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Reversing the Tide:

Policy Challenges and Responses to Youth Brain Drain in the Western Balkans



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Executive Summary

For young, highly educated people in the Western Balkans, the question of whether to stay or to leave has become a constant and defining dilemma. This policy brief highlights the consequences of large-scale youth and high-skilled emigration and stresses the need for systemic measures to address brain drain with a focus on the region. Drawing on existing policies and programs, available data, academic literature, comparative studies, and conducted interviews, the analysis identifies several key challenges: policy fragmentation, limited implementation capacity, weak inter-institutional coordination, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The absence of comprehensive systems to track the skills and qualifications of emigrants and returnees leaves significant gaps in understanding the true scope and nature of brain drain and potential brain gain in the region. By comparing promising practices and exploring opportunities linked to EU integration and diaspora engagement, the brief emphasizes several priorities: strengthening data collection and monitoring, simplifying recognition of qualifications, creating incentives for returnees, and establishing structured channels for diaspora cooperation. Beyond economic measures, improving quality of life through affordable housing, transparent governance, and youth-oriented spaces is essential for long-term retention and youth well-being. **Grounded in the belief that emigration can never be fully stopped, the aim of this policy brief aims to foster comprehensive, evidence-based policies that transform brain drain into a driver of development. By creating conditions that make staying and returning both feasible and appealing, the Western Balkans can ensure that young people envision their professional futures not only abroad, but also within the region.**

Introduction

Brain drain occurs when skilled professionals emigrate from their home, taking their expertise elsewhere. As they emigrate for better opportunities, source economies face labor shortages - most notably in healthcare (WHO, 2025). This talent exodus leaves behind a weakened workforce, with unemployed youth lacking role models and domestic job prospects (International Labour Organization, 2022). Meanwhile, the societies that attract these workers can strengthen their workforces with valuable skills. While migration generates certain short-term benefits, particularly increased remittances, these gains are offset by negative impacts on economic dynamism, public service delivery, and the erosion of political leadership capacity (Sriskandarajah, 2005). Without policies to retain talent and stimulate local job creation, developing economies risk long-term stagnation (World Bank, 2021).

Historical emigration patterns established migration as a normalized response to economic and political challenges across the Western Balkans. Emigration motivations have shifted from education, political freedom, and conflict avoidance in the 1990s to broader economic opportunity-seeking in the 2000s (Naxidou, 2020). The Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo*, and Serbia (hereafter WB6, or Contracting Party/Parties), are among the top exporters of educated youth in the World (World Population Review, 2025). According to estimates by the German Marshall Fund, if the emigration of young, educated individuals continues at its current pace, the region could lose between 25% and 50% of its skilled workforce in the coming decades (Icoski, 2022). Current policies in the WB6 aimed at addressing brain drain lack proper oversight and have yielded limited results, often being embedded within broader frameworks such as youth employment, education, and diaspora engagement (Haxhi, Osman & Žunić, 2024). The region faces demographic decline as a result.

* 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.

Young, highly educated individuals confront decisions over whether to remain or emigrate almost daily. This policy brief addresses the issue through the lens of six young, highly educated individuals from the region, aiming to support young professionals and graduates in their pursuit of happiness. It focuses on how policymakers should design interventions to maximize benefits while reducing unintended consequences. While emigration can never be fully stopped, we argue that strategic policies can gradually shift decision-making toward local retention while enhancing youth welfare. To support this vision, the analysis combines desk research on existing emigration policies with comparative studies from other regions with a focus on migration decision-making, brain drain, and youth emigration. To capture youth perspectives, we conducted semi-structured interviews with two groups: (1) young individuals planning to migrate, (2) those who have already migrated, and circular or returning highly educated professionals. Interviews were conducted in person, via Zoom, or when these were not feasible, through written correspondence, using the Correspondence Method for its flexibility and ability to capture nuanced experiences (Harris, 2002).

The brief continues with a regional overview, followed by WB6 specific insights authored by the respective young researchers. It then presents a comparative study of common difficulties and policy gaps across the WB6, culminating in a series of specific policy suggestions for mitigating brain drain through regional and national actions.



