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Key Findings Summary The Comparative Analysis Of Youth Policies In The Western Balkans



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Contents

INTRODUCTION	5
1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FIELD	7
1.1. EMPLOYMENT – KEY FINDINGS	7
1.1.1. Youth Guarantee	8
1.1.2. Recommendations for the employment field in the WB including Youth Guarantee	9
1.2. EDUCATION – KEY FINDINGS	10
1.2.1. Recommendations for Education	10
1.3. SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH – KEY FINDINGS	11
1.3.1. Recommendations for SRH	12
2. YOUTH PARTICIPATION – KEY FINDINGS	14
2.1. Recommendations for Youth Participation	15
3. MEDIA, CULTURE AND THE DIGITAL WORLD	17
3.1. MEDIA LITERACY – KEY FINDINGS	18
3.1.1. Recommendations for Media Literacy	18
3.2. DIGITAL SKILLS – KEY FINDINGS	19
3.2.1. Recommendations for Digital Skills	19
3.3. CULTURAL POLICIES – KEY FINDINGS	20
3.3.1. Recommendations for Cultural Policies	21

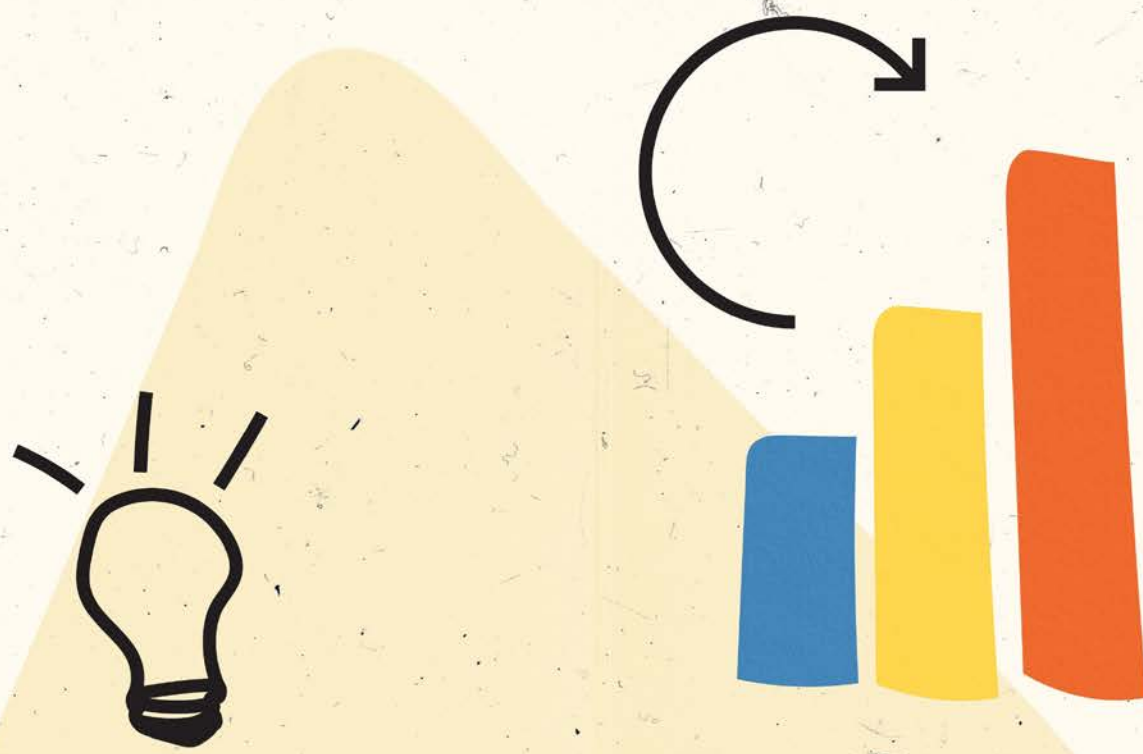
Key Findings
Summary
The Comparative
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Policies In The
Western Balkans

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INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

The Comparative Analysis of Youth Policies in the Western Balkans (WB) was conducted within the framework of the **Regional Youth Dialogue for Europe (RYDE)** project funded by the European Union (2023-2026). The Project is led by the Center for Democracy Foundation from Serbia, in collaboration with partnering civil society organizations (CSO) from the WB, including the Academy of European Integrations and Negotiations (Albania), Youth Act Center (Albania), Kosovar Stability Initiative (Kosovo*¹), Network of Progressive Initiatives (Bosnia and Herzegovina), NGO Info Center Foundation (North Macedonia), and the Regional Academy for Democratic Development (Serbia). The Project aims to empower youth and CSOs, especially youth organizations, to actively participate in the structured dialogue with decision makers, to improve cooperation of young people in the Western Balkans and to promote democratic values and the political, economic, and social benefits of European integration for the WB societies.

This Analysis aims to provide **a detailed comparative insight into youth-related public policies** in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, including policy documents such as strategies, action plans, and laws. It assesses the coherence of measures outlined in these youth policies with other related policy areas and evaluates the alignment of these policies with youth concerns, sustainable development goals (SDGs), and the need for building social resilience. This Analysis also **formulates recommendations** for improving public policies in each field covered by this research.

