



Briefing

Political Trends & Dynamics

Youth Policy in Southeast Europe

Volume 4|2019

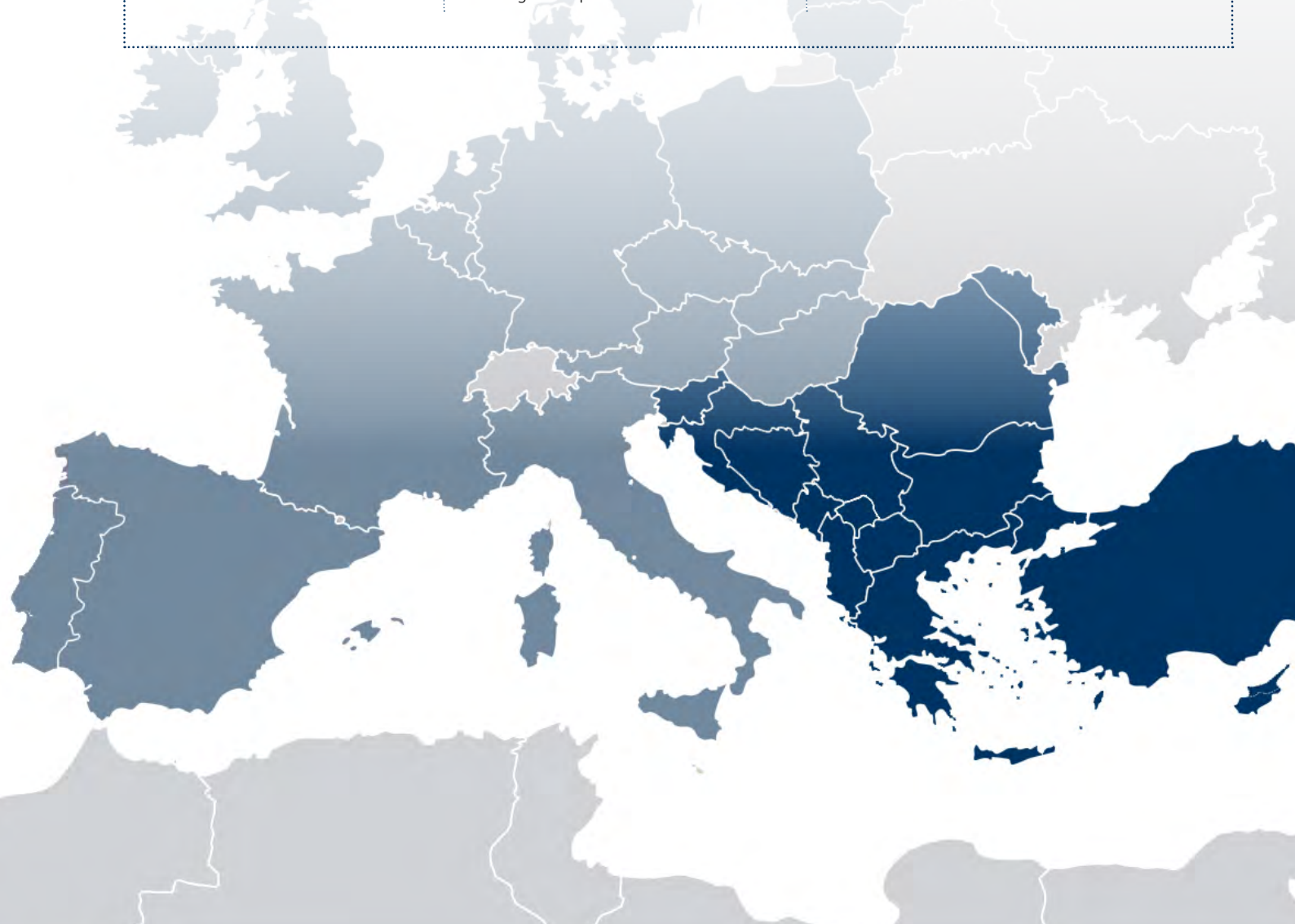
POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

A FES DIALOGUE SOUTHEAST EUROPE PROJECT

Peace and stability initiatives represent a decades-long cornerstone of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in southeastern Europe. Recent events have only reaffirmed the centrality of Southeast European stability within the broader continental security paradigm. Both democratization and socio-economic justice are intrinsic aspects of a larger progressive peace policy in the region, but so too are consistent threat assessments and efforts to prevent conflict before it erupts. Dialogue SOE aims to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in southeastern Europe and to counter the securitization of prevalent narratives by providing regular analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

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EDITORIAL

Jasmin Mujanović, Alida Vračić, and Ioannis Armakolas

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the onset of the 1989 revolutions, the landmark popular mobilizations which led to the collapse of one-party regimes across most of Central and Eastern Europe. From the vantage point of 2019, the results of 1989, as a singular historical moment, are more uneven than they have seemed in decades past. Not only because of the continuing persistence on non-democratic regimes in much of the former “Second World” and democratic backsliding in polities such as Hungary and Poland, but also because of the overwhelming distrust that youth have towards politics in general.

And then there is the matter of the still largely hybrid or “transitional” polities in the Western Balkans; states which experienced extreme episodes of violence rather than social transformation after 1989, and which have continued to struggle with the legacies of conflict, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment. Three decades removed from the fall of the Berlin Wall, although in many ways profoundly integrated in the European dynamics, they remain largely sequestered from the portions of Europe, which one may refer to as fully democratic and open societies.

Although 1989 sparked many hopes and dreams, decades spent in transition, coupled with a rise of inequality between the European core and its poor peripheries and ever more distant EU membership have made youth even less certain about their future in the region. Many decide not to wait. Thousand are departing from the region, often the best and brightest, without any intention of returning.

This issue of *Political Trends and Dynamics in Southeast Europe* focuses on the experiences and views of young people on the occasion of this anniversary. It is they who inherited a world of promise, one in which Euro-Atlantic integration across Eastern Europe – both as process and outcome – was supposed to usher in a more just, equitable, and mobile continent. Has this actually happened, in the view of these same young people?

We seek to address and discuss this question in various ways in this edition. A centrepiece of our analysis are the results of the FES “Youth Study 2018/2019”, which polled and questioned youth across Southeast Europe about their social and political priorities. The report makes for a sober read. For the most part, young people from the region are dissatisfied and disillusioned with decades of corruption and meagre socio-economic prospects. On the other hand, their grievances inspire a comprehensive agenda for European and regional policy-makers looking to deliver on the unrealized promises of 1989.

To this end, our issue consists of interviews and analyses by intergovernmental organisations, regional politicians, and experts,

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whose insights attempt to clarify what opportunities youth have and make sense of the possible paths forward, not just in the Western Balkans, but in Europe as a whole as we collectively struggle to make sense and to live up to the ambitions of 1989. Their contributions highlight some of the policy efforts underway aimed at addressing the position of young people in the region, in particular, but also the scale of problems left unaddressed or unresolved.

Finally, this issue seeks to hone in on the role of youth themselves and specifically, how they can be elevated and promoted to positions of power, or at least positions capable of fostering progressive policies. Given that 1989 itself was in so many ways a youth rebellion – which has likewise remained the case in many post-Cold War civic mobilizations – it is youth that must again be central to addressing the post-1989 challenges. How to facilitate and promote such a transformation, such a passing of the baton, is still a question in search of an answer – thirty years after the end of history.

YOUTH IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE DEMAND A DECENT FUTURE

Felix Henkel

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) carried out a region-wide survey on the experiences and aspirations of youth aged 14 to 29 from ten countries in Southeast Europe covering a wide range of critical socio-economic issues. The results of this substantial academic endeavour – ten national and one regional report – have been presented to various stakeholders across the region. These reports contain a wealth of policy-relevant, comparable data on issues such as migration, employment, and education. They also analyse political values, attitudes, and beliefs of youth in the region and their outlook on the future, providing a point of departure for facts-based policy-making. Addressing the evident lack of channels giving youth a say in politics, the findings are also meant to give youth a voice on topics that could make or break their future. The full results are available at www.fes.de/youth-studies.

It's the insecurity, stupid

With youth unemployment ranging from 12 % to 43 %, NEET (Not in education or training) rates of up to a quarter of the youth population and 78 % on average reporting anxiety over not having a job, youth in Southeast Europe live in a "political economy of insecurity." In Montenegro and Serbia, the share of non-standard work in total youth employment is as high as 67 %. Between one-quarter and one-half of youth state they cannot afford to live independently from their parents. Echoing the global trend of millennial socialism, youth demand equal opportunities and fairer economic arrangements while remaining supportive of open markets and entrepreneurial initiatives. Southeast European youth want an active welfare state, i.e., a stable system of democratic governance reigning in the economic and social uncertainty currently permeating all aspects of their lives. This support is substantially higher among youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Europe, the solution?

The youth of Southeast Europe are overwhelmingly pro-European. Along with a general approval for an active welfare state, this is the most pro-



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nounced political and social tendency found by the surveys. Across the region, youth place greater trust in the EU than in their national governments. The prospect of EU membership enjoys increasing support by a majority, ranging from 56 % in Serbia to 95 % in Albania. At the same time, youth with a weaker European identity have the most positive image of the EU, which points to some degree of idealisation in the non-member states. Pro-EU orientations are especially strong among youth from socioeconomically less developed countries. In general, the values the EU stands for play a less significant role than the promise of economic prosperity.

Perception and tolerance of corruption

Youth in Southeast Europe realize how corruption delays progress. Besides poverty and social injustice, corruption is reported as a top concern; it is seen as rampant and on the rise, specifically in education and labour markets across the region. In the Western Balkan Six (WB6) countries, non-merit factors such as party membership are reported as very important factors for finding a job. At the same time, tolerance of informal economic practices such as bribery or cheating on taxes is also high and has substantially increased since 2008. It is striking that in Montenegro, Albania, Romania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, such informal practices are more widely accepted than homosexuality or abortion. Alongside socio-

economic development, greater commitment to implementing the principles of the rule of law is needed to fight against the normalization of corruption.

Rejection of traditional politics

Youth across the region are quite eager to participate in parliamentary elections. They feel poorly represented and want a stronger say. At the same time, from 50 % in North Macedonia to a staggering 84 % in Bulgaria, youth are not willing to take on a political function. Despite this marked disinterest in party politics, there is considerable potential for unconventional political participation, for instance through the signing of online petitions or taking part in demonstrations. The lack of social and economic security is perceived most prominently by youth on the political extremes, which implies a certain susceptibility to populism. Survey data even suggests increasing receptivity for autocratic leadership as a potentially more efficient means for achieving social welfare.

The wish to belong

In the absence of trustworthy politics, European integration or social security, youth – at least in the WB-6 – increasingly turn to tradition and family, exhibiting a narrow radius of trust and conservative cultural values. The shadows of the recent past reach beyond generations, and ethno-nationalism continues to feature prominently among young people's worldviews. Leading the list are Albania and Bulgaria, where 58 % or 65 % respectively believe that it would be best to live in a mono-ethnic society. Notably, respondents in more socio-economically developed countries express far less nationalism and much more inclusive attitudes towards marginalised social groups. Especially for the WB-6, our findings suggest that restoring trust, if not in traditional politics, then in a European perspective, and social security are necessary for resilient communities and social progress.

