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REGIONAL YOUTH POLICY PAPER

Youth at the Centre of EU Accession

Jobs, Green Transition, Digital Talent and Participation in the Western Balkans

Strategers Institute | 2026



Introduction

This paper draws on the Regional Youth Forum "EUth Negotiators of the Future", held in Podgorica on 1–3 October 2026, which brought together young people from Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. The project was implemented by Strategers Institute in partnership with Partners Albania for Change and Development, NVO Centar za omladinsku edukaciju and the Regional School of Public Administration, supported through the Grant for Grassroot Initiatives, co-funded by the Western Balkans Fund and the European Union as part of the WBF–EU Joint Action.

Through expert discussions and a negotiation simulation, participants examined how youth priorities could be reflected in EU accession reforms. Their proposals, together with evidence from EU institutions and regional organizations, inform the analysis and recommendations below. The paper focuses on four connected areas: employment and skills, environmental protection, digital opportunities and participation in public decisions. The contributions of the youth delegations are summarized in Appendix A, and supporting data are presented in the tables and figures of Appendix B.

Key messages

- **Youth priorities should be a measure of accession progress**. Better employment prospects, quality education and training, a healthy environment and opportunities to influence decisions show whether reforms are improving young people's lives and their prospects for building a future at home.
- **Implementation, rather than the absence of policy, is the main gap.** Youth Guarantee schemes, environmental legislation and digital strategies provide a basis for progress, but their impact depends on capable institutions, sustained funding and effective implementation at national and local level.
- **Wider access to employment and training support must go hand in hand with quality**. Programs should help young people gain useful skills and lasting career opportunities, including in green and digital sectors. Reaching more participants matters, but so does what they gain from taking part.
- **Environmental commitments must lead to visible improvements**. Reliable information, effective enforcement and investment need to advance together. Young people can contribute through local initiatives and public oversight, supported by institutions that respond to environmental concerns.
- **Young people should be able to shape and assess reforms.** Meaningful participation requires an understanding of the accession process, accessible opportunities to contribute and a clear response explaining how proposals were considered. It should include young people beyond established organizations and networks.
- **Regional cooperation can help turn shared challenges into joint solutions**. Cross-border pollution, youth emigration and skills mismatches call for stronger cooperation. Exchanges, joint initiatives and professional networks can help young people and institutions learn from one another and apply that experience in their own countries.

Context

EU integration provides a framework for reforms whose effects extend across education, employment, public services and environmental protection. The European Commission's 2026 Enlargement Package links progress towards membership to sustained reforms under a merit-based approach (European Commission, 2026b). Public support remains strong: 86% of citizens in Albania, 62% in North Macedonia and 59% in Montenegro consider membership a good thing, and 71% of young people aged 18–24 across the region believe it would benefit the economy (Regional Cooperation Council [RCC], 2025; see Figure B1 in Appendix B).

This support, however, coexists with limited improvement in the conditions that shape young people's decisions about their future. For a common-year comparison, in 2024, the share of young people aged 15–29 not in employment, education or training (NEET) stood at 22.2% in Albania, 22.6% in North Macedonia and 16.5% in Montenegro, compared with an EU average of 11.1% (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2026a, 2026b, 2026c; Eurostat, 2026a; see Figure B2). More recent data show that the NEET rate among young people aged 15–29 stood at 20.1% in Albania and 23.4% in North Macedonia in 2025 (INSTAT, 2026, p. 22; Eurostat, 2026c). In 2024, youth unemployment among those aged 15–24 ranged from 22.8% in Albania to 26.0% in Montenegro and 29.0% in North Macedonia, against 14.9% in the EU (ETF, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c; see Table B1). In 2024, emigrant stocks across all ages were equivalent to 43.6% of Albania's population and 29.3% of North Macedonia's (ETF, 2026a, 2026c).

The EU framework offers clear reference points for addressing these concerns. The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and its Reform and Growth Facility for 2024–2027 link financial support to the delivery of agreed reforms, subject to preconditions on democracy and the rule of law (European Commission, 2023; Regulation (EU) 2024/1449). The Economic and Investment Plan commits the region to introducing the Youth Guarantee, modelled on the EU scheme that aims to offer all young people under 30 a quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education (Council of the European Union, 2020; European Commission, 2020a).

In the environmental field, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans commits governments to align with EU climate, pollution and nature protection standards (European Commission, 2020b). The recent Environmental Crime Directive sets a clear benchmark for enforcement, including adequate resources, specialised training and public statistics (Directive (EU) 2024/1203). The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the Youth Action Plan in EU External Action recognise youth participation as a principle of EU policy, including in candidate countries (Council of the European Union, 2018; European Commission & High Representative, 2022). The main EU instruments relevant to young people are summarised in Table B2.

These issues are connected. Better education and employment opportunities can strengthen the contribution of young professionals to reform implementation. More transparent institutions can improve public oversight and make participation more meaningful. Environmental improvements can demonstrate the practical value of reforms in communities. A youth perspective therefore belongs across the reform agenda, supported by cooperation between the institutions responsible for its different parts.

Main challenges and policy insights

1. Education and training need stronger connections to employment

The transition from education into work remains one of the most persistent difficulties facing young people in the region. In the 2024 comparison, NEET rates in Albania and North Macedonia were roughly twice the EU average, and outreach to inactive young people remains a challenge. Programmes designed to address this gap are at different stages. Albania approved its Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan 2026–2028 in June 2026, marking the transition from three municipal pilots to nationwide rollout (European Commission, 2026a). Montenegro moved into its pilot phase in 2025, but coordination across the institutions implementing the scheme remains a challenge (ETF, 2026b; European Commission, 2026c, p. 85). Table B3 compares the state of implementation in the three countries.

