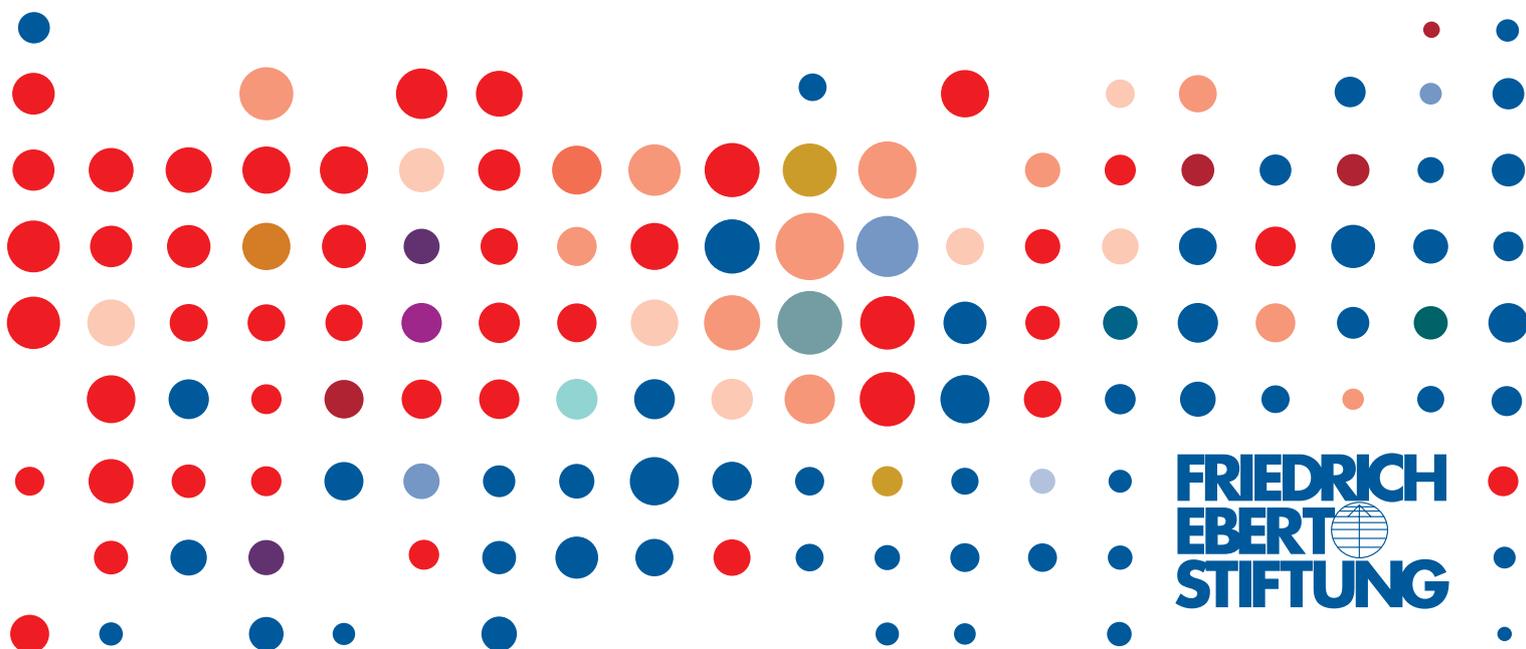


# POLITICAL ALIENATION OF A PRECARIOUS GENERATION

Mirna Jusić

## FIVE POINTS ON POLITICAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION OF SEE YOUTH 2019

- 1** Young people in SEE do not feel that they are adequately represented in national politics; at the same time, they report little political knowledge and interest in politics.
- 2** While young people's turnout in national elections in the region is satisfactory, they are less acquainted with other types of political engagement, such as signing petitions or taking part in demonstrations.
- 3** In most countries of the SEE region, young people are not willing to assume political posts.
- 4** Beyond political participation, civic engagement is not common among youth in SEE. The majority of young people have never engaged in volunteering.
- 5** Survey data show that socioeconomic inequalities are inherent in young people's participation, as young people with greater access to resources are more likely to engage politically and civically.



## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Young people’s increasing political and civic disengagement has been a consistent preoccupation of scholars and policy-makers over the past few decades due to its negative implications for the future of democratic citizenship and political systems.<sup>2</sup> However, there is an ever-greater recognition that the mainstream agencies of political engagement, such as political parties, have increasingly been replaced with new ones – for instance non-governmental

organisations or movements. Similarly, mainstream repertoires of engagement, such as voting, have been exchanged for street protests or political activity on social media.<sup>3</sup> Young people are also more inclined to engage on specific issues, such as social rights or environmental matters.<sup>4</sup> In the young democracies of Southeast Europe (SEE), research to date draws attention to young people’s disillusionment and disengagement with politics.<sup>5</sup> Recent FES surveys, conducted in 2018 among 10,000 young people aged 14–29 from ten SEE countries, reveal the idiosyncrasies and the drivers of young people’s (dis-)engagement in the region.

FIGURE 1.1: Young people’s perceptions of the socio-political situation in a national context, by country

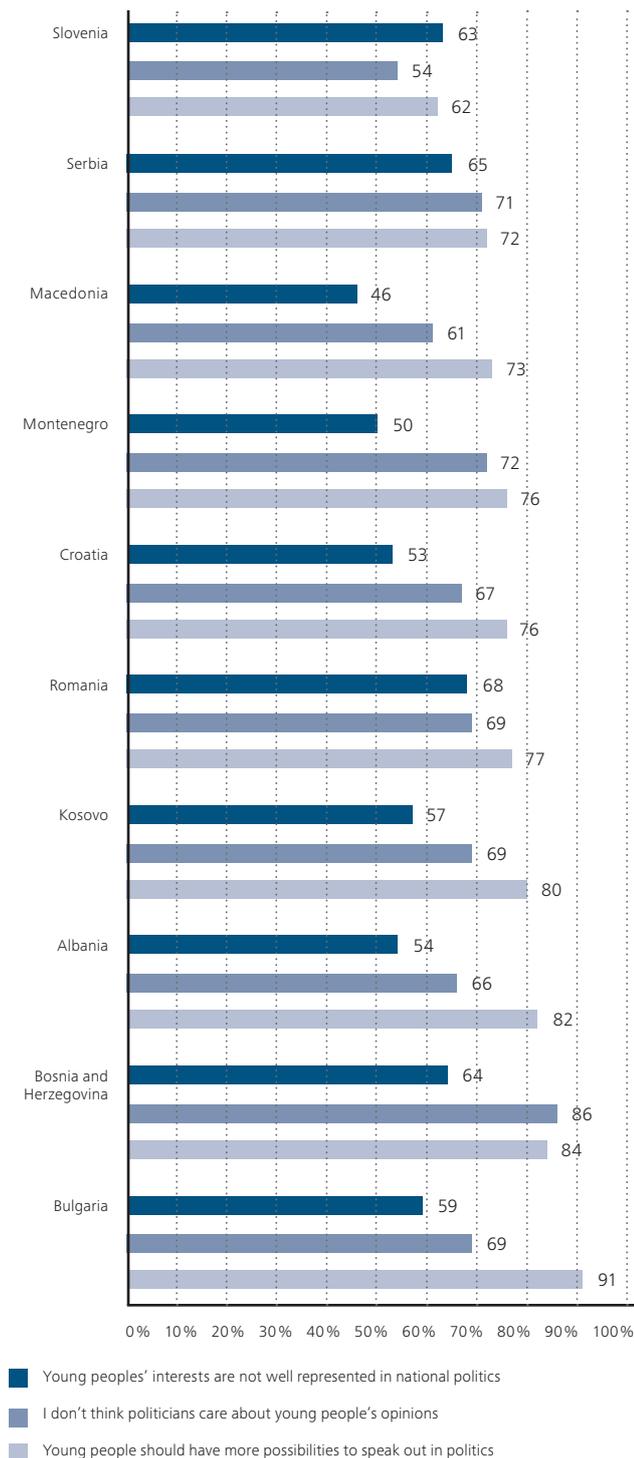
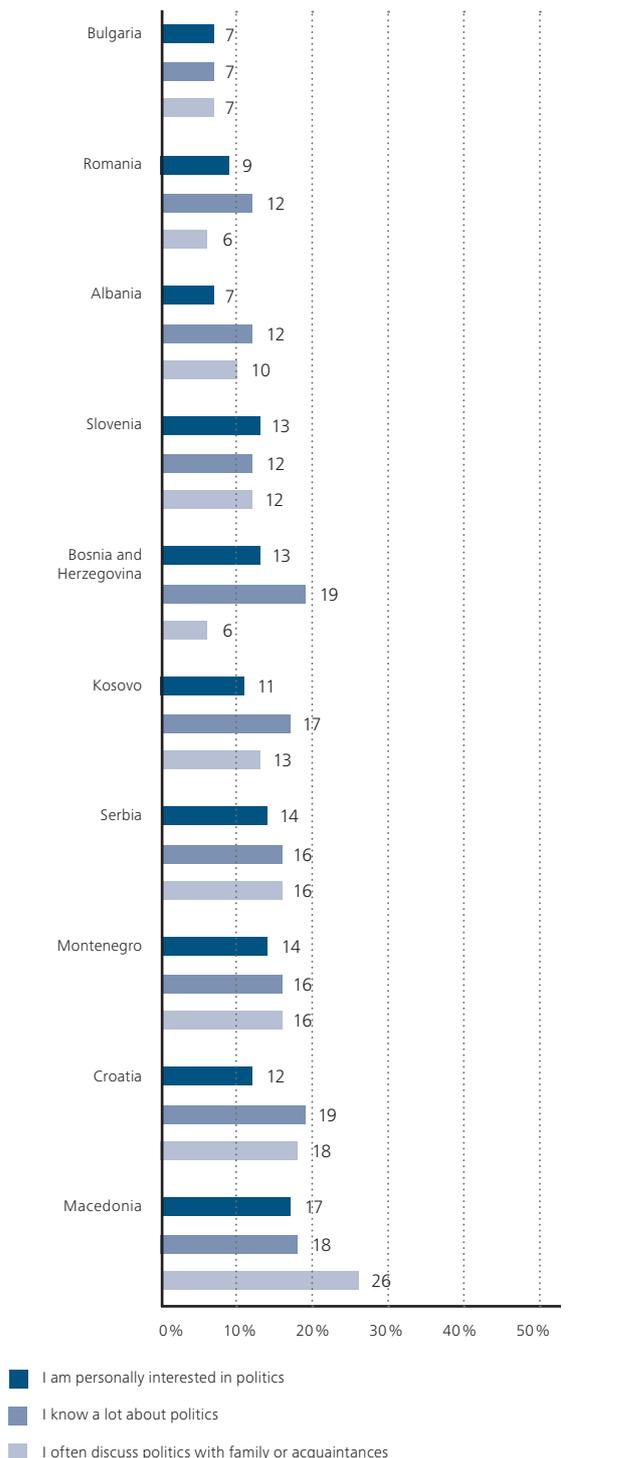


FIGURE 1.2: Political interest, knowledge and deliberation about politics of youth, by country



1

**SEE youth feel weakly represented, but have low levels of knowledge and interest in politics**

SEE youth consider their representation in national politics to be limited. Not surprisingly, the vast majority (78%) believe that young people should have a greater say in politics (Figure 1.1).

While they would like to have a stronger political voice, SEE youth generally profess little knowledge of politics and express little general interest in politics. They also tend to deliberate over political issues with family and acquaintances infrequently. These three aspects – interest, knowledge and deliberation – are positively intercorrelated and may be understood as part of a general indicator of political awareness that ranges from around 20% in Macedonia to 7% in Bulgaria (Figure 1.2).