Mobility does not have to be zero-sum

The desire to emigrate ranges from 26 % in Montenegro to 43 % in Albania. These numbers have slightly decreased over the past five years. The strongest drivers of emigration are precarity and

pessimistic views about the future of their countries. Notably, youth from EU member states Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania report a significantly lower desire to leave, especially when it comes to long-term migration plans. This suggests that EU membership and higher socio-economic development discourage long-term emigration and encourage return or circular migration of youth instead. Despite the availability of mobility programmes, few young people in the WB-6 have spent substantial time abroad. Those who have, however, are far less supportive of nationalist ideas and much more interested in politics.

OP-ED: COUNTERING OUR FEARS AND ENSURING THE MOBILITY OF STUDENTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Majlinda Bregu

Young people account for over 21 % of the population in the Western Balkans (WB), or more than 3.5 million in a region of a total population of approximately 18 million. Young people are also our greatest supporters of EU integration. Compared to 56 % of the overall population, which supports EU accession, 61 % of young people would like their respective countries to join the EU, a membership they associate with new opportunities for travel, study and work.

This is quite understandable as youth in the region continuously suffer from high unemployment. Their unemployment rate stands at 35 % in the WB, compared to 17 % in the EU. A large majority of them express anxiety about being jobless. It takes about two years on average for a young person to land their first job and many of those who do, work in precarious positions in unsuitable or even intolerable working conditions. Furthermore, it is important to mention that marginalized youth or those with underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds have considerably higher difficulty accessing higher education, participating in political or civic activities, engaging in activities related to self-development, and using ICT for educational and informational purposes or to find adequate employment. These realities put into perspective both the position youth find themselves in in the WB and greater South-east European region, and the areas of their life which are in dire need of political intervention and support.

We in the RCC work on three fronts, including: the recognition of academic and professional qualifications and improved education quality, enhancing employment opportunities, and enabling youth participation in political decision-making processes. These three themes are also of key concern to the youth in the region, as evidenced by the Balkan Barometer annual surveys and FES' recent youth study.

An estimated 5 million students are studying abroad, compared to an estimated 2.1 million in 2000. Experts believe the trend will continue to grow and that by 2025 there will be between 8 and 15 million students studying abroad all over



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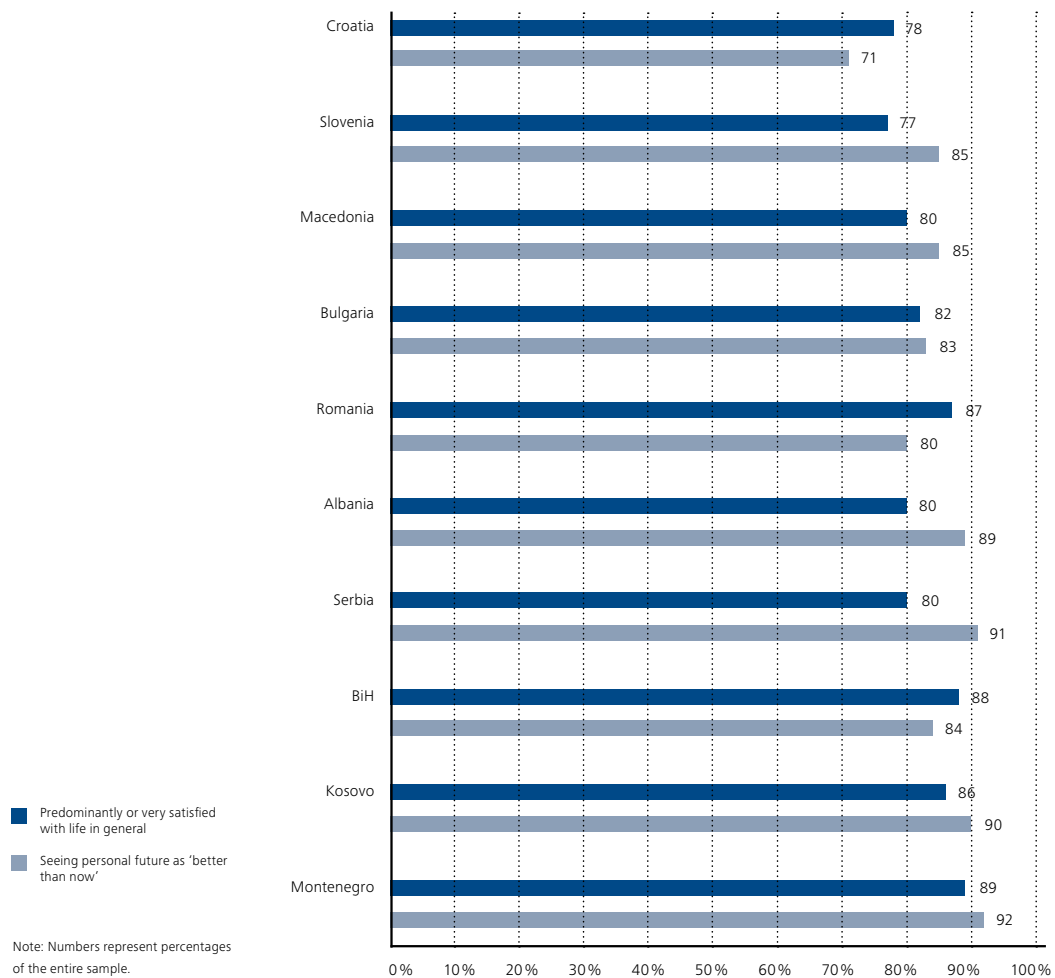
the world.¹ We do not have reliable numbers to reflect student mobility within and from the WB just yet. We do however, know that the act of studying abroad has become increasingly more popular to students in the WB, and that the region's commitment to becoming EU members renders the mobility of students between the EU and our region of particular importance.

Due to high migration flows from our region with more than 200,000 people from WB emigrating legally to the EU in 2018 alone, there are realistic fears that youth will leave to study and never return. Nevertheless, we want our students and our children to learn new skills, acquire new knowledge and competencies for the labour market, and to continue their studies, as well as to experience different academic cultures. We want them to broaden their horizons, become more independent, experience different societies and cultures, and bring those experiences home to share with others.

To counter our fears, we need to think more about the responsibility we carry towards ensuring that these students have a reason to return and are welcomed back. They must know they are

¹ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20120216105739999>

Figure 1
Young people's life satisfaction and perceptions of their personal future, by country



Source: FES Youth Study, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>

valued and in our labour markets and higher education systems. We need to make sure that their experiences contribute to the development of education in the WB, businesses, and society overall.

Once students who studied abroad complete their studies, we must enable them to move freely within the WB region so that they do not feel so compelled to go to Germany or elsewhere in the EU in search of a job. Though the region may not be as competitive as Germany, we must encourage intra-WB mobility and ensure that graduates' professional and academic qualifications are recognized everywhere in the region. We owe it to the people to work on this and make it a reality.

In April 2020, the RCC is embarking on a new project in the Western Balkans – Youth Policy Labs, which aims to contribute by enhancing the participation of young people in the political decision-making process.

The majority of youth state that their political knowledge is poor and that they are disinterested in politics. The Balkan Barometer 2019 shows that 49% of all respondents do not even discuss political decisions made by the government, while 27% do, but in a private setting. This makes it easy to conclude that the youth is apathetic. Still, a lack of activity of youth at the political party level might not necessarily mean disengagement considering that many young people are involved in their local communities through volunteering and other acts of service.

Young people's participation in policy-making, which affects them and the livelihood of their communities, is valuable and important. When youth participate in decision-making, they connect with their peers more easily and share common sentiments, making sure they are respected and hold weight in the political arena. This helps policymakers improve and adjust their

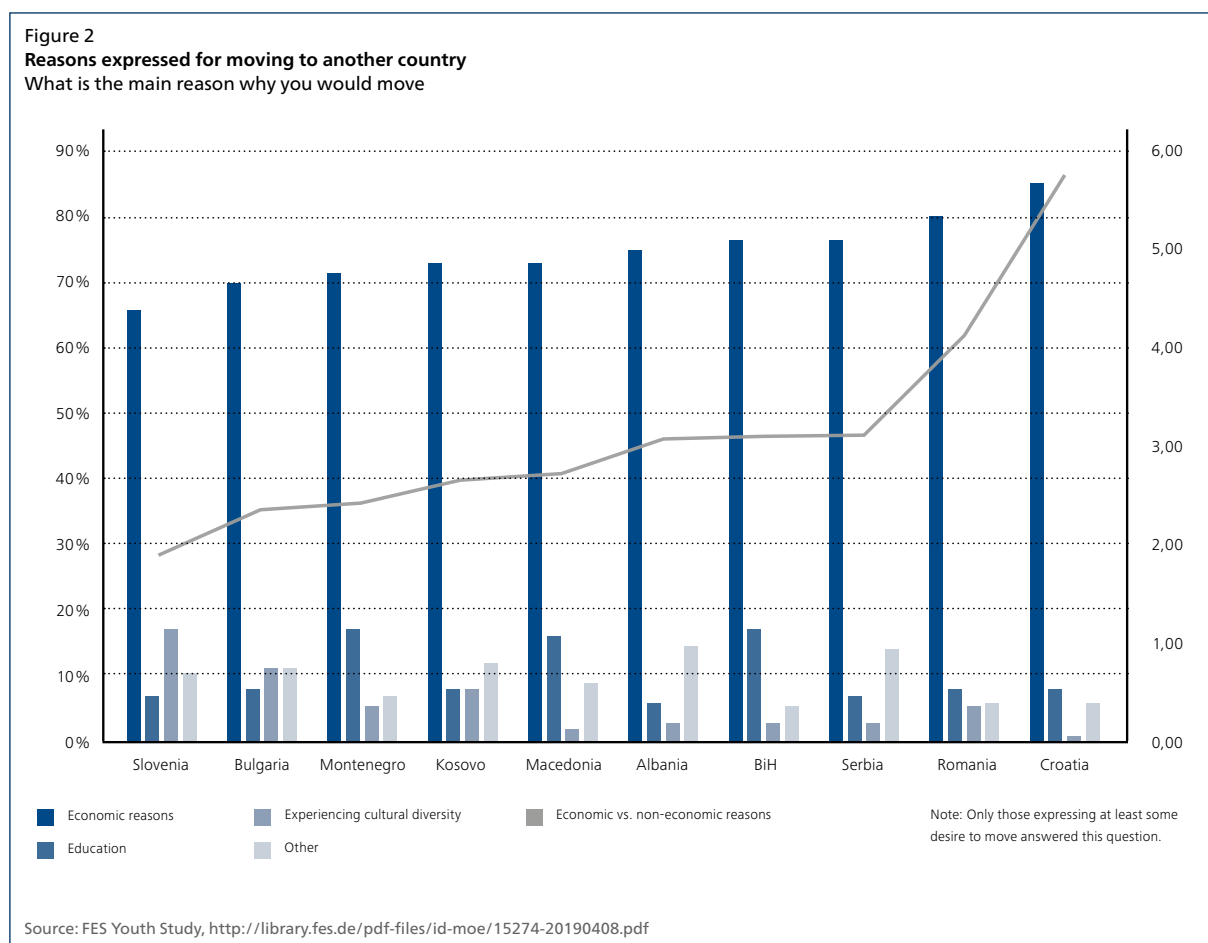
programmes in accordance with the youth's demands.

