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From Misalignment to Regional Coordination:

Aligning Youth Guarantee Implementation in the Western Balkans



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Executive Summary

Youth unemployment in the Western Balkans remains high despite the national adoption of the Youth Guarantee (YG) - an EU initiative ensuring that all young people under 30 receive a quality offer of employment, education, training, or apprenticeship within four months of leaving work or school. Beyond employment, the YG seeks to strengthen youth employability, lifelong learning, and school-to-work transitions through structured opportunities such as traineeships and apprenticeships.

Its implementation across the region, however, remains fragmented, with each government following its own approach and timeline. This weakens comparability, accountability, and regional mobility, limiting the YG's contribution to the Common Regional Market (CRM) and broader EU integration goals. Inconsistent definitions, limited data systems, and unclear institutional responsibilities further constrain evidence-based policymaking.

While the YG has created a foundation for regional cooperation, its full potential to enhance youth mobility and inclusion remains untapped. Strengthening coordination, aligning data frameworks, and improving mutual recognition mechanisms will be essential to ensure that the YG effectively supports youth across the Western Balkans.



Methodology

This policy brief was developed between 15 May and 15 October 2025 by a team of six researchers from the Western Balkans. The research combined desk analysis of policy documents and statistical data with field research involving relevant institutional and civil society actors. The empirical component applied both qualitative and quantitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and a standardized questionnaire.

The key stakeholders consulted included government institutions, national youth councils, and youth policy advisers involved in the design and implementation of the Youth Guarantee. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions divided into four thematic sections, focusing on institutional coordination, inclusion, funding, and monitoring mechanisms.



Introduction

The Youth Guarantee is an EU initiative aimed at ensuring that all young people under 30 receive a quality offer of employment, education, training, or apprenticeship within four months of leaving either education or work ([Council of the European Union 2013](#); [Ibid. 2020](#)). Encouraged by its success, the governments have adopted the YG to address high youth unemployment and the rates of Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) young people.

Despite political commitments, the implementation of YG remains fragmented across the various governments. Differences in timelines, definitions, and governance structures limit the ability to compare initiatives, facilitate mutual learning, and promote labour mobility. This fragmentation (see annex D) undermines regional integration goals outlined in the Berlin Process, the Regional Economic Area (REA) ([European Commission 2017](#)), and CRM ([Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum 2021](#)), all of which emphasise the importance of youth mobility and mutual recognition.

This brief examines where coordination failures occur and explores what a regionally aligned YG could look like in practice. The analysis is based on national policy documents, statistical data, and interviews with stakeholders from the WB6. By comparing the stages of implementation, coordination structures, inclusion mechanisms, funding, and monitoring systems, it identifies the structural gaps that hinder regional alignment.

Assessment of Implementation Gaps

To identify misalignments, we examined five critical dimensions: rollout stage, coordination, inclusion, funding, and monitoring. These dimensions reflect core elements from the EU and ILO frameworks for the YG and align with social policy implementation analyses. Our analysis, based on desk research and interviews, shows that these dimensions reveal the institutional processes of rollout, coordination, and funding, as well as inclusiveness and accountability mechanisms. By focusing on these areas, we can uncover structural weaknesses hindering regional comparability, based on national policy documents, statistical reports, and insights from semi-structured interviews with stakeholders.¹

Five critical



Rollout Stage



Coordination



Inclusion



Funding



Monitoring

Among these, monitoring and data collection emerged as the most critical challenge. The following section explores why harmonisation here is essential for regional comparability and accountability.

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



Harmonisation of Monitoring, Data Collection, and Implementation Frameworks

Each WB6 government operates its YG as an independent domestic policy, which results in inconsistent definitions, timelines, and institutional arrangements. On the other hand, inconsistent data collection and a lack of a unified monitoring mechanism hinder evidence-based policy adjustments.

