the Republic of North Macedonia. The **National Agency for European Educational Programs and Mobility**¹⁰² is a public institution established by a law adopted by the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. The goal is to promote and implement European education, training, youth, and sports programmes in the Republic of North Macedonia. The **MCEC**¹⁰³ was founded in 2004 to develop educational programmes and provide services to academic and other public institutions, local communities, the non-governmental sector, the business sector and citizens to contribute to the continuous development of civil society. MCEC's mission is to support achieving democratic societal changes through the constant evolution of a civil society in which citizens actively participate in decision-making processes. The **ODAS** is a high school devoted to creating a community of dedicated students, responsible citizens, and future leaders.

The **Agency for Youth and Sport**¹⁰⁴ was the primary driver of the National Strategy for Youth 2023-2027 development process in North Macedonia. Also, by the end of 2023, the Agency for Youth and Sport facilitated the adoption of the **Action Plan 2023-2025** for the implementation of the National Strategy for Youth 2023-2027. Since 8th June 2024, with the adoption of the amendments and additions to the Law on Organization and Work of State Administration Bodies, the **Agency for Youth and Sport** ceased to exist, while its functions were divided between the reorganised **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth** and newly established **Ministry of Sport**.

2.5.6. SERBIA

Despite recent improvements in labour market indicators, young people in Serbia continue to face difficulties. One of the major challenges they encounter is establishing independence through stable employment. The economic transition and the recession caused by the global financial crisis led to reduced demand for young workers, thereby diminishing their chances of transitioning successfully from school to work¹⁰⁵. While the school-to-work transition in the European labour market is rarely smooth and clear-cut, in Serbia, it is notably more complex. The situation is likely to worsen given the prolonged effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Young people not in employment, education, or training constitute a particularly vulnerable group in the labour market. The gender gap in employment rates among youth (15-24) within the same degree of urbanization was significantly larger in 2023. Employment rates in rural areas were 35.5% for men and 21.4% for women, while in urban areas they were 23.7% for men and 15.6% for women.

101 Bureau for Development of Education, <https://www.devex.com/organizations/bureau-for-development-of-education-macedonia-142084>, visited on December 1 2023

102 National Agency for European Educational Programs and Mobility, <https://www.na.org.mk/en/>

103 MCEC (MCEC) <https://www.mcgo.org.mk>, visited on December 1 2023

104 Agency for Youth and Sport of the Republic of North Macedonia <https://ams.gov.mk/en/home>, visited on December 1 2023

105 European Union, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-06/youth_in_serbia_executive_summary.pdf, visited on January 10 2024

Thus, the gender gap in rural areas is 14.1 percentage points, compared to 8.1 in urban areas, while the difference between men in urban areas and women in rural areas is only 2.3 percentage points.¹⁰⁶ Young people in also Serbia face bleaker labour market prospects than their peers in the EU. Employment policies in Serbia are primarily overseen by the **Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs**. This ministry is responsible for developing and implementing strategies to address unemployment, promote job creation, and improve labor market conditions. **The NES of Serbia** also plays a significant role in facilitating employment opportunities and providing support to job seekers and employers. Education in Serbia is managed by the **Ministry of Education** SRH services in Serbia are provided through the healthcare system, which is overseen by the **Ministry of Health**.

After a notable deceleration in 2022, Serbia's ERP¹⁰⁷ anticipates a gradual economic rebound from 2023 to 2025. The economy, affected by the economic repercussions of the Russian war against Ukraine, experienced a slowdown with real GDP growth reaching 2.3% in 2022, driven primarily by private consumption and stockbuilding. The ERP forecasts a moderate growth rate of 2.5% in 2023, gradually increasing to 3.5% in 2024 and 4.0% in 2025, approaching pre-pandemic levels. Despite steady consumer price inflation, which peaked at 16.2% in March 2023, the ERP expects a decline starting in the first half of 2023, aiming to return within the target range by the end of 2024. Heightened energy import costs and domestic electricity production disruptions led to a sharp increase in the current account deficit in 2022, projected to persist above 6% of GDP throughout 2023-2025. However, amidst ongoing uncertainty, risks to the growth outlook remain, including geopolitical tensions, energy price fluctuations, trade restrictions, supply chain disruptions, persistent inflation, and financial market tightening. The fiscal strategy outlines a gradual budget balance improvement and continued debt reduction over the medium term.

In Serbia, the **Employment Strategy for the Period 2021 to 2026**¹⁰⁸ and the **Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy 2021-2023**¹⁰⁹ recognise young people as more challenging to employ, and address their position in the labour market, the issues concerning low employment rates and high unemployment rates, high rates of informal employment, and high participation of NEET youth. Additionally, the long transition from education to the labour market, precarious employment, pronounced gender inequalities and the high participation of young people who want to leave the economy are also addressed. The Strategy, as a response to the issues of young people in the labour market, envisages one measure – *improving the position of young people in the labour market*, and plans for the formalisation of work practices, prevention of abuse of youth work engagement through non-employment contracts, the availability of specialised entrepreneurial educational programmes and mentoring support, as well as the availability of various sources of financial support.

In December 2023 the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the **YGIP**. Spanning from 2023 to 2026, it is structured into four phases: mapping and early intervention; outreach; preparation; and offer and cross-cutting enablers needed for effective implementation of the Youth Guarantee. In the initial phase, the focus is on mapping

106 European Commission, Eurostat, https://doi.org/10.2908/LFST_R_ERGAU, visited on January 10 2024

107 Government of Serbia, <https://www.mfin.gov.rs/en/documents2-2/economic-reform-program-erp-2>, visited on January 10 2024

108 Employment Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2021 to 2026, https://sociojalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Strategija_zaposljavanja_u_Republici_Srbiji_2021-2026_engleski.pdf, visited on January 10 2024

109 Action Plan for the Implementation of the Employment Strategy 2021-2026 for the Period 2021-2023, https://sociojalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Akcioni_plan_2021-2023_za_sprovodjenje_Strategije_zaposljavanja_u_Republici_Srbiji_engleski.pdf, visited on January 10 2024

and early intervention, including amendments to the normative framework, capacity building of competent authorities and partners at both national and local levels, and the establishment of a monitoring framework for the Youth Guarantee. In 2024, piloting of the Youth Guarantee commences and continues until the conclusion of 2026. Pilot branches, located in Niš, Kruševac, and Sremska Mitrovica, were selected based on local market resources availability and organizational and administrative factors within the NES branches.

In 2021, the **Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030**¹¹⁰ and the **Action Plan for the Period 2021 to 2023**¹¹¹ were adopted. The Strategy sets two general goals: 1) increased quality of teaching and learning, equity and availability of pre-university education and upbringing, and strengthened the educational function of educational institutions; 2) improved accessibility, quality, relevance and fairness in higher education.

In the **Strategy for Youth in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2023 to 2030**¹¹², several measures refer to youth education: support for the development of young talents, support for existing and innovative programmes aimed at the development of youth career management skills, support for programmes for the development of digital competences and digital citizenship. Special Objective 4. says "Young people have equal opportunities and incentives to develop their potentials and competencies, which lead to social and economic independence" and in relation to youth employment, a measure was formulated to refer to the support of entrepreneurship/social entrepreneurship and youth employability.

In the **Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030**,¹¹³ the term *reproductive health* is mentioned in the section referring to secondary schools: ministries responsible for health, social policy, and youth should, together with schools, organise activities aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles in local self-government (fighting against the use of psychoactive substances, tobacco and alcohol, taking care of the reproductive health of young people). The terms *health education* and *sexuality education* are not mentioned in the Strategy. Analysis of plans and programmes aimed at teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools show that there is no systematic and comprehensive approach to education where sexual and reproductive rights and the health of children and young people in Serbia is concerned. Specific topics and contents are present in general education subjects, often optional, without sufficient horizontal and vertical connection.¹¹⁴

The Law on Youth¹¹⁵ of the Republic of Serbia states that young people have the right to equal opportunities and participation in all areas of social life in accordance with their own choice and abilities. In 2021, the Ministry of Tourism and Youth was established as

110 Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030, <https://dualnok.gov.rs/en/dokumenta/strategy-for-the-development-of-education-and-upbringing-in-the-republic-of-serbia-until-2030-official-gazette-of-rs-no-63-2021/>, visited on January 10 2024

111 Action Plan 2021–2023 For The Implementation Of The Employment Strategy Of The Republic Of Serbia 2021–2026, https://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Akcioni_plan_2021-2023_za_sprovođenje_Strategije_zaposljavanja_u_Republici_Srbiji_engleski.pdf, visited on January 10 2024

112 Strategy for Youth in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2023 to 2030, <https://mto.gov.rs/extfile/sr/1814/Strategija%20za%20mlade%20u%20RS%20za%20period%20od%202023.%20do%202030.%20godine.pdf>, visited on January 10 2024

113 Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030, <https://dualnok.gov.rs/en/dokumenta/strategy-for-the-development-of-education-and-upbringing-in-the-republic-of-serbia-until-2030-official-gazette-of-rs-no-63-2021/>, visited on January 10 2024

114 SRH and rights of women in Serbia: Between Human Rights and Pronatalist Policy, Autonomous Women Centre, 2022, ASTRA – Action against trafficking of human beings and Group 484, <https://preugovor.org/Policy-Papers/1753/Sexual-and-Reproductive-Health-and-Rights-of.shtml>, visited on January 10 2024

115 Law on Youth of the Republic of Serbia, https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_mladi.html, visited on January 10 2024

the main institution at the national level responsible for young people. Previously, the Ministry of Youth and Sports was in charge of youth.

The Republic of Serbia has a comprehensive legal framework that regulates the field of education relevant to young people: the Law on the Basics of the Education and Training System, Law on Secondary Education and Training, Law on Adult Education, Law on Higher Education, Law on Pupil and Student Standards, Law on Dual Education and Law on the Dual Model of Studies in Higher Education, Law on the National Framework of Qualifications¹¹⁶. Serbian government has been actively promoting dual education, the system that is gaining traction as a vital component of educational reform. This system integrates classroom learning with practical training within actual workplace settings, offering students valuable practical knowledge and enhancing their employability skills. Additionally, companies benefit from having a pipeline of skilled workers who are familiar with their operations and procedures. Various industries, including manufacturing, IT, hospitality, and healthcare, participate in dual education programs. However, it is important to note that there are differing views on this issue. Numerous sources have raised concerns regarding the legality and constitutionality of the Law on Dual Education. Furthermore, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, in its Concluding Observations on Serbia's third periodic report, expressed concern that 'students in the dual education system and young people in internship programs are paid less than the minimum wage and often work in substandard conditions'.¹¹⁷ The Committee also urged the state to 'take effective measures to protect students in the dual education system and young people in internship programs, such as the "My First Salary" program, from labor exploitation and ensure that they are covered by labor regulations'.¹¹⁸

The laws that regulate the prohibition of discrimination and the protection of gender equality in Serbia, as well as several laws in the field of health, oblige the provision of appropriate conditions of healthcare, including sexual and reproductive rights and women's health. The **Law on Procedures for Termination of Pregnancy in Healthcare Institutions** regulates the conditions and method of performing these types of interventions. The **Law on Prohibition of Discrimination**¹¹⁹ holds significant importance for young people as it safeguards their fundamental rights and ensures fairness in various aspects of their lives. By prohibiting discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability, the law guarantees that young individuals have equal access to opportunities in education, employment, healthcare, and other essential services.

In the **National Programme for the Preservation and Improvement of the SRH of the Citizens of the Republic of Serbia**¹²⁰, it is emphasized that birth control practice among young people is dominantly conservative, that the sexual behaviour of young people is risky, and that the extent of commitment in the preservation of the SRH of the entire population, including deprived and marginalised groups, is unsatisfactory.

In the **Strategy for Youth in the Republic of Serbia 2023-2030**, one measure relates to SRH: support programmes that contribute to developing healthy lifestyles and sexual, reproductive and mental health.

116 Law on the National Framework of Qualifications, <https://www.propisi.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/?lang=en>, visited on January 10 2024

117 United Nations Digital Library, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3969915?ln=en&v=pdf>, visited on January 10 2024

118 Ibid.

119 Antidiscrimination Law, <https://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/antidiscrimination-law-serbia.pdf>, visited on January 10 2024

120 National Programme for the Preservation and Improvement of the SRH of the Citizens of the Republic of Serbia, http://demo.paragraf.rs/demo/combined/Old/t/t2018_01/t01_0025.htm, visited on January 10 2024

2.6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Enhancing Youth Engagement with Employment Opportunities

Measures focused on strengthening the skills of young people and reducing unemployment should be accessible to all young individuals. In this regard, it is essential to analyze and assess the availability of these measures and the awareness of young people, particularly vulnerable youth categories. Public administration should establish internship programs, job shadowing, volunteering, and other innovative ways to connect young people with employers while simplifying administrative procedures for all parties applying to these programs. The development and adoption of the YGIPs in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be accelerated, and other WB economies with the adopted Plan should continue with the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Programme in order to be able to implement the program in the entire territories. Coordination between responsible educational institutions and institutions focused on social policies and employment to adapt educational programs should be emphasized, reducing the overproduction of specific skill profiles while meeting market demands and needs. Promoting youth entrepreneurship should be a focal point, with a safety net established to support aspiring entrepreneurs. Measures should be envisaged to establish training centers, training facilities, and career counselling centers focused on developing the professional abilities of young people. Employment policies regarding green jobs are still neglected and in their infancy across all the region, and special efforts need to be invested in this area.

Education and Training Initiatives

Efforts should be made to enhance the infrastructure of the educational system, encompassing improvements in buildings, equipment, teaching methodologies, and the integration of assistive (adaptive and rehabilitative devices for people with disabilities and the elderly) technologies. The focus should also be on developing generic and critical competencies in students and all individuals engaged in learning. In line with promoting inclusivity, policies should prioritize creating an appropriate learning environment for all, with particular attention to the inclusion of individuals with special educational needs. The capacities of human resources within the education sector should be strengthened, including leadership personnel, staff, and professional services. To enhance the quality and outcomes of the educational process, there is a need to improve the assessment and evaluation system at all academic levels. Addressing legislative, governance, and financing aspects is crucial to establishing a robust educational framework. A comprehensive mental health education program should be integrated into the national curriculum. There is also a need for establishing school-based mental health services or partnerships with community mental health organizations to provide support groups for students facing mental health challenges, and finally, to combat stigma surrounding mental illness within schools.

SRH Awareness

It is proposed to introduce comprehensive sexual education into primary education curricula. Efforts should be made to bolster the availability of information on SRH within extracurricular activities. A targeted awareness campaign should be launched to raise the awareness of the freedom of sexuality and sexual health directed towards all youth, parents, and educational staff. To address barriers to access, measures should be taken

to improve availability and affordability of family planning services and modern contraceptives. It is proposed to strengthen the existing capacities and improving access to services related to SRH (e.g., testing for sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, contraceptive methods, family planning services), with special focus on vulnerable categories of young people. Steps should be taken to increase the availability of menstrual and sanitary products for young people of all backgrounds and categories. It is also advisable to raise the awareness concerning regular preventive check-ups for SRH in young people, with particular focus on sexually active youth. The participation of young people in planning and decision-making processes regarding SRH should be encouraged, with a special emphasis on peer education. Additionally, awareness campaigns aimed at young people about the dangers of drug use and the importance of prevention should be launched.



Joint
Comparative
Analysis
of Youth Policies
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Balkans

RYDE
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3

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE WB



3. YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE WB

3.1. BEST PRACTICES FROM THE EU

Youth participation is one of the main priorities of the EU-level youth policy cooperation. The main framework of the current cooperation is the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which was adopted in 2018 by the Council of the European Union.¹²¹ The Strategy recognizes youth participation as one of the "core areas of the youth sector".¹²² It divides the core areas into three categories – "Engage", "Connect" and "Empower".

Within the "Engage" category, Member States and the European Commission are invited to take a series of actions to encourage inclusive youth participation. These actions include actively engaging youth in development of policies affecting them and promoting the use of innovative and alternative forms of democratic participation.

EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 also contains 11 European Youth Goals, which were formulated through a consultative process with the representatives of the youth. Member States and the European Commission are invited, within their respective competences, to draw inspiration from the European Youth Goals and include them wherever suitable in all related policies and agendas.

Youth Goal #9 is titled "Space and Participation for All". It suggests that the EU and the Member States should "strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society". The goal contains several "targets", some of which include "ensuring that young people can adequately influence all areas of society and all parts of the decision-making processes" and "ensuring equal access to everyday decision making for all young people from different backgrounds".

One of the Annexes of the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 was also the Work Plan for the period from 2019 to 2021, dedicated to its implementation under two Council Presidency Trios.¹²³ The European Commission was invited to report on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy every three years. The first – and the most recent one – such report was published in October 2021 and covered the period of the first Work Plan.¹²⁴

121 According to the Treaty on the Functioning of European Union (Article 6), the Union shall have competence to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement (but not legally regulate) the actions of the Member States in the area of youth (among others). EU cooperation in the youth field started in 2002.

122 Council of the European Union. Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027. EUR-Lex, 18 December 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/5bey9ezv>, visited on 15 June 2024.

123 18-month cycles during which the three Member States holding the 6-month rotating Council Presidency coordinate their priorities

124 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2021). EUR-Lex, <https://tinyurl.com/mr4bftcd>, 14 October 2021, visited on 15 June 2024.

Evaluation of the area of youth participation in the Commission's 2021 report highlights the adoption of Council conclusions on fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe (2020)¹²⁵ and Council conclusions on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes (2021)¹²⁶.

Other achievements in this area, according to the Commission, included participation of over 56,000 young people in the seventh Cycle of the Youth Dialogue focusing on the topic 'Creating Opportunities for Youth', the launch of the revamped version of the Commission's European Youth Portal and the promotion of the youth participation in policy-making globally, with the Regional Youth Cooperation Office in the Western Balkans named as one of the prime examples. Its aims of promoting spirit of reconciliation and understanding between the youth in the region through intra-regional youth exchanges and cooperation were emphasised.¹²⁷

Council of the European Union adopted conclusions on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2021) in December 2021.¹²⁸ It noted that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some actions included in the EU Work Plan for Youth 2019-2021 had to be modified, rescheduled or even cancelled. The Council invited the Commission and the Member States to, among other, further strengthen youth participatory processes and roll out the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda and the EU Youth Strategy Work Plan 2022-2024, including the EU Youth Dialogue.

EU Youth Strategy Work Plan 2022-2024 was also adopted by the Council in December 2021, spanning the two Presidency Trios from January 2022 to December 2024. Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all, features prominently among the proposed steps that should be taken. Among them are the adoption of the Council conclusions on the 9th and the 10th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue.

The EUYD is the main participation mechanism for young people in the EU. It serves as a forum for continuous joint reflection and for consultations on the priorities, implementation and follow-up of cooperation at EU level in the field of youth between decision-makers, young people and their representative organizations, as well as researchers. It was introduced in 2010 as a "Structured Dialogue" and it is organized into 18-month work cycles. Each cycle focuses on a different thematic priority, agreed upon by the Council.

Resolution of the Council on the outcomes of the 9th cycle of the EUYD was adopted in May 2023.¹²⁹ One of the recommendations regarding participation, as an outcome of the Dialogue, urges Member States to guarantee independent advisory boards on a local level (e.g., youth councils) consisting of, and selected by, young people with an intersectional emphasis on young people with fewer opportunities. The current, 10th EU Youth Dialogue cycle, last from 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2024.

125 Council of the European Union. Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe. EUR-Lex, 1 December 2020, <https://shorturl.at/TqHaM>, visited on 15 June 2024.

126 Council of the European Union. Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes, EUR-Lex, 21 June 2021, <https://rb.gy/dygywv>, visited on 15 June 2024.

127 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2021). EUR-Lex, 14 October 2021, <https://rb.gy/dui4va>, visited on 15 June 2024, p. 9.

128 Council of the European Union. Council conclusions on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2021), EUR-Lex, 14 December 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2zjewrrr>, visited on 15 June 2024.

129 Council of the European Union. Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the outcomes of the 9th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue, EUR-Lex, 26 May 2023, <https://shorturl.at/6difc>, visited on 15 June 2024.

In addition to the EUYD, EU also regards several other programs and initiatives as fostering participation in democratic life, common European values and civic engagement. These are Erasmus+, which offers mobility and cooperation opportunities in the areas of youth as well as education, and European Solidarity Corps, which offer opportunities in volunteering and solidarity projects.¹³⁰

3.2. COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

In all WB economies, which are analyzed in detail in the next chapter, the youth legislation supports the principle of youth participation. Also, the main strategic policy documents (mostly national youth strategies) in each economy contain a goal dedicated to increasing the participation of youth. There is significant variation, however, when it comes to the content of sub-goals/measures to achieve this aim.

In many economies, for instance, this goal is mainly implemented through raising the capacities of youth organizations and promotion of volunteering. The emphasis on raising awareness and informing the youth about opportunities to participate is less frequent, which is also the case with international cooperation and mobility. In North Macedonia, the focus is put on supporting youth activism within specific areas, such as the environment and digital space, which is not the case in other economies.

This variation, perhaps, reflects different stages in which each economy of the region finds itself, as well as the ability of each society to set its own priorities. It is important that the formulation of policies is as inclusive and open to inputs of young people as possible.

In this context, it is important to mention that most of the economies have legal basis advisory bodies dedicated to the inclusion of youth in the decision-making processes (in Kosovo*, the new draft Law on Youth envisages the establishment of a Central Youth Council). Not all of them have been set up, for example, in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, and the dynamic of their work is sometimes less intense than it should be. On the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo* are the only economies where the national parliaments have committees dedicated to the issues of youth, which is one of the platforms which could encourage participation.

Meanwhile, Serbia is currently the only WB economy and the only one outside the EU that implements the EUYD.¹³¹ With the aim of effective implementation of the EUYD in Serbia, the Permanent Expert Team on the EUYD was established in 2021. The coordination intersectoral group, which exists only in EU member states, was also established within the Youth Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, as an advisory body.

On the regional level, WBYL¹³², implemented by the RCC and funded by the European Union, also aims to provide opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making processes. WBYL is based on the EUYD methodology and its implementation started in 2020. Since that year, two Youth Laboratories have been implemented. The first was dedicated to youth unemployment, and the second to youth mental health.

130 "New Eurobarometer survey shows young people's active participation in civic and democratic life ahead of the upcoming European elections". European Commission, <https://shorturl.at/7sTVB>, visited on 15 June 2024.

131 "EU dijalog sa mladima i jačanje učešća mladih u procesu donošenja odluka u Srbiji". Politeia Institute. <https://shorturl.at/MI4az>, visited on 15 June 2024.

132 Ibid.

At the very beginning, young people and policy makers from the countries of the WB underwent training on the methodology and model, which was followed by the formation of a regional and national expert body. Experts had the opportunity to meet through online and offline meetings, as well as mid-term and final conferences, in order to jointly design programs and policies relevant to youth.

Research on youth participation in the WB demonstrates that there is still room for improvement. Overall, recent opinion polls in the region show that there is still a considerable degree of scepticism regarding the ability of young people to influence decision-making processes, especially through participation in the traditional socio-political activities. As the next section, which focuses on the state of play in each individual economy, will show, young people are relatively familiar with the policy-making processes, but are very dissatisfied with its efficiency.

The study "Shared Futures: Youth Participation in Peace in the Western Balkans" (2021), which included all six economies of the Western Balkans, found that the most common form of engagement of young people (15-29) in the previous 12 months was posting on social media about an important political and social issue (17.2%), followed by signing a petition (14.3%), volunteering for an important cause (11.2%), taking part in a campaign (9.8%) and attending a demonstration (5.6%).¹³³

This study also asked young people what are the main reasons preventing them to organize around shared concerns. The main answer (aggregated for the whole region) was that it would not make any difference (47%), followed by the assessment that young people are not interested in civic activity (40.6%), that young people are not aware of the opportunities to act (32.7%) and that they cannot afford it financially (28.5%).¹³⁴

This study also asked young people about their participation rate in politics and interest to participate (showed in Table 1). As can be seen, both the actual participation and interest to participate are quite low, though not very different to the European Union average – a survey released in April 2024 by Eurostat shows that 7% of young people in the EU have participated in the activities of a political party or political organization in the past 12 months.¹³⁵ This makes participation in actual politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina (11%) and Montenegro (10.4%) higher than in the EU average.

Table 1. Answers to the question regarding political participation and political trust¹³⁶

	Albania	BiH	Kosovo*	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Actual participation in politics	1.3%	11%	3.4%	10.4%	5.7%	5.5%
Interest to participate in politics	4.1%	4.9%	6.7%	6.5%	5.6%	4.8%
Agreement with the statement: Political leaders know and understand young people's concerns (1-5)	2.6	2.15	2.1	2.5	2.4	2.75
Agreement with the statement: Young people have the space to influence governments and hold them accountable (1-5)	2.8	2.9	2.6	2.9	2.5	2.7

133 Dakash, Susanna, et al. #Sharedfutures: Youth Perception of Peace in the Western Balkans. UNDP, 2021. p. 58.

134 Ibid, p. 59.

135 European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication. Flash Eurobarometer 545: Youth and Democracy. 2024, p. 18.

136 Dakash, Susanna, et al. #Sharedfutures: Youth Perception of Peace in the Western Balkans. UNDP, 2021.

This survey also asked the respondents whether they agree, on the scale from 1 to 5, with the statements that political leaders know and understand young people's concerns in their economy, and that young people have the space to influence governments. There was no answer higher than 2.9 on both questions.

The Regional Youth Participation Index in the Western Balkans for 2022¹³⁷ was established within the regional project Western Balkans and Turkey for Employment funded by the European Union, as a unique method of monitoring youth participation in public life by measuring three dimensions: political, economic and social participation of young people. The youth participation index is 67.4% for Serbia, 63.3% for Montenegro, 64.8% for Albania and 62.9% for North Macedonia out of a maximum of 100%. The project was not implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*.

3.3. STATE OF THE PLAY IN THE REGION – STRATEGIES, LEGISLATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

3.3.1. ALBANIA

An online survey conducted from October to November 2023 for the study "Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes" showed that almost 54% of young people (15-35) in Albania are either to "a great extent" or "very" familiar with the existing youth policies in their economy, while 38% were "not at all" or "little" familiar.¹³⁸ Furthermore, 37.7% were well familiar with the public policy making process, and additional 30.8% were somewhat familiar. However, only 18.1% assess that the efficiency of policy-making is good.¹³⁹

The principal guide for implementing youth policy in Albania is the **National Youth Strategy 2022-2029**.¹⁴⁰ The Strategy encompasses issues such as the involvement of youth in decision-making processes, employment, education, technology and innovation, the expansion of artistic and craft activities, increased sports engagement, and volunteering.

The Strategy sets three strategic objectives: 1) Empower young women and men to actively participate in society and express their voices. Coordinate intersectoral youth policies based on analysis, supported by well-funded mechanisms; 2) Support and encourage youth innovation and enhance the skills and professionalism of young women and men through quality education in ICT and other fields of digital development to increase and improve opportunities to enter the job market; 3) Promote the active well-being, and physical, social, and mental health of youth, ensuring their security, protection, and inclusion.

137 Bobić Miroslavljević, Mirjana, editor. Youth Participation Index: Monitoring Report of Political, Social and Economic Participation of Youth. Foundation Ana and Vlade Divac, 2022.

138 Rolović-Jočić, Mina, and Ostojić, Dajana, editors. Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes: Research on the Attitudes of civil society organisations and young people. Center for Democracy Foundation, 2024, p. 27.

139 Ibid, p. 29.

140 Minister of State for Youth and Children of Albania. National Youth Strategy 2022-2029, October 2022, <https://shorturl.at/43x7O>, visited on 15 June 2024.

The first objective, therefore, concerns youth participation. It contains three specific objectives: "Youth is well-informed about the opportunities to learn, gain organizational experience and volunteer, as well as about actively participating in the civic, social and political spheres" (Specific Objective 1.1), "Youth policy is well-coordinated, analysis-based and harmonized across different sectors, aiming at achieving resource cohesion and optimization and consolidating the National Youth Agency as the policy implementation body" (Specific Objective 1.2) and "Youth research performance and youth data inclusion in the study programs of higher education institutions and references on further developments in the area of youth" (Specific Objective 1.3).¹⁴¹

The Law on Youth¹⁴² was approved by the Parliament of Albania in 2019. With a total number of 20 articles, the Law specifies the activities, mechanisms, and authorities accountable for safeguarding and advancing the rights of young people within the Republic of Albania. One of several main principles on which youth support and empowerment is based is the principle of equal opportunities and guaranteeing the participation of young people in the policy making processes in the fields such as education, employment, volunteering, protection of social inclusion, health, culture, sport, environment, tourism, and in other fields that encourage youth development.

The responsible **Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth of the Republic of Albania** is tasked with designing and proposing the legal basis, policies, programmes, and strategies for youth, and for budgeting and financing youth activities. To facilitate the implementation of youth policies, the law envisions the establishment of the **National Youth Agency**, a public budgetary legal mechanism within the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth.

In addition, the legislation outlines the tasks and responsibilities of other mechanisms operating at the national or local level such as the **National Youth Council**¹⁴³ and Local Youth Council. Regarding youth civil society organizations, including those focused on youth issues, the new Law on Youth differentiates between 'youth organisations' and 'organisations for youth'. Additionally, the Law outlines the concept of voluntary work and informal education for young individuals and provides guidelines for the licensing of the National Youth Representative Organisation as well as funding sources. National Youth Congress (NYC) is a youth umbrella organization in Albania, established in 2013.¹⁴⁴ Its representative is included in the work of the National Youth Council.

3.3.2. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Study "Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes" showed that 34% of young people (15-35) in Bosnia and Herzegovina are either to "a great extent" or "very" familiar with the existing youth policies in their economy, while 19.3% were "not at all" or "little" familiar and 46.6% were "somewhat" familiar.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, 47.7% were well famil-

141 Ibid, p. 37.

142 Parliament of Albania. Law No.75/2019 on Youth. QBZ, 4 November 2019, <https://shorturl.at/CoWhz>, visited on 15 June 2024.

143 National Youth Council. 2021. <https://shorturl.at/b6Gnw>, visited on 15 June 2024.

144 National Youth Congress (NYC). 2023. <https://krk.al/about-us/>, visited on 15 June 2024.

145 Rolović-Jočić, Mina, and Ostojić, Dajana, editors. Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes: Research on the Attitudes of civil society organisations and young people. Center for Democracy Foundation, 2024, p. 48.

iar with the public policy making process, and additional 31% were somewhat familiar. However, only a very low 3.9% assess that the efficiency of policy-making is good.¹⁴⁶

Youth Policy of Republika Srpska from 2023 to 2027¹⁴⁷ was adopted in January 2023 as the fourth five-year strategic document since 2006. **Strategy for Youth from 2022 to 2026** was adopted in Brčko District in February 2023 as well.¹⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the youth strategy of the **Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina** was in the process of the adoption as of April 2024.¹⁴⁹

Due to the lack of Youth Strategy on the level of Federation of BiH at the time of the writing of this report, only the current Youth Policy of Republika Srpska 2023-2027 will be analysed in this section. This policy document contains four Strategic Goals: 1) Improve opportunities and young people's interest in a better life (sustainable settlement and return) in Republika Srpska; 2) Support the initiative and responsible activities of youth in a community; 3) Incentivise the development of healthy lifestyles of youth and their responsible behaviour towards the environment; 4) Promote excellence and the creation of role-models for youth. **Strategic Goal 2** covers the issues of political participation and civic engagement. Indicators of its success are the number of young MPs, the number of volunteers and the percentage of youth believing that their voice has an impact.

