

# Policy Paper



## From Aspirations to Action: Youth Inclusion in the EU Integration Process of the Western Balkans



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Youth Inclusion in the EU Integration  
Process of the Western Balkans**

Policy paper

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) enlargement process in the Western Balkans is a significant endeavor towards regional stability, prosperity, and peace in the region. The involvement of youth in the EU integration process of the Western Balkans has been recognized as important by both the European Union and the governments of the countries in the region. Youth engagement is seen as a means to foster regional cooperation, promote democratic values, and build a more prosperous and stable future for the region.

In fact, Western Balkan countries have made progress in terms of further establishing and consolidating the youth policy framework, by adopting relevant laws, strategies, and action plans. However, a fully functional youth system that ensures effective and comprehensive youth empowerment, engagement and participation in decision making has yet to be fully developed.

This paper embarks on an exploration of the role that youth currently play in the EU integration process in the Western Balkans. Reflecting the perspectives of the Connecting Youth Partners views, with each partner shedding light on the challenges the youth sector in their countries face, the opportunities they embrace, and the initiatives they champion, this paper seeks to underline the critical significance of empowering and involving youth as active participants in shaping the region's role within the European framework. As the generation that bridges the gap between the scars of the past and the possibilities of the future, youth need to be empowered to foster a sense of belonging, ownership, and responsibility in their communities.

In the subsequent sections of this paper, Connecting Youth partners reflect on the EU integration process in the Western Balkans and on their role as catalysts for change in various domains. This paper also acknowledges the obstacles that young individuals encounter on their journey towards meaningful engagement in the EU integration process. High levels of unemployment, brain drain, political disillusionment, and inadequate representation hinder their potential impact. Connecting Youth partners also bring in their contribution with concrete recommendations on how to accelerate the integration process.

In conclusion, the empowerment and active involvement of youth in the EU integration process in the Western Balkans are not merely desirable but imperative for the region's sustained progress. By understanding and harnessing the role of youth, policymakers, civil society organizations, and stakeholders can collectively work towards a more inclusive, dynamic, and successful integration journey.

## II. EU INTEGRATION PROCESS SEEN BY YOUTH LENSES

### ALBANIA

In 2006, Albania signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU, which established a comprehensive legal framework for cooperation, trade, and political dialogue between Albania and the EU.

In June 2014, the European Council granted Albania the status of a candidate country and the opening of accession negotiations was officialized in March 2020. The accession negotiations process is ongoing, with Albania working to fulfil the required criteria and meet the necessary benchmarks set by the EU.

However, Albania's journey has not been easy, but full of challenges that are still current. Overall, the greatest need for young people in Albania lies in improving the quality and relevance of education, addressing youth unemployment, promoting social inclusion, and enhancing youth participation in decision-making. Efforts have been made in these areas, including educational reforms, vocational training programs, labor market reforms, and initiatives to promote social inclusion. However, further investments, policy reforms, and collaboration with the EU and international partners are necessary to fully address these challenges and create opportunities for young people in the context of the Enlargement Process.

### BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) was ratified and entered into force on June 1, 2015, and one year later, Bosnia and Herzegovina applied for EU membership. In December 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Coordination of the European integration process aims at ensuring the highest level of approximation and coherence of institutions at all levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina to fulfill contractual obligations under the SAA, as well as any other obligations stemming from the European integration process.

However, the political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a significant challenge, characterized by political divisions within the constituent ethnic groups, ineffective management structure, the need for constitutional reform, a high unemployment rate, lack of economic growth, a high degree of corruption, and issues with judicial institutions independence. Harmonizing EU standards is necessary to create the primary conditions for accession.

## KOSOVO

The Republic of Kosovo embarked on its journey toward European integration in 2016 with the establishment of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union (EU). This agreement marked a pivotal milestone, fostering closer political and economic cooperation between Kosovo and the EU. Significant progress has been made in reinforcing the rule of law, bolstering public administration, and achieving commendable economic growth.