This Analysis is focused on **three key areas identified as particularly relevant to youth** in the WB:

- 1) Socioeconomic field:** employment, education and the sexual and reproductive health;
- 2) Youth participation:** civic and political engagement, social inclusion and youth in decision-making process;
- 3) Media, culture and the digital world:** youth media and digital literacy and strengthening of critical thinking, representation of young people in the media space, visibility and media affirmation of marginalized youth, and youth participation in creating cultural policies;

An expert team of 11 members, including three team leaders and eight researchers from the WB, conducted the research and data analysis within the framework of these three fields.

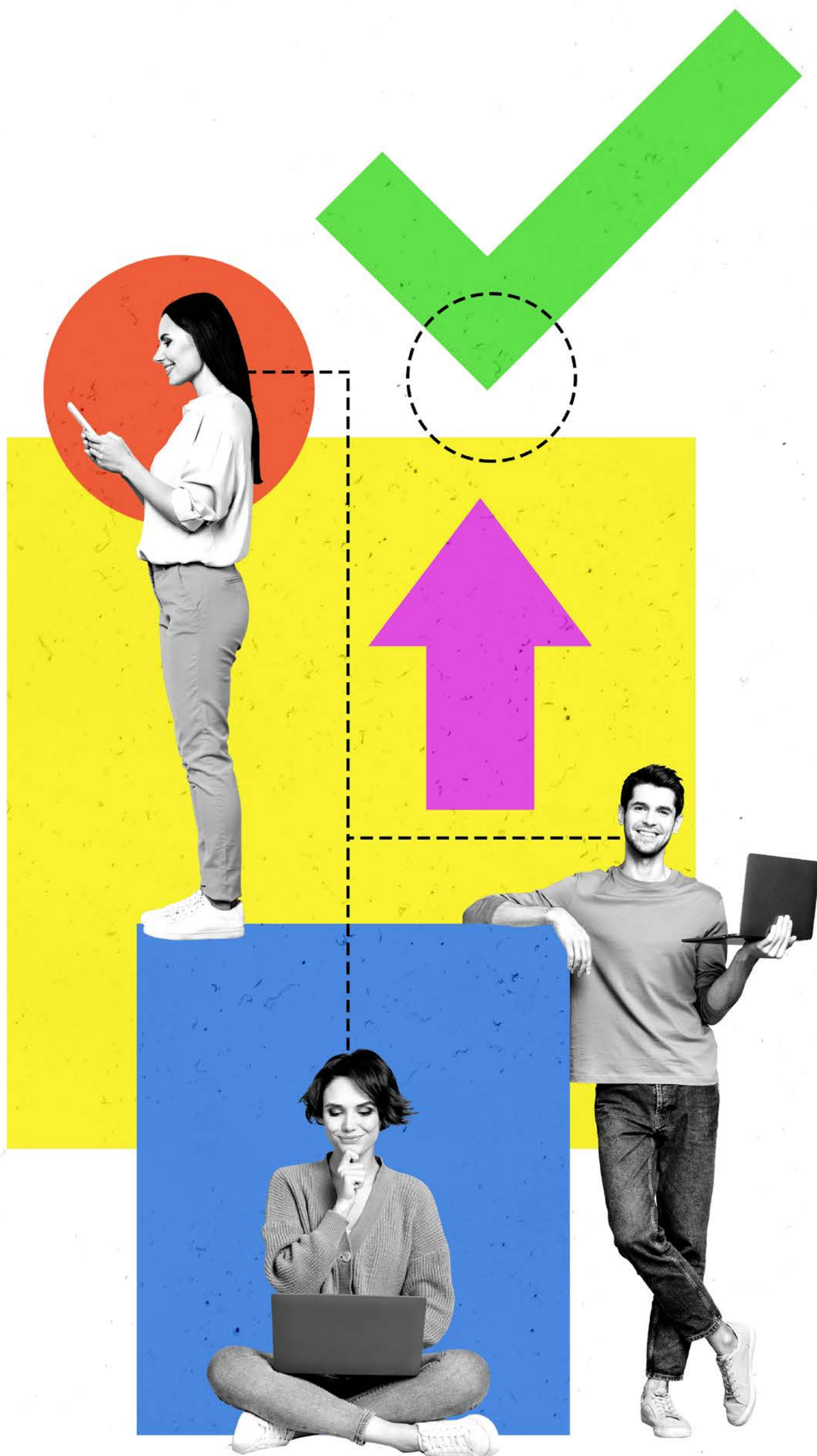
¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo* declaration of independence.

Key Findings
Summary
The Comparative
Analysis Of Youth
Policies In The
Western Balkans

RYDE
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1 Socio-Economic Field



1. Socio-Economic Field

Socio-economic field in the context of this Analysis covers:

- 1) **Youth employment** and the specific challenges young people face in entering into the labour market
- 2) **Education** and the quality and relevance of educational systems in the region
- 3) Access to comprehensive **sexual and reproductive health** services for young people across the region

All Western Balkan economies generally **have a comprehensive strategic, legal and institutional framework** that regulates the socio-economic field of relevance to youth.

