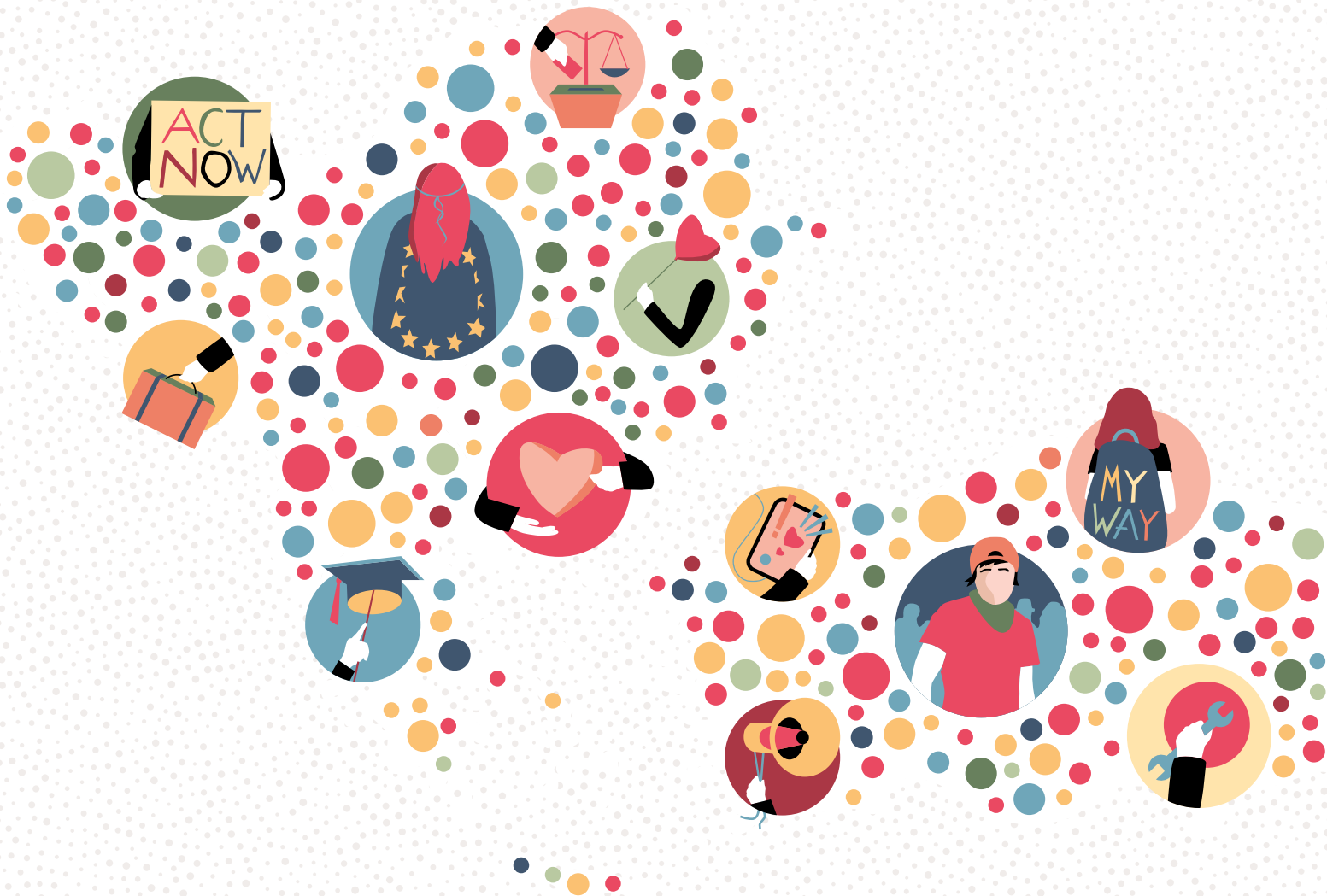


Youth Study

# Southeast Europe

*Independent but concerned:  
the voices of young people  
in Southeast Europe*

2024



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**About FES Youth Studies**

What are young people afraid of or hopeful about? In a rapidly changing world that is challenged by the climate crisis and inequalities, and in many parts aging societies and democratic decline, **FES Youth Studies** investigate how young generations perceive the development of their societies and their personal future. Our aim is to foster informed debate about young people's views on politics and democracy against the background of their life circumstances and values. This includes key issues such as education, employment and mobility, family and friends, and their overall attitudes and perceptions. We focus on young people aged 14 to 29 to understand their perspectives on these critical topics.

**FES** has conducted numerous youth studies around the world since 2009. For this report, young people between the ages of 14 and 29 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece, and Türkiye were surveyed.

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# Executive Summary

How do young people across Southeast Europe (SEE) perceive societal development and their personal futures? This study provides comparative insights from twelve countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece, and Türkiye) for the purpose of fostering informed debate about their views on politics and democracy in the context of their life circumstances and values. Focusing on individuals aged 14 to 29, the Comparative Youth Study SEE 2024 builds on previous surveys conducted in the region by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. These are our most important findings.

## Education

- **Educational satisfaction and GDP:** Countries with higher GDP per capita report higher levels of educational satisfaction than countries facing economic and political challenges.
- **Corruption:** Corruption remains a pervasive issue, undermining the quality and integrity of education systems. This manifests in various forms, including bribery for better grades, biased curriculum development and unfair allocation of resources.

## (Un)employment

- **Gender disparities:** The study results show a gender disparity in unemployment, with women more likely to be unemployed than men, not only because of structural factors such as patriarchal norms, but also because they tend to pursue less remunerative professions, such as education, health care and humanities.
- **Precarious employment:** Precarious employment is the predominant mode of employment among young people in the Southeast Europe (SEE) region, leading to job instability and insecurity.
- **Political influence on employment:** Party membership and affiliation remain significant factors in securing employment, particularly in non-EU and Western Balkans countries. However, this influence has decreased in nine out of ten countries with comparable data.

## Social and political attitudes

- **Libertarianism and the welfare state:** Although support for a welfare state remains high, young people's political values are shifting away from authoritarian welfarism towards libertarianism.
- **Secularization:** There has been an increase in the share of nonreligious young people across the region, with some countries experiencing religious polarization. The decline in religiosity has been more pronounced among women than among men.
- **Ethnonationalism:** Ethnonationalism is generally declining in the region, but North Macedonia, Montenegro and Slovenia have seen significant increases, and Türkiye, Albania and Kosovo maintain very high levels. Men in most countries are more likely to exhibit stronger ethnonationalist sentiments than women, although this gender gap has slightly diminished since 2018.
- **Satisfaction with democracy and economy:** Young people are increasingly satisfied with their home countries' democratic and economic prospects. Although the European Union (EU) is still viewed positively, the satisfaction gap between home countries and the EU has narrowed.
- **Pessimism and EU membership:** The prospect of EU membership maintains a high level of optimism among young people in non-member countries, while pessimism is rising among young people in EU Member States.
- **Rising fears and concerns:** Fears and concerns about various sociopolitical issues have risen sharply since 2018, particularly the fear of war. In 2024, young people in the region were most concerned about corruption, unemployment, emigration, and the quality of public services.

## Political engagement and representation

- **Political interest and knowledge:** The study reveals a slight increase in political interest and self-assessed knowledge about politics compared with previous SEE Youth Studies, though both remain very low among respondents. Political interest is higher among men, older young people and those with higher education and urban residence, mirroring trends in political knowledge.
- **Perception of representation:** Despite the general lack of interest in politics, the vast majority of young people feel underrepresented in national politics, with women more likely to perceive their representation as inadequate.
- **Youth engagement in politics.** When young people feel that their interests are better represented in national politics their interest in political participation tends to increase.
- **Electoral participation:** Voting continues to be the main form of political engagement for young people in the region, with voter turnout remaining steady. However, it's still uncommon for young people in SEE to take on political roles. Many choose not to vote, often because they feel their vote won't make any difference or because they don't find any political parties appealing.
- **Voter turnout trends:** Young respondents in EU countries exhibit lower voter turnout but their electoral participation is trending upwards. Conversely, young people in non-EU countries have a higher turnout, although it is on a downward trend.

- **Non-electoral activities:** Despite stable electoral participation, non-electoral activities remain at a low level. Online activism and volunteering are the most common forms of non-electoral engagement.
- **Trust in democracy:** There is a noticeable regional trend of decreasing trust in democracy as the preferred form of government compared with the previous wave of surveys.
- **Political ideologies and engagement:** Young people who identify with right-wing ideologies show higher levels of political engagement. They exhibit greater interest in politics, perceive themselves to be more knowledgeable, and are more willing to assume political positions and participate in both electoral and non-electoral activities.
- **Gender differences and activism.** Significant gender differences emerge when examining individual countries. The data shows that women more frequently engage in volunteer work, civil society activities, and participation in boycotts for political and environmental causes.
- **Democratic values and authoritarian support:** Most young people in the region adhere to democratic values despite a general decline in trust in democracy as the preferred form of government. Paradoxically, however, nearly half the young people who strongly support democracy are also open to endorsing a strong leader.

## Media

- **Media engagement:** Private centrist media generally show higher user rates.
- **Left-leaning media:** Left-leaning media can engage young people effectively, although the level of engagement varies significantly.
- **Right-leaning media:** Right-leaning media outlets face more of a struggle in engaging young people.

## Migration

- **Migration desire:** The desire to migrate has become more uniform across the region, with more young people wishing to migrate, although the intensity of this desire has decreased.
- **Migration patterns:** There has been a shift from permanent to circular migration patterns, with non-EU countries showing more interest in circular migration.
- **Motivations for migration:** Economic reasons are the primary motivators for moving abroad, but political reasons are also significant.
- **Educational mobility:** Young people with experience of educational mobility prefer circular migration. Economic and political motivations tend toward permanent relocation, while academic and cultural reasons favour short-term stays abroad.
- **Gender disparities in mobility:** Participation in educational mobility programmes has increased, particularly in EU countries, but young men participate more than young women.
- **Political activity and mobility:** Participation in mobility programmes is linked to authoritarian attitudes and lower support for democracy, but it also leads to increased political activity.

