

Society

Policy Brief: Digitalization should remain a high priority in the Western Balkans

by EWB 19. 07. 2023.



Western Balkan Digital Summit; Photo Tanjug/ Sava Radovanović

VIENNA – The countries of the Western Balkan need to be convinced that digitalization must remain high on their agenda and given full attention, it is stated in the newly published Policy Brief “The role of digitalization in transforming Western Balkan societies,” released within the WB2EU Network.

The author recommends that digitalization remain a top priority in Western Balkan countries, contributing to society’s overall well-being by increasing digital literacy and rapidly expanding broadband connectivity.

According to the Policy Brief’s recommendations,

the EU and competent regional authorities must monitor the digital transformation within the framework of their activities and agreed timeline.

The Policy Brief recommends that “as many Western Balkan stakeholders as possible, from civil society to public institutions, acknowledge that they must work together to raise the level of digitalization and increase trust in digital services. This will reduce the digital gap and facilitate access to services for all citizens.”

The author explains that countries in the region have recently started collaborating in initiatives such as the Digital Summits, with the EU funding projects that foster regional digitalization.

The Policy Brief highlights the significant role played by the European Union (EU) in the digitalization of the Western Balkans. Through numerous projects and co-funding, the EU is a key factor contributing to the region’s digital transformation since the launch of the EU’s Digital Agenda for the WB in June 2018.

While some progress has been made in this area, there is still a lot of unfinished work that was foreseen but has not even started yet.

Nevertheless, there is a growing commitment among the countries of the WB to the digital transition, maximizing the use of digital services among citizens.

Much of the digital change in the region has taken place under the auspices of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The Policy Brief recalls that the RCC is contributing to Roaming Free WB from 1 July 2021, participating in regional dialogue on WB Digital Economy and Society Index, developing a sustainable regional framework to support digital upskilling, and



strengthening regional capabilities for developing digital skill strategies.

The author stresses that while international support has been significant, regional cooperation and accelerated action are crucial for the WB to embrace the opportunities offered by digitalization, adding that it is urgent that regional initiatives recognize the importance of digitalization as soon as possible.

Challenges on the ground

Regarding digitalization in the WB, there are recurring problems and obstacles, with a major difference between rural and urban environments. Digital transformation remains a significant challenge in rural areas.

Policy Brief explains that “the concentration of production and the economy is mainly located in urban centers, where the various economic technology sectors are located. To a large extent, rural areas are still dominated by the primary sector of the economy, and consequently, there is no need for digital modernization of rural areas.

Although the WB region has a high internet penetration rate of 75% to 96%, it is geographically diverse, making it difficult and in some cases impossible to have high-speed broadband coverage. In addition to infrastructure, governments need to ensure the development of public policies and programs on digitalization.”

According to the author, without public policies governing digitalization, the development of adequate infrastructure is unnecessary and does not contribute to progress.

Policy Brief explains that Albania’s development in digitalization has been very progressive and



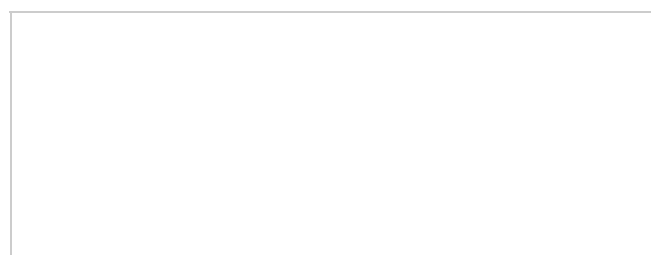
advanced in the last year. With the “Industry 4.0 revolution,” the digitalization process of the economy has become a priority for the Albanian government. The digital transition of Albanian public services was done mainly with the intention of eliminating inefficiency and low-level corruption. On the other side, Bosnia and Herzegovina are gradually advancing in the field of digitalization.

Digital transformation has been a goal for Kosovo as well. It has made strides toward boosting e-government services, expanding broadband access, and enhancing digital infrastructure. Now they are conducting various projects to encourage digital literacy, assist new businesses, and promote innovation. Additionally, Montenegro has concentrated on promoting economic growth and competitiveness through digitization. Montenegro has made improvements to its digital infrastructure, including increased internet access and broadband penetration.

The number of e-government services has increased, and initiatives are being taken to advance digital literacy and encourage entrepreneurship. Initiatives for digitalization have also been aggressively pursued by North Macedonia. Finally, Serbia has been at the forefront of digitalization efforts in the Western Balkans. The country has created a sophisticated digital infrastructure with a universal internet connection. Serbia has put in place extensive e-government efforts and services to improve digital literacy and assist start-ups. Serbia has very well established and operated the Digital Serbia Initiative, which has positioned Serbia as a regional leader in digital transformation and innovation.



The Policy Brief is published in the framework of the WB2EU project. The project aims at the establishment of a network of renowned think-tanks, do-tanks, universities, higher education institutes and policy centres from the Western Balkans, neighbouring countries and EU member states that will be most decisive for the enlargement process and Europeanisation of the region in the upcoming years. The WB2EU project is co-funded by the European Commission under its Erasmus+ Jean Monnet programme.

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