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## ÖGfE Policy Brief 15 2022



By Nikolaos Tzifakis, Anastasios Valvis  
Vienna, 13 October 2022  
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# The social impact of air pollution in the Western Balkans

## Policy Recommendations

The Western Balkans should:

1. Ensure that as long as polluting sites remain operational they will comply with EU environmental standards, decreasing their emissions.
2. Adopt and operationalise with wide national consensus realistic and comprehensive decarbonisation strategies.
3. Implement vigorously the regional energy connectivity agenda and pursue the establishment of transborder renewable resources energy networks.
4. Launch campaigns to inform people about the need to reduce household energy consumption.

The European Union should:

5. Push for genuine (rather than procedural) compliance with the EU *acquis communautaire* and use credibly accession conditionality.

## Abstract

Environmental degradation is an alarming problem in the Western Balkans. Air pollution was the fourth greatest risk factor for human health globally in 2019. The European Union (EU) aspires to promote the transition to Renewable Energy Sources in the Western Balkans. However, this is not an easy task. Not only does it entail substantial socio-economic cost. It also requires overcoming the region's structural deficiencies of governance and particularly the presence of unsustainable investments in the energy sector (predominantly by China), supported by the governments of Western Balkan countries. In this respect, this Policy Brief articulates recommendations in two directions.

At the national level, Western Balkan countries should realise the benefits of energy transition for the local societies in terms of both health improvement and economic performance. At the EU level, policy-makers should increase their attention to the region's deficient environmental policies, in addition to providing generous financial assistance to support transition. Amidst the war in Ukraine and its instantaneous implication in the Western Balkans' energy security and economic recovery, the EU should be even more determined to prevent Western Balkan states from backsliding to old and unsustainable 'energy production' habits.



# The social impact of air pollution in the Western Balkans

## The social impact of air pollution

The environment is practically under siege in the Western Balkans (WB). The region faces severe challenges in complying with the Paris Agreement and European Union (EU) environmental standards. Paradoxically, despite falling short in economic development, the Western Balkan countries are the leaders in air pollution in Europe. According to some studies, air pollution is the fourth greatest risk factor for human health globally (Juginovic et al., 2021: 1). Human activities, such as energy consumption, transportation and heavy industry combustion lead to extensive air pollution with the levels of particulate matter (PM10 and PM2.5), Sulphur Dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) and other dangerous gases, frequently exceeding acceptable limits for human health (Hofthius et al., 2021: 1).

***Paradoxically, despite falling short in economic development, the Western Balkan countries are the leaders in air pollution in Europe.***

Air transmissible solid particles have a severe impact on human health, causing the appearance of acute and chronic diseases and early deaths (Kukolj, 2021: 4). According to medical studies, the intake of polluted air stands as the ninth most important risk factor leading to cardiopulmonary mortality (Kurt et al., 2016). Moreover, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) places air pollution among the greatest carcinogens for humans (Shahadin et al., 2018). As a result, air pollution causes annually around 3,000 premature deaths and 8,000 cases of bronchitis in children in the Western Balkans (Pujic, et al., 2019: 4). Equally severe is the impact of polluted air on the fertility rates of women.<sup>1</sup> It also poses a huge cost to the already weak healthcare systems and regional economies, estimated on an annual basis between 1.9 and 3.6 billion euro. According to the World Bank (2020: 4), the annual economic cost of air pollution ranged in 2020 from 3.6% to 8.2% of the annual gross domestic product (GDP) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

***Air transmissible solid particles have a severe impact on human health, causing the appearance of acute and chronic diseases and early deaths.***

In the Western Balkans, a major cause of air pollution is the fleet of outdated coal power plants. According to a study, 18 plants in the Western Balkans emit two and a half time more SO<sub>2</sub> in comparison to 221 plants in EU countries.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in 2019, 6 out of the 10 most SO<sub>2</sub> polluting coal power sites in Europe were located in the region.<sup>3</sup>

1 <https://balkanfund.org/general-news/air-pollution-causes-higher-infertility-rates-across-the-balkans>.

2 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/western-balkans-pressed-to-tackle-deadly-air-pollution-from-coal/>.

3 <https://ember-climate.org/insights/research/coal-power-air-pollution/>.



1 Ukraine	Burshtynska
2 North Macedonia	Bitola
3 Turkey	Soma B
4 Turkey	Kangal
5 Republic of Serbia	Nikola Tesla A
6 Turkey	Seyitömer
7 Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kakanj
8 Bosnia and Herzegovina	Ugljevik
9 Republic of Serbia	Kostolac B
10 Republic of Serbia	Nikola Tesla B
15 Republic of Serbia	Kostolac A
16 Montenegro	Pljevlja
18 Bosnia and Herzegovina	Tuzla

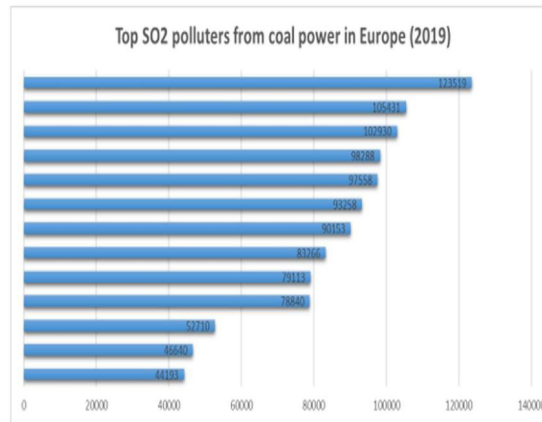


Table 1: Data collected from EMBER (2021)

***In the Western Balkans, a major cause of air pollution is the fleet of outdated coal power plants.***

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia failed to comply with their national emission reduction plans limits of air pollution during 2018-2019, exceeding by several times the ceilings for SO<sub>2</sub> emissions from coal power plants (Ciuata, et al., 2021: 40). Western Balkan countries (with the notable exception of Albania) are heavily relying on “dirty coal” for their electricity in contrast to the EU where only the 9% of electricity came from lignite and another 9% from bituminous coal (World Bank, 2019: 20). In 2019, Western Balkan power plants emitted 10 times more CO<sub>2</sub> than their correspondent in the EU-27 (Energy Community Secretariat, 2021: 5). The war in Ukraine might halt the transition to clean energy. Indeed, shutting down old coal power units seems to be postponed for a long time. In March 2022, despite the strong criticism by the Energy Community Secretariat, the parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina decided to extend the operation of two coal power units until 2028. The prospect of importing electricity in quite high prices brings WB in front of a great challenge particularly as winter approaches (Morina, 2022).<sup>4</sup> Data indicate that several WB countries are characterised by a high degree of vulnerability to an increase in the price of electricity imports. For instance, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia rely heavily on imports to cover a significant share of their total electricity production (World Bank, 2022: 52). Amidst the current energy crisis, a potential backsliding of the WB states dependency on their domestic coal reserves instead of intensifying their energy transition shouldn't be surprising.<sup>5</sup> Besides, it is quite worrying that Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia have not taken any steps towards the adoption of a realistic coal phase out strategy. So far, only North Macedonia and Montenegro have set a corresponding strategy, while, surprisingly, only Albania has already wiped out coal from the national electricity mix.<sup>6</sup> However, there is hope that the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and the Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB), along with important investments on liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in Albania, Croatia, and Greece, could overturn these negative developments.

4 <https://ecfr.eu/article/power-of-need-energy-security-in-the-western-balkans/>.

5 <https://agendapublica.elpais.com/noticia/18093/western-balkans-between-clean-energy-sources-and-dash-for-gas>.

6 <https://beyond-coal.eu/europes-coal-exit/>.

*Amidst the current energy crisis, a potential backsliding of the WB states dependency on their domestic coal reserves instead of intensifying their energy transition shouldn't be surprising.*

## Western Balkans under transformation?

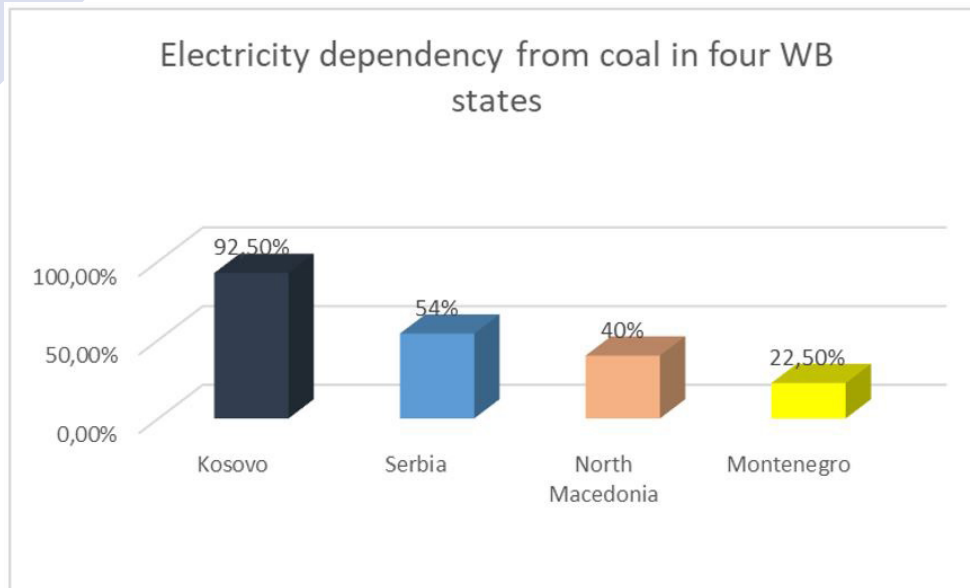


Table 2: Data collected from the Energy Community Secretariat 2019

The Energy Community Secretariat recently reported (2021) that electricity production from fossil fuels increased in the Western Balkans by 4% in 2020. Investments in previous years in old-fashioned power plants have not only been damaging for the environment and human health, but also detrimental to the economic development of the region. The risk of these outdated energy infrastructures becoming stranded assets that must be closed down before being depreciated is very high (Voß, Weischer and Schön-Chanishvili, 2020: 2).

*Crucially, dirty investments in the energy sector also have a questionable impact on economic development.*

Another problem stemming from the region's poorly maintained and dated energy infrastructure is its high energy intensity, i.e., the consumption of much energy for GDP production (Đurašković 2021: 482). According to Eurostat (2018), the energy intensity required for the production of EUR 1,000 of GDP in the Western Balkans was at least two times higher than the EU-27 countries, with estimations for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia being even worse.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, *dirty* investments in the energy sector also have a questionable impact on economic development. As Pejović et al. (2021: 2775) put it, GDP growth "does not measure the degradation that the use of resources has on the environment". Therefore, an increasing number of countries worldwide have been gradually integrating environmental concerns in their economic growth policies.

7 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement\\_countries\\_-\\_energy\\_statistics#Energy\\_consumption](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_energy_statistics#Energy_consumption).



## A glimpse of hope

In recent times, we have observed in the Western Balkans some small scale *green investments* and the establishment of a more environmental-friendly institutional framework. Although these trends should not be overstated, they could mark the beginning of a process of energy transition, with the EU guidance and support. Western Balkan countries have some potential to take advantage of renewable energy sources (RES). They have also all signed the Treaty establishing the Energy Community between the EU and neighbouring countries, acknowledging the need to increase the use of RES as a response to the projected increase of energy demand in the next 20 years (Đurašković et al., 2021: 484).

***In recent times, we have observed in the Western Balkans some small scale green investments and the establishment of a more environmental-friendly institutional framework.***

All countries in the region have increased the share of RES in their energy mix. For instance, Albania, which is the region's frontrunner in RES, relies on hydropower for most of its electricity production.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the European Investment Plan (EIP) for the WB includes some quite promising projects for the future, such as the installation of a floating solar photovoltaic plant at the Vau Dejes reservoir in Albania (Bartlett et al., 2022: 23). Additionally, biomass is another important source for the region's electricity systems. Nevertheless, although a positive trend emerges, RES keep representing only 6% of the total installed electricity generation capacity region-wide, showing the extent to which some countries lag behind (Đurašković et al., 2021: 483).

***All countries in the region have increased the share of renewable energy sources in their energy mix.***

## The environmental dimension of EU accession

The EU adopted last year (24 February 2021) its new adaptation to climate change strategy aiming at becoming climate neutral by 2050. The European Green Deal, already presented in 2019, is essentially the roadmap to achieve this very ambitious goal and implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals Agenda (European Green Deal, 2019). The EU aspires to move towards a development model in which economic growth will rely on efficient use of resources (Knez et al., 2022: 2).

***In November 2020, the leaders of the region signed the Sofia Declaration, committing themselves to conform with the EU climate targets and move towards EU accession.***

However, the EU also needs to engage with its neighbouring countries since climate change and pollution do not stop at its external borders. The EU strives to motivate Western Balkan countries to follow a sustainable development path. In November 2020, the leaders of the region signed the Sofia Declaration, committing themselves to conform with the EU climate targets and move towards EU accession. On its

8 <https://bankwatch.org/beyond-fossil-fuels/energy-sector-in-albania>.

turn, the EU devised an Economic and Investment Plan to support the region's Green Agenda. It concerns an investment package amounting to 9 billion euro, that aspires, through the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility, to additionally pull investments of up to 20 billion euro within the next 10 years. Transition from coal is one of the flagship projects included in the Economic and Investment Plan. Through various gas-interconnector projects (like the gas-interconnector that would link Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia, or the linkage of Kosovo to North Macedonia towards the North Macedonia-Greece interconnector), and most importantly via the Trans-Balkan Electricity Transmission Corridor in Serbia, the EU envisions to bring an end to the use of dirty coal and boost the transition towards green energy sources (Bartlett et al, 2022: 27).

***On its turn, the EU devised an Economic and Investment Plan to support the region's Green Agenda.***

The challenge of energy transition for Western Balkan economies is very high. In Serbia, for instance, Electrical Power Industry (EPS) is one of the country's largest employers, having 20,236 people in its payroll at the end of 2021.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as the following table demonstrates, the regional job market's dependency on the coal sector is non-negligible. Hence, the EU support is crucial to attain a transition that does not cause massive job losses and rise of unemployment.

	<b>Direct jobs in coal sector in 2018</b>		
	Mining jobs	Power plant jobs	Overall jobs
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	14472	2466	16938
<b>Serbia</b>	12331	2931	15262
<b>Kosovo</b>	3249	1482	4731
<b>North Macedonia</b>	2980	678	3658
<b>Montenegro</b>	750	171	921
<b>Total</b>	<b>89381</b>	<b>48477</b>	<b>137858</b>

Table 3: Job market's dependency from the coal sector

Source: JRC, 2021.

The European Commission has raised doubts itself about the effectiveness of the financial assistance provided for the region's environmental transition. According to its own assessment, financial assistance prior to the Green Agenda "has been mainly sectoral, focused on the process of alignment to the EU *acquis communautaire* under the requirements of chapter 27, with both actions at bilateral (mainly investments) and regional level (mainly capacity building)" (European Commission, 2020: 20). In this respect, the Green Agenda's all-inclusiveness aims at extending the focus towards a broader sustainable economic development prospect.

***Western Balkan countries face structural problems related to governance that could hold off green investments.***

In February 2022, the European Commission launched a 3.2 billion euro investment package to support sustainable development in the Western Balkans in the

9 <http://www.eps.rs/cir/Documents/KP%20EPS%202021%20-%20ENG.pdf>.





framework of the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the region.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it is hard to tell whether the fund linked to the Green Agenda is sufficient. Western Balkan countries face structural problems related to governance that could hold off green investments. Moreover, governments in the region don't seem to be quite eager to promote and enforce the prescribed policies. The belated submission by Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina of their National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs)<sup>11</sup> gives the impression that they treat the environment as a secondary priority. Besides, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have been attracting investments with negative environmental footprint from China despite the warnings by the EU and civil society organisations.<sup>12</sup>

Considering the weakness of rule of law in the region, a further cause of concern is the possibility that the European Green Agenda becomes another object for corruption and mismanagement. EU funds should not end up financing state-owned enterprises from foreign investors that do not support the region's green transition. Besides, the EU Green Agenda lacks specific enforcement mechanisms to secure compliance with the pre-defined terms, relying on the commitment of recipient countries to energy transition and EU accession. In this regard, the EU decision of December 2021 to open accession negotiations with Serbia on Cluster four, while the country was shaken by environmental protests sent a confusing message to the entire region and discredited the civil society's demand for greater environmental protection. Admittedly, Belgrade is constantly ranked among the most polluted capitals in the world, while there are important gaps in Serbia's efforts to meet RES targets.

## Conclusions and policy recommendations

In the Western Balkans the socio-economic cost of air pollution due to dirty energy production is significant. Although the European Green Deal is a much-needed instrument in the efforts to promote energy transition in the region, it is still too early to tell whether its funds would suffice to stimulate and bring about sustainable change. Moreover, to move towards a *greener* model of development, there is a pressing need to overcome structural deficiencies in the region such as regulatory ambiguity, lack of transparency, and low prioritisation of the environment. If that does not happen, the Western Balkans will be entrapped in a vicious circle of underdevelopment that would further encumber the improvement of the people's living conditions and social welfare in the region.

The war in Ukraine and its implications in the energy sector are yet to be seen in a full scale. The decision of EU member states to retrocede regarding coal-fired power plants closure to prevent a collapse in the energy system, is something that empowers WB leaders' decision to keep using coal and even reconstruct old facilities like in Kosovo.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, transition towards green energy has not been abandoned from the WB states, quite the contrary. However, real-time needs urge them to reconsider abandoning investments on coal fired facilities. Interconnectedness through other gas supply networks (like the TAP and the IGB) or even the construction of LNG facili-

10 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_1362](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_1362).

11 In the National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) the Western Balkan states place the targets and describe the policies needed towards decarbonisation by 2050.

12 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/china-in-the-balkans-controversy-and-cost/>.

13 WB6 countries struggling to secure electricity production in their old coal power plants ([https://balkangreenenergynews.com/wb-6-countries-struggling-to-secure-electricity-production-in-their-old-coal-power-plants/?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter](https://balkangreenenergynews.com/wb-6-countries-struggling-to-secure-electricity-production-in-their-old-coal-power-plants/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter)).



ties like those in Albania, although not providing instantaneous solutions, they could provide assurances to WB governments in the near future.

To this end, the Western Balkans should:

- Advance their regulatory framework on the environment and seek to attract investors eager to invest on renewable energy sources.
- Consider the health impact of air pollution in policy-making decisions.
- Constantly monitor levels of air pollution and take urgent measures whenever it exceeds alarming levels to safeguard public health.
- Ensure that as long as polluting sites remain operational they will comply with the EU environmental standards, decreasing their emissions.
- Adopt (precisely, the three countries that have failed to do so, i.e., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia) and operationalise with wide national consensus realistic and comprehensive decarbonisation strategies.
- Construct new gas pipelines to be 'hydrogen ready' in order to comply with EU suggestions.
- Implement vigorously the regional energy connectivity agenda and pursue the establishment of transborder renewable resources energy networks.
- Launch campaigns to inform people about the need to reduce household energy consumption.

The EU should:

- Support the generation of new employment opportunities through reskilling programs for employees in coal power plants and in brown industries.
- Push for genuine (rather than procedural) compliance with the EU *acquis communautaire* and use credibly accession conditionality.
- Link part of EU financial assistance with progress in environmental reforms.
- Secure a more adequate coordination among donors to increase the effectiveness of EU assistance in the region.
- Intensify investments on RES and reduce emphasis on investments in gas pipelines for the transition from coal.



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## About the authors

**Nikolaos Tzifakis** holds a Jean Monnet Chair in EU Foreign Policy and the Western Balkans and is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science & International Relations of the University of the Peloponnese; member of BiEPAG; and Research Associate of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. He recently co-edited (with F. Bieber) the book *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries* (Routledge, 2020). Contact: [tzifakis@uop.gr](mailto:tzifakis@uop.gr)

**Dr. Anastasios Valvis** is research fellow at the Jean Monnet Chair on 'EU Foreign Policy and the Western Balkans' (University of the Peloponnese) and research associate at the Center for Security Studies (KEMEA). He has been adjunct lecturer at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of the Peloponnese (2016-2020). Over the last years, he has participated in various research projects with a focus on the Greek NGO ecosystem, the refugee crisis and on Greek Foreign Policy in the Balkans (Southeast Europe Programme, ELIAMEP). Contact: [avalvis@uop.gr](mailto:avalvis@uop.gr)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihčić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



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# Cultural Policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Recognising Culture as an Integration Tool

## Policy Recommendations

1. Creating cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina as the key element for a sustainable society, especially linking it with education, economic and social policies.
2. Ensuring the full engagement of cultural professionals, civil society, media, youth organisations and scientific community in the realisation of a new cultural policy.
3. Strengthening cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, citizens' participation resulting in the unification of society.

## Abstract

Every cultural policy that is led by democratic principles implies, creates and implements cultural actions, which aim to provide the fulfilment of cultural needs and aspirations for as many citizens as possible. The state, as the main carrier of such cultural policy, brings out certain legal regulations, establishes institutions, presents various planning methods and cultural engineering that do not only make cultural contents accessible to the citizens, but influence citizens' opinions and the actions of every individual. In this context, it is important to under-

line the importance of cultural policy regarding integration processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina's society. The main methods for establishing and developing cultural policy should become the tool for strong relations between citizens and state nurturing various integrative traits. Therefore, this Policy Brief critically evaluates the present discourse of current cultural policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina and tries to recommend a better conception of cultural policy and cooperation as a medium for the integration of society in general.



# Cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Recognising culture as an integration tool

## Introduction

When speaking about cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>1</sup> it is essential to look at the current situation in the country in general and especially in the context of a long-time political crisis.

The culture of Bosnia and Herzegovina has been considered and described by diversity, merging and openness. Throughout its history, Bosnia and Herzegovina was a living space for Muslims, Orthodox, Catholics, Jews, Roma people and many other communities. They all have lived mutually, sharing their traditions and values among each other, acknowledging and respecting each other. This is why Bosnia and Herzegovina is still known as the 'diamond of Europe' due to its multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. But today, the lives of all cultural identities in this country are influenced by the past 'captured in the chains' of the Dayton Agreement<sup>2</sup>. This strongly impacts culture, although this topic is avoided in the public sphere to the most possible extent.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is still lacking a general concept or strategy for culture as well as a clear definition of cultural policy. This obscurity, therefore, disregards culture as a creative impulse and process in the modernisation and integration of society but emphasised its role as a 'keeper' and exclusive promoter of national identities and politics. Additionally, cultural institutions vital for the state have been deliberately and systematically destroyed by a lack of judicial support and destructive political influence on culture and cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, archives and theatres.

***Bosnia and Herzegovina is still lacking a general concept or strategy for culture as well as a clear definition of cultural policy.***

The nationalistic political and cultural parable that divisions and clashes within society are natural and impossible to prevail over has always been proved to be inaccurate and wrong by the authentic Bosnia and Herzegovina's cultural patterns throughout its entire history such are multiculturalism, plurality of religions, values and traditions embraced by mutual understanding and respect. It is important to un-

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- 1 Bosnia and Herzegovina gained its independence in March 1992 according to a citizens' referendum and applied for UN membership in May 1992. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina started in April 1992 and lasted until September 1995, when a peace agreement was concluded in Dayton USA. Eventhough the war ended, Bosnia and Herzegovina is still facing crisis reflected in the destruction of the institutional system, slowdown of economic, industrial, social developments followed by ethnonational animosities and mistrust.
  - 2 Dayton Peace Agreement is the peace agreement reached at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, United States, in November 1995, and formally signed in Paris on 14 December 1995. This agreement put an end to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, it created a specific structure of the state and very ineffective and awkward political structures.



derline that these cultural patterns are kept and taken care of by those cultural institutions. These institutions prove continuity and permanence of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (still) existing as a testimony of a multicultural and open society.

***The role of culture to foster dialogue among different cultural identities and reconciliation within the entire country is absolutely not acknowledged and not valued at all.***

Already mentioned today's years-long crisis trend in Bosnia and Herzegovina also involves a disturbing absence of a long-range, integrational and comprehensive development programme, which has not been offered in all these years of political pluralism which we are experiencing. Neither the new/old rulers nor the opposition have yet recognised the emancipation value of culture as a symbolic investment that creates values and essence of society together with its resistance to ideological, political or any other instrumentalisation and manipulation. The role of culture to foster dialogue among different cultural identities and reconciliation within the entire country is absolutely not acknowledged and not valued at all.

## **The current position of cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The present situation regarding cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina mirrors the destruction of the common cultural sphere, because cultural policy is still not in the responsibility of the entire state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but in the hands of the entities and the cantons since the war's end in 1995. There is no Ministry of Culture that covers the entire state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instead, the Ministry of Civil Affairs 'deals' with culture on a state level in particular cases. In the two entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina cultural policies are differently managed. The Republic of Srpska organises cultural activities centrally through the Ministry for Education and Culture while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina regulates cultural policies decentralised within its ten cantons. The Federal Ministry for Culture and Sport supports activities on a cantonal level, but also has its own activities. This situation indicates that cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is strongly separated and distributed along ethnical and political boundaries. As mentioned earlier, cultural institutions that are relevant for the entire country (the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the National Library, the Historical Museum, the National Art Gallery, the Library for the Blind and Visually Disabled, the Film Archive, the Museum of Literature and Theatre) therefore are in a status of neglect in the context of financial support and legal regulations. State political actors do not support them, because doing so would imply acknowledging the existence of a common cultural and historical heritage, integration aspects of culture but the current state as well.

***In the two entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina cultural policies are differently managed.***

On the other hand, integration represents the process of connecting and inclusion of individuals, groups and other parts of society towards functional articulated community based upon equality and respect of cultural diversities (Peters, 1993). The purpose of integration policy in the context of culture is to create circumstances under which people can collaborate in achieving common goals and developing a society where everyone feels safe, can expand their talents, work and learn, and create a social cohesion utterly needed in Bosnia and Herzegovina's society.





The current situation in cultural policy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where innovative elements could be seen only in small parts of structure and its separable parts, enables possibilities for alternative solutions, which means fostering reintegration processes in the society and mostly important, including as many people as possible, especially young people to be part of this important public sphere, what is culture. Particularly in the segments of arts for reconciliation, artistic exchange, cultural activities tackling mutual understanding, meaning creating space for more serious multicultural dialogue. Furthermore, the authentic culture, culture that is independent from any ethnopolitical establishment could eliminate servility of citizens towards the system.

***Moreover, the media news about cultural events are a substitution for culture, instead of citizens attending cultural events.***

However, such an almost ideal situation is going to be very difficult to achieve, because of the reduction of culture on its ethnic dimension and deliberately hiding cultural emancipatory streams and potentials. In addition, it is important to underline the hegemony and domination of mass culture today in the context that culture has been media transmitted and marked mostly by giving to cultural events an image of spectacle. Moreover, the media news about cultural events are a substitution for culture, instead of citizens attending cultural events.

## **Main challenges and recommendations for more sustainable cultural policy**

The prospects of cultural policy for promoting and creating integration processes are still not recognised in Bosnia and Herzegovina although it is for many years acknowledged in the countries in the European Union (EU). The European Commission specified priorities for 2019-2024 that are very much relevant for policy making in the area of culture at EU level<sup>3</sup>. This document could be a significant assistance tool for policy makers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is especially related to the need of taking into account a specific scope of universal values while appreciating cultural diversity and the need to maintain pluralism of cultural initiatives in order to promote mutual cooperation and reconciliation as well as respect and understanding between different individuals and groups. Bosnia and Herzegovina's cultural policy should use culture to promote these aims. Additionally, an adequate cultural policy should be in line with basic EU cultural policy segments especially from the aspects of identity concepts, citizens' participation with the aim to create citizens belonging to the EU. Therefore, cultural policy is more than the sum of a government's activities with respect to the arts, traditions, languages, cultural heritage, religion, everyday life practices, values, symbols and cultural

3 Strategic Framework for the EU's cultural policy 2019-2024. Available at: <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/strategic-framework-for-the-eus-cultural-policy> (last accessed, 17.10.2022).



institutions<sup>4</sup> but fostering intercultural dialogue, reconciliation and integration processes, accentuating citizens' key role in these activities. Intercultural dialogue as one of the key segments of integration processes emerges to be one of the underlying cultural and political challenges not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but in the entire world, which is a major condition for peace and peaceful solutions. Dialogue between various cultures in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be a basic element of cultural policy and institutions that represented them. Responsible political actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina still do not comprehend that cultural activities and creativities are the core of societal progress and that cultural diversity represents a crucial component for development in general.

***The European Commission specified priorities for 2019-2024 that are very much relevant for policy making in the area of culture at EU level.***

Bearing in mind that cultural policy represents one of the main elements for sustainable development in the country, it is important to stress that culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina was never linked with policies in other social fields. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens experienced a 'digital gap' due to their social and economic circumstances but also due to the fact that issues of an efficacious involvement in the information society was never seriously taken into the consideration within the cultural policy at any level. Cultural policy at all levels should also incline towards improving social integration combating any kind of discriminations of citizens in the various parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>5</sup>. This implies closer cooperation with civil society as well as, education institutions, media and youth organisations. All relevant institutions in the entire country should implement joint activities fostering intercultural communication and interactions, integration of various parts of the society, in which the variety of cultural identities, behaviours and beliefs build a sincere peace and reconciliation culture.

***Bearing in mind that cultural policy represents one of the main elements for sustainable development in the country, it is important to stress that culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina was never linked with policies in other social fields.***

Furthermore, it is necessary for culture to be 'brought closer' to rural and smaller towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In other words, it is possible to open an entry to the culture for every citizen, promoting and supporting broader access to culture for all population, preventing marginalisation and exclusion, firming all processes that support cultural democratisation and social integration.

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4 According to the European Agenda for Culture, within the Action Plan and strategic objectives, culture has found a place in the transversal politics of EU. Three main objectives were set: to promote intercultural dialogue (2008), to promote culture as catalyst of creativity (from economy creativeness), and to promote culture as a central element of international relations (and with non-EU activities).

5 On a contrary for example, cultural and education policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina still encourage "two schools under one roof" and fostering discrimination of pupils' right to learn their language in the schools, in the areas of the country where they are minorities.



***Furthermore, it is necessary for culture to be 'brought closer' to rural and smaller towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina.***

All of the above indicates that an adequate cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina would be the essential element to enable a sustainable development of the society, especially linking it with education, economic and social policies. It can reinforce citizens' participation within society, improve their already lost confidence, integrate various members of society and different communities, building the culture of peace not the culture of conflicts and distrust. Bearing in mind political and societal context today, this will take more time and changes in the society's political culture as well.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, cultural policy<sup>6</sup> cannot be any different than an entire political and social situation in the country. Bearing in mind the ongoing crisis in all areas of life, strong political influence on culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina together with an absolute neglect and disinterest of the political responsible for culture, the main question is actually who should make these changes and under whose responsibility culture and cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina should really be. One of the answers should be to position culture more vividly and seriously in the educational systems throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, mitigation of problems could be achieved by transparent financial support and donations related to various cultural projects. EU funds are already providing assistance. Trainings on cultural management are in order to combat various obstacles. Because it is far more important to educate cultural workers how to acquire funds, how to use them and be transparent about it. The fact which should not be overlooked is that Bosnia and Herzegovina's society represents the society with utterly dysfunctional social and political organisations, state and cultural institutions. It is a society characterised by symptomatic influence of mass and populist culture and mass media. Cultural institutions are fighting strictly for their survival, middle class - the one that creates and consumes cultural goods - almost does not exist, funding for cultural, scientific and publishing activities are extremely inadequate and when they occur, their distribution is very questionable, dubious alongside 'shady' criteria. Today's cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina simply does not exist. When speaking about relation between state and culture, it is only about attempts for solving existential issues of cultural institutions, with sporadic participation in the realisation of certain cultural events, and 'completely by the book' without planning in advance and long-term strategies, often due to the pressure of cultural/art professionals, citizens and media.

***It is a society characterised by symptomatic influence of mass and populist culture and mass media.***

When creating an adequate cultural policy all responsible government structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina should finally understand and accept the fact that culture is economic potential, the greatest integrative factor for the society and the leading genuine indicator of one society's progress.

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6 Cultural policy represents an expression and an image of general society condition, and the model of cultural policy is shaped by the political strategies that are favored in every society (Lepenisi, 2009).



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## About the author

**Sarina Bakić** is professor and researcher at the Department of Sociology, University of Sarajevo's Faculty of Political Science. Her core scientific field is the sociology of culture, relations between art and politics, and various phenomena of mass culture.

Contact: [sarina.bakic@fpn.unsa.ba](mailto:sarina.bakic@fpn.unsa.ba)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 17 2022



By Evelina Staykova  
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# Return Migration in Bulgaria: A Policy Context of Missed Opportunities

## Policy Recommendations

1. Identifying and managing the main obstacles to return.
2. Ensuring better interconnectedness between the 'diaspora' and the policies of return migration in order to facilitate return and re-integration.
3. Developing a comprehensive package of measures dealing both with decisions to emigrate and return.
4. Better implementation of the national policies and strategies in the field of migration.

## Abstract

The last census in Bulgaria shows that population has shrunk by 11.5% in a decade. Low birth rate, high death rate and migration are the key factors behind the country's demographic decline. Governmental strategy documents admit that Bulgaria has lapsed into a serious demographic crisis and recognise migration and especially return migration as one possible solution. However, the recognition of potential benefits from this phenomenon failed to translate into active and concrete policies

aimed at attracting returnee's involvement in the prosperity of the country. Return migration gathered new momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has accounted for the return of many Bulgarians. These events have reconfirmed the need for a thorough re-evaluation of current policies concerning return migration and this accounts for the critical analysis of the Bulgarian case made in the following Policy Brief in order to identify possible vectors for improvement.



# Return Migration in Bulgaria: A Policy Context of Missed Opportunities

## Introduction

Many territories in Europe are experiencing population decline. This is a result of a combination of low fertility and emigration and is especially true for nearly all countries in the Western Balkans. For their most part these countries, Bulgaria being one of the examples, share a view on emigration in terms of a “national catastrophe” regarding a perceived loss of demographic and intellectual capital. Presumably, emigration countries would readily make an investment in policies devised to attract back the people they have “lost”. Moreover, return migrants could have a positive impact on the development of sender countries. There is extensive evidence showing that return migrants can have a beneficial social impact on their countries of origin as they bring in productive skills, technological knowledge, international networks and professional experience needed at the domestic labour market (Clemens et al., 2014; Le, 2008; Rapoport, 2004). It is also evident that examples of success can relate to well-elaborated policies affecting all relevant aspects of that field: from motivation for return to facilitation of the reintegration process.

Bulgarian governments identify return migration as a priority of their migration policy. Attracting Bulgarian nationals living abroad has been identified as a key policy objective in several National Migration Strategies (Zareva, 2018). The paradox in the Bulgarian case is that this prioritisation was not followed by steps toward dynamising the return process and facilitating the capitalisation of its benefits.

Return migration gathered new momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is true not only for Bulgaria, but for most countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where the pandemic has accounted for the return of many nationals to their countries of origin back from receiver migration destinations. These events have reconfirmed the need for a thorough re-evaluation of current policies concerning return migration and this accounts for the critical analysis of the Bulgarian case made in the following Policy Brief in order to identify possible vectors for improvement.

