

# PLAN B (ALKAN) YOUTH FOR REFORM



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# Introduction

Our project and research “Plan B(alkan): Youth for Reform” initiative explores how the recent EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans impacts young people and their role in shaping reform processes across the region. As the Western Balkan countries move closer to European Union integration, the engagement, empowerment, and inclusion of youth have become central and truly important for achieving sustainable growth, social cohesion, and democratic resilience.



The Growth Plan, launched by the European Commission in 2023, aims to accelerate the socio-economic convergence of Western Balkan countries with the EU by providing access to parts of the single market and increased financial support in exchange for concrete reform commitments. Within this framework, issues such as education, employment, digital transformation, and green transition are directly linked to youth development and opportunities.

As we know, and as we experienced as young people ourselves, the youth in the Western Balkans face common challenges: high unemployment, limited green and digital skills, limited or non-existent political participation (depends on the region), and persistent brain drain all over the world and Europe. However, they also represent one of the region’s most dynamic forces for change. By focusing on North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania, this study analyzes how the Growth Plan’s reform priorities and financial mechanisms can create new opportunities for youth, enhance regional cooperation, and support the transition toward an inclusive, innovative, and sustainable economy.

Ultimately, Plan B(alkan) seeks to contribute to policy discussions by identifying concrete recommendations for governments, EU institutions, and youth organizations to ensure that the Growth Plan genuinely benefits and is understood by young people and strengthens their role in the EU integration process.

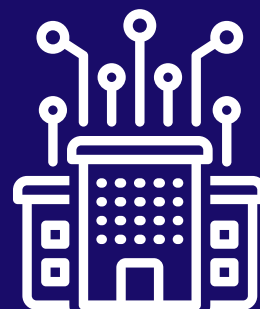
# Methodology



For this project, we used a mix of desk research, policy analysis, and comparative review to understand how the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans impacts young people. We started by going through key official documents like the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (2023), the Economic and Investment Plan (2020), the IPA III Regulation, and the latest European Commission country reports for North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania. We also looked into national youth strategies, government reform agendas, and reports from international organizations like Eurostat, the World Bank, and UNDP. All of this helped us get a clearer picture of what's being done, what's promised, and where things still need improvement.

Our analysis focuses on three main areas for each country: youth-related reforms within the EU integration process, available opportunities and funding for young people, and the main challenges or gaps that still exist. By comparing these points, we can see both the shared problems across the region like high youth unemployment, brain drain, and weak participation – and the unique situations in each country.

We paid special attention to how reforms in education, employment, digitalization, and the green transition actually connect to young people's real needs. We also explored the role of EU programs and SEPA, since these can make studying, working, or starting a business across Europe much easier for young people.



Because the Growth Plan is still new, we focused more on expected results and potential impacts rather than measurable outcomes. Still, the data we gathered gives a good idea of what works and what does not, and where young people can have the biggest influence. In the final part of our project, we will include a conclusion and a set of practical recommendations to help make the Growth Plan more youth-centered and effective in the Western Balkans.



# North Macedonia: EU Integration and Youth under the Growth Plan

North Macedonia, an EU candidate country since 2005 and formally in accession negotiations since 2022, positions youth reform as central to its EU integration strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The *Growth Plan for the Western Balkans* links EU financial support to concrete reforms that directly shape young people's prospects. In North Macedonia's Economic Reform Programme (ERP) 2024–2026, priorities include modernising vocational education and training (VET), aligning curricula with labour market needs, and expanding active labour market measures to help school leavers enter formal jobs.<sup>2</sup> Such measures target structural youth unemployment, which remains above the EU average, and seek to improve the transition from education to work.<sup>3</sup> The Plan also emphasises digitalisation, including full rollout of e-government services, taxpayer digitalisation, and SME digital upgrading.<sup>4</sup> These reforms reduce administrative barriers for young entrepreneurs and expand demand for digital skills among graduates. Green transition policies, particularly renewable energy auctions and energy efficiency programs, open pathways for technical apprenticeships and green sector jobs.<sup>5</sup> Governance reforms, such as strengthening rule of law, transparency, and public accountability, indirectly build youth trust in institutions, addressing long-standing concerns over corruption and exclusion.<sup>6</sup>