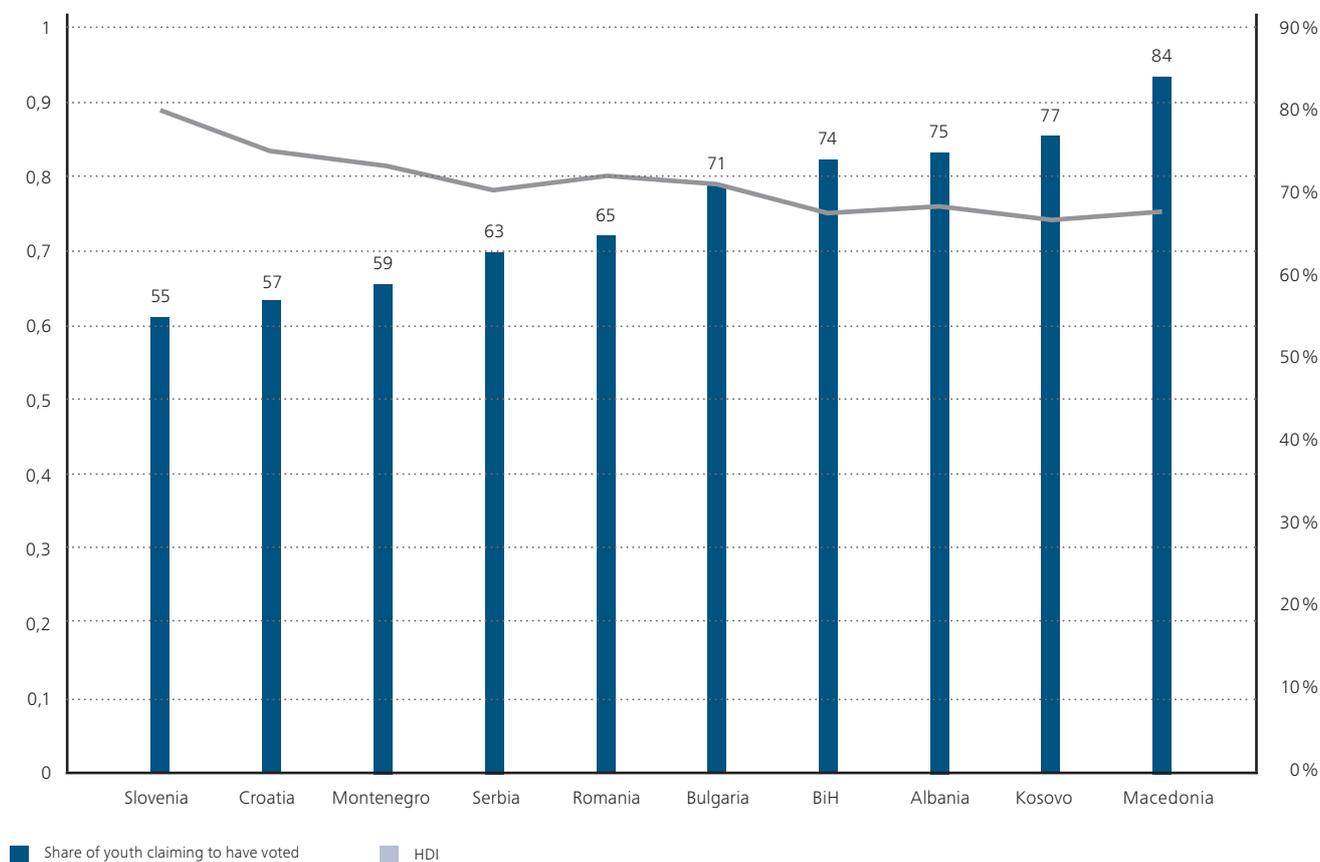
2

**SEE youth are active voters, but other types of political engagement are uncommon**

Despite their seemingly low levels of political awareness, young people in the SEE region who were eligible to vote registered relatively satisfactory turnout rates in the last general elections (Figure 1.3). Surprisingly, voter turnout is lower in countries with higher human development, as measured by the Human Development Index (HDI).<sup>6</sup> This could, inter alia, be explained by the perceived importance of elections among youth – such as the very divisive 2016 national elections that lead to a shift in power in Macedonia, where youth registered the highest turnout.