National Youth Strategies are the main strategic framework for youth in all areas across the region.

In the legislative aspect, all **WB economies have consolidated laws** in employment, education, and sexual and reproductive health; however, there is much room for improving these laws and monitor their implementation.

1.1. Employment – Key Findings

According to the *Study on Youth Employment in the WB*² published by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) from Sarajevo, the **average regional youth unemployment rate is 35.1%**, more than double the 14,5% in the EU³. Data show that 23.7% of young people in the WB are NEET, more than double the 11.1% in the EU. Youth unemployment rates in Bosnia and Herzegovina are among the highest in Europe, with many young people struggling to find stable and decently paying jobs. Youth in the WB are frequently employed through temporary employment contracts, with a disproportionate share of part-time contracts.

Due to the prevalence of corruption and nepotism in the WB societies that undermine meritocracy, there is a trend of de-professionalization, where young people often working in jobs that do not match their qualifications and suffering from 'underemployment' (working in jobs below their skill level). According to the previously mentioned RCC's Study, the average **employment rate for youth with a low level of education** (except Albania) is 7.2% - less than half of the EU's 18.5%. Although much better, the regional **employment rate for highly educated youth** is 41.4% and still significantly falls behind the EU average of 57.3%.

The Western Balkan economies have implemented a diverse range of **employment development strategies**, few of which have been especially designed to target early school leavers or youth in general. Employment policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina are decentralized and are primarily managed at the entity level.

2 Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans, RCC, 2021, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/573/study-on-youth-employment-in-the-western-balkans>, visited on March 11, 2024

3 Youth unemployment rate in the European Union for 2022, Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tesem140/default/table?lang=en>

Some economies are attempting to reestablish connections between vocational schools and the business sector by **adopting dual education systems**, as vocational schools frequently fail to provide students with the necessary skills required on the labour market (Montenegro, Serbia).

Support for self-employment, job subsidies, and the direct development of public works projects and programmes are the ways in which employment support is provided. **Wage subsidies** have been employed in a number of Western Balkan economies (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Serbia) to assist in the creation of jobs for youth.

The majority of economies, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, have **established special initiatives to support young people in transitioning to self-employment**. A significant component of the youth employment programmes is **youth entrepreneurship**. The institutional environment for youth entrepreneurship in the region is far from perfect. Due to their lack of experience, young people have difficulty overcoming administrative and bureaucratic obstacles and are unable to obtain financing for their business. There is a small amount of assistance offered by CSOs and government initiatives.

1.1.1. Youth Guarantee

The implementation of the Youth Guarantee Programme is at various stages in the WB economies. The **Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans** have been adopted in all WB countries, **except from the Bosnia and Herzegovina**.

Adoption of the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan and institution in charge of the implementation		
Albania	Adopted in April 2023	Ministry of Finance and Economy
BiH	Not yet	Ministry of Civil Affairs
Kosovo*	Adopted in November 2022	Ministry of Finance, Labour, and Transfers
N. Macedonia	Adopted in March 2023	Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth
Montenegro	Adopted in July 2024	Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Welfare
Serbia	Adopted in December 2023	Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs

All WB6 economies, aside from Bosnia and Herzegovina, introduced **paid internship programmes**. Each economy has **traineeship** support initiatives in place. None of the Western Balkan economies have yet implemented **apprenticeship programme**.

North Macedonia is the most successful WB country in the implementation of the Youth Guarantee since 2018. The set goal that would evaluate the Youth Guarantee in North Macedonia as successful is that at least 30% of the people involved in the activities of the Guarantee exit it successfully, as employed, re-involved in the educational process or included in active programmes and employment measures within a period of four months. In 2021, of the total number of people who entered the Youth Guarantee process (19.322), 8.064 young people up to 29 years of age, or 41%, secured employment or acquired skills that improved their employability⁴.

⁴ EU's Progress Report on North Macedonia 2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/28a9322a-3f18-434e-89d2-0890c90b2f96_en?filename=SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf, visited on December 1 2023

1.1.2. Recommendations for the employment field in the WB including Youth Guarantee

- ✓ To **make measures aimed at strengthening youth skills** and reducing unemployment **accessible to all young people**, especially vulnerable youth categories
- ✓ To promote and **increase support for youth entrepreneurship**
- ✓ To **improve employment policies regarding green jobs** across the region
- ✓ To accelerate **the adoption of the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan in Bosnia and Herzegovina**
- ✓ To ensure **the continuation of implementation of the Youth Guarantee program in all WB economies** with the adopted Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan in order to be able to implement the program in the entire territories
- ✓ To **establish internship programs, job shadowing, volunteering**, and other innovative ways by public administration to connect young people with employers using simplifying administrative procedures for all parties applying to these programs
- ✓ To establish **coordination between responsible educational institutions and institutions focused on social policies and employment** to adapt educational programs, reducing the overproduction of specific skill profiles while meeting market demands and needs
- ✓ To **establish training centers, training facilities, and career counselling centers** focused on developing the professional abilities of young people



1.2. Education – Key Findings

The education systems across the region face **challenges in providing youth with the skills necessary for the modern labour market**.