Experience from more established schemes shows that reach and quality are both essential. In North Macedonia, the Youth Guarantee included 23,314 young unemployed people in 2025; 6,856 entered employment and 1,490 participated in active employment measures. The employment service still lacks capacity to improve delivery (European Commission, 2026d; see Figure B3). An impact evaluation of Montenegro's state-funded traineeship for university graduates found high levels of participant satisfaction but no measurable improvement in employment or wages (Arandarenko et al., 2022). Expanding a programme without sufficient local capacity may therefore increase coverage without improving outcomes. Similarly, a placement offers limited value if its learning objectives, mentoring arrangements and employer obligations are unclear.

Wider structural factors reinforce these difficulties. Public spending on education in Albania is around 3% of GDP, compared with 4.7% in the EU in 2023 (European Commission, 2026a; Eurostat, 2026b; see Table B1), and curricula are not always aligned with labour-market needs. Albania and Montenegro can participate in selected Erasmus+ activities, but do not have access to the full range of opportunities available to countries associated with the programme (European Commission, 2025), while slow recognition of qualifications can restrict mobility further. Access also requires attention to differences among young people. Young women, young people in rural areas and those without professional networks often face additional barriers, and programme design should identify these early and assess whether delivery arrangements enable them to participate and benefit.

The policy implication is that support should be considered across the full pathway, from outreach and guidance to skills development and subsequent employment. Success should be judged by sustained employment and further learning, rather than by participation alone.

2. Youth emigration limits the capacity to develop and apply talent at home

Emigration intentions remain high across the region. According to the Balkan Barometer, 68% of young respondents aged 18–24 are willing to move abroad for work or residence, and 28% identify brain drain as one of the main economic problems (RCC, 2025; see Figure B4).

At the same time, digital transformation requires precisely the skills that are most mobile. Public institutions need developers, data specialists and engineers to modernise services and manage information systems, while digital competences in the wider workforce remain uneven (ETF,

2026c). Young people who study or work abroad gain experience that could contribute to these needs, but structured opportunities to stay, or to return and apply that experience, remain limited.

Opportunities for young professionals need to combine fair compensation, mentoring, relevant experience and prospects for further development. Public institutions also need the capacity to define useful projects, supervise work and maintain the resulting services or systems. Mobility abroad and contribution at home need not be in conflict, provided that pathways for return are deliberate and credible. The contribution of such initiatives to talent retention should, however, be assessed over time, since short-term participation alone does not establish a lasting improvement in career prospects.

3. Environmental commitments require enforcement and local delivery capacity

Air pollution is a serious public-health concern in the region. The European Environment Agency estimates that long-term exposure to fine particulate matter above the WHO guideline level accounted for 3,551 deaths in Albania, 555 in Montenegro and 2,667 in North Macedonia in 2023, among adults aged 30 and over (European Environment Agency [EEA], 2025). UNICEF reports that 99% of children in the Western Balkans breathe polluted air (UNICEF North Macedonia, 2026), while 61% of citizens cite air pollution as a community environmental concern (RCC, 2025). The main evidence on environmental implementation is summarised in Table B4.

The European Commission's 2026 reports show both progress and continuing implementation gaps. Albania established an air-quality directorate and added two automatic monitoring stations, but still needs stronger administrative and technical capacity. Nature protection has deteriorated amid legislative weaknesses and development pressures (European Commission, 2026a, pp. 94–95). In North Macedonia, limited staffing, weak coordination and enforcement, and gaps in air-quality monitoring continue to constrain delivery (European Commission, 2026d, pp. 90–91).

These findings highlight the relationship between information and action. Monitoring can make environmental problems more visible, but its value depends on whether responsible authorities respond. Enforcement similarly requires capable institutions, specialised expertise, coordination and resources, alongside investment in infrastructure and prevention. The EU Environmental Crime Directive provides an accession benchmark for resources, specialised training and public statistics (Directive (EU) 2024/1203). The Aarhus Convention establishes rights to environmental information, public participation and access to justice (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UNECE], 1998).

Youth involvement can support awareness, public scrutiny and the interpretation of accessible environmental information. It should be connected to functioning institutions and clear procedures through which concerns can be raised and addressed. Responsibility for enforcement and service delivery must remain clearly assigned to the competent authorities.

4. Youth participation needs a clearer connection to accession decisions

Civil-society participation in accession-related reforms remains uneven across the three countries. In Albania, the National Council of European Integration reduced its activity, while government communication on accession became more regular but remained fragmented (European Commission, 2026a, p. 24). In Montenegro, the government–NGO cooperation

council resumed work in December 2025, but civil-society involvement in policymaking sometimes remains procedural (European Commission, 2026c, p. 4). In North Macedonia, the government–civil society council is active again, but the Commission calls for stronger civil-society participation in consultations and the accession process (European Commission, 2026d, pp. 4, 22).

Strengthening these mechanisms also offers an opportunity to involve young people through youth councils and youth civil-society organisations. Their participation in accession-related working groups and consultations could bring youth priorities into discussions on employment, education and environmental protection, including reforms under Chapters 19 and 27 and national Reform Agendas. Timely information, sufficient preparation time and regular dialogue with responsible institutions would support their contribution, while feedback on proposals would help them follow the outcomes.