Kosovo holds the status of a potential candidate member of the European Union starting from December 2022. Kosovo's endeavors to normalize relations with neighboring Serbia have garnered favorable responses from the EU, underscoring its dedication to fostering regional stability and cooperation. These developments signal a promising path toward deeper integration within the EU framework.

## MONTENEGRO

Since its independence in May 2006, Montenegro has made remarkable strides toward joining the European Union. The SAA between Montenegro and the European Union entered into force in May 2010, while Montenegro received the official status of a candidate country in December of the same year.

Montenegro has initiated comprehensive reforms to enhance governance, strengthen the rule of law, improve human rights, and promote economic development. In June 2020, Montenegro successfully opened all the negotiation chapters. Montenegro has been proactive in embracing initiatives from the European Union, including the Dialogue with Youth project, which seeks to enhance youth participation, address their needs, and shape policies that reflect their interests and aspirations.

Since gaining candidate status and adopting the negotiating framework for accession to the EU, Montenegro has initiated a series of comprehensive reforms that aim to enhance governance, strengthen the rule of law, improve human rights, and promote economic development. In its journey towards EU accession, Montenegro reached a significant milestone by June 2020 when it successfully opened all the negotiation chapters.

Montenegro has been proactive in embracing initiatives from the European Union, including the implementation of the Dialogue with Youth project. Launched in 2022, this pilot project was a collaborative effort between the EU Delegation in Montenegro, the

Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the Youth Network of Montenegro, and various non-governmental organizations focused on young people. Inspired by European practices, this dialogue was introduced to align Montenegro's youth policy with the EU's harmonization efforts. By engaging various stakeholders in this dialogue, Montenegro aims to enhance youth participation, address their needs, and shape policies that reflect their interests and aspirations. This collaborative approach emphasizes the significance of youth voices and seeks to empower young individuals as active contributors to Montenegro's development and integration with the European Union.

## **NORTH MACEDONIA**

With aspirations to join the European Union, North Macedonia initiated its European integration process with the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2001. Afterwards it applied for EU membership in March 2004 and the Council decided in December 2005 to grant the country candidate status. Since then, the country has undertaken a series of reforms, institutional changes, and policy adjustments to align itself with the EU *Acquis Communautaire*.

In December 2009, Greece vetoed the start of Macedonia's EU membership negotiations as a result of the almost three decades of name dispute, which eventually was resolved and on June 2018 the country was renamed Republic of North Macedonia. After blocking for two years the official start of North Macedonia's EU Accession Negotiations over what Bulgaria perceived as slow progress on the implementation of the 2017 Friendship Treaty between the two countries, in 2022, Bulgaria's parliament approved lifting the country's veto on opening EU accession talks with North Macedonia and the start of the screening process was officially launched in July 2022.

However, to make further progress, the negotiations are conditional on the change of North Macedonia's constitution. Besides that, more must be done in order to accelerate the EU integration process, the electoral legislation should be comprehensively reviewed to address existing inconsistencies, particular focus is needed on ensuring the effective implementation of existing legislation, rather than launching ad hoc initiatives. Efforts are needed to improve transparency in policymaking and to include youth and civil society during the consultation processes.



## SERBIA

Serbia began its path toward membership in the European Union in 2000 but was granted EU candidate status in 2012. The SAA between the EU and Serbia was signed in September 2013. The journey towards European integration has witnessed significant developments in recent areas such as governance, rule of law, and economic restructuring. To date, Serbia has initiated discussions on 22 accession negotiation chapters and provisionally closed two.

In the context of the enlargement process, young people in Serbia face both challenges and opportunities. Currently, youth inclusion in the enlargement process of Serbia remains a pressing issue. The limited participation of young individuals in decision-making processes and policy formulation hinders the overall effectiveness and legitimacy of the European integration process. Statistical data and reliable sources reveal the existing gap in youth representation and their limited engagement in shaping policies that directly affect their lives. According to the [Alternative report on the needs and position of young people in Serbia](#)<sup>1</sup>, done by the National Youth Council, only 1.7% of young respondents believe that the political system fully enables the influence of young people on political processes and decisions, while the percentage of answers that it does not enable it at all is as much as 38.5%. Key data indicate a lack of opportunities for youth participation, limited access to information, and insufficient collaboration between institutions and youth organizations.

