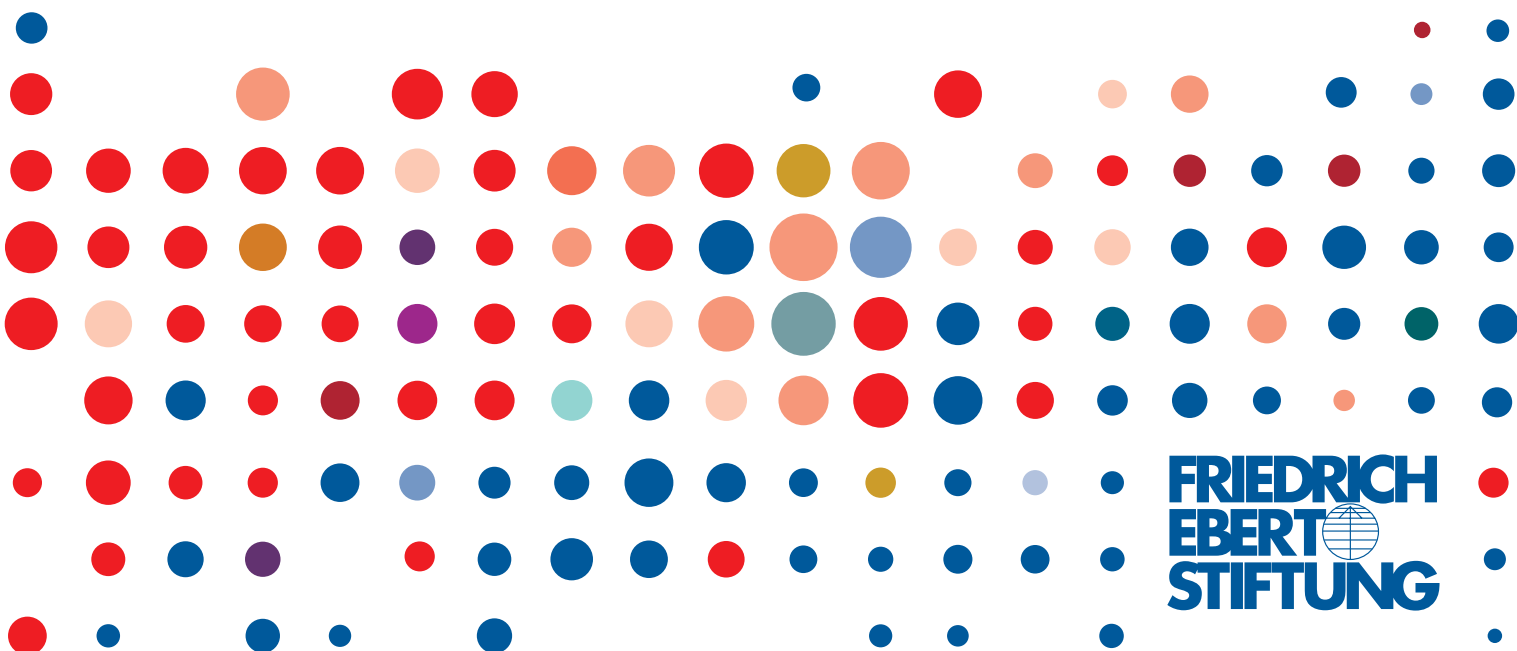


# CLOSER TO THE EU, FARTHER FROM LEAVING

Miran Lavrič

## FIVE POINTS ON YOUTH MOBILITY AND MIGRATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE 2019

- 1** The intent of youth from SEE to emigrate remains high, although it has decreased in recent years in most countries. Economic reasons, negative perceptions of the home country's situation and positive perceptions of the EU are main factors motivating young people to emigrate.
- 2** Youth from EU Member States are substantially less motivated for (long-term) emigration in comparison to youth from the WB6 countries.
- 3** The extent of the brain drain problem varies significantly across countries. It appears to be strong in Albania and Montenegro, while in Bulgaria and Macedonia, youth with lower levels of cultural capital are more likely to emigrate.
- 4** Young people from SEE display a high level of readiness to integrate into the fabric of their societies of choice.
- 5** The vast majority of SEE youth have not stayed abroad for the purpose of education or training. Those that have, report increased civic and political engagement upon return but also exhibit a higher likelihood of emigration later on.



