



WESTERN BALKANS YOUTH FORUM

2026
Recommendations



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Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026
Budva, Montenegro | 4-7 June 2026

The Forum brought together young people from across the Western Balkans together with representatives of governments, regional organisations, European and international institutions, civil society and other partners. More than 220 participants took part in the opening day of the Forum. Participants included young leaders, students, activists, entrepreneurs, researchers, representatives of youth organisations and young professionals from different communities and backgrounds across the region.

This publication presents the recommendations developed through the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026, organised within the framework of the Berlin Process under Montenegro's 2026 Chairmanship and implemented by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) with the support of the Government of Montenegro.

The recommendations reflect the discussions, perspectives and priorities articulated through the participatory process of the Forum. They do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Government of Montenegro, RYCO, Berlin Process participating governments, partner institutions, supporting organisations, donors, or the organisations and institutions with which individual Forum participants may be affiliated.



Foreword

The Western Balkans stands at an important moment in its development. As the region continues to advance regional cooperation, sustainable development and its European integration agenda, one priority is becoming increasingly clear: investing in young people is essential to building a more resilient, prosperous and connected future.

For more than a decade, the Berlin Process has provided an important framework for strengthening dialogue and cooperation among governments, regional organizations, civil society and international partners. Throughout this period, youth participation has evolved from an important objective into a strategic pillar of regional cooperation. The complex challenges facing the Western Balkans such as demographic change and economic transformation, climate action and social cohesion cannot be addressed without the meaningful engagement of young people.

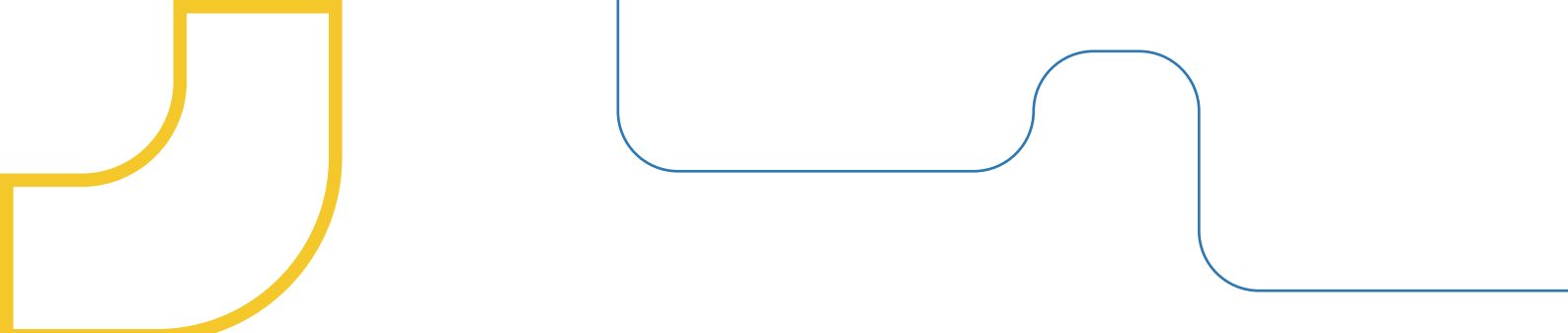
The recommendations presented in this publication are the outcome of the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026, where young people from across the region came together to develop a shared vision for the future of the Western Balkans and translate that vision into practical policy proposals. Through dialogue, collaboration and collective reflection, participants identified priorities that they believe should shape regional cooperation in the years ahead.

The value of these recommendations lies not only in their substance, but also in the participatory process through which they were developed. The Forum demonstrated that young people are ready to engage with complex policy issues, contribute constructive solutions and take shared responsibility for the future of the region. Their perspectives enrich policymaking and strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of regional cooperation.

The recommendations reflect an ambitious but realistic vision of a Western Balkans that invests in skills, innovation and mobility, strengthens democratic participation and peacebuilding and advances an inclusive and sustainable green transition. Together, these priorities form a coherent agenda for a region where opportunity, cooperation and social cohesion reinforce one another.

At the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), we believe that regional cooperation begins with people. Over the years, we have witnessed the transformative impact of youth exchanges, intercultural dialogue and collaborative initiatives in building trust, overcoming stereotypes and creating lasting connections across the Western Balkans. These experiences continue to demonstrate that young people are not only beneficiaries of regional cooperation but also its most important drivers.

The recommendations presented here reflect the aspirations of a generation committed to building a more connected, inclusive and resilient region. Turning these aspirations into tangible results will require partnership among governments, regional organizations, educational institutions, civil society, international partners and young people themselves. Meaningful progress depends on sustained cooperation and a shared commitment to translating ideas into action.



As Secretary General of RYCO, I am encouraged by the vision, determination and sense of responsibility demonstrated by the participants of the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026. Their contributions reaffirm the importance of creating permanent spaces where young people can participate in shaping policies and decisions that affect their lives and communities. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all participants, facilitators, organizers and partners who contributed to this process. Their commitment reflects the strength of regional cooperation and the value of investing in youth participation.

This publication should be seen not as the conclusion of a dialogue, but as the beginning of the next phase of cooperation. The recommendations provide a practical roadmap for advancing a shared vision for the Western Balkans by 2030. The challenge ahead is to translate this vision into measurable progress.

RYCO remains committed to supporting this process and to ensuring that young people continue to play a central role in shaping the future of the Western Balkans. Together, we can build a region where cooperation strengthens resilience, opportunity drives development and young people are recognized as partners in shaping a shared European future.

Vladimir Obradović,
RYCO Secretary General

Introduction

The Berlin Process and Youth Participation

Over the past decade, the Berlin Process has established itself as one of the most important political platforms supporting regional cooperation, connectivity and European integration in the Western Balkans. Launched in 2014 as a complementary initiative to the European Union enlargement process, the Berlin Process was created to maintain momentum for reforms, strengthen regional cooperation and promote dialogue among governments, institutions, civil society organisations and international partners.

Throughout its development, the Process has expanded beyond political and economic cooperation to encompass issues that directly affect the daily lives of citizens, particularly young people. Mobility, education, skills development, employment, digital transformation, environmental sustainability and social cohesion have emerged as key areas where regional cooperation can generate tangible benefits for current and future generations.

The Western Balkans remains a region characterized by significant potential, but also by persistent challenges. Young people continue to face barriers related to employment, educational opportunities, political participation, social inclusion and access to quality public services. At the same time, the region experiences demographic decline, outward migration of young talent and increasing uncertainty related to global political, economic and environmental developments.

Against this backdrop, the Berlin Process has increasingly recognized young people not only as beneficiaries of regional cooperation, but as essential partners in shaping its future direction. Sustainable regional development cannot be achieved without the active participation of youth, whose perspectives, creativity and commitment are indispensable for building democratic, resilient and inclusive societies.

Young people in the Western Balkans have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to contribute to positive social change. Through civic engagement, entrepreneurship, innovation, activism, volunteering and intercultural cooperation, they continue to play a vital role in addressing local and regional challenges. At the same time, many young people express concerns regarding limited opportunities, insufficient participation in decision-making processes and uncertainty about their future prospects within the region. These concerns are reflected in migration trends, declining trust in institutions and growing demand for more inclusive and responsive governance structures.

Addressing these challenges requires more than isolated programmes or short-term interventions. It requires a comprehensive vision that places young people at the centre of policy development and recognises their role as co-creators of solutions. The Western Balkans Youth Forum was established precisely to create such a space. By bringing together young people from different communities, backgrounds and experiences, the Forum promotes dialogue, collaboration and joint ownership over the future of the region.

