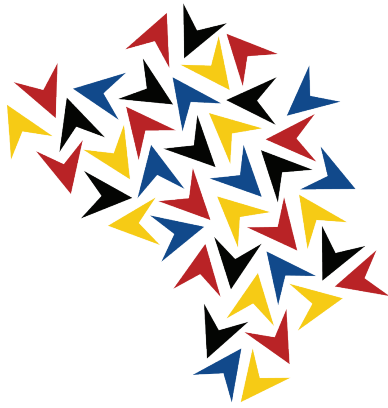


BERLIN ◀ ◀
DECLARATION
OF THE
WESTERN
BALKANS
YOUTH
FORUM
2022 ▶ ▶

Supported by



Western Balkans Summit

BERLIN 2022



PREAMBLE:

THE STATE OF YOUNG CITIZENS STRIVING FOR EUROPEAN FUTURES



We, young and engaged Europeans, independent of our origin in the Western Balkans or the European Union, representing youth councils, youth-led, youth-focused and other civil society organizations, as well as youth activists, in the framework of the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2022 of the Berlin Process, are:

Acknowledging the socio-economic challenges caused by the still ongoing pandemic our societies are encountering,

Feeling transgenerationally re-traumatized due to our own (family) experiences in the wars and violent conflicts our region witnessed in the 1990s and early 2000s,

Showing solidarity with the war refugees and the victims on both sides of the Russian invasion of Ukraine,

Seeing our futures endangered by a lack of awareness for, action towards and promotion of sustainable living in our societies,

Deeply dissatisfied with the lack of progress regarding the European integration of the Western Balkans,

Concerned with the fact that a growing share of our generation wants to leave our region due to a lack of economic progress, serious issues with the rule of law and institutional accountability, and insufficient means of political participation of young people in our flawed democracies,

Pointing out young people's agency to be active citizens and changemakers, and genuine supporters of the EU integration process,

Highlighting the importance of the protection of human rights and the values of dignity, fairness, equality, respect, and independence,

Recognising the key role of civic, political, peace, and environmental education,

Advocating for a substantial change in our societies ready to co-design and work hard for it, and

Calling our governments, international actors, as well as stakeholders from civil society and the economy to join our pledge and take necessary and concrete actions toward achieving what is presented in the following three thematic areas:



CHAPTER I:

TOWARDS RESILIENT DEMOCRACIES INVOLVING YOUNG VOICES



A resilient democracy requires much more than simply holding regular elections. Currently, we are observing a lack of youth participation and ownership in various democratic processes, which is closely related to a lack of active citizenship and institutional mistrust. This makes our societies, and young people in particular, susceptible to disinformation, propaganda, and extremist viewpoints, which undermines democracy as a whole.

On Democratic Institutions

We, young people of the Western Balkans are profoundly concerned about the state of democracy in the region and the rise of institutional mistrust. Increasing polarisation in our societies, hybrid threats, a lack of mechanisms to combat disinformation, and a lack of genuine political will for meaningful democratic processes, along with anti-democratic rhetoric and actions, make our democracies vulnerable and fragile. On the other hand, the lack of recognition and trust of officials in the agency of young people has a negative impact on young people's perception of democracy and democratic tendencies.

We request that those in positions of political authority work along the principles of good governance and refrain from polarising statements and actions, particularly those involving hate speech or the spread of falsehoods about other communities or political beliefs; and provide more opportunities for meaningful youth participation.

On Civic and Political Education

There is a lack of a cohesive and value-centered approach to civic education throughout the region, especially in formal education. This results in an ongoing decline of our societies' fundamental values, which discourages young people from becoming active citizens and sows doubt that their voice is heard and matters. We want every citizen to have both access and real opportunities to engage and shape civic education and participation across formal and non-formal education settings.

We request the incorporation of civic education into evidence-based formal education curricula involving all young people, as well as the strengthening of quality civic education programmes through existing structures such as youth councils, student networks, youth centers and others; and call on international partners to provide financial and technical support for this initiative throughout the region.