Despite local youth laws² defining the age category of youth between 15 and 30 years of age, with minor disparities between the parties, government statistics agencies and other relevant institutions do not adhere to this standard, but instead opt for the outdated age groups of 15-18, 19-35, or 15-24, which do not reflect the applicable youth laws. The resulting disparity in data collection and analysis is particularly evident when compared to research on youth unemployment conducted by NGOs and IGOs, leading to potential gaps when assessing the progress of YG implementation across the governments. The issue is most apparent in relation to the NEET category, since not all governments legally recognise it and therefore face challenges in mapping and monitoring the status of these young people, as well as in fully understanding the category itself. Therefore, there is a lack of official state-specific data for NEETs. Most NEET data has been collected and disseminated by IGOs, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), or local NGOs.

Furthermore, our analysis has shown that the implementation framework of each Party's domestic policy lacks alignment in definitions, timelines, and institutional responsibility. While certain elements are shaped by local youth

¹ WB6 Parties Laws have been listed in the sources.

legislation and budgetary restrictions – such as institutional responsibility and deadlines – other aspects, including terminology, baseline conditions for offers, state-level offer tracking, and NEET inclusion and monitoring, are more susceptible to alignment at the regional level.

Based on the aforementioned, in order to improve evidence-based policymaking and comparability across the WB6, a set of shared indicators on NEET status, youth activation, and program outcomes should be developed by engaging Eurostat and the European Training Foundation (ETF) to establish a regional data dashboard.



Strengthening of Regional Coordination and Youth Mobility

Critical shortcomings lie in the absence of visible regional coordination mechanisms, such as peer reviews, common indicators, and benchmarking. This not only weakens the effectiveness of the YG but also undermines the broader EU integration objectives.

While REA and CRM frameworks call for mobility, skills recognition, and regional labour integration, YG systems remain nationally locked. Limited alignment with REA and CRM objectives undermines the potential for cross-community mobility, mutual recognition of offers, and shared labour market data.

In order to advance regional coordination and cooperation opportunities for youth learning and professional mobility, it is necessary to promote joint initiatives in the field of employment, such as professional internships, mobility vouchers, and digital job exchanges. These initiatives should particularly focus on the green and digital employment exchanges, with an emphasis on green and digital sectors. Successful examples in this regard include Erasmus+ and the CEEPUS network, which have provided wide spaces for exchange, integration, and benefits for students and young people across Europe. Participation of youth from the WB6 in these programs has contributed to skills development, increased employability, and integration into the EU. Building on these best practices, it is important to consider the creation of a regional mechanism within the WB6 itself, offering similar opportunities for exchanges and professional internships. Such a mechanism would serve as a platform for strengthening cooperation, fostering gradual integration, and consolidating mutual trust among the parties. This includes aligning national YG strategies with the REA and CRM frameworks to enable mutual recognition of offers and regional mobility.



Clarification of Institutional Responsibilities and Improvement of Local Delivery

Another aspect of misalignment that affects the implementation and monitoring of domestic YG policies is the lack of clarity of institutional capacity and the role of local government bodies.

Domestically, YG is coordinated by ministries with broad mandates; in most cases, they do not specialise solely in labour or youth affairs but also cover other priorities such as economy, finance, or social welfare. In some instances, YG delivery is overseen by inter-ministerial bodies or boards with representatives from multiple institutions. This institutional diversity may create confusion and weaken clarity in national-level implementation. Youth experts acknowledged the complexity of YG coordination across multiple ministries and institutions. In particular, the expert from North Macedonia, affiliated with the national advisory body for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, pointed to the lack of clearly defined responsibilities due to recent changes in the scope of work of the ministries involved (INT-02).

Moving one level down to municipalities, Youth Councils emerge as crucial actors in supporting YG. In Albania, all 61 Local Youth Councils (LYCs) have been formally established; however, according to the Ministry of Youth, only around 70% remain active ([Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation, 2024, p. 14](#)). These active LYCs meet monthly with municipal officials, including mayors or deputy mayors, to discuss youth-related issues and channel youth concerns into policymaking. In North Macedonia, the situation is more limited: in 2024, only 28 out of 80 municipalities had a functioning LYC, marking a decrease from 34 out of 80 in 2023, according to

the Macedonian National Youth Council ([Monitoring Report of the Macedonian National Youth Council](#), 2024, p.16).