Almost **all economies have developed and implemented an educational strategy, except Bosnia and Herzegovina**, where the joint framework for education consists of several public policy documents. Educational policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina are decentralized, with responsibilities divided between entities and cantons.

Montenegro requires a more comprehensive education strategy. There is no single, all-encompassing strategy for the entire education system; rather, the strategic framework in education consists of individual strategies tailored to specific segments of the system such as: Strategy for Early and Preschool Education⁵, Strategy for the Development of Professional Education⁶, Strategy of Inclusive Education⁷, Strategy of Adult Education⁸ etc.

The researches show that **young people from Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia** are among the groups most certain that there is pervasive **corruption in the educational system**, compared to other Western Balkan economies. Young people's satisfaction with the educational system as a whole is higher than their dissatisfaction across the region. The **majority of youth believe** that education in schools and universities **fails to adequately prepare them for the demands of the modern workforce**. Expertise and educational attainment are seen as secondary to social status and the benefits deriving from employment.

1.2.1. Recommendations for Education

- ✓ To **modernize education systems** across the region to provide young people with the skills necessary for the modern labor market
- ✓ To **enhance the infrastructure of the educational system**, encompassing improvements in buildings, equipment, teaching methodologies, and the integration of assistive (adaptive and rehabilitative devices for people with disabilities and the elderly) technologies
- ✓ To **develop generic and critical competencies** in students and all individuals engaged in learning
- ✓ To **strengthen the capacities of human resources within the education sector**, including leadership personnel, staff, and professional services
- ✓ To **improve the assessment and evaluation system** at all academic levels
- ✓ To **integrate a comprehensive mental health education program** into the national curriculum
- ✓ To **establish a school-based mental health services** or partnerships with community mental health organizations to provide support groups for students facing mental health challenges
- ✓ To **combat stigma surrounding mental illness** within schools

5 Strategy for Early and Preschool Education and Education in Montenegro 2021-2025, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/strategija-ranog-i-predskolskog-vaspitanja-i-obrazovanja-2021-2025-sa-akcionim-planom>, visited on November 22 2023

6 Strategy for the Development of Professional Education in Montenegro 2020-2024, <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/3f8ece83-b549-4c84-8ae9-a8620ff67928>, visited on November 22 2023

7 Strategy of Inclusive Education in Montenegro 2019-2025, <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/reports/montenegro-inclusive-education-strategy>, visited on November 22 2023

8 Strategy of Adult Education 2015-2025, <http://nasedoba.me/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/5-Strategija-obrazovanja-odraslih-1.pdf>, visited on November 22 2023

1.3. Sexual & Reproductive Health – Key Findings

The strategic and legal framework in the area of sexual and reproductive health of young people is less developed than in the areas of employment and education in all WB countries. This reflected in less strategies, action plans, programmes, laws and regulations in all WB economies.

In Albania, there was the **National Contraceptive Security Strategy from 2017 to 2021**⁹, which ensured that all Albanian men and women could choose, obtain, and use high-quality family planning services and contraceptives whenever they wanted to plan their families. **Law no. 8876 on Reproductive Health Law** implies that "adolescents and youth enjoy the right to information and services concerning reproductive health, to information and programmes that aim to prevent unwanted pregnancies and abuse, and for all else related to their active sexual conduct, in conformity with their age".¹⁰

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is no comprehensive state-level strategy regarding sexual and reproductive health and that area is strategically regulated at the entity level. There are two state-level laws relevant to the field of SRH: the **Law on Conditions and Procedures for Termination of Pregnancy** and the **Law on Medicines**¹¹.

The **Strategy for Improving SRH and Rights in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2010-2019**¹² focused on young people in two strategic priorities: to promote SRH in the context of healthy lifestyles, to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, premature conception or accepting different attitudes in the field of sexual reproductive health and to ensure a higher level of knowledge in terms of SRH through formal and informal education.

The **Strategy for the Improvement of SRH in the Republic of Srpska 2019-2029**¹³ states that young people lack appropriate services adapted to their unique needs and the vulnerable period of life they are currently going through. Several planned measures for the implementation of particular goals targeted young people. These measures have been set to reduce the risk of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, through continuous education of the population; strengthen evidence-based formal education of youth about SRH; organise peer education on SRH. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska regulate healthcare separately via the **Law on Health Insurance** and the **Law on Healthcare**¹⁴.

In Kosovo*, there are **Law No. 02/L-76 on Reproductive Health**¹⁵ and **Law no. 03/L-110 on the Termination of Pregnancy and the Law**¹⁶, which specifies further the process of pregnancy termination and gives the right to each girl and woman to decide freely on the termination of pregnancy according to the criteria defined by this law. In 2023, Kosovo* is drafting a separate **Law on Reproductive Health and Medically Assisted Conception**¹⁷.