Montenegro's Chairmanship and Commitment to Youth Participation

As Chair of the Berlin Process in 2026, Montenegro placed regional ownership, measurable results and inclusive participation at the centre of its agenda. Under the motto "Region in Motion. Owning the Change.", the Chairmanship sought to reinforce the Berlin Process as a platform that delivers practical benefits for citizens while advancing regional cooperation and the European integration of the Western Balkans. Its priorities focused on promoting strong and inclusive economic growth, enhancing regional competitiveness, strengthening security and resilience and accelerating a green and sustainable transition.

Recognising that these priorities cannot be achieved without the active participation of young people, Montenegro identified the Western Balkans Youth Forum as one of the flagship inclusive platforms of its Chairmanship. The Youth Forum was designed to strengthen the democratic dimension of the Berlin Process by ensuring that regional policies are informed by the perspectives and aspirations of young people. The thematic structure of the Forum was closely aligned with the Chairmanship's strategic priorities.

By connecting the priorities of Montenegro's Chairmanship with the perspectives of young people from across the region, the Western Balkans Youth Forum strengthened the link between political commitments and youth participation.

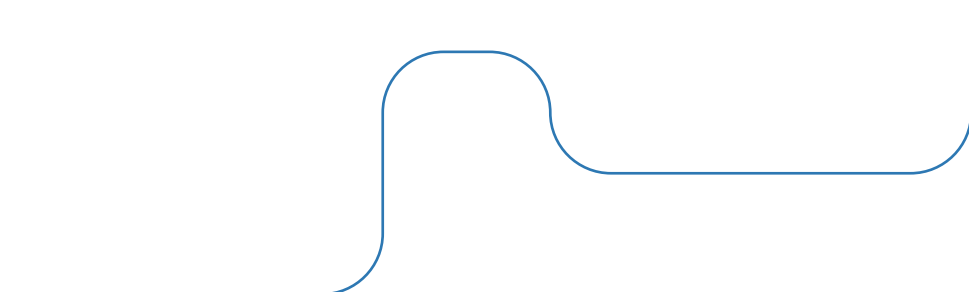
The Western Balkans Youth Forum

The Western Balkans Youth Forum serves as a platform for structured dialogue and youth engagement within the framework of the Berlin Process. It brings together young leaders, activists, students, entrepreneurs, researchers and representatives of youth organisations from across the region to exchange perspectives and develop common policy proposals.

The Forum is based on the conviction that meaningful youth participation strengthens democratic legitimacy, improves policy outcomes and contributes to more sustainable and inclusive societies. It also reflects the understanding that many challenges faced by young people transcend national borders and require regional responses based on cooperation, solidarity and shared responsibility.

The 2026 edition of the Western Balkans Youth Forum was held in Budva, Montenegro, from 4 to 7 June 2026, bringing together young people from across the region and a broad range of institutional, civil society and international partners.

The event followed the priorities of the Montenegro's Chairmanship and designed the agenda around three key areas. Discussions on Skills, Opportunities and Innovation contributed to the objectives of economic growth and competitiveness by focusing on education, employment, entrepreneurship and youth mobility.



The thematic area on Peace, Security and Inclusive Societies supported the Chairmanship's emphasis on resilience through recommendations on democratic participation, reconciliation, media literacy, mental health and the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda. Discussions on Green and Sustainable Development reflected the Chairmanship's commitment to advancing a just and inclusive green transition, highlighting youth leadership in climate action, environmental governance and sustainable innovation.

Through this platform, young people were given the opportunity not only to express their views, but also to formulate concrete recommendations that can inform future policy actions at regional, national and European levels.

RYCO's Role in Supporting Youth Voices



Since its establishment, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) has played a central role in advancing youth cooperation, reconciliation and intercultural learning throughout the Western Balkans. As a unique intergovernmental mechanism dedicated to youth, RYCO works to create opportunities for young people to engage with one another, develop mutual understanding and contribute to building peaceful and inclusive societies.

Through exchange programmes, capacity-building initiatives, policy dialogue and support to youth organisations, RYCO has contributed to the creation of a regional ecosystem that empowers young people and strengthens their role in public life. The organisation's work is grounded in the belief that regional cooperation begins with people-to-people connections and that sustainable peace and development require active youth engagement.

Within the framework of the Western Balkans Youth Forum, RYCO has supported the design and facilitation of a participatory process that enables young people to articulate their vision for the future and translate that vision into concrete policy recommendations. By connecting grassroots perspectives with regional and international policy processes, RYCO helps ensure that youth voices

Methodology

The Role of Youth Recommendations

The Western Balkans Youth Forum was established to address the need of youth inclusion in decision making processes by creating a structured mechanism through which young people can contribute to regional policy discussions and articulate their priorities, expectations and visions for the future.

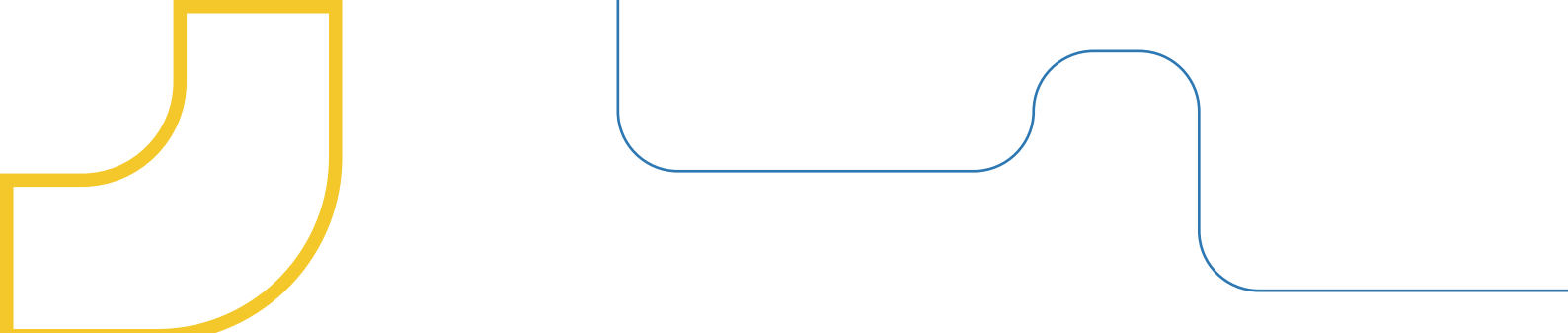
The Youth Recommendations, therefore, serve as an important bridge between young people and decision-makers. They provide a platform through which youth perspectives can be translated into concrete proposals for action and integrated into broader policy processes. More than a collection of demands, youth recommendations represent a collective effort to identify solutions, promote accountability and contribute to the development of sustainable and inclusive societies.

Within the framework of the Berlin Process, youth recommendations have become an increasingly important instrument for strengthening participatory governance and ensuring that regional cooperation reflects the realities, aspirations and needs of younger generations. They contribute to policy discussions by bringing forward perspectives that are often underrepresented in formal decision-making structures while simultaneously strengthening the ownership of young people over regional development processes. By engaging youth in the formulation of policy proposals, the Berlin Process reinforces democratic participation and promotes more responsive governance. Furthermore, youth recommendations contribute to building trust between institutions and young people. In a region where many young citizens express concerns regarding political participation, transparency and accountability, meaningful engagement processes can help strengthen confidence in democratic institutions and demonstrate that youth voices matter in shaping public policies.