These opportunities should also reach young people who are not members of established organizations. Cooperation with schools and local youth councils, alongside open consultations and local discussions, could bring a wider range of experiences into the process. Low public trust—only 27% of citizens express trust in parliament and 21% in political parties—reinforces the importance of making participation accessible and showing how public input is considered (RCC, 2025; see Figure B5).

5. Shared challenges create opportunities for practical regional cooperation

Polluted air and rivers cross borders, as do young workers and students. Different national experiences with Youth Guarantee systems, environmental monitoring and talent programmes offer opportunities for mutual learning. North Macedonia's longer experience with the Youth Guarantee, for example, can inform outreach and follow-up in neighbouring countries. Regional cooperation is most valuable when it produces practical tools, such as common standards, shared data and tested approaches, that institutions and youth organizations can apply directly.

Policy recommendations

1. Integrate youth priorities into the design and review of accession-related reforms

Institutions responsible for EU integration should work with relevant ministries and youth representatives to identify how major reforms affect young people's access to employment, education, services and participation. This assessment should inform the design of national reform agendas under the Growth Plan and their subsequent review. Youth representatives and youth organizations should also be involved, where appropriate, in monitoring the implementation of these Reform Agendas, with particular attention to youth-related outcomes and their impact at the local level.

Consultation should begin while policy choices remain open. Institutions should provide clear information on the issues under consideration, invite contributions through accessible channels and publish a concise response explaining how youth input was used. Existing consultation mechanisms should be strengthened where possible, with clear responsibility for maintaining engagement. Ministries responsible for EU integration should publish consultation calendars and identify contact points for youth input on relevant chapters and Reform Agenda measures.

Where existing rules permit, youth representatives should contribute to thematic working groups or structured hearings, supported by transparent selection and preparation. Monitoring should record participation by age, gender and location, the proposals submitted, institutional responses and proposals reflected in reform measures.

2. Strengthen the quality and reach of employment and skills support

Youth Guarantee implementation should reflect each country's stage: support effective nationwide delivery in Albania and North Macedonia, and expansion beyond pilots in Montenegro, with staffing and funding that reflect the number of young people to be reached. Employment services, schools, municipalities and youth organizations should cooperate in identifying inactive young people who are not registered, using early-warning systems in schools, local outreach and digital tools.

Wider access should be combined with clear quality requirements. Publicly funded traineeships and internships should be paid. They should also include defined learning objectives, a designated mentor and clear employer obligations, drawing on the EU Quality Framework for Traineeships (Council of the European Union, 2014). The number of positions should be planned against real labor-market needs and the prospect of employment after completion, and employment agencies should have dedicated capacity to monitor placements, including through unannounced visits.

Assessment should consider skills gained, sustained employment, job quality and skills matching, alongside participation and completion. Monitoring frameworks should include follow-up assessments at six and twelve months after program completion, to evaluate longer-term employment and education outcomes. Support for young women and other groups facing additional barriers should respond to needs identified through disaggregated data.

Education and mobility should complement these efforts. Governments should set out a gradual path towards EU levels of education spending, involve employers in the design of curricula and work-based learning, and offer short, practical courses in areas such as digital and AI literacy, project management and technical trades. Relevant authorities should pursue full association with Erasmus+ where it is not yet in place and improve the recognition of qualifications, while institutions help young people navigate available opportunities.

3. Connect digital reform with professional opportunities for young people

Public institutions, universities and businesses should develop structured opportunities for young digital professionals, including those returning from abroad, to contribute to clearly defined projects. Paid internships and project work should include transparent selection, fair remuneration, appropriate supervision and recognition of the skills acquired.

Cooperation should focus on practical needs, such as accessible public services or environmental information systems. Participating institutions should identify how completed work will be adopted and maintained. Partnerships with international companies, diaspora networks and support for youth-led digital initiatives can broaden these opportunities, while longer-term assessment should examine retention, career progression and the use of the solutions developed.

4. Link environmental monitoring to enforcement and investment

Environment authorities and municipalities should strengthen the connection between public information, institutional response and corrective action. Monitoring networks for air and water quality should be maintained and expanded, with reliable data standards, accessible publication and clear procedures for responding to identified problems. Citizens should have simple channels to report illegal dumping, excessive pollution or damage to protected areas, and institutions should respond to these reports transparently.

Enforcement reforms should begin with an assessment of gaps in existing capacity and coordination. Specialised capacity for investigating and prosecuting environmental crime could be developed gradually, starting with dedicated teams within existing prosecution offices and evolving into a specialised unit where the caseload justifies it. Institutional changes should be accompanied by staffing, regular training, expertise and resources, consistent with Directive (EU) 2024/1203. Legislation on protected areas and environmental impact assessment should be fully aligned with EU nature protection standards.

Environmental infrastructure and practical education should advance alongside enforcement. Investment in wastewater treatment, waste management and clean energy should be prioritised through the Reform and Growth Facility and related instruments, allowing municipalities to set priorities within national plans. Environmental education can be integrated into existing subjects and extracurricular activities, while green internships and vocational education and training (VET) should prepare young people for emerging occupations. Education providers and employers should identify skills needs and offer practical training in areas such as solar installation and maintenance, wind energy technologies, energy efficiency and sustainable construction. Programs should combine supervised work experience, recognized skills and accessible entry routes for young people outside employment or education, helping build the workforce needed to implement EU environmental and energy standards. Youth organizations and education providers should have opportunities to contribute to awareness, local dialogue and public monitoring.

