



WESTERN BALKANS YOUTH FORUM 2026 Recommendations



INTRODUCTION

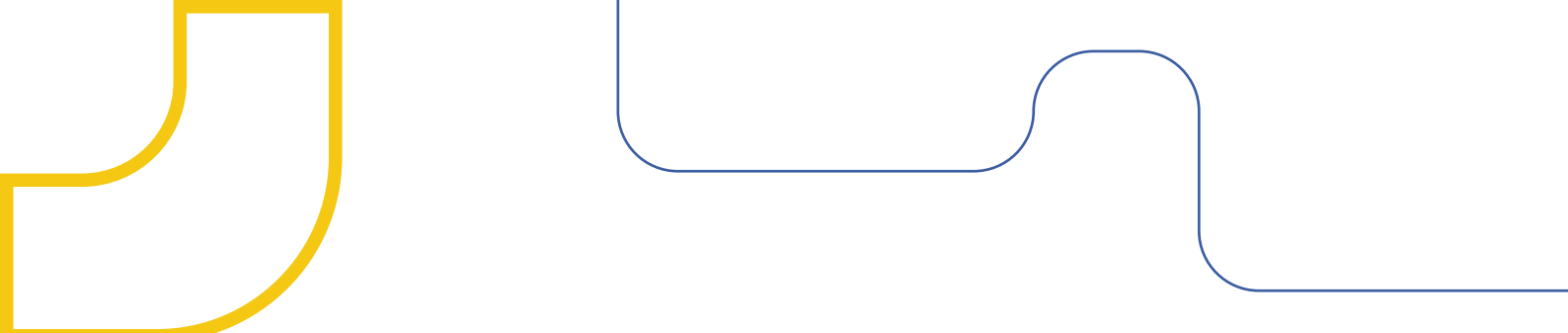
The Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026 provided a regional platform through which young people could move beyond identifying challenges and jointly formulate practical proposals for the future of the region. From 4th until 7th June 2026 in Budva, within the framework of Montenegro's Chairmanship of the Berlin Process and organized by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 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.

The recommendations presented in this section are grounded in the conviction that young people should not be approached solely as beneficiaries of public policies. They are partners in policymaking, contributors to regional cooperation and important actors in the implementation and monitoring of reforms. Meaningful youth participation therefore requires more than consultation or symbolic representation. It requires institutional mechanisms through which young people can influence priorities, contribute their knowledge and experiences, and participate in assessing whether agreed commitments have produced tangible results.

This approach is particularly important at a time when the Western Balkans is facing a combination of demographic, economic, political, social and environmental pressures. Young people continue to experience unequal access to education, employment, mobility, public services and decision-making processes. Skills mismatches, outward migration, declining trust in institutions, political and social polarization, mental health challenges, disinformation and the effects of climate change directly influence their opportunities and expectations. Although these challenges take different forms across the region, they are deeply interconnected and cannot be effectively addressed through isolated or exclusively national measures.

Regional cooperation offers an opportunity to develop coordinated responses, share knowledge and create opportunities that individual economies may not be able to provide alone. It can connect educational institutions and labour markets, strengthen youth mobility and talent circulation, support reconciliation and democratic resilience, and accelerate a fair and inclusive green transition. At the same time, regional initiatives can contribute to the European integration process by translating common values and political commitments into concrete improvements in the lives of young people.

The recommendations were developed through a participatory and future-oriented process based on a shared vision of the Western Balkans in 2030. Using a backcasting approach, participants first considered the kind of region in which they wished to live and then worked backwards to identify the decisions, investments and institutional changes required to achieve that vision. This encouraged participants to move beyond short-term activities and formulate proposals that address broader systems, policies and implementation structures.