Functioning Local Youth Councils in North Macedonia

Based on the analysis of institutional complexity, the authors of this brief propose the following as a solution: to ensure effective implementation and regional alignment, specific mandates for labour ministries, national employment services, municipalities, and youth councils must be clearly defined and authorised, and then published for transparency. This can be achieved by establishing minimum service standards and prioritising geographically balanced expansion beyond pilot models.



Establishment of a Regional Benchmarking and Peer Learning System

Besides regional coordination at the party level, inter-municipal partnerships and knowledge-sharing between governments need to be implemented to ensure a balanced and practical approach to YG implementation. This can be achieved firstly by establishing a regional benchmarking system and then by fostering regular dialogue among national coordinators, social partners (unions and employers associations), municipalities, and civil society, particularly youth organisations, by introducing annual peer review cycles to evaluate performance and share experiences. Representatives of both state institutions and youth organisations involved in the current implementation of YG acknowledged that it could be possible to have a harmonised “structure of measures” (INT-02) or “standardised performance indicators” (INT-03).

This could be achieved by institutionalising obligatory annual meetings of national coordinators. With support from independent experts and guided by a regional benchmarking system, these meetings would allow coordinators to review each other’s progress, share good practices, and address both national and regional challenges in implementing the YG. The necessity for this kind of exchange is highlighted by the fact that different governments face different challenges in the implementation of the YG, according to our respondents, ranging from personnel, legislation, intersectoral cooperation, to funding and outreach, which shows potential for mutual learning and overcoming challenges. Official conclusions with recommendations from these meetings should be distributed to the respective decision makers in the parties.

This kind of peer review event is not unknown in EU practice. A good example that can be used as a model for establishing such a mechanism could be the

Mutual Learning Program related to the European Employment Strategy. The goal of these events is “to discuss a specific topic, with the view of identifying transferable aspects and learning from good practice examples” (European Commission). These events also involve both national officials and independent experts.

Involvement from other mentioned actors could be achieved either through the inclusion of their inputs in these national coordinators’ meetings or through the organization of a regular annual regional forum dedicated to the YG, which would gather all relevant stakeholders.

By introducing regular discussions between field actors, implementation would be beneficial not only in promoting regional cooperation but also in improving implementation practices, considering the similarities in governmental and legal structures across the region.



Ensuring Inclusion and Scaling of Successful Models

Despite efforts to design programs for vulnerable youth groups – such as NEET, young carers, youth with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, Roma youth, and those living in rural areas – significant gaps persist in ensuring their effective inclusion and meaningful participation.

Across the region, formal inclusion of vulnerable youth in the YG is evident, but significant barriers remain. In North Macedonia, a youth council representative noted that while outreach covers rural areas and youth with disabilities, limited awareness and sensitivity among state officials continue to restrict access to institutions, and available measures (INT-02). In Montenegro, a state representative stressed that coverage of vulnerable youth groups has been expanded through targeted programs, yet the scope remains insufficient and better cooperation with civil society organisations is needed to ensure effectiveness (INT-03). Meanwhile, in Kosovo*, the YG framework is envisioned with a stronger focus on these categories, with tailored measures envisioned through education, vocational training, and employment support – though the design is still ongoing (INT-04).

Taken together, these insights show that while formal inclusion exists across the region, practical barriers and insufficiently adapted measures still limit participation. This often leads to indirect discrimination, with NGOs and youth councils underused. The European Commission's Progress Report 2023 for the WB6 similarly recognises that young people remain a vulnerable target group facing persistent labour market difficulties, requiring continued focus on vulnerable groups. ([European Commission & MPI](#), 2023)

To address these inequalities, governments must design tailored interventions for marginalised groups, with special attention to rural youth

* 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.

Economic and Investment Plan should be strategically utilised, embedding YG implementation into broader socio-economic and employment policies to maximise impact and ensure sustainable results.