## From emigration to return migration - does such a tendency even exist?

The population of Bulgaria, which amounted to 6,838,937 persons in 2021, continues to decline. Emigration phenomenon is one of the factors determining this trend. The total number of Bulgarian nationals living abroad, by various estimates, vacillates between a little over 1 million and nearly 2 million and a half. Most of the Bulgarian emigrant population stays in the European Union (EU). Turkey is another major destination country for Bulgarians. Other countries of destination for Bulgarians are primarily the USA, Canada and Israel. Bulgarian emigration includes two categories:

1. Bulgarian citizens residing temporarily or permanently abroad:



- Contemporary ("young") Bulgarian emigration;
  - "Old" Bulgarian emigration.
2. "Historical" Bulgarian communities abroad and persons of Bulgarian origin and with Bulgarian national identity and possessing foreign or dual (foreign and Bulgarian) citizenship.

***The total number of Bulgarian nationals living abroad, by various estimates, vacillates between a little over 1 million and nearly 2 million and a half.***

What is important to this analysis is that the predominant attitude towards emigration is dominated by traumatic images inherited from communism, mostly associated with the "non-returnees" and "The Great Excursion" (Staykova, E., Otova, I., 2021), and from the dramatic descriptions of modern emigration associated with "brain drain" and "loss of the flower of the nation". There is very little talk about the eventual positive aspects of the situation and what are the possible benefits for Bulgaria accruing from communities living outside the national territory. The emphasis is actually laid exclusively on the relation between the country's demographic crisis and emigration. This phenomenon is often identified as one of the important factors for the deterioration of the demographic situation in the country, and the return of the new emigration to the country is seen as one of the responses to the demographic crisis. Attracting people of Bulgarian origin from the historical diaspora for permanent settlement in the country is seen in a likewise manner (Ivanova, V., 2015). This requires concrete government mechanisms, which underlines the need for a comprehensive and critical review of national strategies in that field.

***The emphasis is actually laid exclusively on the relation between the country's demographic crisis and emigration.***

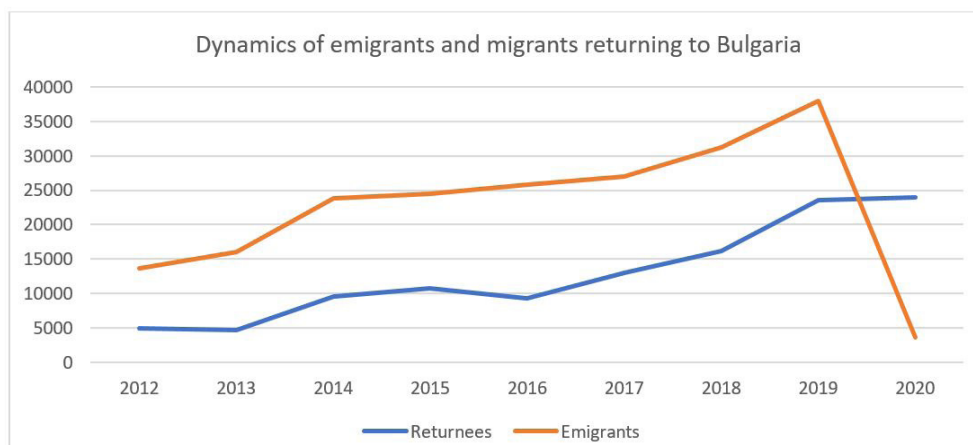
Concerning the dynamics of emigration, it is worth noting that although after 1989 there were estimates of the number of people who have left the country varying between 600,000 and over 1 million, in subsequent decades there has been a significant decrease in the number of departures. The average net annual rate of migration, which added up to 66,000 departures in late 1980s, has dropped to about 27,000 people in the 1990s and to 17,000 people between 2001 and 2011 (Angelov, G., Lessenski, M., 2017). Eurostat data indicates that between 2013 and 2019 the number of Bulgarians leaving the country has registered a gradual increase, with the number doubling over a five-year period – from 16,000 in 2013 to 31,000 in 2018 (Eurostat, 2020). It is noteworthy that 2020 has seen an unprecedented decline in the numbers of people leaving the country – from over 37,000 for 2019 to a little over 3,600 for 2020. Actually, this is the first time that those who have left were less in numbers than migrants arriving to the country.

Data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) indicate that the last decade has seen a steady increase in the number of people returning to the country. Although research has reported a positive tendency, it should be taken into account that, except for the 2020 reversal, which is likely induced by the pandemic, return migration has proceeded on a considerably lesser scale than emigration. It is interesting to mention that it is easier to link return migration to the presence of crises rather than to the enforcement of government policies of attraction. This is confirmed by the dynamics



surrounding the financial crisis in Europe, the Brexit, and is currently being confirmed in the context of the pandemic, with a more pronounced increase in the returnee flows (Georgiev, O., 2020). At this stage, it is still difficult to deduce accurate data as a great part of the returnees have not registered the change in their permanent address and are not included in the NSI statistics. In addition, no thorough investigation of the intentions of this group of returnees has been conducted so far.

***Data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) indicate that the last decade has seen a steady increase in the number of people returning to the country.***



Source: The author according to data from the National Institute of Statistics, 2022

## The context of policies - paradoxes and perspectives

Countries usually avoid to implement self-contained comprehensive return policies; these are rather incorporated as an element into other policies. Most often these policies are part of the general migration or integration policies, or are incorporated as a specific accent into the diaspora-oriented policies (Frelak, J. S., Hahn-Schaur, K., 2019).

In the Bulgarian case, the return policies belong to the overall policy on migration. In order to reduce the negative effects of emigration, public authorities have been developing policies aimed in principle at reducing emigrant flows and stimulating the return of Bulgarian population to the country. The main purpose is to improve the demographic balance, to increase the labour supply and the national human capital (Bogdanov G., Rangelova, R., 2012).

Bulgarian migration policy is characterised by its late inclusion into the political agenda which began with the accession of the country to the EU. However, it is well to keep in mind that even prior to these developments, it had certain elements which indicated accents and commitments. From the perspective of the present analysis, it is important to note the institutionalisation of the Agency for Expatriate Bulgarians as early as 1992. From that moment until now there have been a number of measures implemented in the field, and four national strategies have been developed, recognising the attraction of expatriate Bulgarians as a key emphasis in their priorities.

***Bulgarian migration policy is characterised by its late inclusion into the political agenda which began with the accession of the country to the EU.***



The first strategy (2008 – 2015) adhered to pronounced ethnically marked characterisation, prioritising the return of foreigners of Bulgarian origin, or the so-called Bulgarian historical diaspora. The second one (2011 – 2020) is in more general vein as regards the projected results – encouraging the return to Bulgarian labour market of Bulgarian nationals working abroad, and so is the third one (2015 – 2020) – providing for the attraction of Bulgarian emigrants back to Bulgaria in view of their final return. From the logic of the main strategic documents, one can conclude that they were intended to address mainly national and ethnic ideals rather than identifiable needs of the labour market (Ivanova, V., 2015). The most recent (currently effective) National Strategy of Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 – 2025) in regard to the Bulgarian migrant communities, among the priorities of the national policy are those aimed at their eventual return:

- Preparation of programmes (or actualisation of available ones) providing assistance for Bulgarian citizens intending to return or have already returned to the Republic of Bulgaria. These programmes are supposed to be aimed at the utilisation of the potential of Bulgarian citizens – as regards acquired knowledge, expertise, language skills, contacts, culture of communication, etc. and to facilitate them to the maximum extent in their establishment into the country upon their return.
- Conducting purpose-driven campaigns and intensive discussions, including at the political level, by involving the effort of the wide public in encouraging the return of Bulgarian citizens and settling into the Republic of Bulgaria (NSMRB, 2021).

It is important to note that from the perspective of Bulgarian policies, return is perceived mostly as a definitive act. This tendency, however, does not correspond neither to global migration dynamics, nor to empirical observations, which indicate that the dynamic migration model dominates much more frequently (Bobeva, D., Zlatinov, D., Marinov, E., 2019). The return can be an element in the complex, individual biography of mobility (Frelak, J. S., Hahn-Schaur, K., 2019). Both return migration as well as immigration in Bulgaria are much more related with the trends of ‘circular migration’. Paradoxically, even circular migration persisted in all strategic documents it was not a priority of Bulgaria’s migration policy. In most cases, ‘circular migration’ is referred to as an EU term that is derived from EU migration policy to which Bulgaria adheres to as part of its national strategy on migration (Vankova, Z., 2020).

One of the key elements in Bulgaria’s policy of attracting Bulgarian nationals residing abroad is the granting of Bulgarian citizenship based on origin. With regard to this policy there is discrepancy between expectations and achieved effect. The hypothesis that “new” Bulgarian citizens of Bulgarian origin would fit easier in society and without the need for specific assistance, does not always conform to reality. It turns out that these citizens such as the other immigrants also need support for their successful integration, and besides, it has become clear that a very small part of them in reality remain in the country. In most of the cases, Bulgarian citizenship is used for the purposes of further migration toward other states, most often in the EU.

***One of the key elements in Bulgaria’s policy of attracting Bulgarian nationals residing abroad is the granting of Bulgarian citizenship based on origin.***

Theory and practice demonstrate that good policies of return can be divided into: 1) policies aimed at attracting repatriates; 2) policies aimed at facilitating return,



by way of targeting potential returnees (e.g. through information); and 3) policies seeking to ensure reintegration. Cited measures can overlap in the majority of cases. For example, migrants may require informational support prior to and following their return. Entrepreneurial support may attract emigrants to return, but it may also play an important role in the reintegration process (Frelak, J.S., Hahn-Schaur, K., 2019). Analysis of Bulgarian policies in the field of return has made it possible to outline one of their substantial deficits – lack of implementation. They have remained, just like many other public policies, mostly within the realm of strategy and limited to the level of the campaigns for attracting returnees. Primary initiatives in this field relate to encouragement of return migration through online information portals, consultation services and annual career forums to provide information to expatriate Bulgarians about opportunities to be found in Bulgaria (Zareva, I., 2018). Very few concrete steps have been undertaken to facilitate this return and almost none to support reintegration.

***Analysis of Bulgarian policies in the field of return has made it possible to outline one of their substantial deficits – lack of implementation.***

## Conclusion

Bulgaria has been a country of emigration since the 1990s. The most popular view on emigration relates to the “brain drain” discourse and its negative effect on the country’s demographic dynamics, such as depopulation and ageing (Misheva, M., 2021). Governmental strategy documents admit that Bulgaria has lapsed into a serious demographic crisis and return migration could be one possible solution. However, the recognition of potential benefits from this phenomenon failed to translate into active and concrete policies aimed at attracting returnee’s involvement in the prosperity of the country.



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## About the author

**Evelina Staykova** is associate professor at the New Bulgarian University. She is head of the Department of Political Sciences and coordinator of CERMES. Her teaching and research interests include migration and urban studies, citizenship and e-democracy, populism and far-right extremism. Her last book is "Migration and Populism in Bulgaria". Routledge, 2021.

Contact: [staikova@gmail.com](mailto:staikova@gmail.com)

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Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 18 2022



By Elise Bernard, Fjollë Ibrahim  
Vienna, 11 November 2022  
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# Kosovo: ending isolation

## Policy Recommendations

1. The EU member states should be coherent in their attitudes regarding the visa liberalisation of Kosovo.
2. Kosovo should engage in a bilateral level with sceptic EU member states and work on convincing those who hesitate to provide support for the country in this matter.
3. Kosovo's visa liberalisation process, still pending in the Council of the European Union, should be treated as a matter of urgency.

## Abstract

*"[...] Secondly, Europe cannot afford to look away from the Western Balkans any longer. Given their geography and their history, given the share of tragedy and the share of future promise they bear, the Western Balkans are central to the European continent. They bear scars that remind us of both the fragility of peace and the strength of our union. That is why it is today up to us, there too, to rethink our relationship with the countries of the Western Balkans and give them clearer, more transparent, proactive and sincere prospects of accession. Not accession as a bulwark, so to push back the foreign attempts at destabilization that we are seeing at present. Positive accession, through adherence to our project, in a reasonable period." (Emmanuel Macron's speech at the European Parliament – Strasbourg, 19 January 2022).*

The speech of President Emmanuel Macron at the European Parliament when taking over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union stressed one more time the support for the Western Balkans in general and their clear accession perspective to the European Union (EU) in the future. The president stated that a Conference on the Future of Europe will be followed by a Conference on the Western Balkans. Therefore, in a meeting on 23 June, ahead of the European Council summit held on 23-24 June 2022, the leaders of the EU member states and of the Western Balkan countries discussed progress on EU integration and the challenges stemming from Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Visa liberalisation of Kosovo, which is the topic of this Policy Brief, was not on the agenda, however, it was discussed by [several members of the summit](#).



# Kosovo: ending isolation

## A long road towards Europe

If we take a look at the journey of Kosovo towards integration in the European Union (EU), in a time where other Western Balkan countries are in a process of discussing different stages of the integration, Kosovo remains in search of visa-free regime, which still does not exist after ten years from when the whole journey started. Since 2012, the European Commission has issued five reports on Kosovo's progress towards visa liberalisation (the most recent in June 2018). In July 2018, the European Commission confirmed that Kosovo had met the two outstanding requirements, thus fulfilling all benchmarks set out in the visa liberalisation roadmap. The European Parliament has voted in support of the European Commission's proposal which is pending in the Council of the European Union.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the European Commission's positive assessments regarding the fulfilment of the benchmarks, several member states have remained opposed to date, citing the rule of law concerns. According to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the country suffers from a high level of corruption and organised crime and that there is not enough support for the visa liberalisation process for Kosovo in the Council.<sup>2</sup> However, the Dutch position is shifting. At the European Council summit held on 23-24 June 2022<sup>3</sup>, Prime Minister Mark Rutte told the press as follows: *"[...] even maybe on Kosovo visa liberalisation, you might hope that later this year or next year, we might take the next step, because they have done a lot in terms of rule of law and independent judiciary."*<sup>4</sup>

Rutte's statement at the summit, which referred to granting visa liberalisation as 'taking the next step', was significant because it was the first time a Dutch official indicated a potential position change on Kosovo's visa liberalisation process. These developments illuminate a careful but significant shift towards a more open and positive tone in the Dutch narrative.<sup>5</sup>

After years of waiting, positive signs are also seen from Germany. The German Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Mass, on his visit to Kosovo on April 2021, stated that Kosovo "has fulfilled all criteria for visa liberalisation and it should be granted."<sup>6</sup>

According to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019<sup>7</sup>, regarding the situation of visas in Kosovo, and the rule of law, the positive developments of that time were too recent to sufficiently curb the phenomena of corruption, acknowledging that progress was made but not enough. Therefore, the continued implementation

1 [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/kosovo-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/kosovo-report-2021_en).

2 <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/netherlands-continues-to-oppose-kosovos-visa-liberalisation-due-to-corruption/>.

3 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/24/europe-an-council-conclusions-23-24-june-2022/>.

4 <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/videos?keywords=Rutte> (23 June 2022, from minute 2:37).

5 [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Light\\_at\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_tunnel.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Light_at_the_end_of_the_tunnel.pdf).

6 <https://euobserver.com/world/151874>.

7 <https://www.senat.fr/questions/base/2019/qSEQ190410179.html>.



of the reforms appears essential to produce tangible effects in terms of rule of law and fight against corruption and organised crime. However, on the reception for the French National Day, the French ambassador in Kosovo gave positive signals stating that significant progress has been made on the issue of visa liberalisation although it was not given the green light under the French presidency.<sup>8</sup> This could be an indication that the French position is shifting as well.<sup>9</sup>

Kosovo's report of 2021 issued by the European Commission stated that overall corruption is widespread and remains an issue of serious concern. Thus, despite significant efforts, there is a need for strong and continual political will to effectively address systemic corruption risks and a robust criminal justice response to high-level corruption. While the government in Pristina is faced with distrust and disbelief among a number of EU member states about its seriousness and achievements in the fight against corruption and organised crime<sup>10</sup>, it has to be mentioned that Kosovo's efforts in the rule of law reform have been noted by the international democracy and the rule of law monitors. According to the international watchdog Transparency International, which published its latest Corruption Perception Index in January 2021, Kosovo made progress by climbing 17 places, achieving the highest annual improvement.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Kosovo achieved its highest ranking ever in the latest Freedom House report, where it achieved a rank of 37.5 out of 100 in democracy compared to 36.5 in 2021.<sup>12</sup>

***Kosovo's report of 2021 issued by the European Commission stated that overall corruption is widespread and remains an issue of serious concern.***

On the other hand, regarding the domestic politics in several member states, driven by worries about migration, that stymied efforts to approve visa-free travel for Kosovars, it is to mention that last year the citizens of Kosovo composed the second lowest number of asylum applicants in the EU compared to other countries of the region. About 1,600 Kosovar citizens applied for asylum in the EU in 2021, constituting so 95% decline from 2014 when 34,000 Kosovar citizens applied for asylum.<sup>13</sup><sup>14</sup> With such progress, Kosovo hopes to impact the convictions of sceptical EU member states who continuously require advancement regarding the above-mentioned issues in Kosovo.

In general, the freedom of movement of Kosovars continues to be a prisoner of the contradictions of the EU and the differences that exist between member states.

8 <https://kosovapress.com/en/the-french-ambassador-gives-positive-signals-about-visa-liberalization/>.

9 <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/will-kosovo-get-visa-liberalization-this-time/>.

10 <https://kfos.org/en/publications/114/visa-liberalization-kosovos-saga-eu-path>.

11 <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>.

12 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/nations-transit/2022>.

13 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:CPC22\\_First\\_time\\_asylum\\_applicants\\_to\\_EU\\_by\\_citizens\\_of\\_CPC,\\_2014\\_and\\_2021\\_\(thousand\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:CPC22_First_time_asylum_applicants_to_EU_by_citizens_of_CPC,_2014_and_2021_(thousand).png).

14 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement\\_countries\\_-\\_statistics\\_on\\_migration,\\_residence\\_permits,\\_citizenship\\_and\\_asylum#Asylum\\_applicants\\_and\\_first\\_instance\\_decisions\\_in\\_the\\_EU](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_statistics_on_migration,_residence_permits,_citizenship_and_asylum#Asylum_applicants_and_first_instance_decisions_in_the_EU).





Until the concerns of opposing EU member states are not addressed sufficiently, Kosovo will remain in the waiting room.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, there is neither the situation nor the time to play the “blame game” regarding who failed the visa liberalisation process since the whole situation is ending up in a vicious circle, and no solution is being found. Instead, a set of concrete steps should be taken, and discussions should be over opportunities to overcome the problem rather than just blaming and comparing.

***In general, the freedom of movement of Kosovars continues to be a prisoner of the contradictions of the EU and the differences that exist between member states.***

Additionally, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are essential to Kosovo’s European integration process and to any other country in the region that aspires to the EU. To have good relations and cooperation, the region’s citizens should be able to move freely in the Western Balkan countries. However, this is not the case in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The latter doesn’t recognise Kosovo’s independence, and both maintain a strict visa regime. Waiting months and enduring long and often complicated procedures of obtaining a visa to travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina keep many Kosovars away from this country, even for business opportunities. Individually, numerous business and career opportunities are being missed due to the visa regime between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.<sup>16</sup> This regime is especially harmful to the emerging generation of young people willing to engage in youth and student mobility within the Western Balkans.<sup>17</sup> In particular, affected by this regime is the Bosnian community of Kosovo. Not only are they required to possess visas if they wish to travel to the EU, but they are also required to have visas to visit their country of origin. Both countries, claiming to have a European perspective while enforcing visas seems far from approaching European values. The region should be connected both internally and with the EU. Therefore, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo should abolish the existing visa regime<sup>18</sup> as a priority.

***Additionally, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are essential to Kosovo’s European integration process and to any other country in the region that aspires to the EU.***

## Isolation is not a European value

Still and despite all this long process, the approval and support of Kosovo for the EU and the integration process remain among the highest in all the region. As seen in the

15 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/12/17/agenda-2021-how-can-kosovo-government-approach-the-visa-liberalisation-issue/>.

16 <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/mission-impossible-get-bosnia-herzegovina/>.

17 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/11/06/in-mobility-we-trust-lets-abolish-bosnia-kosovo-visa-regime-and-boost-erasmus-in-the-western-balkans/>.

18 <https://www.rycowb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/One-Way-Ticket-Not-More-Seven-Ideas-for-a-Prosperous-Western-Balkans.pdf>.



public opinion poll published by the European Western Balkans web portal<sup>19</sup> a majority of 90% is in favour of joining the EU. This situation is especially interesting for one of the authors of this Policy Brief, namely Fjollë Ibrahim, who initiated this Policy Brief as a research assistant; she finished her post-graduate studies in law and then had the opportunity to conduct an internship and become part of the organisation EuropaNova in Paris, which was created to understand European construction better. Considering the whole situation from the social dimension, a key priority should be the free movement in order to improve the chances of EU accession and secure the citizens a more prosperous future. So, all citizens and in particular the youth should have the opportunity to travel and meet other young Europeans of different nationalities. By exchanging opinions, points of view, ideas, and culture, we learn about each other and ourselves. Europe is also an experience.

***Still and despite all this long process, the approval and support of Kosovo for the EU and the integration process remain among the highest in all the region.***

The isolation is creating barriers for all citizens, particularly for the youth, to move freely around Europe to search for better education and training opportunities. Even though EU programmes such as Erasmus play a vital role in advancing education, students still have to go over costly and time-consuming procedures to go either to summer/winter schools or benefit from trainings/conferences offered by different prestigious universities in Europe. The cultural exchange element by allowing citizens to meet is important because in this way bridges are built between people, between communities – and this is how Europe is made after all. Additionally, these are the chances for the Kosovar citizens and, particularly, the youth to show the potential they can bring to the European Union.

***The isolation is creating barriers for all citizens, particularly for the youth, to move freely around Europe to search for better education and training opportunities.***

Furthermore, visa liberalisation can also trigger positive movements in the economic sphere. One of the aims in the stabilisation and association agreement between EU and Kosovo, among others, is to support the efforts of Kosovo to develop its economic and international cooperation.

Indeed, economic development is also raised by either a short-term training or business networking but participation is often difficult due to the visa regime. It has a big impact on attracting foreign investments as well. Integration and mobility of people and resources between countries mark the start of new connections and relations between businesses and governments. Economic growth is fostered through trade, economic agreements, and partnerships. This would undoubtedly advance Kosovo, it would open doors to more business partnerships being created between businesses in Kosovo and elsewhere in the EU, encouraging economic growth and reducing unemployment in the country.<sup>20</sup>

19 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/11/08/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>.

20 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263661444\\_Socio-economic\\_Impact\\_of\\_the\\_EU\\_Visa\\_Liberalization\\_for\\_Kosovo\\_and\\_Peoples\\_Motives\\_in\\_Utilising\\_the\\_Freedom\\_of\\_Movement\\_within\\_the\\_EU](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263661444_Socio-economic_Impact_of_the_EU_Visa_Liberalization_for_Kosovo_and_Peoples_Motives_in_Utilising_the_Freedom_of_Movement_within_the_EU).



***Furthermore, visa liberalisation can also trigger positive movements in the economic sphere.***

It can be observed from the practices of the other countries in the region like Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, where the trade with the EU has increased significantly after visa liberalisation. The economic benefits of EU integration were truly understood after the creation of the single market along with the removal of all internal physical barriers. The freedom of movement without barriers opens the way for partnerships among businesses and citizens, and thus, all economic actors could have the possibility, for example, to more easily send their staff either for training or business activities in the EU member states. Based on these arguments, the authors of this Policy Brief believe that Kosovo should avail from the freedom of mobility of people and resources.

The initiatives to deepen the cultural cooperation between Kosovo and EU member states are very much appreciated. In this context, the authors can mention the Declaration of Expression of Interest<sup>21</sup> aimed at establishing stable and strategic relations between France and Kosovo and, as well, the accession of Kosovo as an associate member to the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF) in October 2018. All these initiatives that express interest in supporting various projects between the two countries are linked again with the impact of removing visas would have. We can take, for instance, the fact that Kosovo became an observer member of OIF in 2014 and has since embarked on a proactive policy to promote the French language in the country. Nonetheless, to accomplish this ambitious goal effectively, Kosovar people should be able to attend the language courses or training provided in France or another European country as effortlessly as other European citizens do, without lengthy and expensive procedures.

***Kosovo's European integration should proceed gradually, and the end of isolation should be considered as a first step.***

The authors of this Policy Brief believe that because of developments the world is going through, the need of people to have as much interaction as possible with each other is increased. The difficulty of physical access to other countries through visas makes it impossible for Kosovars to use their capacities and energy in the processes that take place in Europe and which are closely related to Kosovo. The aim should be to increase the inclusion of Kosovar society in European culture to make the state's integration into the EU smoother in the future. We can mention here the great work that the French embassy in Pristina is doing in the field of cultural cooperation. For example, the inclusion of Kosovar cultural actors in festivals held in France during the summer of 2021.<sup>22</sup> Through these meetings in high-quality events with prestigious cultural institutions, the Kosovar participants became more deeply acquainted with French culture, which they can share among their families and friends when they go back home. However, these meetings should be available for every citizen who wishes to participate. Kosovo's European integration should proceed gradually, and the end of isolation should be considered as a first step.

21 <https://telegrafi.com/kosova-dhe-franca-thellojne-bashkepunimin-kulturor-nenshkruhet-marreshja-mbeshtetese-mes-ministrive-dhe-ambasades-franceze/>.

22 <https://kosovo.ambafrance.org/De-Cannes-en-Avignon-le-Kosovo-s-est-invite-dans-les-grands-festivals-en-France>.



To conclude, Kosovo's visa liberalisation process, still pending in the Council of the European Union, should be treated as a matter of urgency. With the crises Europe faces today, and with the three recent application for EU membership<sup>23</sup> of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, the EU must step up the game and finally remove visas for Kosovars. The potential candidate country should move forward with its European integration process and enjoy the same perspective as other countries in the region.

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23 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/23/european-council-conclusions-on-ukraine-the-membership-applications-of-ukraine-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia-western-balkans-and-external-relations-23-june-2022/>.



## About the authors

**Elise Bernard**, Director of Studies, EuropaNova, holds a PhD in public law from the Sorbonne's Institute of European Studies of the University of Paris III - Sorbonne-Nouvelle.

Contact: [elise.bernard@europanova.eu](mailto:elise.bernard@europanova.eu)

**Fjollë Ibrahim**, research assistant, EuropaNova, holds a LL.M. degree in law from Paris 1 Panthéon - Sorbonne University.

Contact: [fjolle.ibrahimi@europanova.eu](mailto:fjolle.ibrahimi@europanova.eu)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihic

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 19 2022



By Svetlana Stefanović, Maša Vračar  
Vienna, 17 November 2022  
ISSN 2305-2635

# The Vulnerability of Women in the Labour Market in Serbia

## Policy Recommendations

1. Including a gender perspective in employment policies.
2. Introducing comprehensive programmes and measures to support the employment of vulnerable categories of women as well as empowering women by improving the career guidance system and developing mentoring programmes.
3. Improving the system of employment protection and preventing discrimination.

## Abstract

Gender inequality exists today in all societies around the world, and it is rooted in the social structure and the traditional division of labour. It is inextricably tied to economic progress, social cohesion, and the advancement of democracy, demonstrating its significance and value. As a result of law, the absorption of a gender perspective into other policies, and the development of particular measures for women's development, the European Union has made substantial progress in gender equality during the last decades. As the European Union is a global leader in the promotion of gender equality, particularly in the countries aspiring to join the full-fledged membership status, to Serbia as one of the candidate countries the achieving of the gender equality is high on the priority list.

Discrimination of women is present in many spheres, especially in the labour market in Serbia. In the labour market it is reflected in a very disadvantaged position for women, especially young women and those 45+. On one side, their participation in the labour market is low, while on the other side, various forms of discrimination at the workplace, gender roles in family and difficulties in balancing private and professional life have been particularly recognised as reasons for that. This Policy Brief will point out the problems that women face in the labour market, present the main causes of the unemployment of young women and women 45+ and also offer some policy recommendations for overcoming them in the future.



# The Vulnerability of Women in the Labour Market in Serbia

## Introduction

Gender equality is one of the fundamental human rights and it is assumed that in one society there are equal opportunities for all, women and men, that they equally contribute to cultural, political, economic, and social progress and enjoy all of the benefits of one community.

Nonetheless, gender inequality exists today in all societies around the world, and it is rooted in the social structure and the traditional division of labour. Equality is a critical component of any society's development and is required for economic growth, social cohesion and the advancement of democracy.

Women are implicitly responsible for the job of caring for others, have a more difficult time finding paid employment and education, they are less involved in the decision-making process and have less economic power. All of this contributes to the fact that women remain at a disadvantage in society, despite claims to the contrary.

Gender equality has been a priority for the European Union (EU) since its establishment. The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 outlines actions that will make a significant progress toward a gender-equal Europe by 2025. The goal is a Union where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are **free** to pursue their chosen life path, have equal opportunities to **thrive**, and can equally participate in and **lead** our European society.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the European Union Strategic Documents are emphasising the importance of gender equality in the enlargement process. Therefore, incorporating gender equality principles into domestic legislation and ratifying the relevant acquis communautaire has become an essential part of the accession process.

Accordingly, Serbia as a candidate country for EU membership adopted several laws, a legal framework, and established necessary gender equality mechanisms, but the status of gender equality policy implementation remains a challenge.

## Women in the labour market in Serbia

Global analyses and reports on the position of women in national states confirm that systemic gender inequality is deeply present in Serbia: according to the World Economic Forum's annual measurement of the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)<sup>2</sup> from 2022: Serbia ranks 23rd out of total 146 analysed countries. This index is calculated as a sum of results from the following sub-indices: economic participation and opportunities, level of education, health and survival, and political empowerment.

1 European Commission, 2022, Gender equality Strategy 2020 - 2025, retrieved from Internet: <https://bit.ly/37XAqIE>, accessed on 11/03/2022, 15.15.

2 World Economic Forum (WEF), 2020, Global Gender Gaps Index 2020, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf), accessed on 17/03/2022, 16.05.



The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) publishes the Gender Inequality Index (GII)<sup>3</sup> on an annual basis, which depicts gender inequality in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. Serbia is ranked 35rd out of 162 countries in the 2019 GI index. The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)<sup>4</sup> of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) measure clear progress in political determination to achieve gender equality and assesses the development of an adequate normative framework for eliminating systemic discrimination. According to the findings of the SIGI index for 2019, Serbia's progress was rated as very low (20%)<sup>5</sup>. This index is made up of sub-indices that measure discrimination in the family.

***All laws and strategies must recognise gender as an important component in order to facilitate and advance women's labour force participation.***

The government established the Coordinating Body for Gender Equality in 2014 to promote gender equality in Serbia. A number of laws and strategies have been adopted that, in their individual provisions, regulate the position of women on the labour market, but the biggest problem is in implementation. However, different laws and regulations are unrelated and, in some ways, contradict each other. All laws and strategies must recognise gender as an important component in order to facilitate and advance women's labour force participation.

## **The position of young women in the labour market in Serbia**

Young women in Serbia face gender-based discrimination when looking for work or in the workplace, as confirmed by the European Commission's Progress Report on Serbia (2020).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) stated that the unemployment rate among young women in Serbia is higher than among young men, and sexual harassment of young women in employment (2019)<sup>7</sup> was highlighted as a particular problem.

***Young women in Serbia face gender-based discrimination when looking for work or in the workplace, as confirmed by the European Commission's Progress Report on Serbia (2020).***

- 3 UN WOMEN, Gender Inequality Index 2019, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>, accessed on 17/03/2022, 18.43.
- 4 OECD, SIGI Index 2019, [https://www.genderindex.org/ranking/?region=&order=field\\_sigi\\_value19\\_value](https://www.genderindex.org/ranking/?region=&order=field_sigi_value19_value), accessed on 17/03/2022, 19.53.
- 5 OECD, SIGI 2019, Serbia, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/data-sheets/2019/RS.pdf>, accessed on 17/03/2022, 19.53.
- 6 European Commission, Serbia 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/serbia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/serbia_report_2020.pdf), accessed on 20/03/2022, 21.43.
- 7 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, <https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=CEDAW/C/SRB/CO/4&Lang=E>, accessed on 20/03/2022, 22.51.





According to the National Youth Strategy of Serbia from 2015 to 2025, the situation of young women is particularly significant. Due to childbearing, young women are much more vulnerable to discrimination in the workplace. Young Roma women face an especially difficult situation, as they are three times less likely to be employed than young Roma men and much less than the broader youth population. Around one-fifth of young women (20.9%) and 17.1% of young males are in the NEET group, which spans the ages of 15 to 29.<sup>8</sup> There are visible differences in the earnings of women and men: the share of young women is twice as high as that of men in the lowest income category, which includes people with incomes lower than 25,000 Serbian dinars per month.<sup>9</sup>

***Due to childbearing, young women are much more vulnerable to discrimination in the workplace.***

One in every four young women and one in every seven young men<sup>10</sup> are over-educated for their job. The observed mismatch may be related to the fact that young women face more difficulties while searching for employment than young men, and are therefore forced to accept jobs that are below their educational qualifications. Furthermore, young men are much more prone to self-employment than young women (9.7% for men, and only 4.6% for young women), and they are much more likely than women to choose self-employment because of its potential to offer greater independence or higher revenue.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, after giving birth, self-employed women receive financial compensation often lower than their salary, through which they are obliged to pay contributions in order not to interrupt the flow of their years of service.

***One in every four young women and one in every seven young men are over-educated for their job.***

Specific gender components are not recognised or mentioned in most programmes aimed at improving youth employability, nor is the gender gap between young women and young men in the labour market recognised. The youth are seen as a homogeneous group and gender equality is ensured through gender-sensitive interventions that are mainly focused on the participation of young people in programmes.

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- 8 Foundation Ana and Vlade Divac, 2020, The position of Neet people in the Republic of Serbia 2020, [https://www.divac.com/upload/document/poloaj\\_neet\\_mladih\\_u\\_republii\\_srbiji\\_2020.pdf](https://www.divac.com/upload/document/poloaj_neet_mladih_u_republii_srbiji_2020.pdf), accessed on: 17/03/2022, 18.18.
  - 9 Sarita Bradaš, Center for Democracy Foundation, Young and dignified work, <http://www.centaronline.org/userfiles/files/publikacije/Mladi-i-dostojanstven-rad.pdf>, accessed on: 18/03/2022, 11.18.
  - 10 Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit, 2017, Transition from school to job: Young People in the Serbian Labor Market, <https://sociojalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/en/school-to-work-transition-young-people-in-the-serbian-labour-market/>, accessed on: 19/03/2022, 12.09.
  - 11 Dragana Marjanovic, International Labour Office, 2016, Youth transition women and men in the labor market Republic of Serbia, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\\_emp/documents/publication/wcms\\_488799.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_488799.pdf), accessed on: 25/03/2022, 20.05.



## The position of 45+ women in the labour market in Serbia

About 420,000 women in Serbia between the ages of 45 and 64, according to the 2020 Labour Force Survey, fall into either the category of unemployed or inactive in the labour market. Statistics also demonstrate that after the age of 45, women's employment drops, whilst men's work does not. The biggest difference lies in the number of individuals inactive in the labour market between the age of 55 and 59 - that number is almost 100,000 for women, while only about 50,000 for men.<sup>12</sup>

When compared to women aged 45 and over to younger women and men, it can be seen that they have a lower employment rate. When compared to "peer" men, it can be seen that the gender gap is large - 20% fewer women that are unemployed are actively looking for employment, while men are leading in employment by 18%.

***Statistics demonstrate that after the age of 45, women's employment drops, whilst men's work does not.***

Education is very important for positioning in the labour market in Serbia for all categories of the population. It is the same with women older than 45. Those with higher education are significantly more likely to be employed than women with secondary and especially lower education. Most low-skilled women (with no education or mostly with completed primary school) are inactive at this age.