History of Youth Recommendations within the Berlin Process

The integration of youth perspectives into the Berlin Process has evolved significantly over the past decade. Young people across the Western Balkans have consistently highlighted a range of interconnected challenges that require regional responses. These include barriers to mobility, unequal access to educational opportunities, limited employment prospects, environmental concerns, democratic backsliding, social polarisation and the lasting consequences of unresolved conflicts. While the specific context of each economy differs, many of these challenges are shared across the region and therefore require collective solutions.

Over the years, various consultations, youth dialogues, regional conferences and policy forums have contributed to strengthening youth participation within the Berlin Process framework. These initiatives have provided opportunities for young people to formulate recommendations, engage directly with policymakers and contribute to discussions concerning the future of regional cooperation and European integration.



The recommendations developed during the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026 build upon this legacy. They draw inspiration from previous consultations while responding to contemporary developments and emerging challenges. In doing so, they represent both continuity and renewal: continuity in their commitment to youth participation and regional cooperation, and renewal through the introduction of new priorities linked to innovation, democratic resilience, mental health, sustainability and green transition.

Importantly, the recommendations recognise that many of the issues facing young people cannot be addressed through isolated interventions. Instead, they require coordinated action among governments, educational institutions, civil society organisations, youth structures, regional organisations and international partners. This understanding underpins the recommendations presented in this publication and reflects the growing maturity of youth participation processes within the region.

Methodology of Development

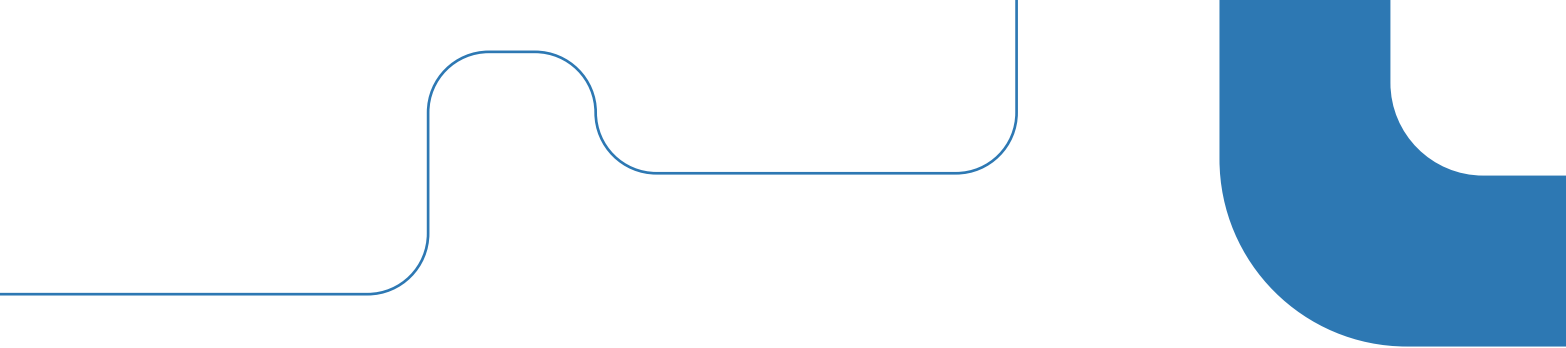
The recommendations contained in this publication were developed through a participatory and future-oriented process implemented during the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026. The process was designed to ensure broad participation, encourage strategic thinking and generate recommendations that are both ambitious and actionable.

Rather than focusing exclusively on current challenges and limitations, participants were invited to explore what kind of region they wish to see by the year 2030 and to identify the actions necessary to make that future possible. To support this objective, the Forum employed the backcasting methodology as the primary framework for discussions and recommendation development.

Backcasting is a methodology that begins with a vision of a desired future and then works backwards to identify the policies, actions and transformations required to achieve that future. Unlike traditional planning approaches, which often focus on incremental improvements to existing systems, backcasting encourages participants to think beyond current constraints and imagine transformative change.

The methodology was selected because many of the challenges discussed during the Forum - including mobility, youth participation, democratic resilience, peacebuilding, environmental sustainability and skills development - require long-term thinking and coordinated action across multiple sectors and institutions. Addressing these challenges effectively requires a shared understanding of the future that young people want to build and a clear roadmap for achieving it.

The starting point for the process was a common vision for the Western Balkans in 2030. Participants were invited to imagine a future in which mobility, skills, green transition, peace, security and democratic participation are interconnected foundations of a sustainable, inclusive and European future. This vision served as a reference point throughout the discussions and provided a common framework for all thematic working groups.



Once these strategic priorities were identified, participants worked backwards to determine what actions would need to be undertaken between 2026 and 2030 to realise their vision. This exercise encouraged participants to consider sequencing, implementation pathways and the roles of different stakeholders in driving change.

Special attention was given to identifying concrete responsibilities and ensuring that recommendations remained actionable. Participants were encouraged to consider who should act, what specific actions should be undertaken, how young people should be involved and what regional value each recommendation would create.

Principles Guiding the Process

The development of the recommendations was guided by several core principles that informed both the process and the final outcomes.

First, meaningful youth participation was treated as a fundamental requirement rather than a procedural formality. Participants were encouraged to actively shape discussions, challenge assumptions and contribute their own experiences and perspectives.

Second, the process emphasised inclusivity and diversity. Efforts were made to ensure that different viewpoints, backgrounds and experiences were represented throughout the discussions, recognising that the Western Balkans is characterised by significant social, cultural and geographic diversity.

Third, regional cooperation was treated as a central principle. Participants were encouraged to look beyond local perspectives and identify opportunities for joint action that could benefit the region as a whole.

Fourth, sustainability and long-term impact guided the formulation of recommendations. Rather than focusing solely on immediate challenges, participants explored how decisions made today could contribute to lasting positive change by 2030 and beyond.

Finally, the process was grounded in the understanding that young people are not passive recipients of policies but active contributors to social transformation. Throughout the Forum, participants consistently highlighted the importance of involving youth not only in implementation but also in decision-making, monitoring and accountability processes.

The recommendations presented in this publication are therefore the product of a collaborative process that combined strategic foresight, regional dialogue and youth participation. They represent a collective vision for the future of the Western Balkans and a call for coordinated action to ensure that this vision becomes a reality.

Youth Recommendations

Youth Vision 2030

The recommendations presented in this publication are rooted in a shared vision developed by young people from across the Western Balkans during the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026. While participants came from different communities, backgrounds, educational pathways and professional experiences, they shared a common belief: the future of the region depends on the ability of societies and institutions to place young people at the centre of development, democratic governance and regional cooperation.

Young people envision a Western Balkans where opportunities are not limited by geography, social background, political affiliation or economic circumstances. They aspire to live in a region where every young person can access quality education, meaningful employment, safe and inclusive communities, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. They imagine societies that value diversity, encourage innovation and actively invest in the potential of future generations.