Furthermore, these findings underscore the need to establish a bottom-up perspective that acknowledges the local context and empowers young individuals to contribute to policy discussions effectively. It is noticeable that young people are increasingly interested in getting involved in their communities and want to participate in decision-making processes.

## II. TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS BEEN INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS SO FAR?

### ALBANIA

In Albania, the EU integration process has received significant support, particularly from its youth population. According to recent data from the Balkan Public Barometer 2, Albania boasts the highest number of supporters, with 92% favoring EU integration, representing a 3-point increase from 2022.

<sup>1</sup> <https://koms.rs/2022/08/12/international-youth-day-2022-alternative-report-on-the-position-and-needs-of-young-people-in-the-republic-of-serbia-for-2022-is-published/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>

In 2019, Albania passed the Youth Law (No. 75/2019) with the aim of safeguarding young people's rights comprehensively. It strives to create conditions conducive to youth activism, participation, and support, delineate the roles and responsibilities of both central and local institutions, and foster collaboration with organizations engaged in youth-related activities.

Furthermore, in 2021, the newly established government introduced the Minister of State for Youth and Children within the Prime Minister's Cabinet. The Minister's primary task was to draft the National Youth Strategy 2022-2029, which, although slated for implementation in 2022, was ratified by the Albanian Parliament only in December 2022.

While these major initiatives seek to enhance regulation, establish frameworks, and secure adequate funding for youth-related matters, the actual implementation and monitoring of these efforts remain at a low level. Consequently, the limited engagement of young people in participatory processes is directly linked to the absence of an enabling environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) and a lack of trust in the institutions responsible for enacting laws and strategies. In the context of Albania's enlargement and integration process into the EU, youth CSOs play a crucial role as advocates and policy influencers, simultaneously engaging in educational efforts to raise awareness among young individuals, whether they are directly or indirectly involved in the process.

Over the past five years, youth organizations have demonstrated a heightened interest in being included in or initiating processes that impact Albania's integration into the EU. A noteworthy example of this is the collaboration between the [National Youth Congress of Albania](#), comprising 140 member entities across the country, and Tirana Municipality. In 2019, they jointly campaigned for the title of [European Youth Capital 2022](#), which was awarded and initiated in 2022. This endeavour led to extensive youth sector involvement and reinvigoration. In the last 5 years, the youth organizations have shown a greater interest and push towards being included and/or initiating processes that influence the integration process of Albania.

In November 2022, the National Youth Congress of Albania joined the [European Youth Forum](#), the largest youth policy platform in the EU. This membership provides 140 youth organizations with a more influential voice and an additional platform for advocacy and engagement. In a more direct role within the EU integration process, the National Youth Congress of Albania is a member of the [National Council of European Integration in Albania](#), actively participating in meetings. Their notable contribution includes involvement in the National Parliamentary Council for European Integration, where they, alongside other civil society organizations, offer valuable insights and perspectives on Albania's journey toward EU membership.

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3 [https://krk.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Raporti\\_KAS\\_2022\\_Final.pdf](https://krk.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Raporti_KAS_2022_Final.pdf)

Additionally, [Beyond Barriers Organization](#), a pioneer youth organization with a 20-year history, has been actively representing the [Contact Point Office for Albania](#) for European Union Programs since 2010, covering initiatives like Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programs. Beyond promoting European values among Albanian youth and facilitating mobility and educational opportunities, they have played a pivotal role in training, mentoring, and supporting numerous Albanian youth organizations in accessing EU program funding and educating the younger generations about becoming future EU citizens. Moreover, organizations not exclusively focused on youth, such as the [Academy of European Integration and Negotiations \(AEIN\)](#), provide extensive training opportunities for young individuals. These programs offer insights into the entire integration process and the state of negotiations, thereby contributing expert support and shaping public opinion.