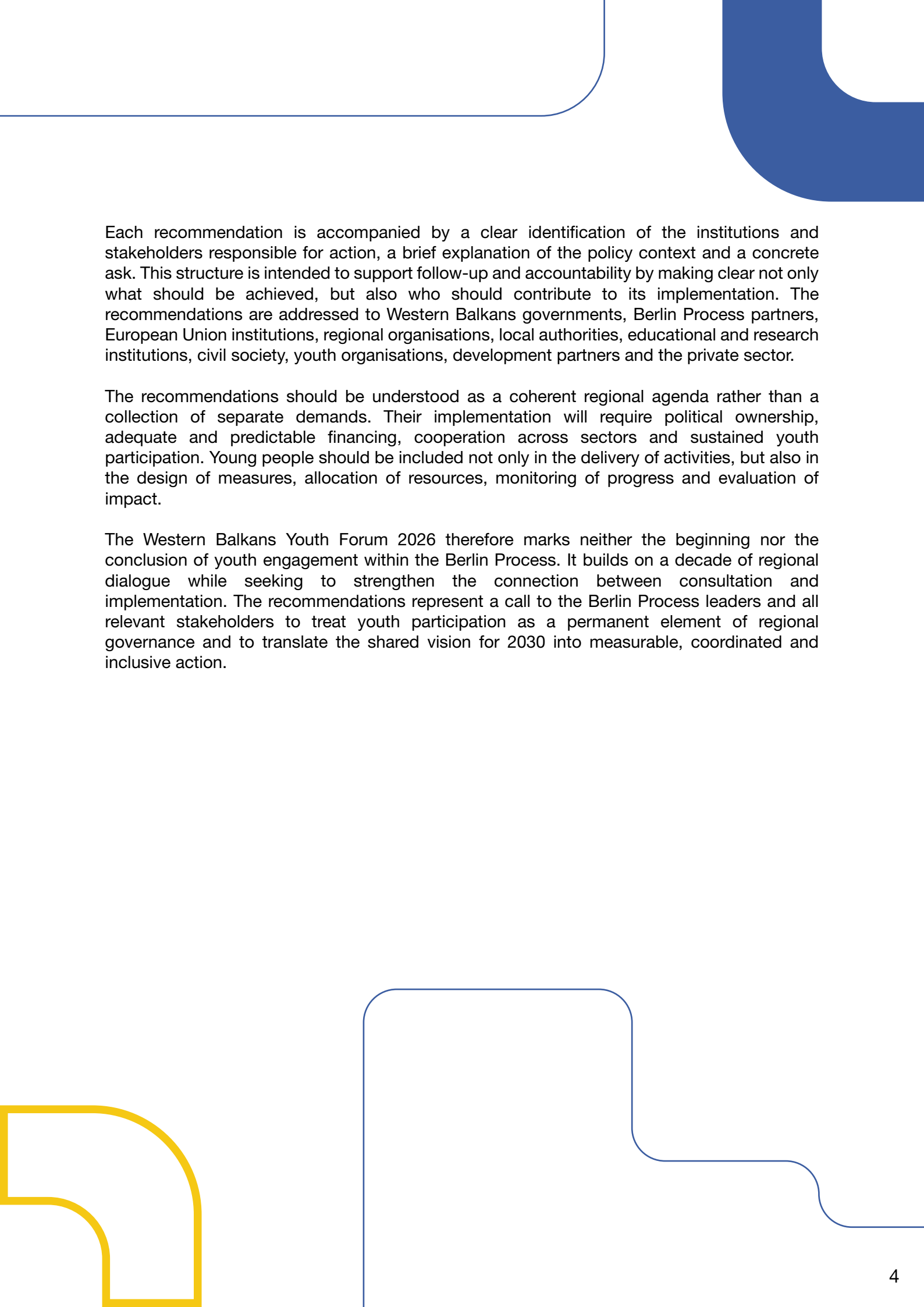
The thematic priorities presented in this publication were identified through a participatory process during the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026. While grounded in the perspectives and experiences of young people from across the region, they also reflect the strategic priorities of Montenegro's 2026 Chairmanship of the Berlin Process. Under the motto "Region in Motion. Owning the Change.", Montenegro's Chairmanship focused on promoting strong and inclusive economic growth enhancing regional competitiveness, strengthening security and resilience, and advancing a green and sustainable transition. These priorities provided an important policy framework for the Forum discussions and informed the thematic structure of the recommendations.