Regional Overview

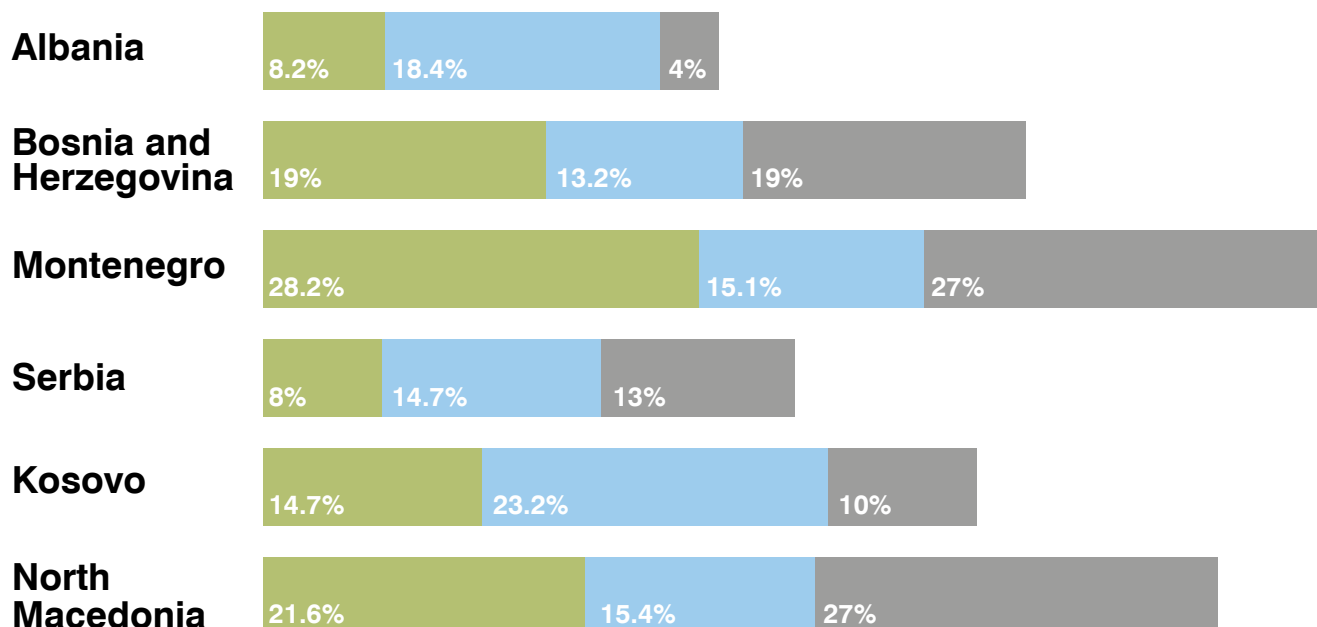
Various studies have documented regional emigration trends. The most comprehensive regional picture, however, comes from opinion polling that covers the entire adult population. Since 2015, the Regional Cooperation Council has commissioned the annual Balkan Public Barometer, an EU-funded survey capturing perspectives and aspirations across six Western Balkan economies with roughly 6,000 respondents each year (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024). It provides valuable signals on potential emigration patterns through questions about willingness to work abroad, preferred destinations, and concrete migration preparations, while also capturing contextual factors including individual life satisfaction and attitudes toward respondents' homeland of origin.

Across the six Western Balkan economies, the 2024 Balkan Public Barometer data show notable variation in the willingness of highly educated respondents to live or work elsewhere in the region. Interest is strongest in Montenegro (28.2%) and North Macedonia (21.6%), while Albania (8.2%) and Serbia (8%) report the lowest shares. At the same time, uncertainty remains high, particularly in North Macedonia (27.1%) and Montenegro (26.8%), indicating hesitation or lack of concrete plans. Kosovo shows the highest share of negative responses (23.2%), suggesting stronger reluctance toward intra-regional movement. These findings also point to an opportunity: while intra-regional mobility appears limited in Kosovo, the study suggests that a segment of graduates remains open to moving within the Western Balkans rather than leaving the region entirely. This could provide a basis for regional initiatives to retain talent, mitigating the risk of complete brain drain to destinations outside the WB6.

¹ Government institutions were recognised as primary stakeholders, while National Youth Councils were contacted in cases as secondary, due to unavailability of institutional representatives.

Would you like to go to live or work abroad for some time during the next five years and where would you prefer to?

Answer: Western Balkans



(Balkan Public Barometer, 2024. This data represents answers of all respondents with the education level of a Bachelor's degree and above (N=2129). Graphic designed by Anja Kalezić.)



Yes



No



Refuse to answer/Do not know

Meanwhile, the [Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's Youth Study Southeast Europe \(2024\)](#) provides one of the clearest recent snapshots of emigration aspirations among young people in the Western Balkans. The share of youth expressing a strong or very strong desire to move abroad for more than six months ranges from just over 20% in Montenegro (20.6%) to more than 40% in North Macedonia (42.4%). In Albania, more than one-third of young people (36.5%) reported a strong or very strong desire to emigrate, while the figures are similarly high in Bosnia and Herzegovina (31%), Kosovo (28.1%) and Serbia (25.6%) (Hasanović et al., 2024.). At the same time, only a minority of respondents said they had no

intention to emigrate, ranging from just **13.4%** in North Macedonia to **38.4%** in Montenegro (Hasanović et al., 2024.). This suggests that while intentions do not necessarily translate into actual departures, the aspiration to leave remains a defining feature of youth attitudes across the region, with clear implications for potential brain drain.

