



YOUNG PEOPLE, MIGRATION AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS 28-30 October 2020

BACKGROUND PAPER¹

ONE WAY TICKET NO MORE: SEVEN IDEAS FOR A PROSPEROUS WESTERN BALKANS²

About the Authors:

Samir Beharić: Board Member of the Western Balkans Alumni Association and a recent graduate of University of Vienna and Leipzig University.

Egzona Bokshi: Engaged in the project “Empowering Youth for a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable Future in Kosovo” funded by the UN Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund.

Nina Drakulić: Currently working as a telecommunication engineer; graduated from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering in Podgorica and founded the NGO Montenegro Robotics.

Nenad Jevtović: Director of the Institute for Development and Innovation, member of the Coordination Body for Monitoring Flows of Economic Migration at the Serbian Ministry of Labor.

Lorenta Kadriu: Representative of Youth and Women Leadership Program at Partners Kosova Center For Conflict Management.

Nikola Kandić: Lawyer and Project Assistant at the Youth Council of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Marjola Memaj: Co-founder and former Regional Representative at Western Balkans Alumni Association; working as a Communication and Policy support with EuroFIR AISBL in Brussels.

Andrea Mićanović: Youth Representative of Montenegro in the Governing Board of RYCO.

Franceska Muço: Secretary General “Young Professionals Network”, Youth Representative of Albania, RYCO.

Tomica Stojanovikj: Graduated from the University of Economics, Skopje; worked for Peace Corps North Macedonia and at the youth organization Mladiinfo International.

Milja Zdravković: is a youth activist and student, currently working at the National Youth Council of Serbia as a Programme Assistant.

¹ The responsibility for the views set out in this paper lies with the author. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the German Federal Foreign Office, the Aspen Institute Germany or the Southeast Europe Association.

² This paper was written with the support of **the Crossborder Factory** think-and-do-thank tank, **the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)**, and **Adnan Cerimagić**, analyst at the European Stability Initiative (ESI). The authors of this paper, Samir Beharić, Egzona Bokshi, Marjola Memaj, Nina Drakulić, Nenad Jevtović, Lorenta Kadriu, Nikola Kandić, Andrea Mićanović, Franceska Muço, Tomica Stojanovikj and Milja Zdravković, are grateful to **Gentian Elezi**, **Donika Emini**, **Tim Judah** and **Alida Vracić** for sharing their valuable research and expertise for this paper.

ONE WAY TICKET NO MORE: SEVEN IDEAS FOR A PROSPEROUS WESTERN BALKANS

WHERE ARE WE IN 2020?

The population in the Western Balkans is shrinking. Between 2013 and 2018, the number of people who moved long-term to the European Union almost tripled - from 55,797 to 161,247 people.³ The overall working-age population in the Western Balkans has declined by more than 400,000 individuals in the last five years.⁴ Across the region, the number of births is also decreasing. In 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina saw its fewest births since 1948.⁵ The forecasts, therefore, are bleak.⁶

This decline comes with a price. First, an emotional one, as many grandparents are separated from their grandchildren, and many children grow up separated from their parents. Second, there is a financial price where most experts and media focus their attention. The Western Balkans spend a considerable amount of money on educating young people who often end up working abroad. On average, the cost of higher education per person spans between 18,283 euros in Albania and 34,139 euros in Serbia.⁷ Educating medical workers tends to be even more expensive. Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, spends more than 50 million euros annually on educating health professionals who might end up working in the EU.⁸ If the current trend continues, Western Balkans will keep producing the free labour force for the EU.

According to the Global Competitiveness Report, four of the Western Balkans participants have one of the biggest brain-drains in the world.⁹ This phenomenon is happening for a reason.

Take the quality of life, which is worse in the region than in the EU. This factor forces people to leave. The education systems have many flaws. For example, too few children get to attend pre-school. In North Macedonia, around 61% of children aged between 3 and 6 are not enrolled in pre-primary education.¹⁰ Relevant international studies also show that those children who do enrol in primary school often end up functionally illiterate. Among 14-year old students in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one out of two was able to read a test text but not able to explain what they read.¹¹ Moreover, a high number of those students that get to attend a high-school or a university do not receive an education that prepares them for the job market.

