



Conference
on the **Future**
of **Europe**

**OUR COMMON
FUTURE:
A BOTTOM-UP
PERSPECTIVE
WESTERN
BALKANS'
YOUTH
ON THE FUTURE
OF EUROPE**

policy paper



**Our common future: a bottom-up perspective
Western Balkans' youth on the Future of Europe**
- Policy paper -

Co-authors:

Miruna Butnaru-Troncotă (Romania)

Donika Emini (Kosovo)

Hatidza Jahic (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Simonida Kacarska and Ardita Vejseli (North Macedonia)

Konstantina Karydi (Greece)

February 2022



This analysis is part of the project titled “Enhancing the Role of the Western Balkans in the Future of Europe”, funded by the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB), in the framework of the BeeEFB Alumni Network.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	Executive summary
6	Introduction
7	Methodology
9	I. Background
9	I.1 The Future of European Democracy: A Common Agenda for the EU and the WB?
10	I.2 Are the Western Balkans in or out of the Future of Europe debate?
12	I.3 Youth challenges in the Western Balkans
15	II Main findings
15	II.1 Youth voices from Bosnia and Herzegovina
17	II.2 Youth voices from North Macedonia
19	II.3 Youth voices from Kosovo
21	III. Creative ways to include Western Balkans youth in CoFoE!
21	Conclusion and Recommendations
24	About authors
26	Annex A

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In spring 2021, the European Union launched the multilingual platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). This initiative is part of a wide deliberation process for sharing reflections on the future of our continent that will run until spring 2022, including EU and non-EU countries. Unfortunately, the Western Balkans, albeit in the process of EU integration and promised a future in the EU, have not been officially included in what was expected to be the most inclusive and laudable event across the EU. Admittedly though, decision-makers in the Western Balkans invested minimal efforts to be included in the debate. This policy paper puts forward inputs collected in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Greece thus aiming to amplify the voices of youth in the debate on the future of Europe.

In the final part, the paper presents practical steps that can and should be taken in support of the deepening of the European democracy. This includes measures that will advance the collaboration of stakeholders across the region, mechanisms to create bridges of engagement between youth in EU and non-EU countries of the region as well as two-way processes of citizen engagement and feedback mechanisms to assess engagement impact. Ultimately, such practical approaches are not dependent on new instruments but on the re-orientation of existing ones.

INTRODUCTION

“No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline”.

Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations

In spring 2021, the European Union (EU) launched the multilingual platform as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE hereafter). The platform is a new, bottom-up and pan-European initiative aimed to give citizens, civil society, and authorities a greater say in EU policy making. The Conference is planned to run until May 2022 and offers a new public forum for an open, inclusive, and transparent debate with citizens, covering several key priorities and challenges for Europe. Currently in its 3rd phase (until February 2022), the Conference is packed with activities, as well as ‘European Citizens’ Panels’ where randomly selected EU citizens jointly reflect on the future of Europe.

But who belongs to the future of Europe? Certainly, that future does not stop at the formal borders of EU member states. Naturally, the debate on the future of Europe cannot only focus on EU countries, but also defines the EU’s role in the world. As such, it was widely expected by policy experts that the Western Balkans (WB hereafter) would be formally included in the potentially transformative, future-shaping debates. The WB describe the EU’s neighboring region that includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, all of which are part of the EU’s enlargement policy. Just as the EU shares a common history, culture, security and economic interests with the WB, their future is shared, too.

The active participation of the WB in the CoFoE is necessary to help the EU shape that common future together, and to also strengthen the EU in the world. Several important contributions within the EU have already spotlighted young people’s thoughts about and visions for the future of Europe¹. But so far, only marginal attention has been given to young people in the WB. Ironically, WB societies have a significantly lower average age than the rest of Europe. Assuming that democracy depends on youth (education), this stresses the importance of youth participation from the region as critical for the future of European democracy. Youth voices from the Western Balkans are not very visible in current EU discussions, and it is hence of utmost importance to make their voices heard in the debate on the Future of Europe. The involvement of young citizens from the WB countries in rethinking European democracy is both

¹ European Youth Card Association (EYCA) “Youth Stand For the Future of Europe” Report, 2021 <https://istand-for.eu/research>

crucial and timely in the efforts to build a better European Union.

2022 has been declared the European Year of Youth which emphasizes the importance for young voices to be heard. This project aims to nurture the culture of dialogue and to help the EU engage in a frank and constructive debate with the region, prospective members of the Union, by listening to what the selected youth in the WB think. That way, this project explores their EU-related hopes but also their disappointments and can present their proposals for a common future. In this sense, the main aim of this policy paper is to advocate for the importance of a bottom-up perspective that centers the views of young people from the Western Balkans to be included in the CoFoE debate.

METHODOLOGY

To tackle this specific topic the analysis is organized as follows: the first section of the paper presents the background of the issue, exploring the current situation of the EU integration process in the WB, the political highlights from 2021 in terms of quality of democracy and the need for the WB region to be included in the future of Europe deliberations, as well as the critical situation of youth in the region. The second section focuses on the field work research to explore the bottom-up perspective. The last section presents main takeaways from the visions of young people in the Western Balkans on their contributions to European democracy. The paper is based on qualitative data from three in-person focus-groups conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia and an in-person closed-conversation with key regional stakeholders (in Athens, Greece) organised in December 2021. The team opted for a participatory approach of the study, with three diverse local focus groups in Sarajevo, Prishtina and Skopje between October-November 2021 (see more in Annex A). The focus groups were assembled as similarly as possible, composed of participants between ages 18 and 35. The size of the groups varied between 12 to 18 participants, selected from different cities, ethnic groups, and professional backgrounds in all three countries. The discussion was conducted in local languages - Bosnian/ Serbian, Albanian and Macedonian (with translation for representatives of minority groups where necessary). The variety of the participants' interests, backgrounds and professional experiences are of utmost importance to the findings, as they showcase that youth are not one homogeneous group and that different opinions exist, and are necessary for building a joint European future. The focus group discussions were moderated by a trained facilitator. The conversations included (1) individual perceptions of democracy and European democracy, (2) expectations from