When asked about the anticipated duration of their potential emigration, most respondents leaned toward circular migration (temporary or shorter stays). This was especially pronounced in Montenegro, where **83.9%** expected their migration to be temporary, and in Serbia (**65.7%**) and Kosovo (**64.9%**). By contrast, in North Macedonia, a majority (**54.2%**) of youth viewed emigration as a very long-term or permanent move. In Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, responses were more evenly divided, though still tilting toward circular migration (Hasanović et al., 2024.). These findings suggest that while the risk of permanent brain drain is significant in parts of the region, there is also a strong opening for circular migration policies. By creating pathways that make it easier for young people to study or work abroad temporarily and return (through recognition of skills, reintegration programs, or bilateral mobility agreements) governments could transform outward mobility into a resource for development rather than a permanent loss of talent.

Temporary Migration Intentions



Permanent Migration Intentions



Beyond people's intentions, information on actual brain drain in the Western Balkans remains fragmented. National statistical offices record population changes and basic flows, but outside of the census they rarely capture the skills or qualifications of those who leave. Even census data is surface level, since it depends on households to accurately report emigrated members and their characteristics, without tracking the duration of their stay abroad or the likelihood of return. To complicate matters further, some of the WB6, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, are long overdue for a census, leaving significant gaps in migration statistics.

International organizations on the other hand, collect more specific, widespread, details of migration, but none of these datasets encapsulates both migration patterns and the education levels or qualifications of those who leave to a degree

that would allow for a precise measurement of brain drain. This data landscape creates a peculiar knowledge gap. Researchers and policymakers know a great deal about who wants to leave the Western Balkans and why, have solid figures on migration, and understand the broad pressures driving emigration. What remains unknown is arguably more important: which specific skills and qualifications are departing, in what quantities, through which pathways, and with what consequences for critical sectors.

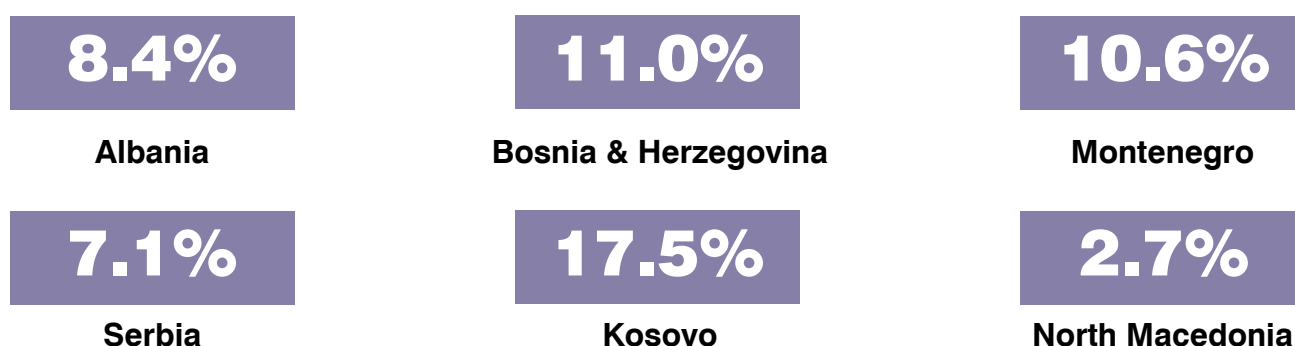
Recognizing these limitations, some researchers have developed innovative workarounds. For instance, the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies created a ‘cohort approach analysis’ that uses Labour Force Survey data from 2010-2019 combined with detailed education statistics from Western Balkan statistical offices to infer skilled emigration patterns by tracking demographic cohorts over time.¹ Their findings challenge common assumptions about regional brain drain: except for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, the data reveals net immigration of the highly educated, suggesting evidence of brain gain rather than loss. In the 2015-2019 period, North Macedonia and Serbia experienced net immigration of the highly educated in all age cohorts, without exceptions. For Montenegro, brain gain mostly refers to the 2012-2014 period where the immigration of the highly educated is estimated to 5,500 people. While brain gain is present in the 2015-2019 period as well, it is significantly lower, especially in comparison to brain drain which is evident in the 25-29, 30-34 and the 35-39 cohorts. Net emigration among the highly educated is most pronounced in Albania, where they account for almost 40% of the total cumulative outflow of around 105,000 persons between 2012 and 2019 (Leitner, 2021).

