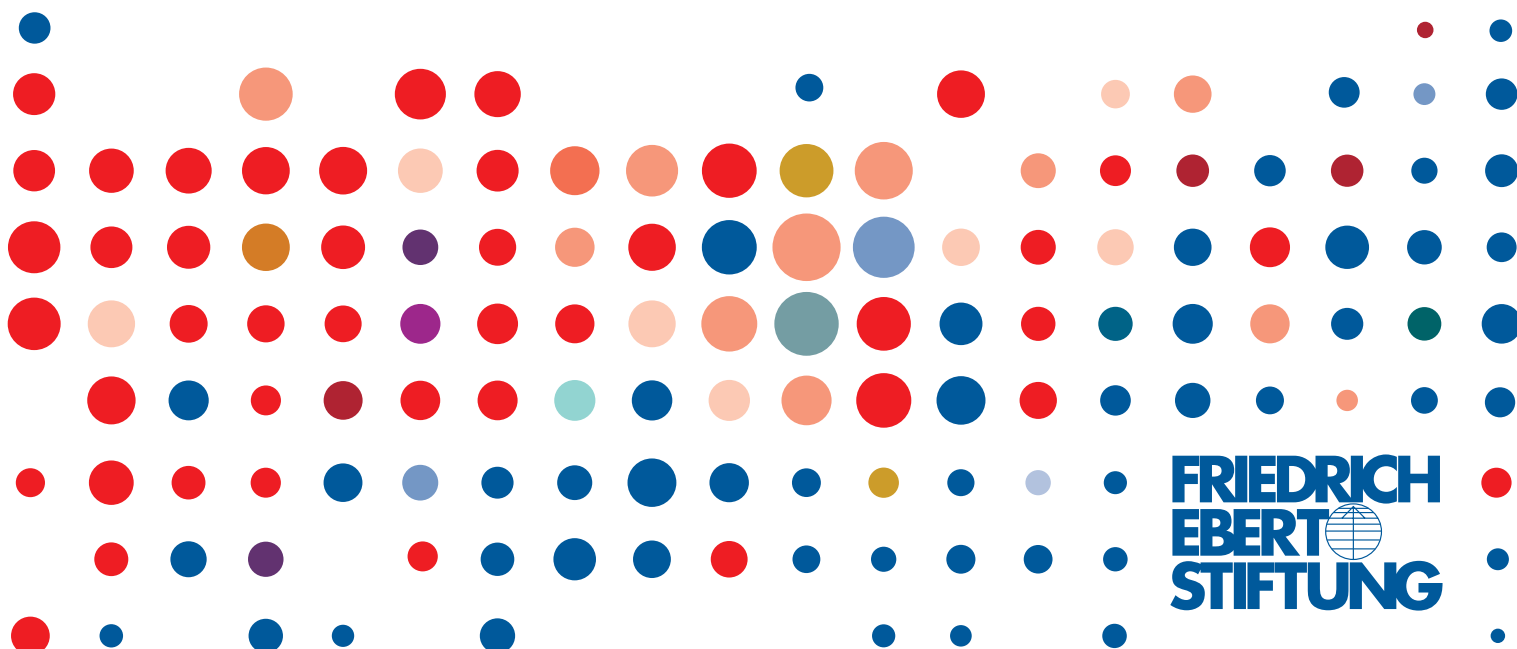


# IN SEARCH OF SOLIDARITY-BASED EUROPEANISATION

Miran Lavrič

## FIVE POINTS ON YOUTH IN THE WESTERN BALKAN SIX COUNTRIES 2019

- 1** Youth in all WB6 countries are confronted with very adverse conditions in the labour market; the situation for youth from the SEE EU countries is by comparison substantially more favourable.
- 2** Informal practices are perceived to be extremely widespread and are increasingly tolerated among youth across the region.
- 3** The emigration potential of youth from the WB6 countries continues to be very high and is much higher in comparison to the SEE EU countries.
- 4** A large majority of youth in the WB6 are in favour of solidarity-based Europeanisation, but there are also signs of increasing authoritarian tendencies.
- 5** Interest in politics is very low and has decreased in recent years. Nevertheless, the democratic potential of WB6 youth in terms of voting and civic engagement appears to be considerable – also in comparison to youth from SEE EU countries.