5. Make youth participation lead to visible influence

Education authorities should introduce practical civic education in schools, supported where appropriate by contributions from experienced civil-society practitioners. School parliaments and youth councils should be made more inclusive, for example through rotation of roles and attention to gender balance and diversity. Ministries responsible for EU integration, education institutions and youth organizations should also offer accessible training, knowledge-sharing sessions and public information campaigns on how accession works, each country’s progress and remaining challenges, and the practical implications of EU rights and obligations. Activities should distinguish rights already available from those associated with future membership and give participants practice in reading reform proposals, preparing consultation submissions and following institutional responses. Short assessments before and after training, followed by checks on subsequent participation, can help assess whether learning translates into engagement.

Municipalities, with support from the competent ministries, should provide a single, regularly updated source of information on local opportunities for young people, including employment, traineeships, grants, consultations and mobility programs. To ensure that participation leads to

visible results, institutions should introduce a simple "You said – We did" feedback mechanism, regularly informing young people which proposals have been accepted, implemented or not taken forward, and explaining the reasons for these decisions.

6. Make regional cooperation a practical resource for reform and youth participation

Public institutions, education providers and civil-society organizations across the participating countries should use regional cooperation to exchange approaches to shared challenges. Priority areas could include Youth Guarantee outreach, mentoring standards, environmental monitoring and data exchange, civic education and cooperation with young digital professionals. These activities should also explain why regional cooperation matters to young people: shared environmental risks, skills needs and mobility barriers create reasons to work together. Workshops and peer exchanges should help participants identify common concerns, understand different national experiences and develop joint responses.

Exchanges should produce practical outputs that organizations can apply, such as guidance, training materials or lessons from tested approaches. Young people should help select themes, design and lead joint initiatives, and assess their usefulness. Small cross-border teams could prepare joint consultation submissions, compare the delivery of youth-related reforms or develop community environmental projects, with mentoring and modest project support. Follow-up should assess both the outputs and whether participants better understand regional cooperation and continue working together. Regional bodies and partners' platforms can help disseminate these recommendations and connect participants with relevant institutions. A light annual follow-up mechanism involving participating youth organizations and relevant institutions could be established to review progress on selected recommendations emerging from the Forum, identify responsibilities for further action and facilitate the exchange of implementation experiences across the three countries.

Conclusions and expected impact

A stronger youth dimension in EU accession requires a clear connection between reform priorities, opportunities in everyday life and participation in public decisions. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia face similar challenges: a high share of young people outside employment and education, weak implementation of environmental legislation, continued loss of skilled young people and uneven opportunities to participate in reforms. The EU framework, including the Growth Plan, the Youth Guarantee, the Green Agenda and the EU Youth Strategy, already provides tools and incentives to address them. What is needed is consistent implementation, attention to quality and regular assessment of results.

The recommended actions could improve the relevance and quality of youth support and gradually bring NEET rates closer to the EU average. Paid traineeships and internships with mentoring and monitoring should be designed to support sustained employment, while structured opportunities for young digital professionals could help more of them stay or return and contribute to public services and innovation. Stronger enforcement, open environmental data and investment in infrastructure could bring visible improvements in air and water quality and strengthen progress under Chapter 27 and the green agenda cluster.

Greater transparency about how youth proposals are considered could also help rebuild trust in institutions and encourage wider participation. Regional cooperation can support these efforts by making experience and expertise more accessible across countries and by allowing them to address shared problems together.

Progress should be assessed through the outcomes that matter to young people: useful skills and employment prospects, functioning services, institutional responses to environmental concerns and evidence that their contributions influence decisions. Giving young people a sustained role in this process can help make accession reforms more responsive to the societies they are intended to serve, and give more young people a reason to build their future at home.

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Appendix A: The voices behind the Policy Paper



"I would invest in young people by creating more opportunities for quality education, practical skills and decent employment, ensuring that no young person's future is limited by where they come from."

Egzon Shegaj | Albania



"I would make youth participation a real part of decision-making, ensuring that young people across the Western Balkans have the opportunity to shape policies, strengthen regional cooperation, and build a more inclusive European future."

Erald Xhufelaj | Albania



"Through regional cooperation and youth-led initiatives like EUth Negotiators, I would work towards a future where justice, rule of law, equal opportunities, democracy and human rights are not just promises on paper, but realities that every young person can experience!"

Tanja Bibaj | Albania



"I would advocate for transparent, merit-based recruitment and equal access to meaningful employment for all young people, regardless of their background or connections, because a society that rewards competence over privilege not only empowers its youth, but also builds stronger institutions, greater public trust, and a fairer European future."

Bleona Tahiri | Albania



"Securing a resilient European future is not possible while the Western Balkans remains an economic enclave; securing the continent requires accelerating the region's integration into the Single Market, transforming physical borders into high-velocity digital and freight corridors, and anchoring local talent through shared educational standards."

Kostian Jano | Albania



"I'd stop treating youth as tomorrow's future and start empowering them as today's architects, making the Western Balkans in particular, a powerhouse of youthful innovations."

Ines Gjata | Albania



"I would bridge the gap between youth and decision-makers today to ensure every young voice truly shapes our shared European future."

Ajla Starja | Albania



"IN DEMOCRACY WE TRUST
Trust. Participate. Change."

Jelena Stajović | Montenegro



"A better tomorrow begins when young people no longer have to wait until they are older to be heard, until they are leaders to make a difference, or until they leave their home countries to find the opportunities they deserve."

Bobana Milić | Montenegro



"I would turn youth participation from a promise into a practice by ensuring that young people always have a seat at the table when decisions about their future are being made."

