



# THE ROLE OF THE WESTERN BALKAN YOUTH IN THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

ROXANA IROD

---



Source: *European Parliament*



## SUMMARY

This paper offers a short overview on the state of the European Union (EU) accession process for the 6 Balkan countries and name the major issues that keep lagging the process. I will take a look beyond the areas of economic development, infrastructure and governance and address the lack of initiatives that target the population in general and youth in particular. This paper aims to show why the involvement of the EU in the Western Balkans is crucial for the EU security and foreign policy and how inaction in the present could lead to youth radicalisation and conflict in the future and I argue that youth involvement is the cornerstone for resolving a lot of the regional issues and that investing in youth means investing in a more peaceful, more prosperous future for the entire continent

## CONTENTS

1. Background
2. Youth role in tackling regional issues
3. Conclusions and recommendations

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Roxana Irod is a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student at the Faculty of Political Science (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania.

## EDITORIAL TEAM

Marc López (Agenda Pública), Luis Bouza (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) and Álvaro Oleart (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam).

Guest editor: Miruna Butnaru-Troncotă,

## DISCLAIMER

This policy brief series is made with the financial support of the European Union Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). The policy briefs only reflect the views of the authors and the Commission and the Agency cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



## BACKGROUND

The European Union (EU) has declared on numerous occasions its intention to support the Western Balkan countries during their Europeanisation process, but many voices argue that they have failed to do so. During the Communication on EU enlargement policy and annual progress reports from 2021, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, [Olivér Várhelyi, has stated](#) that: “*Enlargement policy is a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, security and economic growth on our European continent*”, and while statements about how the future of the Western Balkans lies in the EU have been made repentantly for many years, the accession situation is still uncertain.

The six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo) have had a difficult history since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Even today they face many hardships at both economic and political levels and their current road toward Europeanisation and membership is paved with multiple challenges. Each country is at a different stage in the accession process: Serbia and Montenegro have already started the negotiations, while Albania and North Macedonia hold the status of candidate countries but cannot move further and Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are only potential candidates (Kosovo is a particular case, as not all EU member states recognise its independency).

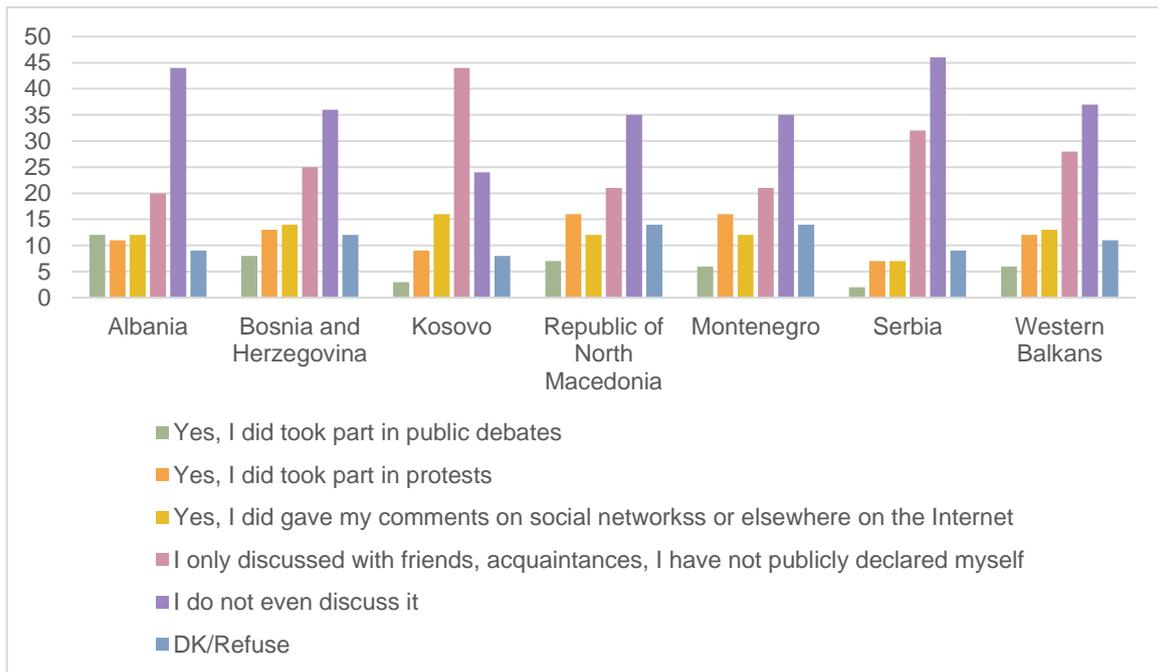
In accordance with its fundamental values, the EU should take on the duty to promote and help sustain peace in the world, especially in its own vicinity. There has to be a bigger commitment from the EU part in the Balkans that reaches beyond trade, infrastructure and governance. These fields, although crucial for the development of a country, should not overshadow the need to invest in ordinary people and especially in youth. Quality education, higher voting turnout, support for cross-country projects and research done by universities, student and teachers exchanges and so on, are also an important aspect that should be approached separately and be clearly stated as one of the priorities of the EU in the region. I would like to stress in the following analysis that it is crucial to help form a new generation of active European citizens in the Western Balkans if we hope to bring about political and societal change, as well as to eradicate corruption.