*The Western Balkans should invest more in their younger generation, our future EU citizens, and give them a perspective for the future, not the past.*

– The European Commission, 2018<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In recent years, considerable attention has been devoted by scholars and policy-makers to youth in the Western Balkans’ six (WB6) countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. While young people in these countries are often seen as a possible ray of hope in terms of democratisation and Europeanisation,<sup>2</sup> empirical studies tend to paint a rather unfavourable picture in this regard. Based on an analysis of a recent series of youth surveys conducted in the region between 2011 and 2015 (FES Youth Studies 2011–2015), Jusić and Numanović even refer to the ‘excluded generation.’ They conclude that young people’s employment prospects are bleak and that most young people face a difficult socioeconomic situation, which is closely related to a widespread desire to emigrate.<sup>3</sup> The authors also stress widespread disillusionment with politics and low levels of political participation among youth across the region.

This brief is based on an analysis of survey data collected in early 2018 on representative samples<sup>4</sup> of youth aged 14 to 29 in WB6 countries and the four Southeastern European (SEE) countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia) that have joined the EU (SEE EU countries). It examines the current situation of youth in WB6 countries from different perspectives and uses the SEE EU countries as the main point of comparison. It also provides general recommendations aimed at helping improve young people’s future and well-being, and consolidating their role in society.

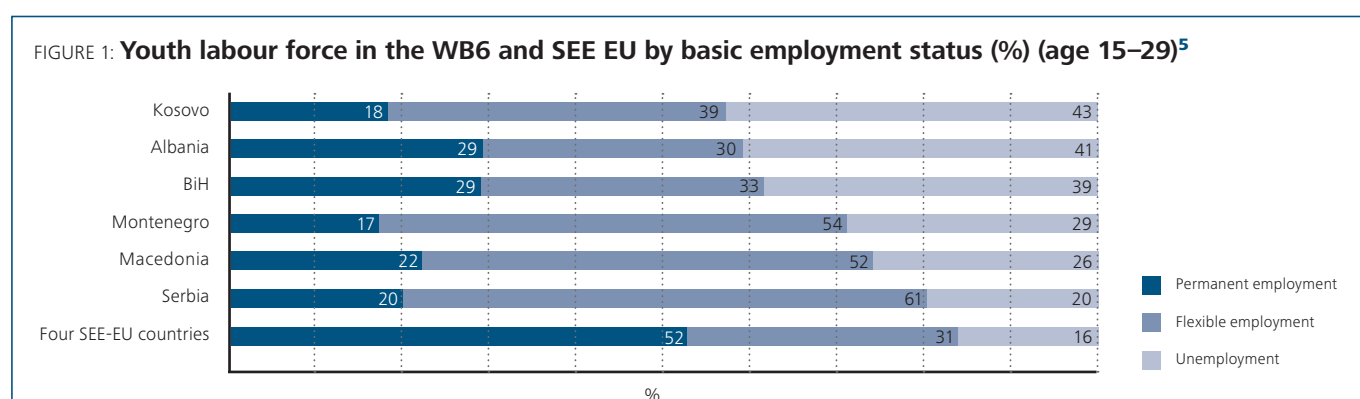
## 1

### Youth in all WB6 countries are confronted with very adverse conditions in the labour market; the situation for youth from the SEE EU countries is by comparison substantially more favourable.

Across the region, youth continue to face high unemployment, precarious working conditions, while many of them are not employed or undergoing education or training (NEET). Youth unemployment rates range from 20% in Serbia to 43% in Kosovo and are substantially higher than in the SEE EU countries. Albania, Kosovo and BiH stand out with the highest unemployment rates, while also displaying very high NEET rates, ranging from 20% of youth in BiH to 25% in Albania.