The resulting recommendations are organized around three mutually reinforcing thematic areas: Skills, Opportunities and Innovation; Peace, Security and Inclusive Societies; and Green and Sustainable Development. These areas should not be viewed as separate policy agendas. Access to education and employment is closely connected to social inclusion and confidence in the future. Peace and democratic resilience depend on informed, engaged and empowered citizens. The green transition requires new skills, innovation, inclusive governance and the active participation of communities. Progress in one area therefore strengthens the conditions for progress in the others.

Under Skills, Opportunities and Innovation, participants call for stronger investment in youth development, better connections between education and employment, expanded mobility opportunities, support for young innovators and entrepreneurs, and regional mechanisms that promote talent circulation. These proposals recognise that the long-term competitiveness and prosperity of the Western Balkans depend on whether young people are able to develop their potential and contribute within the region.

Under Peace, Security and Inclusive Societies, the recommendations emphasise the need for a regional approach to the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, stronger peace and civic education, improved media literacy, accessible mental health services, support for youth-led media and the meaningful inclusion of underrepresented groups. They reflect a broad understanding of security based not only on the absence of conflict, but also on human dignity, democratic institutions, social cohesion, equal opportunities and trust.

Under Green and Sustainable Development, participants propose mechanisms to finance youth-led climate action, integrate green competencies into education, transform educational institutions into practical models of sustainability, improve environmentally responsible mobility and institutionalise youth participation in environmental governance. These recommendations recognise the green transition as both an urgent responsibility and an opportunity for innovation, employment and improved quality of life.



Each recommendation is accompanied by a clear identification of the institutions and stakeholders responsible for action, a brief explanation of the policy context and a concrete ask. This structure is intended to support follow-up and accountability by making clear not only what should be achieved, but also who should contribute to its implementation. The recommendations are addressed to Western Balkans governments, Berlin Process partners, European Union institutions, regional organisations, local authorities, educational and research institutions, civil society, youth organisations, development partners and the private sector.

The recommendations should be understood as a coherent regional agenda rather than a collection of separate demands. Their implementation will require political ownership, adequate and predictable financing, cooperation across sectors and sustained youth participation. Young people should be included not only in the delivery of activities, but also in the design of measures, allocation of resources, monitoring of progress and evaluation of impact.

The Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026 therefore marks neither the beginning nor the conclusion of youth engagement within the Berlin Process. It builds on a decade of regional dialogue while seeking to strengthen the connection between consultation and implementation. The recommendations represent a call to the Berlin Process leaders and all relevant stakeholders to treat youth participation as a permanent element of regional governance and to translate the shared vision for 2030 into measurable, coordinated and inclusive action.

Theme I

Skills, Opportunities and Innovation



Recommendation

01

Create Dedicated Youth Funding Windows within EU and Regional Financial Instruments

Addressed to:

European Commission

Western Balkans Governments

Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF)

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

Berlin Process Partners

International Financial Institutions

Context:

Participants consistently identified limited access to sustainable financing as one of the main barriers to youth innovation, entrepreneurship and civic engagement. While the Western Balkans Growth Plan and other EU financial instruments present significant opportunities for investment, dedicated mechanisms supporting youth-led initiatives remain insufficiently developed. Investing directly in young people is essential to strengthening regional competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion.

Ask:

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.

Recommendation

02

Establish a Regional Compact on Youth Skills, Mobility and Career Development

Addressed to:

Western Balkans Governments

Ministries of Education & Labour

European Commission

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

RYCO

Educational Institutions & employers

Context:

Young people continue to face fragmented labour markets, skills mismatches and unequal access to professional development opportunities. Stronger regional cooperation is needed to connect education systems with labour market needs while promoting mobility, volunteering, internships and entrepreneurship as complementary pathways to employment.

Ask:

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.

Recommendation

03

Increase Public Investment in Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Addressed to:

European
Commission

Western
Balkans
Governments

National
Innovation
Funds

Development
Agencies

Private
Sector
Partners

Context:

Participants highlighted that young innovators and entrepreneurs continue to face significant barriers in accessing finance, mentoring and innovation infrastructure. Long-term public investment and stronger support ecosystems are needed to enable young people to transform innovative ideas into sustainable businesses and social enterprises.