## Family life and transition to adulthood

- **Modern attitudes towards partnership and parenthood:** While young people still value parenthood and marriage, these attitudes have modernized, particularly in EU Member States such as Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, with little change in Kosovo and Albania.
- **Increasing cohabitation rates:** Rising cohabitation rates indicate a modernization of partnerships, with more young people living together outside marriage as a preparatory phase.
- **Unchanged housing transition:** Housing challenges for young parents remain constant, with many still living with their parents even after having children.
- **Favourable transition to adulthood in EU countries:** EU countries offer a more favourable transition to adulthood, with higher living standards, better job opportunities and institutional support. Advancements in non-EU countries such as Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia are helping young people in the Western Balkans to catch up with their EU peers.

# 1. Introduction

**Elena Avramovska**

This study examines how young people in Southeast Europe (SEE) perceive societal progress and their own futures. By comparing insights from twelve countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece, and Türkiye – it seeks to foster informed discussions about youth perspectives on politics, democracy, and societal values in relation to their life circumstances. The *Youth Study SEE 2024* focuses on individuals aged 14 to 29, building on previous surveys conducted in the region by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) between 2011 and 2015 and again in 2018. In addition to advancing the current understanding of the societal and political views of young people, the Youth Study SEE 2024 delves into the broader policy implications of these findings, with the aim of informing and enhancing policy discussions throughout the region.

The release of our *Youth Study SEE 2024* comes at a time of heightened focus on the role of young people in shaping societies and politics. In particular, the growing ideological shift of youth toward right-wing populism has drawn significant attention from scholars, policymakers, and the media in recent times, especially this year, as nearly half the world has either held or is preparing for elections (Lubbers et al., 2002; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Mudde, 2007; Guth and Nelsen 2021; Jacobs and Matthieu 2024; Azmanova 2024; Vinocur and Goury-Laffont, 2024).

While a growing body of research focuses on these emerging political trends among young people in Western Europe, this study adds a crucial dimension to the ongoing debate by exploring the political and societal views of youth in Southeast Europe. Beyond political views, the *Youth Study SEE 2024* adopts a broader lens, examining young people's perspectives on societal values and life circumstances, providing a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Understanding the views of young people on politics and society is essential, not only for insights into this demographic but also because their perspectives often carry broader societal implications. Sociologically, young people are frequently seen as catalysts for societal change, adopting worldviews, values, and trends that signal larger social transformations (Mannheim 1952). Similarly, their political preferences can serve as early indicators of broader electoral and political shifts. Since young people's political identities are still in formation, they are more likely to support the emergence of new political movements (Dinas 2014) and act as political trendsetters, influencing older generations over time (Rekker 2022). Therefore, this study contributes significantly to ongoing discussions about the future political and societal trajectories of SEE at large.





The findings from the study reflect both continuity and change. Consistent with our previous SEE youth studies, socio-economic insecurities continue to affect many aspects of young people's lives. For example, one-third of youth face barriers to education or training due to economic constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to quality resources. Additionally, the majority of young people remain employed in precarious jobs, leading to widespread concerns about job security. Alongside unemployment, the leading anxieties among youth include fears of corruption, emigration, and the deterioration of public services.

However, the study also identifies important shifts, particularly in political values. A gradual move toward libertarianism and a decline in ethnonationalism are becoming evident, although the latter remains a persistent issue. Satisfaction with current state of democracy and economic conditions is improving, especially regarding the prospect of EU membership, which continues to inspire optimism in non-EU countries, while pessimism is rising in EU member states. At the same time, the study highlights a concerning decline in trust in democracy as a form of government, with an increasing openness to authoritarian leadership, reflecting growing uncertainty about democracy's ability to meet the needs of young people.

In terms of migration, while the desire to move abroad has become more widespread, the intensity of this desire has decreased. Economic reasons remain the primary motivations for moving abroad. Furthermore, shifts in young people's attitudes toward family and personal life are also emerging, with more modern and diverse perspectives being expressed.

The study also underscores that young people in SEE are not a monolithic group, with significant variations across gender lines. Gender disparities are evident in most aspects of the study. For instance, young women face higher risks of unemployment, are less likely to seek employment, and are more often employed in lower-paying sectors such as education, healthcare, and the humanities.

Ethnonationalism is more prevalent among young men, who also report higher levels of political interest and knowledge, whereas young women are more involved in volunteering and civil society activities. Gender gaps are also visible in ideological orientation, with young women tending to hold more left-leaning views than men – a trend that aligns with global patterns of increasing gender divergence in political orientation (Off 2023; Burn-Murdoch, 2024; Evans 2024).

The study is structured into chapters that cover key areas including education, employment, socio-political values, politics and political participation, media, migration, family life, and the transition to adulthood. Each chapter not only presents the data but also contextualizes it within broader regional trends. The final chapter provides detailed policy recommendations for both national and international actors involved in decision-making processes, aiming to guide future reforms that better address the needs and aspirations of young people in SEE.

Lastly, this study is part of a broader series of *FES Youth Studies* focused on Southeast Europe, complemented by twelve in-depth country-specific reports. The development of these studies was made possible through the collaborative efforts of our FES offices and colleagues based in the region. We are also grateful to the members of the Advisory Board for their valuable support and feedback. I would especially like to express heartfelt thanks to our Director, Johanna Lutz, for her vision, guidance, and continuous support for this project. Additionally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my colleagues, Krisztina Stefán and Margarete Lengger, for their exceptional work in project management and coordination of graphic design and communications.

# 2. Methodology

Data for the study was collected through a representative survey conducted by IPSOS between 9 February 2024, and 25 March 2024, comprising 8,943 interviews with young people aged 14 to 29 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece and Türkiye.

Interviews were conducted with Computer Assisted Online Interviews (CAWI). Because of the low coverage of online panels in the following three countries a mixed-mode approach was chosen. In all of them, the distribution of offline and online interviews was based on past studies among a similar target group:

- Albania (35 % CAWI, 65 % CAPI)
- North Macedonia (40 % CAWI, 60 % CATI)
- Montenegro (40 % CAWI, 60 % CATI)

In Kosovo, the study was conducted in CAPI mode only.

## Sampling

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Türkiye the data collection was conducted with Computer Assisted Web Interviews (CAWI) only. For CAWI mode, the target audience was limited to people who had registered in an online access panel, who were residents in an EU Member State, and who had access to online services on a digital input device at the time of the survey.

Access to respondents took place through established online access panels. The minimum age restrictions differ from country to country, depending on national laws and data privacy regulations – most European countries set a minimum age of 16. Therefore, special consent was required from parents.

Robust online access panels do not exist in all countries covered in the study. Particularly in smaller countries, the overall size of online access panels is limited. This was the case in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, where online access panels could not guarantee enough respondents to reach established national sample sizes in line with the sampling design. Therefore, a mixed-mode approach was used in these countries, with the exception of Kosovo, where only CAPI mode was used.

All CATI interviews combined landline and mobile numbers and were based on the Random Digit Dialing (RDD) approach for numbers and a quota selection of respondents. For the CAPI interviews, households were selected using a defined starting point (buildings of public importance) and equal steps of household choice (urban and rural). Eight respondents per PSU were interviewed. Respondents within households were selected according to quota. If there were 14- to 17-year-olds in a family, as required for the kids' module, consent was required for interview participation from the teenagers' parent or legal guardian.

## A multi-country survey in 12 countries

- Method**
- Single mode of Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Türkiye
  - Mixed mode of Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) and Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) in North Macedonia and Montenegro
  - Mixed mode of Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) and Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) in Albania
  - Single mode of Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) in Kosovo

**Target population** Resident population aged 14 to 29 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece and Türkiye

- Quota**
- Quota selection according to age, gender, and region in all countries
  - Additional soft quota on education in all countries
  - Additional quota selection according to national languages in Kosovo and Macedonia

**Sample size** Total of 8,943 interviews:

680 in Albania	501 in Montenegro
500 in Bosnia and Herzegovina	1,150 in Romania
750 in Bulgaria	750 in Serbia
750 in Croatia	595 in Slovenia
530 in Kosovo	1,000 in Greece
504 in North Macedonia	1,233 in Türkiye

**Questionnaire** Provided in Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Romanian, Serbian (Latin and Cyrillic), Slovenian, Greek and Turkish. Translated by Ipsos' Global Translation Service. Average length (median):

- CAWI: 18.9 min
- CAPI/CATI: 30.75 min

**Fieldwork period** 09.02.–25.03.2024

# 3. Young people and education

**Emina Adilović** Education is a primary driver of social equity, but it also has the potential to introduce new social inequalities and exclusion if not adequately accessible to all segments of the population. Financial constraints and inadequate support systems are important barriers that hinder educational attainment. The digital divide exacerbates these challenges, as access to technology and the internet becomes increasingly crucial for learning. Rapid technological advancement and globalization are transforming the educational landscape, requiring new skills and competencies. Economic volatility further complicates this environment, impacting funding and resources for education. Altogether, these factors demand a rethinking of traditional educational structures and methods. While informal education is becoming increasingly valuable for acquiring specific employment skills, formal education remains essential for developing well-rounded individuals. Formal education provides the critical thinking, civic awareness and comprehensive knowledge people need to navigate and contribute meaningfully to modern society. However, the integration of digital technologies into education is challenging the traditional definitions of quality education.



## Online schooling and digital learning

Given that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the development and introduction of online teaching and publishing educational activities, it is interesting to observe the time allocated to online school activities. The data on time spent on schooling online across Southeast European countries in 2024 reveals that countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro show substantial engagement, with extended online sessions, while Albania, Kosovo and Serbia are characterized by very short online interactions. By contrast, Bulgaria, Croatia and North Macedonia demonstrate a more balanced engagement with digital learning. As McLaren and Jandrić (2020) suggest, the post-digital age requires a reassessment of educational goals and methods to ensure that they remain relevant and effective. In Southeast Europe, the education sector faces unique regional challenges, which include varying levels of economic development, political stability and cultural attitudes towards education. Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies that recognize the diverse needs of the population and take advantage of both formal and informal educational opportunities.