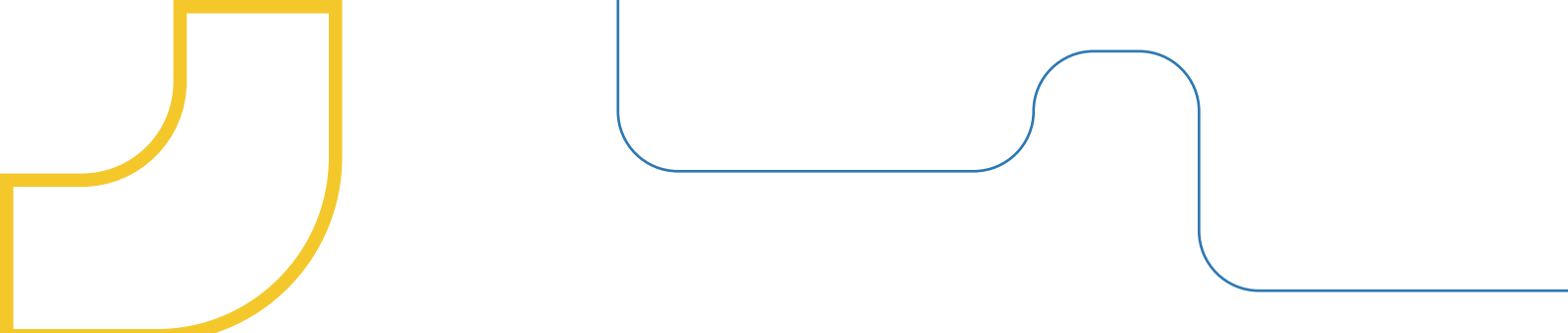
By 2030, young people in the Western Balkans envision a region where mobility, skills, green transition, peace, security and democratic participation are not treated as separate policy areas, but as interconnected pillars of a sustainable and inclusive future. They see a region where cooperation across borders is a normal part of everyday life and where regional partnerships create opportunities that no economy could achieve alone.

This vision is closely connected to the broader aspirations of European integration. Young people across the Western Balkans continue to view the European Union not only as a political and economic project but also as a community of values built on democracy, human rights, solidarity, participation and the rule of law. For many participants, the future of the region is inseparable from its European perspective and from efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, social cohesion and regional stability.

The vision developed during the Forum is grounded in several interconnected ambitions.

First, participants envision a region where education systems equip young people with the skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world. This includes not only technical and professional competencies but also critical thinking, digital literacy, creativity, adaptability and intercultural understanding. Education should prepare young people for active citizenship as much as for employment.

Second, young people aspire to live in societies characterised by peace, trust and democratic resilience. They envision institutions that are transparent and accountable, media environments that promote informed public discourse and communities that value dialogue over division. Reconciliation, mutual understanding and intercultural cooperation remain essential foundations for sustainable peace and stability throughout the region.



Third, participants imagine a region that embraces the opportunities presented by the green transition. They see environmental sustainability not only as a responsibility but also as an opportunity to create new jobs, strengthen innovation and improve quality of life. Young people expect decision-makers to act decisively in addressing climate change and to involve youth in shaping environmental policies and solutions.

Fourth, the vision emphasises mobility and connectivity as drivers of regional development. Young people want to study, work, volunteer and collaborate across borders without unnecessary obstacles. They believe that increased mobility contributes to stronger regional ties, improved economic opportunities and deeper mutual understanding among communities.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of inclusion and equal opportunities. The future they envision is one in which every young person - regardless of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, geographic location or other characteristics - has equal access to opportunities and the ability to participate fully in society.

The recommendations presented in the following sections should therefore be understood not as isolated policy proposals but as interconnected steps toward achieving this broader vision. Together, they represent a roadmap for creating a Western Balkans in which young people are empowered to realise their full potential and contribute to building democratic, peaceful and sustainable societies.



Vision Statement

By 2030, young people in the Western Balkans live in a region where mobility, skills, green transition, peace, security and democratic participation are not treated as separate policy areas, but as connected conditions for a sustainable, inclusive and European future. Youth are recognized not only as beneficiaries, but as co-creators of regional cooperation and public policy.

Thematic Area I

Skills, Opportunities and Innovation



The future prosperity of the Western Balkans will largely depend on the ability of its societies to invest in the knowledge, skills and creativity of young people. In an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world, education systems, labour markets and innovation ecosystems face growing pressure to adapt to new technological, economic and social realities. Young people are expected to navigate complex transitions shaped by digitalisation, automation, demographic change, climate transformation and evolving labour market demands. At the same time, they are increasingly required to develop skills that allow them not only to compete in the global economy but also to actively contribute to their communities and societies.

Despite significant progress achieved across the region over the past decade, many young people continue to encounter structural barriers that limit their opportunities for personal and professional development. Youth unemployment remains a persistent challenge in many parts of the Western Balkans, while skills mismatches continue to affect the transition from education to employment. Employers frequently report difficulties in finding adequately skilled workers, while young graduates often struggle to identify employment opportunities that correspond to their qualifications and aspirations.

These challenges are further compounded by demographic trends that continue to shape the region. Large numbers of young people choose to pursue education, employment and career opportunities abroad, often citing limited prospects, economic uncertainty and insufficient support for professional development at home. While mobility can generate valuable experiences and contribute to skills acquisition, persistent outward migration also raises concerns regarding talent retention, innovation capacity and long-term socioeconomic development.

Participants of the Western Balkans Youth Forum highlighted that addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and forward-looking approach that goes beyond employment policies alone. Skills development, entrepreneurship, innovation, mobility, civic engagement and lifelong learning should be viewed as interconnected elements of a broader ecosystem that supports youth empowerment and regional development.

Particular attention was given to the importance of creating stronger links between education systems and labour market realities. Young people emphasised the need for educational pathways that equip learners with both technical competencies and transversal skills, including critical thinking, digital literacy, communication, teamwork, creativity and adaptability. Such skills are increasingly essential in modern economies and contribute to resilience in the face of rapid technological and social change.

Participants also highlighted the importance of expanding opportunities for non-formal education, volunteering, exchanges and international cooperation. Experiences gained through youth exchanges, civic engagement initiatives, internships and regional cooperation programmes often provide young people with practical skills, intercultural competencies and professional networks that complement formal education. These opportunities contribute not only to employability but also to social cohesion, active citizenship and regional understanding.

Innovation and entrepreneurship emerged as another key priority during discussions. Young people expressed a strong interest in contributing to economic development through innovation, social entrepreneurship, technology and creative industries. However, many participants identified barriers related to access to financing, mentoring, business development support and innovation infrastructure. Participants stressed that young innovators and entrepreneurs require enabling environments that encourage experimentation, creativity and risk-taking while providing adequate support mechanisms for sustainable growth.

The discussions also highlighted the growing importance of regional cooperation in addressing skills and employment challenges. Participants recognised that labour market transformations, technological change and economic development increasingly transcend national borders. Regional approaches can therefore help create larger opportunities for learning, employment, innovation and entrepreneurship while contributing to greater competitiveness and resilience throughout the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans Growth Plan, the Western Balkans Investment Framework and future European Union funding instruments were identified as important opportunities for investing in youth development and strengthening the region's human capital. Participants emphasised that young people should be recognised as strategic partners within these initiatives and that dedicated investments in youth skills, mobility, innovation and entrepreneurship should become an integral component of future regional development efforts.