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Youth in North Macedonia gain access to EU funds and programmes, including IPA III, Erasmus+, and regional mobility schemes. IPA allocations target employment and skills, while Erasmus+ supports international education and training opportunities.<sup>7</sup> In parallel, financial instruments under the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) programmes support SME development, start-up financing, and digital innovation, all sectors where young entrepreneurs are active.<sup>8</sup> In April 2025, the EBRD launched a €417 million programme to accelerate digital transformation, designed partly to boost youth-led businesses and training.<sup>9</sup> North Macedonia was also the first country to receive prefinancing under the Growth Plan’s Reform and Growth Facility, opening a window for early youth-focused investments in skills and start-up support.<sup>10</sup>



Despite these opportunities, significant obstacles persist. Youth unemployment and underemployment remain high, and emigration of skilled youth (“brain drain”) continues to drain the labour force.<sup>11</sup> Eurofound and regional analyses highlight low civic and political participation rates, particularly among rural and marginalised youth.<sup>12</sup>

While the Growth Plan provides instruments to address these gaps, delivery is conditional on institutional capacity and reform implementation. Analysts warn that benefits may remain concentrated in urban centres and among already-skilled groups, leaving vulnerable youth excluded.<sup>13</sup> Without robust monitoring of youth-specific indicators, risks of uneven distribution and limited impact remain substantial.

The Growth Plan can enhance education, digital, and green opportunities for youth in North Macedonia, supported by EU and regional financing. However, its success depends on credible reform implementation, targeted inclusion measures, and stronger accountability to ensure that benefits reach all youth, not only those already positioned to succeed.





# **Serbia: EU Integration and Youth under the Growth Plan**

On December 22, 2009, the Republic of Serbia formally applied to join the European Union, and on March 1, 2012, it was granted candidate status. Serbia entered the most difficult stage of European integration, the membership negotiations, which will lead to complete alignment with the EU's laws, values, and system, after the European Council decided on June 28, 2013, to begin accession talks.

The European Commission moved a €51.7 million loan pre-financing installment to the Republic of Serbia's budget on June 20, 2025. Through the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, an additional €59 million in pre-finance was allocated for infrastructure projects in the form of grants and loans. On July 15, 2025, the European Commission received the second payment request, which covered actions finished by the end of June 2025.

To withdraw the entire amount of funds by 2027, Serbia needs to enact 98 reforms in four main areas: the rule of law, human capital, green and digital transition, and business and the private sector. The implementation of the reforms outlined in the Reform Agendas created by programme participants is directly related to payments.

One of the Economic and Investment Plan's ten flagship programmes is the Youth Guarantee. The labour market and education and skills are the two sub-areas that should be used to advance the reform agenda.

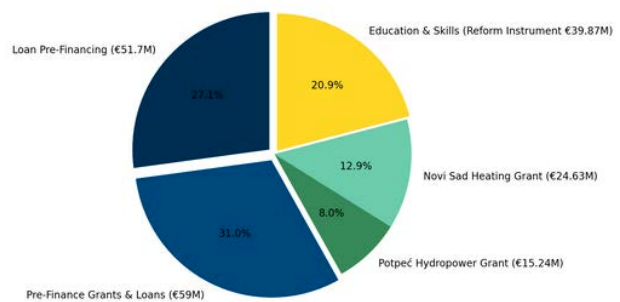
In the **first sub-area**, the Youth Guarantee is being further developed with the goal of giving young people high-quality employment, education, and training opportunities so they can improve their social and economic standing and create a more inclusive and competitive labour market. In the **second sub-area**, the Reform Agenda will support additional enhancements to education's relevance, quality, and accessibility in order to address brain drain and give students the attitudes, abilities, and knowledge needed to thrive in the contemporary labour market. To achieve this, it is necessary to maintain and increase teaching capacity, encourage the development of infrastructure, and further modernise teaching and learning methodologies.