## Introduction

The issue of young people's emigration from Southeastern Europe (SEE) has recently drawn considerable public and scholarly attention. Predominantly fuelled by economic uncertainty at home, youth emigration has especially picked up the pace during the last ten years in the Western Balkans' six (WB6) countries: Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Travel has largely been facilitated thanks to the visa liberalisation regime that countries (except Kosovo) have with the EU.<sup>1</sup> But youth emigration has been a considerable problem for quite some time in the other SEE countries as well, even before their entry into the EU. Based on the analysis of survey data gathered in early 2018 on representative samples<sup>2</sup> of youth in ten SEE countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia – this brief looks at young people's prospects in terms of migration and mobility<sup>3</sup> and provides general policy recommendations in this area.

### 1

## The intent of youth from SEE to emigrate remains high, although it has decreased in recent years in most countries. Economic reasons, negative perceptions of the home country's situation and positive perceptions of the EU are main factors motivating young people to emigrate.

More than 55% of youth in the SEE region express at least some desire to emigrate to another country, with this share ranging from 40% in Romania to 75% in Serbia. According to comparisons with the previous wave of FES youth surveys (FES Youth Studies 2011-2015), these shares, though still very high, have dropped significantly in most SEE countries; exceptions are Slovenia, Serbia and BiH. Given that the last round of surveys was carried out in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis in most countries, the decrease in young people's desire to leave home may possibly be attributed to an amelioration of living standards and job opportunities at home.

In order to draw a more coherent picture of respondents' actual likelihood of emigrating and the scope of potential emigration from individual countries, an emigration potential index was constructed.<sup>4</sup> Results indicate that an estimated 1.6 million or 18% of today's SEE youth are likely to emigrate within the next 10 years (see Figure 1).

The data in Figure 1, among other things, clearly reveal the importance of distinguishing between the average likelihood of young people to emigrate and the emigration potential of a country as a whole. For instance, while a relatively small share (10%) of Romanian youth display a real intent to emigrate, given the country's large youth population, this yields the greatest emigration potential (358,000) in the region. On the other hand, as much as 40% of youth from Albania exhibit a strong likelihood of leaving, but due to a much smaller population, Albania's youth emigration potential is substantially lower than Romania's.

Survey results also indicate that youth from SEE predominantly want to emigrate for the sake of improving their living standard, obtain a higher salary and better employment opportunities. In other words, economic reasons seem to be an overwhelming factor behind young people's intents to emigrate, especially so in Croatia, Romania and Serbia. Educational reasons are second most important, but with an enormous gap compared to economic motives.

The prevalence of economic factors fuelling emigration is also confirmed by correlational analyses at the regional level. For example, youth's desire to emigrate is significantly negatively correlated with the perceived financial status of their household. Employment status also matters, as those who are employed more often state that they do not intend to move abroad, while the opposite is true for the unemployed. Nevertheless, it is very important to consider the fact that significant differences exist between countries with regards to the profile of youth desiring to move abroad.

Statistical analyses also show that, in each of the ten countries, young people who are dissatisfied with the state of affairs in their country are much more likely to emigrate;<sup>5</sup> the same holds for youth who perceive their country's future to be bleak. Such perceptions may not necessarily correspond to reality or only be conditioned by respondents' socioeconomic situation; they may also be affected by media narratives and political statements surrounding emigration. In other words, constant and especially exaggerated criticism of the situation in the country by the media and opinion-leaders may lead to a more negative perception of the home country among youth, which may significantly increase their likelihood of emigrating. This also tends to increase the 'brain drain'<sup>6</sup> problem, which in turn negatively affects on the situation in the country.