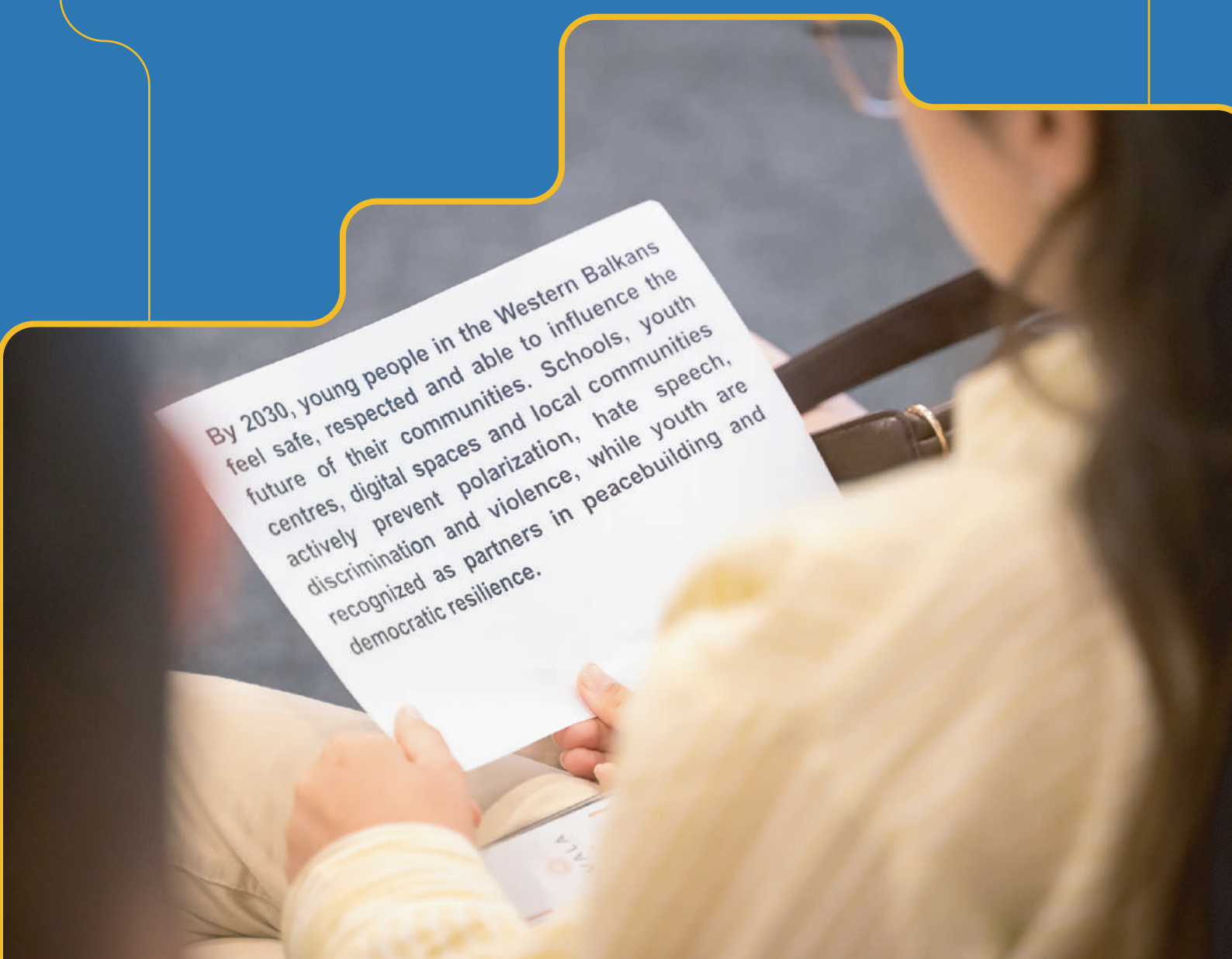
Throughout the discussions, participants repeatedly returned to a common message: investing in young people is not simply a social policy objective but a strategic investment in the future competitiveness, stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans. Creating opportunities for young people to learn, innovate, create and contribute within the region will be essential for building inclusive societies capable of responding to future challenges and opportunities.

Youth Recommendations

1. Advocate for dedicated youth, civil society and innovation funding windows within the Western Balkans Growth Plan, the Western Balkans Investment Framework and the European Union Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034.
2. Establish a Regional Compact on Youth Skills, Mobility and Career Development that strengthens links between education, volunteering, internships, entrepreneurship and employment opportunities across the Western Balkans.
3. Increase public investment in research, innovation and entrepreneurship by creating dedicated opportunities for young innovators within European and national funding instruments.
4. Expand access to innovation, entrepreneurship and employment programmes for young people, with targeted support measures for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.
5. Develop regional talent circulation programmes that support the return, reintegration and engagement of young professionals, researchers and entrepreneurs from the Western Balkans diaspora.

Thematic Area II

Peace, Security and Inclusive Societies

A photograph showing a person's hands holding a white document. The document contains text about youth in the Western Balkans. The person is wearing a light-colored, textured sweater. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a paved surface and a person's leg in the distance.

By 2030, young people in the Western Balkans feel safe, respected and able to influence the future of their communities. Schools, youth centres, digital spaces and local communities actively prevent polarization, hate speech, discrimination and violence, while youth are recognized as partners in peacebuilding and democratic resilience.

Peace, security and social cohesion remain fundamental prerequisites for sustainable development, democratic governance and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. While significant progress has been achieved across the region over the past decades, young people continue to live with the consequences of unresolved divisions, political polarization, social fragmentation and declining trust in institutions. These challenges affect not only the quality of democratic life but also the ability of societies to create inclusive environments in which all young people can thrive.

Participants of the Western Balkans Youth Forum emphasized that peace should not be understood solely as the absence of conflict. Rather, peace is closely linked to the presence of democratic institutions, social justice, human rights, equal opportunities and meaningful participation in public life. Young people repeatedly highlighted that sustainable peace requires continuous investment in dialogue, trust-building and cooperation at local, national and regional levels.

The discussions revealed a strong desire among participants to move beyond narratives that continue to divide societies and communities. Young people expressed a commitment to building a future based on mutual understanding, respect for diversity and shared responsibility for the development of the region. They recognized that reconciliation is not a one-time process but a long-term societal commitment that requires engagement from institutions, civil society, educational systems and communities alike.

Education was identified as one of the most important tools for promoting social cohesion and democratic resilience. Participants highlighted the need for educational approaches that encourage critical thinking, media literacy, civic engagement and intercultural understanding. In a rapidly evolving information environment, young people are increasingly exposed to misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and various forms of manipulation that can undermine democratic processes and social trust. Strengthening the ability of young people to critically assess information and engage constructively in public discourse was therefore considered essential.

Participants also expressed concerns regarding declining trust in democratic institutions and limited opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Many young people continue to feel disconnected from political processes and perceive their voices as insufficiently represented in public policy discussions. Addressing this challenge requires not only institutional reforms but also the creation of accessible mechanisms that enable young people to actively participate in shaping decisions that affect their lives.

Mental health and well-being emerged as another major priority throughout the discussions. Participants noted that young people across the region are increasingly confronted with stress, uncertainty, economic insecurity, social pressures and the long-term effects of global crises. Despite growing awareness of mental health challenges, access to youth-friendly mental health services remains uneven across the region. Participants stressed that mental health should be recognized as an essential component of public health, social inclusion and youth development.

The role of media and digital spaces was also extensively discussed. Participants acknowledged the transformative potential of digital technologies for learning, communication and civic engagement. At the same time, they expressed concerns about the spread of disinformation, online harassment, hate speech and growing polarization. Particular emphasis was placed on supporting youth-led media initiatives and creating spaces where young people can contribute to public dialogue, promote democratic values and counter harmful narratives.

Gender equality and inclusion were identified as essential dimensions of peaceful and democratic societies. Participants highlighted the need to address persistent inequalities, discrimination and gender-based violence while ensuring equal participation of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes. Building inclusive societies requires not only legal protections but also cultural and institutional changes that promote equality, dignity and respect for all individuals.

Throughout the discussions, participants consistently emphasized that peacebuilding, democratic participation and social inclusion are closely interconnected. Democratic societies are stronger when young people feel represented, heard and empowered. Inclusive communities are more resilient when diversity is valued and opportunities are accessible to all. Regional cooperation becomes more sustainable when it is grounded in trust, dialogue and mutual understanding.

