

## Main takeaways from the EU Enlargement Package 2023

Western Balkan partners **committed in 2021 to set up Youth Guarantee schemes following the EU model. As of mid-2023, most of them had established inter-ministerial expert groups to develop implementation plans. Three had already adopted their plans, and some were already starting to pilot the scheme in 2023.**

The sixth priority area supported by the EIP (Economic and Investment Plan (EIP)) is **developing human capital and innovation, including young people, education and embracing innovation.** In July 2021, the ministers of the region endorsed a declaration committing their governments to the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and **implementing the Youth Guarantee flagship of the EIP.** The EU Western Balkans Summit in October 2021 saw the launch of a comprehensive agenda on innovation, research, education, culture, youth and sport (the Innovation Agenda).

As outlined in the report, the Youth Guarantee is an activation scheme to ensure that young people in the Western Balkans receive a quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship and training within a certain time after becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. The scheme requires reforms and capacity building in education and vocational training, employment, labour services and social protection. All Western Balkan partners, except Bosnia and Herzegovina (where work is underway), have adopted national Youth Guarantee implementation plans and set up coordination mechanisms, and some are already piloting them.

The Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport continues to set the Western Balkans on a solid path towards closer cooperation in those policy areas. Numerous cooperation efforts between EU Member States and Western Balkan partners have strengthened key areas such as support to **the modernisation of higher education systems, industry cooperation and smart manufacturing, strengthening of innovation eco-systems, training of medical personnel, digitalisation and cyber-security.**

Support to education reform, including primary, higher and vocational education, professional training and lifelong learning, is a key focus of the EIP. **Providing opportunities for youth and student exchanges (e.g. through Erasmus+) and stronger investment in research capacity are central parts of the EIP's support to human capital development.**

## **Developments made in the area of “YOUTH”**

### In Albania

- The national implementation plan for the Youth Guarantee scheme was approved, as an annex to the 2023-2030 national strategy. Efforts should continue on strengthening the social protection system, alongside the labour market measures.
- The 2022-2029 national strategy for youth was adopted in October 2022.
- Under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021 – 2027 (IPA III)15, a second financing Decision of EUR 80.6 million for the Annual Action Plan 2022 supports the process of re-evaluatouon of judges, democracy, law enforcement, EU integration, water and youth

### In Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Limited progress was made on the recommendation related to development of the Youth Guarantee implementation plan.
- A 2021- 2027 employment strategy was adopted in the Republika Sprska entity, including the Youth Guarantee. An employment strategy still needs to be adopted in the Federation entity.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina was invited to take part in the European Education Area working groups 2021-2025. These working groups fosters collaboration among European Union Member States, as well as with candidate countries, in order to build more resilient and inclusive national education and training systems and prepare their youth for the green and digital transition.
- Although there are youth strategies at some levels of government, Bosnia and Herzegovina should work on a country-wide youth strategy that would ensure equal treatment of young people.

### In Kosovo\*

- The environment for volunteering needs to be improved, including by putting in place an appropriate legislative framework, aligned with international standards and by allocating financial and human resources for youth volunteering programmes.
- To improve the situation, the government adopted a multiannual youth guarantee implementation plan, and there are ongoing reforms to public employment services.
- Some progress was made during the reporting period, in particular on the preparations for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, in securing funds for social services and intensifying inspections in work sectors with higher risk.
- Kosovo has continued the preparations for the implementation the Youth Guarantee, in line with the implementation plan adopted in November 2022. As of 2023, authorities are working to ensure conditions for piloting the Youth Guarantee in two municipalities, and in amending relevant legislation, restructuring the key delivery mechanisms (public employment services), and fast-tracking some long-due reforms in vocational education training.

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\* 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.

- Kosovo is restructuring the Employment Agency so as to deliver on the Youth Guarantee implementation plan.
- Kosovo is participating in the European Education Area working groups 2021-2025. These working groups fosters collaboration among European Union Member States, as well as with candidate countries, in order to build more resilient and inclusive national education and training systems and prepare their youth for the green and digital transition.
- Kosovo adopted the Youth Guarantee implementation plan, making the introduction of the necessary reforms in VET even more urgent. It includes both preventative measures to make education and VET more relevant and measures to expand offers for young people that are not in employment education or training (NEET).