Andjela Pejovic | Montenegro



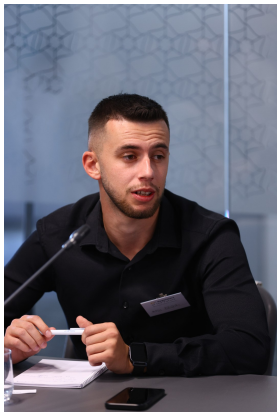
"The change I want to contribute to is Montenegro as a country where young people have more opportunities to grow, succeed and represent their values."

Jovana Jaćimović | Montenegro



"I would give young people a stronger voice in decisions that shape our future, because Europe's future should be built with us, not just for us."

Dženan Mušović | Montenegro



"I would promote economic opportunities, support young entrepreneurs, and strengthen financial education, because empowering young people to build successful businesses is essential for sustainable economic growth and our region's European future."

Andi Beqiri | North Macedonia



"I would bridge the gap between young people and decision-makers across Europe and the Western Balkans, ensuring that our voices shape policies, our opportunities are equal, and our future is built together."

Zorica Spirovska | North Macedonia



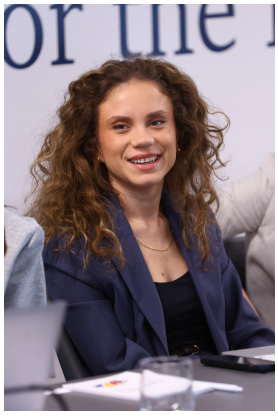
"I would make staying in the Western Balkans a genuine opportunity rather than a compromise, where young people can build their future based on their talent and hard work, not their connections, and where institutions earn the trust of the people they serve."

Ivan Petkovski | North Macedonia



"Tomorrow's Europe begins with young people who are not only heard in decision-making but trusted to shape the decisions that define our shared future."

Dragana Zanova | North Macedonia



The change I want to see is a region where young people's ideas are not only heard but transformed into concrete policies and opportunities.

Albenita Elezi Bina | North Macedonia



The change we all need, especially younger generations, is Western Balkans where negotiation talks are not necessary and a future in the EU is guaranteed.

Beba Zhagar | North Macedonia



Leaving a seat open for the youth must always be a priority. This forum gave us that chance.

Kalina Jovkovska | North Macedonia

Appendix B: Contributions of the youth delegations

This appendix summarises the positions prepared by each youth delegation for the negotiation simulation. The proposals reflect the delegations' priorities and suggested actions.

B1. Albania

Green transition (Cluster 4, Chapter 27: Environment and Climate Change)

The Albanian delegation identified the non-implementation of environmental laws and directives as the central reform gap, noting that the EU had criticized the 2024 amendments to the Law on Protected Areas for not complying with EU nature protection standards. The delegation linked weak environmental rule of law, chemical threats, the degradation of protected land and poor air and waste management to damage to biodiversity, agriculture and water quality, to risks for public health, and to the emigration of young people seeking safer and healthier places to live.

The delegation proposed a dedicated Environmental Prosecution Unit, investment in missing infrastructure such as wastewater treatment, sustainable hydropower and clean energy, training for construction workers in green practices, stronger green literacy in schools and enforcement of waste management and air quality standards. It identified the central government, executive agencies, NGOs and investigative journalists as key actors. As a first realistic step, it suggested investing in human capital by building environmental awareness from an early age through schools and the media, while supporting investigative journalism that exposes violations.

In support of its position, the delegation referred to civic mobilization such as the "Flamingo Revolution" against development on protected land, Article 56 of the Albanian Constitution on access to environmental information and Article 59 on the state's environmental objectives, the Extended Producer Responsibility Law and the Penal Code provisions on environmental crime. It connected the proposal to Chapter 27, to public participation under the Green Agenda and to the rule-of-law conditions of the Growth Plan and stressed that pollution and climate risks are shared regional problems. Progress would be shown by an operational prosecution unit and by public data on cases and convictions, following practice in Spain, Italy and Germany. The delegation was open to a phased approach, starting with specialised task forces in existing prosecution offices, integrating green literacy into existing subjects and allowing municipalities to set local infrastructure priorities. It considered compliance with Chapter 27 and protected-area standards, enforcement of constitutional and criminal-law provisions, and transparency and public participation under the Aarhus principles to be non-negotiable.

Education, employment and youth mobility (Cluster 3, Chapter 19: Social Policy and Employment)

The delegation highlighted the high share of young people outside employment, education or training, a deep mismatch between education and private-sector needs, chronic underfunding of public education and limited international recognition of Albanian diplomas. It proposed raising education spending to the EU average, redesigning curricula with the private sector, fully implementing the Youth Guarantee, expanding dual learning that combines classroom study with paid internships, pursuing full association with Erasmus+, ensuring diploma recognition and offering intensive courses in AI literacy, project management and technical trades. For statistical

context, INSTAT reports that 20.1% of young people aged 15–29 were NEET in 2025 (INSTAT, 2026, p. 22).

The delegation identified the ministries of economy and education, municipalities, international partners, NGOs and private industry as the main actors. Its first realistic step was to move the Youth Guarantee from pilot phase to a fully funded national scheme, supported by door-to-door and digital campaigns to identify inactive young people and by co-funded internships and Youth Cards. UNDP reports that, by July 2026, more than 3,700 young people had benefited from the Youth Guarantee and more than 2,560 had received offers of employment, education or vocational training (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2026). The delegation linked the proposal to the benchmarks of Cluster 3 and Chapter 19 and to the Economic and Investment Plan, pointed to North Macedonia's youth registry and tracking system as a useful regional example, and proposed measuring success through falling NEET rates and the share of registered young people placed in quality jobs, internships or training within four months.