## Quality of education

Levels of satisfaction with the quality of education in the SEE region vary considerably, reflecting diverse experiences and perceptions among young people. Comparing the data from 2018 and 2024 highlights shifts in educational satisfaction across different countries. In 2024, the highest levels of satisfaction were observed in Slovenia, Kosovo and Croatia. In FES Youth Study 2018, the highest satisfaction levels were observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Slovenia. Young people in these countries demonstrated a relatively strong positive perception of their education systems, indicating effective education policies and a supportive learning environment. Such high satisfaction levels in these countries in 2018 can be attributed to several factors, including well-implemented education reforms, investments in educational infrastructure, and a focus on teacher quality and student support services.

Fig. 1 Satisfaction with education among young people in SEE (in %)

*How satisfied are you generally with the quality of education?*  
Share of 'very satisfied' and 'mostly satisfied' answers

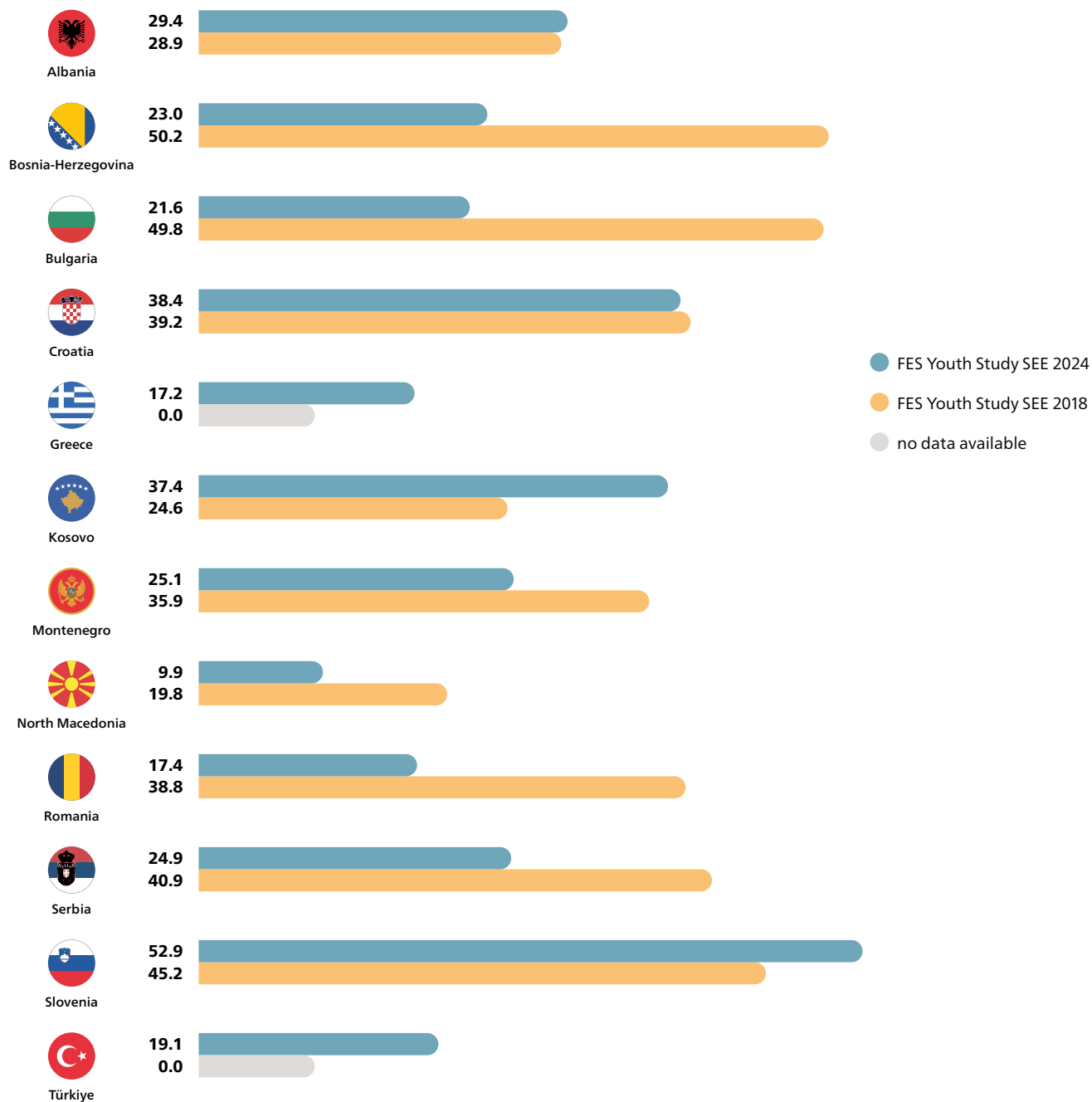


Figure 1 shows that some significant changes had occurred by 2024. According to the OECD (2023), consistent investment in educational reforms and policy enhancements can lead to sustained improvements in educational quality. Taking advantage of continuous investments, Slovenia not only maintained but improved its position, with satisfaction levels rising to 52.9%, indicating continued or enhanced efforts to improve educational quality, which suggests that Slovenia's strategies have been effective.

Albania, Croatia and Kosovo exhibit moderate satisfaction levels. In Albania, satisfaction levels remained relatively stable, indicating neither improvement nor decline in the quality of education as perceived by young people. Croatia, although showing a slight decrease from 39.2% to 38.4%, suggests a relatively stable educational environment with minor fluctuations in student satisfaction. Furthermore, it is evident that Kosovo faces challenges with the quality of education, as stated in their Education Strategy Plan 2022–2026, in which providing access to equal and quality education is highlighted as a significant challenge. However, government actions to address this issue are apparent in the positive trend observed, with an increase from 24.6% to 37.4%. This is the result of targeted efforts to enhance educational access, quality of teaching, and student support services.

## Shifting satisfaction levels

By contrast, some countries have experienced a decline, reflecting possible challenges or deterioration in their education systems that need to be addressed. Both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria saw their satisfaction levels drop to 23% and 21.6%, respectively, from nearly 50% in 2018. Such drops may point to systemic issues affecting educational quality, including political instability, economic constraints and insufficient educational reforms, which the European Commission (2023) identifies as critical factors that can undermine the quality of education and reduce student satisfaction. Political instability often leads to frequent changes in education policies and lack of continuity that reflects growing dissatisfaction with outdated curricula, lack of modern educational facilities and insufficient support. Albania and Croatia showed relative stability in their satisfaction levels, suggesting that while there might not have been major improvements, the quality of education has not deteriorated significantly either.

Greece and Türkiye, with new data in 2023 showing satisfaction rates of 17.2% and 19.1%, respectively, underscore areas that require improvements to meet young people's expectations. Overall, findings present a mixed picture. While countries such as Slovenia and Kosovo have made notable improvements, others, such as Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria, have experienced declines, bearing in mind that socio-economic context influences educational satisfaction. Countries with higher GDP per capita tend to report higher satisfaction levels. For instance, Slovenia and Croatia, with relatively stable economies, show higher satisfaction than countries such as Greece and North Macedonia, which face economic challenges.

## The enduring problem of corruption

With the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), leaders across Europe have committed to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (SDG 4) by 2030. However, corruption in education severely undermines these objectives; it erodes the integrity of educational institutions and diminishes public trust. As Transparency International highlights, corruption in education undermines the very fabric of society by devaluing credentials and contributing to the perpetuation of inequality and poverty (Transparency International 2013). This observation is particularly relevant in the Southeast Europe, where educational corruption not only diminishes the quality of education but also exacerbates social and economic disparities. In primary and secondary education, improper interference from government and the private sector can compromise the integrity of the curriculum, limit the independence of educators, and skew educational priorities. This leads to a curriculum that prioritizes specific interests over a balanced and comprehensive education, affecting the quality of learning and potentially fostering a biased perspective among students. Additionally, such interference can diminish the professional autonomy of teachers, reducing their ability to provide unbiased and high quality education. In higher education, improper interference from government and the private sector erodes academic freedom, distorts research priorities and undermine the trustworthiness of academic research outcomes. Furthermore, corruption in education in Southeast Europe often leads to a brain drain, as education professionals and pupils are compelled to leave their institutions, regions or even countries in pursuit of better salaries, improved working conditions or enhanced professional and student development opportunities.

The young people in these regions are acutely aware of these issues, and their perceptions provide insights into the ongoing challenges and areas in need of reform. The analysis examines perceptions of corruption in education across several countries in Southeast Europe based on the FES Youth Study SEE for the years 2018 and 2024. The focus is on whether young people believe that grades and exams are being “bought” in their educational institutions. The grand total shows a slight decrease in the perception of educational corruption from 2018 to 2024. In 2024, 62.9% of respondents across the surveyed countries believe that corruption exists in educational institutions, compared with an average of 65.4% in 2018, excluding Greece and Türkiye, which did not participate in the survey. These findings are in line with the broader trends indicated by the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), in which Western Europe had the highest average score of 66 out of 100 (2021) and became the highest-scoring region in Europe. Such a comparison supports the notion that corruption in education is a recognized issue across various regions, though it is more pronounced in Southeast Europe, where several countries report higher numbers.