With the exception of youth in Slovenia and Macedonia, other repertoires of political engagement above and beyond voting are, however, uncommon among SEE youth (Figure 1.4). At the same time, a relatively substantial share of youth are willing to try out ‘non-conventional,’ usually more issue-based forms of, engagement, indicating a potential for greater political activation.

**FIGURE 1.3: Percentage of youth reporting having voted in last national elections and HDI levels**  
(N = young people eligible to vote during last election in each country)



3

### Political jobs hold little appeal for SEE youth

While SEE youth do not feel represented in politics, few are willing to assume a political post. An exception are young people in Macedonia, where recent political events may have led to greater interest for such an occupation. Survey data also point to the very small minority of SEE youth who currently hold a political position (Figure 1.5).

4

### Volunteering is rare among SEE youth

While civic engagement is considered to be crucial for building up civic values and social trust and for contributing to a society’s democratic fabric,<sup>7</sup> the majority of young people in the region never engage in volunteering (Figure 1.6). Volunteering is more common in Macedonia and Slovenia, two countries where youth are also more inclined towards ‘non-conventional’ political engagement.

FIGURE 1.4: Young people’s experience with or interest in trying different forms of political engagement in SEE

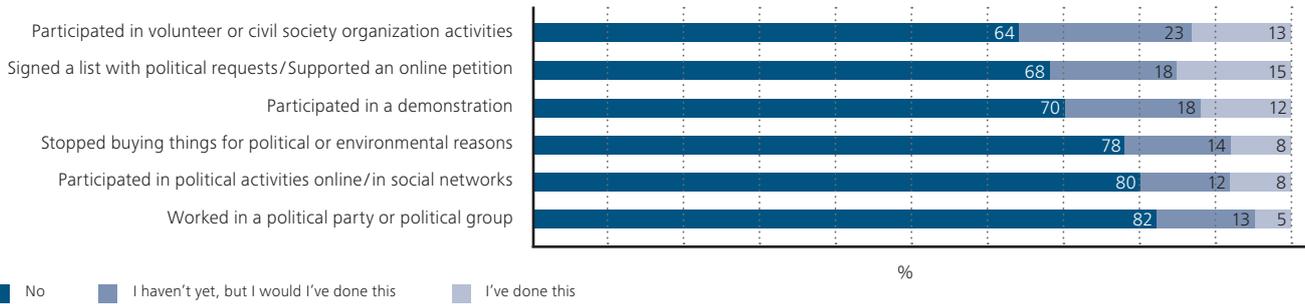


FIGURE 1.5: Young people’s willingness to take on a political function

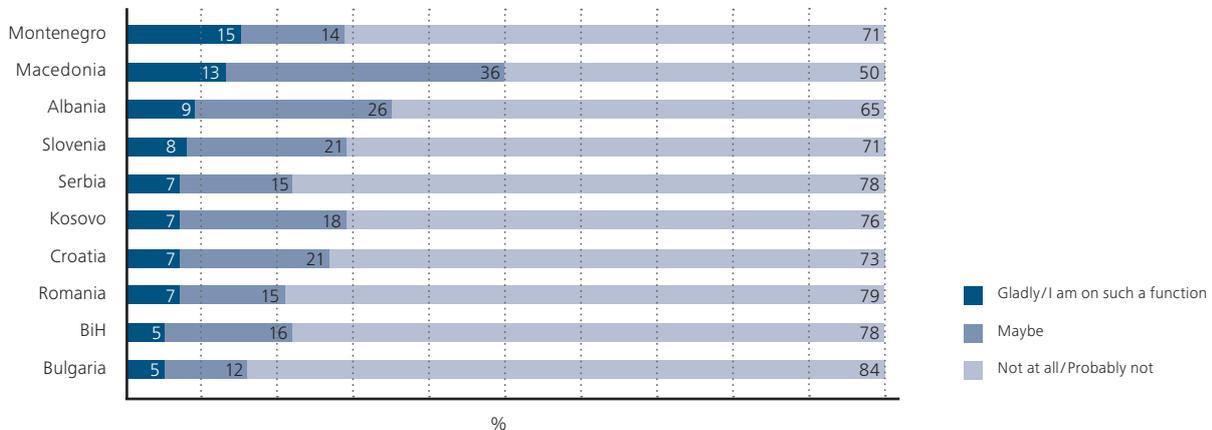
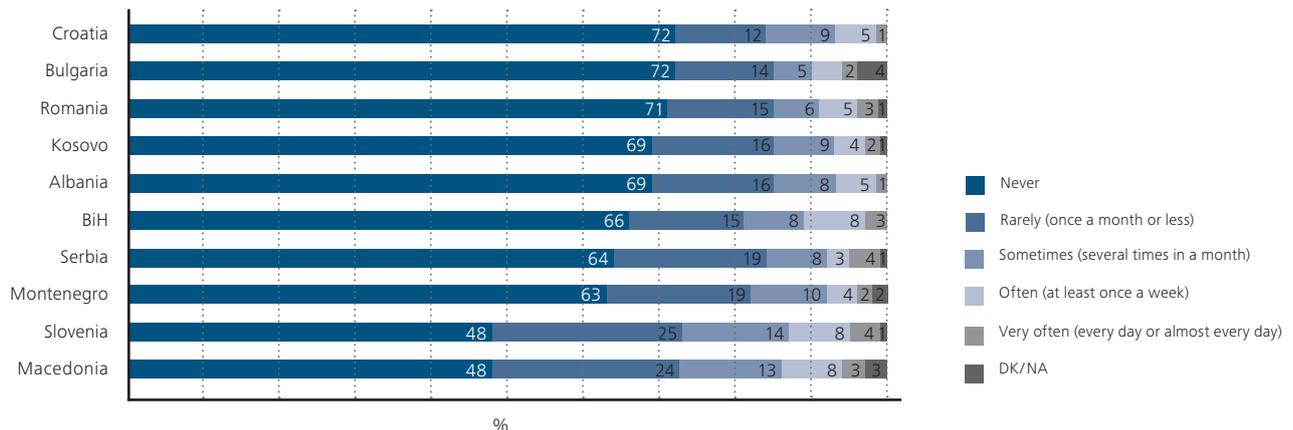


FIGURE 1.6: Frequency of engagement in volunteering in social projects, initiatives, associations



Young people most often experience volunteering through school or university, followed by associations/clubs, NGOs and youth organisations. In comparison with the last round of youth surveys (2011–2015), lower shares of youth profess to have volunteered in the past twelve months, especially in Croatia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria.