Youth Recommendations

1. Establish a Regional Youth, Peace and Security Framework for the Western Balkans aligned with the UN Youth, Peace and Security Agenda and coordinated with existing regional and international commitments.
2. Integrate peace education, civic education, media literacy, critical thinking and dialogue skills into formal and non-formal learning systems, while strengthening support for youth-led peacebuilding, reconciliation and intercultural exchange initiatives across the region.
3. Establish accessible and youth-friendly mental health and well-being services through schools, youth centres, community-based programmes and integrated support mechanisms.
4. Support youth-created and youth-led media content and public platforms that promote democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship and intercultural understanding.
5. Ensure effective prevention of and response to gender-based violence through stronger protection mechanisms, survivor-centred services, meaningful participation of women in decision-making and measures that promote gender equality in all areas of society.

Thematic Area III

Green and Sustainable Development





The green transition is one of the defining challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century. Across the world, societies are being called upon to transform their economies, institutions and lifestyles in response to climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and growing pressures on natural resources. For the Western Balkans, these challenges are particularly significant. The region faces increasing environmental vulnerabilities while simultaneously navigating economic transformation, infrastructure development and the process of European integration.

Young people are among those most affected by the long-term consequences of environmental decisions taken today. The environmental conditions, climate resilience and sustainability of communities will directly shape their future quality of life, economic opportunities and overall well-being. As a result, environmental sustainability has become an increasingly important priority for youth across the Western Balkans.

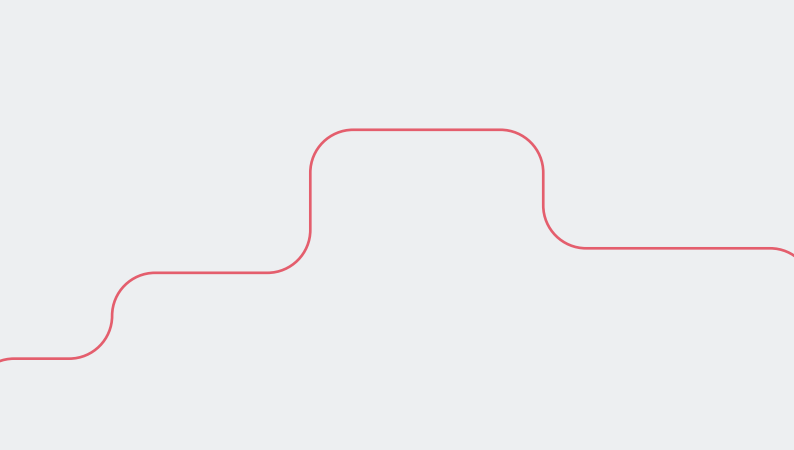
Participants of the Western Balkans Youth Forum emphasized that climate change is no longer a distant concern but a present reality. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, pollution, water scarcity, biodiversity loss and unsustainable patterns of resource consumption are already affecting communities throughout the region. These developments create economic, social and public health challenges that require urgent and coordinated responses.

At the same time, participants highlighted that the green transition should not be viewed solely through the lens of environmental protection. It also represents an opportunity to create new jobs, stimulate innovation, modernize infrastructure and strengthen regional competitiveness. Investments in renewable energy, sustainable transport, circular economy models and green technologies can contribute simultaneously to environmental sustainability and economic development.

Young people increasingly recognize the importance of ensuring that environmental policies are socially inclusive and economically fair. The transition toward more sustainable economies must create opportunities for all members of society and avoid deepening existing inequalities. Participants stressed that young people should be actively involved in shaping the policies and strategies that will define the green transition in the years ahead.

Education was identified as a critical component of this process. Participants emphasized the need to equip young people with the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to navigate and contribute to a rapidly changing world. Sustainability education should not be limited to environmental awareness alone but should promote systems thinking, innovation, responsible citizenship and practical engagement with environmental challenges.

Participants also highlighted the important role of schools, universities, youth organizations and community initiatives in promoting sustainable lifestyles and environmental responsibility. Educational institutions can serve as spaces where young people not only learn about sustainability but also actively participate in developing and implementing practical solutions within their communities.



Regional cooperation emerged as a recurring theme throughout discussions on environmental sustainability. Environmental challenges do not respect national borders, and many issues, including air pollution, water management, biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation - require coordinated regional responses. Participants therefore emphasized the importance of strengthening cross-border cooperation and creating mechanisms through which young people can contribute to regional environmental initiatives.

The discussions further underscored the importance of supporting youth-led innovation in the field of sustainability. Young people across the region are increasingly developing creative solutions related to climate action, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, waste management, biodiversity protection and circular economy practices. However, many participants identified limited access to funding, mentorship and institutional support as significant barriers to scaling these initiatives.

Participants also stressed the importance of ensuring that environmental governance processes are participatory and inclusive. Young people often demonstrate strong interest in environmental issues but face limited opportunities to influence environmental policymaking. Creating structured mechanisms for youth participation can strengthen the legitimacy, effectiveness and long-term sustainability of environmental policies and initiatives.

The green transition therefore represents not only an environmental imperative but also an opportunity to create more resilient, innovative and inclusive societies. By investing in sustainability, supporting youth leadership and strengthening regional cooperation, the Western Balkans can position itself to respond effectively to future environmental challenges while creating new opportunities for economic and social development.

Youth Recommendations

1. Establish a Regional Youth Green Transition Fund to support youth-led initiatives in climate action, biodiversity protection, circular economy, sustainable communities and environmental innovation.
2. Integrate green competencies and sustainability education across formal, non-formal and vocational learning systems, supported by regional partnerships among schools, universities and youth organisations.
3. Transform public educational institutions into living laboratories for sustainability through investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency and practical green learning opportunities.
4. Promote sustainable regional mobility by improving green transport options and enabling young people to participate in regional cooperation, apprenticeships and environmental initiatives.
5. Institutionalise structured dialogue on the green transition by establishing youth climate councils and advisory mechanisms that ensure meaningful youth participation in environmental, climate and urban development policies at all levels.

Cross-Cutting Values

The recommendations presented in this publication are organised across three thematic areas: Skills, Opportunities and Innovation; Peace, Security and Inclusive Societies; and Green and Sustainable Development. While each thematic area addresses distinct policy challenges and opportunities, participants of the Western Balkans Youth Forum consistently emphasized that meaningful and sustainable progress in domain of regional cooperation can only be achieved when certain fundamental values and principles are embedded across all actions, policies and initiatives.

Meaningful Youth Participation and Co-Governance

Young people must be recognised as active partners in shaping policies and decisions that affect their lives. Throughout the Forum, participants repeatedly stressed that youth participation should move beyond consultation and symbolic engagement towards genuine partnership and shared responsibility.

Meaningful participation requires institutional mechanisms that enable young people to contribute to agenda-setting, policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes. Participation should not be limited to occasional consultations but should become a permanent feature of governance structures at local, national and regional levels.

Young people possess valuable knowledge, experiences and perspectives that can improve policy outcomes and strengthen democratic legitimacy. Their involvement contributes not only to more responsive governance but also to greater trust between institutions and citizens.