Ask:

Increase public investment in research, innovation and entrepreneurship by creating dedicated opportunities for young innovators within European and national funding instruments.

Recommendation

04

Expand Inclusive Access to Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Employment Opportunities

Addressed to:

Western
Balkans
Governments

Local
Authorities

Youth
Organisations

European
Commission

Educational
Institutions

Context:

Opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship and employment remain unevenly distributed across the region, particularly for young people from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. Inclusive access to skills development and employment programmes is essential to ensuring equal opportunities and preventing social exclusion.

Ask:

Expand access to innovation, entrepreneurship and employment programmes for young people, with targeted support measures for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.

Recommendation

05

Develop Regional Talent Circulation Programmes

Addressed to:

European
Commission

Western
Balkans
Governments

Diaspora
Organisations

Higher
Education
Institutions

Research
Institutions

Private
Sector
Partners.

Context:

The continued emigration of young professionals presents one of the most significant long-term challenges for the region's competitiveness, innovation capacity and demographic sustainability. At the same time, the Western Balkans diaspora represents an important source of expertise, investment and international networks that remain insufficiently utilised.

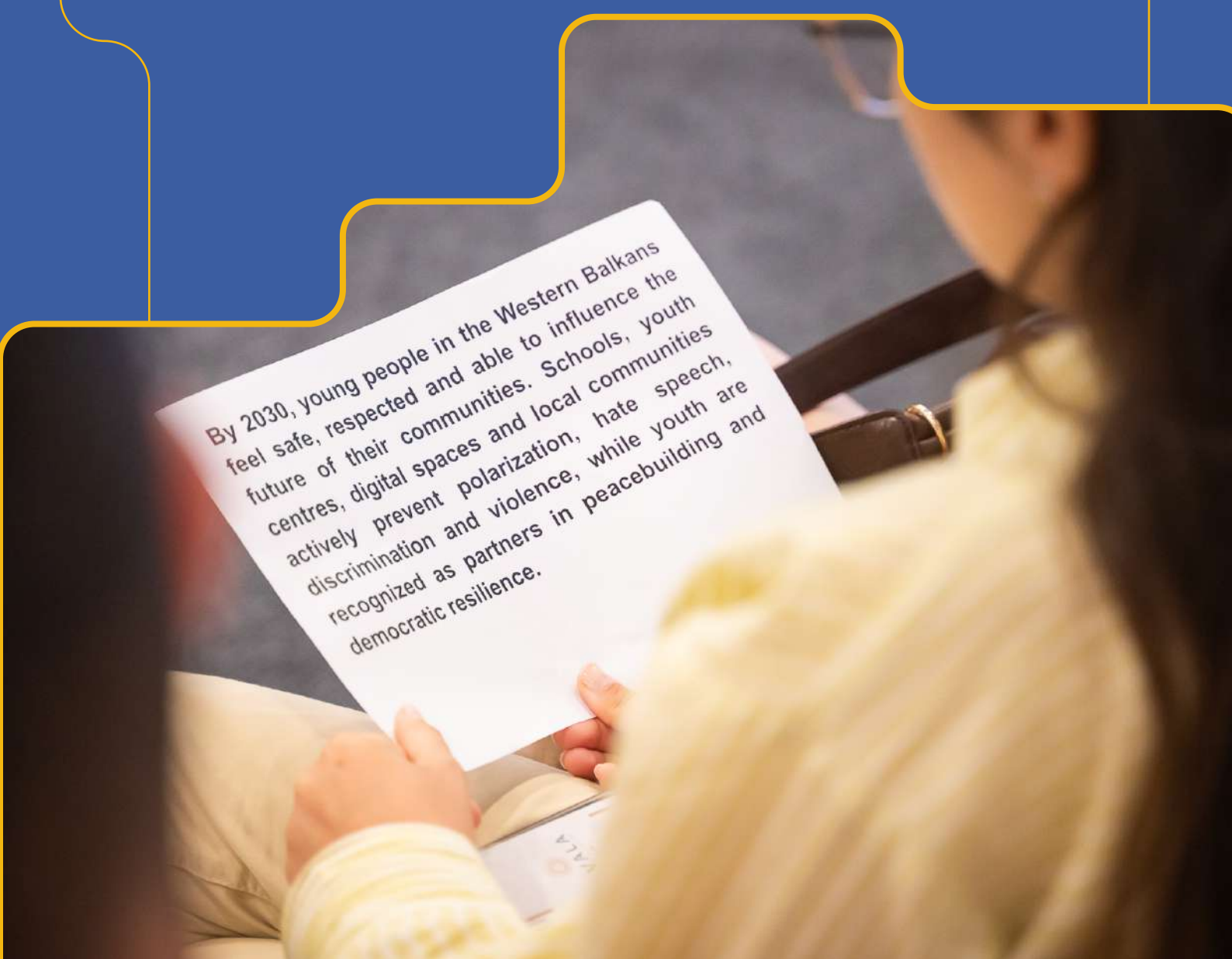
Ask:

Develop regional talent circulation programmes that support the return, reintegration and engagement of young professionals, researchers and entrepreneurs from the Western Balkans diaspora.



Theme II

Peace, Security and Inclusive Societies

A photograph of a person's hands holding a white document. The person is wearing a light-colored, textured sweater. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a street or outdoor setting. The document contains text about youth in the Western Balkans.

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.

Recommendation

01

Establish a Regional Youth, Peace and Security Framework for the Western Balkans

Addressed to:

European Commission

Western Balkans Governments

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

RYCO

United Nations & Berlin Process Partners.

Context:

Participants emphasized that sustainable peace requires more than the absence of conflict. Democratic resilience, reconciliation, human security, youth participation and regional cooperation are closely interconnected and should be addressed through a common strategic framework. While the UN Youth, Peace and Security Agenda provides a global policy foundation, its regional implementation in the Western Balkans remains fragmented.

Ask:

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.

Recommendation

02

Strengthen Peace Education, Civic Education and Democratic Resilience

Addressed to:

Ministries of Education

Western Balkans Governments

Educational Institutions

RYCO

Council of Europe

European Commission

Youth Organisations

Context:

Participants highlighted that democratic resilience begins with education. Increasing exposure to disinformation, hate speech and social polarization underscores the need for education systems that promote critical thinking, media literacy, democratic values and intercultural dialogue. Education should equip young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute to peaceful, inclusive and democratic societies.

Ask:

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.

Recommendation

03

Ensure Accessible and Youth-Friendly Mental Health Services

Addressed to:

Local Authorities

Ministries of Health and Education

Western Balkans Governments

Youth Centres

Public Health Institution

Context:

Young people across the Western Balkans continue to experience growing mental health challenges linked to economic uncertainty, social pressures, political instability and the long-term consequences of multiple crises. Despite increasing awareness, access to affordable, youth-friendly and community-based mental health services remains uneven across the region.

Ask:

Establish accessible and youth-friendly mental health and well-being services through schools, youth centres, community-based programmes and integrated support mechanisms.

Recommendation

04

Support Youth-Led Media and Democratic Participation

Addressed to:

Western Balkans Governments

Media Regulators

Public Broadcasters

European Commission

Civil Society Organisations

Youth Organisations

Context:

Participants emphasized the growing importance of independent, youth-led media in promoting democratic participation, countering disinformation and creating spaces for informed public dialogue. Young people should be empowered not only as media consumers but also as content creators and contributors to democratic discourse.

Ask:

Support youth-created and youth-led media initiatives that promote democratic values, media literacy, intercultural dialogue and informed public participation, while strengthening young people's role in combating misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.

Recommendation

05

Advance Gender Equality and Inclusive Participation in Democratic Life

Addressed to:

European
Commission

Western
Balkans
Governments

Civil Society
Organisations

Local
Authorities

Youth
Organisations

Context:

Inclusive and resilient societies require equal participation of all young people in public life. Participants stressed that persistent discrimination, gender inequalities and barriers faced by marginalized groups continue to limit meaningful participation in democratic processes and decision-making. Addressing these challenges is essential for strengthening social cohesion and democratic resilience throughout the region.