Once in the job market, these students are confronted with too few jobs choices. They live in the region that has one of the world's highest youth unemployment rates (15-24 years of age), ranging between 17 per cent in Montenegro and Serbia to 54.9 per cent in Kosovo*.¹² They are also confronted with unfair competition because the small job market often favours those people with family and political links. Those students that get a job typically earn less than they would in the EU while working conditions and their rights are often violated or non-existent.

³ Eurostat, "First permits by reason, length of validity and citizenship", 28 September 2020. The figures refer to the total number for six Western Balkans partners of all 12 months or over first permits. <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

⁴ Regional Cooperation Council, "Bregu: Brain Drain The Biggest Challenge Of This Decade - Western Balkans Working Age Population Declined By More Than 400,000 In Past 5 Years", 2020. <https://www.rcc.int/news/598/bregu-brain-drain-the-biggest-challenge-of-this-decade--western-balkans-working-age-population-declined-by-more-than-400000-in-past-5-years>

⁵ Klix, "U BiH najmanji broj novorođenčadi od 1948. godine, prognoze su crne, kao i naša pozicija u regiji", 2020. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/u-bih-najmanji-broj-novorodjencadi-od-1948-godine-prognoze-su-crne-kao-i-nasa-pozicija-u-regiji/200917099>

⁶ Balkans Insight, Tim Judah, "Bye-Bye, Balkans: A Region In Critical Demographic Decline", 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/14/bye-bye-balkans-a-region-in-critical-demographic-decline/>

⁷ Institute for Development and Innovation, "Cost of Youth Emigration", 2019. <https://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Cost-of-youth-emigration-Serbia.pdf>

⁸ Al Jazeera Balkans, "Odlasci ljekara: BiH godišnje gubi 50 miliona eura", 2018. <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/files/odlasci-ljekara-bih-godisnje-gubi-50-miliona-eura>

⁹ World Economic Forum, "The Global Competitiveness Report 2019", 2020. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf

¹⁰ UNICEF, "North Macedonia committed to improving access to quality pre-primary education", 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/press-releases/north-macedonia-committed-improving-access-quality-pre-primary-education>

¹¹ OECD, "PISA 2018. Insights and Interpretations", 2019. [https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA 2018 Insights and Interpretations FINAL PDF.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA%2018%20Insights%20and%20Interpretations%20FINAL%20PDF.pdf)

¹² * This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. World Bank Group, The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, "Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2019", 2019. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/351461552915471917/pdf/135370-Western-Balkans-Labor-Market-Trends-2019.pdf>

ONE WAY TICKET NO MORE: SEVEN IDEAS FOR A PROSPEROUS WESTERN BALKANS

However, it is not only the job market that motivates people to leave. Other issues are about the road infrastructure and the quality of the environment, for example. Young people that earn a driving license and have a car to drive are more likely to get hurt or die on the roads because the Western Balkans have some of the deadliest roads in Europe.¹³ At the same time, air-pollution-related illnesses are also increasing in the region. In the Western Balkans, 16 outdated coal power plants threaten public health by producing enormous amounts of air pollution, which impacts people in the region, the EU, and beyond. Every year, these power plants cause 3,000 premature deaths, 8,000 cases of bronchitis in children, and other chronic illnesses, costing both the health systems and economies a total of 6.1-11.5 billion euros.¹⁴ Additionally, the recent backslide of democracy, the reduction of the rule of law and freedoms, has contributed to the emigration of young people.¹⁵

But overall, the economic insecurity seems to be the strongest driver for young people to move abroad. This motivation is the strongest among Albanian youth (43 per cent) and the weakest among young Montenegrins (26 per cent).¹⁶ Increasingly, entire families are moving together, with the elderly (grandparents) staying home. Those families who leave typically look for a job in the EU. Once in the EU, workers from Western Balkans often take jobs that are unpopular among those living in the host countries: the health sector and construction. Most of those people who leave are not eager to come back, not even when they retire.¹⁷