However, to achieve these benefits, youth participation needs to be authentic and as such it must be youth-centred, rooted in their realities, pursuing the youth's visions and concerns, while maintaining its inclusivity of the community as a whole.

Young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect them and the lives of the people

in their community. Participation gives them an opportunity to share issues they deem important, allows them to make their 'own' decisions about their lives, increases self-confidence and skills and empowers them to be a complete and valued part of the community.

To conclude, the holy trinity is mobility, better jobs, and better decision-making. That is where we are going. Ultimately, it is for the benefit of our future societies.





POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

OVERVIEW

THIS SECTION AIMS TO PROVIDE A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS AND UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SECURITY, WHICH INCLUDES STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF CONFLICT SUCH AS SOCIAL TENSIONS BROUGHT ABOUT BY UNFINISHED DEMOCRATIZATION, SOCIAL OR ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES OR ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES, FOR INSTANCE. THE BRIEFINGS COVER FOURTEEN COUNTRIES IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: THE SEVEN POST-YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES, ALBANIA, GREECE, TURKEY, CYPRUS, BULGARIA, ROMANIA, AND MOLDOVA.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

To be or not to be members of the EU – that is what EU hopefuls in the Western Balkans must be wondering following the French ‘non’ to the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia at the European Council of 17–18th October. In the case of Albania, the French were joined by other members such as the Netherlands. Yet on North Macedonia, the French stood alone against the rest of the EU member states.

The French veto has been deemed a ‘historic mistake’ in some quarters and roundly criticised. Particularly in the case of North Macedonia, the decision was widely seen as a breach of faith on the part of the EU, which had – more or less clearly – pledged that if Skopje resolved its name dispute with Greece by changing its name and implementing other reforms, it would be given a date for opening accession negotiations.

Just how much damage will have been done to the EU’s credibility remains to be seen in the future, but there is no doubt that future ‘carrots’ offered by the EU in order to induce actions desired by Brussels and/or EU member states will not necessarily be taken at face value. Perhaps one of the first tests of the EU’s credibility will be negotiations on normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia. In one way or another, the suggestion, or hope, of EU membership has been an important incentive to bringing Belgrade and Prishtina to the negotiating table. But if the credibility of the promise of EU membership becomes questionable, what will keep the two sides at the negotiating table, let alone compel them to make painful compromises?

What was particularly worrying about the French ‘non’ for Balkan EU hopefuls was that unlike in the past, French officials did not offer a clear explanation regarding the conditions the North Macedonian side had apparently failed to meet. Nor did they specify what North Macedonia or Albania needed to do to ensure the opening of accession negotiations, giving rise to the sense that the French side simply wanted to bring enlargement as such to a halt. This was further reinforced by French President Emmanuel Macron’s oft-repeated words that the EU first needed to reform itself internally before enlargement could move forward, along with vague references to

the need for reforming the enlargement process itself for the benefit of all sides.

Such rhetoric by France was seen as disingenuous on two counts. Firstly, there seems little danger that any Balkan hopefuls would be ready for membership so quickly, giving the EU more than enough time to implement internal reforms. Secondly, despite Macron’s talk of reforming enlargement, there was little in the way of concrete suggestions for how this was to be done.

In the absence of this, many EU experts in the region and beyond were left with the impression that the French president was merely trying to assert his own dominance within the EU, demonstrating that he was willing to go against the entirety of the EU if necessary. However, some civil society groups and think tanks tried to put a positive spin on the situation, arguing that the French proposals for reforming the enlargement process should be welcomed with an open mind, as something that could benefit the candidate countries themselves.

ELECTORAL UPS AND DOWNS

In November, **Romanian** voters went to the polls to elect the country’s president in a two-round process. In many respects, the presidential election was a referendum on the ruling Socialists, the PSD, and their opponents, personified by incumbent President Klaus Iohannis, who have been at loggerheads with the PSD for years. Despite a colourful cast of characters who decided to throw their hats into the ring, Iohannis was always the quiet favourite to win. In the first round of voting held on November 10th, Iohannis secured 37.82 % of votes, while his main challenger Viorica Dăncilă, the PSD leader and until recently Prime Minister, came in second place with 22.26 % of votes. With the PSD and Dăncilă – who was voted out of office just days before the first round – dogged by bad news and controversy, it came as little surprise that Iohannis won a resounding victory in the second round of the elections on November 24th, racking up 66.09 % of votes to Dăncilă’s 33.91 %. While the outcome was of little surprise, the scale of Dăncilă’s defeat was a clear message to the Socialists. Dăncilă resigned from party leadership immediately after the defeat. During a party congress in February 2020 a new leadership will be elected.

A woman casts her ballot during the second round of Romanian presidential elections, at a polling station in Plataresti, Romania, on November 24, 2019.



More than a month after **Kosovo's** parliamentary elections, held on October 6th, the vote count was still being disputed. The election itself passed in an orderly fashion, with voters clearly signalling that they wanted out with the old ruling parties, which had emerged from the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in favour of opposition parties – Vetëvendosje and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). After numerous problems with the vote count – including suspicion that votes from Serbia had been poisoned in some way, leading to the hospitalisation of ballot counting officials and the arrests of local officials for falsifying vote counts – the Central Election Commission announced the 'final' vote result. Accordingly, Vetëvendosje won 26,27 % of votes, the LDK secured 24,55 %, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) 21,23 %, and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo – Social Democratic Party of Kosovo (AAK-PSD) coalition won 11,51 %. Meanwhile the Social Democratic Initiative and New Kosovo Alliance (NISMA-AKR) coalition won 4.98 % of the votes, within a whisker of the 5 % threshold needed to enter parliament. Yet, this result was quickly appealed by the NISMA-AKR coalition who among other things, demanded that votes from Serbia that were not sent by post be removed from the final result. In due course, Kosovo's Election Complaints and Appeals Panel (ECAP) ruled that the vote count should be repeated at more than half of polling stations and accepted the request to remove the disputed votes from Serbia. Following this, the NISMA-AKR coalition stood at exactly 5.00 % of votes, allowing it to enter parliament. This very small change to the percentage of votes won by the various parties had a big impact on the dis-

tribution of seats in the new parliament and, by extension, the process of government formation. Before the ECAP verdict, Vetëvendosje and the LDK were on course to secure 32 and 29 seats respectively, a narrow majority of one seat in the 120 seat parliament. The entry of NISMA-AKR into parliament deprived Vetëvendosje of three seats and the LDK of one seat as well as, most importantly, their overall majority in parliament.

The Leader of the Vetëvendosje Party Albin Kurti (c) addresses his supporters as they celebrate their victory in Prishtina on October 7, 2019



On November 4th, both **Bulgaria** and **Moldova** held the second rounds of local election contests, decisive in terms of electing local mayors. In Bulgaria, the ruling GERB party saw some minor losses but remained dominant overall. Most importantly, GERB retained control of the capital Sofia where its candidate, Yordanka Fandakova, took exactly 50 % of the vote. In Moldova, the pro-Russian Socialist Party (PSRM) appeared to come out on top, taking the most votes across the country. Crucially, the PSRM's candidate for Mayor of Chisinau, Ion Ceban, was elected mayor with 52.39 % of the votes cast. This was a rather ground-breaking result, being the first time that the PSRM had taken the capital from pro-European parties.

With these contests out of the way, the next major election in the region will be the **Croatian** Presidential election. The first round is due on December 22nd and if, as is likely, no candidate secures an overall majority in the first round, a second round will take place on January 5th. Nearly all polls suggest that the current President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović is on course for re-election,

although the outcome will likely be much closer than in Romania. While Grabar-Kitarović remains in the lead, she has two relatively strong challengers. One is Zoran Milanović, the former Prime Minister and Social Democratic Party candidate. A more wild-card candidate is Miroslav Škoro, a popular singer and more far right candidate. Although Milanović is the favourite to enter the second round with Grabar-Kitarović, there is an outside chance he could be displaced by Škoro. Even more interestingly, some analysts believe that Grabar-Kitarović might have a more difficult time seeing off Škoro than Milanovic in the second round.

Following the blow dealt to **North Macedonia's** EU accession hopes by France in October, the country's political leaders sat down and agreed to call early parliamentary elections. While the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) had wanted a snap election, ultimately political parties settled on April 12th, roughly half a year before regular parliamentary elections had been due. In order to pave the way for this, current Prime Minister Zoran Zaev will have to resign on January 3rd in order to clear the way for a technical government, spanning ruling and opposition parties, which will pave the way for parliamentary elections. One of the 'victims' of the early elections will be the country's population census, which will likely be delayed to 2021 as things stand.

French President Emmanuel Macron (L) welcomes President of North Macedonia Stevo Pendarovski (R) prior to a dinner with the participants of the Paris Peace Forum at the Elysee Palace in Paris



In April 2020, Turkish-dominated North Cyprus will also see the holding of Presidential elections. Although recognized only by Turkey, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus functions as a de facto statelet. Over the summer, opinion polling suggested that incumbent President Mustafa Akinci was in the lead in terms of popular support, giving him an edge over rivals should he choose to run again.

GOVERNMENT FORMATION VS. DISINTEGRATION

To most analysts and observers, it seems almost a foregone conclusion that the next **Kosovo** government will be a coalition between Vetëvendosje and the LDK. Indeed, everything is pointing in this direction. Under Kosovo's constitutional set-up, Vetëvendosje has the right to nominate the next Prime Minister of Kosovo, given that the party came first in the elections in terms of vote share. Vetëvendosje leader Albin Kurti is seen as the logical choice. Representatives of the two parties have been busily cobbling together a common policy agenda, which according to Vetëvendosje leader Albin Kurti, has mostly been agreed. At present, the main sticking point appears to be the division of posts in the new government and not least, which party will get to nominate the next President of Kosovo, chosen by parliament, after the current President Hashim Thaçi's mandate expires in April 2021. The LDK seems to have set its sights on the post, but Vetëvendosje appears to be trying to extract concessions (chiefly in the form of ministerial portfolios) in return for its support. While Vetëvendosje and the LDK appear to have secured a parliamentary majority thanks to the apparent support of some of the non-Serb minority MPs, the other major issue that must be resolved is the question of who will represent the Kosovo Serb minority in the next government. According to most interpretations of Kosovo's constitution, the Belgrade-backed Srpska Lista has the right to at least one ministry in the government, given that it has won all 10 mandates reserved for the community. However, Kurti has vowed that there will be no place for Srpska Lista in his government. While all these issues need to be resolved, pressing issues such as the adoption of the 2020 budget, wait to be addressed.