Survey data also show that even those young people who have jobs are likely to have some form of flexible employment<sup>6</sup> – usually characterised by precarious working conditions. As is evident from Figure 1, the share of flexible employment among the young labour force tends to be substantially higher in almost all WB6 countries in comparison to the four SEE EU countries, ranging from 30% in Albania to as high as 62% in Serbia. Interestingly, countries’ ranking in terms of precarious employment are almost a mirror image of their ranking in terms of unemployment rates. This suggests that countries in the region tend to achieve somewhat lower youth unemployment rates largely at the cost of increasing insecurity for young people in the labour market. The most striking contrast between the WB6 and SEE EU countries can be found in the category of permanent employment, with only 22% of youth in the WB6 region having permanent jobs, while the level in SEE EU countries is 52%.

The main reason behind the unfavourable conditions facing youth in the labour market is to be found in the general macro-economic conditions prevailing in the WB6 countries. While such conditions are beyond the scope of the FES youth studies, surveys have revealed important factors at the individual level which may contribute to their employment status. Our analyses confirm already well-established patterns of reproduction of social



inequalities that can be identified in relationships between young people’s general socioeconomic status and their situation in the labour market. Thus, unemployment is more common among youth whose parents have only completed primary school and among those who are from financially worse-off households. Similarly, young people who are NEETs are more likely to come from households with less educated parents, fewer material possessions and a worse financial position. The main predictors do not change much even when we take the likelihood of precarious employment into account. Standard employment is more prevalent among those with higher levels of educational attainment, those whose parents have attained higher levels of education, and those who come from financially better-off households.

2

**Informal practices are perceived to be extremely widespread and are increasingly tolerated among youth across the region.**

Several findings suggest that informality in formal procedures is very common and increasingly widespread among youth across the region. Although we did not ask our respondents about their personal involvement with informal practices, as this would be methodologically problematic, we can infer this by looking at young people’s perceptions and attitudes in relation to informality.

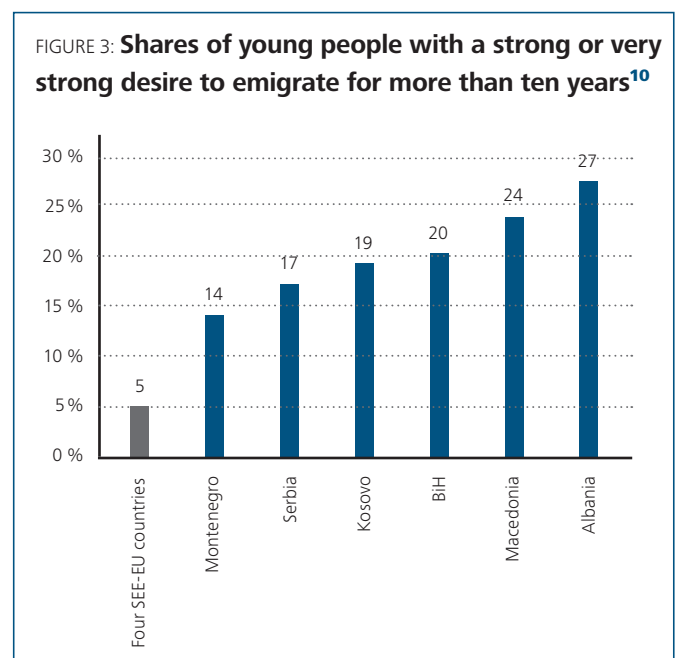
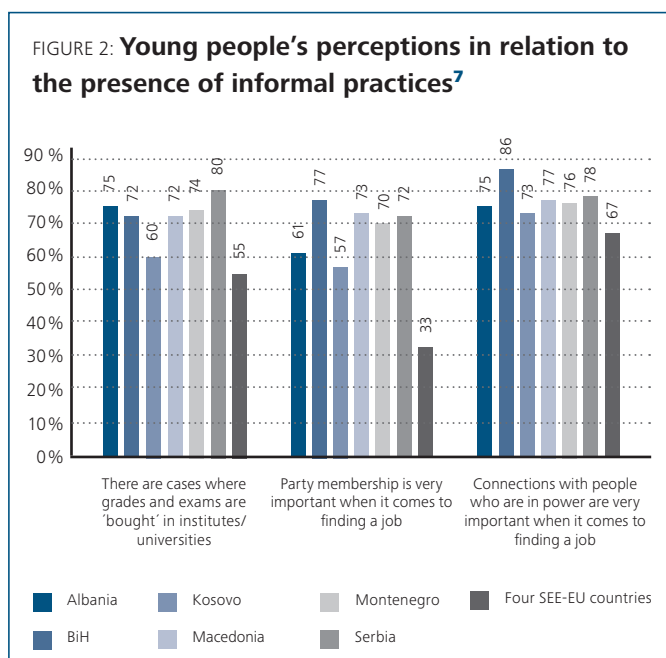
As discernible from Figure 2, there is a very high perception of corruption both with regard to formal education and the labour market, suggesting that such perceptions are likely to be widespread, including with respect to practices at other public institutions, such as healthcare or courts. It should also be added that, since 2008 and with the exception of Albania,