There is one notable exception, those who do not get long-term working permits in the EU. Among them are seasonal workers but also students who take part in international exchanges and mobility programs. Some students, mostly at university, get to study for a semester in the EU and come back. Their number, however, is still quite low, compared to the number of EU students that take part in these programs. The way to change this situation is to boost mobility opportunities within the Western Balkans. At the moment, it is easier for a student from the University of Skopje to spend an exchange semester at a university in the EU, China, Russia, or Turkey than to study for one or two exchange semesters at any of the Western Balkans universities. Benefits for those who studied abroad are high.¹⁸ Those students show more interest in politics, less support for ethno-nationalistic ideas, and a broader understanding of different cultures than their peers without such experiences.

Young people throughout the region increasingly crave a strong hand and authoritarian leadership.¹⁹ There are multiple reasons and explanations behind this trend. Most experts think it is related to the sense that most current politicians are corrupt and serve the interests of only a few rich people.

Throughout the region, however, there is also a growing number of young people who want the Western Balkans to transform into functional liberal democracies that protect the rights of all its citizens, have a market economy, and fully integrate into the European Union.

Aware that this situation did not develop overnight and that it will also not changing for the better overnight, in the following two sections, a group of these young people sketch where it is that our region should be in ten years. We also provide concrete policy ideas on how to get there and hope to start the conversation on the most pressing issues for the future of our region, the European Union, and Europe as a whole.

¹³ Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, "Driving in Europe: It's Riskier in the East.", 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/infographic-traffic-deaths-europe/26692462.html>

¹⁴ The Health and Environment Alliance, "Chronic Coal Pollution", 2019. <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Chronic-Coal-Pollution-report.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1z6BbGiaQwSGmosNXABfi2jRgydyju4tgBovzEFcwrTSWshw9m6v0HpsQ>

¹⁵ Bieber F., Bino B., Cvijic S., Djolai M., Dzihic V., Flessenkemper T., Kmezcic M., Marovic J., Stratulat., Vracic A., Wunsch N. March 2017. The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion, Policy Study, BiEPAG. <http://www.biEPAG.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/final.pdf>

¹⁶ The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019", 2019. <https://www.fes.de/en/youth-studies>

¹⁷ Balkan Insight, "Never Going Home: Why Bosnia's New Exodus is Worrying", 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/29/never-going-home-why-bosnias-new-exodus-is-worrying/>

¹⁸ European Commission, "The Erasmus Impact Study", 2014. https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/library/study/2014/erasmus-impact-summary_en.pdf

¹⁹ The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019", 2019. <https://www.fes.de/en/youth-studies>

ONE WAY TICKET NO MORE: SEVEN IDEAS FOR A PROSPEROUS WESTERN BALKANS

WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE IN TEN YEARS?

When a group of young people from the Western Balkans meets in 2030 to discuss the state of the region, their conclusion should be that the Western Balkans did not lose another generation. They should see the current pandemic as a turning point, which revealed the fragility of Western Balkan institutions and policies. Socially, economically, and democratically, 2020 is the point when all institutions crumbled under the weight of reality, which exposed underinvestment and mismanagement of not just the healthcare systems, but also of other public systems (particularly education). The year 2030 should be the year by which the Western Balkan saga about EU integration is completed. The region should manage to advance progressively by then. The end of the mismanagement in 2020 should create the momentum for positive change across the region, saying good-bye to the political short-sightedness and allowing for focus on investing in institutions and people and committing not to gamble with the prospects of young people ever again.