While women in Serbia are more often employed than men, they are less likely to engage in entrepreneurship or self-employment. In addition, women in this age group are the most likely to be in the status of helping members of the family business. This is a category of employees that is especially vulnerable because it does not indicate profit or employment-based social rights. The 2008 survey on the position of women in the status of helping household members (the only such survey) showed that as many as 40% of women in this status were previously employed outside agriculture. The right to protection in old age is exercised by a small number of women who are in the status of the family labour force. Two-thirds of these women did not invest in pension and disability insurance, and more than a quarter used to do so but stopped due to their unfavourable financial situation. This directly endangers their well-being in old age and forces them to prolonged activity, which often involves hard physical work in conditions of reduced physical ability.

*"As long as you can work, you will be able to live. When you can no longer work, you will not be able to live."<sup>13</sup>*

***While women in Serbia are more often employed than men, they are less likely to engage in entrepreneurship or self-employment.***

Compared to employed men of the same age, women over the age of 45 are less likely to be employed in the occupations of managers, officials, craftsmen, and production workers. They are more represented in the social services sectors (education,

12 Republic Bureau for Statistic 2021, Labor Force Survey in the Republic of Serbia, str 51, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/Pdf/G20215671.pdf>, accessed on: 25/03/2022.

13 Babović, M., Vuković, O. (2008), *Seoske žene u statusu pomažućih članova domaćinstava: položaj, uloge i socijalna prava*, UNDP, Belgrade.



health, etc.) and work for lower wages, even when they do work of the same value as men and have the same qualifications (e.g. level of education and length of service).

According to 2016 salary data, earnings for older workers are generally greater than for younger people. However, women aged 45 and over have lower earnings on average not only than their “peers” but also than younger men.<sup>14</sup>

*“Young people came with high school diplomas and children were appointed to managerial positions. My boss was five years younger than my daughter. I was exposed to mobbing. I stayed at work until the end of 2015 when I was declared redundant together with a large group of colleagues, as many as 30 percent of the working body. At that time, I was 59 years old and had 32 years of experience.”<sup>15</sup>*

## Causes of unemployment among young women and 45+ women in Serbia

The listed data indicates that in Serbia young women have greater difficulties in entering the labour market than young men, while older women are more likely to be excluded from the labour market than men of the same age.

Some of the main causes of unemployment among young women, but also among women older than 45 in Serbia are: education, gender blind policies, mismatch between education and labour market demands, and balance of private and professional life.

### Education

Serbian society is still characterised by patriarchal norms and aspirations toward traditionally established patterns, which can be seen in education. When it comes to secondary education, the biggest disparity arises when it comes to gender. Patriarchal divisions of responsibilities and interests severely limit education’s ability to meet its development goals. The disparity then frames the path, possibilities, and opportunities that the young person encounters in later life.

Gender segregation in education manifests itself in a greater concentration of girls in social and humanistic fields, areas of care for others, as well as general and high schools. In secondary vocational education, gender segregation is even more pronounced.

When looking at the statistics and comparing women’s and men’s participation and coverage in the formal education system, nearly the same number of young women and men attend and complete high school. However, the proportion of women among graduate students is close to 60%. On the other hand, when it comes to teaching staff, particularly in higher education institutions, women’s participation is less than 50%.

***Long-standing norms and discrimination against women can only be addressed when gender is addressed at all levels.***

14 Women at the Crossroads Association, 2017, Denial of the right to decent work: The Labor Market in Serbia, <http://www.zenenaprekretnici.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Zene-plus-45-cele-publikacija.pdf>, accessed on: 25/03/2022, 17.09.

15 Women at a Crossroads Association, Roadmap of Encouragement, 2017, Belgrade.



The aforementioned educational elections are at the core of later labour market inequity. Young women, in particular, have a far harder time finding job in these industries, and their compensation is much lower. More emphasis should be placed on improving the quality of education at all levels, reforming the curriculum, providing more extra-curricular activities that address gender issues, and providing financial assistance to disadvantaged women in order for them to complete university degrees, as well as providing incentives to pursue STEM subjects. Long-standing norms and discrimination against women can only be addressed when gender is addressed at the all levels.

### Gender-blind economic policies

Serbia's economic policies aim to achieve a certain level of inclusive economic growth that benefits both young women and men equally, the reality is frequently different. Economic and employment policies routinely perpetuate the gender divide by benefiting men more than women, particularly in terms of access to economic opportunities, incentives, and stimuli, as well as policies promoting job creation and economic growth.

***Serbia's economic policies aim to achieve a certain level of inclusive economic growth that benefits both young women and men equally, the reality is frequently different.***

Generally, the problem in Serbia is not a lack of employment opportunities but also opportunities created to encourage young women to enter the labour force or older women to re-enter the labour force. Active labour market policies in Serbia, aided by labour market information systems and analyses of current and future human capital supply and demand, can also be used to influence targeted job creation. One critical prerequisite is a diverse, balanced, and healthy economic structure that allows for a fair distribution of growth. This can only be accomplished through a diverse workforce and job creation in a variety of sectors that target young women and older women, including different geographic regions and skill levels. The availability of sex-disaggregated data can be useful in monitoring the impact of economic policies on job creation for women and men, particularly in estimating their impact on the employment of young or old women in various sectors and regions, as well as taking into account the nature, quality, and wages of jobs created. Monitoring is also important for identifying emerging issues and challenges that necessitate policy and programmatic action.

### The mismatch between education and labour market demands

Education, employment, and economic policies and programmes in Serbia are generally designed in isolation from one another and do not always work together toward the same goals, resulting in educational policies producing graduates who are incompatible with the current and future labour market needs.

The prevalent social and cultural beliefs discourage young and older women from entering the labour force. Educational choices for young women are limited by socially imposed labels that identify specific areas of the labour market as appropriate or inappropriate for young women, discouraging young women from pursuing education and employment in a broader range of sectors, opportunities, and geographic locations that are available to young men. Older women are being squeezed



out of the labour market as a result of patterns of discrimination against older women that stem from employers' attitudes and their lower evaluation of the characteristics of women of various ages and their workforce. This entails addressing the social and cultural prejudices that perpetuate negative attitudes. Young and older women can be encouraged to participate more broadly in various walks of life.

***The prevalent social and cultural beliefs discourage young and older women from entering the labour force.***

### **Balance of private and professional life**

Women's well-being is dependent not only on their labour-force participation but also on how they balance family life and business obligations.

Despite the fact that many economic factors contribute to the problems mentioned above, in Serbia, the difficulties in balancing private and professional life have been specifically identified as a reason that contributes to the high level of female inactivity in the labour market, as well as an impediment to climbing the career ladder. In most cases, inactive women stopped working when they started a family, or they never looked for work for the same reason. At the same time, a lack of child care facilities and the need to do household chores are impediments to professional development and advancement.

*„Employment means fulfilment and satisfaction. For a woman to be confident in herself, to have her own identity. To have self-esteem. She is independent of other people's opinions and able to change herself and influence her environment. And she can change what doesn't suit her.“<sup>16</sup>*

Unemployment further weakens the position of women within the family and makes it more difficult to take care of the family. Usually, unemployment status creates difficulties in family life, starting with those existential problems related to satisfying basic needs, changing spending habits, etc. For this reason, single mothers often agree to very unfavourable jobs to ensure a basic existence for themselves and their children. Women are also at a disadvantage relative to their husbands when it comes to job loss and long-term unemployment. Some women are constantly chastised for failing to contribute to the home budget. The rebuke comes not only from the husbands but also from the women who live in the community with their parents and from the wider family.<sup>17</sup>

***Women are also at a disadvantage relative to their husbands when it comes to job loss and long-term unemployment.***

The joint reason for inequality in the labour market for young women and women 45+ is a **gender stereotype** that persists in the belief that men and women in Serbia should play different roles in society. Such assumptions restrict individual choice, resulting in squandered talent and untapped potential, skill gaps, and lower pay for jobs

16 Babović, M. (2007), The position of women in the labor market in Serbia, UNDP, Belgrade.

17 Ibid.



perceived to be “women’s work”. Stereotyping influences what women do at home and how they are treated, which influences the subjects they choose at school, limiting their future job and career options, and contributing to stereotyped views in the home. And it is present in the education through textbooks and school programmes a root of traditional roles in Serbian society. There is a disconnect between what young people believe are appropriate jobs for men and women and the choices they make for themselves, which frequently adhere to traditional stereotypes.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

Serbia has set of laws which determine the legal framework in the areas of the position of women in the labour market: Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Labour Law, Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, Gender Equality Law, Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance, Law on Prevention of Violence at Work, Law on Financial Support for Families with Children, Law on Agency Business as well as strategies and action plans. The two most important are Law on Prohibition of Discrimination and Gender Equality Law and they are harmonised with EU legislation, however, difficulties arise in their implementation. Stronger measures are necessary to encourage a greater role of women in the labour market, such as flexible working hours, as well as encouraging the possibility for fathers to also take childcare leave.

Furthermore, the pandemic has shown the burden of unpaid work and children’s education on women. Women perform three times more unpaid work, and this has increased even more during the pandemic, since children stayed at home. On a positive note, men, who also had to work from home, seem to have become more aware of the burden of unpaid work on women.

***Women perform three times more unpaid work, and this has increased even more during the pandemic, since children stayed at home.***

The unemployment rates of young women are higher than those of older women. If we look at the data for each category and looking at the data alone does not necessarily tell the whole story. The high unemployment rate of young women stems mainly from the characteristics of the labour market and less from their personal attributes. On the other side difficulties faced by unemployed older women when searching for a job are more a function of their age than the overall business environment.

Serbia must use different approaches to address both issues, youth women unemployment, and older women unemployment. Creating more jobs will assist young people in entering the labour force. Increasing the minimum wage and supplementing older women income with earned income tax credits will assist older women in re-entering the labour force.

Discrimination against women in the labour market is a common occurrence and one of the primary causes of women’s unequal social status. It manifests itself in either low labour force participation rates or various forms of workplace discrimination against women that favour men. Even though this type of discrimination exists in the most developed countries, it is more pervasive and damaging in patriarchal societies such as Serbia, where gender roles in the family, as well as gender-stereotyped jobs, are the primary causes of women’s unequal position in the labour market.

Inequality and discrimination against women in the labour market contribute to the perpetuation of the current global economic system, which is exacerbated by gender stereotypes and flaws in laws and public policies. Economic thinking prevails,



frequently failing to recognise the economic value of women's unpaid work and care for others, and thus favours men's macroeconomic policies that are harmful to women and exacerbate structural inequalities.

The number of unemployed young and 45+ women in Serbia, and the resulting loss of their potential, is reason enough to take concrete action addressing the root causes of young women's unemployment, as well as moving toward a policy framework in Serbia that empowers them in all walks of life. The recommendations below could assist in addressing the aforementioned challenges:

- Including a gender perspective in employment policies (labour market analysis and measures to improve the position of young women and women 45+), thus addressing the systemic causes of labour market inequalities;
- Introducing comprehensive programmes and support measures for employment of women and empowering of women in order to create a push factor for young and older women to join the labour force. Creating incentives for young women to pursue education in fields where job growth is expected, strengthened quotas for young women in employment and government-supported enterprise development schemes, improving the career guidance system, developing mentoring programmes in gender equality sectoral policies, etc.;
- Child protection and elderly care institutions should be organised in such a way that women can balance family and business life;
- Improving the system of employment protection and preventing discrimination, which disproportionately affects women, is a necessary condition for the full realisation of guaranteed human rights and women's rights to equality and freedom from discrimination, and thus constant monitoring and harmonisation of the legal framework with international standards is required.



## About the authors

**Svetlana Stefanović**, Executive Director, Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society

Contact: [sstefanovic@bfpe.org](mailto:sstefanovic@bfpe.org)

**Maša Vračar**, Junior Researcher, Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society

Contact: [mvracar@bfpe.org](mailto:mvracar@bfpe.org)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihčić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)





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WB2EU

By Melika Mahmutović  
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# Listening to the people: How the Green Agenda Action Plan can do better for the Western Balkans

## Policy Recommendations

1. To reach desired objectives, the European Union should more closely involve and consult environmental civil society organisations from the Western Balkans and the local population, on all matters related to the Green Agenda, which includes timely and transparent sharing of information in line with the Aarhus Convention.
2. The European Union should extend the Green Agenda Action Plan to delineate clear responsibilities of all relevant actors in the region, set clear time-frames and targets as well as precise rights and responsibilities of civil society organisations in the consultation process.
3. It should impose stricter control over governmental action of the Western Balkans to reach the objectives of the Green Agenda and establish a sound monitoring system that will also include the civil society organisations and extend monitoring financing in line with coordinated and participatory bottom-up financing schemes.

## Abstract

In October 2021 at the EU-Western Balkans Summit held during Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU), the Green Agenda Action Plan was adopted, setting in motion the implementation of the ambitious environmental deal for the Western Balkans (WB). Extending the objectives of the European Green Deal (EGD) to the WB, the Action Plan provides nine billion euros in grant funding for the WB. This initiative is an important step for environmental protection in the region facing serious challenges related to air, water and soil pollution. The Action Plan was delivered by the Regional Cooperation Council after a 10-month drafting process. With the generous funding provided for its implementation, the plan can prompt a renewed momentum of the enlargement process and advance the EU's credibility in the region. However, improper implementation process can seriously hinder the success of this initiative. Environmental civil society organisations

from the WB play a crucial role in safeguarding local communities from harmful practices and weak environmental protection measures. They are actively involved in processes related to environmental justice and offer important know-how and expertise, which proves to be instrumental in crafting a comprehensive and robust Green Agenda for the WB. With much to address, the Green Agenda Action Plan should consider a more serious dedication to the bottom-up approach, with regular consulting from environmental civil society organisations and the public, particularly those most vulnerable from the effects of environmental degradation. The war in Ukraine and consequences of the energy crisis make these matters as relevant as ever, and EU must provide a strong and comprehensive support for the WB states in their journey towards energy transition and sustainable development, while ensuring stability in the region in face of the current crisis.



# Listening to the people: How the Green Agenda Action Plan can do better for the Western Balkans

## Introduction

The European Green Deal (EGD) was announced on 11 December 2019, as an ambitious roadmap for making the European Union (EU) economy sustainable and resource efficient. The chief goal behind the EGD is achieving zero net emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) by 2050.<sup>1</sup> Making Europe a climate neutral continent cannot be possible without a full transition towards circularity and without EU's immediate neighbourhood also taking the effective action. Environmental action has been an important element in the EU's policies for the Western Balkans (WB), often being put forward as independent topic not related to the enlargement perspective.<sup>2</sup>

During the WB Sofia Summit in November 2020, the Green Agenda for the WB was adopted, aligning the region with the EGD. Most recently, at the EU-WB Summit held in Slovenia in October 2021, during its Presidency of the Council of the EU, agreement was reached on the Green Agenda Action Plan. The document was prepared by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and opens the way for the nine billion euros in grant funding and 20 billion euro in investments from the Economic and Investment Plan for the region, covering the period from 2021 to 2030. With it, the WB countries took on the task of reaching sustainable development, and centring nature protection, resource efficiency and climate action in all economic activities whilst aligning with general EU objectives.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Inadequate industrial technology and crude environmental management have resulted in poor soil, water and air quality.***

Pollution is one of the most acute issues in the WB. Inadequate industrial technology and crude environmental management have resulted in poor soil, water and air quality.<sup>4</sup> In particular, air pollution is in critical state in all countries in the region, responsible for one in five premature deaths in urban

- 1 European Commission. (2022). A European Green Deal. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en).
- 2 The Balkan Forum. (2021). Circular Economy in the Western Balkans Region: Waste Management as a Challenge. (p.4). Available at [https://thebalkanforum.org/file/repository/Circular\\_Economy\\_in\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans\\_region.pdf](https://thebalkanforum.org/file/repository/Circular_Economy_in_the_Western_Balkans_region.pdf).
- 3 Todorović, I. (2021). Adopted Green Agenda Action Plan for Western Balkans brings EUR 9 billion in grants, 2024 deadline to align with EU ETS. Available at <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/adopted-green-agenda-action-plan-for-western-balkans-brings-eur-9-billion-in-grants-2024-deadline-to-align-with-eu-ets/>.
- 4 Russo, J. (2019). Pollution in the Western Balkans and the International Response. The Borgen Project. Available at <https://borgenproject.org/pollution-in-the-western-balkans-and-the-international-response/>.



areas.<sup>5</sup> These issues are intensified by the WB's socio-economic context. Low-income families are forced to rely on wood, coal or waste for heating and government funding for appropriate sewage, waste and energy systems and infrastructure are scarce.<sup>6</sup> Rivers are regularly clogged by floating landfilled waste, which is washed away from illegal dump sites around the river banks.

***With specific dedication to the issue and their know-how, environmental civil society organisations are integral in crafting appropriate legislation and ensuring just implementation.***

Management of these issues is weakened by corruption, slow legislation enforcement and failure to monitor and track activities related to environment. It then comes as no surprise, that the bulk of the work aimed at fixing and improving the current situation has been carried out by environmental civil society organisations (ECSOs) and local communities. With specific dedication to the issue and their know-how, ECSOs are integral in crafting appropriate legislation and ensuring just implementation. They have been instrumental in raising awareness and monitoring the state of environment, while also being important bridge between the EU and local and national WB governments. The Green Agenda should reflect this and operationalise the help offered by ECSOs. This is necessary for the overall success of the Green Agenda, as a flawed Action Plan may limit progress and hinder its success.<sup>7</sup>

***The Green Agenda should reflect this and operationalise the help offered by environmental civil society organisations.***

In what follows, the Policy Brief explores the potential of the Green Agenda for the WB, looking at the role of ECSOs in the drafting process and assessing the success of the consultation process. The aim is to question how appropriate the proposed action is, considering the current standing of the WB vis-à-vis environment and by taking into account recommendations from the civil society. We conclude with proposals for establishing sufficient environmental action and remaining responsible to the broader stability in the region.

## **The logic behind the Green Agenda & notes from the civil society**

The Green Agenda for the WB envisions action around five pillars, covered in the EGD: (1) climate action, including decarbonisation, energy and mobility, (2) circular economy (CE), addressing in particular waste, recycling, sustainable production and efficient use of resources, (3) biodiversity, aiming to protect and restore the natural

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5 UNEP. (2019). Air pollution is responsible for up to one in five premature deaths in 19 Western Balkan cities. Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/air-pollution-responsible-one-five-premature-deaths-19-western>.

6 Hofhuis, P., Cretti, G., Popović, M., Vojvodić, H. and Zweers, W. (2021). The Green Agenda: Providing breathing space for Western Balkans citizens? Netherlands Institute of International Relations. Available at <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/green-agenda-providing-breathing-space-western-balkans>.

7 Petritsch, W., Freund, P. (2021). The European 'Green Deal' for the Western Balkans. Available at <https://www.lansky.at/en/newsroom-en/news-media/info-magazine-lgp-news-022021/the-european-green-deal-for-the-western-balkans/>.



wealth of the region, (4) fighting pollution of air, water and soil and (5) sustainable food systems and rural areas.<sup>8</sup> ECSOs have welcomed the advancement of the Green Agenda for the WB while emphasising the importance of an adequate implementation process.<sup>9</sup>

***Environmental civil society organisations have been advocating for lower emissions and phasing out facilities which are the biggest emitters of air pollution, with little avail from the policy makers.***

Decarbonisation is one of the chief goals here, as all WB countries but Albania, heavily rely on coal, making the region responsible for more coal emissions than the entire EU.<sup>10</sup> ECSOs have made proposals for provisions on sustainable decarbonisation and CE<sup>11</sup>, calling on for equal consideration to various social, climate and biodiversity impacts of the process as well as pushing for the legal climate commitment of all WB governments and robust monitoring and sanction mechanisms<sup>12</sup>. Likewise, ECSOs have been advocating for lower emissions and phasing out facilities which are the biggest emitters of air pollution, with little avail from the policy makers.<sup>13</sup>

This advocacy includes a push for inclusion of household energy efficiency measures, electrification of public transport as well as broader compliance with the Energy Community Treaty in the Green Agenda.<sup>14</sup> When it comes to agriculture, which has always been a cornerstone of WB economic activities and communities' liveli-

- 8 European Commission. (2020). Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/green\\_agenda\\_for\\_the\\_western\\_balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf).
- 9 Joint civil society statement in the wake of the Sofia Summit. (2020). Make the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans drive the transition to a sustainable, carbon-neutral wellbeing economy that works for people. Available at <https://www.co-plan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Green-Agenda-Summit-Civil-Society-Statement-09Nov2020-1.pdf>.
- 10 Carragher, A. (2021). The EU's Green Agenda for the Western Balkans packs a risky geopolitical agenda. Carnegie Europe. Available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/84879>.
- 11 Maleš, I. (2020) Guidelines on circular economy for the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey. (pp. 5-7). Available at [http://env-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/guideline-WBT\\_INCIEN\\_final.pdf](http://env-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/guideline-WBT_INCIEN_final.pdf).
- 12 Joint civil society statement in the wake of the Sofia Summit. (2020). Make the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans drive the transition to a sustainable, carbon-neutral wellbeing economy that works for people. Available at <https://www.co-plan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Green-Agenda-Summit-Civil-Society-Statement-09Nov2020-1.pdf>.
- 13 The World Bank. (2021). Going Green Means Cleaner Air, Healthier Living in the Western Balkans. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/05/17/going-green-means-cleaner-air-healthier-living-in-the-western-balkans>
- 14 Joint civil society statement in the wake of the Sofia Summit. (2020). Make the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans drive the transition to a sustainable, carbon-neutral wellbeing economy that works for people. Available at <https://www.co-plan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Green-Agenda-Summit-Civil-Society-Statement-09Nov2020-1.pdf>.



hoods<sup>15</sup>, there is a significant lack of political commitments for improving the implementation of biodiversity policies and the influence of economic activities on it. EC-SOs have urged for the strict enforcement of obligatory rules and standards whilst making more tailor-made programmes for farmers and agriculture workers and supporting research of high-biodiversity areas and their effective protection.<sup>16</sup>

All five pillars of the Green Agenda call for precise and integrated action, which is why its financing must reflect a clear and prioritised spending plan. Importantly, environmental issues are not a consequence of the lack of funds, but rather apparent poor organisation and management strategies employed by the WB governments. This is something which ECSOs have brought attention to and why they advocated for the creation of coordinated financing and monitoring schemes, with just transition funds which would be running bottom-up, based on participatory and transparent local development plans.<sup>17</sup> In many ways, creating a Green Agenda without hearing out these requests - without creating a supervising governance mechanism, simply means setting it up for failure.

***All five pillars of the Green Agenda call for precise and integrated action, which is why its financing must reflect a clear and prioritised spending plan.***

## The road from Sofia to Brdo pri Kranju

### Delivering the Green Agenda

The above explained concerns and recommendations put forward by ECSOs were relayed to the European Commission (EC) months before the Sofia Summit, on top of the continuous action and cooperation of these groups with the local and national authorities in the WB region and the EU. After the Green Agenda was adopted, ECSOs criticised the lack of public participation during its design. According to them, the consultation process was neither inclusive nor transparent, and many relevant environmental NGOs from the region were not informed or consulted. The general public was also mostly unaware of the existence of the agenda, and from those NGOs that

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- 15 Znaor, D. (2013). Sustainable Agriculture as a Path to Prosperity for the Western Balkans. Green European Journal. Available at <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/sustainable-agriculture-as-a-path-to-prosperity-for-the-western-balkans/>.
  - 16 Joint civil society statement in the wake of the Sofia Summit. (2020). Make the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans drive the transition to a sustainable, carbon-neutral wellbeing economy that works for people. Available at <https://www.co-plan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Green-Agenda-Summit-Civil-Society-Statement-09Nov2020-1.pdf>.
  - 17 Joint civil society statement in the wake of the Sofia Summit. (2020). Make the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans drive the transition to a sustainable, carbon-neutral wellbeing economy that works for people. Available at <https://www.co-plan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Green-Agenda-Summit-Civil-Society-Statement-09Nov2020-1.pdf>.



had the opportunity to participate, only few of their proposals have been taken into consideration.<sup>18</sup>

***While environmental civil society organisations showed willingness to cooperate from the beginning and offered their expertise, most of their proposals were not included in the Green Agenda, at least not with the assertiveness required.***

Moreover, while the agenda proposed many good ideas, it seriously lacked proper enforcement mechanisms, not considering lessons given by ECSOs.<sup>19</sup> Once again, they have stressed the lack of focus on the legal enforcement of the Green Agenda hindering its integrity. Also, with no proper monitoring mechanisms, concerns were also raised about short-term economic investments prevailing over the long-term sustainability.<sup>20</sup> While ECSOs showed willingness to cooperate from the beginning and offered their expertise, most of their proposals were not included in the Green Agenda, at least not with the assertiveness required. At this point, the Action Plan had the opportunity to address previously unanswered concerns and provide a more robust system for ensuring enforcement of the agenda.

## The Action Plan ambiguity affair

RCC had about a year after the Sofia Summit to prepare the plan. Still, the Action Plan's first draft was delivered only two weeks prior to the summit in Slovenia – leaving minimal time for any amendments.<sup>21</sup> Dialogue was held on different levels, with little convergence between them. This further excluded ECSOs from achieving meaningful participation. In general, this highlights the lack of political will for meticulously crafting the measures.

***It remains unclear whether and how the EU will sanction WB countries in case of failure to implement the plan.***

Indeed, the quality of the Action Plan was hindered by the rush of its drafting. The hefty list of 58-measures is marked by ambiguity and unclear provisions, which

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- 18 Joint civil society statement in the wake of the Sofia Summit. (2020). Make the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans drive the transition to a sustainable, carbon-neutral wellbeing economy that works for people. Available at <https://www.co-plan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Green-Agenda-Summit-Civil-Society-Statement-09Nov2020-1.pdf>.
  - 19 Gallop, P. (2020). A Green Agenda for the Western Balkans: Where are the teeth? CEE Bankwatch Network. Available at <https://bankwatch.org/blog/a-green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-where-are-the-teeth>.
  - 20 Joint civil society statement in the wake of the Sofia Summit. (2020). Make the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans drive the transition to a sustainable, carbon-neutral wellbeing economy that works for people. Available at <https://www.co-plan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Green-Agenda-Summit-Civil-Society-Statement-09Nov2020-1.pdf>.
  - 21 Gallop, P. (2021). The Western Balkans Green Agenda Action Plan: Quantity over quality. Bankwatch network site. Available at <https://bankwatch.org/blog/the-western-balkans-green-agenda-action-plan-quantity-over-quality>.



can eventually serve as an excuse for the lack of progress. For instance, the Action Plan states that it is 'defining an indicative timeframe for each implementable measure'.<sup>22</sup> Such phrasing is simply not effective, especially not for WB countries already lagging behind deadlines. Moreover, it remains unclear whether and how the EU will sanction WB countries in case of failure to implement the plan.

The Action Plan relies on WB countries to conduct assessments of the progress in each of the measures. With this, the Action Plan also remains obscure in setting up bodies responsible for handling and overseeing the implementation process as the enforcement of the agenda is left up to national governments through their legislation. Here in particular, we see how ECSOs concerns were not reflected in the design of the Action Plan, nor were their calls for stricter monitoring and implementation mechanisms listened to.

### Civil society left cold

All of this points to the failure of the RCC to properly involve ECSOs in the drafting process and expand on their recommendations and concerns. This becomes especially problematic if taken against the claims that the Action Plan preparation came as a result of an 'extensive consultation process', developed in 'a bottom-up approach'.<sup>23</sup> Even more, the Action Plan includes provisions on multi-stakeholder approach as well as cross-sectoral collaboration. However, ECSOs have been very vocal and critical in this regard, particularly towards the RCC, calling for this part of the plan to be amended, as no such activities have occurred.

ECSOs have expressed their frustration, as for 10 months they received no information on the Action Plan, only to be given a week to comment on the draft. They have shown particular concern over the fact that the plan offers no clear delineation between responsibilities of different actors, nor is it clearly disclosed how the civil society is to be consulted regarding the implementation on the national level.<sup>24</sup> Without this, there is a risk of having the contents of the Action Plan dealt with in the 'pick and choose' manner, with the WB national and local governments shifting the obligations among themselves on the basis of convenience and not a structured strategy. Moreover, with already alienated civil society in the region, if their role is not carefully cemented in the Action Plan, they can easily be suppressed by other actors. Finally, from the experience it is easily deducible that without precise and clear timelines, especially those that are legally binding, little to no progress can be made.

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- 22 RCC. (2021). Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021-2030. (p.3). Available at <https://www.rcc.int/docs/596/action-plan-for-the-implementation-of-the-sofia-declaration-on-the-green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-2021-2030>.
  - 23 RCC. (2021). Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021-2030. (p.3). Available at <https://www.rcc.int/docs/596/action-plan-for-the-implementation-of-the-sofia-declaration-on-the-green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-2021-2030>.
  - 24 NGO letter. (2021). For attention of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the European Commission on The Draft Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration. Available at <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NGO-letter-on-the-draft-action-plan-for-the-implementation-of-the-Sofia-Declaration-.pdf>.



***Environmental civil society organisations have expressed their frustration, as for 10 months they received no information on the Action Plan, only to be given a week to comment on the draft.***

Hence, in reality a bottom-up approach was not achieved and RCC made no effort to properly involve the ECSOs in the creation of the plan. Many of the issues in the Action Plan, raised above, could have been prevented with a proper consultation process, while the overall capacity of the RCC in leading the process is questioned due to such shortcomings.

### **What can be done to improve the trajectory of the Action Plan**

The Green Agenda can greatly improve environmental protection in the WB, but rushed and ambiguous measures seriously limit its success. In order to ensure an integrated and reliable implementation of the Green Agenda, current shortcomings of the Action Plan need to be addressed. Russian invasion on Ukraine makes these issues that much more pressing, as Russia continues to use the WB to oppose and counter Western gas diversification attempts while further destabilising the region.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, due to the implications of the energy crisis, WB states are turning back to the coal, at least temporarily. North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have already announced their plans to postpone phasing out coal-fired power plants over the next few years while Serbia plans on increasing its coal production.<sup>26</sup> This raises fears among ECSOs, that WB states are trying to retract on their commitments regarding energy transition. While the consequences of war in Ukraine are extensive and bring about serious threats to EU and international security, it is critical for the EU to offer comprehensive support to the WB, particularly through appropriate implementation of the Green Agenda, as to increase gas diversification and develop a more robust renewable energy sector. The EGD and with it the Green Agenda are instrumental in confronting some of the ramifications of the war in Ukraine, and WB's commitments to the agenda cannot be renounced. Rather, the processes of its implementation should be accelerated and the role of ECSOs further solidified.

***Due to the implications of the energy crisis, WB states are turning back to the coal, at least temporarily.***

ECSOs and wider public have to be involved and consulted in all phases of the implementation of the agenda. This needs to include an active engagement with the local population, and timely and transparent sharing of information in line with the Aarhus Convention.

To properly respond to the raised concerns of the ECSOs, the EC should make the responsibilities of all actors clearly delineated and define precise steps to be taken over different phases, while determining explicit and clear timeframes and targets.

25 Ichord, Jr, R.F. (2022). The war in Ukraine and gas in the Western Balkans. Energy Source. Atlantic Council. Available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/energy-source/the-war-in-ukraine-and-gas-in-the-western-balkans/>.

26 Çakir, B. (2022). The impact of the energy crisis on the EU and the Balkans. Ankara centre for crisis and policy studies. Available at <https://www.ankasam.org/the-impact-of-the-energy-crisis-on-the-eu-and-the-balkans/?lang=en>.





This also means setting up precise responsibilities and rights of the ECSOs in the consultations on the implementation process.

As the region deals with overarching structural issues in the realm of environment protection, the RCC and the EC must impose stricter control over the WB governments and establish a sound monitoring system that will also improve access and reliability of data. It is vital to include ECSOs in the monitoring process and extend monitoring financing, in line with coordinated and participatory bottom-up financing schemes.

***Local and regional environmental civil society organisations offer important insights and direct knowledge of the situation, they are the link between communities and decision-makers.***

Communities in the WB are hit hard by the impact of pollution and environmental degradation. From waste floating in rivers to unbearably poor air quality – people are bearing the costs of how their governments are (mis)managing and responding to environmental concerns. These issues are further exacerbated with the current energy crisis. Local and regional ECSOs offer important insights and direct knowledge of the situation, they are the link between communities and decision-makers. Because of this, they must be taken seriously in the implementation of the document with such a scope. If the EU wants to remain true to its values and protect the people of WB from environmental degradation and energy crisis, properly implementing the Green Agenda is instrumental. Regardless of the dynamic of decarbonisation to be taken, each WB state should aim to implement these policies and measures for inclusive and just transition, taking into consideration goals of decentralization and democratization of energy sector.



## About the author

**Melika Mahmutović** is Junior Research Fellow and PhD student at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Centre for International Relations.

Contact: [melika.mahmutovic@fdv.uni-lj.si](mailto:melika.mahmutovic@fdv.uni-lj.si)

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## About ÖGfE

The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a non-governmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has a long-standing experience in promoting European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna  
Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihčić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 21 2022



By Senada Šelo Šabić  
Vienna, 1 December 2022  
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# Demographic decline of Croatia: What is to be done?

## Policy Recommendations

1. Assess the demographic challenge in a multi-stakeholder perspective and design policies that reflect political, economic and social complexity of the issue. Earlier policy solutions should be analysed critically and fairly.
2. Strengthen the rule of law. Strong democratic institutions with entrenched rule of law and legal certainty positively impact investments and economic development which, in return, incentivise people to remain, those who left to return, and new ones to come. Designing policies aimed at increasing birth rates without tackling broader negative political and economic trends, in particular corruption, will not reverse demographic decline.
3. Reflect on positive aspects of people's mobility and on best practices elsewhere.
4. Show positive examples of immigration in Croatia and successful stories of integration. Discuss challenges of integration both for the local population and immigrants. Deconstruct fear.

## Abstract

Croatia has been steadily losing its population in the course of the last three decades. Demographic decline is partly a result of wartime human losses in the 1990s, but ever since it has been steered by a combination of factors including decreasing birth rates, increasing emigration, and limited im-

migration. Since Croatia joined the European Union in 2013, emigration of mostly young and educated hit new record highs. The government's policy solutions have not reversed negative demographic trends. Is it time that Croatia designs a progressive and comprehensive immigration policy?

# Demographic decline of Croatia: What is to be done?

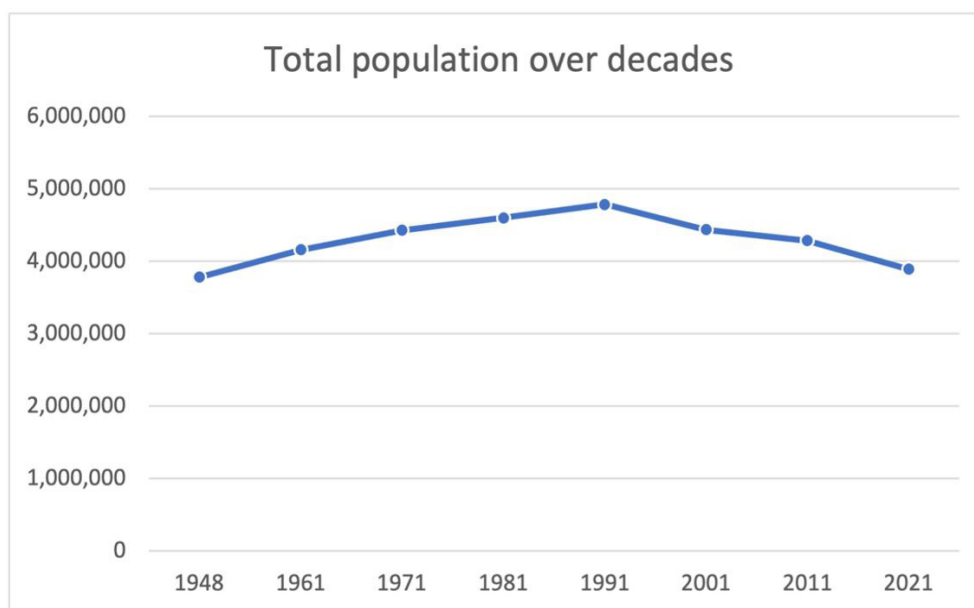
## 2021 census results

Croatia is a small country which over centuries has experienced waves of emigration. People left in search of better life for economic but also, at times, for political reasons. Not to dive deep into historical details, since the end of the Second World War, Croatia recorded the highest population at the time when it became an independent state. The 1991 census recorded Croatian population to be 4,784,265. Over subsequent years, this figure declined and in 30 years Croatia lost over 900,000 people.

