

## Background paper for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ideas go public Lab, 17-18 February 2022

Kosovo is often highlighted for having the youngest population in Europe, with 55% of its population under 30, and over one third under the age of 18. However, the lack of effective investments over the years paints a bleak picture where, according to the Human Capital Index, a child born in Kosovo today will only reach 57% of their potential under the current conditions than if they had enjoyed a complete education and full health support to prepare them for the future.

The situation is the same (or just marginally better) in the rest of the Western Balkans. It seems that many young people have recognized this and are increasingly choosing to emigrate, causing a worrying depopulation trend in the Western Balkans. Kosovo, even though not as hit by this phenomenon as some other WB countries, is estimated to have lost 15.4% of its population from 2007 to 2018.<sup>1</sup> What is even more concerning is that the young people who are emigrating are highly skilled professionals, including doctors and qualified nurses.<sup>2</sup> Given the job market, this comes as no surprise.

Where the youth unemployment in the EU was at 14.9% in 2020 (pre-COVID-19) and in the Western Balkans around 38% in 2019<sup>3</sup>, in Kosovo it stands at an alarming 49%<sup>4</sup>, with even higher figures among women and marginalized groups, despite double the percentage of active women having tertiary education compared to men (40% vs 20%). A third of young people aged 15-24 were not in employment, education or training in 2020. The high unemployment among those with university degrees (20.7%) further highlights a significant gap between education outcomes and labour market needs.

Even the quality of education that they do get is equally concerning. The World Bank estimates that there is a learning gap of 5.3 years – so for the 13.2 years of education that a young person completes in Kosovo, they only learn an equivalent of 7.9 years. Same as with employment, the learning inequalities are even more pronounced among youth from the poorest and non-majority communities. Around 20% of Roma students finish secondary education compared to 80% of non-Roma students.<sup>5</sup>

If it's difficult to imagine how the situation can get any worse, sadly, all of this is pre-COVID-19 data, and the pandemic has only further exacerbated these outcomes. In 2020, the World Bank estimated an increase in students below reading proficiency by an average of 8 percentage points for the Western Balkans (from 53% to 61%)<sup>6</sup>, whereas now, two years into the pandemic, the outlook might be even worse for the already precarious situation of children and young people in Kosovo.

There is, however, a light at the end of this very dark tunnel. Perhaps because of finding little perspective elsewhere, youth in Kosovo are not sitting idly, waiting for others to solve their problems, but have started to demand and create opportunities for themselves, by themselves.

With an unstable internal political situation, and four government turnovers in just as many years (since 2017), as well as the EU member states blocking Kosovo citizens (for a decade now) from the very rights they enshrine – such as freedom of movement – while on the other hand granting visa-free travel to

<sup>1</sup> EU Observer. January 2021. Demographic Crisis in the Balkans. <https://euobserver.com/democracy/154017>

<sup>2</sup> European Commission. 2021. Kosovo 2021 Report.

<sup>3</sup> Human Capital Development in Kosovo: Policies, Challenges, Solutions, European Training Foundation, May 2019.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission. 2021. Kosovo 2021 Report.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF. 2019. Analysis of the Situation of Women and Children in Kosovo.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank. 2020. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: The Economic and Social Impact of COVID-19.

<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/590751590682058272/pdf/The-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-COVID-19-Education.pdf>



notably non-democratic, non-European countries, it starts to become clear that the story of youth in Kosovo is not one of succeeding because they have it all, but on the contrary, succeeding *despite* of it all, with only their sheer willpower to prevail in the face of adversity.

While the youth is often talked about in abstract terms of “Kosovo’s highest potential”, in the most recent parliamentary elections they demonstrated a sliver of their actual potential – being vectors of sociopolitical transformation by overwhelmingly voting to bring to power, for the first time, a political party sitting in opposition for more than a decade. The exact turnout percentage by age is not available, but already in 2016, a study by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems looking at four elections in Kosovo indicated that the turnout among young people, especially those aged 18-21, has consistently been higher than among other age groups, unlike in many other democracies.

While part of the 2021 elections result was likely frustration at too little being achieved in over two decades after the war, this wasn’t just an anti-establishment vote – looking at the pre-election polls, the winning party’s social-justice-heavy campaign attracted primarily young people and women, two very large marginalized groups in Kosovo. These are the people who constantly feel disenfranchised at all levels – being denied access to quality education in schools, being denied access to institutions and national decision-making, and even being denied movement in the EU and beyond. Their vote was one for inclusion and active participation.

It is time for the decision-makers to stop treating young people as beneficiaries, and to start considering them as capable actors. Strategies should not be developed *for* them, but *with* them. For the first time in Kosovo, young people are being consulted for the new National Development Strategy (2030). But these processes need to be more systematic and need to include young people in the implementation as well. It is no coincidence that the most successful sectors in Kosovo are those where the youth are at the driving wheel, and if they can’t be actively supported with policies and investments, they should at least be given more autonomy and a lead role.

Whether IT, outsourcing, or the many successful Kosovo start-ups, whatever young people touch turns to gold – including the Olympics. So many international media outlets continuously express astonishment at how such a small country keeps producing judo gold medalists, or how the new wave of Kosovo cinema (in particular led by young women!) is amazingly gripping the world by storm. If we’re honest, we’re amazed in Kosovo as well. It almost seems that these young talents becoming consciously aware of being systematically treated unfairly, with little positive outlook for the future, is resulting in a creative *déclenchement* aimed at improving the world for them and their peers.

Indeed, despite so many challenges, in the end it seems the kids are alright. In a UNICEF-led consultations process in 2021, young people in Kosovo aged 10 to 24 identified social inclusion, gender equality, and the need for their voices to be heard among their most urgent priorities<sup>7</sup>. They talk about support for their peers lagging behind, and call for less discrimination in schools and society. These are absolutely the voices that we need to hear, in our institutions and even more so at the EU institutions.

Now is the critical time to elevate these progressive voices in our society, while they still have the courage to fight. These are the values that bring us closer to the EU, and the values that the EU should embrace

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF Kosovo. July 2021. Youth Voices from Kosovo. <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/reports/youth-voices-kosovo>

and promote by taking concrete steps towards enlargement for the Western Balkans, before what little remains of the positive momentum is lost.

Qs:

What mechanisms exist for the participation of young people in Kosovo? What about in other Western Balkan countries? Any best practices? How can they be improved and how can decision making be made more inclusive for young people?

How can institutions provide a more favorable environment for young people in Kosovo and support them to achieve their maximum potential? What are the top three priority areas that can be improved with immediately available resources? What is the longer-term strategy?

What role should civil society have? Advocacy? Or direct interventions?

How can the EU contribute to empowering youth in the Western Balkans, beyond promises of enlargement and demands of youth-friendly strategies?

*Venera Hajrullahu, Change Experts, WB2EU Network  
2 February 2022*