More than a year after **Bosnia's** national election in October 2018, there is little indication that Bosnian politicians feel in a particular hurry to form a government. In the 14 months that have passed, only the Republika Srpska (RS) entity and some of the Federation's cantons have formed governments. There are still no new governments at the central and Federation levels of the state. A deal to form a government at the central level and resolve the political deadlock became derailed almost as soon as it was agreed to at the beginning of August. Just when many diplomats, observers, and ordinary Bosnians were on the brink of giving up hope that a central government would be formed any time soon, if ever, on November 18th the Bosnian Presidency nominated Zoran Tegeltija for the post of Chairman of the Council of Ministers. The move was tied to an agreement to send the Annual National Program – under a different name – to NATO as a precondition for activating the country's NATO Membership Action Plan. Progress in this regard was a strong signal that the August agreement on forming a government was back on track. Yet with trust between the main ethno-nationalist leaders running so low, most observers are waiting to see the central government formed before they believe it will happen. In all likelihood, the Bosnian government will probably be formed before the end of the year, opening up the possibility that political leaders will turn their attention to forming the Federation entity's government. Yet with little good will between politicians and so much energy having been spent merely on forming the government, the chances that the new governments will implement any reforms of substance seem slim indeed.

While Kosovo and Bosnia struggled to form governments, **Moldova's** experiment with its government of pro-European and pro-Russian parties came to an abrupt end. After a dispute over who would be appointed Prosecutor General, the pro-Russian Socialists (PSRM) decided to pull the plug on their government with the pro-European ACUM block, led by Prime Minister Maia Sandu. On November 12th, the Socialists decided to join with the formerly ruling Democratic Party to pass a motion of no confidence in the government. Just two days later, a new government was voted in, under the helm of new Prime Minister Ion Chicu. The Chicu government was voted in with the support of MPs from the PSRM and Demo-

cratic Party. Of its 10 ministers, 8 are former advisers of President Igor Dodon, the *de facto* PSRM leader.

In neighbouring **Romania**, the embattled Socialist government of Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă was finally toppled when it lost a vote of confidence in parliament on October 10th. The successful no-confidence motion, tabled by the centre-right opposition National Liberal Party (PNL), referred to Dăncilă's government as 'the most toxic' in recent Romanian history. Less than a month later, the Romanian parliament voted in a new government, led by Ludovic Orban of the PNL. Although the new government got the backing of 240 out of 465 MPs and senators, it will be a minority administration. The PNL itself has only 96 seats in the two chambers of the Romanian parliament. In any case, Orban stressed that his government's term would last less than a year, given that parliamentary elections were due before the end of 2020.

Albania's own political crisis – triggered by often violent opposition demonstrations demanding early elections during 2019, the resignation of opposition MPs from parliament, and the opposition's boycott of the June local elections – seems to have entered a quieter phase. In early October, the Venice Commission, an advisory body of the Council of Europe, voiced doubts that the moves by the Socialist government of Edi Rama to impeach President Ilir Meta were justified. Yet the political crisis would in due course become completely overshadowed by the tragic earthquake that struck Albania in the early hours of November 26th. Tens of people were killed as hundreds of homes collapsed or were seriously damaged, displacing several thousand more people. Given the situation, all attention was focused on dealing with the consequences of the earthquake and helping survivors, with day to day politics being pushed to the side.

Finally, the **Croatian** government of Andrej Plenković showed signs of wobbling after the ruling HDZ's junior partner, the Croatian People's Party (HNS), threatened to vote against the 2020 budget over the issue of pay for education sector employees. Few analysts expected the government to fall, but the mini-crisis was seen as a prelude to the long campaign ahead of parliamentary elections due in late 2020.

MIGRANTS

The recent months have seen a steady increase in the numbers of migrants and refugees arriving from Turkey into Greece and attempting to move up the so-called 'Balkan route' towards the EU. Precise numbers are hard to come by, but reports from Greece suggest that the number of arrivals has doubled in recent months. They are still a far cry from the height of the migration crisis a few years ago. Yet the problems now are different. Borders along the Balkan route and into Europe are much more firmly closed, leaving migrants and refugees stuck along its path. With EU countries such as Croatia and Hungary determined to keep them out, migrants and refugees find themselves trapped in countries such as Bosnia and Serbia as the winter cold sets in. The conditions they face are particularly dire in Bosnia, where authorities are still struggling to come up with a coordinated solution for providing basic shelter and protection for the most vulnerable. While the RS entity refuses to participate in sharing the burden, authorities in the Federation cannot agree with the central government as to where migrants will be housed. Amidst all this, the situation remains most dire in the Una-Sana Canton around Bihać, through which, according to local estimates, more than 40,000 people have passed this year. Several hundred remain stuck in a forest camp as snow falls with no heating, water, or electricity.

Banners, written by irregular migrants, who were not allowed to cross the Croatian border, hung near the makeshift tents at the camp 'Vucjak' near Bihać, on December 5, 2019 in Bosnia and Herzegovina



ENVIRONMENTALISM

Environmental concerns may not be at the top of the priority list for most citizens of the Balkans, yet in line with trends across much of the

rest of the world, environmental issues seem to be gaining in importance.

The region is no stranger to major hydro-electric power projects, most of which were carried out in the Communist era. More recently, there has been a proliferation of mini-hydroelectric plants across the region, which has generated a wave of opposition. Projects to dam small rivers and mountain streams have brought together both environmental activists opposed to the damaging effects of such projects to nature and local communities concerned about the loss of access to water resources on which they often depend for their existence. Protesters in southern Serbia, in the Stara Planina area close to Pirot, have clashed, often violently, with investors, private security, and police. In Kosovo, a proposed mini hydroelectric project in the Štrpce municipality has achieved the unimaginable, uniting local Kosovo Serbs and Albanians around a common cause – opposition to the loss of their rivers.

As winter sets in, the quality of air that the citizens of towns large and small across the region breathe will again become an issue. Bosnia and North Macedonia have some of the highest levels of winter air pollution in Europe. In part thanks to greater media attention to such problems, ordinary citizens are increasingly becoming more vocal in demanding action from authorities to reduce the problem, typically created by outdated and dirty local and district heating systems.

REGIONAL UPS AND DOWNS

At the beginning of October, the leaders of **Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia** signed the 'Mini-Schengen' declaration, pledging themselves to setting up a zone of regional cooperation modelled on the EU's own Schengen zone. Within the zone, the free movement of goods, people, capital, and services would be permitted, while the countries await membership of the EU. The leaders of the three countries – Edi Rama, Zoran Zaev, and Aleksandar Vučić – touted the plan as a significant boost for regional economic growth, trade, and the easier passage of ordinary citizens. They also called on other countries to join the 'mini-Schengen'. Experts were cautiously welcoming of the initiative, warning that building something similar to the Schengen

zone at the regional level would not be a quick process. Montenegro, which sees itself as the regional EU accession front-runner declined the invitation to join the 'mini-Schengen', fearing that it could become a distraction from its EU accession process. Another open question remains how Kosovo could join the zone, given existing and ongoing disputes with Serbia over trade and other issues.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic (C), Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama (L) and North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev (R) pose for a photo after signing a joint declaration on the improvement of the regional trade and traveling between the 3 countries, also known as "small Schengen area" in Novi Sad, Serbia on October 10, 2019.



Such positive examples of regional cooperation were, however, offset by plenty of negative counter-examples. **Albania** and **Kosovo** signed a deal at the beginning of December through which Kosovo would join Albania's power grid system. Kosovo proclaimed that this was another major step in cementing the country's sovereignty. **Serbia**, meanwhile, accused Prishtina and Tirana of building a 'Greater Albania of energy'.

Spying 'affairs' also seemed to cloud relations in the region and beyond. On November 20th, a video appeared on YouTube, showing a **Russian** diplomat – who turned out to be an intelligence officer – handing money over to a Serbian official. Later, it emerged that the Serbian official was a retired army officer. Exactly what the money was in payment for remains unknown. There was even more confusion as to who had released the video and why. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić told media that the meeting seen in the video had taken place on December 24th 2018, adding further speculation to the question of why the video had been made public now. The finger of suspicion for releasing it was pointed variously at the Serbian authorities, other intelligence agen-

cies from the region, or the Americans; however, nobody took credit for it. While some speculated that American intelligence agencies and diplomats were trying to spoil Vučić's visit to Moscow in early December, others argued that the Serbian side had released the video in order to distract from domestic corruption scandals.

Just over a week later, Serbia's Security-Information Agency (BIA) filed criminal charges for espionage against two people – one a Croatian citizen, the other Serbian. They stand accused of gathering information about war crimes cases and passing them on to Croatian intelligence. The accused Croatian police officer, Nikola Kajkić, denied the accusations of espionage.

SECURITY

At present, it is the very southeastern corner of Southeast Europe that seems to be the main generator of security-related problems in the region.

One major development was the invasion of a sizeable area of north Syria by the Turkish Army and affiliated Syrian rebel groups. The Turkish Army began its assault on territory held by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on October 9th. The prelude to this was the decision by US President Donald Trump to withdraw US troops from northeastern Syria, which was widely seen as an act of abandoning local Kurdish allies and a US green light to the planned Turkish invasion. Ostensibly, the declared aim of the Turkish military operation was to clear the SDF – which Turkey sees as a terrorist organization because of its ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – from a 30 kilometre deep zone along Turkey's border with Syria. This, according to a rather ambitious Turkish plan, would allow Ankara to resettle a large number of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees currently seeking refuge in Turkey, and push them onto Syrian territory. So far, the Turkish military operation has only succeeded in displacing a further 300,000 Syrians. Internationally, Ankara's moves received more condemnation than support, with some European countries imposing arms embargoes on their NATO ally. Even the US, whose actions had seemingly cleared the way for the Turkish invasion, quickly changed tack – in part due to heavy domestic criticism of Trump's actions. Limited sanctions were imposed on Turkish officials by the US

in response to the invasion, while the threat of further sanctions helped US Vice President Mike Pence secure Turkish acquiescence to a ceasefire in north Syria on October 17th. This cessation of hostilities seems to have been extended indefinitely thanks to Russian mediation, which has also secured further SDF withdrawals from the border area with Turkey. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Turkish invasion may turn out to be compelling the SDF and Syria's Kurds into negotiating with officials in Damascus.