youth in the region have become more tolerant of informal practices, such as accepting/offering bribes, using ‘connections’ in formal procedures, or evading taxes.

These findings point to a situation which is sometimes referred to as ‘normalisation of corruption.’<sup>8</sup> In such cases, corrupt practices tend to be taken for granted and are perpetuated in a negative spiral, with people increasingly feeling that they have little other choice than to go along with what most other people in society seem to be doing.<sup>9</sup> As we can see, this kind of situation is much more typical of the WB6 countries than the SEE EU countries, suggesting that the level of Europeanisation, at least with a view to full membership in the EU, most likely does have an impact in terms of reducing the extent of corrupt (and other informal) practices.

When it comes to the perception of corruption in formal education specifically, comparisons with the FES Youth Studies 2011–15 surveys indicate a major increase in BiH (from 36 % to 72 %) and in Serbia (from 46 % to 80 %), while in other countries these perceptions have remained at very high levels. Analysis also revealed that young people with higher levels of education tend to be more convinced of the presence of corruption. Since they have a longer experience in the educational system and are likely to be more informed about such problems, this finding suggests that the observed perceptions may be a valid reflection of the existing situation.

Not surprisingly, similar levels of informality are also perceived in the labour market realm. Here, the WB6 countries are strikingly different from the SEE EU countries, especially when it comes to political party membership being perceived as instrumental to getting a job. This is closely related to the finding that young people in the WB6 countries state a very strong preference towards employment in the public sector. Furthermore, this preference is positively correlated with the perceived importance of party membership in getting a job, suggesting that young people’s membership in political parties may largely be motivated by aspirations of obtaining a job in the public sector.



3

### The emigration potential of youth from the WB6 countries continues to be very high and is much higher in comparison to the SEE EU countries.

Comparisons with FES Youth Studies 2011–15 data suggest that the emigration potential of youth has remained stable at high levels across the WB6 region, with the exception of Albania and Kosovo, where it has decreased slightly in recent years. Nevertheless, as is evident from Figure 3, the desire to emigrate is still relatively prevalent, including among youth from these two countries. Comparisons with FES Youth Studies 2011–15 data also show that the percentages of those persons with no desire to emigrate have substantially increased in three out of four SEE EU countries.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that changes relating to citizenship in a country in the EU might, at least in the longer term, significantly reduce the scale of youth emigration. This is particularly so in the case of long-term migration. As Figure 3 suggests, long-term emigration plans are strikingly higher in the WB6 countries than in the SEE EU countries. Of course, the emigration potential is much higher when young people who are planning to migrate for less than 10 years are also included. In this case, shares of young people with a strong or very strong desire to emigrate ranges from 26% in Montenegro to 43% in Albania.