The 2021 national census results show that Croatia has a population of 3,871,833 million people, 413,056 less than in 2011, a decline of 9.64%.<sup>1</sup> The main reason for the decline is intensified emigration since Croatia joined the European Union (EU) in 2013, although the negative demographic trend is recorded since 1991. The sharpest decline is recorded in eastern parts of Croatia, where in some locations reaches over 20%.

*The main reason for the decline is intensified emigration since Croatia joined the European Union (EU) in 2013, although the negative demographic trend is recorded since 1991.*

A percentage of children age 0-14 is slightly over 14%, while seniors over the age of 65 make 22.45% of the population. With declining birth rates, Croatian population will continue to age.



Source by the  
Croatian Bureau  
of Statistics,  
compiled by the  
author.

1 "Objavljeni konačni rezultati Popisa 2021", Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 22 September 2022. <https://dzs.gov.hr/vijesti/objavljeni-konacni-rezultati-popisa-2021/1270>.



Both trends – low birth rates and emigration – have contributed to Croatia losing over 400,000 people in a decade. Some warn that the reality is actually bleaker and that considerably more persons are actually absent. Namely, many who left in recent years maintain their residence status and are officially counted as residents although in reality they no longer reside in Croatia.

***Both trends – low birth rates and emigration – have contributed to Croatia losing over 400,000 people in a decade.***

Croatian National Health Insurance's published data as of 30 September 2022 shows the total number of insured persons in Croatia is 4,106,642.<sup>2</sup> If the total population of Croatia according to the 2021 census is subtracted from this figure, the result shows that in Croatia there are over 234,000 insured people than the total number of citizens.

These people, it is assumed, do not live in Croatia, but they continue to hold their insurance status and are registered in the country as unemployed. A new law on mandatory health insurance aims at clearing this gap. The official statistics may not reflect the real situation, but people have various explanations of how this is possible. A dentist in one Croatian town describes that she has 2,375 patients registered in her office, but many of them no longer live in Croatia. Yet, they come to see her from time to time, usually around holidays.<sup>3</sup>

Determining the exact number of voters is also confusing. Croatia has almost the same number of voters as citizens – 3,660,054 voters<sup>4</sup> and 3,871,833 citizens. What is surprising is that the number of voters is rising while the total population is declining.<sup>5</sup> This is not a new situation and for years media, independent analysts and non-governmental organisations have warned about manipulations of voter registrations.<sup>6</sup> Reasons are several – residence permits given to citizens of neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina in bordering regions with Croatia, a lack of efficient updates of voters' lists that retain names of deceased, changing rules for registration of diaspora voters, and changing methodologies of counting ethnic minority voters. In some cases, in particular with residence given in Croatia to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina is believed to favour HDZ party (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica/Croatian Democratic Union) where in exchange for benefits received on the basis of residence status (social welfare, health access, etc.) they vote for HDZ. Marko Rakar is a data analyst who in 2009 revealed a story about phantom voters lists in Croatia for which he received a global e-democracy award by the French Parliament. According to Rakar, Croatia currently has around 500,000 voters more than citizens of 18 years and older. There

2 Croatian National Health Insurance, accessed 19 October 2022. <https://hzzo.hr/hzo-za-partnere/broj-osiguranih-osoba-hzzo>.

3 Ibid.

4 "Zaključen popis birača za lokalne izbore", Ministry of Justice and Public Administration, 2021. <https://mpu.gov.hr/zaključen-popis-biraca-za-lokalne-izbore-25041/25041>.

5 Vladimir Matijanić, "Hrvatska je vrlo blizu danu kada će imati više birača nego stanovnika", Indeks.hr, 14 January 2022. <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/hrvatska-je-jako-blizu-danu-kad-ce-imati-vise-biraca-nego-stanovnika/2332446.aspx>.

6 Gabrijela Galić, "Provjerili smo kako je moguće da je Hrvatska u četiri godine dobila više od sto tisuća novih birača", Faktograf, 31 July 2020. <https://faktograf.hr/2020/07/31/provjerili-smo-kako-je-moguće-da-je-hrvatska-u-četiri-godine-dobila-vise-od-sto-tisuca-novih-biraca/>.



is little political will to clean voters' registration lists, partly because this mess favours right-wing parties, HDZ but also Most (Most nezavisnih lista/The Bridge), as well as Serb ethnic parties.<sup>7</sup>

## Drivers of demographic decline

*Some authors claim that with the existing negative fertility rate, Croatia is already at a point from which a natural demographic recovery seems to be very difficult to achieve.*

Demographic decline since 2012 has been steady. A difference between newly born and deceased persons in 2012 was -2.3, while in 2021 it was -6.7 on 1,000 persons. A number of newly born children has decreased (41,771 in 2012 and 36,508 in 2021). The number of deceased remained around 50,000 between 2012 and 2020, but it sharply rose to 57,023 and 62,712 in 2020 and 2021 respectively, due also to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Some authors claim that with the existing negative fertility rate,<sup>9</sup> Croatia is already at a point from which a natural demographic recovery seems to be very difficult to achieve.<sup>10</sup>

A lack of economic development impacts negative demographic trends in two ways – by stimulating emigration and by domestic youth unemployment. In Croatia, unable to afford housing, many young people have no other option but to remain living with their parents and even start their own families in overcrowded households. Croatian youth (up to 29 years of age) still living with their parents hold EU record – 92% of male and 84% female. Many thus see no other option but to leave the country.<sup>11</sup>

*A lack of economic development impacts negative demographic trends in two ways – by stimulating emigration and by domestic youth unemployment.*

The entry into the EU allowed many Croatians to seek better paid jobs in more developed EU countries. Most people left for Germany, Austria and Ireland.<sup>12</sup> What is interesting is that the official statistics from these three countries and Croatia do

- 7 "Rakar objasnio kako se vara na izborima: 'Fantomski birači najčešće glasaju za HDZ, Most i SDSS'", RTL.hr, 18 April 2022. <https://www.rtl.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/rakar-objasnio-kako-se-vara-na-izborima-fantomski-biraci-najcesce-glasaju-za-hdz-most-i-sdss-cc7449da-c352-11ec-8250-52c0e7bbe268>.
- 8 "Prirodno kretanje stanovništva Republike Hrvatske u 2021", Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 21 July 2022. <https://podaci.dzs.hr/2022/hr/29028>.
- 9 1.415 children per woman with a steady decline of approximately 0.5% annually since 2009. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/HRV/croatia/fertility-rate>.
- 10 Monika Komušćanac, "Revitalizacijski modeli stanovništva Republike Hrvatske", Doctoral Thesis, 2017.
- 11 Lauren Simmonds, "Croatia Youth Leaving Country Because They Can't Leave Parental Home?", Total Croatian News. <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/59435-croatian-youth>.
- 12 Mia Burić, "Republic of Croatia as a Source of Migrants and Demographic Aspects of National Security", M.A. Thesis, Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, 2022. (The thesis is in Croatian).



not correspond. For example, taking the year 2016 for which the data for all three countries exist, the German statistics shows the immigration of 55,970 Croatian citizens while Croatian statistics show 20,432 citizens that have moved to Germany. What needs to be taken into account is that Germany records all citizens of Croatian nationality that have moved to Germany, although they may have come from a different country such as Bosnia and Herzegovina bearing Croatian citizenship. However, the difference is still significant between German and Croatian statistics.<sup>13</sup> The same situation is noticed with Austria and Ireland. While Austrian data show over 5,000 Croats who have moved to Austria in 2016, Croatian data display 533 emigrants. According to Irish data 5,312 Croatian citizens requested residence in Ireland in 2016, Croatian statistics record 1,917 emigrants to Ireland.<sup>14</sup> Tado Jurić, a migration scholar, gives even bleaker figures. According to his research, since Croatia joined the EU 310,000 people moved to Germany and 20,000 to Austria and Ireland respectively.<sup>15</sup>

Confusion about the exact number of people living abroad while retaining residence in Croatia may start to change. As of 2022 the state tax authority initiated a process of contacting such persons with a request to pay taxes for income received abroad, even if taxes in the country where the income was received are already paid.<sup>16</sup> This new regulation is met with an outcry, a trade union of migrant workers has been established. They claim that there are many irregularities regarding this new situation, there is no clear and transparent criteria why some people must pay taxes on their income abroad and others do not, why, for example, sailors are treated differently and those that work in EU institutions. The tax authority and the ministry of finance respond that the regulation is in line with EU laws and that claims that this is a witch hunt are unfounded.<sup>17</sup> The trade union warns that this regulation may become the motivator for the largest exodus of Croats in recent history.<sup>18</sup>

### *The young and educated are leaving in higher numbers.*

Why are people moving? For the majority this is job opportunity and overall economic prosperity. However, these reasons, when disaggregated and looked into

13 Ibid., p. 34.

14 Ibid., information for both countries on pp. 35 – 36.

15 Ivica Neveščanin, "Tado Jurić: Korupcija je izravno povezana s odlaskom 370,000 Hrvata. Političarima na vlasti uvijek odgovara iseljavanje, kao i onima u Jugoslaviji!", Zadarski.hr, 28 August 2021. <https://zadarski.slobodnadalmacija.hr/zadar/4-kantuna/tado-juric-korupcija-je-izravno-povezana-s-odlaskom-370-000-hrvata-politicarima-na-vlasti-uvijek-odgovara-iseljavanje-kao-i-onima-u-jugoslaviji-1123133>.

16 Ivanka Toma, "Porezna kreće u 'lov na gastarbajtere', uskoro će slati opomene, a kazne su ogromne!", Jutarnji.hr, 22 August 2022. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/porezna-uprava-krece-u-lov-na-gastarbajtere-uskoro-ce-slati-opomene-a-kazne-su-ogromne-15237602>.

17 Marijan Brala, "Gastarbajteri dobili odgovor Porezne: 'Ne idemo u lov, evo na koga se odnosi obveza prijave primitka'", Jutarnji.hr, 24 August 2022. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/gastarbajteri-dobili-odgovor-porezne-ne-idemo-u-lov-evo-na-koga-se-odnosi-obveza-prijave-primitka-15238802>.

18 "Sindikata nakon najave kazni gastarbajterima: Čeka li nas najveći egzodus Hrvata u novijoj povijesti?", Varaždinske vijesti, 23 August 2022. <https://www.varazdinske-vijesti.hr/aktualno/sindikata-nakon-najave-porezne-slijedi-li-najveci-egzodus-hrvata-u-novijoj-povijesti-62090>.



more detail, show that over 60% of people who have left Croatia since 2013, when it joined the EU, had previous employment in Croatia.<sup>19</sup> A percentage of those who leave within the age group of 25 – 40 with university degrees is almost 39% which is 12% higher than the percentage of people in the same age group that remain in Croatia.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the young and educated are leaving in higher numbers.

***Within the EU member states 40.3% young Romanians, 32.6% young Bulgarians, 30.8% young Slovenians and 26.1% young Croatians would be ready to leave their countries.***

Croatia is not unique though. A study on youth in Southeast Europe shows that in Croatia young people have actually the least desire to leave. On top is Albania in which 66.6% young people expressed the wish to immigrate, followed by Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within the EU member states 40.3% young Romanians, 32.6% young Bulgarians, 30.8% young Slovenians and 26.1% young Croatians would be ready to leave their countries.<sup>21</sup> The reasons why young people leave being the following:

- Access to education,
- Employment outlooks,
- Disillusionment with politics,
- Anxiety about the future,
- Low levels of social trust.<sup>22</sup>

Similar reasons are listed in national studies in Croatia. A poll among high school students shows that 47.5%, and not surprisingly, those with best marks, see their future outside Croatia.<sup>23</sup>

As in other countries in Southeast Europe, emigration is stimulated by negative social and political situation. Legal uncertainty, state instability, high level of corruption, culture of impunity, nepotism and the focus on the past are elements that stimulate emigration, not only a lack of jobs.<sup>24</sup>

People want to go where their career success does not depend on personal connections but on their knowledge and ability. They want their children to be raised

19 Siniša Bogdanić, "Novi iseljenici iz Hrvatske: Odlaze oni koji već imaju posao", Deutsche Welle, 18 December 2017. <https://www.dw.com/hr/novi-iseljenici-iz-hrvatske-od-laze-oni-koji-vec-imaju-posao/a-41829200>.

20 Ibid.

21 "Five Points on Youth in Southeast Europe", Friedrich Ebert Foundation, February 2018, p. 6. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/14217.pdf>.

22 Ibid., p. 1.

23 A study is referenced in the article by Zara Troskot, Marija Elena Prskalo and Ružica Šimić Banović, "Ključne odrednice iseljavanja visokokvalificiranog stanovništva: slučaj Hrvatske s komparativnim osvrtom na nove članice EU-a", Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta u Splitu, pp. 877 – 904, 2019.

24 Drago Župarić-Iljić, "Iseljavanje iz Republike Hrvatske nakon ulaska u Europsku uniju", Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2016. Zara Troskot, Marija Elena Prskalo, Ružica Šimić Banović, "Ključne odrednice iseljavanja visokokvalificiranog stanovništva: slučaj Hrvatske s komparativnim osvrtom na nove članice EU-a", Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta u Splitu, 877 – 904, 2019; Tado Jurić, "Iseljavanje Hrvata u Njemačku. Gubimo li Hrvatsku?", Školska knjiga, 2018.





in societies which value education and creativity, in societies that are open, tolerant, and inclusive.

***As in other countries in Southeast Europe, emigration is stimulated by negative social and political situation.***

Results of a survey conducted in 2021 by the World Youth Alliance in Croatia shows that around 50% of young people consider leaving Croatia. Among those who leave many do not vote leading to a conclusion that one of the reasons for leaving is apathy or a sense that nothing can be changed.<sup>25</sup> Corruption in particular is often given as one of key reasons for leaving the country. Even Dubravka Šuica from HDZ, a current European Commission vice-president for democracy and demography, agree that corruption is one of factors driving people out.<sup>26</sup> However, this is a clear example of a non-self-reflective statement by a veteran politician from a party that governed Croatia 22 out of 30 years since the country became independent, the only political party which has been sentenced by the Croatian supreme court for corruption, and whose former prime minister Ivo Sanader, as well as other ministers, are in jail or under investigation for corruption. Capacity for self-reflection would be a first sign of democratic responsibility, but this kind of political culture has not yet developed in Croatia.

***Corruption in particular is often given as one of key reasons for leaving the country.***

## Solutions proposed by the government

In the course of the last few years, Croatia's authorities have begun to treat demographic decline as an existential threat that impacts not only the country's wellbeing and prosperity but also its national security. The current National Security Strategy lists demographic revitalisation among its nine strategic priorities.<sup>27</sup> In 2017, the government established a Demographic Revival Council as an inter-ministerial body whose task is to supervise and coordinate implementation of demographic measures.<sup>28</sup>

***The current National Security Strategy lists demographic revitalisation among its nine strategic priorities.***

The measures are primarily oriented towards financially supporting young families and new parents. Those offered in 2022 are, for example, financial support for newly born children, paid parent leave, subsidized kindergarten, school meals,

25 "Svjetski savez mladih Hrvatska: Mladima je potrebno omogućiti kvalitetne životne uvjete i sigurnost", 9 February 2022. <https://mimladi.hr/2022/02/09/svjetski-savez-mladih-hrvatska-mladima-je-potrebno-omoguciti-kvalitetne-zivotne-uvjete-i-sigurnost/>.

26 "Dubravka Šuica: Ljudi odlaze iz Hrvatske zbog korupcije", Index.hr, 28 January 2022. <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/dubravka-suica-o-demografskoj-katastrofi-mi-smo-clanica-eu-tek-osam-godina/2335687.aspx>.

27 "Strategija nacionalne sigurnosti Republike Hrvatske", 2017. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017\\_07\\_73\\_1772.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017_07_73_1772.html).

28 "Decision on establishment of a Council on Demographic Revitalization of the Republic of Croatia", 2017. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2020\\_12\\_141\\_2731.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2020_12_141_2731.html).



healthcare and textbooks, more scholarships, support for housing, and others.<sup>29</sup> The government also tries to stimulate a return of Croatian diaspora. A government Office for Croats outside Croatia has established a welcome office which offers advice and support to those who express interest to return.<sup>30</sup> In 2021, Croatian government issued a new programme “I choose Croatia” to stimulate intra-state migration, and in particular, to attract Croatian citizens living in the European Economic Area countries to return to Croatia and start their business. The financial support to returnees is a maximum of HRK 200,000 (around €26,600) paid in the period of two years.<sup>31</sup> This programme is active as of the beginning of 2022 and, since a process of application and approval lasts several months, its effects are not yet visible. Until the end of May 2022, 17 persons returned to Croatia on the basis of this programme.<sup>32</sup>

### *The government also tries to stimulate a return of Croatian diaspora.*

How to attract Croatian diaspora to return to its homeland has been a constant challenge for Croatian governments. Some scholars advocate this measure as the only viable remaining option, referring to how Ireland and Israel attract their diaspora.<sup>33</sup>

An active immigration policy, however, does not exist in Croatia, but one of the reasons for the lack of political will to design programmes to attract foreigner workforce may have been a result of relatively negative perceptions about foreign workers. A study on attitudes of the local population towards foreign workers reveal that 75.9% of Croats think that foreign workers should adjust to the values of the Croatian society; 59.3% think that if a foreign and a domestic worker possess same qualifications, a domestic worker should always have a priority; and 55.3% think that the government should not allow immigration of foreign workers.<sup>34</sup> There are no recent studies about perception of migrant workers in Croatia while the above figures date from a decade ago. What can be observed, however, is that Croatia has opened channels for labour immigration, in particular workers in tourism and construction. The figures are rapidly rising. While in 2021 Croatia issued around 80,000 work permits, this year it is expect-

29 “Demographic measures on local and regional level”, <https://demografijaimladi.gov.hr/obitelji-i-mladi-u-sredistu/demografija-5636/demografske-mjere-na-lokalnoj-i-zupanijskoj-razini-5671/5671?fbclid=IwAR0J8fuMULuHEySDWksjKQ12ZFF21gceEQ16JFg-vNuYQKRW3HP6a4ctqMO4>.

30 “Welcome Office”, <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/korisne-informacije/ured-dobrodoslice/791>.

31 “Mjera Biram Hrvatsku: Za povratak u Hrvatsku poticaji do 200,000 kuna”, Press Release, Croatian Government, 22 December 2021. <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/mjera-biram-hrvatsku-za-povratak-u-hrvatsku-poticaji-do-200-tisuca-kuna/33598>.

32 Jagoda Marić, “Preduga administracija ili jednostavno slab interes? Provjerili smo koliko je povratnika dosad iskoristilo mjeru ‘Biram Hrvatsku’”, *Novi list*, 30 May 2022; [Preduga administracija ili jednostavno slab interes? Provjerili smo koliko je povratnika dosad iskoristilo mjeru “Biram Hrvatsku” - Novi list](https://www.novilist.hr/vijesti/preduga-administracija-ili-jednostavno-slab-interes-provjerili-smo-koliko-je-povratnika-dosad-iskoristilo-mjeru-biram-hrvatsku)

33 “Hrvatska se demografski neće izvući bez modela useljavanja”. Lecture by Stjepan Šterc. *Večernji.hr*, 27 September 2018. <https://mojahrvatska.vecernji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska-se-demografski-neze-izvuci-bez-modela-useljavanja-1272540>.

34 Jadranka Čačić-Kumpes, Snježana Gregurović, and Josip Kumpes, “Migracija, integracija i stavovi prema imigrantima u Hrvatskoj”, *Revija za sociologiju* 42(2012) 3:305-336, pp. 318-319.



ed to go over 100,000. On top of the list are workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina followed by Serbia and, as of 2022, Nepal.<sup>35</sup> Lacking programmatic policy planning, with respect to immigration as in so many other policy areas, Croatia improvises and reacts to changing circumstances by providing short term solutions.

***Lacking programmatic policy planning with respect to immigration, as in so many other policy areas, Croatia improvises and reacts to changing circumstances by providing short term solutions.***

Effects of emigration could be mitigated by immigration, but Croatia cannot become attractive to high skilled workforce as long as its structural problems, such as politicised judiciary, high levels of corruption, limited investment in education and innovation, prevail. High skilled Croatians leave for these reasons, other high skilled workers will not come if these conditions persist. Even during the 2015/16 refugee crisis when nearly 700,000 people transited through Croatia, less than 0.02% of refugees applied for asylum.<sup>36</sup>

Local communities cannot wait for national-level solutions. In order to attract new residents, primarily from Croatia but also foreigners, municipalities are adopting measures to incentivise people to remain and new ones to settle. The Pašman municipality offers the most generous financial support for new-borns – €1,591 for the first, €3,182 for the second, €4,773 for the third, €7,955 for the fourth, and €13,258 for the fifth child. The Municipality of Vrbovsko for example offers €13,258 to young families as support for home purchase.<sup>37</sup> Municipalities are competing how to design the most attractive packages within their limited budgets.

***Instilling the rule of law should be the government's priority.***

However, such measures are local and limited in scope. Low birth rates contribute to around 40% of demographic decline, while emigration drives the remaining 60%.<sup>38</sup> The government needs to self-critically assess causes for demographic decline. These are primarily economic but also social and political. Narrow demographic measures or measures intended to attract Croats to return will not resolve the problem. High skilled labour force will also avoid Croatia as long as overall socio-economic conditions do not

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- 35 Gordana Grgas, "Rekordan broj stranih radnika: Ove godine premašit ćemo 100.000 izdanih dozvola za strance", Jutarnji.hr, 20 May 2022. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/rekordan-broj-stranih-radnika-ove-godine-premasit-emo-100-000-izdanih-dozvola-za-strance-15199816>.
- 36 Senada Šelo Šabić, Sonja Borić, "At the Gate of Europe. A Report on Refugees on the Western Balkan Route", Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2016. [https://www.irmo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/At-the-Gate-of-Europe\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.irmo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/At-the-Gate-of-Europe_WEB.pdf). The percentage is calculated from figures on p. 12.
- 37 Branimir Bradarić, "Kako se lokalne zajednice širom Hrvatske bore protiv bijele kuge", Al Jazeera Balkans, 26 July 2021 [https://balkans.aljazeera.net/amp/teme/2021/7/26/kako-se-lokalne-zajednice-sirom-hrvatske-bore-protiv-bijele-kuge?fbclid=IwAR1JFSep-nH4xbR\\_\\_ak2SUZc8rRALoXIGBNsQw8lft38bMi05TU\\_mUDxWccY](https://balkans.aljazeera.net/amp/teme/2021/7/26/kako-se-lokalne-zajednice-sirom-hrvatske-bore-protiv-bijele-kuge?fbclid=IwAR1JFSep-nH4xbR__ak2SUZc8rRALoXIGBNsQw8lft38bMi05TU_mUDxWccY).
- 38 Vedran Salvia, "Psiholog: Ljudi odlaze zbog korupcije. Neće se vratiti zbog famoznih 200.000 kuna", Index.hr, 15 January 2022. <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ima-nas-400000-manje-ljudi-bjeze-zbog-korupcije-i-siromastva-to-je-toksican-spoj/2332505.aspx>.



improve. The rule of law is a cornerstone of a functional democracy but also of a viable economy. Instilling the rule of law should be the government's priority.

## Conclusion

Croatia describes itself as a country of emigration. People emigrated for various reasons in the past - mostly economic but also political. During socialist Yugoslavia, its citizens could seek employment as *Gastarbeiter* in Western Europe. Since Croatia joined the EU, emigration accelerated and the country lost 10% of its population in a decade, combined with lower birth rates. Exact figures are hard to establish as the quality of statistical data to measure this overall loss of population is rather low.

Causes for low birth rates and emigration are connected. Young people without jobs, even if they stay in Croatia, delay forming families or having children because they cannot afford the cost of these new obligations. A solution for many is to leave.

Croatian government relies on conservative solutions to tackle demographic decline - stimulating fertility by offering various financial incentives to young families, modestly increasing annual work permits, and facilitating a return of diaspora. Yet, these solutions will not suffice to change the negative demographic trend. The government must take a pro-active approach and design a sustainable, comprehensive and forward-oriented immigration strategy.

Croatia, as a small state, sees demographic decline as an existential threat. However, basking in self-remorse and fear does not help. Policy solutions need to tackle the causes of emigration, not merely treat the symptoms. Confronting corruption and other structural problems will require unwavering commitment to the rule of law and democratic accountability, which is still lacking.



## About the author

**Senada Šelo Šabić**, PhD, is a senior research associate in the Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb, Croatia. Her research focuses on South-east Europe, European Union, and migration.

Contact: [senada@irmo.hr](mailto:senada@irmo.hr)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna  
Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihic

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 22 2022



By Dimitar Nikolovski, Aleksandar Stojanovski  
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# Digital Europeanisation in North Macedonia: slowly moving forward

## Policy Recommendations

1. Explain the benefits of digitalisation and the digital access to public services to citizens, in particular to the older generations.
2. Convince reluctant institutions of the benefits of being a part of the digital system and offering digital services.
3. Establish an Agency for Digitalisation and Registers and an institution tasked with cyber-security in the public administration.

## Abstract

Since 2019, North Macedonia has been trying to digitalise its public services and install digital wallets in accordance with Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 of the European Parliament and the Council on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market and repealing. The authors of this Policy Brief outline the many political, social and administra-

tive benefits that a fast implementation of these services would have.

The process, however, remains slow, and is riddled with problems coming from both citizens – due to a lack of knowledge, trust, and digital skills – and institutions, because of the need for legal amendments, inertia, the lack of understanding the benefits and trust in other institutions.



# Digital Europeanisation in North Macedonia: slowly moving forward

## Digital wallets in the European Union (EU)

The digitalisation of public services in North Macedonia was promoted, similarly to all other policies of importance, as a crucial part of European integration and the alignment of the country to the *acquis communautaire*. This Policy Brief concentrates specifically on the issue and problems of the implementation of the system necessary for the functioning of the digital wallets (electronic Identification, Authentication and trust Services, eIDAS).<sup>1</sup>

EU regulation on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the European Single Market (eIDAS) was first established in 2014 as Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 of the European Parliament and the Council on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market and repealing Directive 1999/93/EC.<sup>2</sup> It started being implemented from 2018, and requested that all entities which deliver public digital services recognise the electronic identification from all EU member states. Being part of the European Digital Agenda, it sought to simplify transactions within the internal market, by creating standards enabling electronic transactions, such as electronic signatures, qualified digital certificates, electronic seals, timestamps, and other mechanisms for authentication.

***Coupled with the proclaimed intention by the European Commission to have 80% of EU citizens use the digital wallet, it presents a new paradigm in the availability and usage of public services in particular.***

In 2021, the European Commission (EC) proposed an update to the existing regulation, effectively introducing the digital wallets, defined as “mobile apps or cloud services that receive and store these digital credentials, and allow them to be used privately and securely for many government and non-government use cases.”<sup>3</sup> The introduction of the digital wallet (or eIDAS 2.0) was done due to the many identified shortcomings of the functioning of the original Regulation: “The evaluation of the eIDAS Regulation 2 revealed that the current Regulation falls short of addressing these new market demands, mostly due to its inherent limitations to the public sector, the limited possibilities and the complexity for online private providers to connect to the system, its insufficient availability of notified eID solutions in all Member States and its

- 1 European Commission. “Discover eIDAS”. EC Portal, 21 April, 2022. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/discover-eidas>.
- 2 Eur Lex. “Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market and repealing Directive 1999/93/EC”. European Union Law Portal, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32014R0910>.
- 3 Tobin, Andy. “eIDAS 2.0: How Europe can define the digital identity blueprint for the world”. Avast website, 22 February, 2022. <https://blog.avast.com/eidas-2.0-avast>.



lack of flexibility to support a variety of use cases.<sup>44</sup> Coupled with the proclaimed intention by the European Commission to have 80% of EU citizens use the digital wallet, it presents a new paradigm in the availability and usage of public services in particular.

## Digitalisation in the wake of Europeanisation

Within the European integration process of North Macedonia, the digitalisation and the digital wallets are part of the broad topics of Chapter 10 of the *acquis communautaire*: Information society and media. According to the latest European Commission Progress Report of 2021, North Macedonia is overall moderately prepared in this area. In particular, the European Commission commends the country for increasing the number of available electronic services for citizens and businesses. However, it expresses concern over the delayed finalisation and adoption of the long-term Information and Communication Technology Strategy, which was prepared but got stuck in the institutional labyrinths of the public sector. Generally, from the Chapter 10 covering the area of information society, the country is putting much emphasis on digital literacy and improving digital skills, which can significantly contribute to the overall success of the new strategy and the overall digitalisation of Macedonian society. The national e-portal for public services (which is intended to be the local version of the eIDAS) increased to about 130 services by 2021. The report, however, lists the necessary improvements that need to be done in this area:

- lack of communications software in many institutions, and a lack of will to fully use the e-portal for public services by public institutions;
- the need to finally establish the Agency for Digitalisation and Registers, which would coordinate efforts for modernising and digitalising the public administration;
- the date in the population register is not fully uploaded and checked, i.e. is incomplete and unreliable, and needs to be used to cross-check census data;
- despite increase in internet transactions by five times in 2021 compared to the previous year, e-commerce progresses slowly.

Overall, the European Commission feels that “the progress of e-commerce in the country is moving at a slow pace.”<sup>45</sup> The response of the Macedonian government, on the other hand, did not contest them, in accordance with the general practice of approaching the EC Progress Reports. They express gratitude and promise to continue with the reforms.

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4 Eur Lex. “Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on amending Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 as regards establishing a framework for a European Digital Identity”. European Union Law Portal. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021PC0281&from=EN>.

5 European Commission. “North Macedonia Report 2021”. EC Portal, 19 October, 2021, p.79. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021_en).





*Overall, the European Commission feels that “the progress of e-commerce in the country is moving at a slow pace.”*

## The long road of digitalisation in North Macedonia

According to former Minister of Information Society and Administration (MISA), Damjan Manchevski, the first step of the government was to create a predictable and stable legal environment for digitalisation, created in a constant process of consultations with the business sector. That is why they invested much energy into enabling the digital identity, as a driver of the digitalisation of public services. The Law on Electronic Documents, Electronic Identification, and Confidential Services<sup>6</sup> was brought in 2019 in full accordance with eIDAS Regulation of 2014, created the basis for the work of the common digital market and the conditions for alignment of the means of electronic identification. This was intended to enable the functioning of the market of confidential services, as well as the increase in trust towards the electronic services. Furthermore, the Law on Electronic Management and Electronic Services (also 2019)<sup>7</sup> regulated the work of entities of the public administration regarding the transfer of electronic data and documents and the implementation of the electronic services. According to the statement by Minister Manchevski made in 2019, the only remaining steps were “changing the existing landscape, creating and cultivating the digital culture.”

*It is possible that many reform processes were halted due to the Bulgarian veto to the opening of EU negotiations since 2019 (lifted in June 2022).*

Since making that statement and enacting the related two pieces of legislation, three years have passed, and moderate progress (as indicated by the European Commission) was indeed made. For example, the MISA initiated the establishment of an Inter-Ministerial Working Group in 2021, tasked with the preparation and amending relevant laws for the digitalisation of processes, which is directly coordinated by the office of the prime minister. Since April, 2021, this group has had seven meetings, and has started working on 131 laws. Unfortunately, its work is not transparent to the public, thus limited information is available. However, it is indicative that this working group has an extremely large body of laws it needs to amend, in order to align all legislation with the new digitalisation plans. According to an interview with a former ministry officer tasked with the digitalisation,<sup>8</sup> there is a long way from achieving full interoperability: 1,304 public sector institutions and critical infrastructure need to be engaged, while the country currently has the usage and infrastructure for only nine institutions. The National ICT (*Information and Communication Technologies*) Strategy

6 Parliament of North Macedonia. “Закон за електронските документи, електронската идентификација и доверливите услуги”. Ministry of Information Society and Administration Portal, 22 May, 2019. [https://www.mioa.gov.mk/sites/default/files/pbl\\_files/documents/legislation/zakon\\_za\\_elektronski\\_dokumenti\\_eid\\_i\\_doverlivi\\_uslugi.pdf](https://www.mioa.gov.mk/sites/default/files/pbl_files/documents/legislation/zakon_za_elektronski_dokumenti_eid_i_doverlivi_uslugi.pdf).

7 Parliament of North Macedonia. “Закон за електронско управување и електронски услуги”. Ministry of Information Society and Administration Portal, 21 May, 2019. [https://www.mioa.gov.mk/sites/default/files/pbl\\_files/documents/legislation/zakon\\_za\\_elektronsko\\_upravuvanje\\_i\\_elektronski\\_uslugi\\_0.pdf](https://www.mioa.gov.mk/sites/default/files/pbl_files/documents/legislation/zakon_za_elektronsko_upravuvanje_i_elektronski_uslugi_0.pdf).

8 Interview conducted under guarantee for anonymity.



2021-2025, along with its Action Plan, should provide the coordination tools. The draft of the strategy rests on six pillars: 1. Interoperability and government infrastructure; 2. Centralisation and rationalisation of ICT and e-government services; 3. Improving digital skills of citizens, workforce, and professionals; 4. Research, development and innovations; 5. Data protection; 6. Digital services (related to environmental protection). The MISA organised a public consultation on this law in April 2021, which was widely visited by relevant stakeholders, both from civil society and the public and private sectors.<sup>9</sup> After this debate, a limited number of recommendations were included, before putting the draft strategy on the government portal for public discussions on draft legislation.<sup>10</sup> By the time this Policy Brief was last modified (October 2022), the Strategy had still not been enacted. It is possible that many reform processes were halted due to the Bulgarian veto to the opening of EU negotiations since 2019 (lifted in June 2022). The lack of enthusiasm has had an effect on the public administration as well, and more efforts were put into resolving the dispute with the Eastern neighbour.

## The human dimension

The interests of the citizens of North Macedonia to have a fully inter-operational eIDAS and digitalisation system are multifold:

1. *Political benefits:* Although fully in line with the eIDAS Regulation on paper, advancement in this field would mean a true inter-operability and access to services by EU member state citizens in North Macedonia and vice-versa, after accession or even during the intended process of negotiations.
2. *Social benefits:* Access to public services (such as civil registry, public care system, school and university enrolment, cadaster services, administrative tasks related to health and social insurance, tax payment, building permits, business permits, etc.) will be made significantly easier and faster, thus saving the public from the frustration from the long waiting lines and dependence on the 'mood' of public servants. With increased speed and digital processing of documents, citizens can have more time and energy for dedicating their time to other activities of professional and personal nature, which can improve public mental health and efficiency. The change would further affect a rise in the public trust in the public administration and the state in general, bringing about more enthusiasm for Europeanisation.
3. *Efficiency benefits:* In many of the cases, procedures will be removed from human error, which particularly happens with the Civil Registry – an institution supposedly fully digitalised, but in reality not at all.
4. *Governance benefits:* Considering that corruption of all kinds has been over the years identified as the primary problem impeding democratic progress in the countries of the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, full digitalisation can significantly reduce it. All submitted documents (such as building or business permit requests) remain logged, thus can be easily double-checked, in order to avoid the frivolous and corrupt behaviour of civil servants tasked with these pro-

9 Ministry of Information Society and Administration. "МИОА: Национална стратегија за ИКТ 2021 – 2025 година." Javna administracija Portal. 26 July, 2021. <https://javnaad-ministracija.mk/2021/07/26/mioa-natsionalna-strategija-za-ikt-2021-2025-godina/>.