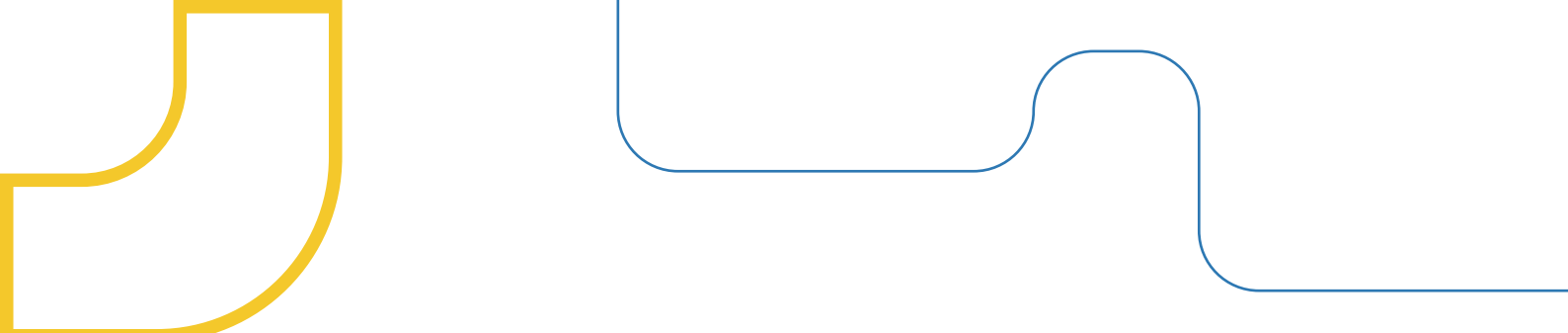
Participants therefore called for the establishment and strengthening of structured dialogue mechanisms, youth advisory bodies, consultative platforms and co-governance models that ensure youth voices are consistently represented within decision-making processes.

Inclusion & Equal Opportunities

A central message emerging from the Youth Forum was that opportunities should be accessible to all young people, regardless of their social, economic, geographic or personal circumstances.

While significant progress has been achieved in promoting inclusion throughout the region, many young people continue to encounter barriers related to poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, disability, geographic isolation and unequal access to services and opportunities. These challenges affect participation in education, employment, mobility programmes, civic engagement and decision-making processes.

Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that policies and programmes are designed with inclusivity at their core. Particular attention should be given to young people with fewer opportunities, including rural youth, young women, youth with disabilities, members of minority communities, economically disadvantaged youth and other underrepresented groups.



Inclusive societies are not only fairer but also more resilient and innovative. Diversity of experiences and perspectives strengthens communities, improves problem-solving and contributes to social cohesion. As such, inclusion should be treated not as a separate policy objective but as a guiding principle integrated into all areas of youth policy and regional cooperation.

Participants emphasized that equal opportunities require both targeted support measures and systemic efforts to remove structural barriers that prevent young people from reaching their full potential.

Regional Mobility and Exchange

Mobility remains one of the most visible and transformative tools for enhancing regional cooperation. Throughout the discussions, participants consistently identified mobility experiences as powerful tools for learning, personal development, intercultural understanding and peacebuilding.

Educational exchanges, volunteering programmes, internships, study visits, professional opportunities and cultural cooperation allow young people to build skills, expand networks and develop a deeper understanding of the diversity that characterizes the Western Balkans. Such experiences contribute to reducing stereotypes, strengthening trust and fostering long-term cooperation among future generations.

Participants stressed that mobility should be viewed as an investment in human connections and social cohesion. Greater mobility can contribute to stronger regional identity, enhanced employability, increased innovation and deeper European integration.

However, participants also recognized that access to mobility opportunities remains uneven. Financial barriers, administrative procedures, lack of information and geographic disparities continue to prevent many young people from participating in exchange programmes and regional initiatives.

For this reason, participants called for expanded and more accessible mobility opportunities throughout the region, supported by governments, educational institutions, youth organisations, regional structures and international partners.

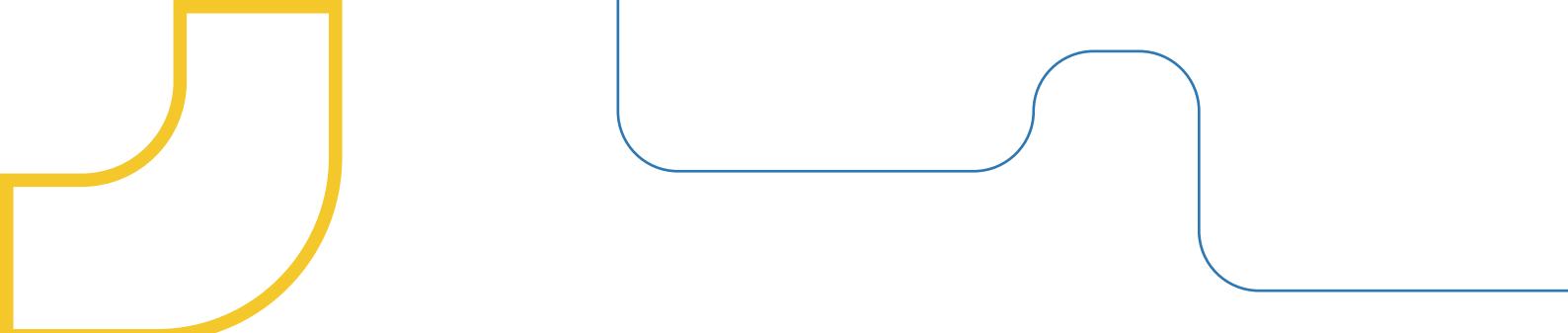
Investment in Youth Development

Participants repeatedly emphasized that meaningful progress requires sustained investment in young people. While youth are frequently recognised as a strategic priority in political discourse, investments in youth development often remain insufficient compared to the scale of existing challenges and opportunities.

Investment in youth should be understood broadly. It includes funding for education, innovation, entrepreneurship, youth work, mobility programmes, mental health services, civic engagement initiatives, environmental action and peacebuilding activities. It also includes investments in institutions, infrastructure and support systems that enable young people to thrive.

Participants highlighted that youth development should be considered a long-term investment rather than a short-term expenditure. Supporting young people generates benefits that extend far beyond individual outcomes, contributing to economic growth, democratic resilience, social cohesion and regional stability.

The future competitiveness and sustainability of the Western Balkans will depend significantly on the extent to which governments and institutions invest in the capacities, talents and aspirations of young people and create conditions that enable them to build their personal and professional futures within the region.



Strengthening Youth Ecosystems

The development and well-being of young people depend not only on individual opportunities but also on the strength of the ecosystems that support them. Participants highlighted the essential role played by youth organisations, youth workers, schools, universities, community centres, civil society organisations and local communities in creating enabling environments for youth participation and development.

These actors often serve as the first point of contact for young people seeking information, support, opportunities and spaces for engagement. They facilitate learning, encourage participation and contribute to building social capital within communities.

Participants stressed that strong youth ecosystems are necessary for the successful implementation of many of the recommendations contained in this publication. Without adequate support structures, even well-designed policies may struggle to achieve their intended impact.

Strengthening youth ecosystems requires long-term investment, institutional recognition and sustainable partnerships among public authorities, civil society organisations, educational institutions and international actors. It also requires recognition of youth work as a valuable profession and an important contributor to youth development.

A Shared Foundation for Action

Although the recommendations in this publication address diverse policy areas, they are united by a common vision: a Western Balkans in which young people are empowered, included and actively engaged in shaping the future of their societies.

Meaningful participation, inclusion, mobility, investment and strong youth ecosystems are not separate priorities. They are interconnected conditions that enable progress across all thematic areas and provide the foundation upon which sustainable regional cooperation can be built.

As governments, institutions, civil society organizations and international partners consider the recommendations presented in this publication, these cross-cutting values should serve as guiding principles for future action. They represent the shared commitments necessary to transform the aspirations of young people into tangible and lasting change throughout the Western Balkans.