In other Western Balkan contracting parties, net emigration is primarily driven by medium- and low-educated populations, apart from Serbia where it is present solely among the medium-educated. Furthermore, a key finding is that educated immigration peaks among young adults in their twenties and early thirties. This age profile, which coincides with the completion of higher education, points to a pattern where skilled migration gains stem largely from diaspora students who studied internationally before coming back, combined with foreign nationals arriving either to continue their studies or to take up professional positions (Leitner, 2021). Ultimately, this leaves a small window of opportunity for policy approaches to retain young, educated individuals in the WB6.

¹ The age cohorts are as follows: 15-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39. “High-education” refers to some form of tertiary education which individuals possess as their highest educational attainment level (ISCED 5 and higher). In this respect, ‘High’ generally encompasses diplomas from different tertiary education cycles, namely from higher education, Bachelor and undergraduate studies (BA), Master’s degree and specialized studies (MA), and doctorate (PhD) studies.

While such methodological innovations provide valuable insights and reveal important nuances in regional migration patterns, they remain indirect measures that cannot fully substitute for direct tracking of skilled emigrants. Many who go abroad for an education simply do not return, or return for a short period before leaving again, building their careers outside of the WB6. Until comprehensive systems for recording the skills and qualifications of both emigrants and returnees are developed, cohort-based analyses like this represent a limited but the current most reliable approach available for understanding the true scope and nature of brain drain and brain gain in the region.

Remittances as % of GDP



Finally, while data on emigration and return provide important insights into brain drain, it is equally crucial to consider the diaspora's potential contribution to development. Although brain drain cannot be fully reversed, diaspora communities represent a significant resource that can be mobilized through knowledge transfer, professional collaboration, and targeted investment. This potential is particularly evident when looking at inward remittances, which in 2024 accounted for 10.6% of Montenegro's GDP, 11% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 8.4% in Albania, and 2.7% in North Macedonia, with Kosovo and Serbia at 17.5% and 7.1% respectively in 2023 (World Bank, 2023; 2024). These figures underscore both the economic importance of the diaspora and the value of structured engagement to transform the challenges of brain drain into opportunities for regional growth and innovation.



Contracting Party Specific Sections

Analysis of the legal and strategic frameworks across the Western Balkans reveals that current policy approaches in addressing youth brain drain are often characterized by fragmentation, limited implementation capacity, weak inter-institutional coordination, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. While national strategies exist in varying forms, implementation gaps and systemic weaknesses undermine their potential to retain skilled youth or support circular migration. Essentially, “brain drain” is often woven into larger diaspora, migration, and economic agendas, with very little direct mention or attempt at addressing it. Our own qualitative interviews revealed that youth preferences for migration are shaped not only by economic, educational, and professional considerations, and aspirations for personal development and mobility opportunities, but also by deep dissatisfaction with systemic conditions at home such as widespread corruption, political instability, weak institutions, and a perceived lack of prospects. For example, in Albania especially, medical graduates report that academic training relies on memorization rather than hands-on practice, which leaves them underprepared for real-world professional demands. One interviewee noted, “Albanian education relies on memorization and lacks practical application; when graduates step into real life, many feel lost and not self-sufficient.” Meanwhile, employers often highlight mismatches between qualifications and available roles, especially in health, ICT, and engineering sectors (UNFPA, 2023; OECD, 2024). These findings align with the broader academic literature, which underscores the interplay between structural socio-economic factors and governance-related grievances in shaping migration intentions at both national and regional levels (Mitrović, 2020; KOMS, 2024; 2025; UNFPA, 2021; Westminster Foundation for Democracy [WFD], 2020; Hasanović et al., 2024). As one interviewee from Bosnia and Herzegovina noted,



The labor market is heavily influenced by nepotism, and the education system is outdated and disconnected from the economy.

National strategies frequently outline broad objectives but lack actionable steps, dedicated funding, or timelines. Bosnia and Herzegovina relies primarily on fragmented ad hoc measures, while North Macedonia's previous strategy left a policy vacuum after its expiration in 2020 (Ministry of Security, 2016; State Audit, 2023). Serbia's comprehensive frameworks, including the Strategy on Economic Migration (2020), the Employment Strategy (2021), and the National Youth Strategy (2023) address youth welfare and diaspora engagement, indirectly responding to brain drain challenges, yet migration is still framed largely negatively, with its developmental potential underestimated (Mitrović, 2021:95; Government of the RS, 2020; 2021; 2023). Kosovo, by contrast, lacks a currently active national strategy on diaspora or migration. [The National Strategy for Diaspora 2013-2018](#) was the first structured policy in this area, but the follow-up framework drafted for 2019-2023 was never formally adopted due to political changes, leaving the contracting party without an updated strategy since 2018. Although several initiatives exist- such as the Citizen Diplomacy Fellowship, the Engaging Diaspora Professionals program, and various IOM-supported schemes, they remain fragmented and underfunded, limiting their overall impact on youth retention and circular migration.