10 Ministry of Information Society and Administration. "Нацрт- Национална Стратегија за ИКТ 2021-2025 в1.1". ENER Portal, 10 June, 2021. <https://ener.gov.mk/Default.aspx?item=newdocumentdetails&detailid=23>.



cedures. By doing this, citizens will be protected from bribery requests, which would ultimately lead to increased trust in public institutions.

## Current problems and recommendations

### *Experience shows that citizens are not enough informed about current digitalisation efforts and opportunities.*

When speaking of 'creating and cultivating digital culture' the former minister aptly identified one of the main problems. Experience shows that citizens are not enough informed about current digitalisation efforts and opportunities. For example, the system for electronic applications for school children exists and it is operational, but it is extremely rarely used. Furthermore, Macedonian society is still very 'paper based' and citizens hold strongly the trust in paper, rather than clicks. Simply, electronic documents still do not have the importance and value among Macedonian citizens as much as paper ones do.

**Recommendation 1:** More intense and constant campaigning and communication in order to explain the benefits of digitalisation and the digital access to public services to citizens, in particular to the older generations.

### *As identified by the European Commission, the Agency for Digitalisation and Registers is in the process of establishing, but the process is stuck and the Agency is still not in place.*

The second identified problem is the institutional inertia. According to our interlocutor, certain public institutions refuse to connect to the system and establish internal procedures simply because there is not a specific law directing them to do so. If it is not contained in the law regulating their work, they do not see the obligation to do it, despite the option to do it in the public's interest. Additionally, certain institutional representatives have expressed distrust in such connectivity, out of security reasons. This problem is narrowly connected to the above-mentioned Inter-Ministerial Working Group, which is not very fast and efficient. Furthermore, as identified by the EC, the Agency for Digitalisation and Registers is in the process of establishing, but the process is stuck and the Agency is still not in place.

**Recommendation 2:** Increased communication between the MISA and reluctant institutions, in order to convince them of the benefits from being a part of the digital system and offer digital services.

**Recommendation 3:** The Inter-Ministerial Working Group needs more resources, in order to be able to process more laws and impose digitalisation on institutions.

**Recommendation 4:** Fast establishment of the Agency for Digitalisation and Registers, and the establishment of a new institution/organ tasked with cyber-security in the public administration.

### *Rarely has the human dimension of digitalisation has been treated and promoted, at the expense of concentrating more on technical issues.*



The final identified problem is on the side of civil society and expert audience. Digitalisation has been tackled by a limited number of projects and civil society organisations in the past few years. Rarely has the human dimension of it has been treated and promoted, at the expense of concentrating more on technical issues.

**Recommendation 5:** Civil society organisations need to put more efforts into monitoring the provision of public services and the process of digitalisation, with the human dimension in focus.

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## About the authors

**Dimitar Nikolovski** is Executive Director of EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies-Skopje. He is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School for Social Research, Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and teaches at the University of Pannonia in Kőszeg, Hungary.

Contact: [dimitar.nikolovski@eurothink.mk](mailto:dimitar.nikolovski@eurothink.mk)

**Aleksandar Stojanovski** works as a head of administration and senior researcher at EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies - Skopje. Aleksandar is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Security at the University "St. Clement of Ohrid". He studied international criminal law and criminology at the Royal University of Groningen, the Netherlands (postgraduate studies).

Contact: [aleksandar.stojanovski@eurothink.mk](mailto:aleksandar.stojanovski@eurothink.mk)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihic

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 23 2022



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# Youth Cooperation in the Serbian-Hungarian Context

## Policy Recommendations

1. Regional organisations should collect information on existing youth projects (e.g. the Regional Youth Cooperation Office and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights) and relevant funding possibilities to better disseminate the available information to a broader audience within the EU and across the Western Balkan region. These organisations should also act as contact points for interested audiences.
2. Fostering reconciliation, dismantling old animosities, and establishing trust by providing exchange possibilities, needs to be further promoted. The ERASMUS Programme should fully include all Western Balkan countries, hence changing the status to programme countries for all.
3. The focus of the Interreg-IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme Hungary-Serbia should move to areas that are of main importance for fulfilling the technical requirements for the EU accession process, such as the rule of law, and providing information on the main logic of democratic processes.

## Abstract

The policies of the European Union (EU) regarding the enlargement process focus not only on the political elite but also try to create bottom-up processes of adapting to the EU's values and behaviours (e.g. EU-isation) by involving and supporting the population in cross-border or regional

cooperation projects. Especially, the younger generation in the accession countries receives more attention from the EU, as they are considered to be better able to overcome old animosities and are more open to new ideas and perspectives.



# Youth Cooperation in the Serbian-Hungarian Context

This Policy Brief looks at the activities concerning youth empowerment in the EU and the Western Balkan region in general, addresses the activities on a regional level, and assesses selected projects in the context of the Interreg-IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme Hungary-Serbia (Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia) from 2014-2020. The second part focuses on activities and exchanges of youth between both Serbia and Hungary as an example, whereby the concrete finance possibilities of activities in the frame of the EU's cohesion fund are discussed.

## Youth within the EU and the Western Balkans

*The EU has launched an EU Youth Strategy, which provides the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for the period of 2019-2027.*

2022 has been declared the Year of the European Youth. The measures and restrictions taken as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic had a drastic effect on the lives of young people over the last two years; therefore, the European Commission has decided to "honour and support the generation that has sacrificed the most during the pandemic". Topics relevant to the younger generations are highlighted such as digitalisation, environmental protection, and green energy. Young people from all backgrounds are encouraged to become active citizens and make their voices heard through political participation. The development of young people's potential by promoting the EU's opportunities is supported, especially in the area of training and education. The overall aim is to raise awareness and strengthen the young generation's support for European values.

Moreover, the EU has launched an EU Youth Strategy, which provides the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for the period of 2019-2027. The strategy consists of three main clusters based on the keywords "Engage, Connect and Empower". The main areas of cooperation focus on connecting young people, fostering equality, practising inclusion, supporting constructive dialogue, raising awareness of wellbeing, ensuring participation for everyone, sustainability and environment, youth organisations, learning, rural youth, and more aspects relating to youth.<sup>1</sup>

Youth has also become a target group for EU policy in Western Balkan countries. In 2016, the prime ministers of the six Western Balkan countries launched the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)<sup>2</sup> at the Paris meeting of the Berlin Process. The aim of RYCO is to facilitate youth exchange programmes, whereas the EU

1 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education (2019): Youth, Sport and Culture, Engage, connect, empower: EU Youth Strategy: fresh opportunities, new discoveries!, Publications Office. Available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/36759> (last accessed 27.03.2022).

2 RYCO (n.d.): About RYCO. Available at: [https://www.rycwb.org/?page\\_id=152](https://www.rycwb.org/?page_id=152) (last accessed 26.09.2022). RYCO (n.d.): Superschool. Available at: [https://www.rycwb.org/?page\\_id=11934](https://www.rycwb.org/?page_id=11934) (last accessed 26.09.2022).



as the main financial supporter of the activities, is hoping that cooperation and reconciliation can be promoted youth cooperation in the region. The priorities of RYCO are to support youth regional cooperation in the region, foster exchange and mobility, engage in dealing with the past, empower young people to influence policy, and strengthen the capacities of the youth in the region. RYCO has for example launched the Superschools programme in 2021, which awarded grants to 30 school exchange programmes. In total 60 schools were involved, 805 students and 118 teachers exchanged and the project was supported by 10 mentors. The second cycle of the Superschool exchange programme opened for applications in October 2022.<sup>3</sup> The thematic priorities of the exchange programmes focus on intercultural learning and dialogue, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Apart from the Superschools RYCO supported projects on social entrepreneurship (RISE) and cross-border volunteering (Route WB6). RYCO has a main office in Tirana and further offices in all six participating countries, which makes the organisation more easily accessible.

### ***Youth has also become a target group for EU policy in Western Balkan countries.***

One of the EU's most successful programmes is the exchange programme ERASMUS<sup>4</sup>, which has, over the last 35 years, enabled students to study for some time in another member country with the result of developing a better understanding of the host country and its culture. The ERASMUS Programme was extended to the countries of the Western Balkans, whereas North Macedonia and Serbia have been fully included, the other four countries are partner countries and require a lengthier application process, which can only be initiated by a full ERASMUS member. The ERASMUS roll-out affirms the EU's idea that persistent remaining identity issues and conflict-related interpretation of history can be overcome by a new generation in the Balkans when exposed to different experiences. According to the European Commission, the ERASMUS Programme in the period from 2015-2020 funded about 2,372 projects to facilitate bilateral partnerships and administrative mobility for over 48,000 students, academics, and administrative staff.<sup>5</sup>

The Austrian-led initiative CEEPUS (Central European Exchange Programme) has been active in the field of student and teacher exchange in the region since 1995. Currently, five Western Balkan Countries are involved in the project, and for Kosovo, some universities can participate.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), which is responsible for regional cooperation projects in the Western Balkan

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3 RYCO (August 2022): Superschools Western Balkans School Exchange Scheme; Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Report 1st Cycle of the Superschools Exchange Program Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis, p. 16.

4 Erasmus+, or Erasmus Plus, is the new programme combining all the EU's current schemes for education, training, youth and sport, which was started in January 2014.

5 EU Commission (January 2021): EU-Western Balkan cooperation through Erasmus+, p. 1. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/factsheets/regional/westernbalkans-regional-erasmusplus-2020.pdf> (last accessed 26.09.2022.).

6 CEEPUS (n.d): About us. At a Glance. Available at: <https://www.ceepus.info/content/about> (last accessed 27.03.2022).





region, initiated a Western Balkan Youth Lab Project in January 2020 with the aim to encourage youth to participate in the decision-making processes.<sup>7</sup>

## Youth and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), one out of four macro-regional strategies initiated by the EU, includes, apart from the nine EU members, also three of the Western Balkan countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia) as well as Moldova and regions of the western parts of Ukraine (Odesa, Ivano-Frankivsk, Czernowitz, and Zakarpattya). Serbia is considered one of the more active partners in the strategy. The EUSDR has identified several Priority Areas, whereby issues relevant to the youth can be found in the Priority Area 9 - People and Skills - and Priority Area 10, Institutional Capacity and Cooperation. Priority Area 10 has identified the "empowerment of young people for participation in the development of the Danube Region through strategic guidance and the implementation of macro-regional networks"<sup>8</sup> as an objective.

Under the umbrella of the EUSDR, a number of events for young people are being organised, e.g. Youth Conferences, and the YouthDanube Salon, the Young Bled Strategic Forum, a Danube Youth Council. The activities in the field of youth have been coordinated by the Danube Youth Participation 2019-2021 (Danube Youth Network), a two-year project to establish governance structures for this new organisation. Hungary was not active in this project. In 2014 the EUSDR Youth Platform was launched, which held two meetings in Eisenstadt and Vienna so far. Moreover, a Danube Youth Council Task Force (DYC-TF) was set up in September 2021 to foster the engagement of young people within the activities of the EUSDR.

### *A central problem of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is to gain an overview of all the activities.*

It seems that all these initiatives are established because of available funds at the time, but failing in sustaining their existence and their relevance. The impact seems to be very limited, because of the unsustainable funding base and maybe short-lived motivations. If the EUSDR is serious on supporting youth initiative and in empowering young people than financial support should be for a longer period of time so that an effective and efficient organisation can be built. To fund several parallel initiatives seems to be counterproductive. A central problem of the EUSDR is to gain an overview of all the activities. Not every EUSDR member is participating in the projects, and different countries, in general, two are responsible for a Priority Area. Activities are started but not maintained or challenging to follow up, and accessing information via the EUSDR website is quite challenging.

7 Regional Cooperation Office (2020): Western Balkans Youth Lab Project. It's time to change, time to act - time for youth. Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/youthlab> (last accessed 27.03.2022).

8 EUSDR (n.d.): One Strategy - 12 Priorities. Available at: <https://danube-region.eu/about/priority-areas/> (last accessed 05.12.2022).



## Youth and EU enlargement

Montenegro and Serbia are currently engaged in EU accession negotiations. During the negotiations, the countries have to tackle a total of six thematic negotiation clusters, which are subdivided into 35 Chapters. The youth topic is covered mainly in Chapter 26, "Education and Culture", and Chapter 19, "Social Policy and Employment", which are both found in the cluster "Competitiveness & Inclusive Growth". Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are additional principles every Western Balkan country must comply with to be considered for EU membership. States are asked to avoid tensions with their neighbours, try to solve disputes through dialogue, and are encouraged to foster cooperation. Reconciliation requires linking initiatives by the political elite with the grassroots to make it a sustainable process in the region. Bilateral cross-border activities within the frame of regional cooperation are considered to be a tool to facilitate exchange and establish joint projects for people in the region. Young people are an essential target audience also in the area of reconciliation, where they should be encouraged to engage with people from different countries and various backgrounds to foster education and personal development. However, youth in the region is not a homogeneous block of people with a liberal, pro-western, pro-EU, and anti-authoritarian outlook. Radicalisation of young people is a fact and the EU policies with their reoccurring calls for good-neighbourly relations and reconciliation are very likely not to reach this group of youth, who is rejecting the EU and western ideas in general and is feeling self-confidence through national patriotism or even anti-democratic nationalism. Even young people with a more pro-western outlook are already disillusioned by the failed promises of the EU, the weak social and economic situation of their countries, and therefore their limited education and job opportunities. The reason why many leave their countries.

*However, youth in the region is not a homogeneous block of people with a liberal, pro-western, pro-EU, and anti-authoritarian outlook.*

## The Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia 2014-2020

The Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020 was the fourth period of cross-border cooperation programmes between the two states. The cooperation during this period took place under the motto: "Good Neighbours Creating Common Future", based on the principle of a "shared management system" for both participating countries. The programme aims to promote strong cooperation between the countries, especially in the border regions. Such cooperation leads to the strengthening of economic and security ties and the maintaining of collective identity and heritage. The main criterion is that the respective project needs to be implemented on both sides of the border. Therefore, cooperation leans on joint blueprinting, workforce, and budgeting.<sup>9</sup>

9 Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary-Serbia (n.d.): Overview of the programme. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/programme/overview-of-the-programme/> (last accessed: 05.04.2022). Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary Serbia (n.d.): Programme objectives and priorities. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/programme/programme-objectives-and-priorities/> (last accessed: 05.04.2022).



Closer research into the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia reveals that 113 projects were launched in this period, and the primary focus of 46 projects was on young people. By translating these numbers, it is apparent that 40% of those projects actually target young people in one way or the other.<sup>10</sup> This is a clear indicator of the importance of the younger generation; young people learn first-hand what moves peers from the other side, the approach needed to bring pre-accession countries closer to integration into the EU.

An example of the Interreg-IPA, CBC Hungary-Serbia programme is the project "BEE - Student - Building Entrepreneurial Ecosystem - Student entrepreneurship beyond borders." The project was launched on 11 November 2020 and finished on the 30 April 2022. Cooperating partner institutions are the Faculty of Technology of Novi Sad from the Serbian side and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Csongrád County from the Hungarian side. The programme encourages students, young researchers, and professionals to engage in the field of entrepreneurship with training and workshops conducted by mentors who gained hands-on practice. The project's sustainability shall be ensured by creating a student centre for innovation called SCI-Food, which indicates an institutionalisation of the project to ensure that later student generations can also benefit from the project.<sup>11</sup>

***Closer research into the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia reveals that 113 projects were launched in this period, and the primary focus of 46 projects was on young people.***

Another project within the IPA CBC Hungary - Serbia programme is the "Youth-Together - Youth working together in protecting the nature, promoting healthy lifestyles, cultural heritage and promotion of tourism through cross-border cooperation and exchange of examples of good practice" which was implemented by The Economics Secondary School in Sombor from the Serbian side and the Vocational Training Centre in Kiskunhalas from the Hungarian side. The objective was to enhance the participation of young people in tourism; hence the project partners organised cultural and sports events to introduce the participants to the cultural heritage and environment, which are the basis for developing tourism in the border region.<sup>12</sup>

These projects match the bilateral cooperation profile between both countries, Hungary and Serbia. Just at the beginning of April 2022, Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Hungary, emphasised during a joint press conference that both countries maintain "excellent relations", especially within the bilateral trade relations - according to Szijjártó, trade turnover has doubled in January 2022.

10 Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary Serbia (n.d.): Projects. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/projects/> (last accessed 05.04.2022).

11 Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary-Serbia (n.d.): BEE-Student - HUSRB/1903/43/0012. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/projects/bee-student-husrb1903430012/> (last accessed 06.04.2022).

12 European Commission (10.04.2019): Involving young people in promoting tourism on Hungary-Serbia border. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/projects/Hungary/involving-young-people-in-promoting-tourism-on-hungary-serbia-border](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/Hungary/involving-young-people-in-promoting-tourism-on-hungary-serbia-border) (last accessed 27.04.2022). Interreg-IPA CBC, Hungary Serbia (n.d.): Youth-together - HUSRB/1602/32/0085. Available at: <http://www.interreg-ipa-husrb.com/en/projects/youth-together-husrb1602320085/> (last accessed 27.04.2022).



Further, Szijjártó has mentioned that Serbia “should have been admitted into the EU yesterday”.<sup>13</sup>

***Despite these excellent relations, it is difficult to predict, if more will be done to support cross-border activities and other activities to support young people in both countries.***

The long-troubled relationship between the countries could be improved by a number of cultural projects, such as the renovation of the Synagogue in Subotica<sup>14</sup> in the frame of the Interreg-IPA CBC Programme 2007-2013. The Synagogue was re-opened by both the Serbian President and the Hungarian Prime Minister in person on the 26 March 2018.<sup>15</sup> The renovation of a secondary school in Zenta (Senta) was jointly financed by the Serbian and Hungarian governments and reopened in 2019. Both sides describe the Zenta School Project as a “Hungarian, Serbian Government Cooperation Model”.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Hungary and Serbia signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in September 2021, which includes the facilitation of cooperation between young farmers, cooperation in the area of technology, agreement on mixed patrols along the common border, technical and professional assistance regarding Serbia’s EU accession process, training of diplomatic staff, fast passenger ships that will operate between the two countries and the regulation of the joint use of embassies and diplomatic and consular missions.<sup>17</sup> The cooperation and coordination on the political level are maintained by hosting annual joint sessions of the two governments, organised since 2014. An inter-parliamentary partnership between both countries was agreed in July 2021.<sup>18</sup> The Hungarian government under the leadership of Viktor Orbán and the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić have established a very close relationship over the years. These bilateral activities have helped to improve the status of Hungarians in the Vojvodina but have also opened up business possibilities for Hungarians in the northern region of Serbia. Despite these excellent relations, it is

- 13 Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister. About Hungary (07.04.2022): FM: Serbia should have been admitted into EU yesterday. Available at: <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-serbia-should-have-been-admitted-into-eu-yesterday> (last accessed 27.04.2022).
- 14 Republic of Serbia Ministry of European Integration (n.d.): Subotica Synagogue. Available at: <https://srbija-projektieu.rs/en/subotica-synagogue/> (last accessed 07.03.2022).
- 15 Homepage of the Hungarian Prime Minister (28.03.2018): Viktor Orbán’s speech at the inauguration of the renovated synagogue in Subotica/ Szabadka. Available at: <https://miniszterelnok.hu/viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-inauguration-of-the-renovated-synagogue-in-subotica-szabadka/> (last accessed 06.03.2022).
- 16 MTI / Hungary Today (04.04.2019): Zenta School Project ‘Model’ of Hungarian, Serbian Govt Cooperation. Available at: <https://hungarytoday.hu/zenta-school-project-model-of-hungarian-serbian-govt-cooperation/> (last accessed 27.04.2022).
- 17 Republic of Serbia. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (08.09.2021): Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between Serbia and Hungary. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/news/strategic-partnership-agreement-signed-between-serbia-and-hungary> (last accessed 27.04.2022).
- 18 Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister. About Hungary (06.07.2021): Hungarian and Serbian speakers sign framework agreement on inter-parliamentary partnership. Available at: <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/hungarian-and-serbian-speakers-sign-framework-agreement-on-inter-parliamentary-partnership> (last accessed 27.04.2022).



difficult to predict, if more will be done to support cross-border activities and other activities to support young people in both countries.

***With the current development, a successful EU accession might only be fulfilled with a new generation of decision-makers, because current negotiations indicate there is still a long way to go.***

Against this backdrop, projects such as “BEE students” ensure that also future generations of leaders continue to build strong economic links, which seem to be the backbone of the Hungarian-Serbian bilateral relations. By promoting young entrepreneurs, both countries educate leaders of tomorrow, potentially fulfilling Hungary’s demand for Serbia to join the EU – that implies that mainly a solid economic development is sufficient for Serbia’s EU accession. With the current development, a successful EU accession might only be fulfilled with a new generation of decision-makers, because current negotiations indicate there is still a long way to go.

***Young people need also to learn how to deal with sensitive issues, such as corruption in the judicial system of Serbia.***

Considering that the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia contains more than 40% youth projects, the EU, Hungary, and Serbia need to support cross-border projects in the area of political participation, justice, and the rule of law, beyond the collaboration in terms of economy and culture. Cooperation in economy and culture is very valuable, and any kind of youth cooperation wakes the interest of young people to engage in the bilateral relations. Yet, young people need also to learn how to deal with sensitive issues, such as corruption in the judicial system of Serbia. For Serbian institutions, it would be crucial to have the opportunity to send, for example, young law students to court internships within the EU and EU students to Serbia to learn about their judicial system, which needs to be adapted to the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. Students should be introduced to the EU’s clear understanding of the rule of law. Learning such values as a young person would help develop tomorrow’s leaders, fight against corruption, nepotism, and state capture, creating a political system based on democratic standards. It is important to raise awareness among young people of the consequences of failing to address the democratic deficiencies in their country, as the EU accession of Serbia will not be conducted solely on, e.g. economic and cultural cooperation, but if democratic standards have been reached.

Policy recommendations:

- Regional organisations should collect information on existing youth projects, e.g. the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), and relevant funding possibilities to better disseminate the available information to a broader audience within the EU and across the Western Balkans. These organisations should also act as contact points for interested audiences.
- Fostering reconciliation, dismantling old animosities, and establishing trust by providing exchange possibilities, need to be further promoted. The ERASMUS Programme should fully include all Western Balkan countries, hence changing the status to programme instead of the partner countries for all.
- The focus of the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia should move to areas that are of main importance for fulfilling the technical requirements for the EU accession process, such as the rule of law, and providing information on the main logic of democratic processes.



## About the authors

**Fanni Elek** is Research Fellow and a Ph.D. Candidate at the Chair of Comparative Political Science focusing on Central and Eastern Europe at Andrassy University Budapest (AUB). In her research, she focuses on the European Integration of the Western Balkan countries with special regard to the politics of external actors in the region. She holds a B.A. in International Relations from the University of Szeged and an M.A. in International Relations – European Studies from AUB.

Contact: [fanni.elek@andrassyuni.hu](mailto:fanni.elek@andrassyuni.hu)

**Christina Griessler** is a research fellow for the Network for Political Communication (netPOL) at the Andrassy University Budapest, Hungary. She studied political science and cultural anthropology at the University of Vienna, where she also obtained a doctorate in political science in 2009. She received a Postgraduate Diploma in Conflict and Dispute Resolution Studies from Trinity College Dublin.

Contact: [christina.griessler@andrassyuni.hu](mailto:christina.griessler@andrassyuni.hu)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihic

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 24 2022



By Nikola Mumin  
Vienna, 21 December 2022  
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# Local elections in Montenegro: beyond political campaigns

## Policy Recommendations

1. Local self-governments need to actively use local governing mechanisms of citizen participation defined by the legal framework – citizens' assemblies, civil initiatives, referendums, petitions and complaints.
2. Montenegro should adopt a new Law on Local Elections – a single legislative act which would regulate the process of local elections. This new legal solution should primarily contain norms about local elections in all municipalities to be held on a single day to increase rationality, efficiency and legitimacy of the process. The new law should also allow for open lists and individual candidatures on the local level.
3. Local self-governments should become more independent, autonomous and efficient in their role as local governing bodies. They need to be organised in a polytype rather than monotype model to better serve the needs of their local communities and to ensure more economic, social and cultural integration.

## Abstract

For years, one of the key objections of the European Commission in its annual reports on Montenegro has been the failure to hold local elections on one day. What is certainly crucial for the very existence of the local self-government system is removing it from the current context of deeply polarised political scene, characterised by a lack of cooperation between political actors, regular action on particular party interests in the executive and legislative branches, consequential spilling of that influence on other branches of government, such as the judiciary. In order for that to be possible, the local self-government, as a sort of autonomous branch of government, must first of all be provided with an adequate political and social context in which to

function. One of the first actions for that would be to start calling local elections in all municipalities in Montenegro on the same day. Also, in order for local elections organised in such a way to contribute to changes in their local communities, a higher degree of rule of law is needed when it comes to application of the set of laws regulating the work and nature of local self-governments in Montenegro. This also calls for adoption of a separate Law on Local Elections, which would additionally address the issues of open lists and individual candidatures. Furthermore, a structural transition to a polytype organisational model of local self-government, which would allow for a higher degree of adaptation of governance based on the needs of the local population.



# Local elections in Montenegro: beyond political campaigns

## Context

After the parliamentary elections held in August 2020, until today, Montenegro had two governments which consequently received vote of no-confidence in the parliament during 2022. First, the 42nd Government of Montenegro, headed by Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić was given the vote on 4 February 2022. After that, the 43rd Government of Montenegro, headed by Prime Minister Dritan Abazović was elected in the parliament on 28 April 2022 and subsequently given a vote of no-confidence on 19 August 2022. Since then, the government is serving in technical mandate until the election of a new one by the current parliament convocation or after extraordinary parliamentary elections are held, which would result in a new parliamentary majority.

Dynamic developments of the situation on the political scene after the first democratic change of government in 2020, caused political turmoil which threatens to paralyse the institutions. Uncertain and still distant outcome of a decade long European Union accession process put the country in a transitional period during which the democratic institutional and structural reforms will be of crucial significance.

In the European Commission's 2021 Report on Montenegro, it is noted that the parliament established the committee on comprehensive electoral reform in December 2020. The committee was tasked to deliver legislative reforms by the end of 2021. It failed, due to boycotts and delays. Despite cross-party agreement to hold all local elections on the same day, the legal framework still provides for their conduct on a rolling basis, leading to nearly constant pre-electoral campaigning at national and local level<sup>1</sup>. In the European Commission's 2022 Report, it is noted that in May 2022, amendments made to the Law on Local Self-Government which stipulated that local elections in Podgorica and 13 other municipalities should be held on the same day, no later than 30 October<sup>2</sup>. Although the Constitutional Court assessed these amendments as unconstitutional, President Milo Đukanović (DPS) called the elections for the former mentioned municipalities for 23 October.

***It is necessary to enable a legitimate electoral and decision-making process for citizens.***

In the current political context, seemingly without a wider consensus on important social issues and without political will for reforms, a new social dynamic which would affirm a broader consensus on various issues is needed. For this, it is necessary to better integrate communities that make up the state through adequate policies and relations towards them and the population. It is necessary to enable a legitimate electoral and decision-making process for citizens. Furthermore, democracy needs

- 1 Montenegro Report 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/montenegro-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/montenegro-report-2021_en).
- 2 Montenegro Report 2022, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2022\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2022_en).





to be strengthened at the local level and the influence of national level party politics needs to be limited.

## Making citizens decision-makers

As local elections in all municipalities are not being held on the same day, high political and state representatives on the national level are able to participate in political campaigns sometimes several times a year within local communities. For years political campaigns within smaller communities have been coming directly from the top of political circles<sup>3</sup>. This is something known as a “functionary campaign<sup>4</sup>”. It is not unusual, for ministers, members of the parliament or other high officials such as the president or the prime minister to be giving political speeches and heading political campaigns in local communities whose interests should be taken care of by local representatives.

With the ongoing campaigning at the local level in several municipalities, political parties were given an opportunity to assess the situation at the national level by using local elections as a “testing ground” for the anticipated pre-mature parliamentary elections. Most recently for example, the President of Montenegro and the leader of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), Milo Đukanović, asked a group of local businessmen in Bar to urge families, relatives and employees of their companies to support the DPS in the local elections, because the situation in the state will be very serious if their political opponents, whom he labelled traitors, win<sup>5</sup>. This kind of electoral campaigning damages the local election process and citizen participation in decision-making at the local level. This example illustrates how high ranking political and state officials guide the decision-making process at the local level, by inappropriately influencing citizens through their employers, relatives, family, etc.

### *This kind of electoral campaigning damages the local election process and citizen participation in decision-making at the local level.*

In order to even begin the process of depoliticisation of local self-government and thus its functioning in the service of citizens, local self-governments must enable participation of citizens in decision-making processes through various mechanisms and institutes predicted by the law. Mechanisms for which the current Law on Local Self-Government allows for, such as citizens’ assembly, civil initiatives, referendums, petitions and complaints by citizens are not being utilised to a sufficient level. Citizen participation through these legally prescribed mechanisms increases the accountability and transparency of local governing bodies, and with additional mechanisms

3 Example of president Milo Đukanović actively participating in his party’s campaign for local elections in Nikšić and Mojkovac in 2021: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/570987/djukanovic-27-poslanika-vecine-je-pjesadija-srpskog-sveta-imali-smo-rat-za-niksic-sada-cemo-imati-rat-za-mojkovac>.

4 Article on “functionary campaigns” in Montenegro on RFE: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-izbori-drzavni-resursi-zloupotreba/30778203.html>.

5 Dramatic messages to scare voters, Internet source: [https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/626144/dramaticne-poruke-za-plasenje-biraca?utm\\_campaign=vijesti\\_share\\_counter&utm\\_medium=app\\_android&utm\\_source=vijesti\\_android](https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/626144/dramaticne-poruke-za-plasenje-biraca?utm_campaign=vijesti_share_counter&utm_medium=app_android&utm_source=vijesti_android).



such as open lists and individual candidacies, can greatly contribute to the affirmation of democracy in the country and local communities. This shift in political dynamics at the local level would ensure the impact of citizen participation in creation of local policies and social, economic and cultural development of their immediate communities. Additional harmonising mechanisms prescribed by a potentially separate Law on Local Elections, could certainly strengthen the existing ones. This could prevent further influx of politicisation, corruption and nepotism.

## A new Law on Local Elections

There have been several initiatives during 2021 and 2022 to amend changes to the Law on Local Self-Government in order to have multiple local elections on the same day. To give a presentation of the timeline in which these initiatives occurred, we have to go back to July 2021. At that time, then Speaker of the Parliament, Aleksa Bečić (Democrats) announced an initiative to schedule local elections in 17 municipalities on the same day. Later in October, before the Assembly session happened, President Đukanović (DPS) reacted to the announced initiative of the Speaker Bečić by using the earliest possible date for calling local elections scheduled for December in three municipalities (Cetinje, Petnjica and Mojkovac). That way, conditionally speaking, he “overtook” the proposed initiative of re-scheduling the elections in these three municipalities for the same date as the elections in at least 14 other municipalities, which was June 2022<sup>6</sup>. Later in February 2022, at the Assembly session at which the no-confidence motion towards the 42nd Government of Montenegro was passed, the parliament adopted a proposal to amend the Law on Local Self-Government, which postpones local elections in two municipalities (Ulcinj and Berane), scheduled for March 27, to an aforementioned date in June 2022, to be held together with other local elections scheduled for that date. Although the proposal was adopted in the parliament, President Đukanović earlier, on January 26, called the elections in these two municipalities, Ulcinj and Berane, for March 27,<sup>7</sup> a date on which they were held. More recently, remaining 14 local election processes have been postponed from a date in June to a date in October 2022 by adopting amendments to the Law on Local Self-Government. As mentioned above, these amendments were assessed as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, but nevertheless, President Đukanović called the elections for 23 October.

***A person can vote in local elections in several municipalities during a single year, a principle prone to alleged abuse by certain political actors and their supporters or party members.***

The European Commission’s 2021 Report also questions the consequential practice of enabling voters’ rights in local election to those who change their residency immediately prior to the local elections. In November 2020, the Constitutional Court ruled that the prescribed residential condition for exercising the right to vote

6 Bécic proposes all local elections in one day, DF and the opposition not announcing their stance, Internet source: <https://www.vijesti.me/tv/emisije/556321/becic-predlaze-sve-lokalne-izbore-u-jednom-danu-df-i-opozicija-se-ne-oglasavaju>.

7 Djukanovic did not sign the postponement of the elections in Berane and Ulcinj, Internet source: <http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/351859/djukanovic-nije-potpisao-odlaganje-izbora-u-beranama-i-ulcinju.html>.



in local elections of 'at least six months before the day of the elections' was unconstitutional and annulled the respective provision of the Law on Elections of Members of the Parliament and Councillors<sup>8</sup>. This means that a person can vote in local elections in several municipalities during a single year, a principle prone to alleged abuse by certain political actors and their supporters or party members<sup>9</sup>. For example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that in the period from 1 July to 14 October 2022, 337 people moved to Šavnik<sup>10</sup>, a municipality in which 1,597 people have suffrage rights<sup>11</sup>, thus effectively increasing the number of voters by more than 20%. This has consequently led to high controversies over the legitimacy of local elections in Šavnik. As of now, seven rounds of elections have been held, each being interrupted due to conflicts between party members of DPS and DF<sup>12</sup>. Out of that number, 250 people have been reported moving in from Nikšić, a municipality in which local elections were held in March 2021. In order to enable quality active democratic participation of citizens in their local communities and to give a higher degree of legitimacy to the process of local elections, a new Law on Local Elections would have to be adopted. This single act could replace the current set of laws which regulate the process of local elections.

***This single act could replace the current set of laws which regulate the process of local elections.***

This is not only a question of rationalisation of the election process but essentially a question of legitimacy of the local election process as a whole. As indicated by the European Commission's Report, the legal framework still provides for their conduct on a rolling basis, leading to nearly constant pre-electoral campaigning at national and local level. Another important aspect of the law would be open lists and individual candidatures. Citizens would be able to choose their representatives at the local level directly. Citizens would be able to choose not only the list which they want to be represented by in the Local Council, but also a specific person which would represent them, based on their merits in the community.

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- 8 Montenegro Report 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/montenegro-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/montenegro-report-2021_en).
  - 9 Representatives of opposition parties blocking the registration of residence in premises of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Mojkovac, Internet source: <https://www.vijesti.me/tv/emisije/576208/predstavnici-opozicionih-partija-i-danas-blokirali-prijavu-prebivalista-gradjanima-u-prostorijama-mup-a-u-mojkovcu>.
  - 10 Popović: 337 people moved to Šavnik before the elections, no doubts about electoral engineering, Internet source: [https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/625989/popovic-u-savnik-se-uoci-izbora-doselilo-337-osoba-nema-sumnje-da-je-u-pitanju-izborni-inzenjering?utm\\_campaign=vijesti\\_share\\_counter&utm\\_medium=app\\_android&utm\\_source=vijesti\\_android](https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/625989/popovic-u-savnik-se-uoci-izbora-doselilo-337-osoba-nema-sumnje-da-je-u-pitanju-izborni-inzenjering?utm_campaign=vijesti_share_counter&utm_medium=app_android&utm_source=vijesti_android).
  - 11 Article from 15 April 2022 about the number of voters in Bijelo Polje and Šavnik: <https://mina.news/vijesti-iz-crne-gore/politika/u-bijelom-polju-pravo-glasa-ima-39-580-gradana-u-savniku-1-597/>.
  - 12 Voting in local elections in Šavnik was interrupted for the 8th time: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/634417/uzivo-ni-ove-nedjelje-izbori-u-savniku-nece-se-završiti-prekinuto-glasanje-na-oba-biracka-mjesta>.