Albanian youth organizations have been vigorous proponents of EU integration, actively engaging in policy discussions, providing input on youth-related matters, and advocating for reforms that align with EU standards. Despite the challenges posed by an insufficiently supportive environment, the National Youth Congress firmly believes that the voices and perspectives of youth are indispensable in shaping their own future and should not be underestimated.

## **BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

Bosnia and Herzegovina have a complex and intricate system in which there is no national youth umbrella organization. Instead, there are permanent Youth Councils in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Youth Association of the Republic of Srpska, and the Brčko District Youth Council, each aligned with their respective line ministries.

Looking at it from the perspective of the Youth Council of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, numerous youth organizations, along with the umbrella bodies, are involved in projects that highlight the significance of the European integration process and the active participation of youth within it. For instance, the "Ready for Europe" project encompasses activities related to employability, education, and ecology. Notably, this year, the Youth Council of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina collaborated with the Institute for Youth Development KULT in Sarajevo to apply for the title of European Youth Capital 2026, resulting in Sarajevo making the shortlist. Furthermore, in terms of significant IPA funds targeting young people, the Youth Council of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina consistently participates in the development of plans and strategies for key components of the draft action documents. Additionally, they take the opportunity to simplify explanations for young people on how to access EU funds.

Regrettably, Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system lacks a dedicated ministry for youth issues. The only viable avenue for youth at the national level is the establishment of the Commission for the Coordination of Youth Issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This commission's responsibility includes coordinating activities related to the promotion and protection of young people's roles and positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the aim of enhancing their living conditions and representing youth-related matters internationally. However, there is a lack of political will to advance the work of this commission.

Due to the absence of crucial mechanisms representing the interests of young people in their engagement with the European Union, Bosnia and Herzegovina is missing out on the significant opportunities and experiences that could benefit its youth population.

## KOSOVO

The active involvement of young people and youth organizations in the European integration process is of utmost importance, as it plays a pivotal role in nurturing active citizenship and instilling a deep sense of ownership among the youth of Kosovo. To achieve this, it is vital for the government to establish robust means of communication and collaboration with youth organizations, ensuring that their voices are not only heard but actively integrated into the formulation of policies and decision-making processes. Furthermore, in addition to direct consultations with citizens, where youth groups are already included in public discussions as required by law, it is equally essential to create accessible and youth-friendly information platforms tailored to the preferences and digital habits of Kosovo's youth. Leveraging social media, interactive websites, and mobile applications can significantly enhance engagement and outreach to young people, as they are more likely to engage with and respond to information disseminated through these channels.

Historically, the participation of young people in the EU Integration Process has primarily involved including youth groups, representatives, and activists in direct consultations and formal institutional meetings, such as those related to the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), where the Kosovar Youth Council (KYC) plays an active role. However, these platforms have often been perceived as mere formalities, lacking the substance needed for meaningful youth participation. This proposal aligns with the European Economic and Social Committee's opinion on 'Youth Policy in the Western Balkans, as part of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans' (own-initiative opinion)<sup>4</sup> from 2022, emphasizing the need for meaningful youth involvement.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022IE0778&from=EN>

The active engagement of Kosovo's youth would not only contribute to the successful integration of the country into the EU but also reinforce the nation's democratic principles, social cohesion, and overall development.

Kosovo has taken several steps to implement these recommendations. Notably, Kosovo has established its first National Inter-Ministerial Commission on Youth, comprised of eight ministries that deal with various aspects of youth-related issues. The commission's purpose is to develop more effective policies for young people, involving youth representatives and interest groups as observers in its meetings. Additionally, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (MCYS) has publicly released the new Law and Strategy of Youth in Kosovo, which includes plans for the restructuring and systemic support of National and Local Youth Councils, incorporating them into the policymaking and decision-making processes.

## MONTENEGRO

The involvement of young people in the enlargement process demonstrates a combination of positive and negative practices in certain aspects. In the negotiation chapters that pertain to the youth, especially chapter 26, young people, such as high school and university students, have their own representatives in the Working Group, which offers them a direct opportunity to influence decisions in relevant areas. This serves as a positive example of meaningful youth engagement. However, [research](#) conducted by the Ipsos agency<sup>5</sup> on the needs of young people in Montenegro points out areas that need improvement. While 15% of young individuals express dissatisfaction with decision-making processes that do not encourage their involvement in matters directly affecting them, a significant majority of 75% of young people show a strong willingness to actively participate in such processes. This indicates a clear desire among young Montenegrins to contribute to shaping policies and decisions that impact their lives.