While economic reasons are the most commonly reported motives for the desire to emigrate, the impact of socioeconomic status differs very significantly between countries. For instance, in Albania young people are more likely to emigrate if they are from financially better-off households, if they have more educated parents, and if they are more educated themselves.<sup>12</sup> In BiH and

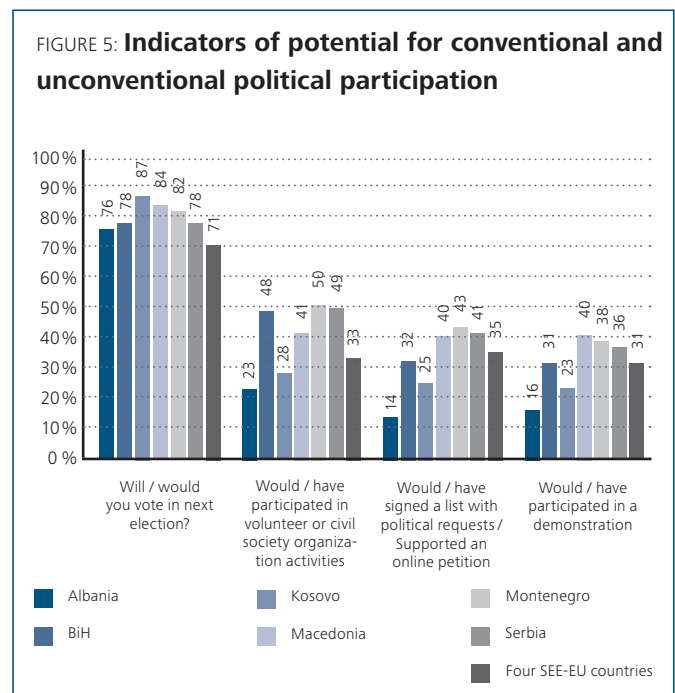
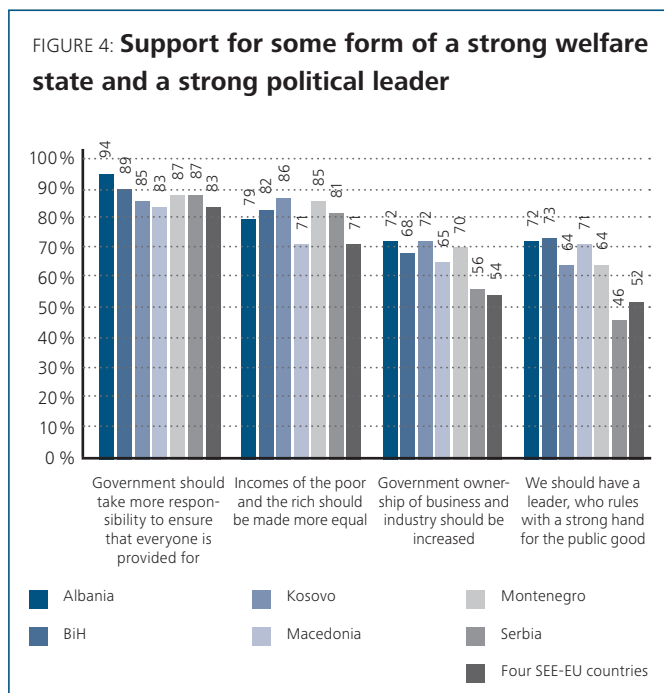
Kosovo, on the other hand, youth from financially better-off households are less likely to emigrate. Similarly, in Macedonia, higher levels of parents’ educational attainment are correlated with a lower likelihood of emigration. These findings suggest that the brain-drain problem is most pronounced in Albania, where better-educated young people are more likely to leave the country, while it appears less pronounced in countries like BiH, Kosovo and Macedonia.

4

### A large majority of youth in the WB6 are in favour of solidarity-based Europeanisation, but there are also signs of increasing authoritarian tendencies.

Youth in the Western Balkans are overwhelmingly pro-European. Support for EU membership is strong, ranging from 81% in Macedonia to 95% in Albania. It is substantially lower only in Serbia, but even there a majority of 56% support membership. Furthermore, our comparisons with FES Youth Studies 2011–15 results indicate that this support has increased over the past several years.<sup>13</sup> A strong pro-European orientation is also evident from the fact that youth across the region place substantially greater trust in the EU than in their national governments.