In Montenegro, in the **Healthcare Development Strategy 2023-2027**¹⁸ with the **Action Plan for the Period 2023-2024**, the analysis of the situation points to issues in the area of providing access to universal sexual and reproductive care services. This document has no measures/activities in response to the stated challenge. The Youth Strategy 2023-2027 encompasses *creating an interdepartmental set of activities for the improvement of the health and well-being of young people* by informing young people about SRH through youth services programmes and formal education (primary, secondary, and higher education). The field of SRH in Montenegro is regulated by the following laws: the **Law on Healthcare**, **Law on Conditions and Procedures for**

9 National Contraceptive Security Strategy of the Republic of Albania 2017-2021, <https://albania.un.org/en/46613-albanian-national-contraceptive-security-strategy-2017---2021>, visited on March 14, 2024

10 Law no. 8876 on Reproductive Health in the Republic of Albania, <https://legislationline.org/albania>, visited on March 14, 2024

11 Law on Conditions and Procedures for Termination of Pregnancy and Law on Medicines <https://www.ohr.int/laws-of-bih/>, visited on December 10 2023

12 Strategy for Improving SRH and Rights in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2010-2019, https://ba.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/inquiry_on_sexual_and_reproductive_health_and_reproductive_rights_in_bih.pdf, visited on December 10 2023

13 Strategy for the Improvement of SRH in the Republic of Srpska 2019-2029, https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/board-documents/CPE_Final_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina_Programme_Evaluation_Report.pdf, visited on December 10 2023

14 Law on Healthcare <https://www.ohr.int/laws-of-bih/>, visited on December 10 2023

15 Ibid.

16 Law no. 03/L-110 on the Termination of Pregnancy and the Law in Kosovo*, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

17 Law on Reproductive Health and Medically Assisted Conception, <https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/eng/projektligjet-dhe-ligjet/laws/>, visited on December 20 2023

18 Montenegro Healthcare Development Strategy 2023-2027 https://extranet.who.int/economyplanningcycles/sites/default/files/planning_cycle_repository/montenegro/montenegro.pdf, visited on November 22 2023

Termination of Pregnancy, Law on Patients' Rights, Law on Patient Healthcare, Law on Treatment of Infertility with Assisted Reproductive Technologies, Law on Health Insurance and Law on Medicines¹⁹.

In North Macedonia, the **National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030**²⁰ ensures several rights and means to achieve them for girls and women in the area of reproduction and contraception. It is the first time that this Strategy stresses education on sexual and reproductive rights as a separate, specific objective.

In Serbia, in the **National Programme for the Preservation and Improvement of the SRH of the Citizens of the Republic of Serbia**²¹, it is emphasized that birth control practice among young people is dominantly conservative, that the sexual behavior of young people is risky, and that the extent of commitment in the preservation of the SRH of the entire population, including deprived and marginalized groups, is unsatisfactory. Analysis of plans and programmes aimed at teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools show that there is no systematic and comprehensive approach to education where sexual and reproductive rights and the health of children and young people in Serbia is concerned. The laws that regulate the prohibition of discrimination and the protection of gender equality in Serbia, as well as several laws in the field of health, oblige the provision of appropriate conditions of healthcare, including sexual and reproductive rights and women's health. The **Law on Procedures for Termination of Pregnancy in Healthcare Institutions** regulates the conditions and method of performing these types of interventions. The **Law on Prohibition of Discrimination**²² guarantees that young individuals have equal access to opportunities in education, employment, healthcare, and other essential services.

1.3.1. Recommendations for SRH

- ✓ To **introduce comprehensive sexual education** into primary education curricula
- ✓ To launch a targeted awareness campaign **to raise the awareness of the freedom of sexuality and sexual health** directed towards all youth, parents, and educational staff
- ✓ To **improve availability and affordability of family planning services** and modern contraceptives
- ✓ To strengthen the existing capacities and **improve access to services** related to SRH
- ✓ To **increase the availability of menstrual and sanitary products** for all young women
- ✓ To **raise the awareness concerning regular preventive check-ups for SRH** in young people, with particular focus on sexually active youth
- ✓ To **encourage participation of young people in planning** and decision-making processes regarding SRH

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ National Strategy for Gender Equality of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021-2030, https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/GRBMagazine_Issue1Winter2022-1.pdf, visited on December 1 2023

²¹ National Programme for the Preservation and Improvement of the SRH of the Citizens of the Republic of Serbia, http://demo.paragraf.rs/demo/com-bined/Old/t/t2018_01/t01_0025.htm, visited on January 10 2024

²² Antidiscrimination Law, <https://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/antidiscrimination-law-serbia.pdf>, visited on January 10 2024

Key Findings
Summary
The Comparative
Analysis Of Youth
Policies In The
Western Balkans

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2 Youth Participation – Key Findings



2. Youth Participation – Key Findings

All Western Balkan economies have adopted National Strategies for Youth, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Youth issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina are mainly the responsibility of the entities and there are no Strategy and Law on Youth at the national level. **Republika Srpska and Brčko District adopted their Youth Strategies**, but the Youth Strategy of the Federation of BiH is in the process of the adoption as of April 2024. In the latest Progress Report²³ on BiH by the EU, it is noted that “Bosnia and Herzegovina should work on an economy-wide youth strategy that would ensure equal treatment of young people”.