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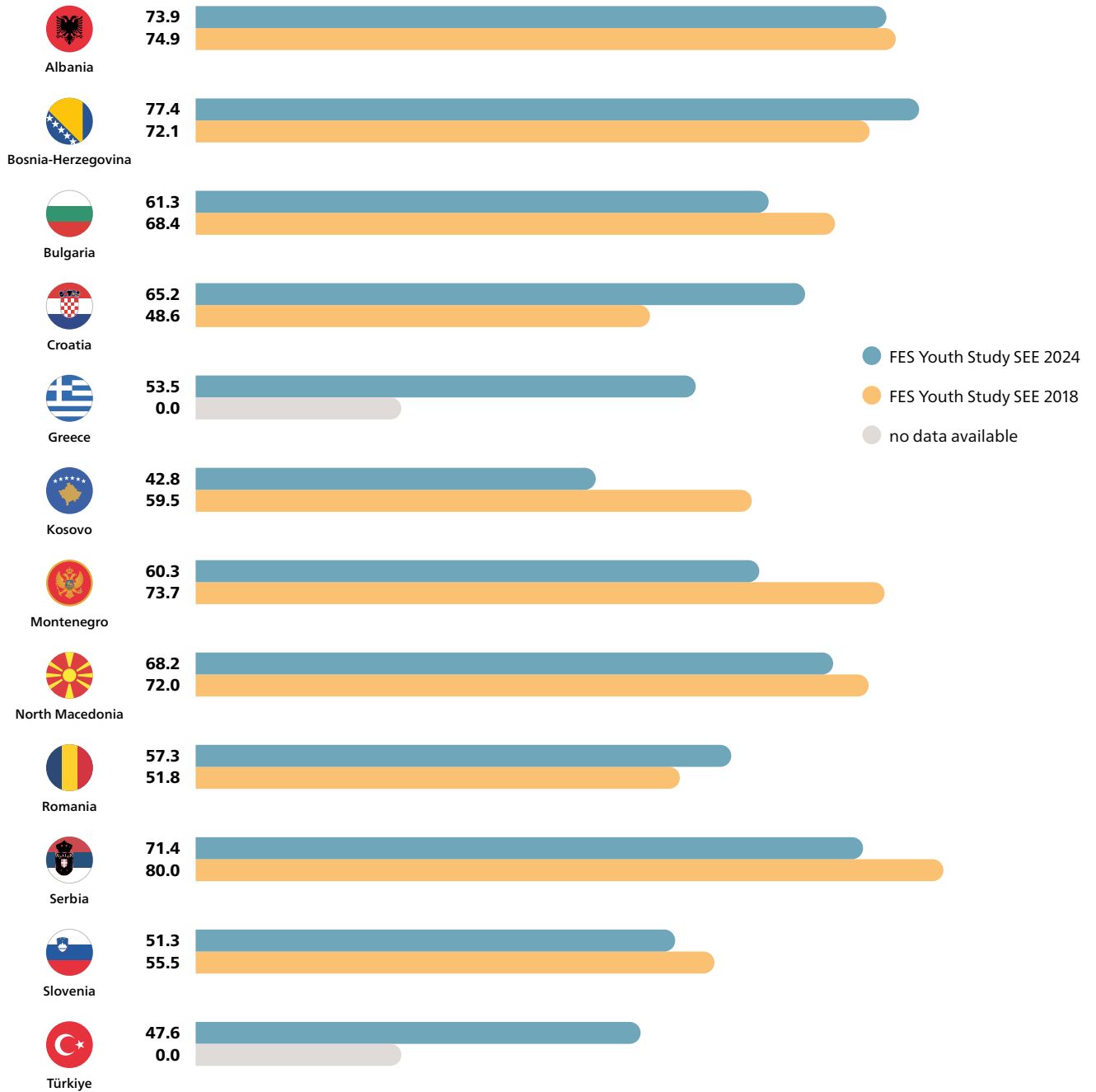
**Between 2018 and 2024, the perception of educational corruption slightly decreased in seven out of ten Southeast European countries.**

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Türkiye and Greece present moderate levels of concern in 2024, with 47.6% and 53.5% of respondents, respectively. Although there is no 2018 data, their current levels indicate issues similar to other SEE countries. Slovenia shows a slight improvement, with perceptions of corruption decreasing by 4.2 percentage points, which suggests that the country’s anti-corruption measures and efforts to enhance transparency in the education sector are yielding positive results, albeit gradually. Bulgaria reflects a positive trend, with perceptions of corruption decreasing by 7.1% points, from 68.4% to 61.3%.

Fig. 2 Views on corruption in education among young people in SEE (in %)

*Do you agree that there are cases where grades and exams are 'bought' in institutes/ universities in your country? Share of 'completely agree' and 'mostly agree' answers*





## Regional efforts and partial progress

Aiming for more robust anti-corruption strategies, Croatia exhibits an increase of 16.6 % points, and Serbia and Romania offer similar trends. Serbia, although remaining high, fell from 80 % in 2018 to 71.4 % in 2024. However, it's important to consider that these data might not fully reflect the on-the-ground realities given the persistent political difficulties. This apparent improvement might be more indicative of public fatigue with reporting corruption or changes in how corruption is perceived rather than substantial systemic changes. Thus, there remains a need for more effective anti-corruption measures to ensure that perceived improvements translate into real, sustained progress. Furthermore, Romania's increase from 51.8 % to 57.3 % signals both growing recognition and escalating corruption issues, highlighting that while awareness campaigns might be effective, they must be accompanied by concrete measures.

North Macedonia and Montenegro show promising decreases in perceived corruption. North Macedonia's decline of 3.8 %, though smaller, along with Montenegro's drop of 13.4 % during the same period, reflect gradual implementation of stricter anti-corruption laws and improving institutional transparency that contribute to better public perceptions and trust in the education sector. Kosovo stands out with a reduction from 59.5 % in 2018 to 42.8 % in 2024, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania present more concerning trends. Bosnia and Herzegovina's increase from 72.1 % to 77.4 % shows rising concerns about educational integrity, while Albania's slight decrease from 74.9 % to 73.9 % still reflects persistently high levels of perceived corruption.

## The changing face of educational integrity

While some countries have made notable progress, others continue to face challenges. Addressing corruption in education requires a multi-faceted approach, including regulatory reforms, enhanced transparency, public awareness and continuous monitoring to ensure long-term improvement and trust in the education system. Additionally, integrity training and education on resisting corruption are critical components in fostering a culture of integrity and accountability (U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre 2020). Ensuring that perceived and expected improvements in countries such as Serbia and Croatia are substantiated by real changes on the ground is crucial for maintaining the integrity of educational reforms. This context is important for understanding why Croatia, unlike some of its regional counterparts and despite being an EU Member State has struggled to make notable progress in addressing corruption in educational practices. Some SEE countries showing decreases, such as Kosovo and Montenegro, have benefited from effective anti-corruption strategies, and stricter enforcement of academic integrity.

## Disparities in educational status

The educational status of young people in Southeast Europe reflects a region with diverse levels of academic engagement and participation. While some countries show strong engagement in higher and vocational education, others struggle with high disengagement rates. Overall, the data reveals that a substantial portion – 33.9 % – of young people in the surveyed countries are not engaged in any kind of education or training, pointing to potential issues with educational access or retention. They can be attributed to several factors. Economic barriers are a substantial issue, as many families cannot afford to keep their children in school or send them to study away from their place of residence.

Additionally, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to quality educational resources further exacerbate the problem. Rural areas, in particular, often suffer from a lack of schools and qualified teachers, leading to higher dropout rates.

Figure 3 shows that Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibit relatively high engagement in education programmes. Montenegro has 32.5% of its young people in (high) school or vocational school and 21.1% in undergraduate programmes. North Macedonia also performs well, with 28.4% in secondary schools and 25.4% in undergraduate programmes. Bosnia and Herzegovina shows 29% participation in educational institutions at the secondary or vocational level and 24% in undergraduate programmes. A closer look reveals several underlying factors that may contribute to these high engagement rates. For instance, both Montenegro and North Macedonia have implemented various educational reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of education and making it more accessible. These reforms in Montenegro include modernizing curricula, improving teacher training, and increasing investment in educational infrastructure. The country has focused on digitalizing the education system, building new school facilities, and equipping schools with modern technologies to improve inclusivity and quality. There are also targeted programmes designed to reduce dropout rates and encourage continuous learning among students (UNICEF 2022; Eurydice 2022).

Slovenia and Greece show balanced educational engagement, with notable portions of their young people in undergraduate and advanced degree programmes. Slovenia, in particular, stands out with 14.4% of its young people pursuing master's or doctorate degrees, the highest among the surveyed countries, and has a strong emphasis on higher education and advanced studies. This may be supported by comprehensive education policies and substantial investment in research and development. Greece, with 28% of its young people in undergraduate programmes, also demonstrates robust participation in tertiary education.

This high level of engagement in higher education is attributed to well-established universities, government support for higher education, and a cultural emphasis on academic achievement. Greece's educational policies provide a conducive environment for students to pursue higher education, including financial aid programmes, scholarships and initiatives to improve the quality of tertiary education.

Countries such as Bulgaria, Albania and Kosovo exhibit high percentages of young people who are not engaged in any educational programmes, with figures of 42.4%, 44.4%, and 39.8%, respectively. Facing similar challenges – 39.6% of its young people are not engaged in education – Croatia exhibits comparable trends. The European Training Foundation (2023) emphasizes the necessity of addressing these barriers through policies that promote the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which can provide alternative educational pathways for disadvantaged young people. According to the ETF report, recognizing skills acquired outside the formal education system can help bridge the gap for those unable to access traditional educational routes. Meanwhile, young people in Türkiye are engaged in educational programmes: 38.8% in secondary or vocational education, 25.2% as undergraduate students, and 13% in advanced degree programmes. Although 16% are not engaged in education, this figure is lower than in other SEE countries.

## Higher education trends in the SEE region

The overall average percentage of young people engaged in higher education ('tertiary education') across the twelve countries is 30.8%. Figure 4 highlights regional disparities and shows higher engagement rates in Türkiye, Greece and Montenegro. In contrast, lower engagement in countries such as Kosovo and Serbia indicates areas in which targeted interventions could help to improve access to and quality of higher education.