There are four priorities for the implementation of **SG2**: 1) Promotion of Volunteering; 2) Strengthening the Influence and the Participation of Young People in Politics (including measures such as improving political education of youth, dialogue between youth and local and national institutions and implementing good practices of youth participation in political decision-making); 3) Systematic Improvement of Capacities of Youth Organisations; 4) Strengthening Institutional and Personnel Capacities of Youth Organisations.

Due to the economy's constitutional arrangement, youth issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina are mainly the responsibility of the entities – Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska – as well as Brčko District, rather than the national government. **There is no Law on Youth at the national level**, nor have any strategic policy documents been drafted. In its latest annual report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, European Commission stressed that "it should work on a country-wide youth strategy that would ensure equal treatment of young people".¹⁵⁰

Legal acts on youth have been adopted in both entities of BiH, as well as in Brčko District. All three laws define youth participation in the decision-making processes as one of their goals. Table 2 presents a comparative overview of laws on youth and the areas they regulate.

146 Ibid, p. 49.

147 Ministry for Family, Youth and Sport of the Government of Republika Srpska, Section for Youth. Youth Policy of Republika Srpska from 2023 to 2027, January 2023, <https://shorturl.at/98jKI>. Accessed on 15 June 2024.

148 "USVOJENA STRATEGIJA ZA MLADE ZA PERIOD 2022–2026. GODINA". Assembly of Brčko District, <https://shorturl.at/Jamhy>. Accessed on 15 June 2024.

149 "STRATEŠKA PLATFORMA Strategija za mlade Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine 2024 – 2027". Federal Ministry of Culture and Sport, <https://rb.gy/dnfq9w>. Accessed on 15 June 2024.

150 European Commission. Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 Report, 8 November 2023, <https://shorturl.at/3qr4H>. Accessed on 15 June 2024.

Table 2. Comparative Overview of Youth Laws in BiH
(the bolded texts represent elements that are regulated in all three)

Law on Youth Organisation of Republika Srpska (2004, amended 2012) ¹⁵¹	Law on Youth of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010) ¹⁵²	Law on Youth of Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2017) ¹⁵³
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status of youth organisations • Youth policy (strategic document) and Action plans • Parliamentary working body for youth • Local youth commissions and councils • Process of registration of youth organisations • Founding of youth associations and youth councils (joint body of associations) • Youth policy financing • Expert work in youth organisations • International cooperation • Council for Youth (government body) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth work • Responsibilities of local, cantonal and federal institutions • Council for Youth of FBiH (government body) • Commission for Youth (working body of the parliament) • Annual report on youth of the government to the parliament • Ministry responsible for youth • Youth strategies (federal and cantonal) • Partnership with CSOs • Youth associations • Youth councils (joint bodies of associations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status of youth organisations • Youth Strategy and Action Plans • Registration of youth organisations • Commission for Youth (parliamentary body) • Official for Youth • Youth council (association of youth organisations) • Youth manifestations • International cooperation

At the national level, the **Commission for the Coordination of Youth Issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina** is an advisory body that works within the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the Council of Ministers of BiH. It was first founded in 2009, and the latest decision on its re-establishment was in 2017. Institutions responsible for youth policy are the **Ministry of Family, Youth and Sports** of the Government of Republika Srpska and the **Federal Ministry of Culture and Sports** of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Each Ministry has its Youth Sector. In Brčko District Government, the Department for Expert and Administrative issues is charged with implementing the strategy for youth and the supporting work.

Unlike the majority of other economies in the region, parliaments of both entities, as well as Brčko District, have working bodies dealing with youth issues: Committee for the Issues of Children, Youth and Sports (National Assembly of Republika Srpska), Commission for Youth Issues (House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Commission for Youth (Assembly of Brčko District). The existence of all three bodies is regulated by the respective laws.

151 National Assembly of Republika Srpska. Law on Amendments to the Law on Youth Organization. Službeni glasnik Republike Srpske 001/12, <https://shorturl.at/ce7CB>, Accessed on 15 June 2024.

152 Parliament of Federation of BiH. Law on Youth of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Službene novine Federacije BiH 36/10, <https://shorturl.at/UANdf>, Accessed on 15 June 2024.

153 Assembly of Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Law on Youth of Brčko district BiH. Skupština Brčko Distrikta, <https://shorturl.at/3hi0r>, Accessed on 15 June 2024.

Both the Government of RS and the Government of Federation of BiH are required by their respective laws to establish **Councils for Youth** as advisory bodies. However, this has so far been done only by the RS Government. Umbrella youth organizations exist in both entities.¹⁵⁴ Three members of the umbrella youth organization of Republika Srpska are members of the entities Council for Youth.

3.3.3. KOSOVO*

Study "Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes" showed that 54.8% of young people (15-35) in Kosovo* are either to "a great extent" or "very" familiar with the existing youth policies in their economy, while 27.8% were "not at all" or "little" familiar.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, 50.4% were well familiar with the public policy making process, and additional 29.7% were somewhat familiar. However, only 27.8% assess that the efficiency of policy-making is good.¹⁵⁶

The **Youth Strategy including the Action Plan 2019-2023 (KSYAP)**¹⁵⁷ served as the most recent central document for the implementation of youth policy in Kosovo*. The main purpose of the KSYAP is to enhance the situation of youth in Kosovo* through an inclusive approach and by fostering cooperation between multiple institutions. The main strategic objectives are: 1) Mobilization of youth for participation, representation, and active citizenship; 2) Providing skills and preparing young people for the labour market; 3) Healthy and safe environment for young people.

The Strategy foresees multiple interventions for each objective. Interventions for the first objective, which covers participation, are "consolidation, functionalization, and strengthening of youth organisations" (1.1), "consolidation of youth legislation" (1.2), "support for youth mobility" (1.3), and "development of volunteering" (1.4).

he New Strategy for 2024-2032 and the action Plan for 2024-2026 based on the draft Law on Youth was approved by the Government in December 2023.¹⁵⁸

Kosovo* first implemented **the Law on the Empowerment and Participation of Youth**¹⁵⁹ in 2009. The primary objective of this Law was to strengthen the involvement of young people in decision-making processes, thereby enhancing their quality of life and social status. Spanning 19 articles, the law assigns responsibilities to various central and local institutions and youth organisations to ensure widespread youth participation in public life.

The Law on Youth was revised in 2023, with one of the significant changes being extending the youth age or 'young person's' age from 16-24 to 15-29. This new Law on Youth aims to regulate the field of youth at the intergovernmental and intersectoral level,

154 Vijeće mladih Federacije BiH. 2024. <https://www.vijecemladih.ba/>, Accessed on 15 June 2024. Omladinski savjet Republike Srpske. 2021. <https://omladinskisavjetrs.org/>, visited on 15 June 2024.

155 Rolović-Jočić, Mina, and Ostojić, Dajana, editors. *Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes: Research on the Attitudes of civil society organisations and young people*. Center for Democracy Foundation, 2024, p. 65.

156 Ibid, p. 67.

157 Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport. *Strategy for Youth 2019-2023*, May 2019, <https://rb.gy/e1s34y>, visited on 15 June 2024.

158 Prime Minister Office. *The 180th Government Meeting*, 27 December 2023, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/blog/the-180th-government-meeting/>, visited on 15 June 2024.

159 Kosovo Assembly. *Law on empowerment and participation of youth*, 30 September 2009, <https://rb.gy/fbhjue>, visited on 15 June 2024.

placing youth at the centre of state priorities. Specifically, the law defines: 1) Support to structural dialogue at all levels of government through an intersectoral approach; 2) Responsibilities of central and local government institutions towards young people and organisations in the youth sector; 3) Responsibilities for empowering youth and supporting youth participation in decision-making; 4) Conditions for the development of youth policies and youth work, the promotion of volunteerism and non-formal education for young people.

The Law outlines in detail the organisation of institutional mechanisms, assigning the **State Commission on Youth** as the highest inter-institutional coordinating mechanism. Additionally, the Law outlines the responsibilities of central public institutions such as the **Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Youth Development Agency** as well as local public institutions such as municipal youth directorates. The law envisions youth participation in public decision-making processes encouraged at both central and local levels through public consultations, central and/or local youth councils, and youth sector organisations.

Kosovo* is the only economy in the region, apart from Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has a parliamentary committee dedicated to youth – Committee for Education, Science, Technology, Innovation, Culture, Youth and Sport. The draft Law on Youth (2023) envisages the establishment of a **Central Youth Council**, as a platform for cooperation between the government, local councils and youth organizations. The current version of the law does not contain provisions on an umbrella youth organization.

3.3.4. MONTENEGRO

Study "Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes" showed that 39% of young people (15-35) in Montenegro are either to "a great extent" or "very" familiar with the existing youth policies in their economy, while 18.5% were "not at all" or "little" familiar and 42.5% were "somewhat" familiar.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, 41.8% were well familiar with the public policy making process, and additional 23.3% were somewhat familiar. However, only the very low 6.7% assess that the efficiency of policy-making is good.¹⁶¹

The new **Youth Strategy 2023-2027**¹⁶² was adopted in October 2023. The previous Youth Strategy 2017-2021 was adopted in 2016 and was the main strategic policy document in the field of Youth Policy in that period. The current Strategy defines four operational goals and accompanying measures that need to be achieved: 1) Development of a sustainable system of services to support young people in the process of their transition to adulthood; 2) Creating conditions for young people to be active citizens, involved in the public policy making and implementation processes; 3) Improving the position of young people, through an interdepartmental approach and 4) Improvement of the normative-institutional framework for the implementation of youth policy.

160 Rolović-Jočić, Mina, and Ostojić, Dajana, editors. Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes: Research on the Attitudes of civil society organisations and young people. Center for Democracy Foundation, 2024, p. 87.

161 Ibid, p. 89.

162 Government of Montenegro. Youth Strategy 2023-2027, 6 December 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yc236ab8>, visited on 15 June 2024.

Measures within the second operational goal, which concerns youth participation, are: "creation of sustainable mechanism for support of youth initiatives, informal groups and youth organizations" (2.1); "creation of new and improvement of existing mechanisms for participation of youth" (2.2); "strengthening the capacity of youth to participate in the development of the community, democratic life and decision-making" (2.3) and "improving the conditions for the development of volunteer work" (2.4).

The current **Law on Youth**¹⁶³ was adopted in 2019, replacing the first Law on Youth in Montenegro, which was adopted in 2016. One of the principles of the Law is active participation of youth in the implementation of youth policies. The Law regulates the status and functioning of the Youth Council, CSOs implementing youth policies (but not youth organisations), youth services (youth centres and youth clubs), as well as co-financing of youth policy. Compared to the previous version of the law, the current one institutionalized youth services, created conditions for the constitution of the representative (umbrella) Association of CSOs and improved the mechanisms for implementation of youth policy at the local level. A new revision of the Law on Youth is currently ongoing.

The **Ministry for Sports and Youth was re-established** is charged with the development and implementation of youth policy, including the Youth Strategy. The Ministry is also tasked with enabling the work of youth services, cooperation with CSOs and other actors and encouraging the participation of youth in policy-making processes.

The **Council for Youth**, an expert and advisory body, is in the process of formation as of September 2023. According to the Law on Youth, it will have a president and 8 members, five of which are nominated by the government, one is the representative of youth services and two are nominated by the representative association of youth CSOs. The current **Montenegrin National Youth Council**, called the Youth Network of Montenegro was registered in 2020, pursuant to Article 20 of the new Law on Youth, as an independent, representative (umbrella) association of non-governmental organisations implementing youth policy in Montenegro.¹⁶⁴

3.3.5. NORTH MACEDONIA

Study "Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes" showed that 36.3% of young people (15-35) in North Macedonia are either to "a great extent" or "very" familiar with the existing youth policies in their economy, while 36.6% were "not at all" or "little" familiar and 27.1% were "somewhat" familiar.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, 31.1% were well familiar with the public policy making process, and additional 29.1% were somewhat familiar. However, only 15.1% assess that the efficiency of policy-making is good.¹⁶⁶

The most important strategic document related to youth policy-making in North Macedonia is the **National Youth Strategy 2023-2027**¹⁶⁷ adopted in September 2023 by the

163 Parliament of Montenegro. Law on Youth, 23 April 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yc8eu6u9>, visited on 15 June 2024.

164 Youth Network of Montenegro. 2020, <https://www.mmcg.me/>, visited on 15 June 2024.

165 Rolović-Jočić, Mina, and Ostojić, Dajana, editors. Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes: Research on the Attitudes of civil society organisations and young people. Center for Democracy Foundation, 2024, p. 105.

166 Ibid, p. 107.

167 Government of North Macedonia. National Youth Strategy 2023-2027. De jure, 29 September 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3n2ec67t>, visited on 15 June 2024.

Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, that replaced the old Youth Strategy 2016-2025. The National Youth Strategy 2023-2027 covers the following eight key thematic areas: Youth participation, Youth information, Youth work, Education, Culture, Health, Entrepreneurship and pre-employment support and Security (violence).

There are **four strategic goals** related to the youth participation: 1) Strengthened influence of young people in all decision-making processes at the local and national level based on an appropriate legal framework; 2) Increased participation of young people in decision-making processes within the educational institutions in the direction of developing and applying modern and advanced educational policies tailored to young people; 3) Improved involvement and impact of young people on development and the implementation of environmental protection policies; 4) Strengthened youth activism within the digital space.

The legal possibility for the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes began in 2020, when the **Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies**¹⁶⁸ was adopted in the Assembly of North Macedonia. Youth participation, according to the Law, means the process that enables young people to participate and make joint decisions concerning policies and programmes that directly or indirectly shape the lives of young people.

This is the first law in the Republic of North Macedonia that guarantees youth participation and recognises young people and forms of youth organisation. This law sets out the basic principles, goals, and measures for the implementation of youth policies, and provides a legal basis for the creation of programmes, projects, and activities that target young people.

The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies defines the concepts of youth organisation and an organisation for youth. **Youth umbrella organisations** are organisations in which the forms of youth organisation are members that are united due to the achievement of common goals in specific areas of interest to young people. **The National Youth Assembly** is a body of forms of youth organisation that elects youth representatives in the advisory body, creates priorities and policies for the representation of youth representatives, and coordinates and monitors their work.

Youth policies in North Macedonia were regulated by the **Ministry of Labour and Social Policy**, which was responsible for the implementation and coordination of policies related to the youth population. Since 8th June 2024, with the adoption of the amendments and additions to the Law on Organization and Work of State Administration Bodies in North Macedonia, the ministry has been reorganised as the **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth**, with the same responsibilities in regard to youth policies.

The **Agency for Youth and Sport in North Macedonia** was a government institution that operated within the Ministry of Education and Science. Its primary role was to coordinate and implement policies and programmes related to youth and sports in the economy. Since 8th June 2024, with the adoption of the amendments and additions to the Law on Organization and Work of State Administration Bodies in North Macedonia, the **Agency for Youth and Sport** ceased to exist, while its functions were divided between the reorganised **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth** and newly established **Ministry of Sport**.

The National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM)¹⁶⁹ is a non-governmental organisation that represents the interests and concerns of young people in North Macedonia.

168 Assembly of North Macedonia. Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies. De jure, 16 January 2020, <https://shorturl.at/iJfDr>, visited on 15 June 2024.

169 National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM). 2020. <https://nms.org.mk/>, visited on 15 June 2024.

After the adoption of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, the government established a **National Advisory Body for Youth Policies**. This body was established to facilitate collaboration between youth representatives and representatives of state administration bodies, which has an advisory and supervisory role in the implementation of youth policies and activities for young people. The advisory body is composed of representatives appointed by state administration bodies, but not more than eight members and nine youth representatives elected by the National Youth Assembly, one of whom is the president.