FIGURE 1: Youth emigration potential, by country

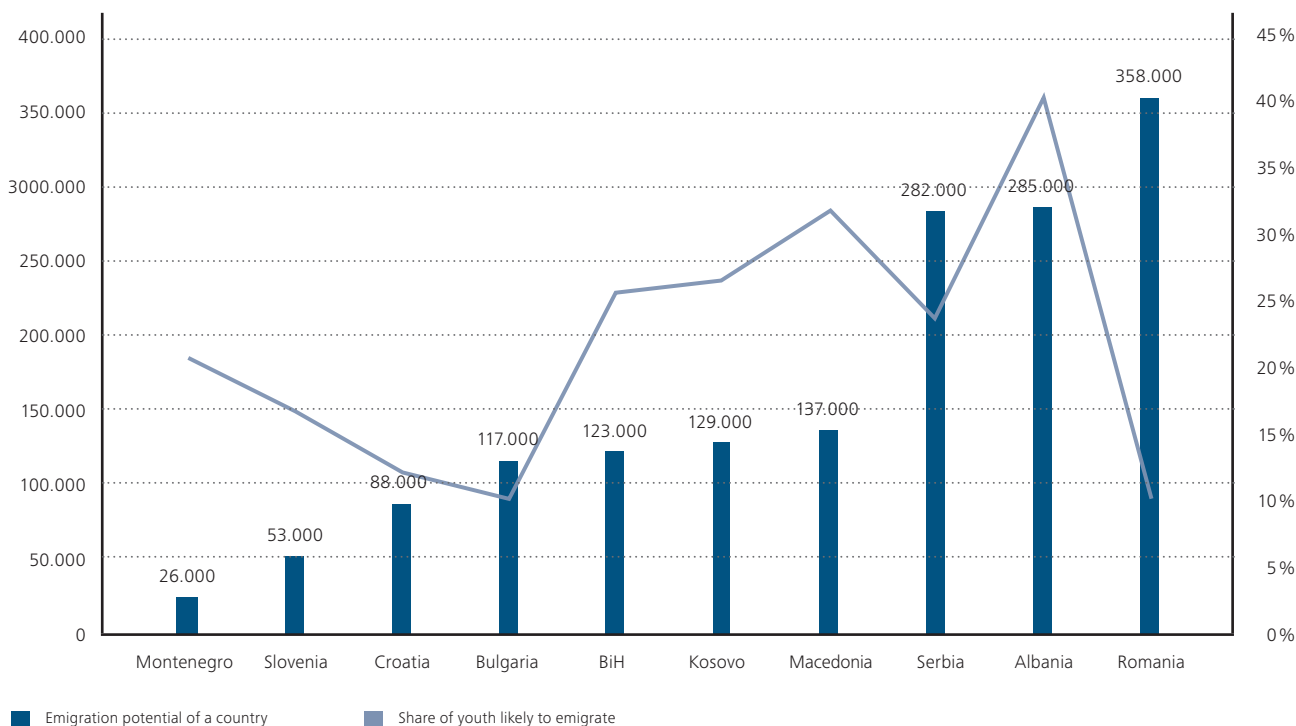


FIGURE 2: Period of desired stay abroad, by country. How long would you like to stay abroad?