the EU, (3) the WB's role in relation to the EU, (4) main expectations from the EU for citizen participation in democratic processes, (5) the situation of youth in WB and (6) their involvement and empowerment in relation to the EU. To discuss the topic of European democracy more in depth and provide comparability, the same set of questions/ issues were raised in all three focus groups. The topics were presented in a way so that participants would not only reflect, but also give recommendations on the involvement of the EU in the region and their respective country. Based on them, a selection of recommendations for EU decision-makers is presented in the last section of this paper.

Out of the nine key policy areas included in the CoFoE², this project focuses on "European democracy", one of the most complex and relevant issues which also directly impacts the future of the WB countries. Furthermore, this topic is interrelated with all the others. Considering the 'undemocratic turn' that the region has seen in recent years ³, it is also of crucial importance for the region. Moreover, this is confirmed by the most recent Eurobarometer issued in February 2022 that shows that defending the value of democracy should be the European Parliament's top priority, with a third of respondents (32%) that sees democracy as most important value to defend⁴. The starting point of the project has been the observation that there is a gap between the ways citizens and politicians across the region perceive the EU. This also concerns the future of Europe and its democratic path. This project has allowed an assessment of how young citizens from the Western Balkans in particular perceive their role in/ for the European democracy and to which extent these voices have effective engagement outlets. Thus, in this context we decided to focus on exploring a citizen-led, bottom-up perspective, raising a very relevant and timely question ahead of 2022 - the European year of Youth: how do young people from the Western Balkans see the role of their region in the future of European democracy.

2 Climate change and the environment; Health; A stronger economy, social justice and jobs; EU in the world; Values and rights, rule of law, security; Digital transformation; European democracy; Migration; and Education, culture, youth and sport. See more details on <https://futureu.europa.eu>

3 Freedom House, Nations in Transit Report 2021 https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf

4 EP Autumn 2021 Survey: Defending Democracy | Empowering Citizens, 2022 https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2612?fbclid=IwAR1j5syDUVkaP2G61EaBVqf6xvzGuS54dybn_I7PvW_4rf_m8LEMGBIWK9k

I. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Future of European Democracy - A Common Agenda for the EU and the WB?

It is inevitable that any discussion on ways to protecting the future of Europe must focus on preserving the democratic principles and values. The current status of democracy in both the EU and the WB is alarming. This impacts EU-WB relations, which for the last few years passed through an already challenging phase that has been marked by the prolonged ‘enlargement fatigue’, unfulfilled promises and the lack of conditioned reforms. Over the last years, we have witnessed an international context pressured by populism, fake news, and realpolitik based geopolitical bargaining. Democratic regimes are being threatened both inside the EU and in the WB. The need to find proper solutions to safeguard European democracy in the next decades has become vital. So where are we standing in terms of the quality of our democracies?

For the last few years, the EU has faced a series of unprecedented threats, challenging its democratic existence. These threats include growing nationalism and Eurosceptic sentiments across member states. Experts have criticized the ‘democratic deficit’ in the EU decision making mechanisms, but there are also numerous national agendas and domestic problems in some member states that contribute to blocking EU’s institutions. Some member states are going through an ‘illiberal turn’ and by starting to promote anti-EU narratives contest the EU from within.

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2021: OVERVIEW OF SCORE CHANGES

▼ DECLINE ▲ IMPROVEMENT △ UNCHANGED

	COUNTRY	DEMOCRACY SCORE	DEMOCRACY %	NDG	EP	CD	IM	LDG	JFI	CO
B A L K A N S	Albania	3.82 to 3.75	46 %			▼	▼			
	Bosnia and hercegovina	3.32 to 3.36	39 %					▲		
	Croatia	4.25	54 %							
	Kosovo	3.18 to 3.14	36 %	▼						
	Montenegro	3.86 to 3.82	47 %					▼		
	North Macedonia	3.75 to 3.82	47 %	▲	▲					
	Serbia	3.96 to 3.89	48 %	▼	▼					

The environment for democracy in the WB faces somewhat similar, but also some of its very own challenges. In the WB countries, the legacy of the 90s is still looming on the horizon. The year 2021 marked 26 years since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (which ended the war in Bosnia) and 22 years since the Kosovo War, but it seems that preserving stability and security in the region is still unfinished. As opposed to any advancement in the EU accession process of the WB in 2021,

some countries showcase in fact a worsening status and more serious challenges. All the deep political crises of the last year are a proof of that: the heated secessionist threats from Milorad Dodik (Republika Srpska) in Bosnia and Herzegovina worried many, the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina was stalled, tensions in northern Kosovo intensified; coalition squabbles in Montenegro impeded reform. It all culminated in December 2021 with mass anti-government protests in Serbia and the resignation of Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. All these events are a continuation of recent other threats to democratic regimes in the WB countries that have affected citizens' trust in democratic institutions. In terms of opening accession negotiations with the EU, 2021 was another year lost for Albania and North Macedonia. The first Intergovernmental Conferences were again postponed due to Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia.