B2. Montenegro

Youth employment and skills

The Montenegrin delegation focused on the scope and effectiveness of the state-funded paid traineeship programme and on how traineeship positions could be improved. It proposed more rational and strategic decisions on the number of traineeship positions, linked to actual staffing needs and to the prospect of a job at the end of the traineeship. It also called for stronger mentoring and exchange of knowledge and skills within an open and supportive working environment. Finally, it proposed a special unit within the Employment Agency of Montenegro to monitor government-funded trainees, including through unannounced visits, which it expected would also contribute to reducing unemployment. Discussion of the proposal also drew attention to the specific barriers faced by young women and the need for more targeted support.

Youth participation and democratic governance

The delegation identified the insufficient inclusion of young people in decision-making in practice as the key problem. It proposed mandatory education on youth participation in civil society in primary schools, complemented by guest lectures from experienced activists. It also called for addressing practices that discourage young people from participating, by promoting gender equality and diversity and introducing rotation in school parliaments. In addition, it proposed a common database of opportunities for young people at local level, published on official municipal websites and maintained by the Ministry of Education.

B3. North Macedonia

Green transition (Cluster 4, Chapter 27: Environment and Climate Change)

The delegation from North Macedonia described how young people are affected by environmental pollution, climate change and limited access to green employment. Air pollution was identified as the most visible issue, while water and waste management also require improvement. Young people living in polluted urban areas and in regions with few green economic opportunities were seen as particularly affected, and the delegation noted that youth are not sufficiently involved in environmental policymaking.

The delegation proposed structured mechanisms for young people to contribute to environmental policy, wider education, training and employment opportunities in green sectors, and greater transparency and accessibility of air and water quality data. It suggested that the Ministry of Environment, the Institute of Public Health and health authorities, municipalities and youth organisations coordinate the process. As a first step, it proposed involving young people in local environmental initiatives, providing citizens with accessible information on environmental rules and clear channels to report illegal dumping, excessive pollution or damage to protected areas, with institutions responding transparently. The delegation noted that national monitoring systems already exist, but that young people need opportunities to understand the data and help develop solutions.

The proposal was linked to Chapter 27, the European Green Deal and the EU principle of participatory policymaking. The delegation emphasised that pollution, water, waste and biodiversity do not stop at borders, and that regional exchange of data, good practice and youth-led initiatives on renewable energy, sustainable transport, circular economy and environmental education would benefit all participating countries. Suggested indicators included the number of young people taking part in consultations, youth proposals incorporated into policy, young people trained in green skills, green internships and jobs created, awareness levels and improved access to data, reported annually. The delegation was flexible on timelines, funding and implementation methods, but considered youth participation, environmental protection, transparency, accountability and fairness to be essential.

Digitalisation (Cluster 3, Chapter 10: Digital Transformation and Media)

The delegation's second position addressed the retention of skilled young people for national digital development. It proposed incentives for young professionals to stay in North Macedonia or return after gaining experience abroad, including internships, competitive employment opportunities, support for youth-led digital projects and partnerships with international companies. Their knowledge could be applied to digital public services, environmental protection and civic projects.

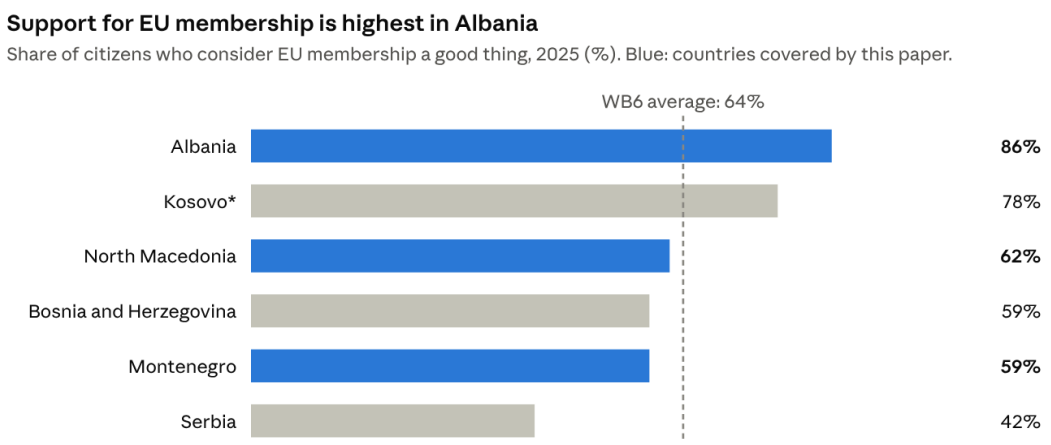
The Ministry of Digital Transformation, the Ministry of Education and Science, universities, municipalities, businesses and youth organisations were identified as the responsible actors. The first step would be a national programme connecting young digital professionals, including graduates with experience abroad, with companies and public institutions. The delegation argued that many young people leave because of better career opportunities, salaries and professional development abroad, while the country needs skilled professionals for its digital transformation. It linked the proposal to EU alignment in digital skills, innovation and modern public services, and noted that youth migration is a shared regional challenge that could be addressed through exchange of retention programmes, regional networks of young professionals and cross-border digital projects. Progress could be measured by the number of young professionals staying or returning, participation in national digital projects, new digital jobs and internships, youth-led projects launched, partnerships formed and digital solutions adopted. The type of incentives, funding and implementation could be adjusted, but the goal of creating real opportunities for skilled young people to stay or return and contribute to the country's development should remain.