## Local self-governments as local governments

*Local self-governments are being run as an extension of the central government, rather than separate governing bodies servicing needs of citizens of their local communities.*

In order for local self-governments to become more independent, autonomous and efficient in their role as local governing bodies, they need to be organised in a polytype rather than monotype model to better serve the needs of their local communities. This would ensure better economic, social and cultural integration of the local communities which they govern. Local self-governments are being run as an extension of the central government, rather than separate governing bodies servicing needs of citizens of their local communities.

Current monotype model of organisation of local self-government does not differentiate between different types of localities being governed. It does not take into consideration sustainable differentiations when practically and systemically applied. This model, characterised by its' reliance on procedural governing, with low efficiency which leads to various structural and systemic issues on the internal plan, questioning overall sustainability of local self-government. For example, municipalities in the northern region show how inadequate policies from the national level can halt the development of an entire region of the country. Even with a high percentage of depopulation in the north region, which encompasses 11 municipalities, unemployment rates in that region remain alarmingly high. Average unemployment rate in 11 municipalities in the north, according to data from 2020, is 35,2%, while the unemployment rate average in six south region municipalities is 7,5%<sup>13</sup>. Inequality in development is a consequence of inadequate economic policies ran from the central government, especially when developing the northern region of the country. Depopulation is a problem in a majority of municipalities, as in 2021, as a consequence of internal economic migrations and COVID-19, 20 out of 24 municipalities have experienced fall in population numbers<sup>14</sup>. This is of course due to many factors, but high unemployment rates in the north and high depopulation rates all over Montenegro are a signal that the government policies and investments in this region need to be much more adequately managed, with attention to the needs of local populations.

*Inequality in development is a consequence of inadequate economic policies ran from the central government, especially when developing the northern region of the country.*

A polytype system of governing at the local level, i.e. a system which would account for differences in various areas of governing of each specific locality and establish appropriate governing structure for each one of them:

- financially sustainable and unsustainable branches of the local self-government,

13 Closed Economy, Internet source: <https://cnogorskiportal.me/sadrzaj/814>.

14 INFOGRAPHIC White plague in 20 municipalities, Internet source: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/580336/bijela-kuga-u-20-opstina>.



- size of the area being governed,
- urbanisation levels,
- cultural and historical specificities and creation of administrative capacities.

***Polytype system of organisation would enable greater flexibility and efficiency of the system of local self-government and prevent its further politicisation, weakening and meaninglessness.***

## Conclusion

Currently, the sustainability of the system of local self-governments is in question. Should local self-government in Montenegro even exist? In order to ensure their proper functioning as a governing system established on principles of direct and local democracy, it needs to be decentralised, flexible, and efficient. Local elections should not be a breeding ground for clientelism, nepotism and misuse of state resources but rather a basis for much needed democratic consolidation in Montenegro. Furthermore, governing structure of local self-government needs to be adapted to the context and locality being governed in order to be an efficient governing body.



## About the author

**Nikola Mumin** is a member of Politikon Network and a researcher at The Center for Civil Liberties (CEGAS.) in Montenegro. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of Montenegro and is currently enrolled in MA studies of Cultural Differences and Transnational Processes at the University of Ljubljana. He is currently working on several initiatives in areas of rule of law, youth, and economic policies.

Contact: [info@politikon.me](mailto:info@politikon.me)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 03 2023



By Inva Nela, Gresa Smolica\*  
Vienna, 27 February 2023  
ISSN 2305-2635

# Sustainable development in the Western Balkans: Is youth on board?

## Policy Recommendations

1. Responding to the demands of the market the relevant institutions throughout the region should develop fast-track programmes advancing the needed skills from youth and enabling further professional development.
2. Regional development initiatives must be specifically designed to target youth in need and guarantee that their views and interests are equally represented.
3. National institutions should ensure youth participation when designing policies.

## Abstract

Today, the Western Balkan region suffers from a situation of fragmentation characterised by high unemployment rates especially among youth, brain drain, high migration rates, low levels of trust in public institutions due to rooted corruption, devastated health systems caused by the impact of COVID-19, weak economies and harmed environments. Among the ongoing agendas that aim to address most of the aforementioned issues is the current European Union's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which represents a good opportunity for a meaningful inclusion of youth in decision-making processes. This major investment plan aims to support human capital development, sustainable connec-

tivity, competitiveness and inclusive growth, twin energy and digital transition in order to spur the COVID-19 recovery of the region and harmonisation with European Union initiatives. However, so far very little attention has been directed toward the inclusion of youth within these topics and projects. While only one flagship project directly targets youth, the others merely touch upon the need to include the next generation.

This Policy Brief aims to focus on the mechanisms in place and the space they offer to ensure youth participation in sectoral policy-making. Furthermore, the authors provide recommendations for increasing youth participation and establishing more inclusive and youth-friendly policies.

\* This Policy Brief is based on the Connecting-Youth Platform's previous research on the Economic and Investment Plan from the perspective of youth.



# Sustainable development in the Western Balkans: Is youth on board?

## Where does the Western Balkans' youth stand in regional development agendas?

The Western Balkan region faces different challenges deriving from the respective stage of political transition and the unstable socio-economic development. Starting from the climate change, brain drain, weak economies, high levels of migration, and other socio-political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the region needs a multi-layer human-centred response to be able to start addressing these challenges.

The Economic and Investment Plan (EIP)<sup>1</sup> for the Western Balkans (WB) adopted by the European Commission in October 2020<sup>2</sup>, represents a good opportunity to address and shift the focus toward youth involvement in sectoral policy-making processes from their initiation to implementation, with the emphasis on youth being an actor of change throughout the whole process rather than just being a beneficiary.

The development of the Agenda for the Western Balkans on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport addresses the long-term sustainability of such investment within the human capital context. The ever-growing challenges of youth in the Western Balkans, such as emigration, brain drain, unemployment and low-quality education, aim to be addressed through brain circulation, sustainable innovation ecosystems and knowledge-based economies – contributing to more inclusive policy-making and better perspectives for youth in the region. In addition, the main flagship project under the EIP is the **Youth Guarantee** as a solution-oriented intervention that offers employment, further education, training or apprenticeship.

While the EIP represents an excellent opportunity to further foster youth engagement in key sectors, the European Year of Youth together with the award given to Tirana as the European Youth Capital for 2022 (TEYC) both offered a very good momentum to create the necessary synergies in empowering young people, encouraging active participation, promoting European Union's (EU) values, and sharing of best practices among the youth at national, regional and EU level.<sup>3</sup> In the case of TEYC, we should be aware that the title came back to the region. As Tirana, a capital of the Western Balkan region was chosen to be the capital of youth for 2022, youth organisations from the region should take this chance to further advocate on their most pressing issues.

- 1 The EIP aims to foster the post pandemic recovery of the region, its economic development and convergence with the European Union (EU). The €30 billion investment aims to spur public and private investments by the EU and International Financial Institutions. Six priorities with ten flagship projects within this plan have been designed to support human capital development, sustainable connectivity, competitiveness and inclusive growth, twin energy and digital transition.
- 2 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_1811](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1811).
- 3 EU and regional-led side initiatives, such as Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, European Year of Youth 2022, EU Youth Strategy 2019 - 2027, Tirana European Youth Capital 2022, Tirana Connectivity Forum, Connecting Youth Platform, EU Youth Dialogue, Conference on the Future of Europe.





In this framework, as part of TEYC 2022, the National Youth Congress of Albania (NYC) created two dedicated programmes “Youth creates Economy and Innovation” and “Youth Develops Capacities” that directly support innovative ideas of young people through granting schemes, not only as part of youth organisations but also as informal groups and individuals. To ensure such initiatives achieve a sustainable impact, it is crucial for youth and youth organisations to be part of them ever since their inception. Next milestone is to ensure their engagement translates into empowered youngsters that meaningfully advocate and for the good practices to be embedded in decision-making.

## **A regional youth perspective: Do we have the preconditions to implement the EIP?**

Involvement of youth should be seen in a wider perspective that goes beyond initiatives, such as the Youth Guarantee, as part of the Human Capital Flagship of the EIP but rather considering the opportunity of youth access to various priority sectors. Insights collected from six umbrella organisations<sup>4</sup> in the Western Balkans explain the sectors where youth involvement can be maximised ever since the planning and initiation of flagship projects in the region.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to the EIP, youth structures in Albania argue for the needed emphasis on intensifying the dialogue between government institutions and youth organisations to ensure alignment of such investments with government strategic documents for the upcoming seven years. Further involvement of civil society is crucial to ensure the effectiveness of such investments.

### ***In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the disparities between education and labour market play a significant role in the high unemployment rate.***

Broad and non-exclusive policies are present in the rest of the WB6 as well. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the disparities between education and labour market play a significant role in the high unemployment rate. Several government measures have been focused on incentivising self-employment through start-ups and entrepreneurship programmes. Due to inadequate design and poor implementation of these policies, youth employability is not sufficiently boosted. In March 2022, through the support of the European Training Foundation, a Report on the Review of Career Development Support System in BiH was published, creating an important baseline for the work both working groups will carry out in the future. The report gives important insights into the current Youth Guarantee and serves as a pathway for its implementation by offering a set of recommendations that would help in its deployment in BiH.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Kosovo, the main progress was noted in the field of digital transformation in different public sectors. However, COVID-19 further exacerbated all

4 National Youth Congress of Albania, Youth Council of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovar Youth Council, High School Students Union of Montenegro, National Youth Council of Macedonia and National Youth Council of Serbia.

5 [https://connecting-youth.org/documents/Position\\_Paper.pdf](https://connecting-youth.org/documents/Position_Paper.pdf).

6 Markuš, R., Suljović, A. (2022), Report on the Review of Career Development Support System in BiH, Torino: European Training Foundation.



shortcomings that youth face when transiting from paper to digital. The skill barrier remains an important obstacle to e-service acceptance from citizens. Socioeconomic challenges, lack of education and lack of technical skills influence to a high extent the use of the e-services. The effect is seen not only in the fact that a majority of the population is deprived of getting the benefits, but it also limits the efficiency and the effectiveness of institutions which should still stick to the traditional devices due to the low use of the e-services.

***However, COVID-19 further exacerbated all shortcomings that youth face when transiting from paper to digital.***

In Montenegro, while many young men and women choose to study and work at the same time to develop professional skills, institutional regulations put some barriers in front of them. In many cases, where companies and organisations want to organise training and internships in cooperation with higher education institutions, their implementation is not possible because currently there is no legal regulation for internships and practical-work of students during their studies.

When it comes to more concrete measures directed to youth, North Macedonia is a frontrunner in the region with the pilotin and implementation of Youth Guarantee which provides further education, employment, training or internship for recent graduates. Although there are many gaps to be filled, such policies have an impact not only for improving the living standards and in general the living conditions for the young unemployed persons but also in perspective for the European integration process of the country.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of Serbia, Youth Guarantee has also been considered as a solution to boost youth employment. While the recent years have shown an increase in the labour force participation rates, the improvement of the quantity of youth employment was not accompanied by enhanced quality. Studies conducted by KOMS<sup>8</sup> have shown that a proper introduction of a Youth Guarantee policy framework modelled on the one implemented in the EU would double the stock of young people eligible to receive a quality offer of employment, continued education and training.

***In the case of Serbia, Youth Guarantee has also been considered as a solution to boost youth employment.***

## **Investing in youth human capital and enhancing the role of youth organisations**

Development policies in the region have very often neglected investments in social and human capital by prioritising mostly public investments in infrastructure as an important driver of economic growth. Suggestive evidence shows in fact that developing economies spend less on schools than on roads, and that it takes about a

7 2018 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The document can be accessed here: European Parliament resolution of 29 November 2018 on the 2018 Commission Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (2018/2145(INI)).

8 <https://koms.rs/national-youth-council-of-serbia/>.



generation (almost 24 years) for the output obtained by investing in schools to overtake that delivered by investing in roads.

Consistent investments in human capital and an enhanced inter-sectoral coordination and youth-centred approach in programming public policies leads to a more meaningful engagement of young people in policy design and policy-making processes.

Pressing concerns need fast response. Relevant institutions throughout the region should develop fast-track programmes targeting youth that respond to the demands of the market, advance the needed skills from the young people, and provide further development professionally and/or academically.

## **Enhancing the degree of cooperation with other youth organisations and civil society actors at any level**

While youth organisations need to enhance their sectoral expertise and role, a systemic and consistent partnership at any level with other specialised civil society organisations, that already have an expertise on the ground, can help building the right set of skills and capacities for advocacy in cross-sectoral policies from the youth perspective.

Through training, focus groups and meetings with institutional stakeholders, the National Youth Congress of Albania continues to inform youth, build capacities and share experiences toward the development of this sector by youth.

The work and activism of civil society organisations and in this case youth organisations throughout the region have further encouraged and incentivised youth participation and involvement in different sectors as preparation to enter the labour market. Connecting Youth partner organisations have specialised and advocated for different skills acquisition through specialised training programmes, hence making non-formal education crucial when preparing youth for the labour market. Throughout recent years, among the most notable initiatives on employment education by the National Youth Congress of Albania (NYC) has been eco-entrepreneurship for youth towards a green economy. As a very specific and innovative sector, it has sparked the attention of many young people interested in entrepreneurship, sustainability and the development of green and sustainable start-ups. Through training, focus groups and meetings with institutional stakeholders, NYC continues to inform youth, build capacities and share experiences with regard to the development of this sector by youth. The Tirana European Youth Capital programme NYC and the Municipality of Tirana enabled investments in empowering and upskilling young people through its dedicated programme "Creative Economy and Innovation".

Other similar positive examples of cooperation between the civil society organisations and youth organisations have been notes across the region as noted by the [Connecting Youth Policy Paper](#).

In the case of the EIP, such pairing gains a significant importance, as a stronger and better collaboration with WB6 specialised civil society organisations, think tanks and other interest groups (including here young people) throughout the entire policy-making or project cycle becomes paramount for the successful implementation of the EIP. Specialised WB6 think tanks have brought in their unique knowledge of the local context and their expertise especially on the transparency, the rule of law challenges and on the environmental impact that directly affects the infrastructure projects in the Western Balkan region. Through the initiative "Open Letter toward the EU Institutions", a network of more than 20 specialised WB6 think tanks and civil society



organisations are formally requesting to be part of the new EIP governance mechanism by professionally contributing in the planning and implementation of WB6 infrastructure and representing the WB6 citizens' interest.

The 2021 [Berlin Civil Society and Think Tank Forum \(CSTTF\)](#) doubled down on the role that the citizens must play in keeping responsible authorities accountable through transparency, monitoring and by providing their expertise throughout the entire project cycle.

In that matter, the EIP with its 10 flagship projects<sup>9</sup> represents a unique opportunity to introduce more decisively the good governance conditionality in the EU financial aid to WB6. Non-governmental actors including civil society organisations; hence youth organisations have an irreplaceable role in enforcing those rules and contributing to more accountable and transparent institutions.

***The Economic and Investment Plan with its 10 flagship projects represents a unique opportunity to introduce more decisively the good governance conditionality in the EU financial aid to WB6.***

Regional development initiatives targeting youth must be specifically designed to reach youth in need and ensure young people from all backgrounds are equally represented and presented to such initiatives.

On the other hand, the EU should identify and distinctively mobilise youth organisations as a systematic partner; anticipate any opportunity to involve youth not only in the consultation and monitoring phases but also in the programming of relevant project fiches and in their monitoring; increase fundings for youth organisations with a clearly defined strategy; support grassroots movements and youth groupings with the aim of bottom-up mobilisation of local communities.

***Social partners should be supported and encouraged to work directly with the EU policies and instruments under the different Director-Generals' competencies, so as to maximise the impact and accelerate social cohesion in the region.***

These positive dynamics under the Tirana European Youth Capital 2022 and European Year of Youth 2022 presented an opportunity for the youth sector in the Western Balkans to advance their position in actively monitoring the process of policy design and implementation. The momentum can be further boosted through the European Year of Skills 2023. In addition, closer cooperation and coordination with programmes such as, Youth Manifesto, Interreg, and Erasmus+ for Young Entrepreneurs brings added value to the quality of opportunities presented to youth. Social partners should be supported and encouraged to work directly with the EU policies and instruments under the different Director-Generals' competencies, so as to maximise the impact and accelerate social cohesion in the region.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/EIP-WB-GG-Dec%202022%20%28V6%29.pdf>.



## Bringing youth to the tables that count! Strengthening young people's participation in sectoral policies

When it comes to the key areas, such as agriculture, environment, technology, energy and infrastructure, where the EIP can contribute the most in engaging young people of the region, it is important to note that youth involvement should not be seen only in EIP projects that are directly connected to young people such as the Youth Guarantee. Youth should be considered as a group getting involved and consulted in different sectors as well, as all six priorities<sup>10</sup> of the EIP allow enough space for youth to be involved. The current consultative mechanisms and/or strategic planning processes, in which youth involvement and engagement is not mainstreamed, should be revised for the opening of these sectors towards youth to materialise. These include economic competitiveness, youth guarantee, green transition and green agenda, human capital development and digitalisation might be of particular interest for the youngsters, as those are more directly affecting their educational or professional development.

***Notwithstanding that regional cooperation has been a driver for enhancing youth position on the regional dimension, a lot needs to be done at national and local level.***

Investing in youth competences, networking and advocacy, so as to assure the sustainability, and systemic presence in the policy-making areas relevant to youth, starting from the traditional ones i.e., education, employability, etc. to the less traditional, i.e., maritime economy, transport, etc. should be prioritised. Considering the fragile institutional context of the region, promoting youth institutional connectedness throughout the region and with the EU remains a core priority, as we move forward with different reforms in all areas in the region. Notwithstanding that regional cooperation has been a driver for enhancing youth position on the regional dimension, a lot needs to be done at national and local level.

While EIP flagship projects promise a lot when it comes to recovery and regional cooperation, in reality seen through the lens of youth there is still a lot to be done to ensure inclusiveness, impactful and needs-based policies. To achieve that, national institutions should embed and allocate sufficient funding for youth civil society organisations since the designing phase of policies, e.g. they can ensure youth organisations and youth representatives are part of working groups where public policies are initiated and designed. In addition, IPA III supports the implementation of the YG throughout the WB6. As for the other flagship projects of the EIP good governance matters. Considering the many challenges in terms of capacities and resources local institutions face, the EU should support social partners involved in the YG deployment to increase the accountability of the institutions. Social partners' constructive pressure on the YG institutions is crucial to ensure that the related YG policy toolkit implementation is on the right track.

10 i) Sustainable transport, ii) clean energy, iii) environment and climate, iv) digital future, v) private sector and vi) human capital. More available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/EIP-WB-GG-Dec%202022%20%28V6%29.pdf>.



## About the authors

**Inva Nela** works as external researcher at Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI). Her main fields of interest and research focus on socio-economic development of the South-East Europe region, rule of law, EU enlargement policy, and regional co-operation.

Contact: [inva.nela@cdinstitute.eu](mailto:inva.nela@cdinstitute.eu)

**Gresa Smolica** works as external researcher for the Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI) in Albania. Her main engagement falls within the programs of Youth and Society and EU and Connectivity Agenda. She has completed her Bachelor's Degree on Political Science at the University of Prishtina, Department of Philosophy.

Contact: [gresa.smolica@cdinstitute.eu](mailto:gresa.smolica@cdinstitute.eu)

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The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a non-governmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has a long-standing experience in promoting European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna  
Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihic

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 04 2023



By Dominic Maugeais  
Vienna, 9 March 2023  
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# Making the EU and member state policy towards the Western Balkans socio- economically more sustainable

## Policy Recommendations

1. Promote circular migration to ensure retransfer of know-how and human capital to the region.
2. Reinforce the social dimension of the enlargement policy.
3. Ensure a credible enlargement perspective to improve the social and economic development outlook.

## Abstract

This Policy Brief claims that the socio-economic policy of the European Union (EU) towards the Western Balkans is not sustainable. Labour migration from the region to the EU-27 represents a double-edged sword for the Western Balkans. EU member states' policies should align with the overall EU goal to promote social and economic development in the Western Balkans. Therefore,

circular migration should be promoted to ensure retransfer of know-how and human capital. The social dimension of the enlargement policy should be strengthened to improve the working and living conditions in the region. Finally, a credible enlargement perspective should be ensured to improve the overall social and economic development outlook.



# Making the EU and member state policy towards the Western Balkans socio-economically more sustainable

## Introduction

The European Union's (EU) enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans aims at promoting democratic reforms, good governance and economic transformation to support the countries in fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria, as precondition for a future EU membership. This policy reflects the democratic values that are fundamental for the functioning and cohesion of the EU as a political system. However, the EU is also criticised for the primacy of its economic policy over its social dimension. This lack of social protective role of the EU contributes to an alienation of increasing segments of the European population that expect more social protection from the EU, although it remains in the competence of the member states. Readiness to vote for nationalist, populist and anti-democratic candidates in elections represents a substantial internal threat to the EU, as populist forces seek to reverse the EU integration process. Labour migration inside the EU and also from its neighbourhood such as the Western Balkans is portrayed as threat and competition on the job market. Seen from the Western Balkans, labour migration towards the EU member states is a double-edged sword, as the region on the one hand profits from substantial remittances, on the other hand suffers from severe human capital losses.<sup>1</sup> This Policy Brief claims that the socio-economic policy of the EU member states towards the Western Balkans is not long-term oriented and proposes policy shifts to make it more sustainable. EU member states and companies have their own economic interests, but member states' policies should contribute to the overall EU goal to promote social and economic development in the Western Balkans.

*Seen from the Western Balkans, labour migration towards the EU member states is a double-edged sword, as the region on the one hand profits from substantial remittances, on the other hand suffers from severe human capital losses.*

## EU's socio-economic policy towards the Western Balkans - crisis driven dependency

Since the 1990s the Western Balkan countries have struggled to attain the level of social and economic development of the pre-war period. With the global financial cri-

1 Omic, E., Handeland, C. (2021), Social Infrastructure in the Western Balkans: Increasing the region's economic resilience, enhancing human capital and counteracting the effects of brain drain, Research Papers Series, Council of Europe Development Bank, Paris, France, p. 9f, [https://coebank.org/media/documents/Social\\_Infrastructure\\_in\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans.pdf](https://coebank.org/media/documents/Social_Infrastructure_in_the_Western_Balkans.pdf).





sis in 2007/2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic the region has been severely hit twice again. The Western Balkan region has made small gains towards economic convergence with the EU but not on a level that would offer its citizens significantly improved opportunities which is one of the main causes for emigration.<sup>2</sup> Forecasts indicate that at current growth rates, it would take sixty years for the average per capita income in the Western Balkans to converge with the EU average.<sup>3</sup> The EU has shown solidarity in view of the social and economic challenges in the region and has provided access to macro-financial assistance and investments with its Economic and Investment Plan.<sup>4</sup> However, in consequence of Russia's war against Ukraine, a third economic and social crisis is swapping over the European continent including the Western Balkans. This is visible in increased inflation, higher energy costs and income losses due to an expected decrease of tourism from Ukraine and Russia.<sup>5</sup> The region is strongly dependent on the EU, and as was visible in previous crisis, the impact will correlate with the scale of the economic crisis within the EU. On the one hand, this dependency will increase with further economic integration of the region in the framework of the enlargement process. On the other hand, this approximation is currently not progressing as wished, causing political uncertainty and economic costs in the long run. A special case of this socio-economic interdependency is the labour migration between the region and the EU member states.

*The region is strongly dependent on the EU, and as was visible in previous crisis, the impact will correlate with the scale of the economic crisis within the EU.*

## The case of labour migration - a win-win or losing deal for the Western Balkans?

In 2021, the EU received over 64.000 labour migrants from the Western Balkan region.<sup>6</sup> Labour migration between the Western Balkans and the EU is an example of mutual dependency, as on the one hand, it is based on a demand side from within the EU and its member states' (companies) in various degrees. On the other side, there is a push-factor from youth, high skilled but also unemployed workers that seek to improve their living conditions by emigrating to the

2 Ibd. p.3.

3 Reljic, D. (2017), The EU and the Western Balkans: So Near and Yet So Far, SWP Comment 2017/C55, p. 3.

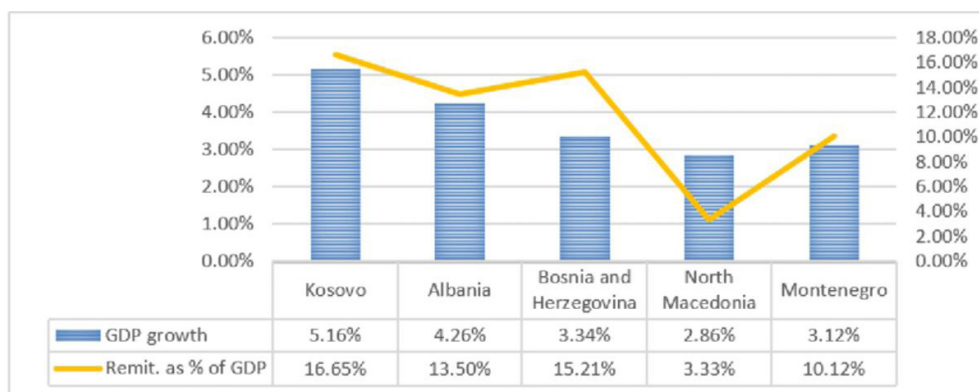
4 European Commission (2020), Western Balkans: An Economic and Investment Plan to support the economic recovery and convergence, Press release, 6 October 2020, Brussels, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_1811](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1811).

5 BiEPAG (2022), Western Balkans. Reactions and Implications of the Russian Aggression of Ukraine, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group Members, 11 March 2022, <https://biepag.eu/blog/western-balkans-reactions-and-implications-of-the-russian-aggression-of-ukraine/>.

6 Eurostat (2022), First permits by reason, length of validity and citizenship, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr\\_resfirst/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst/default/table?lang=en).

EU.<sup>7</sup> Germany has been an example of a labour market in need for qualified workers especially in the health care sector. The remittances of the diaspora significantly contribute to their home countries' economies and households. In the period from 2005-2015, the Western Balkans received an average of USD 1460 million in remittances which have been shown to significantly impact economic growth.<sup>8</sup> The chart below shows the twenty-year average Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and share of remittances of the average GDP.<sup>9</sup>

GDP growth and presence of remittances in Western Balkan countries, 2000-2019 (20-year average)



Source:  
Çollaku and Merovci (2021, p. 8)

At first, this looks like a win-win situation, with both parties profiting from labour migration. However, emigration puts enormous (hidden) costs on the Western Balkan countries, both in terms of the investments in education of people that have left and the negative impact the resulting lack of skilled workers has on economic development in the region.<sup>10</sup> Scenarios also anticipate a significant population drop in countries, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia, where birth rates are low and the working-age population is shrinking accordingly.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the United Nations projects a decrease of up to 24% in the population of Western Balkan countries until 2050.<sup>12</sup> In a long-term perspective the existing pattern of labour emigration risks becoming a losing deal for the Western Balkans, and consequently also for the EU.

- 7 Lavrič, M. (2021), Youth Emigration from the Western Balkans: Factors, Motivations, and Trends, in Brey, H., Hagemann, Ch., Esch, V., Palm, V. (eds.): Emigration from the Western Balkans, Southeast Europe in Focus 1/ 2021, Munich, p. 22-30.
- 8 Petreski, M. et al. (2021), The size and effects of emigration and remittances in the Western-Balkans: Forecasting based on a Delphi process. SDC, RPP and Universität Freiburg, p. 10.
- 9 Çollaku, B., Merovci, S. (2021), The Impact of Remittance in Economic Growth: Empirical Evidence from the Western Balkan Countries, Academy of Accounting and Financial Studies Journal, 25(4).
- 10 Jevtović, N. (2021), The Cost of Emigration from the Western Balkans - The Case of Lost Investments in Education, in Brey, H., Hagemann, Ch., Esch, V., Palm, V. (eds.): Emigration from the Western Balkans, Southeast Europe in Focus 1/ 2021, Munich, p. 38-45.
- 11 Mara, I., Vidovic, H. (2021), The Effects of Emigration on the Western Balkan Countries, in Brey, H., Hagemann, Ch., Esch, V., Palm, V. (eds.): Emigration from the Western Balkans, Southeast Europe in Focus 1/ 2021, Munich, p. 32-37.
- 12 UNDESA (2019), World Population Prospects 2019, p. 3.



Local elites and governments seem to welcome the emigration policy, as it reduces the unemployment figures, enables return financial flows that stimulate the economy and reduces the domestic source of political contestation, since well-educated young people are often leaving their countries and thereby “vote by feet”. The long-term scenario looks dire and should not be in the interest of the EU, as it prevents a genuine and sustainable economic and democratic development in the region. Therefore, the current labour migration policies need to be flanked by more efforts on the side of the EU and its member states to make labour migration a long-term win for both sides.

*In a long-term perspective the existing pattern of labour emigration risks becoming a losing deal for the Western Balkans, and consequently also for the EU.*

## Promote circular migration and skill and mobility partnerships

In order to make emigration less costly and more sustainable for the Western Balkans, there should be an emphasis on the promotion of circular migration of skilled people that have left the region for working in the EU-27.<sup>13</sup> The return and reintegration of emigrated work force needs to be further encouraged and facilitated as much as possible in cooperation with the governments and local employment agencies as well as other labour market actors. EU companies profiting from the labour migration should also contribute to this effort. In case of lack of political will on the side of the Western Balkan countries in this process, efforts should become part of the EU's conditionality mechanism between the EU-27 and the Western Balkan countries. Looking at the EU member states side, skills and mobility partnerships (SMPs) should become mandatory in their relations with the Western Balkan countries. These partnerships have a rather formalised level of cooperation, and include labour market stakeholders, such as trade unions, training institutes and employers. SMPs also ensure skills recognition, as well as support to mobility. They aim to create a mutually profitable solution for both countries of origin and destination, for migrant workers as well as employers with positive effects on economic development.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the so-called Talent Partnerships (TPs) should be extended to the Western Balkans to ensure capacity building assistance in areas of “labour market or skills intelligence; vocational education and training; integration of returning migrants and diaspora mobilisation.”<sup>15</sup> These existing instruments on EU side should become a mandatory element of these member states relations with the region, as the future of these relations depends on a sustainable economic development in the region.

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13 Vracic, A. (2018), The Way Back: Brain Drain and Prosperity in the Western Balkans, ECFR.

14 European Migration Network (2022), Skills mobility partnerships: Exploring innovative approaches to labour migration- EMN Inform, Brussels: European Migration Network, March 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/2022-March-Joint-EMN-OECD-Infom-Skills-Mobility-Partnerships.pdf>.

15 European Commission (2022), Talent Partnerships, DG Migration and Home Affairs, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/talent-partnerships\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/talent-partnerships_en).



*Looking at the EU member states side, skills and mobility partnerships should become mandatory in their relations with the Western Balkan countries.*

## Promote the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights

In addition, to the technical help for facilitating circular migration and knowledge re-transfer, the improvement of working conditions in the region must be put higher on the agenda. In 2017, the EU has adopted the European Pillar on Social Rights to improve the work and living conditions inside the EU-27. The pillar consists of 20 principles that should contribute to attain the goal of a “strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity.”<sup>16</sup> Five years after its introduction within the EU, the question arises if the pillar also had some impact on the social policies in the Western Balkans. The European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research highlighted in a comparative study that some progress in social indicators has been achieved but that “welfare and labour market outcomes generally remain weak in the region.” The study finds that the “implementation and financing of already existing and planned labour market and social legislation is also still lagging behind.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, in a review of the EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans, came to the conclusion that social rights as fundamental rights have not been a priority of the enlargement policy which is reflected in a “lack of reform processes in the realms of education, employment, social policy and healthcare.” The authors rightly claim that EU integration should not only be about institutional and economic transformation, but also about social convergence, therefore “the EU enlargement ‘toolbox’ needs to be reconfigured to encourage strategic social reform in the region.”<sup>18</sup> This is especially important as the long-term stability and development of the region will be dependent on its prospects for social, economic and democratic development.

*The European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research highlighted in a comparative study that some progress in social indicators has been achieved but that “welfare and labour market outcomes generally remain weak in the region.”*

## Conclusions

For a future-oriented and sustainable socio-economic development promotion in the Western Balkans, the EU should focus firstly on a political framework for the en-

- 16 European Commission (2022), The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles, DG Communication, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en).
- 17 Kahlert, R. (2021), Monitoring the progress of the Western Balkan countries regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights, Policy Brief 2021/3, Vienna: European Centre.
- 18 Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (2020), The Social Dimension of Enlargement Policy. Study in cooperation with the Center for Social Research Analitika, Sarajevo, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/16004.pdf>.



largement policy that reduces economic uncertainty by giving a credible accession perspective. Furthermore, it cannot be in the long-term interest of the EU to benefit from labour migration at the expenses of the long-term demographic and economic development in the Western Balkan region. In this context, member states should harmonise their immigration policies on the Western Balkans.<sup>19</sup> An increased focus on circular migration and facilitating the return flow of work force and know how is needed, and EU member states companies should contribute to this effort. In order to keep the well-educated and skilled workers in the region, the EU enlargement policy must put a greater emphasis on promoting the social dimension of the process and the increase of social standards as well as the improvement of working conditions in the region. This policy shift will, however, only have an effect when the overall governance reform process will successfully tackle the persisting clientelist structures that undermine the implementation of adopted rules and regulations.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Vracic, A. (2018), The Way Back: Brain Drain and Prosperity in the Western Balkans, ECFR.

20 Böttger, K., Maugeais, D. (2021), Countering the rule of Law Backsliding in the Western Balkans, Vienna, ÖGfE Policy Brief, 11'2021, <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/countering-the-rule-of-law-backsliding-in-the-western-balkans/?lang=en>.



## About the author

**Dominic Maugeais**, Senior Project Manager and Advisor to the Directors for Capacity Development at the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin.

Contact: [Dominic.Maugeais@iep-berlin.de](mailto:Dominic.Maugeais@iep-berlin.de)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna  
Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihic

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 05 2023



By Daniele Fattibene, Federico Castiglioni,  
Matteo Bonomi  
Vienna, 15 March 2023  
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# Bringing sustainability to the Western Balkan region

## Policy Recommendations

1. The first step in order to advance the Sustainable Development Goals in the Western Balkans is spurring transnational cooperation between the countries in the region. A set of common targets could harmonise the different legislations and involve more effectively the civil society.
2. A transnational network of renewable energy should be seen as a security infrastructure, vital for the independence and autonomy of the whole region. Even if the investments in the field have been delayed by COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, the Western Balkan countries should build cross-border interconnectors to create a coherent energy grid without holes and dead ends.
3. In order to decrease the percentage of *young people neither in employment nor in education and training* and solve other social problems, the Western Balkan countries should smooth their mobility rules and agree on specific provisions for students and workers willing to spend time abroad.

## Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a new ambitious benchmark that the United Nations has adopted to scientifically assess the advancement made by single countries in sustainable growth. The European Union (EU) fully embraces these objectives and is recently anchoring to these international standards many of its plans on sustainability and development. Inevitably, the growing importance of the SDGs for the EU programming and the *acquis communautaire* has consequences on a wide set of EU policies, including enlargement and accession. Indeed, even though the Copenhagen criteria do not explicit-

ly mention environmental goals, the political dialogue on the SDGs between Brussels and all the EU candidate countries today is vibrant but not much investigated. This Policy Brief aims to shed a light on the relationship between SDGs and the EU policy of enlargement, focusing its attention on the Western Balkan region. The research will analyse the state of the art of the SDGs in different Western Balkan nations on their path for accession, trying to underline differences and similarities, and inquiring whether the implementation of these goals has an impact over the ongoing political dialogue between Brussels and the region.