The first and the most important step to achieve this goal is to move beyond the development of policies that only consider narrow interests. This change can happen with robust support from the EU for people those across the region who do not accept mismanagement, incompetence, and poor justifications. Champions for this completely new narrative on the Western Balkans already exist; they call for public interests to be considered to bring the Western Balkan closer to EU standards. Many people currently discuss how the region could be shaped to make it capable of responding and meeting the challenges in the present and the future. Already today the generation of young people is more concerned about economic prospects, education quality, and the environment than the national identity, ever-looming war prospects, or the political instabilities and security issues in the region.²⁰ However, these voices need to be supported, and their ideas heard. If done properly, this support would allow young people to move forward from their parents' past.

The EU and its member states need to channel their support so that majorities across the region can come together to translate a vision of a prosperous Western Balkans into reality. This vision of 2030 is one where the region is fully integrated into the EU, with most bilateral issues resolved. The region has liberal democracies based on the rule of law and a market economy. The region also has education systems that are at an EU-level quality which equips generations for the challenges of the future, enables knowledge transfer about democratic values, civic rights and liberties, critical thinking skills, and understands individual responsibility and teamwork.

By 2030, the region needs governments that aim for policies that consider the environment. The adoption and implementation of environmental laws, sustainability policies, and regional environmental agreements must become a priority so the Western Balkan can turn into a cleaner region. Along the lines of the October Economic and Investment Program and the Green Agenda adopted by the European Commission in October 2020, the EU and the region should find joint instruments to respond to environmental challenges and the fight against climate change. Even before full membership, the entire region should be involved in discussions on the future of the EU. This topic is important because the extreme weather patterns and climate change will see increased numbers of people displaced from their homes and cities.

By 2030, the number of private-sector jobs that provide decent working conditions across the region should increase. To achieve this goal, the politicians and public administrators should focus on the development and implementation of policies that are aligned with the EU over the medium and long term. Mobility across the region should be made easier through public-private partnerships that extend huge infrastructure projects across the region (railway and digital corridors) and make borders invisible. Issues such as visas should become matters of the past.

²⁰ The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019", 2019. <https://www.fes.de/en/youth-studies>

When a group of young people from the EU meet in 2030 to discuss young people, demographic challenges and youth migration in the European Union, the Western Balkans will be part of the process of discussions. As in other parts of the EU, in the Western Balkans many will continue to migrate, but this time not because they have to, but because migration is a circumstance they choose. In 2030, many of them will be returning together with thousands of their young European peers, choosing the Western Balkans as the next most livable region in the EU. Below are concrete proposals on how this goal can be achieved.

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Six ideas, proposals, and initiatives that policymakers in the EU and the region, as well as regional organisations and young people, should consider when considering the future of the region. All these initiatives and ideas can only be successfully implemented if their development, implementation, and monitoring are based on facts and scientific findings, civil society organisations are included, and they are communicated to the citizens and public clearly and directly.

1. REFORM REGIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The German Presidency of the EU, together with the upcoming EU presidencies, with support of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), should set out a **roadmap for education reform throughout the region** that would aim to achieve:

- An EU average in the number of children enrolled in pre-school education, **with a particular focus on minorities**.
- Improved quality of the primary education (based on PISA results).
- High school and university educations that consider the needs of and vision for the economy.

2. INCREASE REGIONAL MOBILITY SCHEMES

Regional cooperation and mobility in the field of education – next to further economic integration and making trade easier - could be a way to slow down youth migration. It could also serve as a driver to peace and prosperity. The region should raise the proportion of students and university professors going to the EU and universities in the Western Balkans to develop valuable skills and expand horizons to study or undertake training. This knowledge contributes to increasing social inclusion and non-discrimination and helps bridge skill gaps by boosting specific skills needed in the modern labour market.

- Governments in the region, with support of the European Commission and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), should establish and implement **a scheme for a primary school student exchange**, that would allow up to 25 per cent by 2025 and up to 60 per cent of students by 2030 to spend two to four weeks of their summer breaks in the Western Balkans and the EU. This exchange would include civic education, activism and dealing with the past, and should particularly include minority groups.
- Governments in the region, together with the European Commission, should **expand the joint degree programs between – and within - the EU and the Western Balkans** in order to encourage intra-regional student mobility.