3.3.6. SERBIA

Study "Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes" showed that 27% of young people (15-35) in Serbia are either to "a great extent" or "very" familiar with the existing youth policies in their economy, while 33.6% were "not at all" or "little" familiar and 39.5% were "somewhat" familiar.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, 35.7% were well familiar with the public policy making process, and additional 28.1% were somewhat familiar. However, only the very low 10.1% assess that the efficiency of policy-making is good.¹⁷¹

The **National Youth Strategy 2023-2030** contains five Specific Goals: 1) standardization and implementation of youth work; 2) improvement of spatial capacities and services for youth policy in all local governments; 3) active participation; 4) equal opportunities and incentives for young people to develop their potentials and competencies, which lead to social and economic independence; 5) conditions for a healthy and safe environment and social well-being of young people.

All measures within the Specific Goal 3 directly tackle civic engagement and inclusion of youth in the decision-making. They include: "creating conditions for the involvement of young people in decision-making processes and policies that affect them" (Measure 3.1), "encouraging volunteering and activism among young people" (Measure 3.2); "improving international cooperation, exchange of experiences and practices young people and other youth policy actors" (Measure 3.3); "developed mechanisms in the function of providing the optimal amount of allocated funds for young people at all levels" (Measure 3.4) and "strengthening and systemic support to associations and youth offices in implementation of youth policies" (Measure 3.5).

The **Law on Youth**¹⁷² was adopted in 2011. Although there have been several attempts to adopt a new law in recent years, this has not taken place so far. The Law regulates the adoption and implementation of the National Youth Strategy, the status of youth associations, the Youth Council, youth offices and the Youth Agency, as well as financing of programmes and projects in the youth sector.

Article 8 of the Law on Youth states that everybody, in particular youth policy actors, shall ensure a stimulating environment and offer active support in the implementation of young people's youth activities, in their taking initiative and in their purposeful

170 Rolović-Jočić, Mina, and Ostojić, Dajana, editors. *Western Balkans Youth in Policy Making Processes: Research on the Attitudes of civil society organisations and young people*. Center for Democracy Foundation, 2024, p. 126.

171 Ibid, pp. 127-128.

172 National Assembly of Serbia. *Law on Youth*. Pravno-informacioni sistem Republike Srbije, 8 July 2011, <https://shorturl.at/4TLfr>, visited on 15 June 2024.

involvement in decision making processes and processes of decision implementation, which decisions contribute to personal and social development, upon young people's receiving complete information.¹⁷³

The current Ministry responsible for youth affairs, the **Ministry of Tourism and Youth**, is charged with the development and implementation of youth policy, including both the National Youth Strategy and the Action Plan. The Ministry is also tasked with carrying out the registry of youth associations; enabling and facilitating international cooperation in the field of youth and supporting the development of mechanisms of youth policy on the local level.

The **Youth Council** is a consultative body established in 2014 by the Government of Serbia. Its goals are to encourage and coordinate the implementation of youth policy and propose new measures. The president of the Youth Council is the Minister of Tourism and Youth while the Assistant to the Minister in charge of youth is also a member. In addition to these two, the Council has 33 members, 17 of whom represent state institutions and 16 of whom represent youth associations. From 2014 to 2023, the Youth Council held 20 sessions, with the frequency of meetings reducing as the years passed.¹⁷⁴

Since 2019, the **KOMS**¹⁷⁵, an umbrella organisation of youth associations in the economy, has organised several structured dialogues with the representatives of the state institutions, including the Prime Minister, Minister in charge of youth affairs and Members of Parliament. In 2021, the Youth Council formed the **Permanent Expert Team for the EU Youth Dialogue** – a dialogue mechanism between young people and decision-makers taking place in the framework of the EU Youth Strategy. Serbia is the only non-EU economy that has formed this type of institution.

3.4. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter has shown how Western Balkans region exhibits diverse approaches to youth participation policies, emphasizing legal frameworks, strategic initiatives, and implementation mechanisms. To bridge these gaps, align strategies and policies in line with EU Integration proposes, as well as improve youth ecosystems across Western Balkan economies, the following policy initiatives are proposed.

Completion and regular functioning of the envisaged mechanisms for youth participation in the decision-making processes in the Western Balkans

All missing elements that are already envisaged by the legal and strategic framework (such as youth councils) need to be established. These mechanisms should be designed to confirm that youth representatives are authentic voices for their demographic, effectively reflecting their diverse perspectives and experiences.

Once all of them are set up, they need to be able to function regularly and achieve an appropriate dynamic. Opinion surveys in the region have, with exception, shown that young people are dissatisfied with the efficiency of policy making, which is a clear signal that this step is needed.

173 Ibid.

174 Stojanović, Boban et al. Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji 2023. Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije, 2023, pp. 55-56.

175 National Youth Council of Serbia. 2022. <https://koms.rs/pocetna/>. Accessed 15 June 2024.

Exploring the possibility of introducing new mechanisms based on examples of good practice

This research has demonstrated that in some economies in the region, there are additional elements of youth participation that could be further adopted. This includes European Union Youth Dialogue, parliamentary committees for youth and other platforms. Online resources for the youth, modelled after the European Youth Portal, could be developed further.

Evidence-based policy planning in the area of youth participation

The diversity of the measures and goals in the regional strategic documents concerning the area of youth participation signals the need to further enhance evaluation and planning, in order to determine what are the priorities in this area. Meeting of the European Union standards should play a major role in these considerations as well, given the fact that all economies are EU-aspiring countries.

Improving communication between decision-makers and youth

Low levels of trust among youth in the decision-makers are present in the entire region. Long-term changes are needed not only in providing more opportunities for the young people to openly communicate with politicians and civil servants, but also, in many cases, the culture of communication needs to become more constructive.

Improving financial sustainability of youth organisations

Youth organisations should actively seek new streams of financial resources to achieve financial sustainability and reduce dependency on donors. Diversifying funding sources, exploring innovative fundraising methods, and establishing partnerships with the private sector can contribute to long-term stability. This approach allows youth organisations to maintain their autonomy and flexibility in addressing the evolving needs of young people.

Establishing and promoting youth research

To promote a youth research, Western Balkans economies should establish comprehensive frameworks that encourage and guide research recognised in these economies. This involves creating structures, policies, and funding mechanisms dedicated to supporting research initiatives. The promotion of youth research should encompass both academic and non-academic spheres.

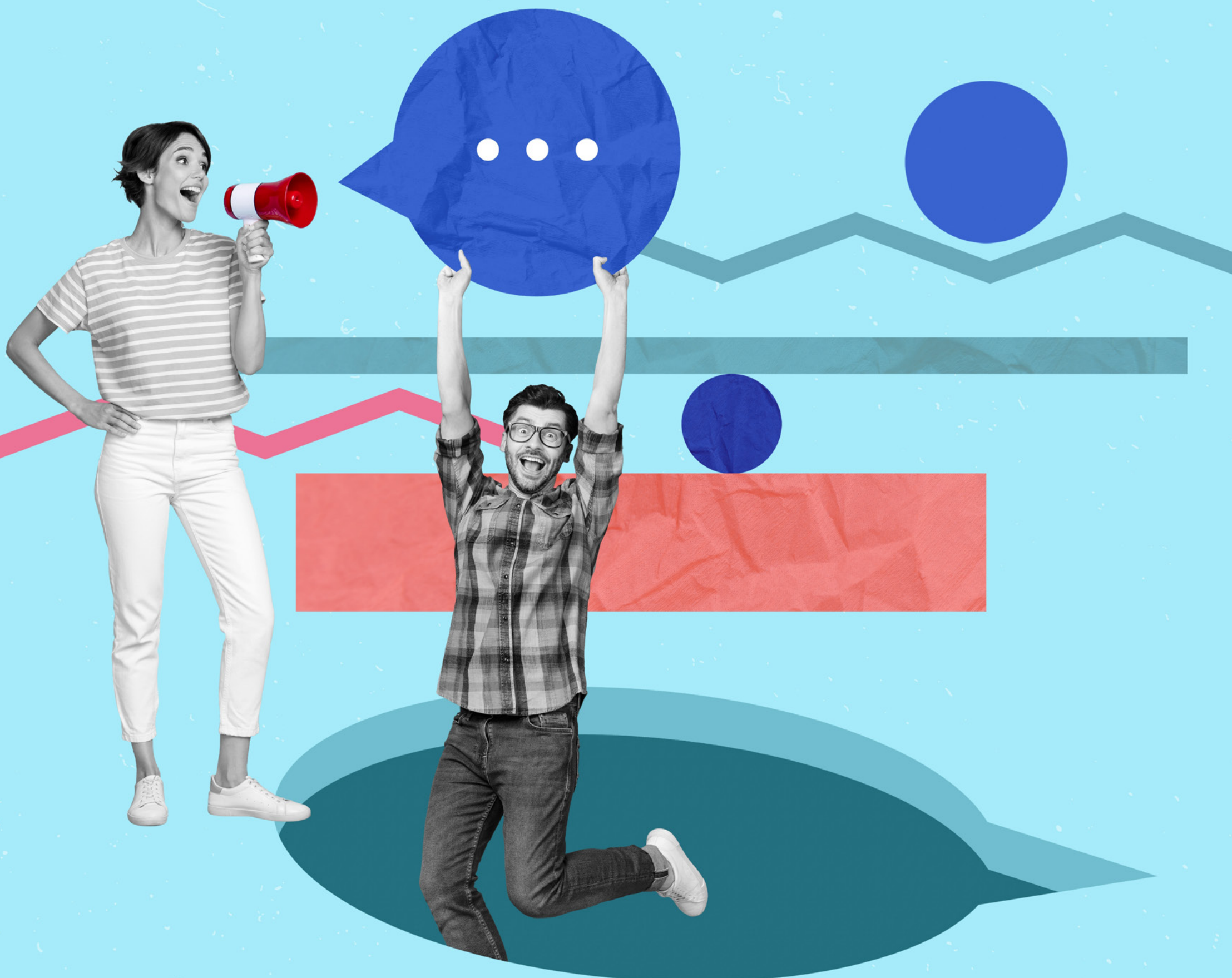
Joint
Comparative
Analysis
of Youth Policies
in the Western
Balkans

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4 MEDIA, CULTURE, AND THE DIGITAL WORLD



4. MEDIA, CULTURE, AND THE DIGITAL WORLD

4.1. GENERAL INFORMATION

In recent years, the WB region has experienced significant transformations, characterized by political upheavals, economic hurdles, and social shifts. In the midst of these changes, the development and implementation of youth policies have emerged as critical components of governance, reflecting activities to provide to the diverse needs and aspirations of young individuals across the region. National youth policies typically include a broad spectrum of areas, including education, employment, civic engagement, and cultural enrichment, particularly in the digital media domain. While specific priorities may vary, common objectives often include improving of the educational systems, promoting youth inclusion in economic sectors, and encouragement of active youth citizenship. Despite the commitment to youth development, the implementation of youth policies in the WB encounters various challenges, including financial limitations, institutional capacity constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, and occasional political instability. Moreover, socio-economic disparities, regional inequalities, and ethno-political tensions can worsen the difficulties in reaching marginalized youth populations and ensuring impartial policy implementation.

A comparison of youth policies in the WB revealed several key themes and trends. Firstly, there is a significant emphasis on education and skills enhancement, reflecting efforts to address elevated youth unemployment rates and equip young individuals with the necessary competencies for the job market. Secondly, initiatives aimed at strengthening youth entrepreneurship and innovation are improving, indicating a shift towards inclusion of the potential of youth for economic growth. Additionally, there is a growing acknowledgment of the importance of youth participation in decision-making processes, with efforts to involve young individuals in governance, policy formulation, and community development initiatives. However, challenges persist in ensuring meaningful youth participation, including insufficient representation, purely formal approaches, and serious challenges for using of youth input into policy solutions. The low participation of young people in WB societies shows that the systems usually do not recognise the value of young people and their potential as a resource for economy development. The result of this continued practice is their poor inclusion, social marginalisation and increasing migration to western economies.

The level of youth participation in creating of cultural policies is unsatisfactory in most WB economies. The youth is part of the wider stakeholders engaged in consultation processes for policy-making and, as envisioned in the laws, but so far there is no clear substantiation that youth cultural practitioners have been practically engaged. The comparative analysis of youth policies in the WB underscores both progress and persistent challenges in addressing diverse needs and complex issues for young individuals in this region. While there is a shared commitment to youth development, translating policy objectives into solid outcomes requires sustained political determination, institutional capacity-building, and inclusive approaches that prioritize the voices and experiences of all young individuals across the region. By collectively addressing these challenges, policymakers can use the potential of youth as catalysts for positive change and contribute to the long-term stability and prosperity of countries in the WB.

Efforts to enhance ML and MIL among youth for the advancement of digital competencies and understanding are progressing across all economies in the WB. In certain instances, these principles are integrated into specialized programs and initiatives, while in others, they are cultivated in conjunction with various projects associated with this domain. Notably, there are various legal provisions in WB that prescribe activities to support cultural creativity and the innovation of young people. These activities have a declarative rather than an essential character. The limited results in cultural programmes and inclusion of youth should be treated directly by **increasing budgetary allocations for cultural and youth organisations** to provide greater financial stability and support for their activities and programmes. Other related recommendations may also include: increase of funding for cultural and sports programmes in local municipalities (with particular focus on small communities), creating incentives and partnerships with the private sector to invest in cultural infrastructure, and ensure support for youth-driven initiatives, projects and campaigns, allowing young people to actively contribute to these issues.

In addition to funding, another key step is to **create upgraded national culture strategies** that include a clear vision, measurable goals, support for arts and cultural industries, the promotion of cultural diversity and inclusion amongst youth, investment in cultural education and institutions, engagement with international partners, and better developed monitoring and evaluation tools. To note, some expert recommendations include developing different incentives, such as introducing annual youth awards that both recognise and celebrate the outstanding work of youth activists in the field of media, culture and the digital sphere. Increased inclusion of youth in participatory policy-making processes in media, culture and the digital world is still needed. Due to various reasons including political, economic, legal factors, etc. the inclusion of youth is inconsistent in the separate economies and still below EU standards.

Various legal provisions in the WB aim to support cultural creativity and innovation among young people, but their implementation is more symbolic than substantive. To address the limited outcomes in cultural programs and youth inclusion, increasing budgetary allocations for cultural and youth organizations is essential. Other recommendations include boosting funding for cultural and sports programs in local municipalities, incentivizing private sector investment in cultural infrastructure, and supporting youth-driven initiatives. Additionally, upgrading national culture strategies with clear visions, measurable goals, and support for arts and cultural industries is crucial. This should also involve promoting cultural diversity and inclusion among youth, investing in cultural education and institutions, engaging with international partners, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation tools. Expert suggestions also advocate for introducing annual youth awards to recognize and celebrate outstanding work in media, culture, and the digital sphere.

4.2. BEST PRACTICES FROM EU

This research showed that WB economies are active in the implementation of the key principles by the EU Youth Strategy and recommendations from the EU annual reports on the economies' progress in EU integration.

Montenegro, along with North Macedonia and Serbia participate¹⁷⁶ in the Creative Europe 2021-2027 programme¹⁷⁷, which is the EU's most important fund supporting the cultural, creative and audiovisual sectors. The Creative Europe Programme 2021-2027 is the European Union's funding program aimed at supporting the cultural and creative sectors across Europe. The Creative Europe Programme offers various funding opportunities, including grants, loans, and equity investments, to support a wide range of activities such as cultural projects, networking, capacity-building, and transnational cooperation. Overall, the Creative Europe Programme 2021-2027 aims to strengthen the cultural and creative sectors in Europe, stimulate economic growth and job creation, and promote European values and identity on the global stage. It succeeds the previous Creative Europe Programme 2014-2020 and continues the EU's commitment to promoting cultural diversity, fostering innovation, and enhancing the competitiveness of the cultural and creative industries.

There are various initiatives of international organisations and civil societies engaged in the involvement of young people working on coordination with EU practices. One such project is the European Youth Card - the Path to European Opportunities¹⁷⁸ implemented by the European Youth Centre and funded by the Ministry of Youth and Sports which aims to encourage youth mobility through numerous services, discounts and benefits in Serbia and abroad. The idea is to enable youth to explore the world they live in and be informed about events and to actively and fully participate in social life.