On a more optimistic note, young people in Montenegro have a favorable view of regional and European projects and organizations operating within the country. For example, 74% of young individuals hold a positive attitude towards the activities of the Regional Office for Youth Cooperation (RYCO), recognizing its valuable contributions to promoting regional cooperation among youth. Additionally, an impressive 87% of young people provide a positive assessment of the activities of the European Youth Card (EYCA), acknowledging its significance in providing various benefits and opportunities to young individuals in Montenegro.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://wapi.gov.me/download/1aed3958-fbfa-4310-86e0-a7d56855a1c8?version=1.0>

While there are both encouraging practices and areas that require improvement, it is crucial to continue nurturing youth involvement in decision-making processes throughout the enlargement process. Recognizing the enthusiasm among young Montenegrins to actively engage in shaping their future, efforts should be made to create more avenues for youth participation and ensure their voices are heard and considered in matters directly affecting them.

As Montenegro progresses towards EU accession, giving priority to youth inclusion is of utmost importance. Recommendations from the Dialogue with Youth project promote youth development and empowerment. Collaboration with government and youth organizations is essential for successful implementation. Inclusive policies will unlock the potential of the youth, contributing to innovation, sustainability, and economic growth.

## NORTH MACEDONIA

According to a study<sup>6</sup> conducted by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy on the involvement of young people in socio-political matters, there has been a significant decrease in the belief that the country will become an EU member state among the youth. In 2019, 59.5% of young people held this belief, but in the current study, only 44.7% share this view, marking a decline of approximately 14.8%.

Although there have been positive developments in youth participation in North Macedonia, notably with the adoption of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, the involvement of young people remains primarily symbolic. Their participation is often limited to areas traditionally associated with youth, such as education, unemployment, volunteering, etc. Unfortunately, on more substantial issues like EU accession, youth-led civil society organizations are excluded from important discussions. North Macedonia faces challenges typical of the Western Balkans, including youth migration, high youth unemployment, limited participation in policy processes, low trust in institutions, and a strong desire for improved living standards.

The National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM) was an implementing partner in this process, which received favorable recognition from the European Parliament in its November 29, 2018 resolution on the Commission Report for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The European Parliament welcomed the collaboration between the government and the National Youth Council in implementing the Youth Guarantee Scheme as an effective means of cooperation between young people and decision-makers in shaping and implementing youth policies. The Parliament called on the government to increase financial support for youth organizations and young individuals to address the issue of brain drain.

<sup>6</sup>“Youth in North Macedonia: Optimism, Apathy or Disappointment?” n.d. Westminster Foundation for Democracy. <https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/youth-north-macedonia-optimism-apaty-or-disappointment>.

<sup>7</sup>“COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018 Report.” n.d. EUROPEAN COMMISSION. <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-05/20180417-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-report.pdf>.

Regarding the rule of law, while the adoption of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies was a significant milestone for the youth sector in North Macedonia, its practical implementation has been lacking, and there has been a noticeable absence of accountability for this lack of implementation. This indicates that young people represent a low priority for the stakeholders. NYCM conducts an annual monitoring<sup>8</sup> report on the law's implementation and has found that three years after its adoption, many of the specified mechanisms for youth participation and youth services have not been implemented yet.

As per the findings of the 2023 report, the establishment of the National Youth Assembly and the National Advisory Body for Youth Policies has not been realized. Additionally, only 21 out of all municipalities, constituting 26%, have Local Youth Councils in place. Moreover, just one municipality has established a dedicated youth office for young residents seeking information on municipal youth-related matters. The report also reveals that there are youth centers in only seven municipalities, accounting for a mere nine percent of all municipalities. In terms of personnel, 57 youth officers have been appointed within state institutions, and 64 within municipalities, with around 79% of municipalities having met this specific requirement.