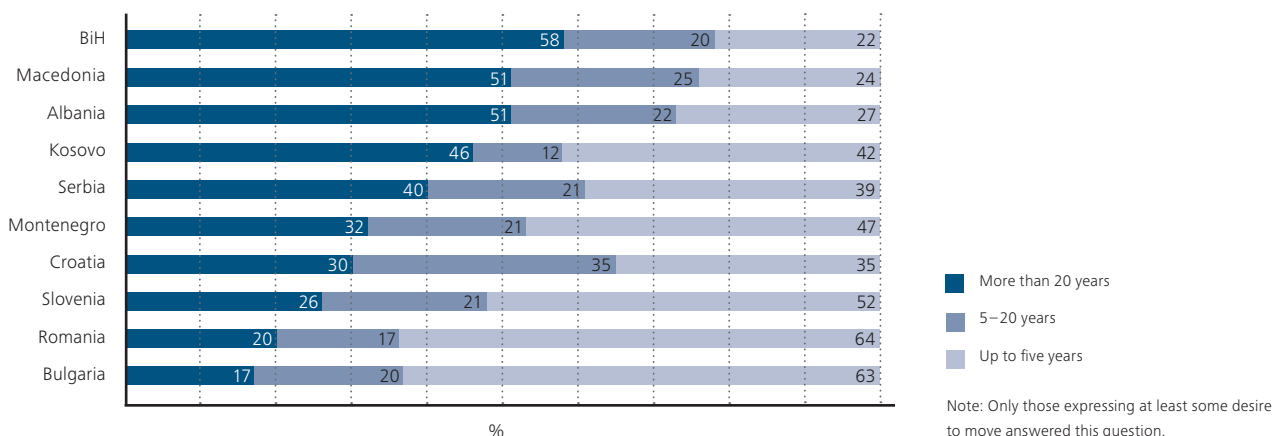


TABLE 1: Correlations between socioeconomic status and emigration potential, by country

COUNTRY	PEARSON'S R
Albania	0.125**
Montenegro	0.110**
Serbia	0.073*
Slovenia	0.072*
Croatia	0.062*
Romania	0.063
BiH	0.016
Kosovo	-0.024
Bulgaria	-0.085*
Macedonia	-0.137**

\*\* p < 0.01; \* p < 0.05

## 2

### Youth from EU Member States are substantially less motivated for (long-term) emigration in comparison to youth from the WB6 countries.

Survey findings on the desire of SEE youth to emigrate indicate a significant contrast between the non-member states and EU member states from the region. Young people from Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovenia show the least interest in emigration. This contrast is even more visible when we look at the anticipated duration of young people’s stay abroad (Figure 2).

The shares of young people that would like to leave their home country for more than 20 years are substantially greater in those countries that have not joined the EU. About one-fourth of youth from the Southeast European EU Member States plan to stay abroad for more than 20 years, while this share is close to one-half in the WB6 countries. In other words, living in an EU Member State seems to significantly reduce young people’s motivation for long-term emigration.

3

**The extent of the brain drain problem varies significantly across countries. It appears to be strong in Albania and Montenegro, while in Bulgaria and Macedonia, youth with lower levels of cultural capital are more likely to emigrate.**

Countries vary in terms of the risk of brain drain. When using socioeconomic status of youth as a proxy for brain drain,<sup>7</sup> correlations with emigration potential suggest that brain drain may be a very serious issue for Albania and Montenegro, and to a lesser extent for Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia. Results suggest the opposite is the case for Bulgaria and Northern Macedonia: youth with a greater potential for emigration from these countries have lower levels of education and come from poorer households, with lower levels of cultural capital. Results were inconclusive for Romania, BiH and Kosovo due to insignificant correlations (Table 1).

It should be stressed that the above findings do not suggest that, for example, Northern Macedonia and Bulgaria do not face a brain drain problem at all. While it is true that youth with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to emigrate from these countries, it is also true that many well-educated young people are leaving as well. For instance, while as much as 36% of youth with

primary education or less express a strong or very strong desire to leave Macedonia, this share is as high as 29% for those with tertiary education.