Fig. 3 Current educational status of young people in SEE (in %)

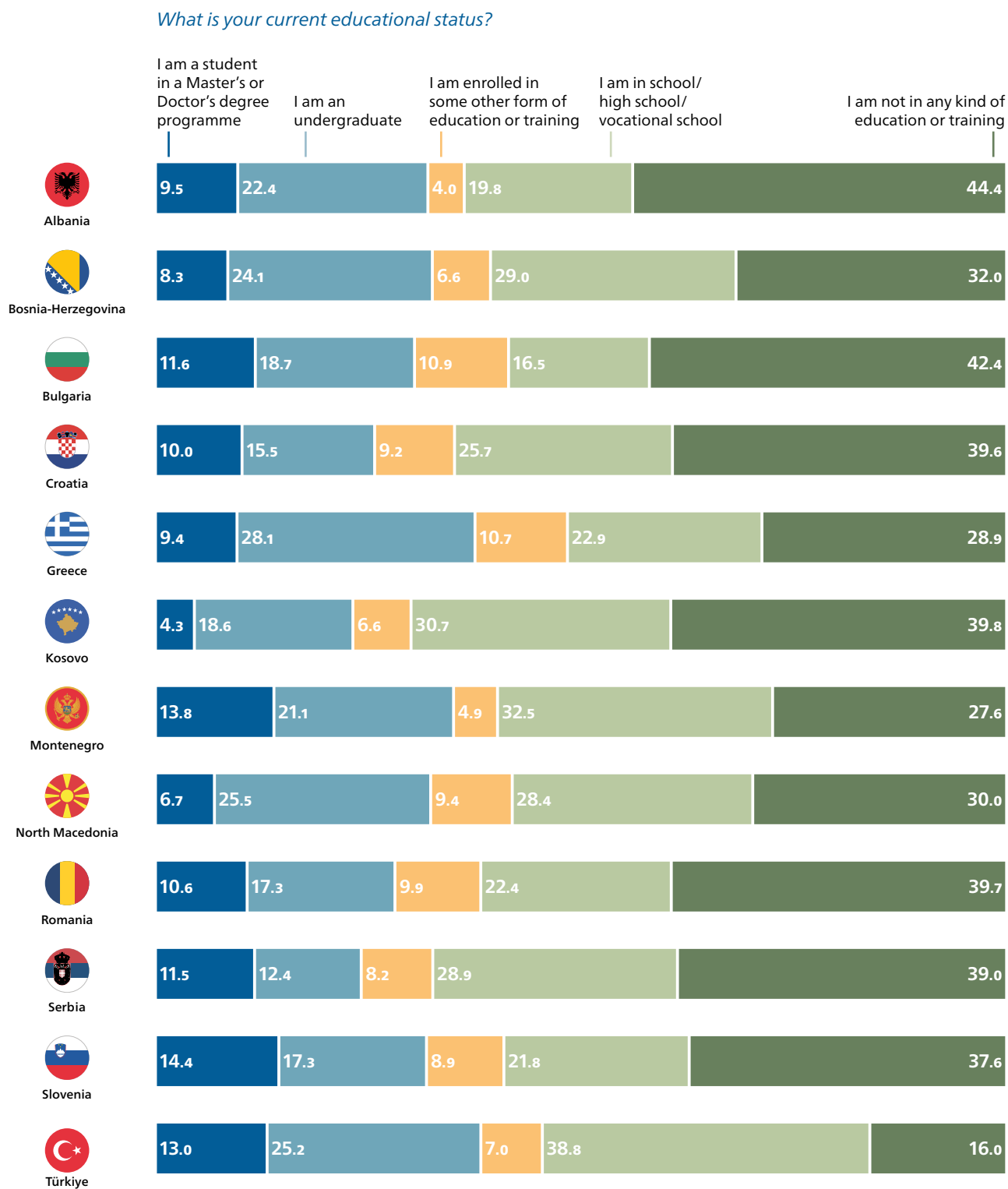
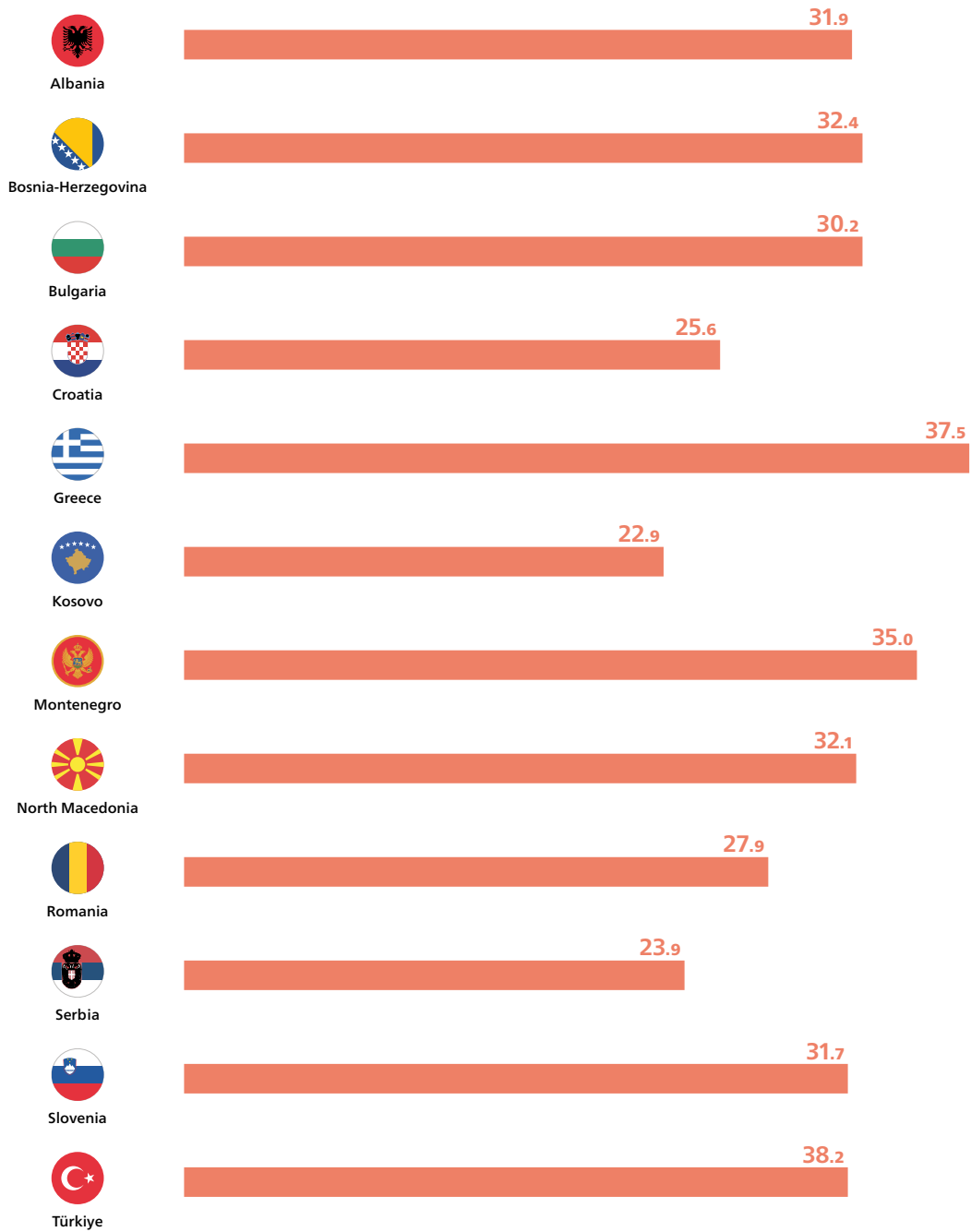


Fig. 4 Proportion of young people with higher education across EU countries (in %)



Türkiye with 38.2% and Greece with 37.5% lead as regards youth engagement in tertiary education. Both countries have a long history of universities and educational institutions, which contributes to higher engagement rates. Additionally, the socio-economic benefits of higher education are well recognized in these countries, encouraging greater participation. Montenegro's progress is notable given its smaller size and economic challenges: it shows a high engagement rate at 35%, and the country's efforts to align with European educational standards as part of its EU accession process could also be a contributing factor. This alignment includes both economic and political reforms aimed at improving public administration, reducing corruption and enhancing the business environment. By integrating policies and practices that enhance educational opportunities, Montenegro is not only working towards economic stability but also meeting political criteria necessary for EU membership.

Other countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Albania, show an average engagement rate of around 30%. While this indicates relatively healthy participation in higher education, there remains room for improvement to achieve higher levels of educational engagement and access. For instance, Slovenia's historical emphasis on education and its relatively stable economy probably support its higher education system. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, ongoing efforts to improve educational infrastructure and access are reflected in these moderate engagement rates. However, Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia, exhibit lower engagement in tertiary education. These countries, while having robust educational traditions, are facing economic constraints that limit higher education engagement. Economic hardships, such as high unemployment rates and limited public funding for education, strain the capacity of these countries to provide accessible and high-quality educational opportunities. This results in lower participation rates and highlights the need for economic reforms and increased investment in education. Kosovo's lower engagement rate could be attributed to its unique political and economic situation. Therefore, efforts to stabilize the political situation and boost economic development are critical for improving educational engagement.

## Main takeaways

- 1.** Countries with higher GDP per capita tend to report higher educational satisfaction and engagement rates than those facing economic and political difficulties. Stable economies provide better funding for educational infrastructure, resources and teacher training, contributing to a more positive educational environment.
- 2.** Approximately 33.9% of young people in Southeast Europe are not engaged in any form of education or training. This high rate of disengagement points to significant barriers, such as economic constraints, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to quality educational resources.
- 3.** Corruption remains a pervasive issue, undermining the quality and integrity of education systems and manifests in various forms, including bribery for grades, biased curriculum development, and unfair allocation of resources.
- 4.** Croatia has seen increasing perceptions of corruption, whereas Slovenia and Bulgaria show a slight improvement in transparency.
- 5.** Türkiye and Greece lead in youth engagement in higher education, supported by well-established universities and government policies.
- 6.** While formal education is essential for developing critical thinking and civic awareness, informal education becomes more valuable for acquiring specific skills needed for employment. Non-formal and informal learning pathways, such as work experience, volunteer activities and online courses, provide alternative opportunities for young people.