Regarding the **National Action Plans on Youth**, the situation is **generally consistent** across the entire region. Bosnia and Herzegovina stands out as an exception, lacking national-level youth policy documents. Some sub-state entities have adopted local youth strategies and action plans and the adoption of youth frameworks across governance levels still needs improvement.

In all WB economies, **the youth legislation supports the principle of youth participation**. Also, the main strategic policy documents (mostly mentioned above national youth strategies) in each economy contain a goal dedicated to increasing the participation of youth. There is significant variation, however, when it comes to the content of sub-goals/measures to achieve this aim.

In many economies, for instance, **this goal is mainly implemented through raising the capacities of youth organizations and promotion of volunteering**. The emphasis on raising awareness and informing the youth about opportunities to participate is less frequent, which is also the case with international cooperation and mobility. In **North Macedonia**, the focus is put on **supporting youth activism** within specific areas, such as the **environment and digital space**, which is not the case in other economies.

Albania and Montenegro explicitly guarantee youth rights and protection in their Constitutions, while only **in Kosovo* and North Macedonia there are the Laws that guarantee youth participation**: the Law on the Empowerment and Participation of Youth²⁴ in Kosovo adopted in 2009 and the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies in North Macedonia adopted in 2020 and.

On the other hand, there are many other regional and European initiatives promoting youth participation, such as the Western Balkans Youth Lab established by the Regional Cooperation Council, EU Youth Dialogue etc. **Serbia is currently the only WB economy** and the only one outside the EU that **implements the EU Youth Dialogue - EUYD**²⁵, as a structured communication mechanism between youth and decision-makers. With the aim of effective implementation of the EUYD in Serbia, the Permanent Expert Team on the EUYD was established in 2021. The coordination intersectoral group, which exists only in EU member states, was also established within the Youth Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, as an advisory body.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo* are the only WB economies whose national parliaments have committees dedicated to the youth issues. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, parliaments of both entities, as well as Brčko District, have working bodies dealing with youth issues: Committee for the Issues of Children, Youth and Sports (National Assembly of Republika Srpska), Commission for Youth Issues

23 European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_691%20Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20report.pdf, visited on April 29 2024

24 Kosovo Assembly. *Law on empowerment and participation of youth*, 30 September 2009, <https://rb.gy/fbhjue>, visited on 15 June 2024.

25 “EU dijalog sa mladima i jačanje učešća mladih u procesu donošenja odluka u Srbiji”. Politeia Institute. <https://shorturl.at/MI4az>, visited on 15 June 2024.

(House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Commission for Youth (Assembly of Brčko District). The existence of all three bodies is regulated by the respective laws.

Corruption and lack of trust in public institutions alienate young people from the participation in political and social process. The study *"Shared Futures: Youth Participation in Peace in the Western Balkans"* (2021), which included all six economies of the Western Balkans, found that the most common form of engagement of young people (15-29) in the previous 12 months was posting on social media about an important political and social issue (17.2%), followed by signing a petition (14.3%), volunteering for an important cause (11.2%), taking part in a campaign (9.8%) and attending a demonstration (5.6%).²⁶

This study also asked young people about their participation rate in politics and interest to participate and both the actual participation and interest to participate are quite low, though **not very different to the European Union average** – a survey released in April 2024 by Eurostat shows that 7% of young people in the EU have participated in the activities of a political party or political organization in the past 12 months.²⁷ This makes **participation in actual politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina (11%) and Montenegro (10.4%) higher than in the EU average.**

2.1. Recommendations for Youth Participation

- ✓ To **establish and enable regular functioning** of the envisaged mechanisms for youth participation in the decision-making processes in the WB countries such as **youth councils**
- ✓ To **establish the EU Youth Dialogue** in all WB countries (Serbia already did it)
- ✓ To **establish parliamentary committee for youth issues** in all WB countries (BiH and Kosovo* already did it)
- ✓ To develop and **improve the culture of communication between youth and decision-makers** in the region due to the low level of trust among WB youth in the institutions
- ✓ To **enable long-term financial sustainability of youth organizations** in the WB and reduce dependence on donors by diversifying funding sources, exploring innovative fundraising methods, or establishing partnerships with the private sector to ensure the autonomy and flexibility of youth organizations in addressing the needs of young people.
- ✓ To promote and **establish comprehensive frameworks that encourage youth research initiatives** in both academic and non-academic spheres that involve creating structures, policies, and funding mechanisms



²⁶ Dakash, Susanna, et al. *#Sharedfutures: Youth Perception of Peace in the Western Balkans*. UNDP, 2021. p. 58.

²⁷ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication. *Flash Eurobarometer 545: Youth and Democracy*. 2024, p. 18.