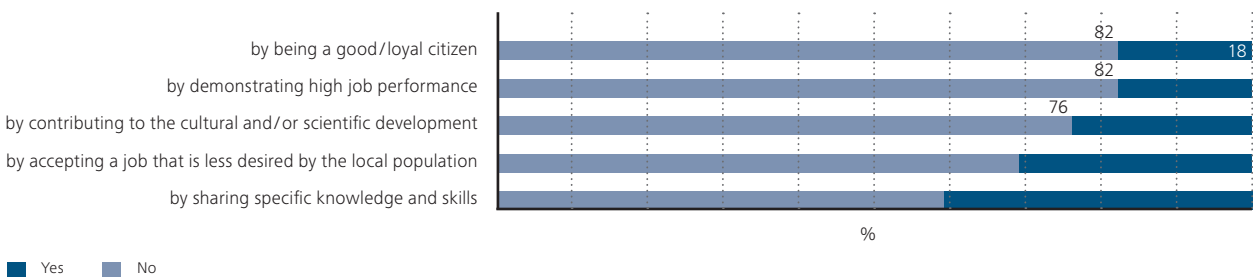
4

**Young people from SEE display a high level of readiness to integrate into the fabric of their host societies of choice.**

Several indicators suggest that youth emigrating from the SEE countries are very willing to adapt to the social circumstances of their host country. Across the region, youth exhibit good language proficiency and exceptionally high willingness to learn the language of their desired destination country. Among those with a high potential for emigration, 87% show a (very) great willingness to learn the language, while 78% speak the language of their potential host country. Moreover, 58% claim to be familiar with employment possibilities available to immigrants in their respective host country.

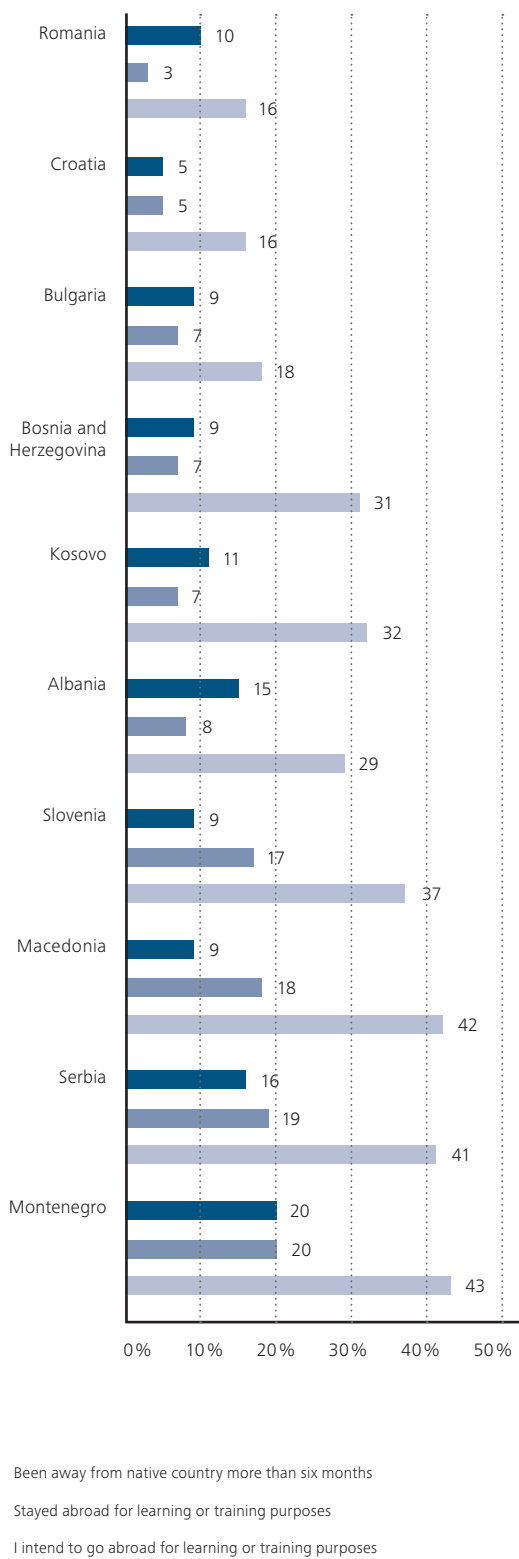
Simultaneously, young people who desire to leave overwhelmingly see their own contribution to their prospective host country to manifest itself in superb job performance and being a good citizen, followed by the ability to contribute to cultural and scientific development. With the exception of Montenegro, a majority of young people across SEE also expressed readiness to accept a job that is less desired by the native population of their prospective host country. Statistical analysis at the regional level suggests that willingness to accept a job that is less desired by the local population is positively correlated with the ‘not in education, employment or training’ (NEET) status. Young people more willing to accept a ‘subpar’ job are also more likely to come from rural areas, have lower levels of educational attainment and have parents with lower levels of educational attainment. They are also more likely to come from financially worse-off households with fewer material possessions.