As governance in BiH highly decentralized, with responsibilities divided among state, entity, cantonal, and Brčko District authorities, implementation is further complicated, resulting in a fragmented system response characterized by the absence of comprehensive monitoring mechanisms and persistent delays in the recognition of foreign qualifications (Financial Times, 2024; Borgen Project, 2025; Euraxess, 2023). Similarly, in North Macedonia, over 90% of the measures in the National Strategy for Networking and Cooperation with Highly Educated and Professional Personnel (2013–2020) remained unimplemented, largely due to ineffective inter-institutional coordination (Karadafova & Andreevski, 2020; State Audit, 2023). Only about 10 percent of young people living in North Macedonia were aware of the existence of national strategies, with one interviewee stating



I have no idea what kind of benefits the government offers to help people find work or return to the country. I've heard from a friend that there are some courses for unemployed people, but that's all" (State Audit, 2023).

Meanwhile, Montenegro has developed promising initiatives, such as the Strategy for Scientific Research Activities 2024-2028 and related legislation

on research and innovation (Government of Montenegro, 2020; 2025; Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation, 2024), which create foundations for research funding and innovation support that could help retain talent in knowledge-based sectors, aiming to strengthen youth engagement and circular migration potential. On strategies, Albania does not currently maintain a dedicated national brain drain policy. Migration concerns are logged under broader youth, education, and diaspora programs, with sporadic initiatives such as preferential loan schemes and scholarship offerings for medical graduates. However, these measures are modest in scale, lack consistent monitoring, and are often not well integrated into a coherent framework (Leitner, 2021; UNFPA, 2022). Overall, across all WB6, broad systemic measures often fail to translate into tangible improvements for young people.

Across the region, monitoring and evaluation systems are either absent or underdeveloped. Montenegro formally plans a monitoring mechanism under the Youth Strategy 2023–2027 (Measure 4.3), but data collection is still at an early stage, and uncertainty in cross-ministerial coordination threatens to limit the impact of existing measures (Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2023). In Serbia, monitoring mechanisms exist on paper, but the absence of precise statistical data and an active action plan undermine their effectiveness (Mirić, 2022). These gaps contribute to a persistent weakness in translating strategic commitments into measurable outcomes, leaving youth policies vulnerable to stagnation. As one interviewee from Serbia observed:



When we talk about challenges in policy and strategic planning, I think there are laws that simply aren't being implemented, and that's a fundamental problem.

A recurring theme is the disconnect between policymakers and young people. Conducted interviews indicate that youth often feel unsupported and unaware of existing opportunities. They call for practical interventions that improve quality of life through concrete, everyday measures rather than abstract, long-term policies. One interviewee from Serbia summarized this frustration, “To be honest, I feel like there is no support system at all. Everything mostly comes down to figuring things out on your own. Even if some form of support does exist, information about it is hard to access. People often don't even know where to look for help.” Another interviewee from Bosnia and Herzegovina highlighted, “The hardest part isn't adapting abroad – it's

realizing that (Bosnia and Herzegovina) doesn't want you enough to fight for you to stay."

Youth also emphasized that support networks and accessible guidance are critical to retaining skilled professionals. An interviewee from Serbia said



Listen to young people, but not just declaratively. Ask them what they need and then try to really enable that. Many want to stay or return, but they need a support network.

One of the key findings from diaspora engagement research in the Western Balkans highlights that personal ties (particularly family and friendship) remain the strongest motivator for the WB6 diaspora to contribute to or consider returning. By strengthening local social networks and creating welcoming, youth-friendly spaces for connection and collaboration, third spaces can play a key role in sustaining those ties and encouraging long-term engagement from both local and returning youth. This was echoed by multiple interviewees. For example, one from Serbia noted, "I would be eager to share the experiences I've gained, as I believe they could genuinely help young people facing similar situations. Right now, there are too few spaces for exchanging experiences and building connections, and this lack contributes to a growing sense of alienation. I think creating opportunities for support and meaningful connection would be one of the most valuable contributions we can offer to youth." Another from Montenegro said, "If I was in their shoes (decision-makers), I would perhaps create more "third spaces" in Montenegro. I think that that is a pretty simple start to building a community and giving it a reason to stay and prosper.