## 5

### Young people's engagement is conditioned by their socioeconomic capital

Socioeconomic status and educational attainment are considered to be important predictors of individuals' propensity to vote or other types of political engagement.<sup>8</sup> Statistical analysis at the regional level paints a consistent picture of socioeconomic inequalities inherent in young people's engagement in the SEE region. Young people from financially worse-off households or ones with a lower number of material possessions are less likely to vote, volunteer, use (or have interest in) different forms of political engagement other than voting or pursue a political position. Their level of education also matters, and is positively correlated with voting, experience or interest in forms of political engagement above and beyond voting, as well as the pursuit of political positions. Their parents' educational attainment matters as well, as correlations between parents' cultural capital and engagement show the same relationships. Strikingly, statistical analysis also shows that young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) are left out in the cold when it comes to political and civic activity, and not limited to volunteering, voting, non-traditional forms of political engagement or political jobs.

Regional inequalities also impact young people's familiarity with political and civic engagement. Having an urban place of residence correlates positively with volunteering, taking on political positions, and with political engagement such as signing petitions/political requests, partaking in demonstrations and having worked (or being interested in working) in a political party or group. Age appears to matter for some forms of political or civic participation: while older youth are more likely to protest, sign online political petitions or requests, and work with a political party/group, younger youth are more likely to volunteer. The latter may not be surprising considering that young people frequently volunteer within the framework of educational institutions.