Further to the west, in the Mediterranean Sea, Turkey and Libya signed an agreement demarcating their maritime boundaries and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) on November 27th. All would be well and good with this news, were it not for the fact that part of the area demarcated by Turkey and Libya is claimed by Greece as part of its own EEZ. Fatih Donmaz, Turkey's Energy Minister, has stated that once ratification of the agreement with Libya is completed, Turkish drilling ships will begin exploring oil and gas in the area. However, Greece seems unlikely to accept such moves and could well use its navy to block Turkish ships. All of this carries the risk of armed conflict between the two NATO allies. And this is hardly a new twist – the two countries narrowly avoided war over oil and gas exploration in the Aegean Sea in 1987.

A NEW DEAL FOR YOUTH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Ema Smolo

Based on findings from the Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019, the FES together with authors and youth practitioners from the Western Balkan Six have created twenty actionable and creative policy proposals – in bold below. These suggestions stem from the assumption that one of the best ways to approach youth policy in the Western Balkans is to create more opportunities for young people. The main foundation for this ideation process consists of comprehensive research results derived from the study and interviews and input from youth representatives, which point to two priority areas for engaged policymaking: education and employment.

Additionally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the youth is largely dissatisfied with the state of the economy and “democracy” in the region, which results in a generally low and continually declining interest in politics and civic engagement. The recommendations here serve as a set of concrete policy measures, which can be integrated into ongoing policy processes on the national, regional, and even EU level. Inspired by the famous “New Deal”, the U.S. programme that contributed to the recovery from the Great Depression, this set of proposals is titled *A New Deal for Youth in the Western Balkans*.

“Career opportunities, the ones that never knock”

Starting with the biggest concern of youth in the region: unemployment. In Southeast Europe, all of the youth’s respective countries face similar problems when it comes to employment and education exhibiting high levels of youth unemployment. Even when young people manage to secure a job in spite of the toxic political climate, they often end up working precarious jobs in unsatisfactory working conditions, which contribute to their demotivation and create feelings of existential insecurity. Up to 80% of youth in the Western Balkan six (WB6) report anxiety due to not having a job. While there has been some movement by governments to reform the educational system in order to reduce skill mismatch and move towards providing for active labour



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markets, these measures generally remain insufficient. Given the urgent need for greater access to decent jobs, a **regional model of Youth Guarantee**, similar to the one that EU Member States are committed to, could be a viable method for the WB6 to initiate in collaboration. This “guarantee” would secure employment for young people under the age of 25, greater access to continuing their education, an apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or having completed their formal education. In general, there is little to no assistance or trainings provided by the government to support entrepreneurial ambitions or young people to roll out their ideas. A **regional support system for young entrepreneurs** would help stimulate the possibility of greater education and financial support. Such a regional initiative could have multiple effects, including increasing young peoples’ engagement and job opportunities, but also improving the overall development of countries by linking young people to service providers and exchanging best practices.

“I wasn’t taught how to get a job / But I can remember dissecting a frog”

A bridge between these two principal issues is the process of a school-to-work transition, which is poorly facilitated throughout the region by the existing educational and labour market institutions. **Improving career guidance in primary, secondary and tertiary education** by

introducing new career guidance and counselling services, while strengthening existing ones would allow young people to make informed choices regarding their professional future. Existing mechanisms are generally underdeveloped, especially at the level of primary education. This initiative would not only help young people make career related decisions, but could also help in decreasing the student drop-out rates. Yet, the precondition to receiving good career guidance is to be enrolled in an educational programme, which means that governments in the region should commit to **a regional initiative to ensure a certain minimum standard in terms of equity in education**. In most countries of the region, social mobility is not a reality and there are not a sufficient number of opportunities for youth to access higher levels of education than their parents. This problem perpetuates more inequalities because youth with lower levels of education have much bleaker job prospects later. Such an initiative would involve access to early childhood education, grant schemes based on social status, and drop-out prevention. A common set of objectives on a regional level to facilitate greater enrolment and completion rates on all levels of education would help to battle some of the existing inequalities. Another important contribution towards advancing education for the youth in the Western Balkans is to recognize the complementary knowledge obtained vis-à-vis various online opportunities, after-school and volunteering programmes, which universities or prospective employers do not currently recognize. **A regional system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning** could for starters seek to expand the reach of Youthpass¹ to activities organized by bodies such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office. Such a measure would give young people the opportunity to articulate the learning outcomes of activities they have engaged with, but also possibly increase social recognition of such programmes and foster youth employability.

“Let’s (not) do the brain drain and leave it all behind”

Young people consistently report a high degree of interest in leaving their countries. Part of this interest is related to the desire for a better education, and yet, as the findings of the Youth

study point out, migration does not have to be zero sum. Part of an enriched educational experience is also learning mobility, which is considered a beneficial experience for youth by numerous studies. Educational mobility facilitates the access to new knowledge, and helps to develop linguistic skills and intercultural competencies. It also contributes to raising awareness about political participation and increases a young person’s interest in politics. However, it is currently not accessible to youth in the Western Balkans. By extending the reach of effective programmes such as Erasmus+, **all WB6 countries programme countries could create opportunities for better higher education, internships, and trainee-ships for youth**. Encouraging cooperation, mobility, and opportunities for learning could be enhanced within the region by **developing a regional educational exchange scheme**. Such a programme could result in boosting reconciliation and co-action processes, overall better skills acquirement, and increased tolerance for others. Mobility programmes such as these could harness the potential of young people wanting to experience opportunities outside the borders of their country. Simultaneously, there remains the responsibility of creating an environment that would make this migration circular, and not zero-sum. One concrete proposal on how to achieve this, is by **giving grants to young scholars who study or work abroad, encouraging them to conduct research in their home countries**. All governments in the region allocate modest shares of their budget for research, though brain-drain remains a key concern. Such a scheme would result in numerous positive effects, e. g. knowledge transfer, an increase in research initiatives fostering collaborative activities, and generating innovation.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are now entering / The age of information”

In line with the previous policy recommendations, building knowledge, fostering educational exchange, and increasing critical thinking are all valuable contributions. Yet it is important to remember that the world is rapidly digitizing, and virtual forms of education may be more successful in reaching youth. The study results show that young people are becoming more accustomed to seeking knowledge outside of formal institutions, and that a great portion of their time is dedicated to ICT use. Thus, **creating an**

1 <https://www.youthpass.eu/hr/about-youthpass/about/>

online educational platform that would offer a variety of courses and programmes for young people, supported by educational institutions, NGOs and companies from the region, would reduce skill mismatches and foster lifelong learning, encourage civic education and potentially go a long way in promoting and improving education. A similar notion of the youth's virtual presence can be used as evidence for need to create accessible information pools for the youth's utilization. For instance, this can be achieved by **including all WB6 countries in the Youth Wiki project**, an online encyclopaedia in the area of national youth policies. While Youth Wiki would feature information regarding policies, the proposal of creating a **Western Balkans Youth Portal** would serve as an online hub with all information and opportunities offered to youth in the region. It would be a web page where young people from the region could find relevant initiatives, calls, and opportunities for educational and political engagement. Similarly, youth work could also be digitized and improved through a common set of guidelines that would require setting up a **regional network of digital youth centres**. These centres would ideally provide online chat counselling for children and youth, create relevant publications and info materials, as well as facilitate capacity building through online workshops. Not to forget the omnipresence of smartphones, participation can also be made more approachable through **an application of the online digital and mobile participation toolbox OPIN**. Such an app could stimulate implementation of several cross-national projects that are currently using it.

"Close up your books, get out of your seat / Down the halls and into the street"

With such government-endorsed empowerment schemes, accessible knowledge and good experiences, young people in the region may be more inclined towards heightening their political and civic participation. As the study indicates, this type of engagement and political awareness is very low. Youth need a renewed sense of trust towards their governments and encouragement to participate. **Establishing a WB youth empowerment fund** would stimulate and support youth grassroots initiatives that could be translated into projects co-financed by the Global Youth Empowerment Fund, increasing civil participation of youth. Informal civic ed-

ucation could also be introduced by **democracy workshops for youth in parliaments across the region**. Such programmes offer the chance to meet and converse with officials, expand one's knowledge of politics, and inquiries between youth and government representatives. A more advanced approach to increasing participation would be an **introduction of participatory budgets for youth at the municipal level**. Participatory budgeting, as a mode of participatory democracy would directly involve youth as a social group, and potentially decrease the feeling of being poorly represented. Youth representative bodies are existing channels for voicing their thoughts and concerns, but they would benefit from having **minimum standards concerning youth representation and more government commitment to implementing these standards**. By strengthening representative bodies, young people could vest more of their trust and interests in them, ultimately fostering greater levels of awareness and participation. The lack of trust towards national governments can be mitigated through increased support and evidence-based policy making. In order to create such policies and actually respond to youth needs, **an annual regional report on the state of the youth** based on EU indicators in the respective field, would collect the necessary information. Such reporting could serve to monitor the implementation and efficiency of existing policies, while also help to recognize new priority areas of work. Last but not least, **governments of the region should increase commitment and support to youth work initiatives in the region**. More financial and institutional support, chances to learn and formulate clear objectives would ensure sustainability to youth work activities. Ultimately, such support would contribute to young people's learning, career prospects, civic and political engagement.

Conclusion

The findings of the FES Youth Study SEE point to an overwhelming lack of prosperity, education, employment and the enhancement of civic and political participation as well as the dissatisfaction and rising anxiety of youth require a determined course of action. These policy recommendations are a mere starting point for more evidence-based policy making. They are meant as an invitation to experts and policy-makers to engage with the full SPSS dataset, which is available for download at <https://www.fes.de/en/youth-studies>.

INTERVIEW WITH ĐURO BLANUŠA

Before his appointment as Secretary General of RYCO (Regional Youth Cooperation Office), Đuro Blanuša served as Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Serbia in the sector of International Cooperation and European Integration. He has a long track record of activism in civil society and has worked in the non-governmental sector with Save the Children and various youth organizations. Mr. Blanuša is also a member of numerous regional and European expert groups working in the field of youth. As a governmental representative in Serbia, he has been long-involved in supporting the establishment of RYCO.

FES: Recently, the FES has published a comprehensive regional study on youth, and shared a paper with twenty ideas for innovative regional youth policy based on these findings, both of which have been widely discussed in the region. What are the key takeaways from the study and main potentials for the youth development policy in the region?

Blanuša: The study provides a comprehensive statistical and general understanding of youth from the region and their needs, views and aspirations. For us in RYCO, the main takeaways are insights into their values, opinions and hopes, which help us to properly design our programmes and direct our activities. In particular, we were interested in data about youth participation in politics and other spheres, the overall democratic potential of youth from the Western Balkan six (WB6) and their civic engagement levels, EU aspirations, migration trends, and the level of trust that youth have towards their six governments, political leaders and institutions in general. The study provides a clear overview and comparison between all the WB6 countries, which is of paramount importance to RYCO.

We have been using the study as a strong communication and advocacy tool during meetings with the highest decision-makers, but also with the general public. We view this study as a sort of “reality check” for stakeholders who deal with the youth and youth related topics.

I am 100% convinced that all the policies designed with and for young people have to be evidence-based. This is exactly how the study can contribute its utmost to youth policy development across the region but also on the national level of each of the WB6.