Despite differences in national strategies, the Western Balkans share common issues: governance fragmentation, insufficient monitoring, broad policy objectives, and low youth engagement. However, opportunities for reform exist. Leveraging EU accession frameworks, mobilizing diaspora networks, and prioritizing tangible, youth-centered interventions could transform these strategies into effective tools for reform. As one young respondent from North Macedonia urged:



The system doesn't care about building a system, they try to solve peripheral problems rather than find solutions to deeper issues.

Considering the above insights, we propose the following policy aspects be taken into account when addressing emigration and youth empowerment in the WB6.



Policy Recommendations

1

Standardizing Migration Data and Enhancing Oversight of Brain Drain Policies

Underlying problem

Lack of standardized data on tracking skilled immigrants; poor oversight over national strategies on brain drain, and lack of evaluation of current and previous strategies across the region.

Desired outcome

Drawing on models such as Germany's Institute for Employment Research, each Western Balkan national statistics office should systematically collect and publish data on skilled migration. This would include the number of skilled workers leaving, returning, or circulating within the region and beyond, ensuring evidence-based policymaking.

Specific actions

- Draft and pass amendments to national statistical laws requiring the collection of standardized youth emigration data. This data should be published quarterly or annually by the national statistics office of each contracting party.
- Create a regional data-sharing platform coordinated among Western Balkan national statistics offices, ensuring harmonized indicators and facilitating cross WB6 comparison of migration trends.
- The institution implementing the national strategy addressing youth migration, brain drain, or diaspora engagement should set up a monitoring body with civil society and youth representatives to oversee and assess its implementation.

- Institutionalize an annual public youth survey, with data collection managed by relevant state institutions and survey design conducted in partnership with youth organizations, to identify priority focus areas. Use the results to plan and schedule targeted activities and programs within youth hubs (see recommendation 5).

2

Enhancing Youth Access Through E-Government Initiatives

Underlying problem

Youth in the Western Balkans face significant barriers in accessing youth-centered services. Complex and bureaucratic procedures hinder the recognition of foreign qualifications, while students and graduates often lack information about available opportunities. These challenges limit access to jobs, career development, and mobility programs.

Desired outcome

A simplified, efficient, and digitalized system that provides youth with accessible services, career development resources, and job opportunities, ultimately benefiting all as these measures can enhance multi-stakeholder cooperation, “reduce corruption, increase transparency, lower administrative burdens and costs, improve service quality”, and strengthen regional collaboration (Milenković, 2019:202).

Specific actions

- The establishment of a centralized digital portal consolidating scholarships, internships, apprenticeships, public vacancies, and startup grants led respective national ministries working closely with universities, civil society organizations, and national employment agencies to actively share and update opportunities in real time.
- At the regional level, ministries responsible for public administration, together with EU cooperation bodies and national IT agencies, should coordinate efforts to align digitalization models with EU approaches, building on experience from previous initiatives such as the [Electronic South Eastern Europe](#)



[\(e-SEE\) project](#), to create a unified framework for developing an information society across the region.

- National governments should continue ongoing e-government initiatives while enabling automatic data sharing between relevant institutions to simplify procedures, including the recognition of foreign diplomas on a regional level.

3

Develop Incentive Programs for the Return and Retention of Young Professionals

Underlying problem

Young professionals in the Western Balkans often face limited career opportunities, weak professional networks, and insufficient financial or institutional support upon graduation. These conditions make returning after studies abroad less attractive, and encourage continued emigration.

Desired outcome

Improved career prospects and institutional support for young professionals, leading to higher rates of return after studies abroad and stronger retention of skilled talent within the Western Balkans.

Specific actions

- Guarantee public sector job opportunities for top graduates (especially those educated abroad with public funding) by assigning them fellowship placements or entry-level roles in state institutions, local governments, and the justice and health sectors.
- Prioritize sectors facing critical skill shortages, and provide clear career advancement opportunities, competitive salaries, and other benefits (e.g. housing support, professional development) to encourage long-term service, with the coordination of the Ministries of Public Administration, Education, and Health (as relevant for each contracting party).
- Establish national research and innovation funds to support early-career researchers, with dedicated support for academic collaboration, professional development, and locally relevant

research, coordinated by responsible ministries on the national level.

- Develop targeted low-interest or interest-free loan schemes to support the settlement and local investment of young professionals (especially in critical shortage areas such as healthcare and education, with priority given to couples or families), designed and administered by the Ministries of Finance in partnership with public development banks.

4

Strengthen Communication and Collaboration with the Diaspora Community

Underlying problem

Weak institutional ties with the diaspora and underutilized diaspora potential in development.