Disillusionment with political institutions and politicians is mirrored in young people's disengagement. For instance, young people are less likely to vote if they do not believe that their interests are being represented in national politics, or they are not interested in politics. Political interest, on the other hand, is positively correlated with trust in political institutions, which has been seen to be very low across the region. Young people's

widespread reluctance to take on political functions also corresponds to the extremely low levels of trust in political leaders, political parties and institutions as shown by youth surveys: young people who are more inclined to take on (or already hold) a political job also express greater trust in political institutions.

The 2018 youth surveys have shown that the majority of young people in SEE are in favour of a strong welfare state, but also have a pronounced affinity to the notion of a strong political leader.<sup>9</sup> Can such attitudes translate into political action akin to the civic mobilisation that has recently been observed in many places across the region? Statistical analysis at the regional level suggests that young people's political orientations pertaining to support for a strong leader and a strong welfare state have a minimal impact on young people's non-conventional political participation. The main factors that predict this type of participation appear to be the material status of households, age, and parents' cultural capital. In other words, non-conventional political engagement tends to increase with indicators of higher socioeconomic status and age.

### 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. Importantly, their actual experience of living abroad for the purpose of education or training is rather limited, especially in Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria. Those that have stayed abroad, report increased civic and political engagement upon return. The scant experience of youth with educational mobility thus appears to be a missed opportunity in terms of fostering young people's civic and political engagement.

- In order to enhance civic and political engagement among SEE youth, policy-makers, educational institutions and civil society organisations should seek ways to improve young people's political literacy. Innovative and effective programmes of civic education should be fostered in the region. In a broader sense, our data suggest that increasing the general level of education and the fight against poverty and economic insecurity are very important mechanisms in this regard.
- Through cooperation with the civic sector, governments should promote opportunities for youth to engage in volunteering and other types of civic engagement. Such opportunities should be further developed and promoted through the educational system as well, already a key mechanism through which young people have already engaged in volunteering.
- Political representation of young people should be strengthened, both through mainstream political party structures and

through representative bodies such as youth councils or committees. Putting youth and youth issues on political party agendas may be one way to foster greater youth interest in mainstream politics.

- Given the universality of Internet use among SEE youth, and their experience or interest in politically engaging online, the e-participation of youth may be promoted through the development of tailored online platforms that provide relevant information on and opportunities for such engagement.

## About the Author

**Mirna Jusić** is a senior researcher at the Center for Social Research Analitika, Sarajevo, and one of its co-founders. Mirna holds an MA degree in Public Policy from the Department of Public Policy, Central European University, Budapest and an MA Degree in State Management and Humanitarian Affairs from Sapienza University of Rome, the University of Sarajevo and University of Belgrade. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Public and Social Policy program, Institute of Sociological Studies, Charles University in Prague. Her research interests are in the fields of governance and social policy.

## Endnotes

[ 1 ] This brief is based on research results published in the regional study FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. For further information on the study's methodology and statistical analysis, see: FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019 ([www.fes.de/youth-studies](http://www.fes.de/youth-studies))

[ 2 ] Macedo, S., Alex-Assensoh, Y., & Berry, J. (2005). *Democracy at risk: How political choices undermine citizen participation, and what we can do about it*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Stoker, G. (2006) *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

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[ 5 ] Jusić, M., & Numanović, A. (2017). *The Excluded Generation: Youth in Southeast Europe*. Sarajevo: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue SEE; Hurrelmann, K., & Weichert, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Lost in Democratic Transition? Political Challenges and Perspectives for Young People in South East Europe: Results of Representative Surveys in Eight Countries*. Sarajevo: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Regional Dialogue SEE.

[ 6 ] For more on the Human Development Index, please see: United Nations Development Programme. (2016). *Human Development Report 2016*. New York, NY: UNDP.

[ 7 ] Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

[ 8 ] Sloam, J. (2017). Youth political participation in Europe.

[ 9 ] For more, see Lavrič, M. (2018). Socio-political values and attitudes, in Miran Lavrič, Smiljka Tomanović and Mirna Jusić regional study: FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019 ([www.fes.de/youth-studies](http://www.fes.de/youth-studies))

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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.

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