On the Enhancement of Community Resilience

Stable institutions and active citizens are at the core of inclusive and resilient communities. Currently, we are witnessing a lack of cohesion and community support especially among the young. **We ask all public institutions from municipalities to government entities and international organizations to recognise and actively support local efforts for community development through capacity building, providing space and financial support.** We also encourage allocating more public funds for youth programmes and projects that strengthen youth networks in order to interconnect communities, share good practices and build partnerships. To effectively further this approach we highly recommend to value inclusive youth work and ask for the full implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda on a local level.



On Mobility of Young Professionals within the Balkan Region and Beyond

New regional mobility programmes should be developed for young professionals, both interns and employees. Parallely, we request that governments, where necessary, harmonize legal frameworks that permit the recognition of these work experiences. The governments of the region should take actions to ensure and enhance regional circular migration based on existing regional agreements, providing a chance to young people to gain professional benefits from their professional or educational engagement abroad.

The governments of the Western Balkans Six must commit additional funds to support youth mobility activities through existing regional mechanisms such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and Western Balkans Fund (WBF) but not limited to those. Furthermore, we urge all governments to ensure full access to various European Union programmes, such as the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. Further investment in regional infrastructure in line with the “Connectivity Agenda” for the Western Balkans must remain a priority for the governments in order to establish foundations for increased regional mobility.

CHAPTER II: ENHANCE SECURITY AND INCLUSIVE PEACE IN TIMES OF WAR



We are sad to witness another war on European soil with the invasion in Ukraine and deeply concerned about the spillover effects. At the same time, we are also concerned about the rise of violent extremism among young people, gender-based violence, militarization, polarization in public discourse and spread of fake news and misinformation in the region. We also have recognised the risk of using the security issues to undermine human rights, a practice jeopardizing our efforts to ensure that the fundamental values of the European Union are respected across our societies. For those reasons, we commit to promoting and sustaining peace across the Western Balkans.

On Youth in Peace and Security

We are concerned by the lack of inclusive and positive peace and security as pre-conditions for the well-functioning democratic societies. Quoting the UNSCR 2250, we recognize “the important and positive contribution of youth in efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security”, and their crucial role as catalyst to shaping ongoing as well as future peacebuilding efforts.

We strongly believe in the importance of a comprehensive and democratized approach towards security, which moves beyond military defense and focuses on social security and well-being of all citizens, addressing the root causes of conflicts. Young people contribute to peace and security by engaging their peers, working at community level, sustaining dialogue and bridging divisions between polarized communities. **We encourage our governments, regional and international stakeholders to follow this example and prioritize human approaches towards sustainable peace but also to meaningfully include young people in peace negotiations and bilateral dialogues on normalisation of relations between societies in the region. We ask all relevant actors to use a strategic approach to systematically and meaningfully integrate youth perspectives in all dimensions of peace and security policies.**



On Regional Approach to Implementation of Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

Young people across the region are already engaged in grass-root peacebuilding efforts however unrecognized for their contributions. We urge decision-makers to shape policies and commit to concrete actions, because no efficient reconciliation process or sustainable peace is possible if not everyone concerned, including young people, are gathered at the table. To achieve this, **we recommend a regionally coordinated approach towards the implementation of the YPS agenda through developing roadmaps, plans and frameworks, policies and programs, projects or services.**

We are strongly encouraging our respective governments, as well as regional and international organizations such as United Nations and its agencies, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Regional Youth Cooperation Office, Regional Cooperation Council, EU institution and other relevant stakeholders to work with and support organized youth and their structures such as Youth Umbrella Organizations in the implementation of YPS agenda. In order to do so, we nevertheless rely on strong support with regards to institutional capacities and financial resources to ensure that young people are recognized as essential partners in the field of peace and security through the policy documents and are enabled to act as equals based on co-management and similar mechanisms.

We, the young people, are fully ready to selflessly invest our energy, skills and knowledge into this joint call of protecting our societies from any penetration of hatred or aggression and including all its members in our decision-making.