While this data can be interpreted as indicative of youth being a potentially important force in the Europeanisation of WB6 countries, other findings suggest that young people are predominantly in favour of a specific kind of Europeanisation. Namely, as is evident from Figure 4, the vast majority of WB6 youth also support some sort of a strong welfare state. These ideas also positively correlate, at the level of the entire region, with support for EU integration and greater trust in the EU.



This overwhelming support for a strong welfare state (see the first three sets of bars from the left in Figure 4) could be interpreted as an echo of the rise of so-called millennial socialism in Western countries. However, this popularity of socialist ideas in the WB6 also coincides with a sharp rise in political assertiveness or even authoritarianism, as measured by the statement on the right-hand side of Figure 4. Agreement with this statement has substantially increased since 2008 in all WB6 countries.

There is also a strong positive correlation between support for an assertive leader and support for a strong welfare state. These findings might suggest that young people's political preferences in the WB6 are shifting in the direction of a leftist authoritarianism. Seemingly contradictory correlations between the support for assertive leadership with both nationalism and different aspects of pro-democratic attitudes, however, point to a more complex picture. Taking all correlations into account, the tolerance of more assertive modes of governance should not be interpreted as a desire to abandon democracy, but as a desire to make it work.

Our analyses suggest that tolerance of more assertive modes of governance is caused by persistently high levels of economic insecurity. Accordingly, young people advocate socio-political values which they believe hold out the promise of greater economic welfare and security.<sup>14</sup> The pro-European orientation of youth in WB6 countries should also be understood from this perspective.

## 5

### **Interest in politics is very low and has decreased in recent years. Nevertheless, the democratic potential of WB6 youth in terms of voting and civic engagement appears to be considerable – also in comparison to youth from SEE EU countries.**

Shares of young people voicing at least some interest in national politics have substantially decreased across the region since the 2011–15 round of surveys, indicating that young people's disillusionment with politics has deepened in recent years. Furthermore, a large majority of youth admit to having a limited knowledge of politics, with shares of those not expressing agreement with the statement that they are knowledgeable about politics ranging from 81 % in BiH to 88 % in Albania.

This does not necessarily mean, however, that youth are generally unwilling to participate in policy-making. For example, agreement with the statement 'Young people should have more possibilities to speak out in politics' ranges from 62 % in Serbia to 84 % in BiH. Furthermore, young people in the WB6 region show relatively satisfactory levels of electoral participation, with

electoral turnout ranging from 59 % in Montenegro to 84 % in Macedonia.<sup>15</sup>

As the results shown in Figure 5 suggest, intentions of participating in elections are even higher, surpassing the level of SEE EU countries. Thus, the democratic potential of youth in terms of voting can be considered high in WB6 countries, especially considering the low levels of interest and knowledge of politics among youth.

The potential for unconventional political participation (see the three sets of bars on the right side of Figure 5) is lower, as was to be expected, but is still significant. With the exception of Albania and Kosovo, it exceeds the level of SEE EU countries. For instance, about half of young people in Montenegro, Serbia and BiH have been or are willing to participate in volunteer or civil-society activities.

Not surprisingly, both types of political participation tend to correlate positively with indices of higher socioeconomic status, such as educational attainment, parents' education or household financial status. Also, as was to be expected, young people who have spent some time abroad for educational or training purposes are substantially more interested in politics, report greater knowledge of politics, are much more willing to hold a political office, and active in terms of non-conventional political participation.