The Reform Agenda's contribution to human capital development will complement Serbia's initiatives to advance gender equality in the workforce by amending pertinent laws and outlawing discrimination in the workplace. The prevention of discrimination against women, national minorities, minority groups, and people with disabilities will serve as the foundation for the support given to young people enrolled in the Youth Guarantee.

Two investment grants totalling €39.87 million have been given to the Republic of Serbia thus far from the Reform and Growth Instrument's pre-financing resources: The first is the restoration and new production unit of the Potpeć Hydropower Plant (project value of €71,596,934, of which €15.24 million is EU grantfunding). One of EPS's oldest hydropower plants will be restored as part of the project, and a new multipurpose production unit will be built, allowing for dependable, long-term energy production. The project boosts output and prolongs the economic lifespan. The City of Novi Sad's second project, which has a total project value of €113,385,390, of which €24.63 million is funded by an EU grant, involves integrating renewable energy into the district heating system. This project is a major priority for decarbonisation and lowering reliance on fossil fuels. It also encourages electrification of Serbia's heating sector and supports the stability of the electrical grid by balancing production from renewable sources.

EU Funding Allocation for Serbia under the Growth Plan (2025)



Serbia is also involved in several EU programmes that improve institutions and collaboration with EU member states while bolstering science, education, culture, digitalisation, and the economy. Serbia uses EU resources and expertise to promote innovation, employment, social inclusion, and infrastructure development through initiatives like Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, Creative Europe, Digital Europe, and CEF. This helps Serbia get closer to European standards.

# Albania: EU Integration and Youth under the Growth Plan

Albania, a candidate country for European Union membership since 2014, is steadily advancing through the accession process, having opened formal negotiations in 2022 that tie its future closely to EU-led reforms.<sup>1</sup> The EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (2023) offers Albania a clear path toward socio-economic convergence with the Union by linking access to parts of the Single Market with financial assistance in exchange for measurable reforms.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, youth are placed at the centre of national development, as reforms in education, skills, and employment directly shape their prospects.

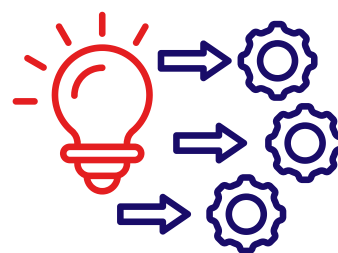


Through the €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility for 2024–2027, Albania can access conditional grants and loans based on progress in implementing its Reform Agenda 2024–2027, which includes 31 specific measures in five policy dimensions: rule of law, public administration, green transition, digital transformation, and private-sector competitiveness.<sup>3</sup>

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These reforms are expected to enhance transparency, foster innovation, and improve conditions for youth employment and entrepreneurship. The European Commission approved an initial package of €87.7 million for Albania in July 2024, of which approximately €32 million finances the first three investment projects—digitalisation of electricity transmission, rehabilitation of the Fierza hydropower plant, and construction of a 400/220 kV transmission line connecting Rrashbull and Tirana.<sup>4</sup> These projects contribute to energy security and sustainable infrastructure while generating technical jobs for young engineers and technicians.