FIGURE 3: **Dimensions of young people’s perceived own contributions to host countries**



Note: Analysis was limited to respondents with high (> 0.50) emigration potential.

FIGURE 4: Experiences and plans of staying abroad for learning or training purposes or being away from the home country for more than six months



Note: Percentages of youth claiming to have respective experience/intent in relation to being/going abroad.

5

The vast majority of SEE youth have not stayed abroad for the purpose of education or training. Those that have, report increased civic and political engagement upon return but also exhibit a higher likelihood of emigration later on.

Despite their desire to emigrate, survey data show that young people from SEE have had very little experience with living abroad for longer periods of time. In fact, the vast majority have not spent more than six months in another country. SEE youth also have very little experience with staying abroad for the sake of education, which usually means temporary, shorter stays and may be understood to constitute mobility rather than migration.

When it comes to staying abroad for learning or training purposes, we seem to be dealing with two groups of countries. While in Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Slovenia, about 20% of youth have had such an experience, in all other countries, these shares are substantially below 10%. We can discern quite a similar situation if we examine intentions of moving abroad for educational purposes. Interestingly, educational mobility is the lowest in the three EU member states: Romania, Croatia and Bulgaria. The international mobility of youth appears to be especially low in Croatia, where both alternatives of experiencing foreign countries are reported by only 5% of respondents, and intentions with regards to educational mobility are also very low.

Such low levels of international mobility can be considered a missed opportunity, since many of the suggested effects of being abroad for educational purposes are generally desirable in social terms. According to statistical analyses, international mobility correlates with a greater interest in politics, higher level of expressed knowledge of politics, a greater willingness to take on a political function, higher levels of non-conventional political participation, and lower support for nationalist ideas. On the other hand, those who report such an experience are, not surprisingly, also much more likely to emigrate.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The intent of youth to emigrate appears to be decreasing in many SEE countries, but overall it remains high, especially in the WB6 countries. Not surprisingly, young people's intentions to move are mainly conditioned by economic motives. Nevertheless, the effect of socioeconomic status on the likelihood of emigration varies significantly between countries, indicating differences in terms of the risk of brain drain. Importantly, youth intending to emigrate display a great willingness to adapt to the society of their chosen host country, although their actual experience of living in foreign countries is rather limited, especially in Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria. The relatively weak desire and scant experience of youth with respect to moving abroad for educational purposes appears to be a missed opportunity in terms of fostering young people's civic and political engagement.

### Policy recommendations:

- Policies to deter emigration need to be enhanced, especially in SEE countries that have not joined the EU. The development of such policies needs to take on an integral, multifaceted approach, targeting economic insecurity, weak job opportunities and career prospects as the most significant motivational factors underlying migration.
- Given the beneficial effects of international educational mobility, including greater interest and willingness to engage in politics and lower support for nationalism, countries should encourage participation in existing mobility programmes, such as Erasmus+, and consider establishing new programs to foster greater educational mobility, including intraregional mobility in SEE.
- Since educational mobility is related to a greater likelihood of emigration, incentive measures to encourage return migration should be developed. For example, incentives for employers in sending countries to hire professionals with experience or education from abroad could stimulate those professionals to return to their home countries. Such policies should be integrated into broader return migration schemes involving cooperation between sending and receiving countries.