Next Steps

The Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026 represents an important milestone in strengthening youth participation within the Berlin Process and broader regional cooperation efforts. However, the true value of the Forum lies not only in the quality of the discussions or the recommendations produced, but in the actions that follow. The recommendations presented in this publication reflect the collective vision, experiences and aspirations of young people from across the Western Balkans. They constitute a call for action directed towards governments, regional organisations, educational institutions, civil society actors, international partners and all stakeholders committed to supporting the development of the region and its future generations.

Transforming these recommendations into tangible outcomes will require sustained political commitment, institutional ownership, adequate resources and continued engagement of young people throughout all stages of implementation.

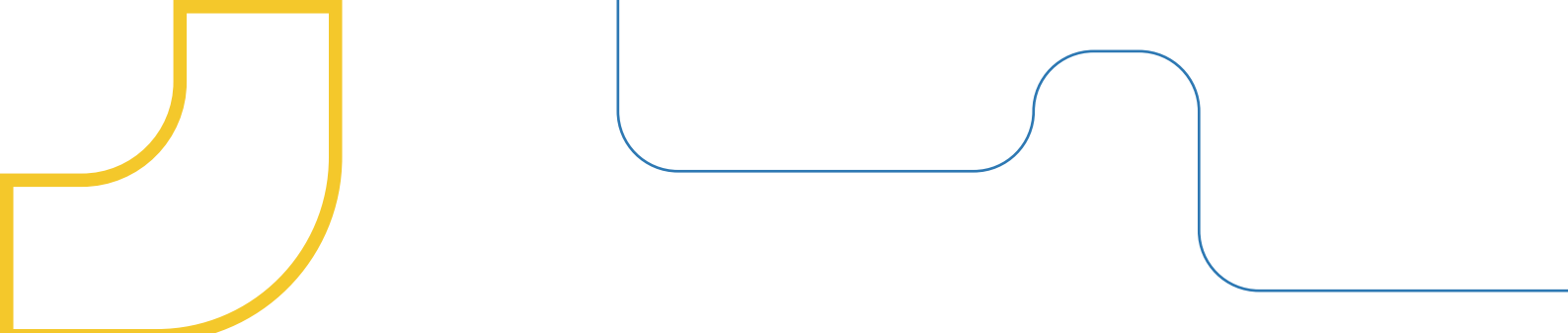
Youth participation should not conclude with the adoption or presentation of recommendations. Instead, the recommendations should serve as a starting point for continued dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders responsible for shaping policies and programmes that affect young people. Participants of the Youth Forum emphasized the importance of establishing clear pathways through which recommendations can be considered, integrated and translated into concrete measures. This requires structured engagement between youth representatives and decision-makers at local, national and regional levels.

Governments and institutions are encouraged to review the recommendations and assess opportunities for their integration into existing policy frameworks, strategic plans and regional cooperation initiatives. Particular attention should be given to areas where youth perspectives can strengthen ongoing reforms and contribute to achieving shared development objectives. The implementation of youth recommendations should not be perceived as an additional policy obligation, but rather as an opportunity to improve the effectiveness, legitimacy and long-term sustainability of public policies.

One of the strongest messages emerging from the Youth Forum is the need for continuous and meaningful dialogue between young people and institutions. Participants highlighted that youth engagement is most effective when it is regular, structured and linked to concrete decision-making processes. Occasional consultations, while valuable, cannot substitute for permanent mechanisms that enable young people to contribute to policy development, implementation and monitoring.

Moving forward, stakeholders should explore opportunities to institutionalise youth participation within relevant regional and national processes. This may include the establishment of advisory mechanisms, structured dialogue platforms, consultation frameworks and co-governance models that allow young people to actively contribute to shaping public policies.

Strengthening communication between institutions and youth can also contribute to rebuilding trust, improving transparency and increasing public ownership over reform processes.



The recommendations developed through the Youth Forum align closely with broader regional and European priorities, including economic development, democratic governance, social cohesion, environmental sustainability and European integration. As such, they should be considered within ongoing discussions and initiatives related to the Berlin Process, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the Common Regional Market, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and other regional cooperation frameworks.

Regional organisations and international partners have an important role to play in ensuring that youth priorities remain visible and integrated into future policy discussions. This includes promoting opportunities for youth participation, supporting youth-led initiatives and facilitating cooperation among different stakeholders working on youth-related issues. Participants emphasized that youth policies should not be treated as a separate sector but should be mainstreamed across various policy domains. Issues such as mobility, skills development, peacebuilding, democratic participation and sustainability affect multiple sectors and therefore require coordinated and cross-sectoral approaches.

Achieving the ambitions outlined in this publication will require collaboration among a wide range of actors. Governments play a critical role in creating enabling policy environments and allocating resources necessary for implementation. Educational institutions contribute by equipping young people with knowledge, skills and opportunities for participation. Civil society organisations provide expertise, outreach and support to communities. International partners contribute through funding, technical assistance and policy support. Regional organisations facilitate cooperation, knowledge sharing and coordination across borders.

Young people themselves must remain at the centre of these efforts. Participants repeatedly stressed that youth should be involved not only in identifying priorities but also in designing solutions, implementing initiatives and evaluating progress. Successful implementation therefore requires partnerships that are based on trust, mutual respect and shared responsibility.

Strengthening cooperation among these actors can generate synergies, improve resource efficiency and increase the impact of youth-focused initiatives throughout the region.

Meaningful participation requires accountability. Participants highlighted the importance of creating mechanisms that allow young people and other stakeholders to track progress and assess the implementation of commitments related to youth development and regional cooperation. Monitoring mechanisms can help identify achievements, challenges and areas requiring additional attention. They can also contribute to greater transparency and strengthen confidence that youth contributions are taken seriously within policymaking processes.

Future Youth Forums may provide opportunities to review progress, revisit priorities and assess developments in relation to the recommendations presented in this publication. Such processes can help ensure continuity and maintain momentum between successive Berlin Process cycles. Participants also highlighted the value of sharing good practices and successful examples from across the region. Learning from innovative approaches and successful initiatives can inspire further action and encourage replication of effective solutions.



As a regional institution dedicated to youth cooperation, reconciliation and intercultural learning, RYCO remains committed to supporting the implementation of the principles and priorities reflected in this publication. Through its programmes, partnerships and policy engagement efforts, RYCO will continue creating opportunities for young people to connect, learn, collaborate and contribute to regional development. The organisation will also continue supporting spaces for dialogue and participation that enable young people to engage with decision-makers and influence policies affecting their lives.

Building on its experience and regional presence, RYCO can contribute to fostering partnerships, facilitating exchanges of knowledge and promoting initiatives that advance the objectives outlined in the recommendations. At the same time, successful implementation depends on the collective efforts of all stakeholders. No single institution can achieve the vision outlined in this publication alone. Progress requires shared ownership and coordinated action across sectors, communities and borders

The vision articulated by young people through the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026 is ambitious. It reflects optimism about the future of the region and confidence in the ability of cooperation, dialogue and innovation to address common challenges. The recommendations presented in this publication offer a roadmap towards that future. They invite decision-makers, institutions and partners to work together with young people to build a Western Balkans that is more inclusive, democratic, sustainable and prosperous. The year 2030 is not simply a destination. It is a shared commitment to creating societies where young people are empowered to realise their potential, contribute to their communities and actively shape the future of the region.

The responsibility for achieving this vision belongs to all of us.

Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026 - Recommendations

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