# 4. Youth (un)employment

**Jasmin Hasanović  
& Emina Adilović**

The main fears and concerns among young people in SEE are predominantly socio-economic (see chapter on Sociopolitical values, religion and trust by Miran Lavrič). The most frequent concern is the bad health-care system (61.6 %), followed by the fear of not having a job (55 %). It is worth noting that the proportion of young people sharing this fear has risen by 10.3 % since the 2018 survey. It is most common in Türkiye (65.2 %), followed by Albania (64.2 %) and Romania (62.8 %), falling to “only” 41.6 % of young people in Bulgaria.

Evidently, the fear of unemployment is more pronounced among women (54.5 %), urban youth (53.9 %), and young people facing the worst social conditions, who express the highest level of concern (62.5 %). Furthermore, young people with a higher education worry more frequently about joblessness and unemployment. This concern is particularly evident among undergraduates (62.9 %).

Job insecurity or loss remain paramount concerns. They emerge as the primary socio-political issues for the next decade across the region and are intricately linked to other factors, such as brain drain, unemployment and corruption. Fears of unemployment are most prevalent among young people in Kosovo (69.6 %) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (67.6 %).

Indeed, the latter, followed by Romania (71 %), is the first country to consider corruption the biggest issue (71 %). On the other hand, Romania shares the lowest fear of unemployment (42.5 %), indicating broad and significant differences among the countries.

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**Official youth unemployment statistics, unlike our findings, indicate a more optimistic scenario in SEE, showing a general trend of declining unemployment across nearly all the observed countries.**

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In contrast to our findings, official youth unemployment statistics suggest a significantly more optimistic situation in Southeast Europe (SEE), reflecting a general trend of decreasing unemployment in almost all the countries under observation (Figure 5). Compared with 2018, which we consider our baseline, it has decreased in nearly all the countries we investigated, with minor exceptions, such as Bulgaria (+0.9 %) and Romania (+1.3 %). It ranges from 9.9 % in Bulgaria to 28.6 % in North Macedonia.

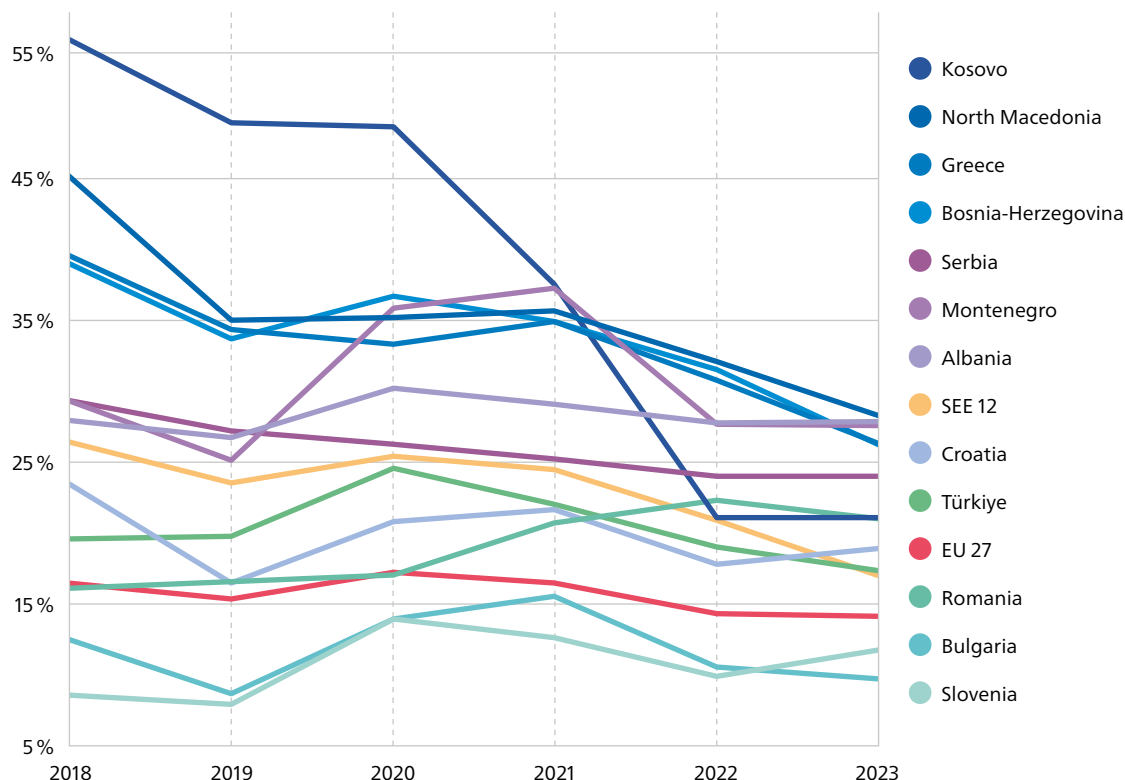
Fears of job loss are equally prevalent among young people from countries with higher youth unemployment rates (Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as those with slightly lower rates (Türkiye or Romania). On the other hand, except for Bulgaria and Slovenia, the overall youth unemployment rate in the region still exceeds the EU average. Similarly, such trends reveal significant differences among countries. First, it is notable how this trend in EU Member States averages significantly lower (17.2 %) than in countries in the region aspiring to join the EU (24.9 %). However, considering that the averages of only two EU Member States fall below the overall EU average, it also points to significant internal disparities within the EU between its core and periphery. This becomes even more noticeable when we compare the slightly smaller differences between the perceptions of employment status among EU and non-EU countries (Figure 6).



Fig. 5 Youth unemployment rates in SEE 2018–2023 (in %)

Age 15–29, % as a share of active population

Sources: All SEE countries except Kosovo – World Bank (modelled ILO estimate); Kosovo – ESAP (last data available for 2022); EU 27 – OECD Youth unemployment rate/Eurostat.



It is necessary to dig more deeply beneath the youth unemployment statistics, which often overlook precarious work or the impact of different structural facets of employment or unemployment, to obtain a more comprehensive picture, which is often missing in such qualitative generalizations and simplifications.

### General insight into youth (un)employment

The data offer an in-depth look at the employment status of individuals across various countries in SEE and neighbouring regions. The analysis covers a range of employment categories, including people in occupational training, the self-employed, and people with permanent contracts for full-time or part-time jobs.

It also examines temporary employment, both full-time and part-time, as well as individuals not engaged in any job and not actively looking for work, those who are actively seeking employment, and those with occasional jobs.

The 2024 data indicates a gender disparity in unemployment rates and job-seeking behaviour. Females are more likely to be unemployed than males. Specifically, 60.1% of those not looking for a job are female, compared with 39.5% male. Similarly, 58% of those actively seeking employment are female, while 41.8% are male. Self-employment shows the most significant gender disparity. Males constitute 63.4% of the self-employed, while females make up only 36.4%.



Fig. 6 **Perceptions of employment status across SEE countries (in %)**

*On a scale from 1 ('very bad') to 5 ('very good'), respondents were asked, among other values, to rank the status of employment in their countries.*

EU Member States		Non-EU Member States	
Bulgaria	2.41	Albania	2.42
Croatia	2.36	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.85
Greece	2.34	Kosovo	2.58
Romania	2.17	North Macedonia	2.00
Slovenia	2.89	Montenegro	2.53
		Serbia	2.29
		Türkiye	2.43
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.43</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>2.29</b>

This difference highlights the challenges women face in business endeavours, including access to funding, networks and business support services. Additionally, educational data reveal that while a higher percentage of females (53.7%) are engaged in secondary and vocational education than males (46.3%), fewer women pursue advanced degrees. Men represent 55% of the students in MA or doctoral programmes, highlighting a gender gap that potentially limits women's opportunities in higher-paying and more stable job markets.

While structural reasons such as patriarchal norms and conservative societal attitudes contribute significantly to gender disparities, additional factors are also at play. Women are more likely to pursue degrees in fields such as education, health care and the humanities, which, although essential, tend to be less remunerative and less in demand in the labour market compared with fields predominantly chosen by men, such as engineering and technology. This inclination towards less market-demanded professions further exacerbates the gender gap in employment and income. The 2023 Report on Gender Equality in the EU further supports these findings, noting that these educational and professional choices are significant factors in the persistent gender disparities observed in the labour market.

Some countries have shown improvements in stable employment, particularly an increase in permanent contracts. Bulgaria and Romania, for example, have made significant strides in this area. In Bulgaria, the percentage of young people working on permanent contracts increased by 25.8%, and in Romania by 5.4%. These countries have benefited from EU membership, which has contributed to stronger labour market regulations and better job opportunities. However, the improvement in terms of permanent employment has often come at the expense of non-standard work, which has decreased significantly, suggesting a shift towards more stable and long-term employment arrangements.

Young people with full-time permanent jobs largely do not engage in ongoing education; 57% are not involved in any educational activities. However, 8.1% are still in school, high school, or vocational school, and 13.7% are undergraduates. A notable 12.7% are pursuing advanced degrees, and 8.5% are engaged in other forms of education or training. This shows that while a majority are likely to have completed their formal education, a significant portion continue to advance their qualifications alongside their full-time employment.