#### In Montenegro

- The Parliament also organised the 'Simulation of Parliament' for high school students, as well as a Youth Parliament session
- The Working Group for the Youth Guarantee Programme is working with experts from the International Labour Organization and the European Training Foundation on improving the draft Youth Guarantee implementation plan.
- The Ministry of Sports and Youth formed a working group end of August 2022 to work on the amendments to the Youth Law, to further specify youth services and implementation procedures.
- Furthermore, intersectoral cooperation between various ministries dealing with youth issues needs to improve.

#### In North Macedonia

- The inter-party parliamentary groups on youth; on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) persons; on persons with disabilities; on Roma4 ; and on environment successfully completed numerous activities, in close cooperation with relevant civil society organisations.
- 969 Roma were included in the Youth Guarantee scheme.
- The Youth Guarantee scheme was implemented successfully throughout the society.
- A new plan for implementing the 2023-2026 Youth Guarantee was adopted by the authorities in March 2023. In 2022, more than 20 000 young people participated in the scheme, with 43% of them successfully finding employment or training opportunities. 969 Roma people participated in the scheme, out of which 148 found employment.
- The number of participants in funded youth exchange projects was 465 in 2022 (compared to 294 in 2020).
- In the reporting period authorities developed the national youth strategy for 2023-2027, which is yet to be adopted.
- North Macedonia continued its active cooperation with international organisations. Its priorities in the UN are in line with important EU priorities, including on security, protection of human rights and the climate, countering violent extremism, implementing the resolution on women, peace and security, promoting the role and participation of women and strengthening the role of youth.

### In Serbia

- The introduction of the Youth Guarantee in Serbia aims to address youth unemployment, support labour market integration and ensure that no young person is left behind. A Youth Guarantee coordinator was lacking for part of the reporting period and the Youth Guarantee implementation plan was not yet adopted. Serbia continued to implement the My First Salary programme, which aims at activating young people without prior work experience.
- In addition, Serbia participated in various initiatives such as the Erasmus Days and the European Youth Week.
- In February 2023, Serbia adopted a youth strategy to 2030 and in July an action plan on its implementation until 2025. Serbia has yet to adopt the delayed action plan for the implementation of the youth guarantee mechanism.
- The national youth council was revived and involves youth representatives that advocate for the rights of the young generation in Serbia

### **Developments made in Western Balkans 6**

- In the Western Balkans, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are essential elements of the stabilization & association and enlargement processes.
- A regional programme, EU4Digital, is in preparation. It has a budget of EUR 15 million, and it is planned to be implemented in 3 years. The programme aims to complement the ongoing work of the Common Regional Market – Regional Digital Area, which builds on the objectives of the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans.
- The Commission proposed in parallel a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. The plan consists of four pillars that will be mutually reinforcing, (i) increasing integration with the EU's Single Market which needs to go hand in hand with (ii) opening the markets to all Western Balkan neighbours and building a Common Regional Market. (iii) In order to deepen current reforms, investment priorities and reforms will be articulated in Reform Agendas per country, building on the Economic Reform Programmes. (iv) Delivering on these reforms will unlock increased financial assistance.
- The Berlin Process Summit on 16 October 2023, held for the first time in the region – in Tirana, saw progress in the Common Regional Market, with the signature of the Agreement on recognition for professional qualifications for midwives, vets, nurses and pharmacists and a number of joint statements related to regional cooperation. It was also an opportunity to discuss the EU Growth Plan for Western Balkans with the leaders of the region and to inaugurate the representation office of the College of Europe in Tirana including the launching of the enrolment of students for academic year 2024/25

- The EU-Western Balkans Summit took place in December 2022 in Tirana. The fact that the summit was organised for the first time in the region was a clear sign of the EU's full and unequivocal commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans.
- The EU welcomed the breakthrough in the negotiations for three new Common Regional Market agreements facilitating freedom of movement and employment across the region. A roadmap for lowering roaming costs between the EU and the Western Balkans was adopted in the margins of the summit.
- The Western Balkans participate in the regional Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership, launched in November 2022 to support law enforcement and judicial cooperation against criminal smuggling networks and to increase border management capacities.
- To promote renewable energy and energy efficiency and support progress in renovating public and private buildings, the Commission replenished the regional energy efficiency programme with EUR 100 million through a contribution agreement signed in December 2022.
- The Commission and the Energy Community are also engaged with the Western Balkans on developing a regional Emissions Trading System as part of their accession process.
- Under flagship 7, the WBIF Operational Board and the Commission have so far approved financing for seven water and wastewater management investment projects in all six partner countries (including in the capitals Podgorica, Skopje, Belgrade and Sarajevo) and three programmes supporting waste management (in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia).

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