## YOUTH ROLE IN TACKLING REGIONAL ISSUES

According to [a recent poll on public opinion in the Western Balkans on electoral participation](#), most citizens believe that the government can be changed through elections, but there are many reasons for election abstention such as lack of interest in the political process, election irregularity, the absence of candidates they would like to vote for and in some countries, the belief that their vote cannot make a change. These issues and concerns should be addressed and worked on in a visible and transparent manner in each country through public awareness campaigns, advocacy and youth involvement either through projects designed on an international level by the EU or partnerships with local NGOs in order to reach as many people as possible. The Balkan Barometer of 2021 touches upon this subject and points out that voting should not be the only mean through which citizens get engaged in the issues affecting their communities. The low percentage of people involved in active discussions on reforms can also be seen as a sign of failure or of lack of interest from the authorities to incentivize the population to act and not only react to the issues concerning their communities.

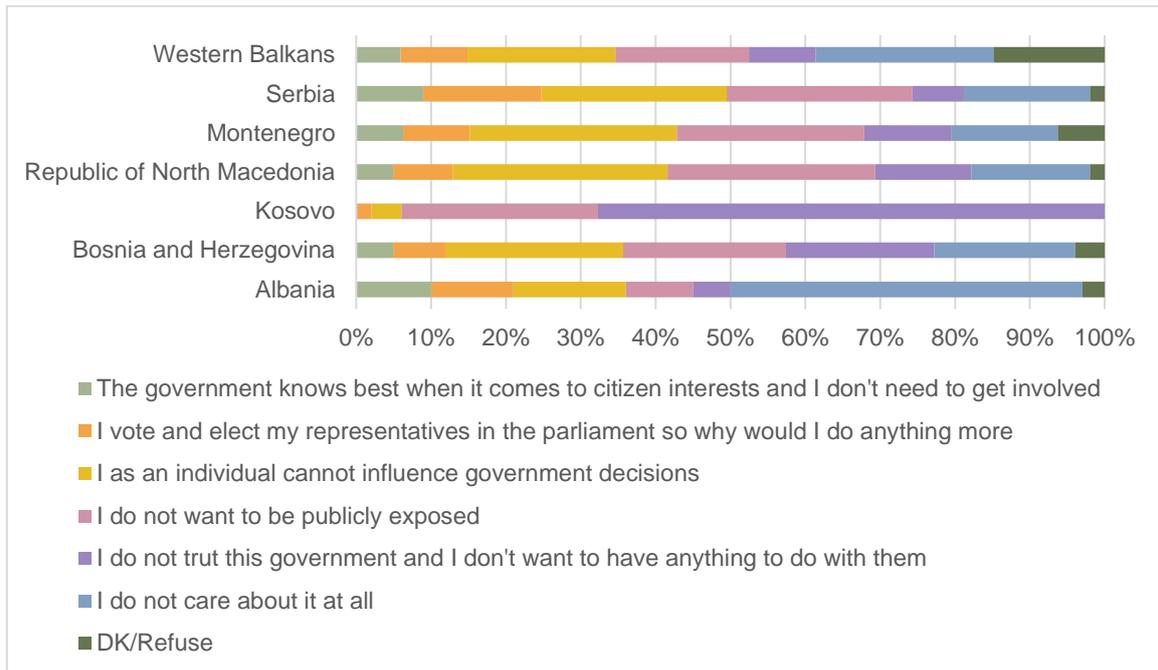


Figure 1: Have you ever done something that could affect any of the government decisions?