ONE WAY TICKET NO MORE: SEVEN IDEAS FOR A PROSPEROUS WESTERN BALKANS

- Governments in the region, together with the European Commission, should **support mobility in vocational education and training** where newly qualified apprentices and teachers benefit from the program.
- Governments in the region, with support of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), should facilitate the **recognition of academic and professional qualifications gained abroad**.
- EU member states should take a long-overdue step and allow **visa-free travel for Kosovo. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo should abolish the existing visa-regime as a matter of priority**.

3. MAKE THE WESTERN BALKANS GREEN(ER)

The entire Western Balkans is faced with severe challenges on their paths to the EU with regards to energy transition and environmental protection. Environmental issues are still marginalised and need to be considered as one of the key issues for the future of the region. This initiative requires financial investments in the region, and the EU should take the lead on that issue.

- The EU and its member states should commit to working with the Western Balkans to **bring down air pollution in general, but in particular from coal plants**, as agreed to in the Energy Community. Currently air pollution in the Western Balkans is six times higher than in other parts of the EU.
- The EU and its member states, during the German EU presidency, should commit to develop a plan and invest necessary resources to **clean the six most polluted rivers and cities in the Western Balkans**.

4. BRING WESTERN BALKANS INTO A DIGITAL AGE

If the current digital gap between the Western Balkans and the EU is not closed, or it becomes even wider because the process is being mismanaged on a national level, the region risks being left behind yet again.

- **Invest in digital transformation in the Western Balkans** because it can help achieve higher growth and greater levels of employment.
- Boost the positive impact digitalisation can have on administrative procedures, including reducing the space for corruption, **increasing regional connectivity, and clearly making the lives of citizens easier**.
- Set up regional and national **monitoring mechanisms for digitalisation**.

5. ESTABLISH A REGIONAL NETWORK OF CIVIC EDUCATION CENTERS

Citizens of the Western Balkans should have space and time to think and debate the democratic future of their societies. Democracy is not only a form of government but also needs to be experienced and debated in the daily lives of citizens. Civic education is an important element of democracy which increases qualifications for political commitment, the assumption of political tasks, and offers orientation and information. Democracy thrives on the participation of informed citizens.

- The German Federal Government, inspired by the role of civic education centres in Germany, **by 2025, should support the establishment of six civic education centres**, as part of a regional

ONE WAY TICKET NO MORE: SEVEN IDEAS FOR A PROSPEROUS WESTERN BALKANS

network. These independent centres should provide citizens with information about all areas of politics - without being tainted by governments and party politics – and provide space to discuss issues and the development of democracy and European Integration.

6. FINALISE THE CONNECTIVITY AND IMPLEMENT THE ECONOMIC AND INVESTMENT AGENDA FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

Connecting the region both internally and with the EU is a precondition for economic and social development that would help close the gap between the region and the EU.

- The Western Balkan partners and the EU should aim to **finalise projects that are part of the Connectivity Agenda** (railway, highway, and air infrastructure) by connecting all six centres with a modern infrastructure by 2024. Furthermore, implement the Economic and Investment Agenda for the Western Balkans, adopted by the European Commission in October 2020.

7. CONTINUE DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE, MIGRATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

Regular discussions on the issues of young people with young people, as well as on migration and demographic challenges should continue in the region, within the EU context.

- The conference on demographic and brain drain, organised by the German EU Presidency, should not be a one-time event, but turn into a regular event to discuss these issues as part of **future EU presidencies or the Berlin Process**.
- The Western Balkan region should also be included in the **Conference on the Future of Europe**.

This paper was developed at the workshop "One-way ticket?" - Young People and Migration from the Western Balkans - Possibilities and Opportunities for Shaping the Process" by the authors mentioned above. The discussion process was structurally supported by



crossborder
factory
european think-and-do tank



We would like to thank the German Federal Foreign Office for their financial support of the workshop "One-Way-Ticket? - Young People and Migration from the Western Balkans - Possibilities and Opportunities for Shaping the Process".