Despite each country's specific situation, there is a common set of challenges that all the WB countries were subjected to over the last year, specifically in terms of 'illiberal' threats. As a consequence of all these events, Pro-European reformist political parties have been weakened, nationalist forces have grown stronger and regional and internal reconciliation after the wars of the 1990s has been undermined. A lot of concerted efforts are continuously needed to go beyond existing divisions and lack of trust between some EU member states and the candidate countries in the WB (such illustrated in the disputes between Croatia and Serbia or most recently between North Macedonia and Bulgaria).⁵

1.2 Are the Western Balkans in or out of the Future of Europe debate?

Today's challenges are many: the post-COVID-19 uncertainties, growing socioeconomic disparities, demographic decline, erosion of democratic values, rise of populism, lack of solidarity, persistence of bilateral tensions, contested borders, rising insecurity and geopolitical tensions. These challenges affect Europe as a whole and hence equally impact the WB as a region already 'in' Europe. Significant policy issues such as climate change, economic disparities, migration or the current health crisis cannot be tackled by the EU on its own. All these issues have a transnational impact and they are not confined by national borders. The same applies for discussing the future institutional set up of the EU.

As there are two elements to the CoFoE: the civic and the government dimension, it is important for the WB representatives to be included in both. Several civil society analyses have emphasized the fact that the citizens from the Western Balkans ought to have their voices heard in the debate on the future of Europe⁶. Initially, there was a sort of neglect in opening the process both to non-EU countries' representatives and to non-EU citizens. This feeling persisted even after October 2021, when the

⁵ <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-English-1.pdf>

⁶ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/06/25/the-daring-six-why-the-western-balkans-should-have-a-word-when-it-comes-to-the-future-of-europe/>

Slovenian Presidency of the Council of European Union 2021 officially invited the “Western Balkan partners” to attend as guests at the second Plenary session of the CoFoE⁷. This also came in connection to more policy attention given to the region after the Brdo Declaration⁸ adopted at the EU – Western Balkans Summit on 6 October 2021, that states that the EU and the Western Balkans need to work together “to face generation-defining tasks”.

This paper argues that it is very problematic how the inclusion of the Western Balkan in the CoFoE was not stressed and assumed publicly from the beginning in both civic and political dimensions. Pro-EU groups in the WB had the feeling that they had been excluded from this transnational and very relevant process⁹. This happened in a moment of serious doubts about the EU enlargement policy and its continuation. Particularly because of the Conference title that includes “Europe” in place of “the EU” it could have been expected to stimulate a broad discussion, without being limited to the current members of the EU. Consequently, the WB civil society representatives felt left out. Even if only on a consultative basis, the aspiring member states in the WB would have been fit to join the Conference process from the beginning. Their inclusion would have sent a clear message of support for the European perspective for the Western Balkans region. That said, the governments in the WB countries did not push for their inclusion either. The decision makers in the region did not engage actively by sending strong messages to the EU to show political will for an active part in the Conference. From their side, the CoFoE could have been seized as an opportunity to reiterate the needs of the region to EU institutions and to put the Balkans back on the EU’s priority list.

Sadly, the fact that the EU and the WB do not only share a common history and culture, but also a common future remains an empty slogan, not the reality, for many European politicians that remain reluctant to the advancement of EU’s enlargement policy. There is still room for more mutual understanding, reconciliation and an honest exchange of views. The citizens of the Western Balkan states should bring their views, ideas, and visions of the future to the larger table of the ‘work-in-progress’ that is Europe. CoFoE is a transnational participatory exercise, so it cannot be sustainably meaningful without the WB. That is why the paper intends to contribute to CoFoE with a bottom-up approach by listening to the opinions of young citizens in the region.

7 <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/slovenia-invites-w-balkans-partners-to-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>

8 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/10/06/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021/>

9 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/03/12/epc-leaving-the-balkans-out-of-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-would-be-a-mistake/>

1.3 Youth challenges in the Western Balkans

Young people are the greatest resource for any society and even more so when discussing ways to reform the EU's democracy. Their inputs are relevant as they are the ones that will not only be beneficiaries of these reforms, but also be the ones responsible for the sustainability of our democratic regimes. Compared to the rest of the continent, the Western Balkans have a significantly lower age average and has in fact one of the youngest populations in Europe¹⁰. As such, youth are a social group of utmost importance for the region's future. As they are so numerous, they represent a great growth potential for the region, but are also the most exposed to structural vulnerabilities such as emigration and brain drain towards EU countries, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic related economic hardships. As numerous recent analyses stressed, the situation of youth in the WB is critical¹¹, not only because they are exposed to numerous challenges, but also because their voices are often not heard, neither by their own politicians, nor by the EU institutions.

Unemployment and slow economic development, together with massive brain drain remain two key problems in the WB region that affect the lives of young people the **most**. Youth unemployment in the region has been consistently high: at around 30 percent in 2019, it was more than twice as high as the EU average.¹² This aspect is directly correlated with rising emigration rates of youth, one of the most pressing demographic concerns that the WB are now challenged with. An average of 52 percent of youth see themselves living outside of the region in 10 years.¹³ For the last few years, experts have spoken about a massive 'demographic revolution' taking place in the WB that is changing society more dramatically than past developments¹⁴. The World Bank estimates that 4.4 million people emigrated from the region between 1990 and 2015 (including war refugees during the dissolution of Yugoslavia)¹⁵. To put it in perspective, this figure includes nearly one-third of the populations of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. OECD data provides us with a reality check, pointing to the fact that between 2015 and 2020 alone, net emigration from the region to the rest of the world stood at an estimated 135,000¹⁶. In fact, the emigration from the Western Balkans to EU member states continues to grow as this report is written. At the beginning of 2020, the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report painted a dark picture for the region: globally, Bosnia and

10 More than half of the population in Kosovo is under 25, making it the youngest population in Europe. https://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/democratic_governance/social-cohesion-in-kosovo-con-text-review-and-entry-points.html