FES: In July this year in Poznan at the Western Balkans summit, youth policies were discussed. Can you share some insights from that meeting, and



do you think there is some forward-looking development when it comes to more active youth participation?

Blanuša: RYCO had quite a significant role at this year's Western Balkans Summit, being one of the very few initiatives that emerged within the Berlin Process, and one that is really delivering. We had the opportunity to discuss the current situation of youth in the region at several high-level meetings organized in the framework of this summit.

As RYCO representatives, we strongly advocate for politicians to gain a better understanding of the youth's main concerns and perceptions of political and social developments in the region, such as those derived from the FES Youth Study during meetings and panel discussions. We stated that politicians should keep their promises to the youth and that they should be simultaneously careful of practicing incendiary and careless rhetoric. This is a good moment to recall the chair's conclusions, which reaffirmed the importance of young people for the future of a healthy Western Balkans and the necessity for tackling the brain drain phenomenon. Leaders remain concerned about a persistent shortage of opportunities for young people in the region and agreed that an increase of effort is needed to encourage participation and entre-

preneurship, modernize education, introduce career specific skills and employment opportunities, and encourage brain circulation, social and economic inclusion.

But promises and conclusions are not enough. That is why we want to see our political elites delivering on multiple fronts. Maybe that could be one of the most relevant outcomes of the Poznan Summit: an acknowledgement by our leaders of the numerous problems that young people face today in the WB6 and beyond. It is vital to note that any solution to these problems must always include youth in the decision-making process. Youth policies for young people designed without them will simply not work. RYCO will keep pushing for this approach in policy-making.

FES: Are there any examples of good practices in the region?

Blanuša: I don't want this to sound like bragging, but RYCO is one of few organizations not only in the region but across Europe, which exercises real youth participation in its decision-making processes. This means that our governing board consists of an equal number of governmental and youth representatives. Both maintain equal power and must consent to a joint decision-making process. This is a unique way of governance and we face challenges and resistance to it. All six youth representatives on the RYCO governing board are very vocal and confident about advocating for the interests of WB youth. In general, young people should be encouraged and empowered to take a stand whenever they have the opportunity to voice their perspectives, needs and expectations.

FES: RYCO is implementing many youth schemes and offers programme activities for young people. At the same time, the numbers of departures from the region is staggering. In your view, what needs to be done in the short term to make offerings in the region, and keep youth in the Western Balkans?

Blanuša: RYCO is an organization that promotes youth mobility, with intra-Balkan youth mobility as a main priority, but we also promote mobility culture in general and the youth's access to new study abroad and professional opportunities. According to our understanding, brain drain is simply a phenomenon rather than an *issue* per se.

Unfortunately, most young people in the region plan to leave it, and when one looks at the statistics, the numbers are alarming. On average, two out of three young people want to leave and one out of three already has a solid plan on how to do it. These statistical figures are more or less the same across the entire WB region.

I'm afraid that there are no short-term solutions when it comes to ongoing (de)population trends, which are not only characteristic to the WB6, but also a prevalent concern in EU member states such as Croatia, Bulgaria and Poland to name a few. Only a holistic, multi-sectoral, and long-term approach, which includes all relevant stakeholders, can slow down the trend of brain drain exhibited in the WB6 and eventually transform the phenomenon into brain circulation.

We have good examples in Europe of these "reverse" and positive trends, such as Spain and Portugal. You've asked about quick wins – perhaps the first one should be to identify examples of best practices as the process should not be about reinventing the wheel. It is much more than just about economic growth and new opportunities for young people in the labour market. It is also about general sense of security and certainty that young people need in order to stay. A lack of certainty and predictability is often the main reason for them to look for a better future elsewhere. Even the study clearly shows how a huge the feeling of "disconnect" exists between youth and institutions in our region. This has to be changed and it will take time.

FES: What is the potential for return migration as per suggestion of the New Deal and how realistic is it to counter the brain drain trend by enhancing circular migration?

Blanuša: I partially responded on this question in my previous answer. Circular migration is just one of the many tools that can contribute to positive change. Other measures, including additional incentives and subsidies for young people, like accessible start-up schemes for young entrepreneurs, or affordable loans schemes for young couples, might be good method for motivating the youth to come back.

But before any of that comes into question, there is one big precondition that is often taken for granted. I am talking here about peace because what we have in the Western Balkans is more of

a fragile peace rather than real reconciliation. Who is going to be motivated to come back to a region in which the political atmosphere is still so sensitive and electric? This is precisely why an investment in peace and reconciliation is so important, and the main reason for why RYCO was established in the first place.

FES: *A New Deal for WB youth references the creation of a regional educational exchange programme modelled after Erasmus+, fostering intra-regional mobility and contesting conservative values. What is the best way to facilitate these improvements to the same extent that EU-oriented mobility programmes do?*

Blanuša: Fostering and implementing long-term educational exchange will of course largely contribute to the aims set out by the initiative, but what we should be aware of is the question of how to make the region more attractive to young people for obtaining new knowledge here, and not elsewhere. Moreover, allowing young people to travel without administrative barriers and mobility obstacles among the WB6 is an additional point that we should think about. RCC is already accomplishing a great deal regarding diploma recognition, one of the main prerequisites for “WB Erasmus +”. From RYCO’s perspective, this recommendation is one of the most relevant and is fully in line with our mandate in the region. However, additional analysis is required with the specific context of each of the WB6 taken into consideration when designing this programme.

FES: *The New Deal offers a platform for tackling civic/political engagement by building more knowledge about politics (an online educational platform, participatory budgeting, parliamentary*

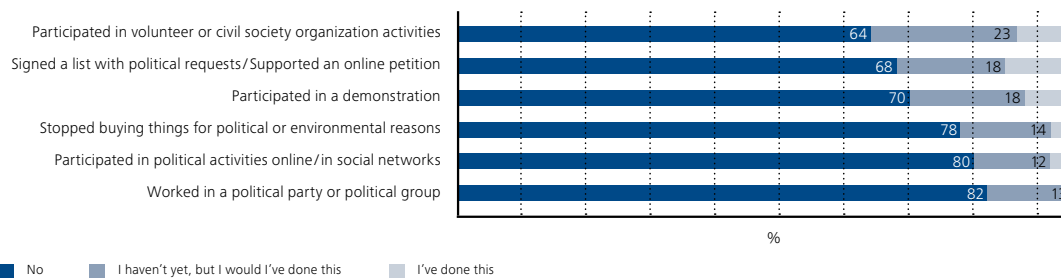
democracy workshops) with the final aim of promoting critical thinking and active participation among youth. What role does RYCO envisage in this respect, and how best to strengthen information sharing and activism among the youth?

Blanuša: Our philosophy is that the best way of sharing information is to bring people together and enable them to meet each other. This is what RYCO was established for. The same goes for strengthening youth activism. People get inspired when they hear success stories first-hand. That’s why our main investment is in inter-cultural youth exchanges across the region. We strongly believe that young people should be the ones to create a culture of mobility, intercultural exchange and reconciliation. They should also be active contributors to democratic development, social and economic prosperity, and European integration in an increasingly open Western Balkans region. With this in mind, we design our programme in a participatory way, always encouraging young people to take part in the recreation of their societies.

FES: *The absence of a welfare state and the perception of socio-economic insecurity push youth to support any part of the political spectrum so long as they promise progress and development. The New Deal suggests government support and commitment to youth work through young representative bodies and democracy workshops in parliament. What is RYCO’s perspective on this? Are there any realistic possibilities of building trust between youth and their government, and how so?*

Blanuša: Among many different reasons, RYCO was established to build trust among the youth but also between young people and their governments.

Figure 3
Young people’s experience with or interest in trying different forms of political engagement in SEE



Source: FES Youth Study, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>

We believe that such a change is possible and we are implementing and promoting a number of activities designed to reach this positive change. RYCO's unique system of governance brings together governmental and civil society representatives to ensure that young people are represented and heard at all levels of our organization.

RYCO was, is, and will continue to be a threat for the status quo of the region. We don't feel discomfort when dealing with sensitive topics and bad practices. I've already mentioned this strong sense of "disconnect" between young people and institutions. One concrete example of what RYCO is doing to bring young people closer to institutions is a project we've launched this year with all six parliaments in the region and the support of the French and German parliaments. In May of this year, we brought together a group of active young people and a group of WB6 parliamentarians to discuss shared ongoing regional issues and challenges. The project will continue throughout 2020 with regional tour and study visits to all WB6 parliaments. Both young people and parliamentarians thanked RYCO for providing them with the opportunity to meet one other and openly discuss questions and challenges in a transparent and democratic fashion.

FES: Evidently, there is very little interest among the youth for political participation. Is the reason for such civic/political (dis)engagement related to strong disillusionment on what the EU can do for their countries and them?

Blanuša: I believe that the reason is partially related to your conclusion. Indeed, when it comes to the latest developments and (non)decisions regarding Albania and North Macedonia, the EU doesn't help at all. However, the disengagement you refer to is primarily a result of national and regional policies and a continuation of the status quo. This lack of change is one of the main reasons that young people choose not to engage politically or at all.

The EU is and should always be a strong partner in promoting active participation of young people in the civic and political arenas, but what we should do as a region is to find our own regional ways of dealing with these issues. The EU should not be the one to deliver solutions. That's our homework. We are the ones who should fight against corruption, nepotism, brain drain, youth

unemployment, and encourage young people to understand the importance of their participation in the political process.

RYCO will always be there to enable cooperation between all relevant actors, from both the governmental and non-governmental sectors, and to send a positive political message to young people, encouraging them to participate more actively in democratic development, social and economic prosperity, and European integration in the Western Balkans.

INTERVIEW WITH BORIS JOKIĆ

Boris Jokić holds a degree in psychology from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb. He holds a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Cambridge. He is a Senior Research Associate in the Centre for Educational Research and Development at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, and is currently working on a project titled "Educational aspirations of pupils at transitional periods of Croatian elementary education: nature, determinants and change (COBRAS)." He has authored or co-authored ten publications in the area of education. He was a member of the National Council of Education and is one of the authors of the Croatian Strategy of Education, Science and Technology. He was one of the creators and a leader of the Comprehensive Curricular Reform of early and pre-school, elementary and secondary education in Croatia. The ideas, processes and values in this reform led to mass protests of support all over Croatia with estimates of over 50,000 people participating in Zagreb alone.

FES: Recently, the FES has published a comprehensive regional study on youth and shared a paper with twenty ideas for innovative regional youth policy based on these findings, both of which have been widely discussed in the region. What is your assessment of these ideas and how in your opinion do they inform youth development policy in the region?

Jokić: I strongly welcome both the study and the ideas for regional youth policy. The study is important not only because of its scope, but also because it channels the voices of young people in the region. These voices have largely been neglected and ignored within Southeast Europe. Political parties, including social-democratic ones, have failed to listen to youth, who increasingly express the desire to emigrate. Parties must take youth into consideration for the sake of the public good.