Source: Balkan Barometer 2021

Figure 2: What is the main reason you are not actively involved in government decision-making?



Source: Balkan Barometer 2021

As it is well known, the Western Balkans have a long and convoluted history and a lot of unresolved issues that still contribute to a state of mistrust between the national governments and their people. These issues cannot be addressed without youth involvement and bigger efforts to normalize the relationship between the sides involved. There is an obvious need for better communication between the states in this region and their people and between this region and the EU. Therefore, more voices should be heard at EU level that speak on behalf of the youth that live in the Western Balkans.

The EU already showed that it can mobilize youth with the help of other youth as seen from the results of the 2019 European Parliament elections where the overall turnout was 50.6%, the highest since 1994. This increase is due to young and first-time voters. According to the [EU press release](#), youth participation 42% of the 16/18-24 year old voted compared to the elections in 2014 where only 28% cast their vote, thus marking a 14 percentage increase. Another interesting shift was the increased turnout in the age group of 25-39 years, rising by 12 points from 35% in 2014 to 47% in 2019.

Thanks to actions such as Y Vote, FEMYSO 2019 European Elections, the This Time I'm Voting campaign, youth and ordinary citizens were able to actively engage and promote the things they believed in, they were not only given information as the receiver or target audience of a political campaign but were encouraged to actively take part in it and spread their own message. From this we can conclude that further such actions are needed, especially in the Western Balkan countries where youth involvement is overall even smaller than in EU countries and the target value for youth involvement according to the 2020 agenda of the Council of Europe has not been met.

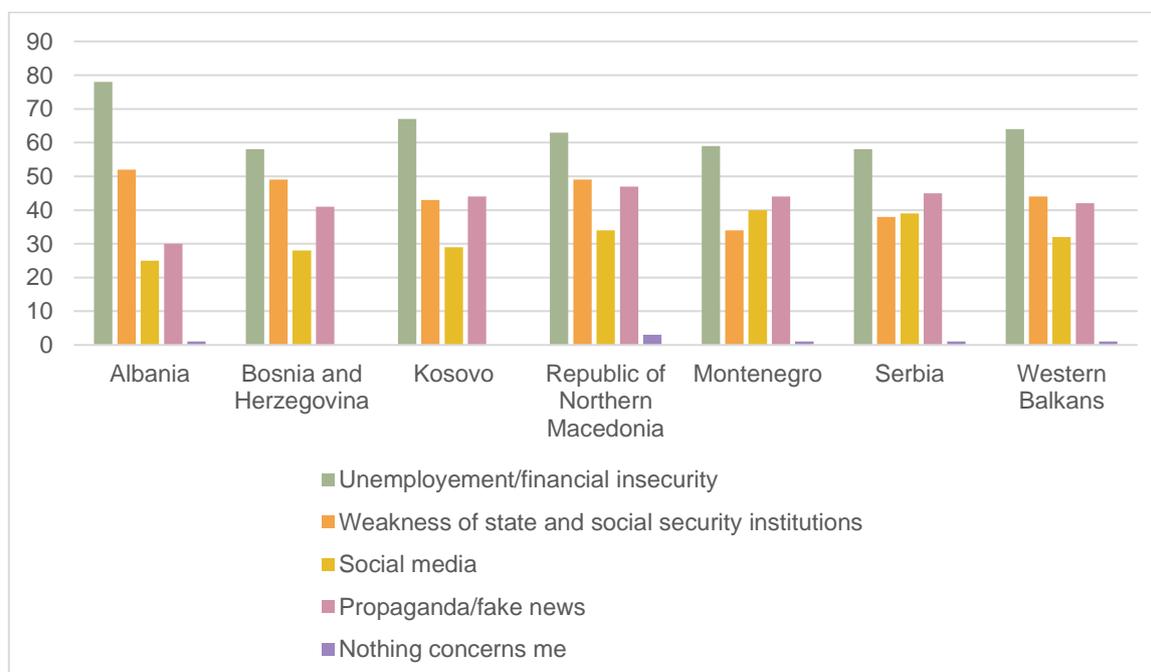
If we look through [a research paper published by the Council of Europe Development Bank](#), we notice the high rate of youth emigration and the fact that in 2020, almost 43% of people in the region from which 71% of young people reported that they were considering emigrating in order to work abroad. But all these countries need their youth, they need them not only for economic reasons, but also in order to ensure progress of the country from a societal perspective. According to [the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies](#), the brain drain resulting from the emigration of youth