Desired outcome

Sustained diaspora engagement, increased knowledge transfer, and targeted investment back into the region.

Specific actions

- Operationalize a live Diaspora Talent Registry by creating an opt-in online platform (privacy-by-design) that maps diaspora expertise, making the database accessible to universities, research institutes, innovation hubs, and relevant government institutions - with national ministries coordinating data collection and collaboration with universities and research centers, facilitating outreach and engagement with diaspora communities, and the Regional Cooperation Council supporting standardization and interoperability across the WB6.
- Introduce tax and investment incentives for diaspora entrepreneurs who establish or expand businesses in the WB6 region, including reduced corporate tax rates, start-up grants, or preferential access to industrial zones - with Chambers of Commerce designing and administering incentives.

- Provide systematic support to students and young professionals abroad by creating “Diaspora Youth Desks” in embassies/consulates that offer career guidance, networking opportunities, and information on internships, scholarships, and return pathways.
- Establish a Regional Western Balkans Diaspora Ambassadors & Knowledge Transfer Program, coordinated by the Regional Cooperation Council in partnership with national diaspora agencies and the Western Balkans Fund, to recognize outstanding diaspora members and returnees and support short- to medium-term placements of diaspora professionals in universities, research institutes, and businesses.

5

Creating Youth Centered Spaces

Underlying problem

Weak local social infrastructure for youth, limited opportunities for meaningful engagement, weak social ties of the local youth, and weak social ties of the emigrating highly educated people and diaspora.

Desired outcome

Stronger social ties and sense of belonging among the youth, enhanced retention of youth talent, sustained engagement of the diaspora and their place of origin.

Specific actions

- Convert unused public buildings into multifunctional youth centers in at least three municipalities in each contracting party (capital city, urban, and regional) - formally co-managed by youth organizations and local governments (best practices evident in Montenegro and North Macedonia).
- Integrate youth hubs into urban planning and relevant national strategies to guarantee their legal and financial recognition and secure their long-term integration in coordination with municipal planning offices.

- Mandate municipalities to allocate a dedicated annual budget line for hub maintenance, staffing, and structured youth activities as part of local development plans.
- Introduce tax incentives for businesses that invest in youth infrastructure, training, or programs hosted within youth hubs, implemented by Ministries of Finance and Economy in coordination with local tax offices.
- Establish micro-grant schemes for youth organizations on a municipal level, to run specific targeted projects that have been jointly identified as priorities by youth and municipalities, with activities implemented in youth hubs.
- Foster regional cooperation among youth centers across the Western Balkans (WB6) through joint programs, exchanges, and capacity-building initiatives - facilitated and coordinated by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO).

6

Promote Campaigns that Destigmatize Emigration and Return

Underlying problem

Emigration in the Western Balkans is often framed only as a loss, while both returnees and those who remain abroad are frequently undervalued or stigmatized (returnees as “unsuccessful” and permanent migrants as “lost” to the contracting party). This prevents societies from recognizing the broader benefits of migration.

Desired outcome

Reduced stigma around both return and emigration, with greater public recognition of the skills, knowledge, remittances, and networks that migrants and returnees contribute to contracting party development.

Specific actions

- Civil society organizations, in partnership with international organizations, should design campaigns that showcase contributions of both returnees and diaspora (e.g., investments, knowledge transfer, philanthropy).

- Municipalities should organize public dialogues and events where returnees and diaspora members share their experiences and contributions, fostering local acceptance and inclusion.
- Universities and research institutions should continue to conduct studies on the social, economic, and cultural impacts of emigration and return, producing evidence-based data to inform public campaigns, policy-making, and community dialogues, thereby ensuring a fact-driven approach to reducing stigma.

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Appendices²

Appendix A: Questionnaire A (Young Educated People Considering Migration)

Hello, my name is _____ and I am conducting research carried out by the organization RYCO. The aim of this study is to better understand the experiences of young, educated people from the Western Balkans who have already left their homelands and now live abroad. This is part of a broader project in which we collect diverse perspectives to later develop a policy brief with recommendations for improving the system and enhancing support for young people.

The interview will last about 40 minutes and will help us draw up potential policy recommendations. It is important for you to know that your responses are confidential, and we will anonymize all quotes. I will record the interview to make sure nothing is missed, the recording will be used exclusively for the analysis of the collected data. Do you agree with this?

Current Situation and Migration Motivations

1. Where do you currently live, and what are you currently doing (working, studying, looking for a job, etc.)?
2. Can you recall a specific situation or period when you seriously started considering migration?
3. What are the main factors that currently motivate you to stay (personal, professional, social, etc.)?
4. What are the main factors that currently motivate you leave (personal, professional, social, etc.)?
5. How much do close relationships (family, friends, partner) influence your decision to stay or leave?
6. Do you see your potential departure as temporary or permanent?