For example, the ReCulture project¹⁷⁹ is establishing a basis for improved visibility and modernised appearance of Western Balkan cultural institutions by supporting the inter-sectoral linking and cooperation between cultural and creative industries within the WB and EU Member States. Specific project objectives are: 1) Capacity building of cultural institutions from WB through reconstructing their visual identities and developing new skills in strategic approach towards audience development and communication practices; 2) Gaining new professional experiences and expertise of young WB designers through fostering cooperation within WB and acquiring and practising new designing skills shared by European and Western Balkan design professionals; and 3) Promoting new marketing and audience development approaches and testing new models of revenue of WB cultural institutions through education on new business skills, production of limited series of souvenirs and development of online shops. Also, the Regional Programme on Local Democracy in the WB (ReLOaD)¹⁸⁰ is financed by the European Union (EU) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It builds on the good practices of the Reinforcement of Local Democracy (LOD) project, another initiative financed by EU, which also represents the replication model in WB. As a regional initiative, ReLOaD and now it's second phase ReLOaD2 is

176 Government of Montenegro <https://www.gov.me/en/article/montenegro-joins-creative-europe-2021-2027-programme> , visited on April 25 2024

177 European Union, <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe/about-the-creative-europe-programme> , visited on April 25 2024

178 European Youth Card <https://mojakartica.rs/> , visited on April 25 2024

179 Reculture project <https://www.recultureproject.eu/> , visited on April 25 2024

180 EU Local Democracy <https://eulocaldemocracy4wb.org/> , visited on April 25 2024

implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, Kosovo*, Montenegro and Serbia.

It should be noted that the research and evaluation of local policies relating to youth and youth needs in 15 local governments - the Regional Programme of Local Democracy in the WB¹⁸¹ showed that in the majority of municipalities, young people have expressed dissatisfaction with cultural and sports programmes, as well as the infrastructure necessary to carry out these activities (lack of sports halls, cinemas, cultural halls, theatres, etc.). This issue is pronounced in particular in smaller municipalities which highly affects cultural offerings for young people. Another discovery of the research is that 43.7% of the surveyed youth have never attended cultural places such as museums, galleries, and theatres. A third attend concerts and performances only a few times a year or less often. A quarter never engage in physical activity, and almost half (47.6%) never attend sports events, while 37.5% have no hobbies. Additionally, over 80% do not visit local youth clubs or participate in activities organised by local non-governmental organisations.

4.3. COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

An analysis of the situation concerning youth media, culture, and the digital sphere in the WB indicates that the institutional and legal framework are well developed at the state and civil sector levels, while numerous activities were registered in the past few years. The importance of these issues, especially the significance of active young people in their societies, is recognised in all states included in this research. Still, there are many existing issues, mainly in the form of increased migration of young people, unsatisfactory coordination and cooperation among various sectors responsible for youth, lack of budgeting for specific programmes, poor support of digital and ML, centralised models of decision-making in regard to youth issues, etc.

4.3.1. YOUTH MEDIA AND DIGITAL LITERACY, STRENGTHENING CRITICAL THINKING

Work on ML and MIL¹⁸², for development of digital skills and knowledge for youth is improving in all economies in the WB. In some cases, these concepts are implemented in specialised type of programmes and activities, while in others, they are developed together with different projects related to this field. To note, in Albania ML and critical thinking are not present or practiced in formal education settings, as different aspects of ML are part of several strategies and they include media issues mainly, rather

181 United Nations Development Fund https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-06/Istra%C5%BEivanje%20i%20procjena%20omladinskih%20politika%20i%20potreba%20mladih%20u%2015%20LSU_0_1.pdf, visited on April 25 2024

182 Media Information Literacy (MIL) is a subset of ML that specifically focuses on the ability to access, evaluate, and use media information effectively and ethically. MIL places greater emphasis on information literacy skills, including the ability to identify reliable sources of information, assess the credibility and accuracy of media content, and discern between fact and opinion

than ML, and competencies in information literacy, rather than critical thinking¹⁸³. 37% of young people in Albania reported to have received ML or critical thinking training, while 28% have engaged in producing activities. ML Education is segmented through different programmes and does not include critical thinking, focusing more on the right to information, media regulation, and protection of minors from media. Such a gap has been addressed in local strategies, while the media itself and the private sector do not play any role here. CSOs are more involved in ML on this subject, with various programmes such as: Youth and Youth Media,¹⁸⁴ Youth Media Lab Albania,¹⁸⁵ The voice of youth in media and news verification,¹⁸⁶ Skills for Jobs,¹⁸⁷ Cisco academies,¹⁸⁸ "i-Clubs",¹⁸⁹ and others.

The research also confirmed that in regards to ML, Montenegro is in the advanced stages of integrating ML into its educational system. Perhaps, the most prominent example is the active process of ML integration into the education system as an elective subject in secondary (high) schools since 2009. For the school year 2023/2024, this subject is made available to 7-9th grade elementary school pupils, as well¹⁹⁰. According to the Digital Agenda Observatory, 99.6% of young people in Montenegro aged 16 to 24, and 96.3% of young people aged 25 to 34, use the Internet¹⁹¹. An analysis by UNICEF Montenegro from 2023 shows that the young people primarily use social networks (93.9%) and the Internet (90,3%) to stay informed. This means that young people in Montenegro are particularly at risk of being exposed to harmful or misleading content online, given their heavy use of social media and other digital platforms¹⁹². Montenegro also adopted the Media Strategy 2023-2027 in October 2023¹⁹³ with the Action Plan for the period 2023-2024. The issues identified in the Media Strategy are the limited coverage of this subject, insufficient promotion within schools, lack of continuous teacher training, and the fact that this type of knowledge is currently only offered to secondary (high) school students in gymnasium schools which constitute 30% of the total number of secondary school students (there are roughly 32,000 secondary school students, with 11,000 in gymnasiums). In the last three years, on average, only approx. 200 secondary school students chose ML as the elective subject.

In North Macedonia ML has been slowly integrated into other subjects within formal education while the civic sector is also very active in improving ML and opportunities for acquiring digital skills by youth. According to the ML Index for 2022¹⁹⁴, North Macedonia is at the bottom of the economies in Europe when considering the num-

183 Source (Media for Citizens – Citizens for Media, 2019)

184 British Council, <https://www.britishcouncil.al/en/programmes/society/media/youth> , visited on April 26 2024

185 Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063710042459> , visited on April 26 2024

186 World Vision Albania, <https://www.wvi.org/stories/albania/voice-youth-media-and-news-verification> , visited on April 26 2024

187 Skills for Jobs, <https://skillsforjobs.al/> , visited on April 26 2024

188 School of Informatics, <https://www.schoolofinformatics.com/> , visited on April 26 2024

189 Vodafone, <https://www.vodafone.al/vodafone-albania/articles-al/iclub-albania/> , visited on April 26 2024

190 Institute for media Montenegro https://mpm.cmpf.eui.eu/upload/sources/Montenegro/plusmontenegro_medijska-i-informaciona-pismenost-u-obrazovnom-sistemu-crne-gore_1607168446.pdf , visited on April 26 2024. Furthermore, in the 2018/2019 academic year, the implementation of the new curriculum began, introducing the subject of ML at the Faculty of Political Science. The Faculty of Political Science underwent changes as the previous Journalism study programme was reorganised, introducing the new programme Media Studies and Journalism where students attend a ML course in the second year.

191 Metamorphosis North Macedonia https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/izdanija_arhiva/digital-agenda%E2%80%AFobservatory%E2%80%AF-baseline-research-of-the-state-of-e-government-development-digital-literacy-in-the-targeted-western-balkan-economies-2020/ , visited on April 26 2024

192 UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/media/23621/file/Istra%C5%BEivanje%20o%20polo%C5%BEaju%20mladih%20-%20Prilog%20razvoju%20strategije%20za%20mlade.pdf> , visited on April 26 2024

193 Government of North Macedonia, <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/b7e6dde8-74a2-4ce7-b58c-376a85ed0416> , visited on April 26 2024

194 Open Society Institute Sofia, <https://osis.bg/?p=4243&lang=en> , visited on April 26 2024

ber of citizens that are most vulnerable to disinformation. Youngsters in the Republic of North Macedonia can study digital and ML in several school subjects within the framework of primary and secondary education¹⁹⁵. These school subjects cover media culture, not ML. Young people are generally aware of the issues of disinformation, reliability of source or the quality of news, but they easily succumb to disinformation obtained through social media and internet news-sites which is the main source through which they receive information. This is the conclusion from the results obtained from the research "Critical thinking and the habits of informing among young people"¹⁹⁶. In recent years, a large number of international organisations have been implementing training projects and workshops for disinformation and critical opinion including young people in North Macedonia¹⁹⁷. Also, the National Strategy for Youth 2023-2027¹⁹⁸, adopted by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, states one goal as "to strengthen youth activism in the digital space, through advancing the digital literacy of officials in local and national institutions with focus on youth officials". These activities are also foreseen in the Action Plan of the Agency for Youth and Sports 2023-2025¹⁹⁹.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina there are no strategic documents on ML at the state level. The lack of ML programmes in Bosnia and Herzegovina was noted in the Handbook for the Development of Political and ML of Young People, back in 2017²⁰⁰. A positive example involving state assistance is the project by the Regulatory Agency for Communications of BiH and UNESCO called MIL²⁰¹, which is part of the regional UNESCO platform SeeMIL²⁰². The project aims to create and promote MIL among citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and is also active on social media platforms so that youth have easy access to materials. This initiative has been recognised as an excellent tool to enhance ML and foster a more informed and engaged society, especially for younger citizens.

In the case of Kosovo*, the economy has achieved progress in digital transformation but ML is still lacking in its development²⁰³. Media representatives believe the reasons for this are social dynamics including migration, lack of formal education concerning the matter, and lacking educational content produced by local media. 'Use of media' data for youth in Kosovo* are as follows: 73.2% watch TV every day, 70.1% read news online, they are very active in content creation, almost all of them (97.4%) use social networks, yet, at the same time, most youth in Kosovo* do not consider the local media as reliable. The established Independent Media Commission is focused on raising medial literacy skills, but it needs external support to be able to function. Several ini-

195 Faculty of journalism and Public Relations, <https://medium.edu.mk/attach/Mediumskata-pismenost-vo-Makedonija-obid-za-impelementacija-vo-osnovnoto-obrazovanie-MKD.pdf>, visited on April 26 2024

196 Meta North Macedonia, <https://meta.mk/mladite-lesno-podlegnuvat-na-dezinformacii-preku-soczi%D1%98alnite-mediumi-i-internet-portalite/>, visited on April 26 2024

197 These are mainly USAID, the European Union and other foreign donors. In recent years there has been a positive climate for the inclusion of media and digital literacy content in formal education. At the same time, ML manuals for students and teachers are constantly being promoted, and a framework for ML in primary education has been presented <https://is.gd/5mtPTb>, visited on April 26 2024

198 Government of North Macedonia, <https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/nsm23-27-sluzhben-vesnik.pdf>, visited on April 26 2024

199 Government of North Macedonia, <https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/akciski-plan-2023-2025.pdf>, visited on April 26 2024

200 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/14153.pdf>, visited on April 26 2024

201 Media Literacy, <https://medijskapismenost.ba/category/mreza-za-mip/>, visited on April 26 2024

202 SEEMIL, <https://seemil.org/>, visited on April 26 2024

203 Source, National Democratic Institute. (2022). Information Integrity in Kosovo. Kosovo* is ranked in Cluster 5, with 23 out of 100 points in the ML Index 2022 (OSI Sofia, 2022).

tiatives have been registered in this sector, such as those of OSCE,²⁰⁴ KOSOVO KIST,²⁰⁵ OSCE,²⁰⁶ USAID,²⁰⁷ UNDP,²⁰⁸ National competition in Cultural Creativity and Critical Thinking.²⁰⁹

Based on the latest report from the EU²¹⁰, Serbia continues with the implementation of the Action Plan²¹¹ on the Media Strategy²¹² but still there is more to be done as the legislative process is not fully finalised in line with EU standards. One of the reasons for implementation issues was the delayed formation of the new government in October 2022. Several other issues are on the agenda from November 2022, such as consultations on the Law on Public Information and Media, adoption of consultations with media associations as well as consultations with the EU's amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media and on electronic media.

4.3.2. REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE MEDIA SPACE AND MEDIA AFFIRMATION OF MARGINALISED YOUTH

The representation of youth from WB economies in the media is still unsatisfactory. The main reasons for this vary from economy to economy, but some of the common issues involve the institutional framework, lack of motivation by the media and often budgeting on many sides. The low participation of young people in WB societies shows that the systems usually do not recognise the value of young people and their potential as a resource for economy development. The result of this continued practice is their poor inclusion, social marginalisation and increasing migration to western economies.

To illustrate, according to available data, media representation of youth in Albania shows that only 28% of youth engage in media producing activities at an annual level²¹³. Additionally, their representation is often negatively influenced by factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status, which can result in discrimination, exclusion, or marginalisation.²¹⁴ In addition to these issues, there is also the issue of public information and data resources on this subject. Most of the identified resources are outdated, and no longer relevant, considering the rapid pace of change affecting the media sphere in Albania. Additionally, most of the data available has

204 OSCE Mission in Kosovo, <https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/545668> , visited on April 28 2024

205 Kosovo Inovating Social Transformation, <https://kec-ks.org/en/programet/kosovo-innovating-social-transformation-kist/?lang=en> , visited on April 28 2024

206 OSCE Mission in Kosovo, <https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/376975> , visited on April 28 2024

207 USAID, <https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/results-data/success-stories/usaid-supports-usage-social-media-benefit-community> , visited on April 28 2024

208 UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/projects/strengthening-information-integrity-kosovo-through-youth-empowerment> , visited on April 28 2024

209 KOHA, <https://www.koha.net/en/arboretum/167902/the-results-of-the-national-competition-for-cultural-creativity-and-critical-thinking-for-six-municipalities-are-published/> , visited on April 28 2024

210 European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2023_en , visited on April 28 2024

211 Government of Serbia, <https://www.kultura.gov.rs/tekst/sr/5745/akcioni-plan-za-sprovodjenje-strategije-razvoja-sistema-javnog-informisanja-u-republici-srbiji-za-period-2020-2025-godina.php> , visited on April 28 2024

212 Government of Serbia, <https://www.kultura.gov.rs/tekst/sr/4993/strategija-razvoja-sistema-javnog-informisanja-u-republici-srbiji-za-period-od-2020-do-2025.php> , visited on April 28 2024

213 Source: (Media for Citizens – Citizens for Media, 2019) (UNICEF , 2021).

214 Source UNICEF (2021). SITUATION ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN ALBANIA

been produced by civic society organisations or independent researchers, while official government reports on the topic are very rarely available. The role of the media in raising awareness towards issues of equal rights and youth representation has been not fully researched²¹⁵.

On a scale of 1 to 5, young people from North Macedonia in the Youth Trends Survey²¹⁶ for 2022 gave a score of 2.6 for the quality of information intended for young people in the media. This trend is also confirmed in the NYS2023-2027 adopted by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, which states that young people do not have enough opportunities to influence media content and participate in its creation. In most of the media space, there are no youth programmes at all, and events organised by young people are getting less and less space in the media. According to the 2017 Public Opinion Survey²¹⁷, 47% of the respondents answered that young people between 15-29 rarely participate in TV programmes.

According to the NYS 2023-2027,²¹⁸ the quality of information offered to young people in North Macedonia varies and is with limited access. Information that may be of interest to young people is not consolidated within a single space that would allow it to be easily accessible. In addition, young people are much less represented in the media than other age groups and are often portrayed as disinterested, passive and apolitical. There is also insufficient participation of young people in the creation of media content, and also in the process of developing quality content for young people.

The NYS2023-2027 does not mention the term 'marginalised youth' at all, which means that the state does not recognise this group as an issue. It is very difficult to find any strategic state documents that refer to young people with sensory or physical disabilities, then for young people from rural areas, for young Roma, for young people who are members of the LGBTI community, etc. For example, the Government's Programme 2022-2024 states that efforts to increase educational reform, including the provision of various types of internships for young people and support in gaining [first] work experience for young ethnic Roma who are unemployed, etc.