## 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 ] A visa-free regime was introduced as of December 2009 for citizens of Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia, and as of the end of 2010 for citizens of Albania and BiH. For more, see European Commission 2017.

[ 2 ] Research results were published in the regional study *Youth in Southeast Europe 2018: In Search of Solidarity-based Europeanization* (FES Youth Studies 2018/2019). This policy brief summarises the key findings of the study in the area of mobility and migration. For further information on methodology and statistical analysis, please consult the regional study.

[ 3 ] As opposed to migration, which is usually understood as a permanent change of residence, mobility is usually understood as a transitory movement of people in the course of their everyday lives. In this brief, we refer to international migration as a change of residence to another country for more than six months, while movement to another country for a period of less than six months is considered to constitute international mobility.

[ 4 ] The emigration potential index constitutes six dimensions relying on questions on migration from the youth surveys. Its values range from 0 to 1, whereby value 1 means a very strong desire to emigrate, planned departure within the next 6 months, planning to stay for longer than 20 years, having support or an invitation from someone living in the host country, the highest level of familiarity with the host country, having taken all six concrete steps listed in the survey for the purpose of emigrating (such as contacting an embassy or an employer). Based on the calculated emigration potential for each individual, we were able to compute the emigration potential for each country. This variable represents an assessment of the number of young people in each country who display a serious likelihood of emigrating according to the six dimensions of the emigration potential. The variable was created in two steps. First, shares of individuals with scores over 0.50 as part of the variable 'emigration potential of individuals' were computed for each country. Second, these shares were multiplied by the actual number of young people (15–29) living in each country.

[ 5 ] Perception of the situation in the country was measured by a composite variable including respondents' evaluation of eight issues: human rights, economic welfare of citizens, rule of law, equality, employment, individual freedom, democracy, and security.

[ 6 ] Brain drain can be understood as the the situation in which large numbers of educated and very skilled people leave their own country to live and work in another one where pay and conditions are better.

[ 7 ] A composite variable, denoting parents' education, respondents' education, number of books in the household, the financial situation of households, and household material possessions.

## THE FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany, with a rich tradition in social democracy dating back to 1925. The work of our political foundation revolves around the core ideas and values of social democracy – freedom, justice and solidarity. This is what binds us to the principles of social democracy and free trade unions.

With our international network of offices in more than 100 countries, we support a policy for peaceful cooperation and human rights, promote the establishment and consolidation of democratic, social and constitutional structures and work as pioneers for free trade unions and a strong civil society. We are actively involved in promoting a social, democratic and competitive Europe in the process of European integration.

## YOUTH STUDIES SOUTHEAST EUROPE 2018/2019:

“FES Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2018/2019” is an international youth research project carried out simultaneously in ten countries in Southeast Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia. The main objective of the surveys has been to identify, describe and analyse attitudes of young people and patterns of behaviour in contemporary society.

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,  
Dialogue Southeast Europe

**CONTACT:** [info@fes-soe.org](mailto:info@fes-soe.org)

**DESIGN:** Andrea Schmidt • Typografie/im/Kontext

**DATE:** 2019

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), or of the organisation for which the authors work. The FES cannot guarantee the accuracy of all information and data provided in this publication. Commercial use of any media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. Any reference made to Kosovo is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. Any reference made to Macedonia in this publication is understood to refer to the Republic of North Macedonia.

**ALL FES YOUTH STUDIES 2018/19 INCLUDING  
THE FULL DATASET ARE AVAILABLE AT:**  
[www.fes.de/youth-studies](http://www.fes.de/youth-studies)