Appendix C: Statistical tables and figures

This appendix presents the data referred to in the main text. Figures and tables are numbered in the order in which they are first cited. Unless stated otherwise, regional public-opinion data refer to the six Western Balkan economies (WB6).

Figure C1

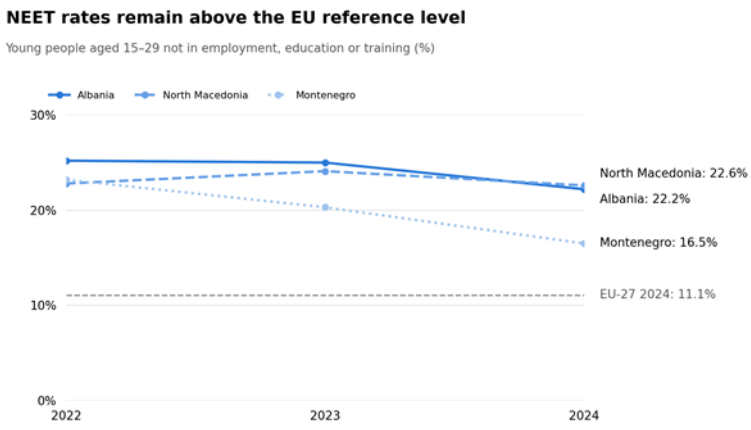
Support for EU membership across the Western Balkans, 2025



Source: RCC (2025), Balkan Barometer 2025: Public opinion
Note. *Kosovo: this designation is without prejudice to positions on status. *Source:* RCC (2025).

Figure C2

NEET rates among young people aged 15–29, 2022–2024



Sources: ETF (2026a, 2026b, 2026c); Eurostat (2026a). EU-27 benchmark: 11.1% in 2024.

Table C1

Selected youth labour-market, education and migration indicators

Indicator	Albania	Montenegro	North Macedonia	EU-27
Youth unemployment rate, ages 15–24, 2022 (%)	24.9	29.4	32.5	–
Youth unemployment rate, ages 15–24, 2024 (%)	22.8	26.0	29.0	14.9
Public expenditure on education (% of GDP, latest available)	3.0 (2024, provisional)	4.2 (year unspecified)	3.2 (2024)	4.7 (2023)
Emigrant stock, 2024 (% of resident population)	43.6	14.2	29.3	–
Erasmus+ participation status	Non-associated third country	Non-associated third country	Associated third country	Member States

Note. Education expenditure values *have different reference years; Montenegro's year is unspecified* in *ETF's fiche. Emigrant stocks cover all ages*. – = not applicable. *Sources:* ETF (2026a, 2026b, 2026c); European Commission *(2025, 2026a); Eurostat (2026b).*

Table C2

EU policy framework relevant to young people in the accession process

Instrument	Year	Relevance for young people
Quality Framework for Traineeships	2014	Sets standards on learning content, mentoring, written agreements and transparency of traineeship conditions (Council of the European Union, 2014).
EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027	2018	Frames youth policy around engaging, connecting and empowering young people, including through structured dialogue (Council of the European Union, 2018).
Reinforced Youth Guarantee	2020	Aims to offer all young people under 30 a quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of unemployment or leaving formal education (Council of the European Union, 2020).
Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans	2020	Commits the region to introducing the Youth Guarantee and supports green and digital investment (European Commission, 2020a).
Guidelines for the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans	2020	Sets commitments on climate, energy, pollution, nature protection and the circular economy (European Commission, 2020b).
Youth Action Plan in EU External Action	2022	Promotes youth participation and empowerment in EU external action, including enlargement countries (European Commission & High Representative, 2022).
Growth Plan and Reform and Growth Facility	2023–2024	Provides €6 billion for 2024–2027, with payments tied to national reform agendas and rule-of-law preconditions (European Commission, 2023; Regulation (EU) 2024/1449).
Environmental Crime Directive	2024	Requires adequate resources, specialised training, national strategies and statistics on environmental crime; EU Member State transposition deadline: 21 May 2026; an alignment benchmark for candidate countries (Directive (EU) 2024/1203).

Source: Compiled by the authors from the documents cited.

Table C3

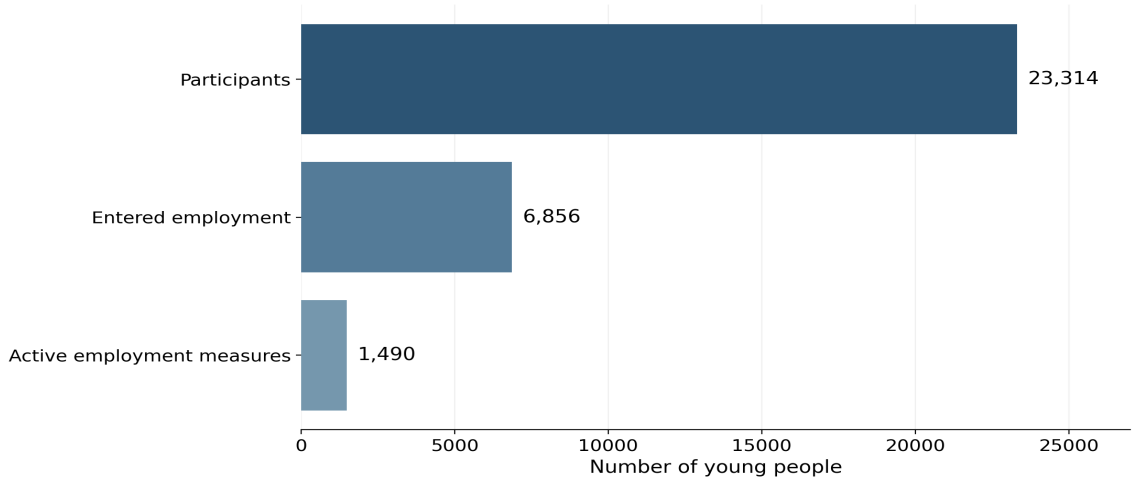
Implementation of the Youth Guarantee in Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia

Aspect	Albania	Montenegro	North Macedonia
Start of implementation	Pilot launched October 2023	Pilot phase from 2025	2018, the first non-EU country to introduce the scheme
Implementation plan	2026–2028, approved June 2026	2024–2026, adopted July 2024	2023–2026
Coverage	Nationwide rollout following three municipal pilots	Pilot framework for Ulcinj, Nikšić and Bijelo Polje	Nationwide
Reported progress	National rollout approved; outreach and delivery capacity remain priorities	Coordination across sectors and institutions remains insufficient	23,314 participants in 2025; 6,856 entered employment; delivery capacity remains insufficient

Sources: ETF (2026a, 2026b, *2026c); European Commission (2026a, 2026c, 2026d).*

Figure C3

Youth Guarantee participation and reported results in North Macedonia, 2025

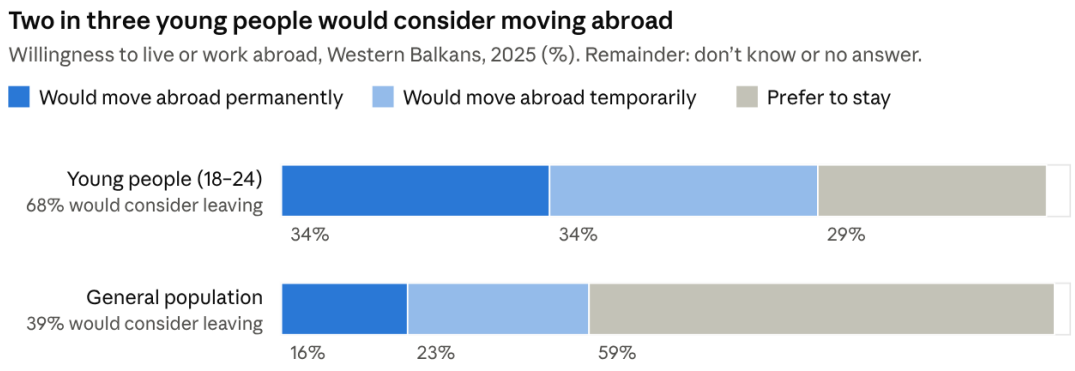


Source: European Commission (2026d), Chapter 19: Social policy and employment.

Note. Counts refer to 2025. Employment and active employment measures are reported separately; the *categories should not be added together or interpreted as a measure* of *sustained employment.*

Figure C4

Emigration intentions of young people and the general population in the Western Balkans, 2025



Source: RCC (2025), Balkan Barometer 2025: Public opinion

Table C4

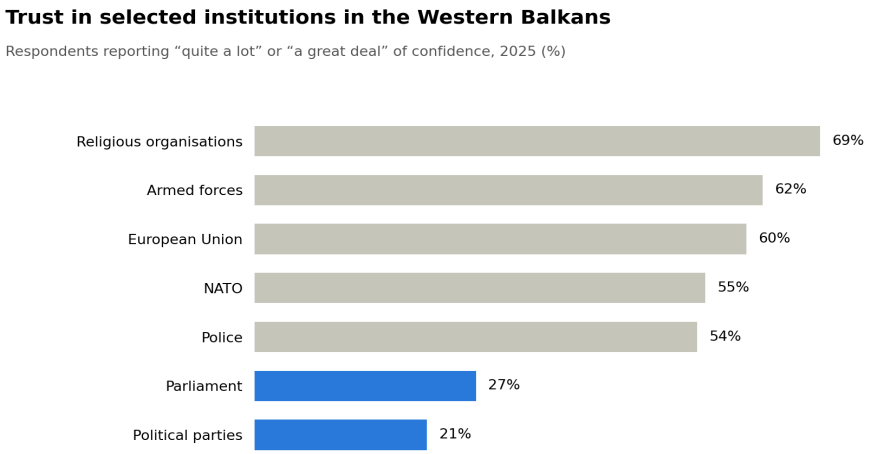
Selected evidence on environmental implementation

Area	Evidence	Source
Health impact of air pollution	Estimated deaths attributable to long-term PM2.5 exposure above 5 µg/m^3 in 2023, ages 30+: Albania 3,551; Montenegro 555; North Macedonia 2,667.	EEA (2025)
Exposure of children	99% of children in the region breathe polluted air	UNICEF North Macedonia (2026)
Public concern	Air pollution cited as a community environmental concern by 61% of citizens in 2025 (57% in 2024)	RCC (2025)
Albania: implementation	Air-quality directorate established and two monitoring stations added; administrative and technical capacity still insufficient	European Commission (2026a, p. 94)

Area	Evidence	Source
Albania: nature protection	Nature protection deteriorated amid weaknesses in legislation and development pressures	European Commission (2026a, p. 95)
North Macedonia: institutional capacity	Staffing, coordination, enforcement and air-quality monitoring remain insufficient	European Commission (2026d, pp. 90–91)

Figure C5

Trust in institutions in the Western Balkans, 2025



Source: RCC (2025), Balkan Barometer 2025: Public opinion