Youth opportunities are also expanding through EU programmes such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe, and Digital Europe, which enable student exchanges, innovation networks, and research collaboration with EU partners.<sup>5</sup> The government’s national Employment and Skills Strategy 2024–2030

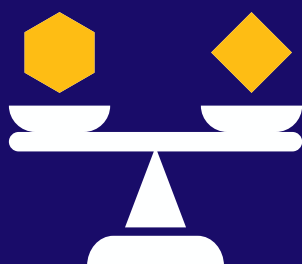


complements these initiatives by focusing on labour-market integration and vocational training.<sup>6</sup> Still, challenges persist: Albania’s youth unemployment rate remains around 20 per cent, and the NEET rate (Not in Education, Employment or Training) stands near 25 per cent, well above the EU average.<sup>7</sup> Persistent emigration of skilled youth and limited alignment between education and labour-market needs threaten to offset reform gains.<sup>8</sup>

For the Growth Plan to reach its full potential, Albania must ensure that reforms are not only legislated but implemented with measurable impact on young people’s daily lives. This requires better coordination between ministries, transparent use of EU funds, and closer partnership with youth organisations.<sup>9</sup> If effectively managed, the Plan could transform Albania’s youth landscape—linking education with jobs, fostering innovation, and creating incentives for young Albanians to build their futures at home rather than abroad.<sup>10</sup>

# Comparasions

**Focus on 3 comparison points:**

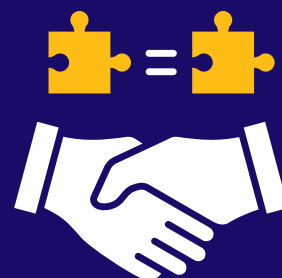


## Similarities

- Shared challenges (unemployment, brain drain, skills mismatch).
- Common priorities (digitalization, green economy, regional cooperation).

## Differences

- Political/economic stability and pace of reforms.
- Sector focus (e.g., Albania stronger on mobility/Erasmus+, Serbia on digitalization, Macedonia on governance/public sector reforms).



## Opportunities for Youth

- Which country offers the best opportunities in jobs, education, or EU mobility?
- Where are young people most included in policymaking or entrepreneurship initiatives?

# Comparison Between Albania and North Macedonia



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Albania and North Macedonia are two Western Balkan countries advancing toward European Union membership. Both nations face similar socio-economic challenges, including youth unemployment, skills gaps, and migration pressures, yet each follows a distinct reform path shaped by political and institutional contexts. Albania has been an EU candidate since 2014 and opened accession negotiations in 2022. Recent years show increased momentum in legal and institutional reforms, supported by EU-backed investment programmes. North Macedonia has been an EU candidate since 2005 and opened negotiations in 2022. Although it has demonstrated long-term commitment to EU reforms, political and identity-related disputes have occasionally slowed progress.



Both countries struggle with youth unemployment, high NEET rates, and migration pressures. Albania reports youth unemployment around 20% and is implementing strengthened vocational and employment initiatives. North Macedonia also faces high youth unemployment and focuses on improving vocational education, labor market transitions, and active youth employment measures. Skilled youth emigration remains a significant challenge in both countries.

Albania prioritizes infrastructure modernization, energy security, and digital public services. Key investments include hydropower rehabilitation, electricity transmission upgrades, and e-governance initiatives. North Macedonia emphasizes public administration reform, digital transformation, and SME competitiveness, including the expansion of e-government services and innovation programs supporting young entrepreneurs. Both countries engage in European cooperation programs, though at different levels. North Macedonia is fully associated with Erasmus+, allowing broad participation in education, training, and mobility programs. Albania participates in Erasmus+ through partner country mechanisms with more limited access, primarily in higher education mobility and capacity building actions. Both countries also participate in regional initiatives that support skills development, entrepreneurship, and youth mobility. However, youth civic and policy participation remains relatively limited in both contexts.

Albania and North Macedonia share a common European perspective and face comparable youth development challenges. Albania is rapidly advancing infrastructure and digital reforms, while North Macedonia focuses on governance modernization and institutional capacity. Continued progress in education to employment pathways, enhanced youth participation in policymaking, and sustained reform implementation are essential for both countries to maximize youth potential and strengthen their EU integration trajectories.