Key Findings
Summary
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3 Media, Culture and The Digital World



3. Media, Culture and The Digital World

The **institutional and legal framework concerning media, culture, and the digital sphere** in the context of youth in the WB are **mostly well developed**. There are many existing issues, mainly in the form of increased migration of young people, unsatisfactory coordination and cooperation among various sectors responsible for youth, lack of budgeting for specific programmes, poor support of digital and media literacy, centralized models of decision-making in regard to youth issues, etc.

Efforts to enhance media literacy among youth for the advancement of digital competencies and understanding are progressing across all economies in the WB. The **civic sector is very active in improving media literacy** and opportunities for **acquiring digital skills by youth** across the region. In certain instances, media and digital literacy are integrated into specialized programs and initiatives, while in others, they are cultivated in conjunction with various projects associated with this domain.

When it comes to the culture, there are various legal provisions in WB that **prescribe activities to support cultural creativity** and the innovation of young people. These activities have **a declarative rather than an essential character**. The limited results in cultural programmes and inclusion of youth should be treated directly by increasing budgetary allocations for cultural and youth organizations to provide greater financial stability and support for their activities and programmes.

This Analysis indicates that, in most WB economies, **there is a pressing need for more in-depth research on the relationship between youth and the media, culture, and the digital world**. Such research would help generate concrete data and inform key priorities and strategies for the future. Current materials predominantly stem from reports and projects that address these issues only partially or within broader contexts such as youth employment, education, media freedom, etc.

General recommendations for media, culture and digital world:

- ✓ To **conduct more in-depth research** on the relationship between youth and the media, culture and the digital world
- ✓ To **ensure more efficient cooperation and communication** among relevant stakeholders in the field of media, culture and the digital world in the context of youth issues
- ✓ To **improve mechanisms for including youth in the creating of policies** concerning media, culture, and the digital space
- ✓ To **introduce annual youth awards** to recognize and celebrate outstanding work in media, culture, and the digital sphere

3.1. Media Literacy – Key Findings

In some economies, media literacy is implemented in specialized types of programmes and activities, while in others they are developed together with different projects related to the field.

No country in the Western Balkans has media literacy as a mandatory subject in formal education. Media literacy is an elective subject in primary schools in **North Macedonia**, in several high schools in **Kosovo***, while in **Albania**, ML and critical thinking are not present or practiced in formal educational settings, as different aspects of ML are part of several strategies and they include mainly media issues and competencies in information literacy. The piloting of ML in **Albania** showed that the education system will face the challenge of integrating ML in the educational system and moving from the piloting phase to becoming a part of the curriculum in all schools in the country.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, there is no media literacy as a separate subject and there are no strategic documents related to media and information literacy at the state level nor at the lower levels of government.

In **Serbia**, the subject “Language, Media and Culture” was introduced as an elective in high schools and some vocational schools.

Montenegro is the most prominent example for introduction of **media literacy as an elective subject in gymnasiums** (high schools) back in 2009. For the school year 2023/2024, it has been made **available to students in the upper grades of elementary schools** (specifically, in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades). However, the first Media Strategy 2023-2027 in Montenegro adopted in October 2023, followed by the Action Plan for the period 2023-2024, states that media literacy subjects in high schools have limited coverage, and that there is insufficient promotion in schools and a lack of continuous training for teachers.

The representation of WB youth from in the media is still unsatisfactory. The main reasons for this vary from economy to economy, but some of the common issues involve the institutional framework, lack of motivation by the media and often budgeting on many sides. The low participation of young people in WB societies shows that the systems usually do not recognize the value of young people and their potential as a resource for economy development. The media representation of youth in Albania, according to available data, shows that only 28% of youth have engaged in media producing activities on an annual level. Programmes targeting or addressing minorities and vulnerable groups, as well as programmes adapted for people with disabilities, are extremely underrepresented.

3.1.1. Recommendations for Media Literacy

- ✓ To further **integrate media literacy and critical thinking into educational systems** and academic curricula at all levels in all WB countries
- ✓ To **establish a long-term funding scheme for ML initiatives** and appoint a body to oversee program implementation
- ✓ To **develop national media strategies** with specific objectives aimed at increasing youth representation in media, particularly marginalized youth groups
- ✓ To **foster media entrepreneurship among youth** by providing funding and mentorship for those interested in creating their own media platforms

3.2. Digital Skills – Key Findings

It could be said that strategic framework for improving digital skills exists in the WB economies, except for the Bosnia and Herzegovina, but it needs to be further improved. There are no strategic documents in BiH related to digital skills at the state level nor at the lower levels of government.

In **Serbia**, there is the Digital Skills Development Strategy 2020-2024²⁸ followed by the Action plan adopted in 2023. The goals of the Strategy include the improvement of digital competences in the education system, as well as of basic and advanced digital skills for all citizens.

In **Montenegro**, the Program of Economic Reforms of Montenegro 2023-2025²⁹ includes the reform measure 4: *Digitization of education and development of digital skills*, and recognizes the importance of increasing the information literacy of young people, which is also in line with the measures and activities planned in the new Youth Strategy.

In **North Macedonia**, the National Strategy for Youth 2023-2027³⁰ states one goal as “to strengthen youth activism in the digital space, through advancing the digital literacy of officials in local and national institutions with focus on youth officials”. These activities are also foreseen in the Action Plan of the Agency for Youth and Sports 2023-2025³¹.