In Serbia, the Law on Public Media Services²¹⁹ stipulates the obligation for the media to meet the information needs of different social groups without exclusion and discrimination. Among others, there is an obligation to create programmes for youth, but the research confirms that this type of content is rarely created and analysed, with a significant absence of children's programmes on commercial TV stations (up to 15.6%). The research Youth in the Media Mirror²²⁰ shows that the share of youth programmes on national TV stations was inconsistent²²¹. It is of note that almost half of this content (46%) placed young people in a negative context, following only 16% of media outlets that deal with young people in positive light. Although some efforts have been made

215 Source IDRA. (2017). LOCAL GOVERNANCE MAPPING IN ALBANIA.

216 Radio MOF North Macedonia, <https://www.radiomof.mk/vkluchivanje-na-mladite-vo-procesite-na-odluchivanje-i-kreiranje-politiki-vo-drzhavata/>, visited on April 29 2024

217 Agency for audiovisual services North Macedonia, <https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/%D0%98%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B6%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%98%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%9A%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-17.04.pdf>, visited on April 29 2024

218 Government of North Macedonia, https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/nsm-23-27_draft.pdf, visited on April 29 2024

219 Regulaotry Body for Electronic Media Serbia <https://www.rem.rs/uploads/files/izvestaji%20o%20nadzoru/RTS%20-%20izvestaj%20za%202018.pdf>, visited on April 2024

220 National Youth Asscoiation of Serbia, <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Mladi-u-medijskom-ogledalu-FINAL-1.pdf>, visited on April 29 2024

221 The highest percentage was registered on TV O2 (now B92), with 4.26%, followed by RTS1 (3.93%) and RTS2 (2.5%), then by TV Prva (2.28%) and RTV1 (1.36%). There was not a single minute of youth programming broadcasted on the two remaining commercial stations, TV Pink and TV Happy.

to involve youth in media production by providing them with platforms through which to voice their opinions/needs and to include them in the media, there is definitely more work to be done in this area in Serbia.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, most recent analysis confirmed that children and youth programmes are insufficiently represented in the content of broadcasters. Also, media representatives mostly produce content for young people through reporting on youth topics from local communities through various shows, mainly covering their achievements in school, sports, music, career, other school activities, and youth association events²²². Existing programmes mostly focus on discussions on youth issues. In response to the question concerning which topics, content, and formats are missing in online media, television, and radio, youth respondents point out the lack of discussions with young people and the presentation of their views and opinions, as well as the absence of objective and critical analysis of the situation in the economy. Furthermore, certain young people opine that there is a shortage of educational and entertaining content for children and youth, a need for more investigative journalism, psychological advice, motivational stories, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and cultural content.

Other analysis indicates that programmes targeting or addressing minorities and vulnerable population groups, as well as programmes adapted to people with disabilities, are extremely underrepresented²²³. The situation is particularly poor concerning the quantity and quality of programmes adapted for people with disabilities, constituting only 0.3% of the total broadcasted television programme duration during the analysed period, and a mere 0.008% of the total broadcasted radio programme duration during the same period. Initiatives to improve the representation of youth in the media and the content for them usually come from CSOs funded by foreign donors. Some examples include the Media for All programme, which was financed by the UK Government from 2019 to 2022, including five economies from the WB²²⁴. The programme offered support to media programmes for young people and young journalists and focused on strengthening gender-sensitive reporting. Within the programme, young journalists had an opportunity to gain practical experience by collaborating with the media, increasing the visibility of youth, and amplify their voices in the media.

For Kosovo* specific youth-related data is often missing as is the case of youth representation in the local media. Most of the available research on media representation in this economy are focused on children, gender issues, and ethnic minorities while there are very few projects undertaken for the media and youth²²⁵. Protecting the public and marginalised groups is part of the objectives of the Independent Media Commission of Kosovo*. However, there are no clear mechanisms to fight negative phenomenon in the media like intolerance and hate speech. Proper data on marginalised youth representation and media affirmation are missing, with the exception of ethnicity-based research.

Concerning Montenegro, according to UNICEF²²⁶, most parents and children in Montenegro believe that the Montenegrin media does not have enough interesting and useful content adapted to different ages of children and young people. Most would prefer more media content that includes children and young people, and one in two children in Montenegro expressed willingness to participate in the production of these types of programmes. The Media Regulatory Body and UNICEF launched a campaign

222 Media Center Sarajevo, https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi_za_bolje_medije_dtp_05.pdf , visited on April 29 2024

223 Regulatory Agency for Communication Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://www.rak.ba/bs-Latn-BA/medialiteracy> , visited on April 29 2024

224 British Council Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://www.britishcouncil.ba/programi/obrazovanjie/media-for-all> , visited on April 29 2024

225 Source Independent Media Commission. (2022). RAPORT MONITORIMI.

226 UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/voices-young-people-need-be-heard-regular-basis-media> , visited on April 29 2024

in 2018 called Let's Choose What We Watch²²⁷. The aim of the campaign was to raise the quality of media programmes for young people in Montenegro, to improve the quality of media reporting on child rights issues and to promote ML among parents and children. One of the most positive outcomes of this campaign are the UNICEF Montenegro volunteers – Young Reporters who have been creating different types of content such as blogs, vlogs, videos, ML song, and interviews that highlight positive stories about young people and give a voice to often-ignored perspectives. At the same time, this content serves to educate their peers about ML and critical thinking, helping to build a more informed and engaged youth population²²⁸. They are also producing first TV news for youth in Montenegro according to the internationally known format Wadada News for Kids²²⁹.

4.3.3. YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL POLICIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

The level of youth participation in creating of cultural policies is unsatisfactory in most WB economies. For example, in Albania, while there is a vast pool of information and data related to youth participation in policy-making, none of these focus on cultural policies. The youth is part of the wider groups of stakeholders engaged in policy-making consultation processes, as structured by law, but there is no data to show that youth cultural practitioners have been practically engaged.

Also, as an example, the Cultural Policy Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina²³⁰ was adopted in 2008 and it only mentions 'young artists' and 'young talents' without focusing on youth in general and their inclusion in cultural policies and activities. The EU in its latest report on BiH²³¹ calls for increased budget allocation for culture on all levels of government with longer-term, multi-annual funding decisions to provide stability for cultural creation and operation and for BiH to establish formal partnership structures enabling transparent and organised participation in cultural policy-making. It should be noted that primary responsibility for the issues of culture, sports, and leisure activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina lies with the cantonal or entity ministries, and at the state level, it falls under the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

Yet, there are some positive examples at the lower levels. Canton Sarajevo adopted the Strategy for Development of Culture until 2027²³² in which the mid-term measure is to support projects strengthening the connection of children and young people with cultural institutions. The biggest issue in the economy is the lack of a comprehensive national strategic framework for investment in the development of culture and sports, with the emphasis on youth and vulnerable groups, as well as the absence of a systemic

227 UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/lets-choose-what-we-watch-campaign-launching> , April 29 2024

228 YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTy48Dw5Be4> , visited on April 29 2024

229 UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/montenegro-gets-tv-news-children> , April 29 2024

230 Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, http://www.mcp.gov.ba/attachments/bs_Migrirani_dokumenti/Sektor/Nauka_i_kultura/Nauka_i_kultura-dokumenti/strategija_kulturne_politike_u_bih.pdf , visited on April 29 2024

231 European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_691%20Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20report.pdf , visited on April 29 2024

232 Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, https://mks.ks.gov.ba/sites/mks.ks.gov.ba/files/strateska_platforma_razvoja_kulture_u_ks_-finalno.pdf , visited on April 29 2024

approach. The previously mentioned 2018/2019 Study on Youth²³³ also shows that young people mostly spend their free time in cafes, do not attend cultural events, and do not travel much. This can be connected to the fact that they generally have very low or no income, and are unable to contribute to the household budget. Finally, BiH participates in the Creative Europe 2021-2027 programme of the EU.

For Kosovo* there is no data showing youth participation in drafting cultural policies in both central or local government. The law and the Strategy for Youth emphasise the role and importance of including youth in evidence-based policy-making, while only 10% of Kosovo's* youth feel their interests are well represented in politics²³⁴. Some sporadic initiatives in this field were undertaken including the one by EULEX-Kosovo*.

The development of the culture and innovation sectors face a number of challenges among which the most reported are criteria for granting funds, the strict dependence of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth on small grants, and gender inequalities²³⁵. Also, research and innovation are allocated less than 0.1% of the GDP, according to the EU Progress report on Kosovo* for 2022. The Strategy for Youth 2019-2023 focuses on the importance of these sectors as participation in culture, recognition of cultures of different ethnicities and supporting marginalised youth in this would guarantee integration and European standards. To achieve these aims, it would be important to increase public funding in these sectors, as well as Kosovo's* representation in regional and international networks and initiatives, and to increase the independence of local CSOs from external funding²³⁶.

Every year the Ministry of Culture of Montenegro announces public calls for supporting youth cultural projects²³⁷ implemented by youth organisations. In 2023 they announced a public call for co-financing projects/programmes in the field of culture and art under the name "Youth culture - culture of the future²³⁸" with the main goals of providing quality cultural content for children and young people as the target beneficiaries, as well as providing support for the development of creativity in children and young people and their direct participation in the implementation of project activities. An interesting finding is that the applicants to this call could have been persons who have residence in Montenegro and have the capacity to implement the project independently and/or in cooperation with partners, which is a unique opportunity for young people who do not belong to formal organisations to receive support for their ideas and projects.

In Albania, there has been increased focus on innovation and cultural projects in recent years. As per the EU, Albania is moderately prepared in the fields of culture and youth. This is noticeable in the project application for Tirana Youth Capital 2022, where Youth make Creative Economy and Innovation and Youth create Culture were the two most applied for categories, with 132 and 315 applications respectively, accounting for 45% of all the applications (Tirana EYC 2022, 2022). Moreover, Albanian youth consider creativity and innovation as some of the most important tools to deal with the world's most pressing challenges. Culture is the second most significant factor in increasing Albanian youth pride in being citizens of Albania. Various calls and opportunities are available as well, such as the NYA, Creative Europe 2021-2027 program, Horizon Europe, The WB

233 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/15288.pdf>, visited on April 29 2024

234 Source, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport. (2018). Strategy for Youth 2019-2023.

235 Source WBYL. (2021), Mapping of youth policies and identification of existing support and gaps in financing of youth actions in the Western Balkans.

236 As per (WBYL, 2021) (Balkans Policy Research Group, 2021) (Youth Partnership, 2021).

237 Government of Montenegro, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/javni-konkurs-finansiranje-projekata-programa-nvo>, visited on April 30 2024

238 Government of Montenegro, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/javni-konkurs-za-sufinansiranje-projekata-programa-u-oblasti-kulture-i-umjetnosti-pod-nazivom-kultura-mladih-kultura-buducnosti>, visited on April 30 2024

Youth Cultural fund, Culture and Creativity for the WB (CC4WBs), Erasmus+, Creative Spotlight, Creative Leaders Academy, Swiss Cultural Fund, WB Fund. However, the state remains the main funder of cultural institutions and independent operators²³⁹. In the recent years, specific calls have been opened for young artists in the field of theater, literature, and classical music. Various indicatives and hubs operate, although mostly in the capital, such as the Tirana Art Lab Gallery 70, Harabel, Destil Creative Hub, Boulevard Art Media Institute, Zeta Contemporary, Art Center, Tulla Culture Center, Shkodra Art House, EMBRACE, SPARK/IGNITE, ICTSlab, INNOSPACE TIRANA, COOLAB, etc.

Concerning North Macedonia, the NYS2023-2027 states that the access and participation of young people in culture is of crucial importance, along with their ability for creative thinking and education through art and cultural practices.²⁴⁰ The activities include encouraging the development of creative and educational programmes in culture and art at pre-school age and in primary schools that will encourage interest in culture from an early age and the development of cultural needs among young people, as well as the modernisation of study programmes in the arts at institutions of higher learning for the acquisition of knowledge among youth. Some organisations already promoted their initiative to establish so-called youth hybrid centres²⁴¹, through which abandoned buildings and institutions would be modernised, and in this way innovation, sustainable development and environmental responsibility would be encouraged among young people. Mainly, opportunities to support cultural creativity and innovation come more from foreign donors and international organisations that implement various projects in North Macedonia. Within the municipalities, there are special strategies for young people, in which activities for cultural creativity are integrated.

Finally, for Serbia, in comparison to the previous years, some improvements were noticed in terms of the efforts of the government regarding participation in creation and consumption of cultural content. The government supports the sector by co-financing different projects and programmes. There have been changes in the formal education curriculums and several non-governmental organisations and networks have become recognisable as high quality, non-formal education providers in the field of cultural production industries with content tailored for youth.

4.4. HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REGION

Regional initiatives aimed at fostering cooperation among Western Balkan countries in media, culture, and digital domains have been pivotal in enhancing cross-border collaboration, promoting cultural exchange, and advancing digital innovation. Some prominent initiatives include:

WB Fund (WBF): Established in 2015, the WBF aims to promote cooperation and strengthen relations among the Western Balkan countries through funding various projects, including those in media, culture, and digital sectors. It supports initiatives that foster regional cooperation and integration.

239 Ministry of Culture 2019

240 Government of North Macedonia, https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/nsm-23-27_draft.pdf, visited on April 29 2024

241 Radio MOF North Macedonia, <https://www.radiomof.mk/organizacii-baraat-mladinski-hibridni-centri-vo-napushteni-objekti-eden-od-predlozite-e-i-poshtata/>, visited on April 29 2024

RCC: The RCC plays a significant role in facilitating regional cooperation and integration among Western Balkan countries. Through its various programs and initiatives, it promotes collaboration in media, culture, and digital domains, fostering a conducive environment for regional development.

Creative Europe Programme: Although not exclusive to Western Balkan countries, the Creative Europe Programme, funded by the European Union, provides support for cultural and creative sectors across Europe, including the WB. Through its funding opportunities and networking activities, it encourages collaboration, capacity building, and cultural exchange in the region.

The Digital Agenda for the WB is a strategic framework developed to accelerate the digital transformation of the countries in the WB region. It aims to foster economic growth, increase competitiveness, improve connectivity, and enhance digital skills and infrastructure. The agenda outlines key priorities and actions to harness the potential of digital technologies for the benefit of citizens, businesses, and governments in the region. It includes 6 Western Balkan partners - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

WB Digital Summit: This summit serves as a platform for stakeholders from government, industry, and civil society to discuss digital transformation in the WB. It focuses on topics such as digital infrastructure, e-governance, cybersecurity, and digital innovation, fostering cooperation and knowledge sharing among countries in the region.

BIRN Balkans, or the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting independent journalism, transparency, and accountability in the Balkans region. BIRN operates as a network of local non-profit organizations and investigative journalists across several Balkan countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Founded in 2005, BIRN aims to provide in-depth investigative reporting on issues such as corruption, organized crime, human rights abuses, and other topics of public interest.

Regional Media Days: These events bring together journalists, media professionals, and policymakers from Western Balkan countries to discuss challenges and opportunities in the media sector. They provide a platform for dialogue, exchange of best practices, and joint initiatives to promote media freedom, professionalism, and ethical journalism.

These initiatives contribute to building trust, fostering mutual understanding, and strengthening ties among Western Balkan countries in media, culture, and digital domains, ultimately promoting regional stability, prosperity, and European integration.



4.5. STATE OF PLAY – STRATEGIES, LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK IN THE WB

4.5.1. ALBANIA

Youth issues in Albania are in the focus of many activities including development of youth skills in the digital world, culture, arts, and media. Also, in the period of the past two years focus of the related reforms are education, employment, social inclusion, and participation of youth in society²⁴². These issues are included in the work of various sectors and institutions which revealed another aspect that there is a lack of cross-sectoral coordination among the key stakeholders. Additionally, it is often difficult to find specific data on these topics for Albania.