# Comparison Between Albania and Serbia

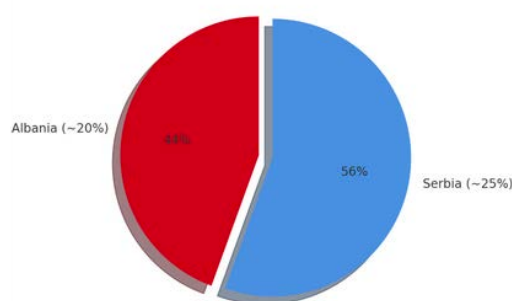


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Albania and Serbia are two key countries in the Western Balkans with different political dynamics but a shared long-term objective of joining the European Union. Both face common structural challenges, including youth unemployment, emigration, and the need for improved governance. However, they follow distinct reform trajectories shaped by political alignment, economic structure, and relations with the EU. Albania became an EU candidate in 2014 and opened accession negotiations in 2022. It has demonstrated strong political commitment to EU-oriented reforms, particularly in governance, energy, and digital administration. Serbia received candidate status in 2012 and opened negotiations in 2014. While Serbia has advanced technically in chapters, its progress has slowed due to geopolitical balancing, concerns over rule of law, and EU expectations regarding foreign policy alignment.

Both countries suffer from persistent youth unemployment, high NEET rates, and significant emigration. Albania reports youth unemployment around 20% and continues to expand vocational training and employment initiatives. Serbia faces youth unemployment rates above 25%, but it has introduced the Youth Guarantee as part of labor market reforms to support job placement, training, and education pathways. Both continue to struggle with retaining skilled young professionals.

Youth Unemployment Comparison — Albania vs Serbia



Albania prioritizes sustainable energy development, infrastructure modernization, and digital public services. Major reforms include hydropower rehabilitation, transmission upgrades, and expansion of e-governance. Serbia focuses on industrial development, green and digital transition, and strengthening public sector efficiency. It benefits from a larger industrial base, particularly in manufacturing, IT, and logistics, while continuing reforms in state-owned enterprises and energy systems. Serbia participates fully in Erasmus+ as an associated country, enabling wide student and youth mobility across Europe. Albania participates in Erasmus+ in a more limited way as a partner country, with mobility and capacity building opportunities primarily in higher education. Both countries are involved in regional cooperation frameworks supporting youth exchange, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, youth political participation and civic engagement remain limited in both cases.

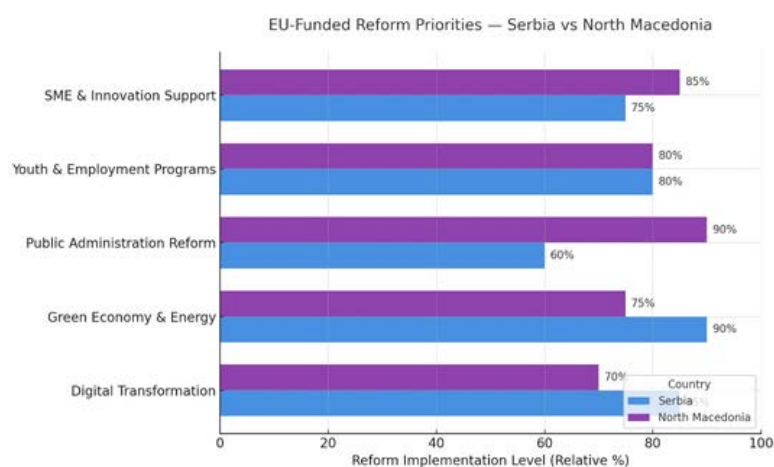
Albania and Serbia share similar demographic and socio-economic pressures but diverge in their EU accession dynamics and policy orientation. Albania has recently accelerated reforms tied to EU conditionality, particularly in digital governance and energy modernization. Serbia has advanced institutional capacities and industrial strength, but its EU trajectory is influenced by broader geopolitical and rule of law considerations. For both countries, sustained reform implementation, stronger youth empowerment measures, and improved education to employment transitions are essential to support young people and advance toward European integration.