The youth study is one of the ways these voices have a chance to be heard. It is of equal importance that sound youth policies are formulated at the regional level. This may enhance the chance that politicians in these countries start thinking about the youth and their challenges, as now it seems only a few of them do.

FES: Brain drain and youth migration are among the gravest problems in Southeast Europe today. The recent FES Youth Studies revealed the depth of the problem, but also illustrated nuances that make the youth mobility landscape more complex. In your opinion, to what extent do deficiencies in education contribute to youth migration intent? And, conversely, is education the solution to the migration problem or can it be a recipe for return migration?

Both the perception of the quality and equity of education contribute young people's desire

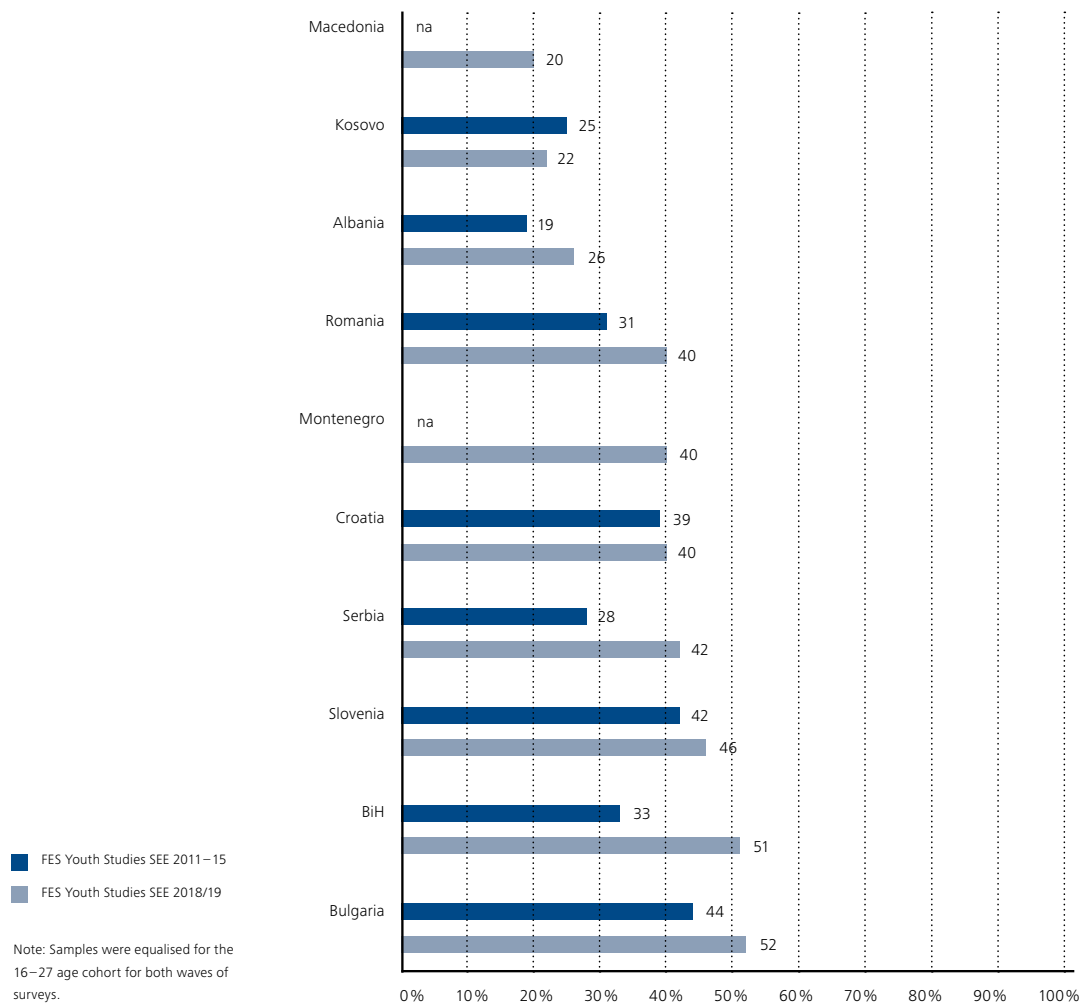


to emigrate. Our longitudinal study of educational aspirations suggest that young people in Croatia, and especially those with higher educational achievements, see that their educational and professional goals and ambitions would be better served in some other country. The main reason for this is insufficient investment in education and educational workers. Youth also perceive both the content and delivery of education as outdated, irrelevant, and not connected with their life experiences.

Furthermore, they perceive that in Croatia, non-meritocratic elements (such as familial background, nepotism, and corruption) count for more than education. Moreover, in the biggest ever research conducted with 13,301 Croatian high school students, more than a half of them stated that in 20 years they see themselves living in some other EU country or another country outside of the EU. These results alarmed the public, but not those responsible for the policies. The reaction of the Croatian PM was that the researchers should not spread pessimism among youth and within society and that we need more optimism. This reaction accurately depicts the level of responsibility politicians of the region feel they

Figure 4

The share of youth aged 16–27 who responded that they are 'satisfied' and 'very satisfied' with the quality of education in their country (in %)
How satisfied are you generally with the quality of education in your country?



Source: FES Youth Study, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>

have – for both education and young people. Education, in my view, is the one of the main, if not the greatest, solution for reversing migratory trends. However, education has been particularly neglected in the region by the politicians. They do not see it as a particularly interesting field for political activity.

FES: *Your work has focused on educational reform in Croatia. Have developments in that field responded to the particular needs and challenges of youth in Croatia and in what way?*

Alongside six other colleagues, I co-authored one of the biggest attempts of educational reform in the region. We envisaged and led educational reform, with the vision of youth at its foundation, as a bottom-up democratic process in which we democratised the curriculum development by al-

lowing teachers from every part of Croatia and from the smallest schools to become a part of a curriculum drafting group.

As part of the reform, more than 500 teachers and academics developed solutions for almost all aspects of the system, from preschool to university. This innovative democratic process resulted in the rebalancing of power within the educational system and society and invoked extremely positive reactions by the general public, youth especially.

Ultimately, in May 2016, the political forces in power, under the influence of marginal ultra-conservative groups, put political pressure on our work, after which we resigned. Our resignation led to the one of the largest public protests in the history of Croatia with more than 50,000 people on the streets of Zagreb alone. It was great to ex-

perience many young people protesting for education and reform. The reform and consequent events proved that truly democratic processes encapsulate positive emotions and reactions and hold immense power.

FES: Croatia has been a member of the EU since 2013. Has its membership empowered Zagreb to deal more effectively with challenges related to education and the youth? Has the Croatian government done enough to respond effectively to all of these problems?

In short, no, and by saying that I refer to all of governments since 2013, both conservative and social-democratic. It seems that issues of youth and education are not at the centre of their interests. They do not see these fields as very important because they are not financially attractive like infrastructure development or military. In both of these you need to deal with people and our politics has been such that the people are their last concern. They will find money for used warplanes, they will build roads that lead to nowhere, large monuments and water fountains, but people ... people are in this region usually seen by politicians as a necessary burden, a cost and a nuisance.

The situation with education is particularly challenging in this respect, as changes within this social subsystem demand time and Balkan politicians seem even more impatient than those in Western Europe. When you tell them: "We need 5–10 years to see the results of proposed changes," they politely say: "Thank you, but no thanks. My mandate is very short." In doing so, they demonstrate a lack of wisdom and are completely short-sighted, which has resulted in the lack of positive perspectives for a significant proportion of young people in Croatia.

FES: Where do you see the main challenges facing youth in the region and in what ways can curricula reform, another focus of your academic work, address these?

It is not easy to state all of the deficiencies of the educational system and in order to answer this, it would be better to depict what we would like to achieve with our educational reforms.

From the outset, we stated that the reform includes the introduction of new assessment practices, the development of teaching and learning ma-

terials, including open digital resources, and, most importantly, intense work with educational workers. We wanted to develop education, which is open to new technologies and artistic expression and their use for improving student's educational outcomes, increasing motivation, and reducing social inequalities. Early and pre-school education was supposed to be play-based, relying on a holistic understanding of a child's development. Kindergartens, elementary, and upper secondary schools were supposed to have been bound to one common system for the first time. A greater amount of flexibility in organizing the teaching and learning process should have been ensured at all levels. Gymnasium education should have provided students with a certain level of choice to opt for enhanced learning in their areas of interest (higher-education choices). Vocational education should have been brought closer to the world of work in order to facilitate a better and faster link between the education and economy. All existing forms of art education should have been retained and new ones were designed to further encourage this form of education and training, which is especially valuable for Croatia. A shift concerning all parts of the system and all subjects has been made from factual to conceptual understanding, the development of metacognitive knowledge and skills, problem-solving and decision-making, critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. Equally important and integral elements of the system were to be communication and collaboration as key forms of work in the twenty-first century, and the development of information and digital literacy, as well as practical work. Similarly, at all levels of education, an emphasis was put on the development of the ability to connect with others, of positive self-esteem, the ability to manage one's own educational and professional path, and to encourage active citizenship. The documents we produced included clear expectations regarding the development of economic, financial and political literacy, the protection of children's and students' mental health, sustainable development, and the use of information and communication technology in all subjects and at all levels. The reform envisaged different assessment and grading practices mainly aimed at assessment for learning as well as special arrangements for gifted children and young persons with disabilities.

All of these proposed solutions would have benefitted young people living in Croatia today, as well as future generations and immigrants to the country.

FES: The so-called New Deal for WB Youth references the creation of a regional educational exchange programme modelled after Erasmus+, fostering intra-regional mobility and contesting conservative values. What is the best way to facilitate these improvements to the same extent that EU-oriented mobility programmes do?

I think the New Deal for WB Youth offers a great palette of options that could really affect the lives of young people. One thing we need to do is also not to idolize EU policies and instead learn from their challenges. However, I am sceptical about the willingness of politicians in the region to accept these models and carry them out in a manner which would yield positive results. For decades they have profited off division and often, short of meaningful substance, revert to dredging up past conflicts and tensions. Because of that, they need to be reminded every day that in the connected world, regional mobility is extremely important. It would be fabulous if we could ensure an environment where young people could communicate and cooperate with others. Environments where they could live in and learn about other cultures, where they could see first-hand see that joy, sorrow, hardship, love and hardship are universal. Where they could experience by themselves that people, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, are one, and that people are a positive force.

SHORT COMMENTARIES

We asked three members of the parliaments of the region to comment on the Policy Recommendations in Milan Lavrič's *"In Search of Solidarity-Based Europeanisation"* published by FES. Below are three responses we received.

NADIA GIANNAKOPOULOU

Member of Parliament, Greece

The school-to-work transition refers to an important turning point in one's life trajectory, as it entails a mandatory movement from a likely predictable environment and clearly defined pathway to an often uncontrollable and uncertain terrain. Improving school-to-work transitions consists of facing the challenge of reducing high unemployment and precariousness among youth and therefore, accommodating social integration and progress. In this context, the transition of young people from school to labour markets is considered a top priority on most EU countries policy agendas. However, underprivileged and at risk children, being restricted to degraded social and educational environments, undervalued jobs and shrinking economic niches, are more likely to experience downward mobility and transgenerational decline.