Ask:

Promote gender equality, equal opportunities and the meaningful participation of women, marginalized groups and underrepresented communities in democratic decision-making, peacebuilding processes and public life.



Theme III

Green and Sustainable Development



Recommendation

01

Establish a Regional Youth Green Transition Fund

Addressed to:

European Commission

Western Balkans Governments

Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF)

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

Development Partners & International Financial Institutions

Context:

Participants highlighted that young people are increasingly developing innovative solutions in climate action, biodiversity protection, sustainable agriculture and the circular economy. However, limited access to funding, mentoring and institutional support continues to prevent these initiatives from reaching their full potential and contributing to the region's green transition.

Ask:

Establish a Regional Youth Green Transition Fund to support youth-led initiatives in climate action, biodiversity protection, circular economy, sustainable communities and environmental innovation.

Recommendation

02

Integrate Green Competencies into Education Systems

Addressed to:

Western Balkans Governments

Ministries of Education

Youth Organisations

European Commission

Educational Institutions

Universities

Context:

Education is fundamental to preparing young people for the transition towards sustainable societies and economies. Participants emphasized that sustainability education should extend beyond environmental awareness to include systems thinking, innovation, responsible citizenship and practical competencies required for the green transition.

Ask:

Integrate green competencies and sustainability education across formal, non-formal and vocational learning systems, supported by regional partnerships among schools, universities and youth organisations.

Recommendation

03

Transform Educational Institutions into Living Laboratories for Sustainability

Addressed to:

Ministries of Education

Western Balkans Governments

International Development Partners

Educational Institutions

Local Authorities

Context:

Schools and universities should become practical examples of sustainable development rather than solely places where sustainability is taught. Investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency and hands-on learning can help educational institutions become centres of innovation while reducing their environmental footprint.

Ask:

Transform public educational institutions into living laboratories for sustainability through investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency and practical green learning opportunities

Recommendation

04

Promote Sustainable Regional Mobility

Addressed to:

Western Balkans Governments

Transport Authorities

Local Governments

European Commission

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

Context:

Sustainable mobility is essential for achieving climate objectives while strengthening regional cooperation and youth participation. Participants stressed that environmentally friendly transport systems should facilitate educational exchanges, apprenticeships, volunteering and regional cooperation

Ask:

Promote sustainable regional mobility by improving green transport options and enabling young people to participate in regional cooperation, apprenticeships and environmental initiatives.

Recommendation

05

Institutionalise Youth Participation in Green Governance

Addressed to:

European
Commission

Western
Balkans
Governments

Environmental
Agencies

Youth
Organisations

Local
Authorities

Context:

Young people consistently expressed a strong willingness to contribute to environmental policymaking but identified limited opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Institutionalising structured dialogue would strengthen the legitimacy, effectiveness and long-term sustainability of environmental governance.

Ask:

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.



Message for the Berlin Process Leader's Summit

The recommendations under these thematic areas call on the Berlin Process leaders:

a) *to prioritise investment in youth skills, innovation, mobility & entrepreneurship as strategic drivers of regional competitiveness & European integration.*

b) *to strengthen peacebuilding, democratic resilience, inclusion & youth participation as essential foundations of long-term regional stability.*

c) *to accelerate a just and inclusive green transition by empowering young people as partners in environmental governance, sustainable innovation and climate action.*

d) *to recognise young people as strategic partners in shaping the future of the Western Balkans and to reflect these priorities in the "Leaders Declaration."*

The Summit should reaffirm its commitment to meaningful youth participation and invite relevant regional organisations, EU institutions and Western Balkans governments to integrate these recommendations into future regional cooperation initiatives and implementation mechanisms.

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. 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. 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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The recommendations presented in this publication were developed by participants of the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2026. They do not necessarily represent the official positions of RYCO, its Governing Board or Contracting Parties, the Government of Montenegro, the Berlin Process, or the supporting partners.

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