## SERBIA

While Serbia may lag behind some EU member states in terms of socio-economic development, there are commendable practices that can be adopted to bolster youth participation in the European integration process. These practices include the promotion of youth engagement through civic activism and the encouragement of active involvement in decision-making processes. One way to influence this is to establish an institutional mechanism that exists within the EU member states - EU Youth Dialogue. This mechanism involves the formation of working groups at the national level of each EU member state, working towards harmonizing youth policies in the EU. Serbia stands out as the first non-EU country to implement such a mechanism, achieved through the creation of the Permanent Expert Team for EU Youth Dialogue within the Youth Advisory Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. The formation of this mechanism was initiated by the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), in partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, to work on improving youth policies, involving young people in decision-making processes, and speeding up the process of European integration.

Another illustrative instance is the regional mechanism for involving youth in decision making known as the Western Balkans Youth Lab (WBLYL), established by the Regional Cooperation Council.

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<sup>8</sup> “Documents Monitoring report on the implementation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies 2023- National Youth Council of Macedonia.” 2023. National Youth Council of Macedonia. August 24, 2023. <https://nms.org.mk/documents/?lang=en>.

WBYL serves as a platform where youth from Western Balkan economies can collaborate, exchange experiences, and collaborate on projects aimed at advancing the region socially, economically, and politically. WBYL places particular emphasis on the co-management mechanism, allowing young people to have a say at the same level as institutional representatives. This approach encourages youth to actively participate in shaping their societies and influencing policy agendas at local, national, and regional levels. These EU integration mechanisms can help mitigate distrust of EU institutions by enabling young people to have an impact on policies at the national level. These good practices demonstrate the potential for success and can serve as inspiration for policy development in our regional context.

Youth organizations play a crucial role in advocating for the interests of young people and increasing awareness about the advantages of the enlargement process. Supporting these organizations is vital to facilitate effective advocacy campaigns, provide accurate information, and engage with young individuals who may be challenging to reach.

For example, according to the Tempus Foundation, over 300 projects have been carried out in collaboration with schools, youth organizations, and universities as part of the implementation of Erasmus+ in Serbia, which is supposed to bring youth closer to the EU. While Erasmus+ showcases the significant influence of Serbia's closer integration with the European Union on the youth, it appears that young individuals in Serbia have limited opportunities for involvement in the EU integration process within their own country. KOMS plays a valuable role in shaping the negotiating stance for Chapter 26, asserting itself as a significant actor in the realm of youth policy. It actively engages in aligning the national youth policy framework with European standards, primarily by introducing EU Youth Dialogue mechanisms at both the national and local levels. However, the existing institutional structure of Serbia's negotiating team lacks a specific platform for active youth participation in the negotiation processes. Additionally, the current negotiating framework provided by the European Union doesn't include a dedicated chapter focusing on youth and their position.



## IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

When we observe the WB6 region, it becomes evident that the path to European Union integration encounters similar obstacles from the perspective of its youth. Key concerns for young people in the region revolve around issues like youth unemployment and limited economic opportunities. These challenges create uncertainty about their future, which, in turn, prompts emigration and diminishes their motivation to contribute to their communities.

The region also faces the ongoing challenge of providing high-quality education, vocational training, and programs to enhance the capabilities of those involved in local youth councils and youth-related roles.

Youth activism and participation are pivotal for nurturing an informed generation dedicated to improving society. However, young people encounter hurdles in their attempts to engage in policy-making processes. Despite the existence of mechanisms intended to boost youth participation, such as the Law on Youth and the National Youth Strategy, the actual implementation and monitoring of these measures remain insufficient. This presents a substantial challenge, signaling a gap between policy formulation and effective execution. Distrust in institutions and the civil society sector further hampers youth involvement in participatory processes. Without a supportive environment and confidence in the systems, young individuals may be hesitant to actively participate in EU integration initiatives.

To address these challenges, we have elaborated the following recommendations. The first category addresses issues related to education, skill development, and youth awareness. The second category emphasizes accountability and transparency in implementing youth-related policies. The third category highlights the importance of collaboration, partnerships, and cross-border cooperation to support youth engagement in the EU integration process.