Curiously, there is also a positive correlation between voting and support for the welfare state, support for assertive leadership, and especially support for EU integration. When it comes to unconventional forms of political engagement, statistical analysis at the regional level suggests that, unlike in the case of voting, young people who support a strong welfare state are slightly less likely to engage in petitions, demonstrations or boycotts, and are also less likely to volunteer or participate in political activities online. Similar correlations were found in relation to support for EU integration and support for an assertive leader. Theoretically, these correlations could be explained by the higher external locus of control among supporters of a strong welfare state,<sup>16</sup> an assertive political leader, and the EU. These three notions are all related to strong external actors (political parties/political leaders/the EU) who, it is asserted, should resolve the most pressing social problems. On the other hand, it should be stressed that the negative correlations in relation to unconventional political participation were very weak, indicating that supporters of a welfare state still form a large majority of unconventionally active youth. For example, as many as 68 % of those who have or would participate in a demonstration completely agree with the statement that the government should assume more responsibility for ensuring that everyone is provided for.

Taken together, these results suggest that, among youth in WB6 countries, there is major potential electoral support for socialist or genuine social democratic and pro-European political parties, especially ones with charismatic leaders.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Youth in WB6 countries continue to suffer from a serious lack of quality employment opportunities. Besides a high incidence of unemployment, the majority of employed youth work in precarious jobs. It is therefore not surprising that young people in the region exhibit a very strong preference for public sector employment. It is worrying, however, that political party membership is considered to play a very important role in gaining access to jobs – only one of several indicators suggesting that corruption is increasingly becoming an integral part of daily life. The described situation continues to fuel a strong desire to emigrate, which is much higher among WB6 youth in comparison to youth from the SEE EU countries. Economic uncertainties are also a major factor behind the widespread support for a strong welfare state and assertive leadership. Together with a pronounced pro-European orientation, these constitute the key political perceptions of contemporary youth in WB6. Despite a marked disinterest in politics, youth across the region for the most part want a stronger say in politics and are quite eager to participate in parliamentary elections. In most WB6 countries, there is also a considerable potential for unconventional political participation, such as signing online petitions or taking part in demonstrations.

Given such findings, we propose the following policy recommendations in relation to the four main issues addressed by this brief:

### On youth employment:

- To tackle high unemployment and NEET rates, youth guarantee schemes, comprised both of active labour market policies and opportunities to continue education and training, should be strengthened or put in place. Such guarantee schemes should especially promote work-related learning. Youth mobility schemes that facilitate working or continuing education abroad should be further developed.
- In order to prevent the vicious cycle of temporary and occasional jobs for youth, job protection and youth representation through labour unions should be increased.
- In order to increase young people's chances of finding employment, online job search platforms and job placement services should be improved.
- To tackle the problem of skill mismatches between educational systems and labour markets, better coordination and exchange of information between the private sector and educational and training institutions should be fostered and include an improvement in vocational training.

### On the prevalence of informal practices:

- Effectively combatting corruption and more effective promotion and implementation of the principle of rule of law are necessary conditions to reduce young people's tolerance of informal practices.
- Reforms of the educational system should strengthen accountable, reliable, and transparent rules and procedures in order to fight corruption.

### On migration:

- Policies to deter emigration should be enhanced. These policies should target economic insecurity and the lack of employment opportunities as the most significant motivational factors underlying migration.
- Incentive measures to encourage return migration should be developed in cooperation between countries of origin and host countries. For example, incentives for employers in countries of origin to hire persons with experience or education abroad could stimulate these people to return to their home countries.

### On political and civic engagement:

- Policy-makers should seek ways to improve political knowledge among youth. Civic-education programmes with the aim of achieving greater civic engagement should be fostered in the region, especially through schools and digital media.
- Both NGOs and governments should do more in terms of promoting opportunities for youth to take part in volunteering and other types of civic engagement.
- Political representation of young people should be strengthened, both through mainstream political party structures and representative bodies, such as youth councils or committees. Policy-makers should also do more in terms of translating youth aspirations for general economic security and European integration into real political action and should directly involve young people to this end.
- Given the universality of Internet use and young people's existing interest in online political engagement, e-participation of youth should be promoted through bottom-up as well as top-down development of online platforms.
- Given the beneficial effects of international educational mobility, countries should encourage participation in existing mobility and exchange programmes such as Erasmus+ or the European Volunteering Service (EVS) as well as programmes run through the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) while strengthening these programmes.