# Comparison Between North Macedonia and Serbia



Serbia and North Macedonia, two EU candidates, face comparable youth-related issues, such as high unemployment, the rule of law, and labor skills. Their EU integration process revolves around resolving these issues, with a focus on employment, education, and entrepreneurship opportunities through EU-funded initiatives. Since 2005, North Macedonia has been a candidate for EU membership; formal accession talks began in 2022. Its integration approach makes a direct connection between institutional and governance advancements and youth reform. In 2013, Serbia, a candidate since 2012, began formal accession negotiations. Serbia's integration places a strong emphasis on organized changes in the areas of business development, human capital, green and digital transitions, and the rule of law. Both nations rely on EU funding for these reforms through the Growth Plan, IPA III, and other EU initiatives.

Both countries use EU funding (Growth Plan, IPA III, Erasmus+, WBIF, EBRD, Horizon Europe) to support youth-focused reforms, entrepreneurship, and mobility. Modernizing vocational education, matching curricula to labor market demands, and growing active labor market programs are the main goals of North Macedonia's initiatives. In addition to reforms to improve education quality, relevance, and inclusivity for women and minorities, Serbia implements the Youth Guarantee to give young people employment, training, and educational opportunities. The goal of both nations is to close the skills gap in the green and digital industries.



For both governments, digitalization and the green economy are top priorities. While North Macedonia concentrates on e-government, SME digital upgrades, renewable energy, and green apprenticeships, Serbia prioritizes infrastructure projects, digital transformation, and renewable energy integration. Serbia prioritizes structured project implementation and business

sector reforms alongside social inclusion measures, while North Macedonia places more emphasis on public administration reforms, such as transparency and fundamental rights.

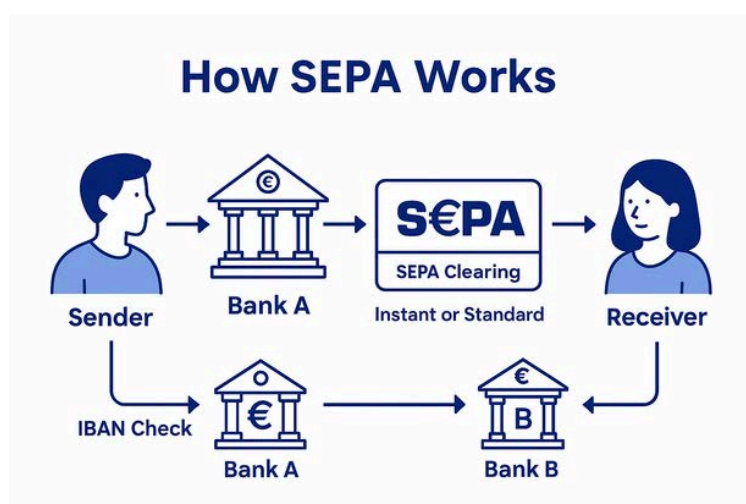
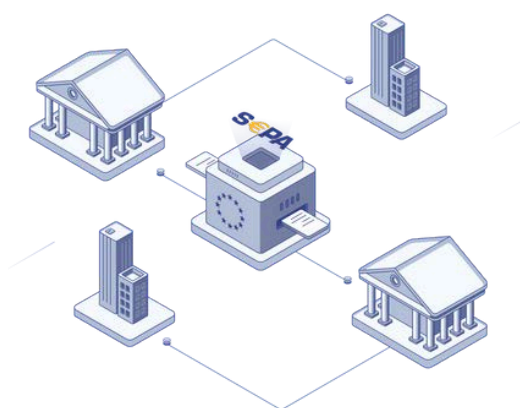
Serbia currently offers more organized and inclusive opportunities in employment, education, and policymaking, supported by comprehensive reform implementation, even though both nations share youth-related challenges and priorities. Targeted opportunities are offered by North Macedonia, especially in the digital and green sectors; however, fair access is contingent upon institutional capacity and the successful implementation of reforms.