Fig. 7 Employment status of young people in SEE (in %)

Ages 15–29

		I am in occupational training	I am self-employed	I have no job and I am currently not looking for a job	I have no job, but I am actively looking for a job	I have a permanent contract	I do non-standard work
Albania	2024	2.1	8.1	21.2	21.0	23.6	24.1
	2018	3.9	0.9	0.7	4.1	71.9	18.5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2024	3.0	2.7	20.2	32.5	15.5	26.1
	2018	6.6	1.3	1.1	3.3	63.1	24.6
Bulgaria	2024	3.2	6.2	12.3	20.1	42.3	15.9
	2018	4.7	1.5	1.1	3.5	16.5	72.6
Croatia	2024	1.7	5.4	15.5	11.4	40.9	25.2
	2018	4.5	1.8	0.7	0.7	47.8	44.7
Greece	2024	2.6	7.0	19.6	23.4	26.3	21.1
Kosovo	2024	2.5	7.3	38.3	17.2	14.2	20.5
	2018	2.0	1.4	0.6	4.6	79.1	12.3
Montenegro	2024	3.4	4.3	29.7	15.3	14.8	32.4
	2018	8.6	3.3	4.8	4.8	45.1	33.6
North Macedonia	2024	12.0	4.5	19.3	20.2	22.9	21.1
	2018	7.9	7.8	1.4	4.6	49.1	29.2
Romania	2024	8.3	5.3	10.2	21.6	41.7	12.8
	2018	3.9	0.9	6.6	3.8	36.3	48.6
Serbia	2024	1.8	6.4	16.1	30.4	24.1	21.2
	2018	8.4	4.1	3.2	4.1	48.3	31.9
Slovenia	2024	2.1	5.3	11.0	17.2	36.6	27.8
	2018	14.1	2.4	3.3	2.6	49.8	27.8
Türkiye	2024	8.3	7.2	21.1	12.8	36.1	14.5

Youth unemployment remains high in countries such as Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. In these countries, a significant percentage of young people are still either not actively looking for work or are actively seeking employment. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20.2% are not looking for a job, and 32.5% are actively looking. Similarly, in Montenegro, 29.7% of young people are not looking for a job, and 15.3% are actively seeking employment.

Several countries display mixed trends, with both improvements and declines in different areas. Kosovo and Croatia, for example, have seen increases in youth unemployment, but also shifts in employment types. Croatia experienced an increase in young people not seeking work of 14.8% and of those actively seeking employment by 10.7%, alongside a decline in permanent employment by 6.9%, reflecting the challenges of economic recovery and labour market stabilization.

Young people who are unemployed, whether actively seeking work or not, exhibit varying degrees of financial hardship. Among those actively looking for a job, 11.4% report not having enough money for basic bills and food, highlighting severe economic distress. An additional 15.9% can cover basic bills and food but struggle to afford clothes and shoes, while 28.6% can afford food, clothes, and shoes but cannot afford more expensive items, such as household appliances. This group is followed closely by 33% who can afford some expensive items but not major purchases such as a car or a flat. Only 11% of job seekers report being able to afford whatever they need for a good living standard, indicating a minority with relative financial stability. Similarly, those not looking for a job face financial challenges. The largest group, 30.9%, can afford food, clothes, and shoes but not expensive items, and 41% can buy some more expensive things but not major purchases. A notable 13.5% report being able to afford a good living standard, suggesting that even among the unemployed, a small portion maintains financial security, possibly due to support from family, savings or other social safety nets that provide a cushion.

A notable portion of unemployed young people actively seeking jobs are still engaged in some form of education. Specifically, 23% are in school, high school or vocational school, and 28% are undergraduates. A smaller percentage, 7.1%, are pursuing advanced degrees, and 6.4% are enrolled in other forms of education or training. This distribution suggests that many young people are in a transitional phase, completing their education while seeking employment, and highlights the challenges of integrating into the workforce immediately after or during their studies. Among those not looking for a job, a substantial 52.8% are still in school, high school, or vocational school, showing that their focus is on completing their education before entering the job market.

The participation of young people in occupational training programmes varies across the region. North Macedonia has seen an increase in youth engagement in occupational training, rising by 4.1%, suggesting efforts to enhance skill development in response to rising unemployment rates. On the other hand, Montenegro has experienced a decline of 5.2% in occupational training participation.

## The precarious generation: overeducated but professionally misplaced

The data reveal further disparities in relation to whether young individuals are working in the jobs for which they trained (Figure 8). Here, we focus on two types: skills mismatch between the education system and the labour market, and work in or outside the profession young people were trained or educated for as the first, and over- and under-education as the second dimension.

Some countries show relatively close alignment between education and employment, with a significant percentage of young people working in their trained professions. In Türkiye, over half of young people (51.2%) work in their trained profession, demonstrating a strong match between educational qualifications and job market needs. Slovenia also shows positive trends, with 41.5% of young people working in their trained profession in 2024, up from 34.6% in 2018. Similarly, Croatia has shown slight progress, with 37.1% in 2024, up from 36.5% in 2018, and Greece exhibits a stable trend, with 37.7% of young people working in their trained profession in 2024. On the other hand, several countries exhibit a lack of alignment between education and employment. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the percentage of young people working in their trained profession has decreased from 36.6% in 2018 to 28.9% in 2024. Bulgaria shows a similar decline, while Serbia has experienced the most pronounced mismatch, with only 20.7% of young people working in their trained profession in 2024.

Fig. 8 Alignment of education/training with employment among young people in SEE (in %)

*Do you currently work in a job within your profession  
(one that you have been trained/educated for)? Ages 15–29*

		I haven't been trained for any profession	I work in a job quite close to my profession	No, I do not work in my profession	Yes, I work in my profession
Albania	2024	16.3	18.1	27.8	37.8
	2018	14.2	11.7	47.7	26.3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2024	3.5	15.6	52.0	28.9
	2018	2.4	12.4	48.6	36.6
Bulgaria	2024	10.2	17.8	50.1	21.9
	2018	0.4	46.1	18.2	35.3
Croatia	2024	5.5	21.2	36.2	37.1
	2018	2.1	25.2	36.1	36.5
Greece	2024	4.8	22.2	35.2	37.7
Kosovo	2024	7.2	15.9	50.3	26.7
	2018	4.6	9.1	53.9	32.4
Montenegro	2024	4.9	12.8	42.0	40.3
	2018	3.6	11.8	44.4	40.2
North Macedonia	2024	7.4	14.7	46.6	31.4
	2018	10.3	20.1	42.7	26.9
Romania	2024	5.0	23.0	31.7	40.2
	2018	14.0	18.6	36.0	31.4
Serbia	2024	6.0	10.7	62.7	20.7
	2018	1.3	15.0	54.5	29.1
Slovenia	2024	3.8	15.3	39.3	41.5
	2018	10.8	12.0	42.6	34.6
Türkiye	2024	6.9	17.5	24.4	51.2

Countries such as Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo exhibit contrasted trends, with slight improvements in some areas, but persistent challenges overall. In Montenegro, 40.3 % of young people work in their trained profession in 2024, a slight improvement from 40.2 % in 2018, though 42 % do not work in their trained field.

North Macedonia shows an improvement, with 31.4 % of young people working in their trained profession in 2024, up from 26.9 % in 2018, but 46.6 % still face a skills mismatch. In Kosovo, there has been a decrease, with only 26.7 % of young people working in their trained profession in 2024, compared with 32.4 % in 2018.

Young people with permanent full-time contracts show a relatively close alignment with the professions they trained for. Specifically, 43.6 % of individuals in this category work in their trained profession, while 18.6 % work in jobs quite close to their profession. Those with permanent part-time contracts exhibit a more diverse distribution, with 26.8 % working in their trained profession and another 25.4 % working in jobs quite close to their profession. Young people with temporary part-time contracts face even greater challenges in finding work within their professions. Only 23.3 % are employed in their trained profession, while 25.7 % hold positions that are somewhat related to their field of study. A notable 41.9 % work in areas completely unrelated to their training, and 9 % have not received any professional training at all. Overall, self-employed young people in SEE show a relatively close alignment with their trained professions, with 36.5 % working in their trained field, while those engaged in occasional jobs experience the highest level of misalignment. A mere 15 % work in their trained profession, with 13.6 % in jobs quite close to their profession.

While Albania and Romania show positive trends, countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia face growing mismatches, in the sense that highly educated young people are being forced to take jobs that do not require their level of education or for which they have not been trained. This also applies to those working in professions they were trained or educated for. Although the findings at regional level indicate that more than half of young people currently work in a job that is in line with their formal education, there has been a declining trend in such employment matches in comparison with the 2018 survey. In 2024, the share of overeducated young people is higher, indicating an increasing number working in jobs that require a lower level of formal education. This trend is most evident in Serbia, Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the largest increases observed in countries characterized by lower rates of unemployment and permanent contracts, such as Bulgaria and Croatia. These countries also exhibit the highest levels of non-standard employment in the region (Figure 9).