# Bringing sustainability to the Western Balkan region

## Introduction

In the last years, the United Nation Agenda 2030 has turned into one of the most important benchmarks to assess the path towards more prosperous and sustainable communities. The overarching aim of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to achieve 169 ambitious targets spanning over multiple sectors, from health and education, to eradicating hunger, ensuring access to water, sanitation, energy and fighting climate change. The SDG targets are not a mere collection of goals and wishful thinking. They reflect, for the first time, a global consensus on sustainable development, by also setting a framework to achieve decent living conditions for all. The SDGs include developed and developing countries alike, establishing the principle of a shared responsibility toward the current and future generations. The SDGs provide the research community and civil society organisations with valuable and measurable tools to call for action and encourage a step change in political leadership. Finally, the SDGs foster international cooperation as they require to rely on strong global partnerships and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. For some countries, the main international partner to deal with is the European Union (EU), an organisation pioneer in green transition that is gradually introducing sustainability assessments in its external action tools. Today, the parameters of sustainable development are not only accounted in different fields, such as trade agreements and agricultural policy, but also entangled with the criteria of accession for new member states. This Policy Brief addresses the triangle link between SDGs, Western Balkan countries and EU accession policy, providing an overview about the state of play and some policy recommendations.

## The Western Balkans

The objective of this Policy Brief is twofold. First, it aims to discuss the role that sustainability has played in the accession process and negotiations between the EU and the countries in the Western Balkan region. Second, it focuses on the performance of the Western Balkan countries regarding the SDGs through a selection of five key socio-economic indicators to provide policy recommendations to both European and national decision-makers.

The premise is that - despite important political progress achieved so far - very few Western Balkan countries appear on track to achieve the SDGs, as demonstrated from the latest available reviews published by the High-Level Political Forum (2019 and 2020).<sup>1,2</sup> Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic hit hard the path towards a sustainable transition not only in the region but worldwide, halting or in some cases even reversing the progress achieved by individual countries and the international community.<sup>3</sup>

1 United Nations (2019), High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2019#docs>.

2 United Nations (2020), Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2020. Available at: [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26727SDG\\_Chart\\_2020.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26727SDG_Chart_2020.pdf).

3 [https://sdgintegration.undp.org/sites/default/files/Foundational\\_research\\_report.pdf](https://sdgintegration.undp.org/sites/default/files/Foundational_research_report.pdf).





The least Developed Countries (LDCs), alongside the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), “Small Island Developing States” (SIDS), and countries in humanitarian or fragile situations borne the biggest burden of the crisis, as they suffered from weak health systems, limited social protection coverage, insufficient financial and other resources, vulnerability to external shocks, and dependence on international trade. Therefore, – and understandably – these same states experienced the worst setback even in sustainability, as the transition for many downgraded in importance to just a side priority in this cascade of emergencies. A recent report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)<sup>4</sup> highlighted that the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 are set to widen the gap regarding the SDGs between countries at different stages of development. On the flip side, other reports however have shown that the developing countries would have the potential to increase their current pace and even exceed pre-COVID-19 development trajectories if they wanted through a combination of innovative policies, investments in green economy and digitalisation (the so called ‘SDGs Push’).<sup>5</sup> In the array of these developing countries committed to achieve the SDGs, the Western Balkans (WB) do occupy a peculiar place for their relationship with the EU. This region is deeply complex and faced with specific socio-economic and environmental challenges that need to be tackled as soon as possible not only for the sake of international stability but to ensure better standards of living for the local populations.

## The impact of COVID-19 on the socio-economic balance of the Western Balkans

The pandemic has exposed the Western Balkan countries to several socio-economic vulnerabilities. COVID-19 has particularly put under strain public finances that were already struggling due to the consequences of the 2008-09 global financial crisis. A recent study highlights that the reduction of gross domestic product (GDP) due to COVID-19 has triggered an increase in public debt levels, exposing the health sector and social safety net programmes. Table 1 below provides an overview of the data on public debt, its share in GDP as well as the structure of the public debt portfolio of the countries in the region.

Table 1: Public debt portfolio of the Western Balkan 6 countries

	Montenegro			North Macedonia			Serbia		B&H			Kosovo			Albania			
	2010	2015	2020	2010	2015	2020	2010	2015	2020	2010	2015	2020	2010	2015	2020	2010	2015	2020
GDP (mil EUR)	2104	3625	4245	7109	9072	10,766	31,546	35,740	47,156	12,969	14,618	17,322	4402	5807	6831	8933	10,448	12,710
Public debt % GDP	42	61.6	102.4	24.6	38	60.2	42.9	76	56.8	33.8	40	35	6.2	13.0	24.6	57.7	72.8	77.9
Public debt portfolio (% of total public debt)																		
Multilateral and bilateral creditor loans	46.4	27.7	13.7	49.2	25	n.a	46.6	35	37.8	66.6	70.4	68.5	n.a	49.25	33	18.9	25.7	25.6
Eurobond	15.7	39.6	44.9	19	22.3	n.a	0	19	19	0	0	5.4	n.a	0	0	3.36	4.31	9.05
Private sector loans	9.8	18.1	32.5		13.6	n.a	0	5	0.9	0	4.13	1.85	n.a	0.45	1.4	3.03	6.38	3.07
Government securities	3.9	4.37	4.2	31.3	38.9	n.a	47.5	30.5	39.5	11	10.4	15.8	n.a	50.5	64.7	32.41	36.32	40.12

Source: Lukšić et al. (2022)<sup>6</sup>

4 <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22>.

5 <https://www.undp.org/publications/leaving-no-one-behind-impact-covid-19-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs#>.

6 <https://energysustainsoc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13705-022-00340-w/tables/2>.



Not all the Western Balkan countries have been affected by the crisis in the same way. Countries highly dependent on services' exports, such as Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, have been more vulnerable to immediate shocks, especially in light of substantial losses in tourism during the summer seasons. All Western Balkan countries have though experienced strong effects of the pandemic on their labour markets, due to their specific features: high share of informal, temporary and self-employment, together with very weak social safety nets. Most of the countries have witnessed a further worsening of their labour market indicators, something that could exacerbate the already existing social and political tensions.

***Not all the Western Balkan countries have been affected by the crisis in the same way.***

Likewise, the limited room for fiscal manoeuvring is also hampering the path towards sustainable socio-economic development in the region and staving off the rigid EU accession criteria. These indicators, rooted in the Copenhagen criteria, demand a sound and solid public finance to successfully complete the candidacy procedure. More specifically, the economic criteria require to withstand competitive pressure inside the EU single market and thus secure the public finance from potential external liabilities. The resilience of the overall financial systems is gauged through different indexes, including the accountability of the public spending, which should follow both a rule of rationality and efficiency.<sup>7</sup> In its Guidance for the Economic Reform Programmes 2022-2024,<sup>8</sup> the European Commission evaluated mainly these two aspects, addressing not only the public debt and deficit of each nation but the overall rationale behind the governments' investments. The European Commission's assessment mirrors a greater – but under control – tendency to rely on deficit financing in all the Western Balkan countries, and in some cases, like in Kosovo and North Macedonia, a questionable investment strategy.<sup>9</sup> In the current environment, public resources need to be coupled with private funds that would require a proper rule of law and economic environment to fully harness their potential. Some studies are suggesting using innovative finance mechanisms, such as environmental, social, governance/sustainability-linked bonds and debt-for-climate swap investments to accomplish this goal.<sup>10</sup> Countries such as Serbia have already started to use this kind of instrument, with Belgrade issuing its first ever green bond worth 1 billion USD in September 2021. The 7-year maturity and 1% annual coupon security settled is aimed at investments in rail and subway network, sewerage, water and wastewater processing, flood protection, biodiversity protection, pollution prevention and control, waste management, support

7 In conformation with the *acquis communautaire* set out by the Treaty of Maastricht and detailed in the Council Recommendation 2015/1184 on "Broad guidelines for the economic policies of the Member States and of the European Union".

8 <https://finance.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Guidance-for-the-ERPs-2022-2024-of-the-Western-Balkans-and-Turkey.pdf>.

9 European Commission, North Macedonia 2021 ERP assessment, Brussels, 20.4.2022 123 final, p.14; European Commission, Albania 2021 ERP assessment, Brussels, 27.4.2022, 126 final, p.8 ([https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/economic-governance\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/economic-governance_en)).

10 <https://energysustainsoc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13705-022-00340-w>.



for energy efficiency measures and installation of rooftop solar panels.<sup>11</sup> Other Western Balkan countries are likely to follow with similar measures.

*Likewise, the limited room for fiscal manoeuvring is also hampering the path towards sustainable socio-economic development in the region and staving off the rigid EU accession criteria.*

## The role of sustainability in the EU accession process

As outlined in the 2021 Europe Sustainable Development Report,<sup>12</sup> in recent years the SDGs have also provided a useful framework for constructive dialogue and exchanges between the EU and candidate countries in the Western Balkans. On the one hand, as already stated, sustainable development has been increasingly at the heart of EU legislation and policies both inside the Union and abroad. On the other hand, the SDGs have funded regional initiatives in the region, such as South East Europe 2030 Strategy,<sup>13</sup> adopted through the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEEC) and implemented with the support of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The synergy between the EU and the United Nations (UN) in the region is, therefore, pivotal to understand the latest socio-economic developments.

*As outlined in the 2021 Europe Sustainable Development Report, in recent years the SDGs have also provided a useful framework for constructive dialogue and exchanges between the EU and candidate countries in the Western Balkans.*

As the Western Balkans continue to bounce back from the social and economic impact of COVID-19, the 2021 EU-Western Balkans Summit<sup>14</sup> highlighted the need to unlock the potential of green and digital transition to accelerate the economic transformation of the region by creating new job opportunities and putting a halt to the dramatic levels of brain drain (see Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> For the purpose of this research, we will focus on five indicators reported by the European Commission which seem particularly important for the Western Balkan countries:<sup>16</sup>

1. Poverty reduction (SDG1)
2. Good health and wellbeing (SDG3)
3. Energy intensity (SDG7)
4. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (SDG8)
5. The frequency of internet use (SDG17)

11 Igor Todorović (2021), Serbia raises EUR 1 billion in its first green bond auction. Balkan Green Energy News, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/serbia-raises-eur-1-billion-in-its-first-green-bond-auction/>.

12 <https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2021/Europe+Sustainable+Development+Report+2021.pdf>.

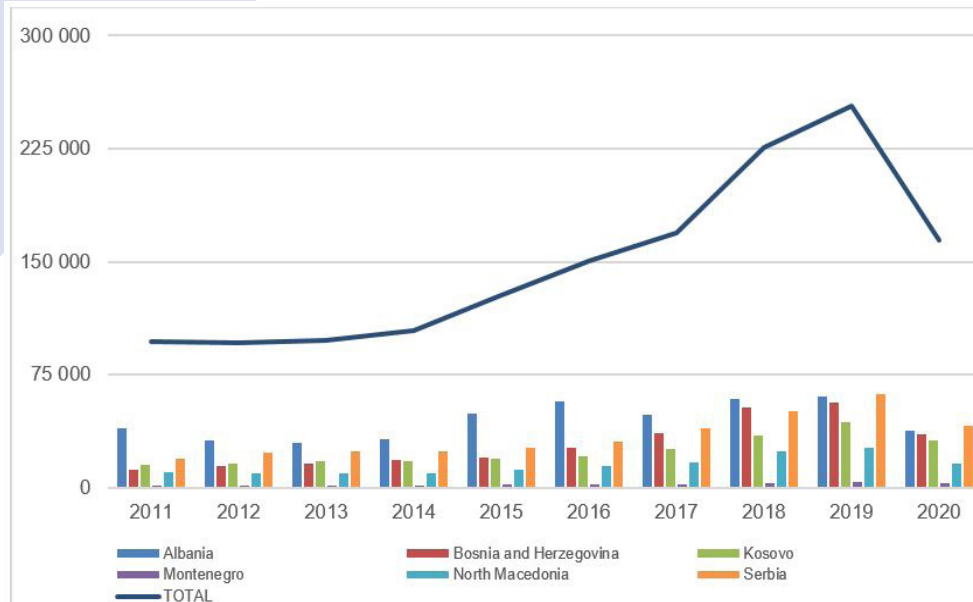
13 <https://www.rcc.int/docs/581/south-east-europe-strategy-2030>.

14 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2021/10/06/>.

15 <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/events/eu-western-balkans-summit/>.

16 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement\\_countries\\_-\\_indicators\\_for\\_Sustainable\\_Development\\_Goals#SDG\\_3\\_E2.80.94\\_Good\\_health\\_and\\_well-being](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_indicators_for_Sustainable_Development_Goals#SDG_3_E2.80.94_Good_health_and_well-being).

Figure 1. Legal migration from the Western Balkan countries to the EU



Source: Eurostat (2022)

## Comparative analysis of the socio-economic indicators

### (1) Risk of socio-economic exclusion

*The latest data available display that all EU candidate and potential candidate countries experienced a reduction in the risk of poverty or social exclusion between 2015 and 2020.*

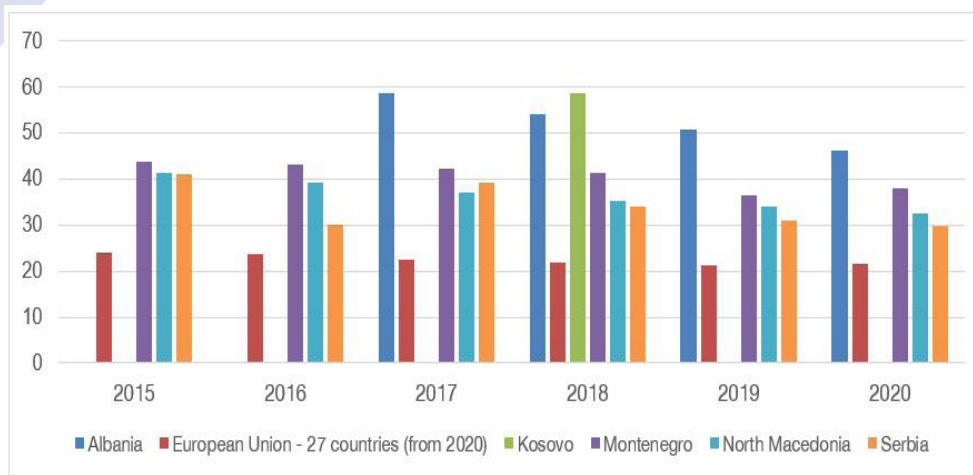
All these social indicators, however not explicitly outlined in the Copenhagen criteria, are consistent with the EU social framework and all the guidelines that the member states abide to since the Lisbon European Council on economy and cohesion onward.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, all these priority areas are also embedded in the EU 2030 strategy on comprehensive development which was devised after the UN SDGs.<sup>18</sup> The appraisal of the single policy areas aforementioned is not easy, due to the changing situation in many Western Balkan countries and the evolving framework of reference. The first of the selected policy field reports the proportion of the population considered to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This indicator shows the sum of people that are either at-risk-of-poverty after social transfers, severely materially deprived or living in households with very low work intensity. The latest data available display that all EU candidate and potential candidate countries experienced a reduction in the risk of poverty or social exclusion between 2015 and 2020. The highest rate in 2018 was recorded in Kosovo (58.6%) but given that this is the only year available, it is not possible to truly assess this development over time. The countries that regis-

17 European Union, Presidency Conclusion of the Lisbon European Council, 23 and 24 March 2000.

18 European Commission, Sustainable Development: EU sets out its priorities, Strasbourg, 22 November 2016.

tered the best performance were Serbia (from 41% in 2015 to 29.8% in 2020), North Macedonia (from 41.2% in 2015 to 32.6% in 2020), Montenegro (from 43.8% in 2015 to 37.8% in 2020) and Albania (from 58.5% in 2017 to 46.2% in 2020). This means that the Western Balkans had an average risk of poverty indicator of 40.6% in 2019, therefore, double of the EU average of 20.9%, although by 3,9% less than in 2010.

Figure 2: Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion, 2015-2020 (% of the total population)



Source:  
Eurostat (2022)

## (2) Good health and wellbeing

***Anyway, despite important fluctuations, all countries experienced a swift decline in the infant mortality rate between 2009 and 2020.***

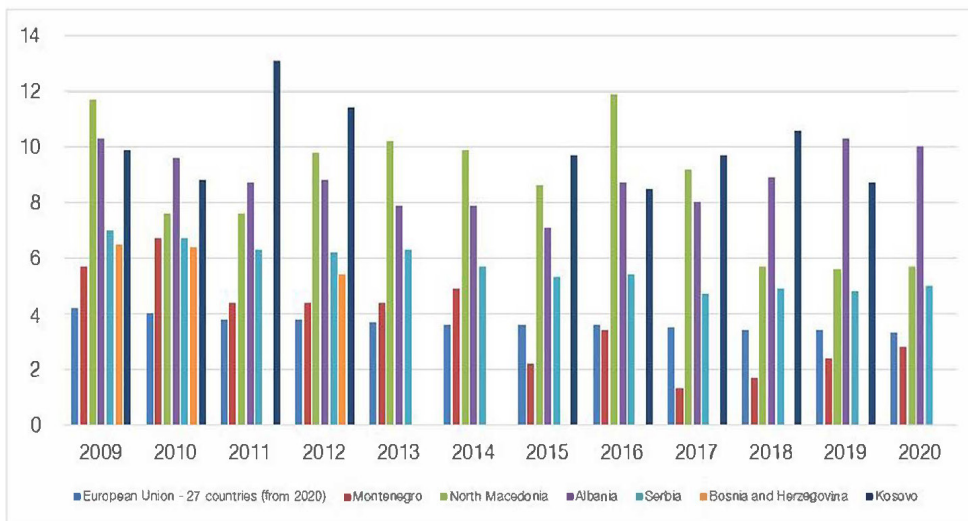
A second indicator widely used for SDG3 addresses child mortality, including ending preventable deaths of new-born children by 2030. As notorious, healthcare is a policy area that, according to the *acquis communautaire*, is mainly under the responsibility of the EU member states. However, the objective of a healthier Europe is consistent with the objective of European Health Union as outlined by President Ursula von der Leyen as she took over office.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, a better performance in this instance may draw these countries closer to Europe, as recognised by the European Investment Bank which has been investing on Western Balkan health care systems for years to help them to close the gap with the EU.<sup>20</sup> In the 2009-2019 period, the infant mortality rate in the EU candidate and potential candidate countries was higher than the one in the EU, but today there was a strong commitment from all countries to reduce neonatal mortality up to 12 per 1,000 live births or fewer. One best practice in this sense was Montenegro, which successfully more than halved the mortality rate in 2015, falling below the EU average and remaining below it until the end of the period. Anyway, despite important fluctuations, all countries experienced a swift decline in the infant mortality rate between 2009 and 2020. The strongest reduction was recorded in North Macedonia, where the rate of 5.7 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2020 was

19 <https://europeanhealthunion.eu/>. One of the pillars of this strategy is to line up the EU healthcare quality with the highest world standards and the international guidelines.

20 <https://www.eib.org/en/publications/eib-healthcare-investments-in-the-western-balkans>.

much lower than the 11.7 recorded in 2009. Albania followed a bizarre path, with a significant 3 points reduction registered until 2015 (from 10.3 deaths per 1,000 live births to 7.1), followed by a rapid increase until 2020 (with 10 deaths per 1,000 live births). Kosovo's rate – for which data are missing for 2013, 2014 and 2020 – was fluctuating over time, in 2019 being 8.7, only somewhat lower than the 9.9 recorded ten years earlier. In this context, it ought to be mentioned that data for Bosnia and Herzegovina are only available for 2009 (6.5), 2010 (6.4) and 2012 (5.4). Overall, with the exclusion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the average mortality rate of new-born children for the Western Balkans 6 (WB6) in 2019 was 6.8 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 3.4 registered for the EU members.

Figure 3: Infant mortality rate (number of deaths per 1,000 live births)



Source:  
Eurostat (2022)

### (3) Clean and affordable energy

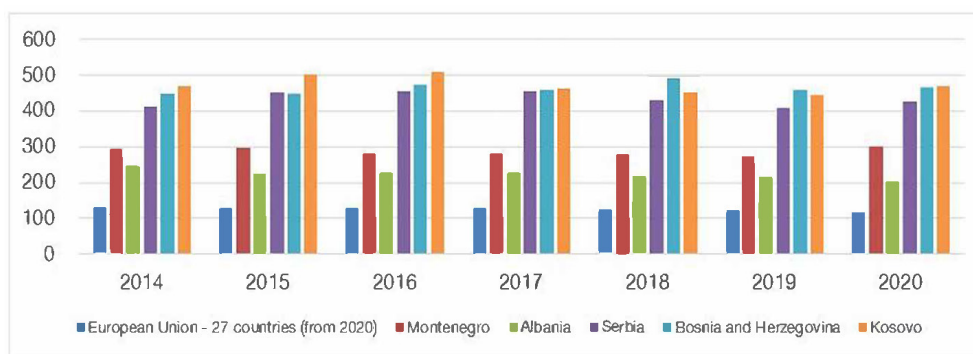
*In this sector, the main bulk for the EU-WB cooperation is revolving around the Energy Community Treaty which sets several shared goals between the European Commission and the Energy Community Secretariat.*

Another key area for assessing the progress towards SDGs concerns doubling the global rate of improvement in energy intensity. In this sector, the main bulk for the EU-WB cooperation is revolving around the Energy Community Treaty which sets several shared goals between the European Commission and the Energy Community Secretariat. Together with others, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and the EU are part of the Energy Community Treaty, an international organisation that envisages the creation of a common “energy acquis” between these countries and the EU.<sup>21</sup> Among the objectives of this cooperation, besides the establishment of a common market, there is an attention for a smart use of energy. The definition of energy efficiency is grounded on the gross inland consumption of energy in relation to constant price (or volume) the GDP; namely the energy

21 <https://www.energy-community.org/>.

supplied to the economy per unit of economic output. If the ratio between energy and GDP declines over time this indicates that less energy is required, thereby confirming that the economy concerned has made progress in relation to energy efficiency gains. Otherwise, the ratio worsened or remains stable, predicting a negative outlook. The figure below highlights that all Western Balkan countries have improved their energy efficiency from 2009 to 2020, with the strongest performance registered in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. Montenegro also showed some improvement, although data are missing for 2020. Lastly, Bosnia and Herzegovina has experienced worsening energy performance from 2014 to 2020, shifting from 446 to 466 kilogrammes of oil (equivalent per thousand EUR). Just for the sake of comparison, the energy intensity in the EU fell gradually from 2009 to 2020, reaching 116 kilogrammes of oil equivalent per thousand EUR of GDP in 2020. Therefore, despite the efficiency gains, the amount of energy required to produce a unit of GDP remained considerably higher in the candidate and potential candidate countries than in the EU: energy intensity ratios were generally 2 to 4 times as high as for the EU in 2020. This overall picture has been negatively assessed by the EU, not only because it parted ways with the SDGs but for its negative fallout on environment and employment.<sup>22</sup> According to the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the main forum for cooperation between South Eastern European countries,<sup>23</sup> and the afore quoted South East Europe Strategy, the goals expected to be met within 2020 included a dramatic increase of renewable energy, a significant investment in energy infrastructure and an empowerment of customers. The energy dimension was a pillar of the regional strategy for sustainable growth, linked with social policies and environment.<sup>24</sup> These reforms, if ever delivered, would have helped the Western Balkans to raise their standards and thus be more compliant with the EU/UN requirements and their own aspiration. As already explained, however, the non-fulfilment is likely to pose an obstacle for accession in a key sector that - more than others - is a crossover of different policies and priorities.

Figure 4: Energy intensity, 2014-2020 (kg of oil equivalent per thousand EUR)



Source: Eurostat (2022)

22 Martin Voß and Lutz Weischer, Supporting the Western Balkans' Energy Transition: An Imperative Task for the German EU Council Presidency, German Watch, Berlin, 2020.  
 23 <https://www.rcc.int/pages/2/about-us>.  
 24 Regional Cooperation Council, South East Europe 2020, Bruxelles, 2013.



***Defusing this complex situation and reconciling the current price increase, energy security and environmental protection are conceivable and feasible only through an even stronger and more coordinated action by the governments of the region and the EU.***

The fundamental goal of moving towards clean and affordable energy was recently reaffirmed through the launch of a Green Agenda for the Western Balkans,<sup>25</sup> based on the EU Green Deal which the governments of the region have pledged to implement in order to contrast climate change and foster the ecological transition.<sup>26</sup> These tasks are made even more urgent today in light to Russia's military aggression on Ukraine and ensued energy crisis. Although Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are largely dependent on Russia for natural gas (and Belgrade has even recently renewed its gas supply contracts with Moscow<sup>27</sup>), this only represents a small part of their energy mix. Rather, the crisis is affecting the region through rising prices for electricity imports and risks, on the one hand, to jeopardize the adequacy of domestic energy supply and, on the other hand, to aggravate their already precarious environmental situation. The high costs of electricity imports risks to push the WB countries to rely even more on the use of coal-fired power plants (from which today almost all countries derive a large part of their energy requirements). Defusing this complex situation and reconciling the current price increase, energy security and environmental protection are conceivable and feasible only through an even stronger and more coordinated action by the governments of the region and the EU. Promoting energy efficiency and accelerating the green transition will require, in the coming years, to move towards an even greater integration of energy networks and strengthen the coordination of integrated policies for all of South Eastern Europe.

#### **(4) Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs)**

***Today, the importance dedicated to the NEET at a European level inevitably connects accession, UN goals and the European "acquis" in youth policies.***

In order to measure progress on the SDG8 target, the EU collects data on the share of young persons (aged 15-24 years) who are neither in employment nor in education and training, referred to as the NEET rate. In the last decade, the European Commission settled the fight against this phenomenon as a priority, devising specific measures of contrast in concertation with non-governmental organisations and the civil society. In Europe 2020, the main tool deployed was the so-called *Youth Guarantee*, a financial instrument extended to the Western Balkans through the WB6 roadmap. The

25 European Commission, Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, 6 October 2020, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/guidelines-implementation-green-agenda-western-balkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/guidelines-implementation-green-agenda-western-balkans_en).

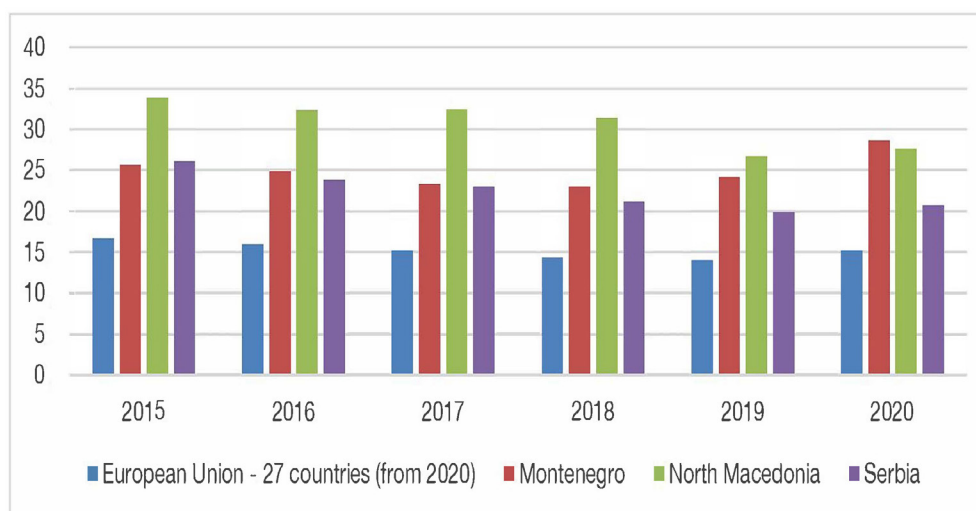
26 Regional Cooperation Council, Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, 10 novembre 2020, disponibile su [www.rcc.int/docs/546/sofia-declaration-on-the-green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-rn](http://www.rcc.int/docs/546/sofia-declaration-on-the-green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-rn).

27 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/29/serbia-ignores-eu-sanctions-secures-gas-deal-with-putin>.



4-steps strategy of the European Commission for the region encompassed different stages and recommendations for the recipients; they would embrace careers advice and job-search counselling, business start-up advice and mentoring, start-up grants and loans and education grants in partnership with financial institutions and European agencies.<sup>28</sup> The strategy for the next years will be following the conclusion of the 2021 Porto Summit and the provisions conveyed through the EU Action Plan of Social Rights.<sup>29</sup> The EU institutions are actively encouraging the candidate countries to fall in line behind its 2030 objectives, for instance through the allocation of (small and inadequate) incentives.<sup>30</sup> Today, the importance dedicated to the NEET at a European level inevitably connects accession, UN goals and the European “acquis” in youth policies. Even in this field, the assessment could be better.<sup>31</sup> Although data are missing for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the strongest performer in the WB group as of 2022 is North Macedonia, where the NEET rate fell from 33.9 of 2015 to 27.6% in 2019. Montenegro and Serbia from 2015 to 2017 scored similar results but followed different trajectories afterwards: while both countries were close to a rate of 23% in 2017, in the years later Montenegro recorded a new increase to 28% in 2020 as against Serbia that showed a positive decrease to 20%. In any case, the NEET rate was substantially higher in all the candidate and potential candidate countries than in the EU, where it stood at 15%. Against that backdrop, some good news might come from the new wave of sensitivity on the issue that (at least) several countries of the region are starting to display.<sup>32</sup>

Figure 5: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and labour status (NEET rates) 2015-2020



Source:  
Eurostat (2022)

28 Regional Cooperation Council, Youth Guarantee in Western Balkans, 2020.

29 European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofund), Living and working in Europe, Bruxelles, 2021.

30 [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/eu-boosts-youth-employment-western-balkans-eu10-million-small-and-medium-enterprises-2020-08-06\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/eu-boosts-youth-employment-western-balkans-eu10-million-small-and-medium-enterprises-2020-08-06_en).

31 Please note: the following statistics the ratio is calculated as a rough share of all young residents in these countries, excluding only those whose attendance of the educational system remains unclear.

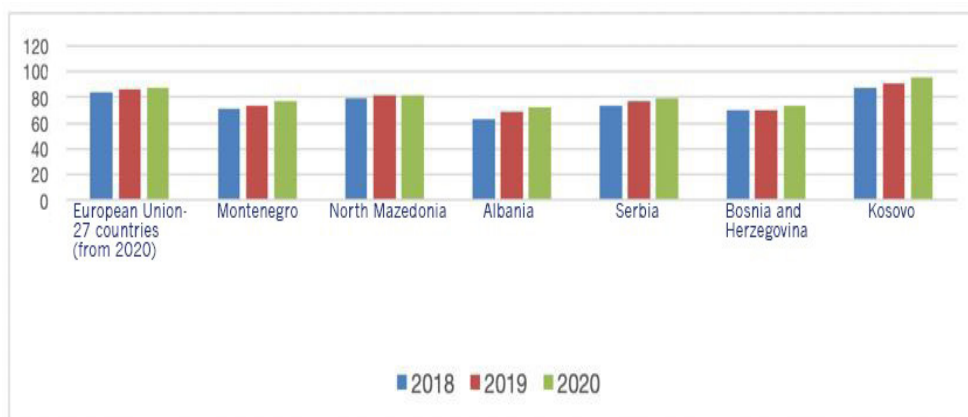
32 <https://www.divac.com/News/2906/National-Dialogue-for-Youth-Employment-launched.shtml>.

## (5) Access to internet

*The focus of the European Commission is on creating a Europe with harmonised rules for connectivity services, offering more choice to consumers and higher standard of service.*

Regarding SDG17, the UN established the target "17.8.1", which is gauged after the frequency of internet used by individuals aged between 16 and 74, and calculated for three different intensities: trimester usage, weekly usage and daily usage. In this regard, the European Commission is more than anything a provider of digital infrastructure and even its objectives - conveyed through its digital strategy - are related to the 5G and the facilities necessary to improve and expand the existing lines. The focus of the European Commission is on creating a Europe with harmonised rules for connectivity services, offering more choice to consumers and higher standard of service.<sup>33</sup> From their side, the Western Balkans seem ready to meet the UN goals, even despite an inadequate network of infrastructure. In 2020, all EU candidate and potential candidate countries presented high volumes with a daily use of the web shifting from 20% in 2009 to an impressive 71% in 2020. Kosovo reported the highest proportions of individuals aged between 16 and 74 using the internet in the last three months in 2020 (96%) and daily (93%). These figures are significant if we consider that in the EU, the trimester usage of the internet increased from 63% in 2009 to 88% in 2020 and that the daily use rose from 46% in 2009 to 80% in 2020.

Figure 6: Internet use individuals 2018-2020



Source:  
Eurostat (2022)

## Conclusions

When faced with the challenge of the SDGs, the Western Balkan countries share similar environmental, economic and social constraints. The analysis of the five selected development goals shows that, notwithstanding minor differences, the attainment of the envisaged targets remains elusive. In order to meet the challenge in a more cooperative way, these countries together with the RCC should organise fair consultations around specific sets of goals. The societies of the Western Balkans are facing similar problems in healthcare, child mortality, youth access to the job market and economic exclusion. The response - as always - lies in a prompt reaction via transnational soli-

33 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/connectivity>.



parity. The EU is suggesting a method – namely the transnational cooperation – that the member states itself are enforcing to respond to the new continental crises (COVID-19 first). A common effort from all the partners of the region could also help the international organisation and the EU itself to improve their statistical data collection and, therefore, upgrade the indicators used to evaluate accession. Another good side effect of this cooperation would be a major sharing of best practices among local authorities and municipalities, thereby realising a practical subsidiarity. Besides the quoted targets, there are several fields in which a better collaboration could be beneficial, such as the managing of transboundary environmental issues, the access and development of renewable energy sources, economic innovation and job creation. In all these sectors, a more efficient regional cooperation could trigger the benefits that often come with a scale economy (cost reduction, higher standard) and grow a shared knowledge. The SDGs could thus provide inspiration for a whole series of regional programmes that could contribute to develop economies, societies and above all build trust and create a sense of joint purpose.<sup>34</sup>

In particular, in order to advance the SDGs and spurring transnational cooperation between the countries in the region, the WB countries could undertake a number of urgent measures. Firstly, with the support of the RCC, they could set common targets in order to harmonise the different legislations and involve more effectively the civil society. Secondly, WB countries should invest in cross-border interconnectors to create a coherent energy grid without holes and dead ends. Finally, in order to decrease the percentage of NEET and solve other social problems, the WB countries should smooth their mobility rules and agree on specific provisions for students and workers willing to spend time abroad.

34 <https://iefworld.org/ddahl16k>.



## About the authors

**Daniele Fattibene** is Coordinator of the European Think Tanks Group (ETTG). Daniele has a major in food and nutrition security and development cooperation and has worked for several years as a researcher of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome. He also served as a Consultant for UN Agencies, think tanks and NGOs, such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Barilla Foundation, Save the Children and OXFAM. Contact: [dfa@ecdpm.org](mailto:dfa@ecdpm.org)

**Federico Castiglioni** (Ph.D.) is political analyst, specialized in European politics and institutions. He is currently researcher in the EU Programme at Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), and adjunct professor of European Governance at the University "L'Orientale" in Naples. Contact: [f.castiglioni@iai.it](mailto:f.castiglioni@iai.it)

**Matteo Bonomi** (Ph.D.) is senior fellow in the "EU, politics and institutions" programme at Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). He is member of the "Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group" (BiEPAG) and of the Editorial Committee of the academic journal "The International Spectator." He holds a PhD in "Politics, Human Rights and Sustainability" from the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa, Italy. Contact: [m.bonomi@iai.it](mailto:m.bonomi@iai.it)

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European Union, Western Balkans, COVID-19, Sustainable Development Goals, accession

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihčić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 09 2023



By Fiona Kelmendi  
Vienna, 28 April 2023  
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# Kosovo's youth: Overcoming challenges and creating opportunities

## Policy Recommendations

1. Kosovo needs to make significant investments to improve the quality and equality of education, as a main driver of personal empowerment.
2. Both formal and non-formal education need to incorporate the teaching and nurturing of essential life skills that will enable children and young people to meaningfully participate in a democracy.
3. Youth empowerment should be fostered through active participation in decision-making from an early age by institutionalising youth engagement and participation in schools as well as in local and national policy-making.