Greece experienced a prolonged economic crisis which exacerbated unemployment and precariousness across the entire labour force. Young people's unemployment, let alone unemployment of vulnerable categories of the population, including underprivileged or immigrant youth, has been deeply aggravated by protracted fi-

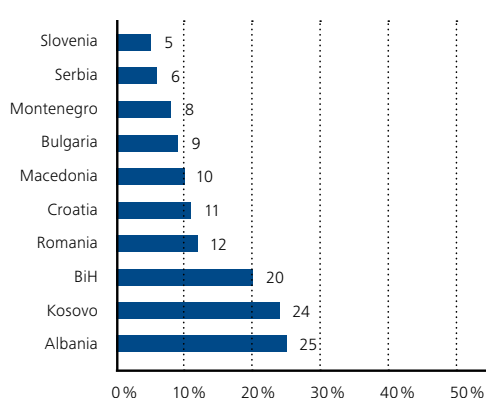


Nadia Giannakopoulou was born in Athens in 1977. She graduated from Athens Law School and holds an LLM in Commercial Law (University of Bristol) and an MSc in European Politics and Policy from the London School of Economics (LSE). She has worked as a lawyer since 2003. In 2009 she was elected for the first time as an MP of the Greek Socialist Party KINIMA ALLAGIS (PASOK) in the prefecture of Messinia. She was re-elected during the 2012 elections. From August 2013 to December 2014, she served as a Secretary General for the Environment and Climate Change. From 2015 to 2019 she was the National Spokesperson of PASOK. In July 2019 she was elected an MP of KINIMA ALLAGIS in the B2 Western Section of Athens.

nancial austerity and exposed to poverty and long-term social exclusion. While the implications of financial crisis on youth groups seems to be complex and multi-parametric, the potential risk of entering a NEET state (young people not in education, employment or training) is considerably high.

Job insecurity, precarious work, and a rapidly changing workplace have increased the risk of poverty and social marginalization. It is under these structural conditions that disadvantaged young people shape their ideas of their futures and make deliberate decisions concerning their life trajectories. Targeted strategies need to be introduced and based on focused research about the most common barriers faced by at-risk youth. At the same time, regional initiatives such as "No child left behind" should be promoted. Strengthening key competencies and developing high quality skills are considered among the high priorities set by the Europe 2020 growth strategy agenda, which seek to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. It is therefore essential that our societies educate smart, creative, and entrepreneurial individuals with the confidence and capabilities to think autonomously and critically, engage in lifelong learning, learn how to learn, generate new knowledge, serve societal and technological innovation and most of all facilitate positive change towards the direction of active citizenship.

Figure 5
Percentage of young people who are not employed, undergoing education or training (15–29)



Source: FES Youth Study, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>

LANA PRLIĆ

*Member of Parliament,
Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Though everyone is talking about the brain drain of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a strategy for combatting this phenomenon. Every country in the region faces more or less the same problem when it comes to youth, like emigration, low voter turnout, low employment rate, issues with the educational system, etc. Almost all of these problems are captured in the FES report.

As MPs, we need to consider and listen to what young people say, write, and propose, because no one knows what youth need better than the youth themselves. During the last election campaign, my party created a youth plan based on the youth plan of the Young European Socialists in the EU, which resonates with the FES report. As a young Member of Parliament, I feel I am obligated to talk with young people in order to try to enable them to stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, I proposed the Student Work Law, which would be separate and in addition to the labour law, in order to protect students who work and do their internships during their education, as well to define their rights and obligations.

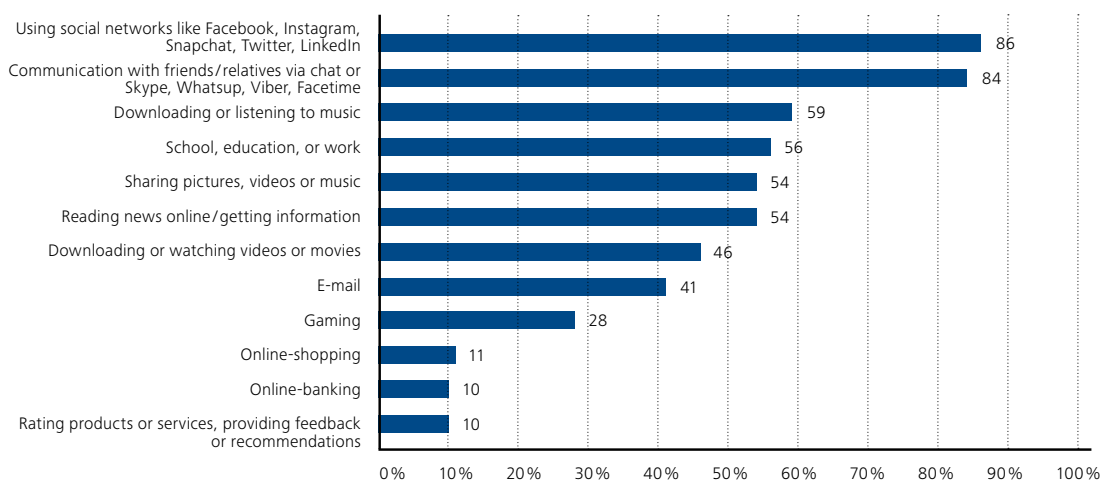


Lana Prlić is a 26 year old MP in Parliament of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She comes from Mostar and holds a Bachelor of Arts in International and Public Relations and Master of International Business and Finance from the International University of Sarajevo. Elected as Vice President of Social Democratic Party of Bosnia at the age of 21, and re-elected twice, she remains the youngest woman to be the VP of the SDP party.

Digitalization and modernization is something that is sorely lacking in all countries of region, and I am glad that that they are mentioned here. Younger generations are used to finding whatever they want with one click, but this is by far not the case for state paperwork or accessing online education in their countries or neighbouring ones.

Government support cannot just be declarative. We need concrete measures starting immediately, or we will soon have no youth to write strategies for and no possible solutions. We need to keep in mind that youth born in the early 2000s already have the right to vote.

Figure 6
Share of young people often using the Internet for different purposes (in %).
How often do you use the Internet for ...



Source: FES Youth Study, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>

NATAŠA VUČKOVIĆ

*Member of Parliament, Democratic Party,
National Parliament of the Republic of Serbia*

When a policy is designed, it is of the utmost importance to predict the impact it may have on youth. Policies that foster the emigration of young people are rarely designed so as to produce such an effect directly, but the reasons for youth emigration appear as effects of larger policies, as a side effect, or the effect that has not yet been predicted.

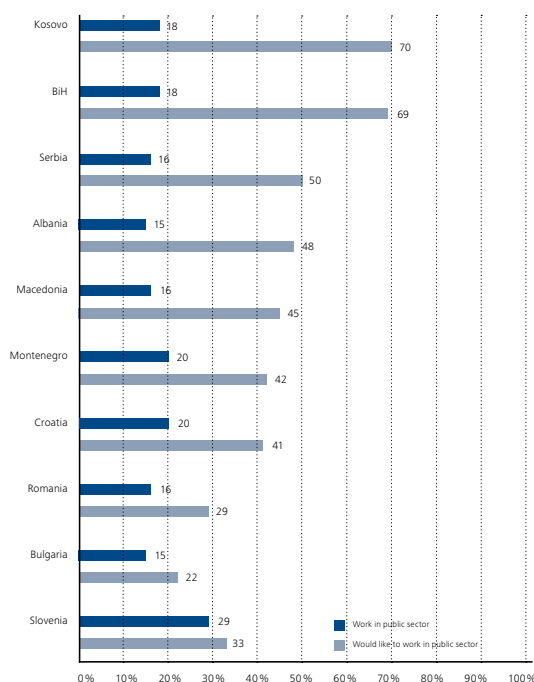
One such example of unforeseen impact was the Government of Serbia's 2015 introduction of the *Law on Mechanisms for Determining the Number of Employed in Public Sector* (popularly called the *Law on Prohibition of Employment in the Public Sector*). The law was seen as a measure for consolidating public finances and a way to control public spending. Economic experts largely supported it as a short-term measure that would last no longer than a year. However, the government prolonged it for the next four years, and even now it is not clear whether it will last through 2020 as well. In view of the fact that the private sector does not have the capacity to offer the requisite number of jobs and that, as the FES study shows, young people in WB6 "have a very strong preference towards employment in the public sector," this measure has had serious impact on youth employment. Consequently, it has led to emigration, as many young educated people could not find employment in health services, educational institutions, public administration, public enterprises, etc. It prevented them from starting their careers and obtaining their first professional experience. In this situation, the option for many was to search for employment abroad and leave the country. Although government bodies were authorized to issue permissions in particular cases (for example, a hospital required permission to employ additional staff), such a central permit issuing system has been seen as a way to foster party employment in government-friendly public institutions, which is seen by many young people as a practice that undermines the importance of education and professionalism.

This example shows that the social impact of reforms, particularly the impact that measures will have on youth, should be cautiously taken into consideration. Youth policies should not be the task of one ministry alone. On the contrary, and similarly to gender mainstreaming methodology, the policies' impact on youth ought to be considered through a cross-sectoral approach.



In addition to being a practicing attorney at law, Ms. Vučković has been a Member of Parliament since 2007. She has chaired the Committee on European Integration and has sat on the Committees on Foreign Affairs, Judiciary and Public Administration, and Administrative Affairs. As a member of the Serbian Standing Delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, she served as Vice President of the Assembly, as well as Chair of the Committee on Rules and Internal Procedures, and as Vice Chair of the Committee on Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights. She is the cofounder and Secretary General of the Center for Democracy Foundation, a Serbian civil society organization.

Figure 7
Working in the public sector: reality and preference



Source: FES Youth Study, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Southeast Europe

After more than two decades of engagement in southeastern Europe, the FES appreciates that the challenges and problems still facing this region can best be resolved through a shared regional framework. Our commitment to advancing our core interests in democratic consolidation, social and economic justice and peace through regional cooperation, has since 2015 been strengthened by establishing an infrastructure to coordinate the FES' regional work out of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Regional Dialogue Southeast Europe (Dialogue SOE).

Dialogue SOE provides analysis of shared challenges in the region and develops suitable regional programs and activities in close cooperation with the twelve FES country offices across Southeast Europe. Furthermore, we integrate our regional work into joint initiatives with our colleagues in Berlin and Brussels. We aim to inform and be informed by the efforts of both local and international organizations in order to further our work in southeastern Europe as effectively as possible.

Our regional initiatives are advanced through three broad working lines:

- Social Democratic Politics and Values
- Social and Economic Justice
- Progressive Peace Policy

Our website provides information about individual projects within each of these working lines, past events, and future initiatives: <http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org>

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