According to the EU WB²⁴³, there is a need to increase funding and capacity for skills and training, social protection, and healthcare to improve employability and social inclusion. Albania should also step up efforts on connectivity, the green transition and adapting to climate change, while further efforts are needed to nurture competitiveness, and tackle the informal economy and the digital transition²⁴⁴.

National strategic documents in Albania contributing to digital skills development include the National Education Strategy 2021-2026, Multisectoral Strategy on Digital Agenda and Action Plan 2022-2026, the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2019 – 2022, the National Strategy for Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation 2017 – 2022, the NDS II 2015-2020. As is evident, most of these documents require updating for further periods.²⁴⁵

The NYSAP 2022-2029 for Albania focuses on digital development as its key goal. More specifically, Policy Goal 2 referred to in this document, states: "Supporting and encouraging youth innovation and enhancement of youth's skills and professionalism through quality education in ICT and other digital development fields, thus increasing and improving opportunities to enter the labour market."²⁴⁶

Most of the policies regarding youth prioritise general education, employment rates and the migration of young people. On the other hand, the issues of youth and the media mainly include activities concerning freedom of speech and its practice, rather than the media's role in representing youth or specific topics that refer to youth. The situation in the cultural sector is similar, where most attention is on pre-university education programmes concerning culture, but much less is paid to culture and arts, for example. Only a few initiatives of national institutions dedicated to youth and culture were registered in the research. The situation is somewhat similar where digital development is concerned, as most efforts are aimed at technological development and the building of infrastructure. In regards to the improvement of skills in these fields, most initiatives are aimed at ICT skills and school children, while not much emphasis is placed on critical thinking skills and youth initiatives.

242 Publications of the European Union, 2023, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/22b8829d-b786-11eb-8aca-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-233221374>, visited on April 29 2024

243 European Union, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/2023-economic-reform-programmes-albania-bosnia-and-herzegovina-montenegro-north-macedonia-serbia_en

244 Ibid. p 29.

245 ITU (2022). Albania - Digital Development Economy Profile.

246 Minister of State for Youth and Children, 2022

4.5.2. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The decentralised political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina contributes to the complexity of policy making, leading to the lack of a unified youth policy and strategy at the state level. In the latest Progress Report²⁴⁷ on BiH by the EU, it is noted that "Bosnia and Herzegovina should work on an economy-wide youth strategy that would ensure equal treatment of young people". Also, according to EC report, country-level policy formulation is strongly impeded by highly fragmented competences and a lack of co-operation among the country's stakeholders²⁴⁸. In the report it is also emphasised that, difficult business environment and weaknesses in the country's single economic space are key factors driving poor labour market outcomes, holding back improvements in competitiveness and living standards and impeding preparations for the green and digital transitions.

Both entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have envisaged the establishment of Youth Councils and Committees as mechanisms for bringing together young people and decision-makers to collaboratively create better policies for youth and monitor the implementation of existing ones. This opportunity also exists at the local level in Republika Srpska. There are three umbrella youth associations: Youth Council of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Vijeće mladih Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine - VM FBiH), Youth Council of Republika Srpska (Omladinski savjet Republike Srpske - OSRS) Youth Council of Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Vijeće/Savjet mladih Brčko distrikta Bosne i Hercegovine) that are key stakeholders in the implementation of legal frameworks.

The existing policies mainly aim to enhance educational opportunities for young people and improve their access to the labour market. Various programmes include vocational trainings, career counselling, and initiatives with a goal to bridge the gap between education and employment opportunities. Encouraging active involvement of young people in decision-making processes at local and national levels is also a common goal, but there is no comprehensive and effective strategy at the level of the Federation of BiH, unlike the RS and Brčko District where related strategies and policies do exist. There are no strategic documents related to MIL at the national level nor at the lower levels of government. The lack of MIL materials is predominant with some exceptions resulting from civic sector activities²⁴⁹.

Additionally, most of the initiatives to improve the representation of youth in the media and the content for them usually come from CSOs funded by foreign donors. One such example, is the project Youth for Better Media²⁵⁰, implemented by Mediacentar Sarajevo in partnership with the CSO JaBiHEU with financial support from the European Union, which is dedicated to developing an innovative approach to strengthening independent media in Bosnia and Herzegovina and enhancing ML. The biggest issue in regards to media and culture initiatives is the lack of a national strategic framework for investment in the development of culture and sports, with emphasis on youth and vulnerable groups, and in practice there is absence of a systemic approach.

247 European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_691%20Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20report.pdf , visited on April 29 2024

248 European Union, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7973c00e-6b1c-464b-8321-a47b669bc096_en?filename=ip252_en.pdf p. 65 , visited on April 29 2024

249 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15262.pdf> , visited on April 29 2024

250 Youth for Better media, <https://www.mladizaboljemedije.jabiheu.ba/> , visited on April 30 2024

The 2015 Study on Youth²⁵¹ in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung revealed that the majority of their free time is spent engaging in activities directed and based on modern media, with 83.5% of respondents stating that they use digital technologies and the Internet as one of the primary ways to spend their leisure time. The later 2018/2019 Study on Youth²⁵² has confirmed this, as 70.3% of respondents claim to be connected more or less all the time. Furthermore, the research²⁵³ conducted by Mediacentar in 2021 shows that the primary sources of information for youth are online media, specifically news portals and websites (65%). Social networks are the main source of information for just over 28% of respondents. The questionnaire results suggest that respondents spend the most time on Instagram (56%), followed by Facebook (22%) and YouTube (around 11%), while TikTok with 5% and Twitter with 2% are less popular.

The constant use of social media and digital technologies can have serious negative effects on youth which include exposure to harmful content, and increased susceptibility to cybercrime, thus it is crucial to understand the risks, develop critical thinking skills and improve media and information literacy in order to use technology in a healthy and safe way. Unfortunately, there are no strategic documents related to media and information literacy at the national level nor at the lower levels of government. A positive example involving a state body is a joint website of the Regulatory Agency for Communications of BiH and UNESCO called Media and Information Literacy, which is part of the regional UNESCO platform SeeMIL. The website is created to promote and enhance media and information literacy (MIL) among citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it is also active on Facebook so that the youth can access the materials easily.

4.5.3. KOSOVO*

In Kosovo* there is no systemic national data source²⁵⁴ for youth, and consequently most of the data for this research originate mostly from the reports of CSOs and international organisations. Media, culture, and projects concerning youth issues in the digital sphere are not in the focus of the current activities for youth. In the main focus regarding youth are education and employment at a more general level, with no specific programmes registered during this research. It should be noted that ML and culture are becoming more and more part of the recent activities and projects in Kosovo*, being considered closely intertwined with key youth issues at the state level, such as employment and migration²⁵⁵. According to EC WB, Further reforms are needed to improve the quality and relevance of the education system to increase employment and reduce skills mismatches. Persistent, widespread informality and a weak business environment remain a key structural challenge for Kosovo's economy²⁵⁶.

251 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/11436.pdf> , visited on April 30 2024

252 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/15288.pdf> , visited on April 30 2024

253 Mediacentar BiH, <https://media.ba/bs/publication/stavovi-navike-i-potrebe-mladih-za-medijskim-sadrzajima-u-bih> , visited on April 30 2024

254 Source, Youth Partnership. (2021). CONTRIBUTION OF PARTNER ECONOMIES - YOUTH POLICY GOVERNANCE. EU, EC.

255 Source <https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/545668>

256 European Union, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7973c00e-6b1c-464b-8321-a47b669bc096_en?filename=ip252_en.pdf pp. 299-300, visited on April 30 2024

Kosovo* is evaluated to have some preparation in the area of digital transformation and media,²⁵⁷ but ML is still lacking. Kosovo* is ranked in Cluster 5, with 23 out of 100 points in the ML Index 2022.²⁵⁸ Media representatives believe the reason for this are constantly changing life trends, lack of formal education concerning this matter, and a lack of educational content on media.

One of the existing approaches to MIL in Kosovo* is to use it as a tool contributing to multicultural dialogue and connections among youth.²⁵⁹ In regards to youth participation in media and culture activities, the wider approach so far is to increase participation of youth in creating policies and culture as part of the wider process of the Europeanisation and democratisation of Kosovo*, and in helping young people and citizens to be heard by politicians, the business sector and other key stakeholders²⁶⁰. Innovation policy in Kosovo* is in its initial stages, although the economy's performance in European Union Framework Programmes in this area has improved, while the cultural sector is considered to be in the early stages of preparation.²⁶¹

Currently, work on youth issues in Kosovo* is regulated under the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth, while a draft Law on Youth²⁶² was published in August 2023. The new draft law includes several changes to the current system. First, it establishes the State Commission on Youth as the highest inter-institutional coordinating mechanism on the implementation of sectoral and inter-sectoral youth policies. Second, it introduces the Youth Development Agency as an executive agency of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, that is still in charge of drafting legislation and providing space for activities. The Central Youth Council, the Local Youth Councils, and the Youth Centres remain the same for the most part. The new draft law also refers to a State Youth Strategy as a mid-term goal definer and measurement fulfilment mechanism.

The current law defines the core responsibilities of central and local government institutions relative to strengthening the youth sector and supporting participation of youth in decision-making. Kosovo* has also developed a NYSAP 2019-2023, through a broad consultation process. The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports and its Department of Youth are responsible for youth policy and implementation. As per the current law, there are several governmental institutions at both central and local levels working on youth issues: the Central Youth Action Council – a volunteer organisation on youth organisations serving as an advisory structure at the central level; the Local Youth Action Council and Youth Centres – representing youth interest and organisations in the municipalities, which are obligated by law to have such structures, although funding often is a challenge. However, the lack of a separate institution focused on youth issues often creates many challenges.

The State Commission on Youth was established in August 2021 as a key mechanism of the government for cooperation, support and decision-making towards youth.²⁶³ It is important to note that intersectoral legislation regarding youth issues is in need of improvement. Although the legal framework and structures regarding youth are well

257 EU report for Kosovo, 2022 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2022_en

258 https://osis.bg/?page_id=849&lang=en, visited on April 30 2024

259 Soeth Eastern European Network for Profesionalization of Media, https://www.seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/KOSV1_Final_Background-paper_Kosovo.pdf, visited on April 30 2024

260 European Western Balkans, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/02/21/youth-participation-and-culture-are-important-for-the-europeanisation-and-democratization-of-kosovo/>, visited on April 30 2024

261 EU report for Kosovo, 2022 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2022_en, visited on April 30 2024

262 <https://konsultimet.rks-gov.net/viewConsult.php?ConsultationID=41972>

263 Youth Partnership. (2021). CONTRIBUTION OF PARTNER ECONOMIES - YOUTH POLICY GOVERNANCE. EU, EC.

designed, the cross-sectorial approach needs improvements. The cultural sector in Kosovo* falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, and is regulated by the Law on Cultural Institutions²⁶⁴. Despite the Ministry covering both culture and youth, there is no legislative intersection.

4.5.4. MONTENEGRO

The representation and participation of young people in the media, culture and digital spheres in Montenegro are recognised as a crucial factor in the development of an inclusive and innovative society, as confirmed by all main stakeholders in Montenegro through the numerous research and reports used in this analysis. The current activities are considered to be well coordinated with the EU Youth Strategy²⁶⁵ by many sources.

The EC WB for 2023 notes that Strengthening the long-term sustainability of public finances requires improvements in fiscal governance and in the management of public investments²⁶⁶. Digitalisation process in Montenegro continued, but at a slower pace, hampered by political developments and a series of cyberattacks dating back to the second half of 2022.

It could be noted that the Programme of Economic Reforms of Montenegro 2023-2025 in its reform measure the *digitisation of education and development of digital skills*, recognises the importance of increasing the information and ML of young people, which is also in line with the measures and activities planned in the new Youth Strategy²⁶⁷. Additionally, research and assessment of local policies related to youth and youth needs in 15 local governments from 2021²⁶⁸, show that youth recognise the dominance of political topics in the media and public discourse and the marginalised position of youth in media and cultural spheres. According to UNICEF Montenegro, most parents and young people in the economy believe that the Montenegrin media lacks content adapted to different ages of children and young people.²⁶⁹

According to the Digital Agenda Observatory²⁷⁰ - Baseline research of the state of e-government development & digital literacy in the targeted Western Balkan countries 2020 - 99.6% of young people in Montenegro aged 16 to 24, and 96.3% of young people aged 25 to 34, use the Internet. The analysis on the position of youth by UNICEF Montenegro from 2023 shows that the young people primarily use social networks (93.9%) and the Internet (90,3%) to stay informed. This means that the young people in Monte-

264 Government of Kosovo, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2443>, visited on April 30 2024

265 Council of Europe, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/national-situations/-/asset_publisher/yTXkP9XUfXHe/content/montenegro, visited on April 30 2024

266 European Union, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7973c00e-6b1c-464b-8321-a47b669bc096_en?filename=ip252_en.pdf p. 109., visited on April 30 2024

267 Government of Montenegro, <https://wapi.gov.me/download/da1d441a-47a6-4245-a156-c94602f21ab6?version=1.0>, visited on April 30 2024

268 UNDP, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-06/Istra%C5%BEivanje%20i%20procjena%20omladinskih%20politika%20i%20potreba%20mladih%20u%2015%20LSU_0_1.pdf, visited on April 30 2024

269 UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/voices-young-people-need-be-heard-regular-basis-media>, visited on April 30 2024

270 Digital Agenda Observatory, https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/izdanija_arhiva/digital-agenda%E2%80%AFobservatory%E2%80%AF-baseline-research-of-the-state-of-e-government-development-digital-literacy-in-the-targeted-western-balkan-countries-2020/, visited on April 30 2024

negro are particularly at risk of being exposed to harmful or misleading content online, given their heavy use of social media and other digital platforms. For this reason, the aforementioned Youth Strategy recognizes the importance of improving the media and information literacy in the Operational goal 1, namely the measure 1.4. Implementation of this measure involves youth capacity building activities to enhance their media and information literacy skills, as well as organizing periodic public calls for initiatives/projects that promote media literacy among youth, fostering collaboration with non-governmental organizations.

Montenegro seems to be a trailblazer in the Western Balkans when it comes to media literacy, and the most prominent example is its introduction of media literacy as an elective subject in gymnasiums (high schools) back in 2009. For the school year 2023/2024, it has been made available to students in the upper grades of elementary schools (specifically, in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades).

Another novelty is the first ever Media Strategy 2023-2027²⁷¹ adopted in October 2023 with the AP for the period 2023-2024. The issues identified in the Media Strategy regarding the previously mentioned media literacy subjects at high schools are the limited coverage of this subject, insufficient promotion within schools, a lack of continuous teacher training, and the fact that this type of knowledge is currently only offered to high school students in gymnasiums schools.

It is important to note that the Program of Economic Reforms of Montenegro 2023-2025²⁷² in its reform measure 4: *Digitization of education and development of digital skills*, recognizes the importance of increasing the information literacy of young people, which is also in line with the measures and activities planned in the new Youth Strategy.

In the Montenegro Report 2023²⁷³ by the European Commission it was noted that Montenegro has a pluralistic and diverse media landscape, however, it remains highly politically polarized and media outlets remain highly vulnerable to internal and external influence from corporate and political interests. Research and assessment²⁷⁴ of local policies related to youth and youth needs in 15 local governments from 2021, financed by the EU and co-financed by UNDP and local governments within the ReLOaD2 program, shows that the youth recognize the dominance of political topics in the media and public discourse highlighted by prominent figures. On the other hand, there is a lack of educational content and those based on topics of significance for all generations.

UNICEF Montenegro notes that most parents and children in Montenegro believe that the Montenegrin media does not have enough interesting and useful content adapted to different ages of children and young people. In addition, most of them want media content that includes children and young people of different ages, and one in two children in Montenegro wants to participate in the production of such media programmes.