11 <https://www.rcc.int/docs/573/study-on-youth-employment-in-the-western-balkans>

12 <https://wiiw.ac.at/western-balkans-labor-market-trends-2020-dlp-5300.pdf>

13 <https://shared-futures.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Shared-Futures-Youth-Perceptions-on-Peace-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

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

15 <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GevwB9nBNHk1Cnndku7BcNbvHHcRwwBNVukqCdfen7Y/edit>

16 https://coebank.org/media/documents/Social_Infrastructure_in_the_Western_Balkans.pdf

Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Croatia ranked amongst the countries most affected by ‘brain drain’¹⁷. Young people have struggled to survive in the home job markets due to inadequate opportunities and low wages¹⁸. World Bank data shows that while unemployment for this demographic in Serbia is 30 percent, North Macedonian rates are at 38 percent, and Bosnia and Herzegovinian unemployment is an alarming 40 percent¹⁹. As a result, many have sought better professions and living standards abroad. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic and further collapse of the job market worsened the situation in the region. Overall, the emigration of young and talented nationals remains one of the toughest and most pressing problems in the Balkans, that requires long-term solutions. They will be decisive for the future of WB democracies. It is worth underlining also that this brain drain phenomenon has ambivalent consequences - it is detrimental for the countries of origin of the young migrants, but at the same time it brings numerous benefits to the Western (ageing) countries in the EU. Consequently, in terms of finding more sustainable solutions at the policy level both at WB and EU level this youth-centered brain drain phenomena needs to be treated in a more nuanced manner²⁰.

Beyond all hardships, young people in the WB have a similar democratic mindset with their peers in the EU. Eurobarometer data showed that the historical high turnout at the European elections in 2019 was driven by a rise in the involvement of young people in defending EU democracy against populism and anti-EU narratives²¹. This revived interest of young citizens in democratic participation and the active turnout in elections connects youth in the EU with youth in the WB. Research conducted for various international organisations shows that between 55% and 84% of young people in the WB voted in the last national elections, which is way above the national averages in those countries²². It is an encouraging fact that young people in the WB countries are politically active. Furthermore, youth are largely active supporters of the EU integration process. Based on a 2021 representative UNICEF survey²³, young people in the region generally support their countries to join the EU, but are unsure when that might happen. This creates a feeling of insecurity. Coupled with the domestic political crises in their countries this might expose them to radicalization. The opinion poll showed strong support for joining the EU among Balkan youth, with over **57%** thinking their country’s membership would ‘make things better’. Yet, **24.4%** think that their country will never get into the EU, and **60.5%** strongly disagree that political representatives heard their voice.²⁴ In the same vein, the 2021 Balkan

17 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/02/03/wef-four-balkan-countries-top-global-ranking-with-big-gest-brain-drain/>

18 <https://www.wb6cif.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Strategic-Response-to-Covid-19-in-SEE.pdf>

19 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?view=map>

20 https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_way_back_brain_drain_and_prosperity_in_the_western_balkans/

21 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190923IPR61602/2019-european-elections-record-turnout-driven-by-young-people>

22 https://coebank.org/media/documents/Social_Infrastructure_in_the_Western_Balkans.pdf

23 https://www.friendsofeurope.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/FINAL_FoE-UNICEF-U-Report-Background-Note.pdf?utm_source=flexmail&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_campaign=2021pressreleasebalkans-07dec&utm_content=survey+by+unicef

24 ibidem

Barometer showed that one-third of Serbs, Bosnians and Macedonians do not expect EU accession to happen at all²⁵. The Barometer shows that there are still glimmers of hope as overall support for EU integration increased from 59% in 2020 to 62% in 2021. At the same time, the overall pessimism regarding the future membership is on the rise (22% of the total population believe that the EU integration will never happen, compared to 20% in 2020)²⁶. The gloomy part of this picture and the loss of trust for a future EU membership is also confirmed by an opinion poll from November 2021, that showed increasing public support for Russia and China among WB citizens²⁷. Despite country-by-country differences, challenges to good governance and attacks on democracy have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and they placed even more pressure on young people in WB. In this context, the concern that more and more young citizens in the WB share a negative view of the EU is even more worrying and should be taken seriously.

25 <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/123/balkan-barometer-2021--infographics>

26 ibidem

27 <https://biepag.eu/news/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>

II. MAIN FINDINGS

Excluded from the process but determined to have a say in shaping their future as part of Europe, the next section will present and contextualize the opinions of young people from the Western Balkans on the Future of Europe, as they shared them with us in the focus groups.

2.1 Youth voices from Bosnia and Herzegovina

“The dominant feeling is that we don’t want to use our energy to fight the impossible battles. (...) But for us, the EU is a useful resource because it offers lots of opportunities for youth (education, exchange etc.). Still, more ‘spreading of good news’ about the EU is needed”.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is currently experiencing the biggest crisis since the end of war in 1995. Since the mid of 2021, state institutions are blocked and not fully functioning, and the entire democratic governance is put to test. At the end of July 2021, the UN High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, imposed amendments to the country’s criminal code to prohibit the denial of genocide and war crimes. Just three days later, Serbian politicians started their boycott of the parliament, presidency and government consequently blocking all state (central) institutions.²⁸ At the beginning of January 2022, due to the continued boycott of central institutions and threats of secession of Republika Srpska, which puts the stability and territorial integrity of BiH in danger, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed a set of new sanctions upon Milorad Dodik as well as on one entity under his control, the Alternativna Televizija d.o.o. Banja Luka²⁹. The EU is also threatening with a set of sanctions for Bosnian Serb leaders, however a clear EU approach towards this issue is missing.³⁰ The European Commission announced to halt €125 millions of financial assistance which is part of the December 2020 financial package aimed at helping BiH fight the pandemic.³¹