In **Albania**, national strategic documents contributing to digital skills development include the National Education Strategy 2021-2026, Multisectoral Strategy on Digital Agenda and Action Plan 2022-2026, the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2019 – 2022, the National Strategy for Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation 2017 – 2022, the NDS II 2015-2020. As is evident, most of these documents require updating for further periods.³² The NYSAP 2022-2029 for Albania focuses on digital development as its key goal. More specifically, Policy Goal 2 referred to in this document, states: “Supporting and encouraging youth innovation and enhancement of youth’s skills and professionalism through quality education in ICT and other digital development fields, thus increasing and improving opportunities to enter the labour market.”³³

Kosovo* is evaluated to have some preparation in the area of digital transformation and media.³⁴

3.2.1. Recommendations for Digital Skills

- ✓ To **foster a positive online environment for youth** and prioritize digital safety and ethical considerations in policies concerning the digital space
- ✓ To **improve education on harmful content and its negative consequences** in order to protect youth on social media platforms

28 Government of Serbia, <https://pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2020/21/2/reg>, visited on April 20 2024

29 Government of Montenegro, <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/e19b682f-19f3-4788-99f5-ca5ad1df3e4a>, visited on April 30 2024

30 Government of North Macedonia, <https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/nsm23-27-sluzhben-vesnik.pdf>, visited on April 26 2024

31 Government of North Macedonia, <https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/akciski-plan-2023-2025.pdf>, visited on April 26 2024

32 ITU (2022). Albania - Digital Development Economy Profile.

33 Minister of State for Youth and Children, 2022

34 EU report for Kosovo, 2022 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2022_en

3.3. Cultural Policies – Key Findings

The level of **youth participation in creating of cultural policies is unsatisfactory** in most WB economies. The youth is part of the wider groups of stakeholders engaged in policy-making consultation processes, as structured by law, but there is no data to show that youth cultural practitioners have been practically engaged. Various legal provisions in the WB aim to support cultural creativity and innovation among young people, but their implementation is more symbolic than substantive.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the biggest problem is the lack of a comprehensive national strategic framework for investment in the development of culture and sports, with the emphasis on youth and vulnerable groups, as well as the absence of a systemic approach. The EU in its latest report on BiH³⁵ calls for increased budget allocation for culture on all levels of government with longer-term, multi-annual funding decisions to provide stability for cultural creation and operation and for BiH to establish formal partnership structures enabling transparent and organized participation in cultural policy-making.

Cultural Policy Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, adopted in 2008, only mentions 'young artists' and 'young talents' without focusing on youth in general and their inclusion in cultural policies and activities. However, there are some positive examples at the low levels. **Canton Sarajevo** adopted the **Strategy for Development of Culture until 2027** in which the mid-term measure is to support projects strengthening the connection of children and young people with cultural institutions.

In Kosovo*, the Strategy for Youth 2019-2023 focused on the importance of participation in culture, recognition of the cultures of different ethnicities and supporting the marginalized youth in this would guarantee integration and European standards.

In Montenegro, the Ministry of Culture announces public calls for supporting youth cultural projects³⁶ implemented by the youth organizations every year.

In North Macedonia, the National Youth Strategy 2023-2027 states that the access and participation of young people in culture is of crucial importance, along with their ability for creative thinking and education through art and cultural practices.³⁷ The activities include encouraging the development of creative and educational programmes in culture and art at pre-school age and in primary schools that will encourage interest in culture from an early age and the development of cultural needs among young people, as well as the modernization of study programmes in the arts at institutions of higher learning for the acquisition of knowledge among youth.

In Serbia, the Culture Development Strategy from 2020 to 2029 with an Action Plan was adopted in 2020. The strategy systematically regulates public interest in culture and determines strategic priorities for its development in the stated ten-year period. The children and young people are recognized as the most important segment in the development of cultural needs, as not only are they visitors to events, they are also future audiences and creators in culture.



35 European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_691%20Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20report.pdf, visited on April 29 2024

36 Government of Montenegro, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/javni-konkurs-finansiranje-projekata-programa-nvo>, visited on April 30 2024

37 Government of North Macedonia, https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/nsm-23-27_draft.pdf, visited on April 29 2024

3.3.1. Recommendations for Cultural Policies

- ✓ To **enhance youth participation** in the development of cultural policies
- ✓ To **upgrade national cultural strategies** with a clear vision, measurable goals, support for the arts and cultural industries, promotion of diversity and inclusion among youth, investment in cultural education, and engagement with international partners
- ✓ To **harmonize national cultural strategies** and national youth strategies
- ✓ To **harmonize Laws concerning culture** ratified European and international conventions and standards
- ✓ To **increase budget allocations for culture** in all WB countries, especially in local municipalities, and to ensure a long-term funding scheme for cultural initiatives and activities, as many projects currently depend on external financial support
- ✓ To **increase budget allocations for cultural and youth organizations** to enhance their financial stability and support youth-driven activities effectively



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