CHAPTER III: ENSURE SUSTAINABLE LIVING FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR PLANET




We witness the everyday consequences of the dramatic climate crisis, environmental pollution, and biodiversity loss. We see drastic air pollution in our cities, littering of the beauties of nature, heatwaves in the summer and extreme rainfalls flooding inhabited areas. Hence, we want to become actors for change towards a low-carbon and climate resilient future, hold decision makers accountable and push towards green solutions.

On the Establishment of a Green Mentality for Change

Despite many young people living in a world that is changing rapidly because of climate change, many of us face issues recognizing the problem and local based solutions, due to a lack of green education and emphasis of its importance.

We request the responsible ministries of education to establish green education as an obligatory subject in the core curricula. In this subject, recycling trainings, climate awareness and project work including the possibilities for students to implement green activities should become key to arrive at a green mentality. To successfully implement this we ask our governments to ensure that teachers have the proper training and capacities to further promote and lecture on green issues. We want schools and all other educational institutions to ensure good and sustainable infrastructure and promote a sustainable way of living. To match the school-based learning process, non-formal and extra-curriculum education needs to be promoted as a necessary condition.

We want our governments to further support the civil society, with focus on youth structures, in the organizing of promotion and awareness raising actions, at a local but also



regional level. These activities need to be upgraded and at the same time matched with the infrastructural realities (why recycle at home if the waste is not separated after). Moreover, we urge the media community to engage in further promotion of the green agenda through public information platforms.

On a Participatory Green Agenda

We believe that the advancement of the Green Agenda is closely linked to the degree of citizens' participation. We request to be involved and acknowledged as key-partners in all phases of policy making that will arise from the implementation of the Green Agenda.

Participation mechanisms should target the local level, in particular rural areas in order to bring these processes to everyone in our societies. We want our policy makers to make specific efforts to reach out to the most vulnerable, underrepresented, and marginalized groups, as environmental degradation affects them disproportionately more than others. In order to do so, **we need political acknowledgement to widen the engagement of groups of interests in the dialogue, such as private sector and businesses, NGOs working with vulnerable and marginalized groups, youth structures etc.** We want our governments to engage with local successful initiatives and raise them to a higher political level.

On Energy Security, not Endangering the Climate

With the Russian war on Ukraine, we see the question of a just and sustainable energy transition as more pressing than ever. **We want our economies to overcome traditional, fossil means to generate electricity to more locally produced and sourced energy, this needs to be at the key of government efforts.** We believe that the Western Balkans have a huge potential to produce renewable energy, especially by solar, water and wind power. **To make use of these sources we request our governments to further the process of energy democratization. It is essential to ease the conditions and bureaucratic processes for (young) citizens to produce energy themselves, providing new tax exemption policies on sustainable energy, creating and linking a solar panel energy network.** We commit to support the sometimes-difficult process of energy transition and want our governments to align it even stronger with the current European transformation agendas. Yet, Western Balkans need financial and resources support in order to fully implement the Green Agenda programs.

On Green Agenda Regulations Implementation and Monitoring of the Process

A set of declarations, regulations, action plans and recommendations were initiated for the sustainable future of the Western Balkans from the EU level. Nevertheless, we have challenges in the implementation of the already set bases of regulations. **We want our governments to improve the already existing regulations, and revise them on the respective level or create new ones where needed.** In this regard, we want monitoring mechanisms to be built on a law regulated basis, that also sets sanctions if not implemented.

Finally, we need to go further: **We request our politicians to implement new policies that promote the Green Agenda, such as the green and social procurements for the public institutions and digitalization of administrative as well as other processes.** We want to create new policies in regard to the proper distribution of fundings and also the share of funds (horizontal institutional approach) from different entities when it comes to investment on Green Agenda implementation.

On Regional Initiatives Supporting the Sustainable Development of the Western Balkans

Regional integration initiatives, such as Common Regional Market, are crucial mechanisms for sustainable development of the Western Balkans. These initiatives support the region in its path towards sustainability by focusing on the economic pillar of sustainable development. **We encourage our governments to devote themselves to the implementation of agreements in the framework of Common Regional Market and further intensify regional integration with the support of regional actors such as the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).**

Berlin, Autumn 2022.