Conclusion

In this policy brief, we analysed the implementation of the YG across the Western Balkans. We highlighted how fragmented national approaches can undermine youth mobility, regional integration, and the potential effectiveness of the YG. Our analysis focused on five key dimensions: the rollout stage, coordination, inclusion, funding, and monitoring. We based our findings on national policy documents, statistical reports, and interviews with stakeholders.

We found that inconsistent definitions, timelines, institutional responsibilities, and data collection practices limit evidence-based policymaking and comparability across the region. Weak regional coordination and the absence of mutual recognition mechanisms further constrain intra-regional mobility and the alignment of YG initiatives with the CRM and EU integration objectives. Vulnerable youth groups, such as NEETs, rural youth, and youth with disabilities, continue to face barriers to participation, despite existing programs.

To address these challenges, the brief recommends establishing a regional coordination mechanism, creating a shared framework for monitoring and benchmarking, clarifying institutional responsibilities, scaling up inclusive programs, and promoting peer learning and inter-municipal partnerships. These measures aim to strengthen regional alignment, improve implementation, and ensure that all young people in the Western Balkans benefit from the YG's promise of quality employment, education, and training opportunities.

Policy Recommendations

In this research, several practical recommendations are proposed to improve alignment and unlock the full potential of the Youth Guarantee in the region:

1

Harmonise Monitoring, Data Collection, and Implementation Frameworks

National employment services and statistical offices, coordinated by labour ministries with Eurostat/ETF support, should develop shared indicators and a WB6-wide data dashboard to improve comparability within the next two years.

2

Strengthen Regional Coordination and Youth Mobility

Labour ministries, youth councils, and CSOs should launch regional internships, mobility vouchers, and digital employment exchanges to enhance youth mobility.

RCC should work on establishing intergovernmental cooperation within a year of pilot phase completion.

3

Clarify Institutional Responsibilities and Improve Local Delivery

Labour ministries, national employment services, municipalities, and LYCs should formalise mandates and service standards as soon as possible to ensure consistent YG delivery.

4

Clarify Institutional Responsibilities and Improve Local Delivery

RCC, labour ministries, and the ETF should organise annual peer review cycles to share experiences and highlight best practices by the end of next year.

5

Clarify Institutional Responsibilities and Improve Local Delivery

Labour ministries, municipalities, NGOs, and donor agencies should design tailored interventions for vulnerable groups and scale successful pilots nationally as soon as possible.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview List

Code	Location	Interviewee Affiliation	Mode	Date
INT-01	Belgrade	National Youth Council of Serbia	In Person	15.08.2025.
INT-02	Skopje	National Youth Council of North Macedonia	In Person	11.09.2025.
INT-03	Podgorica	Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue	Via e-mail	08.09.2025.
INT-04	Zenica/Sarajevo	Youth Council of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina	Via Google Meet	27.08.2025.
INT-05	Pristina	Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports	In Person	20.08.2025.
INT-06	Tirana	National Youth Congress	Via e-mail	12.09.2025.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form (Template)

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

This interview is part of a research process aimed at developing an analytical report on youth unemployment and the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans. The research is conducted within the framework of the “Empowering Young Researchers” programme – a mentorship initiative of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), supported by the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria.

The purpose of this interview is to gather your perspectives, insights, and opinions as a representative of a relevant institution regarding the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, current challenges, institutional capacities, and potential solutions for improving youth employability in _____.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any point without providing any explanation. The interview will be audio recorded solely for the purpose of accurate transcription. Once the transcription is completed, the recording will be permanently deleted.

The transcript of your responses will be anonymised – your name and personal information will not appear in any public document, report, or publication. If quoting your input becomes necessary, your name will be replaced with a neutral identifier such as “interviewee,” along with a general reference to your functional role (e.g., “government representative”).

All questions in the interview are open-ended, and there are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your genuine views and experiences. We encourage you to speak openly, even if your views differ from those of other institutional actors. We also kindly ask you not to share the contents of this interview with third parties.

If you have any questions before we begin, please feel free to ask – I’ll be happy to clarify.