One can see how challenging it was to discuss democracy and Bosnia’s European perspective at the end of 2021. Under these conditions, the youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina sees its own country as not democratic and lacks freedom, basic human rights and equality in almost all aspects. This is e.g., highly visible when it comes to minority rights in the current electoral law which discriminates against important

28 <http://www.ohr.int/60th-report-of-the-high-representative-for-implementation-of-the-peace-agreement-on-bosnia-and-herzegovina-to-the-secretary-general-of-the-united-nations/?print=pdf>

29 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0549>

30 <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-balkans-bosnia-serbs-dodik-/31648435.html>

31 <https://seenews.com/news/eu-to-postpone-disbursement-of-second-mfa-tranche-to-bosnia-report-768941>

segments of citizens by not allowing them to take part in democratic elections³². However, despite the current challenges that the European Union is facing, BiH youth still view the EU to be directly associated to freedom, trust and equal rights.

For them, freedom and trust are key values of European democracy that are missing in BiH society. Their understanding of freedom is the ability for everyone to express their own opinions and where elections are based solely on citizens' will. Their "common core" ideas regarding the elections in BiH is that the results do not reflect the citizens' will, thus doubting the election system in general. The other value they have pointed out is trust. Trust is perceived as an important characteristic of European democracy and includes the trust in the system and institutions. Their lack of trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina connects mostly to the rampant corruption.

Young views of civic engagement, participation and elections are divided. They acknowledge the power of voting as the most powerful tool in their hands, however, they feel "stuck" in the vicious circle: a lack of both motivation and future perspectives. In line with the highlighted disappointment with previous elections, their motivation levels and perspective views are limited. To their understanding, nationalism and threats about another war in the country are something that they feel they cannot fight. When asked "how do you see your future in the EU?", one participant simply and clearly answered: "in Germany". To them, the country's future in the EU is bringing more possibilities when it comes to education and jobs. On the opposite side are views of BiH youth who have been very active in their local communities since high school. They see the membership as the only way to bring the change or a "French revolution" as another participant stressed.

Lastly, some young people share an idealistic view of the EU, where the EU has the power to improve the situation of one country beyond all odds. Big expectations are thus projected solely on outside intervention. Their understanding is that the EU is the most relevant actor which can put much needed pressure to reforms in BiH, enabling the implementation of laws and conventions on basic human rights. With more EU presence, young people underlined that they would feel safer and more included in their society. However, acknowledging the previous efforts and ongoing involvement of the EU in the country, many youths feel disappointed due to the fact that reforms are "forced" or "imposed" by foreign actors rather than promoted and stimulated by local policy makers.

"Currently, we feel that nothing can be changed. We are witnessing for years the same situation - elections do not change anything and the system remains the same. It seems like a vicious circle and change is not happening at all. (...) We need a 'French revolution'".

32 The discussion on the reform of the current electoral law has been pushed by many members of the international community especially in the last year since the general elections are scheduled for October 2022. More on: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/osce-calls-bosnias-rival-leaders-reform-election-law-2021-10-04/>

2.2. Youth voices from North Macedonia

“We have the power to start a revolution, but we cannot go to a revolution every day. We need formal channels of power, to be in the position of decision makers and not to push all the time in institutions [...] Maybe citizens in the EU are alienated from the EU institutions, but what is true is that their institutions have rooted the concept of democracy and the level of corruption is lower.”

Among the youth from North Macedonia who participated in our study there is overarching trust that the EU is a synonym for democracy. The EU is viewed as a model for long-lasting democracy, based on several values such as the existence of rule of law, respect of human rights, freedom of speech, better education and health system, as well as with institutions that work towards the interest of the citizens. There is recognition and understanding of the historical challenges that Europe and its democracy have faced. Young people believe, but also expect, that the countries in the Western Balkans should be supported during the process of a similar development towards a more democratic system in the region.

There is a broad association with the future of Europe as a possible way for development, however young people realize that not all things should be seen through “rose-coloured glasses”. Young people are aware that the EU in itself is facing a lot of challenges, especially in the field of human rights protection and the rule of law. In addition, although they associate the EU with democracy, young people are aware of the estrangement of the average European citizen from the European Union institutions. It is believed that this is due to the high level of bureaucracy and the lack of knowledge on how the European Union itself, and its institutions, function. These are some of the challenges that the European Union would need to tackle on its own for the future of the common good, and to not dim the hope for some countries that have not yet developed a certain level of democracy.

The European Union is seen as a stabilizing force not only in the country, but also in the WB region. Young people recognize the longstanding involvement and investments in the economic and political, but also cultural, spheres of society. Firstly, the European Union has invested a lot of funds in the region to help institutional and economical recuperation. In addition, these funds are also targeted at the civil society, who are greatly active in the region and implement activities in increasing European values in the countries. Secondly, the European Union has high political involvement, giving recommendations and opinions which have had immense impact in institutional development and bettering the rule of law. In addition, effects certain institutions have for the protection of human rights are welcomed and perceived highly important. As an example for this, the effects of judgements and verdicts of the European Court of Human Rights on national courts were mentioned. Encouraging is also that youth themselves see that the EU can learn a lot from the region in the future. The region would have, for example, an exemplary diversity which could be transposed in the

European Union.