### 1. Education and Skill Development

- **Enhance the Quality and Accessibility of Education:** This can be achieved by investing in modernizing curricula, teacher training, and educational infrastructure. Expanding scholarships and financial aid for higher education can also remove barriers to accessing quality education. Implement targeted programs that equip young people with the skills demanded by the labor market. This includes vocational training, apprenticeships, and partnerships with businesses.

- **Support Entrepreneurship:** Encourage the growth of startups and small businesses and provide mentorship, access to financing, and business development resources. This empowers young people to contribute to the region's economic growth.
- **Enhance Civic Education:** Integrate EU-related topics into the education curriculum to increase awareness and educate young people about the EU, its institutions, values, and opportunities.
- **Digital Engagement:** Emphasize the use of social media and other digital platforms to raise awareness, engage, and mobilize young people around EU integration. Promote the use of online petitions and campaigns to gather support for youth-focused EU policies.
- **Enhance the Quality and Accessibility of Education:** This can be achieved by investing in modernizing curricula, teacher training, and educational infrastructure. Expanding scholarships and financial aid for higher education can also remove barriers to accessing quality education. Implement targeted programs that equip young people with the skills demanded by the labor market. This includes vocational training, apprenticeships, and partnerships with businesses.
- **Support Entrepreneurship:** Encourage the growth of startups and small businesses and provide mentorship, access to financing, and business development resources. This empowers young people to contribute to the region's economic growth.
- **Enhance Civic Education:** Integrate EU-related topics into the education curriculum to increase awareness and educate young people about the EU, its institutions, values, and opportunities.
- **Digital Engagement:** Emphasize the use of social media and other digital platforms to raise awareness, engage, and mobilize young people around EU integration. Promote the use of online petitions and campaigns to gather support for youth-focused EU policies.

## 2. Accountability and Transparency

- **Establish Clear Accountability Measures:** Ensure institutions responsible for youth-related policies are held accountable for their implementation. This could involve setting clear targets, regular progress reporting, and consequences for non-compliance.

- **Implement Transparency and Accountability Measures:** Increase transparency in decision-making processes related to EU integration. This includes providing clear information on how policies are formulated, implemented, and evaluated.
- **Enhance Capacity for Monitoring and Evaluation:** Stress the importance of regularly monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of youth engagement initiatives in the EU integration process and making necessary adjustments. Provide training and resources to both government bodies and civil society organizations to effectively monitor and evaluate the implementation of youth-related policies and strategies.

### 3. Collaboration and Engagement

- **Collaboration with EU Institutions:** Advocate for increased collaboration between local and regional governments and EU institutions to facilitate youth participation and share best practices in the framework of different EU's policies in which the region is integrated to different degrees, such as, Enlargement, Cohesion, etc.
- **Partnerships with NGOs:** Collaborate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Think Tanks that focus on youth issues and EU integration. These organizations can provide valuable resources, networks, and expertise.
- **Promote Cross-Border Cooperation:** Stress the importance of regional cooperation and collaboration among Western Balkan countries to enhance the collective voice of youth in the EU integration process.

Addressing these challenges necessitates a coordinated effort involving EU, government agencies, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and the private sector.

Enhancing youth involvement in the EU integration process is not only a matter of promoting inclusivity and empowerment but a strategic imperative for the European Union. As the region strives for greater unity and prosperity, the energy, ideas, and innovation of its young citizens are invaluable assets. This paper has outlined a set of recommendations that collectively provide a comprehensive approach to tackling the challenges of engaging and mobilizing the youth effectively.

As we look ahead, it is clear that the European Union's success in integrating the Western Balkans and fostering a sense of ownership and belonging among its youth largely depends on how well these recommendations are put into practice. The EU's commitment to fostering an environment where young people can actively participate, voice their concerns, and contribute to the decision-making processes will reinforce the core principles of unity, solidarity, and democracy on which the European project was founded.



[connecting-youth.org](http://connecting-youth.org)