CONSENT STATEMENT

I, the undersigned, declare that I understand the information provided above and I give my informed consent to participate in this interview under the stated conditions.

Full Name:

Place and Date:

Signature:

Appendix C: Questionnaire

1. Could you briefly describe your current role and involvement in the Youth Guarantee process in your society?
 - How did your institution become involved?
2. For how long have you been engaged in this process, and how has your experience evolved over time?
 - Has your institution's role changed in the past years?
3. How would you describe the current status of Youth Guarantee implementation?
 - Which institutions are involved at different levels (national, regional, local)?
 - How is the coordination between them organised?
4. Have you recognised any specific challenges in implementing the Youth Guarantee?
 - Could you elaborate on some of them?
5. How would you describe the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place for the Youth Guarantee?
 - Are these mechanisms institutionalized or project-based?
6. Is there any system in place to track NEET youth, either at national or local levels?
 - If yes, who manages the data and how is it used for policymaking?
7. Are any digital tools or platforms used for outreach, registration, or tracking of NEET youth?
 - Are these tools accessible and operational in all regions?
8. Other than state institutions, who else is involved in the design and implementation of the Youth Guarantee?
 - How would you assess the role of civil society, youth organizations, or young people themselves?
9. Are there any forms of inter-municipal, inter-sectoral, or regional cooperation related to Youth Guarantee implementation?
 - If so, could you give some examples?

- 10.** How is the Youth Guarantee funded?
- Is there a dedicated national budget, or does the initiative rely on donor support?
- 11.** In your view, how sustainable is the current financial model for Youth Guarantee implementation?
- 12.** To what extent are vulnerable youth groups addressed within the Youth Guarantee framework?
- Are there any targeted measures or programs?
- 13.** Which sectors of the economy do you see as having the highest potential to improve youth employability in your national context?
- 14.** Is there any existing regional cooperation in the context of the Youth Guarantee?
- How would you describe the current state of regional collaboration?
- 15.** In your opinion, what would a regionally aligned Youth Guarantee look like in practice?
- 16.** Do you think that a joint regional monitoring or coordination mechanism would be feasible?
- What kind of institutional or technical conditions would be needed to establish such a mechanism?
- 17.** Are there institutional or legal limitations that hinder more harmonised or decentralised implementation of the Youth Guarantee?
- 18.** Looking ahead, what would you identify as the top national or regional priority to strengthen the impact of the Youth Guarantee?
- What time frame do you think would be needed for this priority to be achieved?
- 19.** Is there anything else you would like to add or emphasise that we haven't discussed during this interview?
- 20.** Do you have any questions or recommendations for us as interviewers or researchers?

Appendix D: Supplementary Table

Dimension	ALB	BIH	KOS	MNE	MKD	RS
Implementation Phase	Pilot 2023–25;	Pre-pilot	Pilot 2025	Pilot 2025	Fully implemented	Pilot 2023–26
Coordinating Body	Prime Minister's Office and National Agency of Employment and Skills (NAES)	Ministry of Internal Affairs BiH	Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers	Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs
Monitoring Systems	No dedicated system: INSTAT (LFS) + NAES data	TBD	No system; Statistical Agency data.	Implementation reports, administrative data	No official data; NGOs/IGOs only	No system; (Ministry of Tourism and Youth would manage if established)
NEET Data	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Funding Model	National budget, EU/IPA funds, UNDP, UNICEF	IPA, national budget	National budget, EU/IPA funds, IGOs.	National budget, EU/IPA funds	National budget, EU/IPA funds	National budget, EU/IPA Funds
Digitalization of Services	e-Albania platform	N/A	e-Kosova platform	In development	Underdeveloped; weak alignment with green/digital sectors	National Employment Service platform TBD + Viber community
Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups	Yes	N/A	Limited	Limited	Yes	Yes

Sources: based on Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans (Albania 2023–2024; Montenegro 2024–2026; North Macedonia 2023–2026; Serbia 2023–2026), State Strategy for Youth 2024–2032 (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of Kosovo), and stakeholder interviews (Appendix A).