## Abstract

Kosovo has a unique demographic and a window of opportunity for capitalising on it, which will be closed sooner than expected if no action is taken. Over half of its population is under 30, whereas the current key indicators relating to human capital development are very low, with education outcomes being the most concerning. On the other hand, whether in creative entrepreneurship or in electoral process participation, young people in Kosovo demonstrate a clear willingness to become active citizens. In order to give them the tools to thrive, targeted interventions in the ed-

ucation system are urgently needed, as research confirms that education is a key factor in individual empowerment. This Policy Brief focuses on three ways to foster youth empowerment by addressing a few key challenges in education: improving the quality of education, building essential skills in formal and non-formal education, and encouraging active participation in decision-making from an early age. It includes short-term as well as long-term policy recommendations for nurturing civic participation and building a progressive society that will lead Kosovo into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



# Kosovo's youth: Overcoming challenges and creating opportunities

## Introduction

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. There is a unique window of opportunity, expected to close by 2036,<sup>1</sup> to use this immense potential for growth. However, the current indicators are not encouraging.

Youth unemployment in Kosovo currently stands at 29%,<sup>2</sup> with even higher figures among women, marginalised groups and non-majority communities. Over a third of young people aged 15-24 were not in employment, education or training in 2020.<sup>3</sup> The high unemployment among those with university degrees (between 13.7% and 20.7% in the last few years) further highlights a significant gap between education outcomes and labour market needs, which is not surprising given the alarmingly low national scores in standardised student tests. The COVID-19 pandemic has only further exacerbated these outcomes. Without immediate action, Kosovo's potential can quickly become its liability.

While young people are sometimes seen as having no agency or power, in the most recent parliamentary elections they demonstrated their actual potential – as vectors of socio-political transformation by overwhelmingly voting to bring to power Vetëvendosje for the first time, a political party that started out as a grassroots activist movement and which, since it ran for elections in 2010 for the first time, has been sitting in opposition for more than a decade. The exact turnout percentage by age is not available, but since at least 2016, the turnout among young people, especially those aged 18-21, has consistently been the highest among all age groups,<sup>4</sup> in stark contrast to many other developed democracies.

***Their vote was one for inclusion and active participation, and this needs to be the primary focus of the new government.***

The 2021 elections result wasn't just an anti-establishment vote; looking at the pre-election polls, the winning party's social-justice-heavy campaign attracted pri-

- 1 UNICEF Kosovo, June 2016, The Demographic Dividend - A Time Sensitive Window of Opportunity for Kosovo, <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/press-releases/demographic-dividend>.
- 2 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Labor Force Survey Q3 2021, <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/7072/afp-tm3-2021.pdf>.
- 3 Kosovo Education Center (KEC), May 2021, Evaluation of the Implementation of the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021 - Insufficient achievement, <http://kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Evaluation-of-the-Implementation-of-KESP-2017-2021.pdf>.
- 4 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), July 2016, Voter Turnout Among Youth of Kosovo, <https://www.ifes.org/publications/ifes-kosovo-works-engage-youth-political-and-electoral-processes>.



marily young people and women, two very large marginalised groups in Kosovo. These are the people who constantly feel disenfranchised at all levels: being denied access to quality education in schools (currently only 33% find it very satisfactory<sup>5</sup>), being denied access to institutions and national decision-making (only 10% think their interests are “well” represented<sup>6</sup>), and even being denied free movement in the EU and beyond. Their vote was one for inclusion and active participation, and this needs to be the primary focus of the new government.

***The only way to ensure their sustained empowerment is through the education system.***

The main question is still unanswered: how to provide these young people with the necessary tools for active and constructive civic participation in Kosovo and, perhaps, the EU? After all they will be leading the country in the next decade. The only way to ensure their sustained empowerment is through the education system. Although there are many brilliant young Kosovars who have paved their own way to success independently of the existing systems, especially in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector, they are the exception, not the norm.

There are many issues that have a direct impact on the empowerment of young people and can be addressed through the prism of education. Deeper structural problems that exist in the Kosovo education system, such as a lack of accountability and monitoring mechanisms, the dysfunctionality of school governing bodies, or the need for curriculum reform and textbook revision, are not the focus of the recommendations.

## **Empowerment through improving the quality of formal education**

The role of education in personal empowerment cannot be understated, in addition to providing pathways out of poverty, as each additional year of schooling is estimated to contribute to a 10% increase in income per individual.<sup>7</sup> Children in Kosovo not only spend fewer years in school than those in more developed countries, but they also learn significantly less – a learning gap of 5.3 years,<sup>8</sup> meaning that out of the average 13.2 years spent in school by age 18, they only learn the equivalent of 7.9 years of schooling – yet quality of education is essential in the development of socioemotional skills.<sup>9</sup> Young people in Kosovo are seemingly aware of these problems, as surveys suggest only 33% are very satisfied with the quality of education.<sup>10</sup>

- 5 UNDP Kosovo, January 2021, Youth Challenges and Perspectives in Kosovo, <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/publications/youth-challenges-and-perspectives-kosovo>.
- 6 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), 2019, Youth Study Kosovo 2018/2019, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15264.pdf>.
- 7 Montenegro, C. E., & Patrinos, H. A. (2014), Comparable Estimates of Returns to Schooling around the World, World Bank Group, Education Global Practice Group, September 2014.
- 8 World Bank, October 2020, Kosovo Human Capital Index 2020, [https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext\\_download/hci/HCI\\_2pager\\_XKX.pdf?cid=GGH\\_e\\_hcpexternal\\_en\\_ext](https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/hci/HCI_2pager_XKX.pdf?cid=GGH_e_hcpexternal_en_ext).
- 9 World Bank, March 2020, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020, <https://wiw.ac.at/western-balkans-labor-market-trends-2020-dlp-5300.pdf>.
- 10 UNDP Kosovo, January 2021, Youth Challenges and Perspectives in Kosovo, <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/publications/youth-challenges-and-perspectives-kosovo>.



***Considering that the school population at the primary and lower secondary levels will continue to decline, now is the time to increase the quality of education by making long-term, strategic investments.***

A good education system costs money, and the pre-requisite for any coherent reform of the education system in Kosovo is committing sufficient funding as well as ensuring efficient distribution of funding. In 2020, public spending on education was 4.7% of GDP, or 11.3% of total government spending.<sup>11</sup> While the EU spends the same proportion of its GDP on education, the outcomes are wildly different. Most of these expenditures in Kosovo are on salaries and the occasional capital investment, leaving a notable gap in development and innovation. It is crucial that more funds are dedicated to: a) teaching and learning resources, including libraries, information and communication technology, even the outdoor environment; b) professional development programmes for teachers; and c) innovation, which has been completely sidelined so far. Considering that the school population at the primary and lower secondary levels will continue to decline,<sup>12</sup> now is the time to increase the quality of education by making long-term, strategic investments.

***Apart from the urgent pedagogical training needed for all teachers, it is imperative to implement the teaching performance evaluation at full speed.***

After parents, teachers have the second most important impact on children's personal empowerment, far beyond just imparting knowledge. Their actions in the classroom determine whether children grow up wanting to be active citizens, confident enough to demand and enact political change, yet unfortunately, many students in Kosovo report feeling very disappointed that their opinions are not taken seriously by their teachers.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the urgent pedagogical training needed for all teachers, it is imperative to implement the teaching performance evaluation at full speed. So far, only 2% of teachers have undergone a performance appraisal. This would open the way for the promotion of better performing teachers and the requalification of others to lower levels as needed, while also creating higher standards of admission for new teachers. While teachers have been asking for higher salaries, which is absolutely essential for ensuring quality, without a re-evaluation of current teachers' abilities and performance, any significant blanket increase would be an inefficient use of resources. Finally, for empowerment, equality in education is as important as quality. Enrolment and access to education need to be prioritised in particular for early childhood education (ECE) programmes and pre-primary levels, as they are crucial not only for child development but also for enabling women to labour market

- 11 ARISE – Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education, January 2021, Policy Brief: Kosovo, <http://www.kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Policy-brief-Kosovo-ENG-Final.pdf>.
- 12 Kosovo Education Center (KEC), May 2021, Evaluation of the Implementation of the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021 – Insufficient achievement, <http://kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Evaluation-of-the-Implementation-of-KESP-2017-2021.pdf>.
- 13 UNICEF Kosovo, January 2022, Youth Voices from Kosovo, <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/reports/youth-voices-kosovo>.





participation.<sup>14</sup> In Kosovo, individuals attending ECE were seen to have more “grit”,<sup>15</sup> to be more open to new experiences, and to be more emotionally stable, all of which are essential for their empowerment. It is equally critical to incorporate targeted policy interventions to provide better access as well as continued pedagogical support to poorer and rural households, as well as girls, children from non-majority ethnic communities, and children with special needs.

A few policy interventions that require less investment and are more easily implementable but that can have an equally important and direct impact on youth empowerment in addition to supplementing the above recommendations are: a) the establishment of a feedback mechanism that would allow students to evaluate their teachers; b) consulting children and young people to define easily implementable short-term curricula interventions; and c) building on and expanding existing higher education exchange programmes, such as the EU-funded Young Cell Scheme.

## Empowerment through building essential life skills

Today, essential life skills include those that give young people better access to jobs – marketable skills – but also basic skills that allow them to meaningfully participate in public life, such as communication and critical thinking skills. The fact that most young active labour market participants in Kosovo do not work in their occupation<sup>16</sup> confirms the mismatch between education and labour market needs.

Communication and digital skills are among the top three most sought-after by Kosovo employers, especially those that offer higher wages.<sup>17</sup> The impression among young people in Kosovo is that the formal education system does not nourish these two essential skills at all and that it focuses too extensively on theoretical knowledge rather than its application, resulting in a lack of critical thinking skills development.<sup>18</sup> Teaching methods and lesson plans should urgently be revamped to build practical knowledge and develop skills needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ideally, this should be accompanied by capital investments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) capacities in both formal and non-formal education.

***Communication and digital skills are among the top three most sought-after by Kosovo employers, especially those that offer higher wages.***

The importance of strengthening non-formal education is increasingly being seen as a priority, but results are lacking. Vocational education and training (VET) programmes are not considered attractive career options, again, mostly due to the low

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14 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), February 2020, The Social Dimension of Enlargement Policy, <https://soe.fes.de/features/social-dimension-of-eu-enlargement>.

15 World Bank, March 2020, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020, <https://wiiw.ac.at/western-balkans-labor-market-trends-2020-dlp-5300.pdf>.

16 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), 2019, Youth Study Kosovo 2018/2019, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15264.pdf>.

17 Ibid.

18 UNICEF Kosovo, January 2022, Youth Voices from Kosovo, <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/reports/youth-voices-kosovo>.



quality of teaching and the lack of government investment in those programmes.<sup>19</sup> It is essential that these programmes are not only donor needs driven but that there is a regular review of profiles available so that they respond to evolving market needs.

Another key priority is to strengthen and build on the few existing programmes that support linkages between education and the labour market, as well as programmes that build skills through opportunities for entrepreneurship. Employers should also be involved in curriculum development so that they can continue supporting students with on-the-job learning opportunities. Young people who had internships during their studies in Kosovo seem to have an advantage in finding jobs in their occupations,<sup>20</sup> thus it is important that the existing donor-funded internship schemes continue to be expanded.

***Employers should also be involved in curriculum development so that they can continue supporting students with on-the-job learning opportunities.***

## Empowerment through active participation in decision-making

Lastly, in addition to improvements in education, all institutions, teachers, and parents should work to actively engage children and young people in decision-making by maximising youth engagement and participation in and outside of schools. Giving them this agency would serve in parallel to build their capacity to participate in a democracy from an early age and to build civic awareness.

Every small step makes a difference, even if it is as simple as including a suggestion box in every school. From the re-functionalisation of youth councils in both schools and municipalities to the appointment of youth focal points in local and central institutions, these are non-costly options that only require the determination needed to succeed. In the long term, it is important that volunteering is institutionalised in schools and recognised as practical work experience by state institutions.

Finally, 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 were being consulted for the new National Development Strategy. However, youth consultation processes need to become systematic and consider the inclusion of young people in the implementation of relevant strategies as actors.

***Finally, it is time for the decision-makers to stop treating young people as beneficiaries and to start considering them as capable actors.***

There have been some positive steps towards strengthening national youth policies, such as conducting consultations with youth and using those inputs to draft

19 Kosovo Education Center (KEC), May 2021, Evaluation of the Implementation of the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021 - Insufficient achievement, <http://kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Evaluation-of-the-Implementation-of-KESP-2017-2021.pdf>.

20 World Bank, March 2020, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020, <https://wiw.ac.at/western-balkans-labor-market-trends-2020-dlp-5300.pdf>.



the Concept Document on Youth<sup>21</sup> which will set the basis for the new Kosovo Youth Strategy. While it is encouraging that the document acknowledges the importance of a cross-sectoral approach and highlights youth participation in decision-making as one of its primary objectives, it remains to be seen how much of these policies will be prioritised and implemented.

## Conclusions

Various opinion polls continuously suggest high percentages of young people wanting to leave Kosovo – possibly around half<sup>22</sup> of them definitely or likely considering emigration. Perhaps because they find little perspective in their environment, they have started to create opportunities for themselves. It is no coincidence that the most successful sectors in Kosovo are those where the youth are at the wheel, despite the many limitations under which they are developing and operating. In order to give them the necessary tools to become fully empowered, an education that nourishes active citizenship is key.

Significant targeted investments for improving the (e)quality of education are urgent. As the saying goes, if you think education is expensive, try ignorance. It is equally important that the education system will foster the skills needed in the 21st century, especially by making use of non-formal education opportunities. Finally, active involvement of children and young people in all types of decision-making during their school years should not only be encouraged, but it also needs to be institutionalised to build their civic awareness.

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21 Government of Kosovo, Public Consultations Platform, November 2020, <https://konsultimet.rks-gov.net/viewConsult.php?ConsultationID=41590>.

22 UNDP Kosovo, January 2021, Youth Challenges and Perspectives in Kosovo, <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/publications/youth-challenges-and-perspectives-kosovo>.



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## About the author

**Fiona Kelmendi** is a former Kosovo diplomat with expertise in socio-economic policy research and strategic communication. Working in civil society, institutions, and international organizations in Kosovo, France, and Canada, she has extensive experience in project coordination, public diplomacy, and monitoring and evaluation. She has been part of the Change Experts Group as an associate researcher since 2019.

Contact: [fiona.kelmendi@gmail.com](mailto:fiona.kelmendi@gmail.com)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna, Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihčić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 10 2023



By Andrei Tiut, Ana Maria Teacă  
Vienna, 5 May 2023  
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# Emigration from Romania: impact and legacy

## Policy Recommendations

1. Understand the issue.
2. Focus on social and educational policies.
3. Improve the quality of the labour market.

## Abstract

More than 4 million Romanians have emigrated during the 30+ years since the 1989 Revolution. They send back remittances, and when they return they bring new skills and attitudes. Migration has also prevented significant social problems in Romania by offering employment to the otherwise unemployable, particularly during years of economic hardship. It can also be argued that the departure of a young, male, intrepid and often low-skilled population from the home country brought greater social (and, thus, political) stability.

On the downside, migrants and their families (especially children and the elderly) are vulnerable both in relation to the authorities and on a personal level. This may have contributed to radicalisation: The diaspora systematically skews towards parties that appear to be anti-establishment, even when these parties are on the far-right.

It has been argued that the migration of highly skilled workers deprives Romania of growth opportunities. This assertion, however, seems to be political and/or promoted by business advocates with very little data to confirm or deny it. While it is intuitively clear that returning high-skilled migrants would be an opportunity for the Romanian economy, it is far less clear that the economy or the state have the capacity to put this opportunity to good use.

This Policy Brief recommends that authorities, academia, and think-tanks work harder to better understand the new diaspora. If Romania wants potential emigrants to remain in their home country and perhaps migrants to return, then it must become a more welcoming and inclusive country with better employment and better services to promote employment, including childcare, general health-care, a stronger social safety net, and education.



# Emigration from Romania: impact and legacy

## A major and sensitive issue

The EU accession process represents a turning point in Romanian emigration. Between 2001 and 2016, Romania's emigrant population increased from 1.3 million to 3.6 million, or even 4 million.<sup>1 2</sup> In other words, almost 20% of the people born in Romania no longer live in the country. The data is not fully accurate, nor could it be, due to various administrative hurdles including the lack of documentation for workers. Most estimates, however, tend to suggest an even higher number of Romanians working abroad (almost 4.4 million).<sup>3 4</sup> The main countries of destination include Italy, Germany, and Spain.<sup>5 6 7</sup> Emigrants leave Romania for shorter or longer periods of time in order to obtain better wages to support themselves and their families or to study.<sup>8</sup> According to limited evidence, they remain in the country of destination due to higher pay but also due to better working conditions for those who succeed in integrating.<sup>9</sup>

***Almost 20% of the people born in Romania no longer live in the country.***

While net wages are the reason most often invoked explicitly, social services and infrastructure play a role in the net income of the prospective migrants, and thus an indirect but significant role in the motivation to leave: without affordable childcare, for example, mothers may be unable to obtain gainful employment, and without adequate transportation some rural workers will be unable to access jobs in the nearest city.

Regional disparities have long-lasting implications in the dynamic of migration. The poorer regions of Romania are also the regions where most Romanians emigrate.

- 1 Talent Abroad, A review of Romanian Emigrants, OECD 2019.
- 2 Romania is among the top 20 countries in the world with the highest emigration (in Romanian), <https://romania.iom.int/news/romania-among-top-20-countries-world-highest-emigration-romanian>, quoting data from the World Migration Report 2022, <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022>.
- 3 The Romanian Diaspora's Impact on European Stability, 2019, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs [https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles\\_papers\\_reports/20190627-romanian-diaspora-impact-european-stability#:~:text=A%20conservative%20estimate%20has%20one,are%20hard%20to%20come%20by](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/20190627-romanian-diaspora-impact-european-stability#:~:text=A%20conservative%20estimate%20has%20one,are%20hard%20to%20come%20by).
- 4 This year's census may shed a light on the issue, but its implementation has encountered significant issues.
- 5 Romeni in Italia/Popolazione residente in Italia proveniente dalla Romania al 1° gennaio 2022, <https://www.tuttitalia.it/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri/romania/>.
- 6 Comunitatea românească, <https://berlin.mae.ro/node/286>.
- 7 Población (españoles/extranjeros) por País de Nacimiento, sexo y año, <https://www.ine.es/jaxi/Datos.htm?path=/t20/e245/p08/l0/&file=01006.px#!tabs-tabla/>.
- 8 [https://www.dropbox.com/s/tircdm4ppazwl73/MMT%20aprilie%202008%20comunitatea\\_romaneasca\\_in\\_spanya%20italia%20via%20ContextPolitic.net.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/tircdm4ppazwl73/MMT%20aprilie%202008%20comunitatea_romaneasca_in_spanya%20italia%20via%20ContextPolitic.net.pdf?dl=0).
- 9 <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/migratia-muncii-romania/31437331.html>.



ed from both before and after accession to the European Union (EU).<sup>10</sup> A vicious circle thus emerges: poor municipalities offer poor quality social services because they cannot afford more. Poverty and poor social services lead to increased migration. Increased migration leads to smaller workforce and thus lower income for the municipalities.<sup>11</sup>

The emigration wave has serious implications at political and socio-economic levels. It is not the purpose of this Policy Brief to give a simplified verdict on the effect of migration, saying that it is mostly positive or mostly negative. Instead, we are trying to illuminate both the positive and negative consequences and shift the focus to the future impact.

Countries all around the European Union's borders, irrespective of whether they have been EU accession candidates or not, are experiencing very similar dynamics: Having lost a third of its population already, the Republic of Moldova "is struggling to remain a viable state".<sup>12</sup> While in the Western Balkans, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo are projected to lose 3% and respectively 5% and 11% of their population by 2050, Albania is likely to lose 18%, Serbia 24%, and Bosnia and Herzegovina up to 29% of their population, with potentially dramatic consequences.<sup>13</sup>

## Positive consequences

The most obvious consequence of migration is that it will *keep people employed* who would otherwise lose their jobs. That makes it especially important for many Romanians in marginalised situations where they do not have access to well-paid employment. For them, migration is a solution to provide a minimum of prosperity for themselves and the family, or sometimes even a survival strategy as subsistence agriculture pays off less from year to year.<sup>14</sup>

***The most obvious consequence of migration is that it will keep people employed who would otherwise lose their jobs.***

Another consequence is the *transfer of money through remittances*. While remittances sometimes insert distortion into the labour market, especially in the case of seasonal workers,<sup>15</sup> they can also be a source of prosperity for families that otherwise struggle financially. Remittances also have a significant economic role, being a source of investment (or at least of consumption) and increasing the national income.<sup>16 17</sup>

10 <https://timponline.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/harta-emigrarii.jpg>.

11 <https://panorama.ro/obsesie/diaspora-ce-a-pierdut-si-a-castigat-romania-din-cauza-exodului/>.

12 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/16/moldova-faces-existential-population-crisis/>.

13 <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/14/bye-bye-balkans-a-region-in-critical-demographic-decline/>.

14 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=8834&langId=en>.

15 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/18052-20210623.pdf>.

16 Idem.

17 USD 7.5bn were transferred as remittances according to 'Romania among the top 20 countries in the world with the highest emigration' (in Romanian), <https://romania.iom.int/news/romania-among-top-20-countries-world-highest-emigration-romanian>, quoting data from World Migration Report 2022, <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022>.





The third consequence is increased *political stability* in Romania. The effects of migration on political stability have been insufficiently studied. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to notice that people who migrated for work, particularly early, less qualified cohorts, are exactly the demographic from whom supporters of violent riots and populist movements could be recruited: coming from poor and marginalised areas, relatively young (largely 25-29 years old), with a significant number of males, and more open to taking risks than their neighbours who chose not to migrate.<sup>18</sup>

A fourth benefit would be the *transfer of knowledge, skills, and cultural attitudes* from the host country to Romania through the returning migrants. It was commonly expected that after a relatively brief stint abroad, the migrants would return with new money and new skills, putting them to work and helping Romania achieve sustainable long-term growth as a new entrepreneurial class.<sup>19</sup> This romantic notion has largely waned, being replaced in public debate with examples of economically irrational behaviour.<sup>20</sup> However, according to leading Romanian demographer Dumitru Sandu, it remains partially true: Regions that send emigrants to different countries tend to take different paths to modernisation, paths that are similar to those taken by the host countries.<sup>21</sup>

***The effects of migration on political stability have been insufficiently studied.***

## Negative consequences

A major effect of migration is the *vulnerabilisation of emigrants*. Emigrants, particularly in the early days, had few cultural and linguistic skills that would help them adapt to a new country and claim their rights. Migration for work was also illegal in many European countries for many years, even when it was informally tolerated. This meant that illegal workers were very unlikely to go to the authorities, even when they were abused. Their employers, on the other hand, were illegal employers themselves, so they were arguably more likely to break the law than the average firm.

***The situation is currently better, after EU accession, but the balance of power between employers and employees is still uneven.***

The situation is currently better, after EU accession, but the balance of power between employers and employees is still uneven. Sometimes bad-faith intermediaries who want to maximise their profit put extra pressure on the migrant workers.

18 [https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/social\\_trends\\_in\\_2021\\_0.pdf](https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/social_trends_in_2021_0.pdf).

19 See, for example, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336288428\\_Raport\\_privind\\_potentialul\\_de\\_implicare\\_al\\_diasporei\\_in\\_comunitatile\\_din\\_Tara\\_Fagarasului](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336288428_Raport_privind_potentialul_de_implicare_al_diasporei_in_comunitatile_din_Tara_Fagarasului).

20 For example, seasonal migrants would use the income to build large houses and buy expensive cars (<https://www.totb.ro/mandrie-si-beton-povestea/>) that would become difficult to support in leaner years.

21 <https://www.totb.ro/mandrie-si-beton-povestea/>.



Reports of slave labour,<sup>22</sup> poor sanitary conditions, and of confiscating passports still exist.<sup>23 24</sup>

Even where there are no abuses, the migrants still remain vulnerable to loneliness and depression. In Romania this is actually called the “Italy syndrome”, after the stories of Romanian female workers who care for elderly Italians and who become separated not only from their families, but also from their fellow workers.<sup>25</sup>

***Even where there are no abuses, the migrants still remain vulnerable to loneliness and depression.***

Another consequence is the *political radicalisation* of the diaspora. For a while, this was masked by the prevalence of diaspora voting against the Social Democratic Party (PSD, “heir” to the Communist Party) which was interpreted as pro-democratic orientation. Candidates Traian Băsescu and Klaus Iohannis, both running on a strong pro-Western and pro-democracy platform, were elected with the critical help of the diaspora vote.<sup>26 27</sup>

However, a closer look at the electoral data shows that the diaspora votes for a radical anti-PSD party no matter its democratic credentials. The populist PPDD party (People’s Party, Dan Diaconescu) scored significantly higher in the diaspora than in Romania in the 2016 parliamentary elections.<sup>28</sup> The outright extremist AUR party (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians) also scored better in the diaspora than at home.<sup>29</sup>

***However, a closer look at the electoral data shows that the diaspora votes for a radical anti-PSD party, no matter its democratic credentials.***

It is worth noting that radical political behaviour is largely in the rational self-interest of the diaspora voter, and therefore it is not likely to disappear soon. Radical change of any kind brings risks, and the domestic constituency will weigh that risk against the probability and intensity of a benefit. However, most forms of negative fallout coming from poor leadership will not affect the diaspora voter. Thus, if things change for the better, they may gain (the possibility of returning home and finding good employment); if change is for the worse, they are personally sheltered from the consequences and can also mitigate the fallout on their families through remittances.

Another negative consequence is the *de facto abandonment of children and the neglect of the elderly for long periods of time*. Sometimes children are left with a remaining parent but other times they need to be left with other relatives, particularly

22 <https://voxeurop.eu/en/the-romanian-slaves-behind-the-sicilian-tomatoes/>.

23 <https://www.rferl.org/a/romanian-migrants-get-covid-19-as-pandemic-exposes-bad-conditions-for-east-european-workers/30643195.html>.

24 <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/local/am-fost-vindut-ca-sclav~ni43sm>.  
25 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/2/12/why-romanian-migrant-women-suffer-from-italy-syndrome>.

26 <http://alegeri.roaep.ro/?alegeri=prezidentiale-2009>.

27 <https://prezidentiale2019.bec.ro/>.

28 <http://213.177.15.7:8080/siap-wp>.

29 <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/parlamentare06122020/romania-pv-final>.



grandmothers. This often leads to lasting emotional damage.<sup>30</sup> The elderly are also affected,<sup>31</sup> particularly in rural communities where agricultural workers were not historically required to contribute to pension funds.<sup>32</sup> The psychological effects, both direct and indirect, are arguably worse than the material ones, yet they remain insufficiently studied due to difficulty of access and lack of interest (out of sight, out of mind).

***Another negative consequence is the de facto abandonment of children and the neglect of the elderly for long periods of time.***

This is a problem: the material effects are both positive and negative and if we trust the migrant to act on average as a rational actor, we can affirm that the material impact is positive at the individual level and some of that individual impact will transfer to the societal level.

With immaterial personal effects, the balance appears tilted towards the negative effects, even if sufficient data is missing. We do not know how single workers, the children, and the elderly left behind are affected, but we know that they are. Even when positive psychological effects appear, they are arguably more likely to promote integration in the host society than trickle down into positive social effects at home.

Without a study of such psychological and, *sensu lato*, social effects, the state and municipal authorities are unable to offer effective support as the problems are still relatively new, and Romania seems to lack an adequate culture of care for those negatively affected by migration.

## Future perspectives

***In the long run, the country of origin would need pre-existing opportunities for the optimal use of its professionals before they could decide to return.***

A problem that is oftentimes quoted in relation to migration is the human capital flight (the so-called brain drain), that is, the migration of the “smartest” and most educated individuals. Left without this educated elite, the country of origin would have difficulties moving forward with its economic development, or at least this is the complaint you can occasionally hear in Romania.<sup>33</sup> Similar opinions were held unanimously by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR),<sup>34</sup> even though the scientific evidence on the issue is mixed.

In its most abstract form, the theory is elitist, presuming implicitly that the loss of elites cannot be compensated by the import of technology and ideas, leading eventually to the reacquisition of the migrants through competitive salaries. However, ac-

30 <https://childhub.org/en/child-protection-news/more-200000-romanian-children-suffer-being-left-behind>.

31 <https://stirileprotv.ro/campanii/parinti/tu-stii-ce-mai-fac-parintii-tai-batranii-abandonati-de-copiii-plecati-in-strainatate-pentru-a-ingrijii-parintii-altora.html>.

32 The material issue is more complex than can be explored here. While children can no longer work around the household and garden to help their elderly parents, they can still send remittances that, in some cases, have more value.

33 <https://republicanews.ro/brain-drain-exodul-de-creiere/>.

34 <https://cor.europa.eu/ro/news/Pages/tackling-brain-drain.aspx>.



According to existing empirical research, this might happen in the long run, whereas the damage done impacts development in the short run (i.e. arguably a waste of educational resources or the loss of some specialist doctors).<sup>35</sup>

In the long run, the country of origin would need pre-existing opportunities for the optimal use of its professionals before they could decide to return. However, Romanians typically emigrate from a position of unemployment or from low paying jobs.

***Whole industries are so reliant on cheap labour that increasing the minimum wage risks making them uncompetitive.***

It is not clear whether the state and the business environment are truly invested in attracting skilled workers. Whole industries are so reliant on cheap labour that increasing the minimum wage risks making them uncompetitive.<sup>36</sup> Romania continues to have some of the lowest hourly labour costs in the EU, ranking second lowest after Bulgaria.<sup>37</sup> It also has the fourth lowest minimum wage (despite significant increases in the last decade).<sup>38</sup> Private and public programmes to facilitate the return of the diaspora have focused on speeches and cash handouts without giving due attention to other needs of a seasoned professional, like healthcare and education for kids.<sup>39 40 41</sup> Finally, a pilot programme to reintegrate young Romanians educated abroad as public servants failed due to bureaucracy and politicking.<sup>42</sup>

***Romania continues to have some of the lowest hourly labour costs in the EU, ranking second lowest after Bulgaria.***

After the pandemic, the managerial culture is evolving to accommodate working from home, whether that home is in the same country as the “office” or not.<sup>43</sup> Some Romanian professionals, particularly programmers and freelancers were doing remote work even before the pandemic; thus, they are familiar with the tools and skills required and are also well placed to profit from this opportunity and teach others how to profit from it.

However, this has the potential to create a class of digital (virtual) emigrants who disengage from the social fabric. A professional can work remotely, pay little or no

35 The overall number of doctors is generally increasing. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/12/16/why-balkan-doctors-head-for-western-europe>.

36 [http://mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/MMPS/SNOFM\\_2021-2027.pdf](http://mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/MMPS/SNOFM_2021-2027.pdf).

37 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Wages\\_and\\_labour\\_costs#Eurostat%20#StatisticsExplained](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Wages_and_labour_costs#Eurostat%20#StatisticsExplained).

38 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Minimum\\_wages\\_July\\_2022\\_and\\_July\\_2012\\_\(EUR\\_per\\_month\\_and\\_%25\)\\_-F1.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Minimum_wages_July_2022_and_July_2012_(EUR_per_month_and_%25)_-F1.png).

39 [https://www.dropbox.com/s/tircdm4ppazwl73/MMT%20aprilie%202008%20comunitatea\\_romaneasca\\_in\\_spanya%20italia%20via%20ContextPolitic.net.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/tircdm4ppazwl73/MMT%20aprilie%202008%20comunitatea_romaneasca_in_spanya%20italia%20via%20ContextPolitic.net.pdf?dl=0).

40 The News from Diaspora section on the website of the presidency.

41 <https://repatriot.ro/category/finantare/>.

42 <https://www.zf.ro/zf-24/exclusiv-online-guvernul-a-platit-6-mil-de-euro-pentru-burse-in-strainatate-ca-sa-puna-vedete-la-conducere-5526356>.

43 [https://www.ey.com/ro\\_ro/munca-de-la-birou-devine-munca-de-oriunde-in-lume--o-tendinta-cu](https://www.ey.com/ro_ro/munca-de-la-birou-devine-munca-de-oriunde-in-lume--o-tendinta-cu).



taxes,<sup>44</sup> and sidestep the public health and education systems by preferring private alternatives. If we are to use Albert O. Hirschmann's terms,<sup>45</sup> they would perform a (partial) exit from society even though they live, eat, and socialise in Romania.

They would have little incentive to engage in constructive criticism and promote improvement at the social level as they feel that society (or at least the state) has little to offer them that they do not already have and have paid for. This (still only a potential) phenomenon is more insidious than the brain drain but potentially more damaging.

Also, digital emigrants could prove as prone to radicalisation as physical emigrants, but they have easier access to the voting booth. Some may feel they owe nothing to society so they should optimise or avoid taxes. Yet they use the roads and the security offered by the state and, as they grow older, may need to rely on pensions and healthcare. Thus, they are not only a lost opportunity but also, to an extent, a drain on resources.

*Digital emigrants could prove as prone to radicalisation as physical emigrants, but they have easier access to the voting booth.*

## Recommendations

- **Understand the issue.** There is a clear lack of reliable data when it comes to the diaspora. A comprehensive study programme is difficult and somewhat expensive, but in no way impossible. It should study both actual and prospective migrants and should involve, among other stakeholders, local authorities, host states, and universities that are undertaking studies on migration.<sup>46</sup>
- **Focus on social and educational policies.** Wages which are an important factor in the decision to migrate or not are ultimately established by the market. But the state should offer social services that increase the quality of life and promote gainful employment. Good health, a social safety net, and a good education not only improve the lives of citizens but also help them find better-paying jobs.
- **Improve the quality of the labour market.** Promote the creation of long-term jobs, focus on life-long education, improve physical access to labour markets and provide affordable childcare.

44 The Romanian state is chronically unable to collect taxes and has one of the lowest taxes-to-GDP ratios in Europe: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Total\\_tax\\_revenue\\_by\\_Member\\_States\\_and\\_EFTA\\_countries,\\_2019\\_and\\_2020,\\_%25\\_of\\_GDP.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Total_tax_revenue_by_Member_States_and_EFTA_countries,_2019_and_2020,_%25_of_GDP.png).

45 <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674276604>.

46 For example, <https://migrademo.eu/>.



## About the authors

**Andrei Tiut** is a political scientist, data analyst, and pollster with extensive experience in quantitative and qualitative analysis. He leads the Democratic Resilience program of the GlobalFocus Center and has recently focused on policy-oriented social media monitoring and analysis around information manipulation.

Contact: [andrei.tiut@global-focus.eu](mailto:andrei.tiut@global-focus.eu)

**Ana Maria Teacă** is a Senior Research Analyst with GlobalFocus Center. Her interests are in democratisation and transition processes and European social policies. She also worked as Chief of Staff and EU Affairs Adviser to the State Secretary of EU Affairs in Romania's Ministry of Labour.

Contact: [ana.ianus@global-focus.eu](mailto:ana.ianus@global-focus.eu)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna  
Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihic

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)