## About the Author

**Miran Lavrič** is an associate professor of Sociology at the University of Maribor, Slovenia. He has worked on a number of research projects focusing on youth in Slovenia and the region of Southeast Europe and has published a number of original scientific articles in international journals on these and other sociological topics. He was the head of a comprehensive national study of youth in Slovenia (2010) and a researcher involved in many other youth studies in Slovenia and several international studies dealing with the societies of Southeast Europe.

## Endnotes

[ 1 ] The European Commission. (2018, Feb. 6). A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (COM/2018/065 final). Retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0065>

[ 2 ] See for example: Taleski, D., Reibold, H., & Hurrelmann, K. (2015). Building democracies in South East Europe: Youth as an unwilling agent? In K. Hurrelmann & M. Weichert (Eds.), *Lost in Democratic Transition? Political Challenges and Perspectives for Young People in South East Europe* (pp. 15–66). Sarajevo: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Regional Dialogue SEE.

[ 3 ] Montenegro was not included in the survey.

[ 4 ] Research results were published in the regional study FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/19 (FES Youth Studies 2018/2019). This policy brief summarises the key findings of the study and uses them for the purposes of specific analysis of the WB6 countries. For further information on methodology and statistical analysis, see the regional study.

[ 5 ] Note: Respondents were categorised based on their responses. Those who chose options that are not included in the figure (such as currently undergoing education or training, other or don't know) were not included in the analysis. In other words, the data in Figure 1 pertains to the youth labour force.

[ 6 ] This category included temporary contract for a full-time job, temporary contract for a part-time job, occasional job(s), and being self-employed.

[ 7 ] Percentages of those choosing response 4 ('agree') or 5 ('fully agree') on a scale of 1 to 5.

[ 8 ] Ashforth, B. E., & Anand, V. (2003). The Normalization of Corruption in Organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior* 25, 1-52.

[ 9 ] Karklins, R. (2005). *The System Made Me Do It: Corruption in Post-Communist Societies*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

[ 10 ] Percentages were computed based on two variables, and include those who (1) have a strong or very strong desire to emigrate and (2) reported that their preferred period to stay abroad is 10 years or more.

[ 11 ] The only exception being Slovenia.

[ 12 ] Taking into account only the age group 25–29.

[ 13 ] Due to differences in survey questionnaires, we were only able to compare data for three countries, limiting the analysis to the 16–27 age group. The results show that support for entry into the EU has increased from 73% to 81% in Macedonia; from 82% to 89% in Kosovo; and from 89% to 94% in Albania.

[ 14 ] For example, both support for the welfare state and for an assertive leader are substantially more pronounced among youth with a lower socioeconomic status, who tend to experience higher levels of economic uncertainty.

[ 15 ] Only those who were eligible to vote in the last election were considered in the analysis.

[ 16 ] See: Kouba, L., Pitlik, H. (2014). I wanna live my life: Locus of Control and Support for the Welfare State. *Mendelu Working Papers in Business and Economics* 46/2014. Mendel University in Brno. Retrieved from <http://ideas.repec.org/s/men/wpaper.html>

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The data was collected in early 2018 from more than 10,000 respondents aged 14–29 in the above-mentioned countries who participated in the survey. A broad range of issues were addressed, including young peoples’ experiences and aspirations in different realms of life, such as education, employment, political participation, family relationships, leisure and use of information and communications technology, but also their values, attitudes and beliefs.

Findings are presented in ten national and one regional study and its accompanying policy papers, which have been published in both English and the respective national languages.

## IMPRINT

**PUBLISHER:** Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
Dialogue Southeast Europe  
Kupreška 20 • 71 000 Sarajevo • Bosnia and Herzegovina  
[www.fes-southeasteurope.org](http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org)  
[www.fes.de/youth-studies](http://www.fes.de/youth-studies)

**RESPONSIBLE:** Felix Henkel, Director,  
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**DESIGN:** Andrea Schmidt • Typografie/im/Kontext

**DATE:** 2019

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