When it comes to empowerment, young people reflect on criticism of their national government and institutions. Some legislative frameworks that enable citizens to be included in some decision-making processes exist, to raise their voices when they see their rights being infringed and so on. However, young people believe that there are more obstacles than opportunities to feel like they have power. At the national level, there is a high level of corruption and lack of youth representation in the institutions. For the latter, young people are only involved through informal outlets, they can unite and have initiatives, and express that they are not satisfied with the system, but it only has short-term impact and passes quickly. The real “formal” power returns to the people who do not represent them. Instead of having only informal groups where they discuss and have no power, there should be more stimulating processes for young people to get involved in real positions of power. Youth need formal outlets of power which will include youth in decision-making processes. For the former, they believe that the deeply rooted corruption in institutions and their politicization truly affects them. The fact that the right connections with political parties is often crucial to find jobs, means that institutions are filled with unqualified workers and that the media is highly politicized and corrupted. The lack of youth representation diminishes their feeling of empowerment or of belonging in the current system. With such non-professionalism and corruption, young people cannot feel as if they are ‘European’. The focused efforts on youth that the European Union has provided are recognized, there is a sense that more structure needs to be provided for formal ways of engaging young people. More EU funded projects are needed, as peer-to-peer education and exchange of ideas between young people, through the prism of European values, will help create a more inclusive Europe for other generations, and bridge the gap between young people from the European Union and from the Balkans.

The critical tone of young people for the development of the region, but also the European Union, is of immense importance, especially when it is constructive. Youth in North Macedonia do not see the European Union as a perfect project, and are well aware of the difficulties it faces and the need for these difficulties and issues to be sorted out so it can have further positive influence on the development of the region. They concluded that the European Union needs to continue nurturing the cooperation and building bridges in the region, and push for greater fulfilment of obligations from signed international agreements and implementation of crucial reforms for bettering the rule of law and democracy.

“I think that, especially the exchange of ideas among young people, through the prism of European values will put us in a better situation because I think it will shatter the narratives and image of the Balkans in the EU and among European citizens as a periphery, but rather a part of Europe. Exchange of ideas will bring a more inclusive Europe.”

2.3 Youth voices from Kosovo

“The most dangerous hypothetical question to be posed is: How would the future of Europe be without the European Union?”

Enjoying the least of a European Union perspective, youth in Kosovo perceive the European Union nonetheless as one of the key actors shaping their future as individuals, but also of Kosovo and the entire region. Being aware of the political complexities surrounding the relations between Kosovo and the European Union, the youth continue to see the European Union as a set of democratic values and an overarching goal for Kosovo. Being shaped by the predominantly positive attitude towards the European Union, Kosovars, irrespective of the challenges, the European Union is seen through a positive lens showcasing the belief that the European Union – despite the internal problems – remains a stable union promoting democracy, rule of law, economic development, solid education, and health system. Furthermore, the future of Europe is not only a stronger and stable democracy in the European Union, but also with the Western Balkans being an integral part of it.

Aware of the most pressing issues challenging the integral functioning of the European Union which follows the crisis of democracy, serious concern has been raised about the enlargement as part of the future of Europe’s trajectory. This triggered debates among focus groups participants about the future of Europe as a global power, the place that Europe would have in the world as one of the biggest promoters of democracy. This mainly due to the active role of the EU in the Dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. Hence, the successful completion of the European Union project with the Western Balkans in it would immensely contribute to helping the European Union to further maintain this role in the region and the world.

In spite of the acknowledged current complex position of the European Union, in the eyes of the young people from Kosovo, the institutions of the European Union still serve as a guideline for the Western Balkans and particularly in this case Kosovo’s development, i.e. the importance of the EU’s contribution in shaping the future generations in Kosovo. Understanding the importance of the European Union in developing a solid infrastructure for the youth, it has been understood that the investment in youth would be a contribution to the future of the country, the region and beyond. Understanding the importance and relevance of youth empowerment has been noted while highlighting the importance of the cultural exchange projects such as the ERASMUS programme. This programme contributes not only to education but also to people-to-people communication. Additionally, joint projects launched and supported by the European Union are seen as crucial support in preparing youth to shape the future of the country and the region.

In line with the values highlighted as being – still – the stronghold of the European Union, deliberative democracy has been brought up as one of the key positive elements of the European Union. This is gradually being implemented in the Western Balkan countries - particularly Kosovo. The European Union is often associated with

power to the people and to the citizens. Hence, the focus groups' inputs show that the young people see the EU's instruments as extremely relevant in amplifying their voices and increasing their engagement in policy making processes. However, the lack of formal inclusion of the Western Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe has not provided the opportunity for the youth to use the right which has been long promoted by the European Union itself - the right to have a say in shaping their future.

As far as the future of Europe is concerned, the most difficult part for the young people in Kosovo is the elephant in the room: the lack of integration perspective and the visa liberalization process which highly impacts the ability of youth to move and experience Europe. Regardless of the above, the European Union is still seen from a positive point of view and as a driver of reforms and change. The EU is perceived as a source of stability, and the region can highly contribute in that regard to the European Union. The region can nurture the Union not only from the security and stability perspective as it is largely seen, but also through completing the jigsaw and further strengthening the role of the EU in promoting democracy. Furthermore, strong partnership between the EU and the region can be utilized to jointly promote reforms in other regions of importance for the European Union.