# The Importance of SEPA

SEPA, the Single Euro Payments Area, makes euro transfers across Europe work just like local payments. It simplifies cross-border transactions by using the same standards for everyone - mainly



the IBAN, or International Bank Account Number, and sometimes the BIC, or bank code. This unified system ensures that payments are faster, cheaper, clearer on fees, and more reliable across all participating countries. Whether studying, working, or travelling abroad, SEPA enables young people to send and receive money seamlessly throughout the EU and beyond, creating a truly single market for payments.



Before SEPA goes fully operational, banks and learners often use a SEPA simulator to practice how the system works. The simulator is a safe digital environment where users can send "test payments" to check IBANs, verify file formats (ISO 20022), and detect possible errors - without transferring real money. This process helps banks and individuals understand the mechanics of SEPA, reduces risks, and ensures that real payments are processed correctly and efficiently once the system is live.

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For young people like students, freelancers, and aspiring entrepreneurs, SEPA offers real opportunities to participate more equally in Europe’s economy. Students studying abroad can pay rent or tuition fees in another SEPA country using a simple euro transfer, while their families can top up their accounts instantly and with minimal fees. Freelancers and small business owners can invoice EU-based clients and get paid quickly using their IBAN, without the high charges or delays that used to come with international payments. SEPA Direct Debit also allows them to manage subscriptions or regular payments easily. With SEPA Instant, money can move between accounts in seconds, making it convenient for everyday needs such as splitting bills, covering emergencies, or managing cash flow for small projects.

Financial inclusion is at the heart of SEPA’s mission and is especially important for young people entering the European single market. Having access to a basic bank account with an IBAN opens the door to countless opportunities – it allows young people to receive payments, pay for services, and move freely between countries without financial barriers.



This system supports mobility for students, interns, and young professionals by making tuition fees, stipends, and salaries work like local transfers.



It empowers freelancers and young entrepreneurs to reach clients across Europe with fair, transparent, and secure payment options. Above all, it ensures fairness, trust, and equal participation, helping young Europeans build their careers, studies, and projects in a connected and inclusive financial space.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations to Enhance Youth Impact from the EU Growth Plan in the Western Balkans:

### Strengthen Education-to-Employment Pathways

Governments should align curricula with labor market needs, particularly in digital, green, and technical sectors, while expanding vocational education and apprenticeship programs. Programs should also build soft skills, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement to prepare young people not only for employment but also for active participation in society and policymaking.

### Increase Access to Funding and Opportunities

EU programs such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and regional mobility initiatives must be widely promoted, especially among rural and marginalized youth. Targeted financial instruments, including seed funding, microloans, and innovation vouchers, can support youth-led initiatives and start-ups, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship locally.

### Enhance Youth Civic and Political Participation

Governments should create platforms such as youth councils, advisory boards, and digital engagement tools to involve young people in monitoring and evaluating reforms. Institutional capacity and transparency must be strengthened, and youth-specific indicators should be used to ensure EU-backed funds benefit all youth, including those in underserved areas.

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## **Address Brain Drain and Retain Talent**

Incentives such as scholarships linked to local employment, subsidized start-up incubators, and career mentoring programs can encourage skilled youth to remain and contribute locally. Regional cooperation initiatives should also be expanded to enable cross-border collaboration, allowing youth to gain experience while staying connected to their home countries.

## **Promote Financial Inclusion and Practical Skills**

Tools like SEPA should be leveraged to facilitate cross-border payments, internships, and entrepreneurship. Governments and youth organizations should provide training to young freelancers and entrepreneurs to navigate the European single market effectively. NGOs and youth organizations should act as partners in designing programs, implementing initiatives, and advocating for youth needs, ensuring that the Growth Plan delivers tangible opportunities and empowerment for the next generation in the Western Balkans.

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