Every year, the Ministry of Culture and Media announces public calls for supporting youth cultural projects implemented by youth organizations. In 2023 they announced a public call for co-financing projects/programs in the field of culture and art under the name "Youth culture - culture of the future" with the main goals of providing quality cultural content for children and young people as the target beneficiaries, as well as providing support for the development of creativity in children and young people and

271 Government of Montenegro, <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/b7e6dde8-74a2-4ce7-b58c-376a85ed0416> , visited on 30 April 2024

272 Government of Montenegro, <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/e19b682f-19f3-4788-99f5-ca5ad1df3e4a> , visited on April 30 2024

273 European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_694%20Montenegro%20report.pdf , visited on April 30 2024

274 UNDP, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-06/Istraživanje%20i%20procjena%20omladinskih%20politika%20i%20potreba%20mladih%20u%2015%20LSU_0_1.pdf , visited on April 30 2024

their direct participation in the implementation of project activities. Interesting thing is that the applicants to this call could have been natural persons who have a residence in Montenegro and have the capacity to implement the project independently and/or in cooperation with partners, which is a unique opportunity for young people who do not belong to formal organizations to receive support for their ideas and projects.

However, the previously mentioned research and assessment of local policies related to youth and youth needs in 15 local governments shows that in the majority of municipalities, young people have expressed dissatisfaction with the cultural and sports programs, as well as the necessary infrastructure for carrying out these activities (lack of sports halls, cinemas, cultural halls, theaters, etc.). This problem is particularly pronounced in smaller municipalities which highly affects the cultural offerings for young people.

Another thing that the research showed is that 43.7% of the surveyed young individuals never attend cultural events such as museums, galleries, and theaters. A third of them go to concerts and performances only a few times a year or less. A quarter of them never engage in physical activity, and almost half (47.6%) never attend sports events, while 37.5% have no hobbies. Additionally, over 80% do not visit local youth clubs or participate in activities organized by local non-governmental organizations.

4.5.5. NORTH MACEDONIA

The EU Report for North Macedonia 2023²⁷⁵ noted that in 2022 the government adopted a new implementation plan to strengthen the Youth Guarantee²⁷⁶ which has been in place since 2018 contributing to a significant reduction in youth unemployment from 45.4% in 2018 to 32.5% in 2022. A new plan for implementing the 2023-2026 Youth Guarantee, which is designed to improve the situation of youth in the fields of media, culture and digitalisation as well, was adopted in March 2023. According to the mentioned report, so far, the reinforced Youth Guarantee Scheme has not been sufficiently monitored, evaluated or assessed, and requires further improvements, including the areas of youth media representation, support for marginalised youth groups and culturally related projects. EC also notes that, the education system does not adequately equip young people with the key competences – skills and knowledge – that they need to actively participate in the labour market. North Macedonia has made good progress in terms of raising the number of people with higher education, but an inadequate quality of education and business structures is contributing to the persistently high level of unemployment and a still significant share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). The education strategy and related action plan prioritise equipping young people with high-quality skills to prepare them for the labour market, but state financial support is insufficient and intersectoral coordination still needs further improvement²⁷⁷.

275 European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2023_en, visited on April 30 2024

276 The reinforced Youth Guarantee is a commitment by all Member States to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship and traineeship <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en>, visited on April 30 2024

277 European Union, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7973c00e-6b1c-464b-8321-a47b669bc096_en?filename=ip252_en.pdf p. 150., visited on April 30 2024

According to the NYS2023-2027²⁷⁸, the quality of information offered to young people varies and is of limited access. Information that may be of interest to young people is not consolidated within a single space that would allow them to be easily accessible. In addition, young people are much less represented in the media than other age groups and are often portrayed as disinterested, passive and apolitical. The inadequate representation of young people in the media is largely the result of the insufficient participation of young people in the creation of media content, and thus the development of quality content for young people.

Young people in North Macedonia are generally aware of the issues on digital communication platforms; however, they easily succumb to disinformation through social media and internet news-sites which have become their main source of information. This is the conclusion from the results obtained from the research "Critical thinking and the habits of informing among young people" carried out within the project Critical Opinions of Citizens with Media Skills - Kritink²⁷⁹. Also, the study "Vulnerability to Misinformation Among Different Groups of Citizens in North Macedonia", compiled by the Institute for Communication Studies from 2023, states that 69.4% of students declared they have not undergone media or digital literacy training.

In addition to its student exchange programme, the National Agency for Erasmus also supported over 100 activities and events for young people in 2022. The number of participants in funded youth projects in 2022 was 465 (compared to 294 in 2020) contributing to the improved inclusion of youth in the media, culture and digital spheres.

4.5.6. SERBIA

The main strategical processes in Serbia are being developed and aligned with the broader principles of the EU Youth Strategy, emphasising the importance of youth empowerment, inclusivity, education, and wellbeing. In this context, so far, two action plans were implemented, the Action Plan for the Implementation of the NYS 2015–2017²⁸⁰ and the Action Plan for the Implementation of the NYS 2018–2020²⁸¹.

According to the Report on the Implementation of the NYS 2015-2020,²⁸² key aims were to build a more focused system for monitoring its implementation, and to encourage collaboration among all relevant stakeholders and cooperation and partnerships with international partners to improve the inclusion of youth in processes of their wider concern and interests. One of the key areas within these activities is creating incentive policies for young people, especially in terms of building and strengthening institutional capacities for monitoring and improving the quality of life which can, for example, reduce

278 United Nations, <https://northmacedonia.un.org/en/213030-new-national-youth-strategy-2023-2027-underway> , visited on April 30 2024

279 Source <https://meta.mk/mladite-lesno-podlegnuvat-na-dezinformacii-preku-soczi%D1%98alnite-mediumi-i-internet-portalite/>

280 Government of Serbia, <https://mto.gov.rs/extfile/sr/1548/Action%20plan%20for%20the%20implementation%20of%20the%20National%20Youth%20Strategy%202015-2017.pdf> , visited on April 20 2024

281 Government of Serbia, <https://mto.gov.rs/extfile/sr/1542/Action%20plan%20for%20the%20implementation%20of%20the%20National%20Youth%20Strategy%202018-2020.pdf> , visited on April 20 2024

282 European Commission, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/serbia/13-national-youth-strategy> visited on April 20 2024

youth migration volumes. In comparison to the previous years, certain improvements were noticed concerning the efforts of the Government of Serbia regarding youth participation in media and cultural events. The government supports the sector through the co-financing of different projects and programmes. There have been changes in formal education curricula and several non-governmental organisations and networks have become recognisable as high quality non-formal education providers in cultural industries with content tailored to youth.

According to the EU report, the share of young people that are NEET remains high. The introduction of the Youth Guarantee aims to address these challenges but the preparatory work for the introduction of the measure is not yet finalised, and the YGIP is pending for adoption. Workers across the in all areas of employment are continuing to emigrate and the impact of the circular migration initiative cannot yet be quantified²⁸³.

In 2020, the Government of Serbia adopted the Culture Development Strategy from 2020 to 2029 with an Action Plan²⁸⁴. The strategy systematically regulates public interest in culture and determines strategic priorities for its development in the stated ten-year period. Children and young people are recognised as the most important segment in the development of cultural needs, as not only are they visitors to events, they are also future audiences and creators in culture. Furthermore, the Serbian NYS2023–2030 proposes support for the development of aesthetic competences and the creativity of young people as one of the measures that should contribute to the strategic goal of young people having equal opportunities and incentives to develop their potential and competences. There have been changes in the formal education curriculums and several non governmental organisations and networks have become recognisable as high quality, non-formal education providers in cultural production industries with content tailored to youth.

Digital Agenda Observatory - Baseline research of the state of e-government development & digital literacy in the targeted Western Balkan countries 2020 shows that 97,4% aged 16-24, and 96,3% of young people aged 25 to 34, use the Internet.²⁸⁵ The EU online survey research results regarding Internet and Digital Technology Use among Children and Youth in Serbia was conduct by UNICEF²⁸⁶ with the aim to collect data on the use of the Internet and digital technology by young people. Based on the results of the research, young people mostly use social media channels (92%) and they rate their digital literacy skills above average. Moreover, 86% is the score for operational skills (privacy settings, settings, saving options, notifications, etc). Slightly lower number of young people (80%) has obtained mobile usage skills (installing apps and similar) as well as information and navigation skills (77%). The lowest score although still high is for creative skills related to digital content (editing/posting/creating content). This means that most of the young people are the risk of experiencing disturbing online experience.

The Digital Skills Development Strategy²⁸⁷ in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020 to 2024 was initially adopted without an Action Plan which is important for the achievement of the results. Although, it was stated that the AP will be adopted in 90 days after the Strat-

283 European Union, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7973c00e-6b1c-464b-8321-a47b669bc096_en?filename=ip252_en.pdf p. 202. , visited on April 20 2024

284 European Union, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/serbia/83-national-strategy-on-creativity-and-culture-for-young-people> , april 20 2024

285 Digital Agenda Observatory, https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/izdanija_arhiva/digital-agenda%E2%80%AFobservatory%E2%80%AF-baseline-research-of-the-state-of-e-government-development-digital-literacy-in-the-targeted-western-balkan-countries-2020/ , visited on April 20 2024

286 UNICEF, https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/12526/file/Internet_and_Digital_Technology_Use_among_Children_and_Youth.pdf , visited on April 20 2024

287 Government of Serbia, <https://pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2020/21/2/reg> , visited on April 20 2024

egy, it was not the case and the AP was adopted in February 2023. The goals of the Strategy include the improvement of digital competences in the education system, as well as of basic and advanced digital skills for all citizens. Third goal in development of digital skills in relation to the needs of the labour market as well as lifelong teaching of ICT experts.

It is of note that the Strategy should be used to improve the digital knowledge and skills of citizens, including members of vulnerable social groups, but there is no evidence that persons with disabilities were involved in the work of Strategy. In that regard, CSOs should monitor the implementation of the Strategy and AP to ensure that needs of persons with disabilities are met adequately and timely.

Based on the latest Serbia Report²⁸⁸ from European Commission, although Serbia continues with the implementation of the Action Plan of the Media Strategy, there is more to be done as the legislative process is not fully finalised in line with the EU Acquis and standards.

In the Law on Public Media Services,²⁸⁹ Article 7 stipulates the obligation for the media in Serbia to meet the information needs of everyone without discrimination. Among others, there is an obligation to create programs for youth. The research²⁹⁰ „Youth in the Media Mirror“ shows that the share of the youth program was the largest on TV O2 (now B92), where it was 4.26%. That was followed by RTS1 (3.93%) and RTS2 (2.5%), and then by TV Prva (2.28%) and RTV1 (1.36%). Not a minute of youth program was broadcasted on the two remaining commercial stations, TV Pink and TV Happy. The same research shows the double number of media outlets about young people compared to 2007. It is of note that almost half of this content (46%) put young people in a negative context, following only 16% of the media outlets about young people in positive light.

In February 2020, the Government of Serbia adopted the Culture Development Strategy from 2020 to 2029²⁹¹ with an Action Plan. The Strategy systematically regulates public interest in the field of culture and determines strategic priorities for its development in the stated ten-year period. Children and young people are recognized as the most important segment in the development of cultural needs, because they are not only visitors to events, but also future audiences and creators in culture. The Strategy implies it is very important to involve young people in creating cultural content. Additionally, in February 2020, the Government adopted the Smart Specialization Strategy 2020–2027²⁹². This Strategy is an important instrument for improving the innovation and research ecosystem in Serbia, as well as for the development of a knowledge and innovation economy. Creative industry is recognized as one of the priority areas in this document, with proposed measures to develop policies promoting growth of the creative sector.

Previously mentioned National Youth Strategy 2023–2030 proposes support for the development of aesthetic competences and creativity of young people as one of the measures that should contribute to the strategic goal of young people having equal opportunities and incentives to develop their potential and competences.

288 European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2023_en , visited on April 20 2024

289 Government of Serbia, <https://www.rem.rs/uploads/files/izvestaji%20o%20nadzoru/RTS%20-%20izvestaj%20za%202018.pdf> , visited on April 20 2024

290 National Youth Association of Serbia, <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Mladi-u-medijskom-ogledalu-FINAL-1.pdf> , visited on April 20 2024

291 Government of Serbia, <https://kultura.gov.rs/extfile/sr/3993/strategija-razvoja-kulture-od-2020--do-2029-godine.pdf> , visited on April 20 2024

292 Government of Serbia, <https://pametnaspecijalizacija.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Smart-Specialization-Strategy-of-the-RS-for-the-period-2020-to-2027.pdf> , visited on April 20 2024

4.6. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This research indicates that, in most Western Balkan economies, there is a pressing need for **more in-depth research** on the relationship between youth and the media, culture, and the digital world. Such research would help generate concrete data and inform key priorities and strategies for the future. **Current materials predominantly stem from reports and projects that address these issues only partially or within broader contexts** such as youth employment, education, media freedom, etc.

A common challenge across WB economies is **the necessity for more efficient cooperation and communication among relevant stakeholders** in the mentioned fields. Improved coordination is essential, alongside better systems for including youth in the formulation of policies concerning media, culture, and the digital space. Experts emphasize that youth inclusion in participatory policy-making processes is still inadequate and often falls short of EU standards. Despite having solid legal frameworks aligned with EU strategies, many economies struggle with the full implementation of these policies. **Enhanced monitoring and evaluation systems for national youth strategies are crucial**, as are adequate funding mechanisms for planned activities, in collaboration with international organizations and donors.

In countries like Albania, the legal framework should be more attuned to pre-faculty youth, given that current focus tends to be on those over 20. Bosnia and Herzegovina urgently needs comprehensive research to understand the needs and position of youth within the economy, which will facilitate the development and implementation of a National Youth Strategy (NYS) aligned with the EU Youth Strategy. Additionally, diversifying funding sources beyond state budgets is essential, as local initiatives can sometimes be undermined by social and political factors, including corruption.

For all WB economies, as outlined in the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, it is vital to develop training and educational activities for parents, teachers, and caregivers, as well as for youth themselves. A lack of skills among those involved in institutional and civic sectors regarding project application and implementation has been identified, necessitating further initiatives and training.

MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

MIL should be further supported and integrated into educational systems. Most current MIL activities for young people are offered through informal education by civil society organizations. While Montenegro and, to some extent, North Macedonia have made progress, **more educational programs and MIL training are needed in schools to help youth critically analyze media content** and develop protective skills. Integrating MIL and critical thinking into academic curricula at all levels, along with creating educational tools and materials in line with the EU Youth Strategy, is essential. WB states must **prioritize digital safety and ethical considerations in policies** concerning the digital space, fostering a positive online environment for youth.

Furthermore, **establishing a long-term funding scheme for MIL initiatives** and appointing a body to oversee program implementation are necessary. Addressing **the protection of youth on social media platforms** is critical, alongside improving education on

harmful content and its negative consequences. More localized research is also needed to understand the **media consumption habits and preferences of young people** in WB, allowing for tailored media programming and MIL strategies. The findings underscore the importance of developing national media strategies with specific objectives aimed at increasing youth representation, particularly among marginalized groups.

Additionally, **fostering media entrepreneurship among youth** by providing funding and mentorship for those interested in creating their own media platforms is crucial, as well as supporting media organizations that collaborate with youth-focused entities.

CULTURE

WB economies should **enhance youth participation in the development of cultural policies** to promote democratization and peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups. **Upgrading national cultural strategies** is another vital step. These strategies should present a clear vision, measurable goals, support for the arts and cultural industries, promotion of diversity and inclusion among youth, investment in cultural education, and engagement with international partners, coupled with improved monitoring and evaluation tools.

National cultural strategies and national youth strategies should be harmonized. Laws concerning culture should be also harmonized with ratified European and international conventions and standards.

The creation of a **long-term funding scheme for activities that promote cultural initiatives is essential**, as many projects currently depend on external financial support. Establishing responsible bodies or agencies to monitor the implementation of youth programs will help ensure sustainability and facilitate long-term planning. Increased budget allocations for cultural and youth organizations are also necessary to enhance their financial stability and support their activities effectively.



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