“Deliberative democracy is power, power for the citizens wanting to have a say in the policy making process. The bottom-up approach gives power to the people, hence it should be used actively to amplify the voices of the youth”

III. CREATIVE WAYS TO INCLUDE WESTERN BALKANS YOUTH IN CoFoE!

Conclusion and Recommendations

The younger generations commitment to the Western Balkans EU integration is still predominant in terms of the EU ideal. However, it is accompanied by a mature stance relative to the mutually beneficial relationship that should be cultivated. Throughout the focus group discussions with almost 50 young people from the WB and stakeholder engagement process there were identified multiple points of common departure on what the EU does well, what it should do, and what it needs to do better in order to increase its capacity to act and to make it more democratic. Three major key action-areas stand out:

More deliberative democracy and inclusion of youth at all levels:

Young people need to be practically included and empowered at all government levels - local, national, regional and EU level. Currently in the WB's youth satisfaction vis-a-vis their governance systems and institutions is relatively low. In terms of their access to decision making and power to change things around them, there are ambivalent feelings. Many perceive themselves as disempowered citizens. Some young people feel 'neglected' by their governments, but also by the EU. "We feel like we are invisible citizens", as one participant mentioned.

How? For youth in the WB to identify more meaningfully with the EU, they need to see themselves more represented in within the EU deliberative processes directly or indirectly – through the stakeholders who make up the institutions, in the decisions taken and in the impact on their daily lives. It is currently troubling that already a significant percentage of participants appears to share the negative perception of the EU in the region as a rather 'elitist club' that is closed off to them. Some said that they feel it is 'unfair' that their countries remained on the EU's 'waiting list' for more than two decades and they want to see some improvement in the EU integration process. At the same time, they are also raising doubts concerning the extent to which their political leaders are indeed committed to the EU perspective of their country. Beyond ethnic lines or national problems, there are still numerous young people that look up at the EU as the best guarantor of democracy and respect for human rights and European values and expect the EU to be more present in their countries' domestic

agenda. Overall, most young people feel that they would be more democratically empowered in the EU than outside. To build a sustainable future for Europe, young people need increased engagement in participatory formats that would boost their sense of agency. Young people in the WB voiced their need for the EU to fight against the lack of youth representation in the institutions, to take their opinions on board in all decision-making mechanisms and to involve youth from the WB in consultative processes beyond the CoFoE format. There is, therefore, a significant window of opportunity in connecting formal EU accession government reforms policies to more inclusive participatory mechanisms that will re-enfranchise youth for the years to come.

More EU direct investment in youth in the region:

The focus groups reveal that younger citizens in the WB feel caught in a ‘vicious circle’ between old-fashioned, backwards-oriented politics and nationalism on the one hand and the lack of economic, educational, or social perspectives on the other. The young generation in the Balkans seem to be losing patience and, when possible, continue to be emigrating to the West in search for a better life seems to be the best solution causing a significant social and economic deficit³³. For this to change in the coming decades, young people in the WB need more financial support, quality schooling, skilling, and networking opportunities with the help of EU funds. For youth in the WB in particular, stable jobs and high standards of living are among the most attractive features of the EU. Among all problems their societies face, the lowest satisfaction of youth is with scarce employment opportunities. However, based on the focus group response analysis, if living standards would improve in their home countries, it would be more attractive for them to stay rather than move abroad. Most of the participants in the three cross-national focus groups confirmed that they want the creation of decent jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities to be top priorities for their governments and that internships and practical on-the-job experience would support them in entering the world of work. As opposed to long-term migration it is indicated that young people wish to become productive members of their local communities and they feel that more EU investment to ensure quality education, lifelong learning, and more opportunities for them could reverse the persisting brain-drain trends. Many of the young people want to study abroad and to experience the EU for a limited time, so that they can bring back the knowledge and use it for the benefit of their home countries.:

“Collaboration opportunities between organisations and young people from different Balkan countries (with one-another) would be slow or non-existent if it wasn’t for the EU involvement and funds. There is a need to extend these programmes and involve more and different new people”, one participant underlined. **Their overall**

³³ For an overview of the region’s current status refer to https://coebank.org/media/documents/Social_Infrastructure_in_the_Western_Balkans.pdf and additional country-specific information available on <https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/cost-youth-emigration-bosnia-and-herzegovina-wfd-research>, accessed on 13/02/2022.

expectations are for the EU to invest in the creation of more jobs for youth in the region, that would facilitate integration and mobility in the labour market, create skills for the future and encourage access to education for the new generations.

While acknowledging the significance of existing investments in the region it is also recommended that alternative approaches are adopted to ensure that current and future instruments reach directly the organisations and individual youths. Looking to explore the concept of connectivity in parallel to mobility could be a mechanism that maybe piloted in the context of the 2022 EU priorities for youth.

More citizen-oriented tools to defend EU values and democracy in the WB:

Young people recognize that they have an important role in implementing real change, and for this they need to be better equipped and supported, so that they can protect European values and democracy in the WB. Some of them criticized the lack of information on how the EU democratic institutions work and how citizens can take part in democratic processes. As some countries in the WB are currently facing attacks on democratic standards (as it is the case with the political crisis in BiH), they feel the need of more citizen-oriented tools to defend the EU values when they are broken by their leaders. They all voiced the need for governments in the WB to be held accountable in other ways than just elections once every 4 years. Moreover, many of them mentioned corruption as a common threat to democracy and one of the main sources of their disappointment. Disengagement with the traditional political sphere can result in young people in the WB moving towards populist, anti-democratic and xenophobic movements as well as, in exceptional cases, violent extremism in Europe. What we found very encouraging was that almost all youth in our focus groups confirmed their willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of a better and more inclusive and functional European democracy. A common task of the future would be repairing the broken connections and trust between young people and decision-makers, as an essential task for a healthy European democracy. The paper stressed that in order to succeed in supporting these proposes ways for preserving the quality of democracy in the EU and within the context of the Future of Europe Conference goals and the 2022 EU priority on Youth significant and practical steps should be taken when it comes to engaging and empowering youth in the Western Balkans. Such steps do not necessarily entail new policies or instruments, but do require adopting a holistic approach to engagement, social inclusion and stakeholder involvement in programs, projects and policy making. The future of European democracy becomes meaningful when all citizens, inside the EU formal borders and from the neighbouring regions are truly empowered to act and react.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Miruna Butnaru-Troncotă, PhD is Associate Professor and Director of the Center for European Studies at the National University of Political Science and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania. She held research fellowships in Graz, Ljubljana and Berlin. She worked in regional diplomacy in Prishtina and Sarajevo, and currently acts as a researcher and policy analyst specialised on the EU integration of the Western Balkans and security in the Black Sea. She is a member of the European Fund for the Balkans Alumni Network. Additionally she is a writer and activist, Board member of PEN Club Romania writer's organisation and since 2013 she acts as Balkans Beyond Borders Ambassador for Romania.