has huge economic and social costs, especially as a lot of the emigrants are young and highly educated, a fact which adds substantial costs to their national states as governments must pay for their education. The money sent back by the immigrants to their families in the form of remittances, although helping increase a country's GDP, can have negative effects if their share becomes too large. Among the issues listed by the [Council of Europe Development Bank](#) are: government fiscal accounts becoming dependent on them as indirect revenue, distortive effects on the real exchange rate impacting the tradable sector, and can also push up the reservation wage within a country, exacerbating labour market issues.

All these factors considered lead us to understand the fact that Western Balkans need their youth inside their countries, but in order to make this arrangement mutually beneficial there should be a greater investment in increasing the standard of living by focusing on local initiatives. Proper conditions must be assured in order to achieve the desired results otherwise the young population that was supposed to be the ones leading the advancement of the countries and their subsequent accession to the EU might turn out to do the exact opposite and the fact that they are constantly neglected by political actors from both within and outside their national states only adds to the problem. As the findings of the 2021 Balkan Barometer point out, the current economic and social issues we see in the Western Balkan countries seem to contribute to the radicalisation of youth and violent extremism as stated by the citizens themselves. They consider unemployment and financial insecurities as the leading cause of radicalisation; this belief is universally shared in all the countries in the region. This clearly shows the need for widespread action in the youth sector and the fact that the situation already declined at such a level of concern only proves that the issue can no longer be ignored.

**Figure 3: Which factors do you think contribute the most to radicalization and violent extremism in your economy today?**



Source: Balkan Barometer 2021



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of the Western Balkan countries is undoubtedly tied with the one of EU from a wide array of variables such as geography, history, economics, security, etc. Negligence to address the issues faced by youth also inhibits their potential in strengthening the Europeanization process in their countries and even risks alienating them altogether from the European values which can lead to radicalisation and further instability in the region. The reluctance of youth to get involved in the democratic process and civic actions can be seen in the low voter turnout and the reluctance to take up any other action or public stance beyond the act of voting. In this context, if the EU wants to preserve and enhance peace and prosperity on the continent, the issue of enlargement and the potential contribution of youth in this process cannot be overlooked.

Therefore, the involvement of the EU in the Western Balkans is crucial for the EU security and foreign policy, as current inaction could lead to internal / regional conflict in the future. Youth involvement is the cornerstone for resolving many of the regional issues, as investing in youth means investing in a more peaceful, more prosperous future for the entire continent. As long as the EU is willing to invest resources in creating the necessary framework for the citizens in the region to actively engage in their country's issues, a plurality of bottom-up initiatives will develop in the region, contributing to an increased level of engagement on political, as well as social issues.

Some suggestions on action that the EU could take in this regard are:

- Creating an internship program modelled after the one currently in place at the EU level, the Blue Book traineeship program, which will involve governmental institutions and agencies as well as the private sector so youth can acquire the necessary work experience asked by most employers in the field of their interest, therefore helping raise their employability prospects for the future;
- Promoting different means of youth involvement in issues concerning their communities by helping facilitate a better dialogue and foster an increased stability in the region through the involvement of youth in the reconciliation process. This could be realised through the development of a program such as an Erasmus+ for the Western Balkans (which would only involve countries in the region, incentivizing youth to work with each other). The program would encompass training activities, exchanges and other youth centered projects. The process would also be facilitated by the similarities between the languages spoken in the region, which will enable even more youth to participate as the language barrier will no longer be an issue and the travel and living costs will be more similar and evenly distributed among participating Balkan countries than if you compare Balkan and EU countries. This initiative would be specifically orientated towards the needs of the region and would imply a separate budget where the cost could be shared between the EU and the Balkan countries themselves in a fair way, taking into account the financial capacities of each of these two blocs. The main focus of this program should be to increase the degree of mutual understanding and cooperation among ethnicities and also youth involvement in civic actions, which might also awaken their interest in specific policy areas and in turn encourage youth activism.