¹ Interview transcripts are not included with this document, as interviews were conducted under varying circumstances, including in-person, online, and informal settings, in multiple languages, and not all were recorded. For reference, only the interview questionnaires have been attached.

Perception of the System and Structural Barriers

1. How would you describe the quality of life in your homeland? What is the biggest challenge for you personally?
2. How do you perceive institutions, the labor market, and the education system?
3. In your opinion, what are the main challenges in the system when it comes to young, educated people:
 - a) Challenges related to policy and strategic planning
 - b) Challenges within the legal framework
 - c) Challenges in the functioning of specific institutions
 - d) Challenges regarding access to resources, support programs, and development opportunities
 - e) Challenges related to documentation, statistical data, and analysis of young people's needs
4. Have you ever contacted an institution, organization, or program for support (e.g., employment, scholarships, career development)? If yes, which one?
 - a. If so, how would you rate your experience working with them, on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good)?

Recommendations

1. What advice would you give to young people facing a similar dilemma today?
2. What kind of changes are necessary to encourage young, highly qualified people to stay (in terms of specific policies, laws, institutional functioning, or society as a whole)?
3. If you had the chance to speak directly to decision-makers, what would you say? Or, if you were in a position of power, what would be the first change you would implement?
4. How do you envision your future in five or ten years, do you see yourself living here or elsewhere?
5. If you were to leave, do you think you would be interested in participating in activities that keep you connected to your homeland?

Is there anything else you would like to add that you consider important for understanding the situation of young, educated people from the Western Balkans who are considering migration, which we have not covered during this conversation?

Appendix B: Questionnaire B (Young People Who Have Already Left Their Homeland)

Hello, my name is _____ and I am conducting research carried out by the organization RYCO. The aim of this study is to better understand the experiences of young, educated people from the Western Balkans who have already left their homelands and now live abroad. This is part of a broader project in which we collect diverse perspectives to later develop a policy brief with recommendations for improving the system and enhancing support for young people.

The interview will last about 40 minutes and will help us draw up potential policy recommendations. It is important for you to know that your responses are confidential, and we will anonymize all quotes. I will record the interview to make sure nothing is missed, the recording will be used exclusively for the analysis of the collected data. Do you agree with this?

Current Situation and Migration Motivations

1. Where do you currently live, and what are you currently doing (working, studying, looking for a job, etc.)?
2. When did you leave your homeland, and what was your main motivation for doing so?
3. Can you describe how your decision-making process to leave unfolded? Were there any specific events or situations that were decisive?
4. How would you compare your expectations before leaving with the reality you encountered in the new society?
5. What are the biggest advantages and challenges of living abroad from your perspective?
6. How do you currently feel about your homeland? Do you still feel connected to it, and to what extent?
7. What are the main factors that would make you consider returning to your homeland?
8. How do close relationships (family, friends, partners) influence your decision to stay abroad or possibly consider returning?
9. Have you ever tried to return, or are you currently in the process of deciding whether to return? Why or why not?

Perception of the System and Structural Barriers

1. How do you assess the opportunities and challenges for young, educated people in your society of origin now, from the perspective of what you have experienced abroad?
2. How do you see the role of institutions, the labor market, and the education system in your homeland in relation to what you needed to stay, or deciding whether to return?
3. What do you think are the biggest systemic problems contributing to the emigration of young people from your society? Can you tell me how these problems affect your decision to stay abroad or possibly consider returning?
4. During your time abroad, have you used or contacted any institution or program from your homeland of origin that supports the diaspora or returnees? How would you evaluate that experience?
5. Have you faced any barriers when trying to access support programs? (e.g., administrative barriers, lack of information)?
6. What would you change in policies or approaches related to young people and migration to improve the situation?

Recommendations

1. What would you say to young people in your homeland who are considering leaving?
2. What specific changes do you think could encourage young, highly qualified people to stay or return?
3. If you could communicate directly with decision-makers, what would you say to them?
4. How do you envision your future in the next five or ten years? Do you plan to stay abroad or return? Why?
5. Are you interested in participating in activities that would keep you connected to your homeland, even if you stay abroad? In what ways?
6. How motivated do you feel to contribute to the development of your homeland despite living abroad?
7. How do you think you can contribute to your homeland from abroad, as part of the diaspora?

Is there anything else you would like to add that you consider important for understanding the situation of young, educated people from the Western Balkans who have gone abroad, which we have not covered during this conversation?