Donika Emini (PhD candidate in Politics and International Relations at the University of Westminster, London) is leading the CiviKos Platform. She holds a master's degree in Public Policy, specializing in Public and Non-Profit Management and International Relations. Ms. Emini was a Research Fellow at the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) Paris Office HQ. Previously, Ms. Emini worked with the Transparency International Secretariat in Berlin, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, Balkan Policy Institute (IPOL), and the General Consulate of the Republic of Kosovo in New York. Ms. Emini is country analyst for Freedom House covering Kosovo and Albania. Ms. Emini's field of expertise include regional cooperation, dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, security cooperation between Western Balkans and the EU (CSDP). She has been actively working in the Eastern Partnership Countries on cybersecurity as part of the EU funded projects.

Hatidza Jahic, PhD is Assistant Professor at the Department of Economic Theory and Policy, School of Economics and Business, University of Sarajevo. During her studies, Hatidza has been awarded with scholarship grants such as Erasmus, British Scholarship Trust and Fulbright for the academic year 2016/2017 at the University of Arkansas (Department of Economics and Department of Educational Reform). She holds a PhD from the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb in the field of Economics of Education. Additionally she is certified in evaluation practice by the Evaluators' Institute from Claremont Graduate University with extensive experience in various domestic and international projects that are focused on education, education reform, educational strategy and education and labour market mismatch in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is currently Head of International Office at School of Economics and Business, University of Sarajevo.

Simonida Kacarska is the director and co-founder of the European Policy Institute, a think tank in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia. She has held research positions at the University of Edinburgh, the College of Europe as well as the Central European University. Her professional experience also includes lecturer at her alma mater the American University in Bulgaria, and a civil servant in the European integration office of the Macedonian government. Simonida holds a PhD in Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds. Her research interests are related to the political transformation and European integration of the Balkans.

Ardita Vejseli is a researcher at the European Policy Institute, Skopje. She graduated from the South East European University in Skopje with a degree in law, and is currently pursuing a master's degree in international law at the same university. Her thesis focuses on youth policies in North Macedonia and their harmonization with European standards. Ardita is responsible for conducting field research on human rights projects, and also works on topics related to youth rights. She has been actively involved in leading and organizing two national debates according to the Deliberative Polling method in cooperation with Stanford University from the USA. She is the author and co-author of several studies and was part of the second generation of the project "EUth - Youth Advocating in the EU" organized by Civil Rights Defenders.

Konstantina Karydi is Vice President of the regional organisation Balkans Beyond Borders (BBB) and a senior expert on global urban affairs with extensive experience in government, multilateral organisations and civil society, working on impact-change initiatives to improve response to 21st societal challenges. She is currently acting as an Urban Innovation Expert and Senior Advisor for the international organisation Resilient Cities Catalyst, the European Commission and the UNDRR Europe and Central Asia Office (MCR2030 Campaign). Most recently she was Special Advisor to the Greek Minister of State for Resilience, and Climate Transformation Lead and EME Associate Director for 100 Resilient Cities – Pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation. In her tenure, Konstantina has co-led the establishment of global initiatives and organisations managing cross-national teams and senior stakeholders and acts as advisor and independent evaluator in large-scale programs and grass-roots initiatives focused on impact-change and networking. For her work she is co-recipient of the EU Civil Society Cultural Heritage Award for 2018 and has taken part as guest-lecturer and lead speaker in leading universities and conferences. She is holder of the Global Executive Masters on Innovative Governance on Large Urban Systems (IGLUS) from EPFL, Switzerland and of the MSc on European Public Policy from UCL, UK. She speaks four languages and is based in Athens, Greece.

ANNEX A

FOCUS GROUPS

The views of the young people in this paper are original, from primary qualitative data obtained in three local focus groups organized by the team of authors. All three focus groups were organised in-person (respecting COVID-19 regulations). Our strategy in selecting the participants was applied in all three events following the same criteria: a balanced gender participation, diversity by educational backgrounds, age, geographical location (all different regions of the three countries; rural and urban settings), inclusion of participants from minority groups, as well as a participant with disability. We also focused on more diversity in terms of occupational status, from students to volunteers, to more experienced citizens such as youth council representatives or youth workers.

COUNTRY	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	KOSOVO	NORTH MACEDONIA
Location	The School of Economics and Business	Hotel Prishtina	Europa House
Date	December 1, 2021	December 8, 2021	December 3, 2021
Coordinated by	Hatidza Jahic	Donika Emini and Gresa Berisha	Simonida Kacarska and Ardita Vejseli
Number of Participants	15	18	14
Origin of Participants	Sarajevo, Zenica, Mostar, Banja Luka, Istočno Sarajevo (East Sarajevo).	Prishtina, North Mitrovica, Gjakova, Peja, Gjilan.	Skopje, Tetovo, Shtip, Krushevo.
Gender Balance	9 females and 6 males	9 females and 9 males	7 females and 7 males
Representatives of minorities	3	2	4