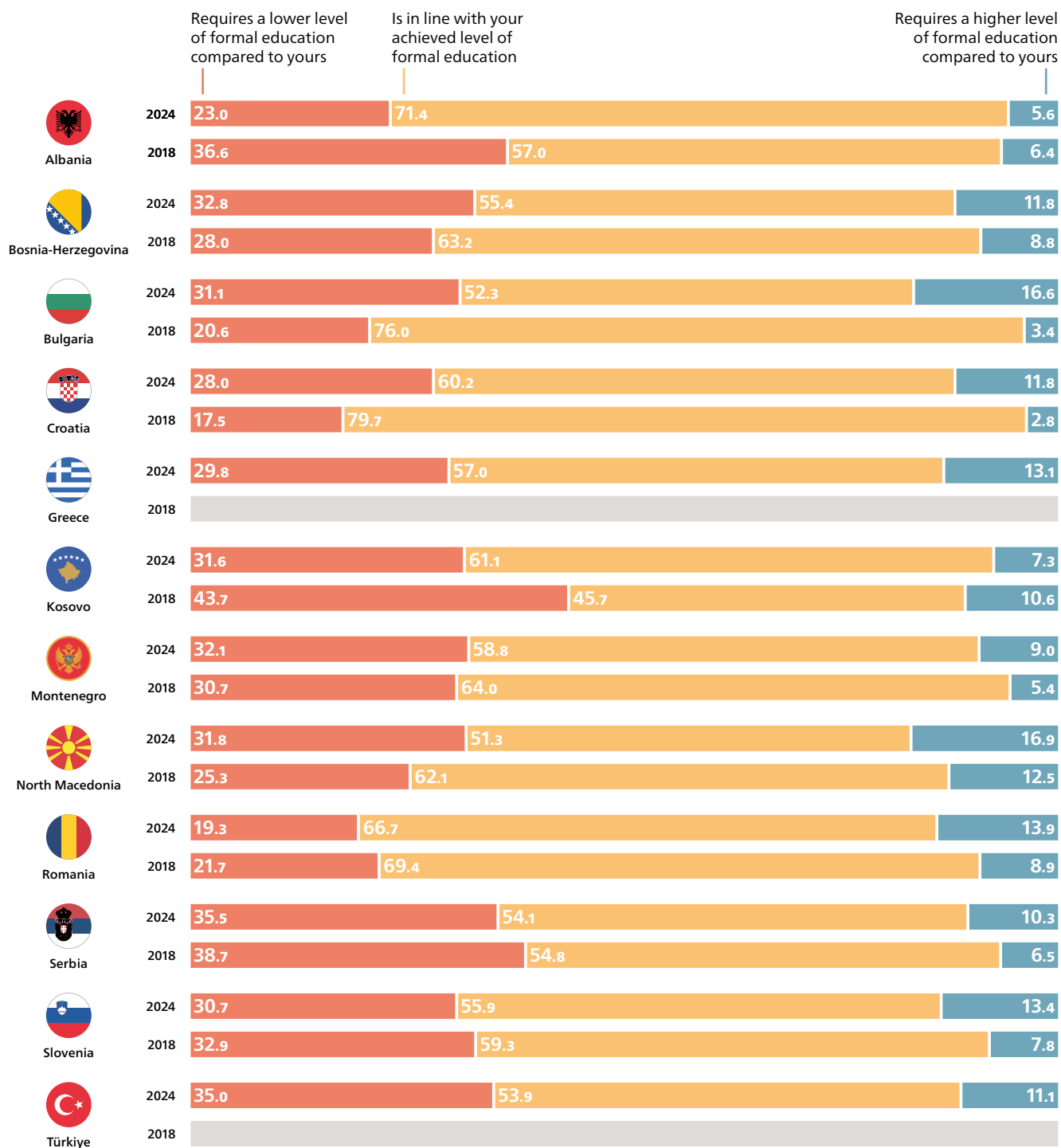
On the other hand, as in the previous research wave, undereducation remains a less common problem. With the exception of Kosovo and Albania, however, there has been an overall increase across the region, with the highest rates found in countries at both extremes with regard to youth unemployment rates, namely North Macedonia (16.9 %) and Bulgaria (16.6 %).

This misalignment between education and employment, both on the periphery and in the core economies, reflects not only structural inefficiencies in the labour market, which may have a negative impact on overall economic performance (ILO 2014, 5), but also the inherent contradictions of capitalist economies (cf. Fraser 2023; Peović 2021; Harvey 2005). Profit-oriented markets, pursuing short-term gains at the expense of long-term sustainability, give rise to a surplus of overeducated people, who as a result of underemployment are exploited with precarious, often inhumane labour conditions. With reduced levels of motivation and job satisfaction, labour alienation occurs, as workers are disconnected from meaningful use of their skills and subjected to the whims of market demands rather than able to satisfy human needs. On top of this, employers are increasingly rethinking whether they need college degrees in favour of skills and experience, which further complicates the employment landscape for graduates (Hufford 2022). Furthermore, the rise of the gig economy, characterized by short-term contracts, freelance work and temporary positions, means that stable, well-paying jobs that match the qualifications and aspirations of highly educated individuals are in short supply (cf. Hedges 2018; Scholz 2017; Grey 2015).

Although precarious work isn't new – rather it reflects capitalism's fundamental mechanisms (Carbonell 2020) – it is difficult to establish a universal definition that could encompass every form of work that entails some type of insecurity (Starčević 2014). Thus, we will follow the definition popularized by Guy Standing, who describes the precariat as a mass class of exploited workers formed in the neoliberal labour market, subject to unstable labour arrangements, lack of identity and erosion of rights (Standing 2011).

Fig. 9 **Formal education requirements of young people’s jobs in SEE (in %)**

*Do you currently work in a job that ...? Ages 15–29*



As seen in the survey, over half of the region's overeducated young people are working precariously and part-time on permanent contracts, or on temporary contracts in full- or part-time positions, or in occasional jobs, while 67.5% are not employed in the fields for which they are educated (Figure 10). This trend is common across the region, except in Türkiye, where most overeducated individuals (38.9%) work within their field. In Serbia, the highest share of overeducated young people (83.2%) work outside their professions, followed by Kosovo (81.7%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (73.1%). Conversely, North Macedonia has the highest share of overeducated young people working precariously (70.3%), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (67.2%) and Kosovo (62.2%). In contrast, overeducated young people in Romania, Slovenia and Türkiye typically hold permanent, full-time positions.

Analysis at the regional level shows that, overall, jobs requiring a lower level of formal education than the worker's qualifications appear to be most prevalent among older urban males.<sup>1</sup> From 2018 to 2024, the proportion of overeducated individuals in occasional jobs decreased from 58.2% to 43.6%, while undereducated individuals occupied only 10.4% of such positions. Still, the significant presence of non-standard work and the predominance of freelance positions underscores a broader trend of precarious employment among young people in the SEE region, leading to overall job instability and insecurity.

Moreover, it is important to consider self-employed workers, freelancers and others in similar positions as precarious (Conen and Schippers 2019; Fudge and Rosemary 2006), often subordinated and self-exploited, while being forced to sell their labour to different companies without basic workers' rights, such as contracts, statutory annual leave, fixed working time or salary. Considering that their precarity is often obscured by pro-market advocates using such terms as "mobility" and "flexibility", we did not categorize the self-employed as part of the precariat in our analysis, aiming to empirically highlight the similarities of their working conditions with the rest of the precariat class.

Although concerns about joblessness are most pronounced among precarious, overeducated young people working outside their field of expertise, the data reveal that those with permanent full-time contracts working in their profession and in accordance with their education (Figure 11) are also worried. Across countries, this trend is particularly notable among permanent, fully employed young people in Romania and the vast majority of professionals working within their own fields in Albania, Türkiye and Greece. These three countries also show the highest levels of concern among young people working in their profession and in accordance with their educational qualifications. Interestingly, only in Kosovo and Montenegro are fears of joblessness among young people working in their field higher than among the overeducated.

Fig. 10 **Over-educated young people in SEE, by employment status and working field (in %)**

*Ages 15–29*

	Young people with jobs that require a lower level of formal education than theirs
Don't work in their profession	67.5
Precarious workers*	51.3
Permanent contract, full-time job	39.1
Work in their profession	16.6

\* Non-standard part-time under permanent contracts, temporary contracts for full or part-time positions, or occasional jobs.

Fig. 11 **Job (in)security among young people in SEE (in %)**

*Share of respondents who fear having no job 'a lot' and view unemployment as the biggest issue for their country in the next decade. Ages 15–29*

Note: The percentage of respondents choosing the answer "A lot" when asked "To what extent are you frightened or concerned in relation to the following? – Having no job", and choosing "Unemployment" as the answer to the question "Which of the following do you think will be the biggest issues facing your country in the next decade?"

	Fear having no job	Unemployment is the biggest issue of the decade
Self-employed	47.1	62.9
Don't work in their profession	54.3	62.3
Over-educated	56.4	61.2
Precarious workers	55.2	57.3
In line with their achieved level of education	53.2	56.1
Permanent contract, full-time job	52.5	55.7
Work in their profession	53.6	55.3
Under-educated	47.2	50.6

On the other hand, concerns among precarious young people about not having a job are predominant in ten out of the twelve countries surveyed. Statistical analysis shows that the fear seems to be more prevalent in non-EU countries such as Albania, Türkiye and Kosovo than in EU Member States. But while this issue is less statistically pronounced among precarious young people in Croatia, Slovenia and Bulgaria, it remains a significant concern.

**Concerns about joblessness are predominant among precarious young people in ten out of twelve surveyed countries. Statistical analysis reveals that this fear is more pronounced in non-EU countries such as Albania, Türkiye and Kosovo than in EU Member States.**

Additionally, the fear of unemployment is most acute among 75 % of those whose current work requires a lower level of formal education, with the highest levels observed in Albania, Romania and Türkiye.

While the self-employed may not currently fear joblessness as intensely, a significant majority view it as the biggest issue for the coming decade, indicating a long-term concern about job security. Only in North Macedonia are the self-employed most in fear of joblessness compared with other employment statuses. When asked to identify the most pressing challenges for the next decade, however, self-employed young people in eight out of the 12 countries cited unemployment as their primary concern. As the data show, the highest levels of concern are in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Greece. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo also have the highest proportions of people expressing worries about future job security among the overeducated and those working outside their professions.

## The role of expertise, influence and politics in youth employment

While statistical analysis highlights significant trends, it doesn't capture the full extent of job instability caused by polywork and second jobs. Nor does it address the trend of frequent job changes. As a result we have an inadequate understanding of the challenges faced by young workers and among young people seeking stable employment in general.<sup>2</sup> In stark contrast to the pro-market and libertarian narrative that assumes that Millennials or members of Generation Z need to change jobs and professions more frequently, seeing it as a desirable future characteristic of work, the global rise of the gig economy, ever more temporary jobs overall, part-time and second jobs are more of an existential necessity as young people struggle to make ends meet rather than a result of self-choice, self-creativity or efforts to improve skills (cf. Berger 2024; Strauss and Moscrop 2023; Kiderlin 2023). This trend is also evident in global peripheries such as SEE, where young people, in contrast to an overall during the past six years, actually show general support for a strong welfare state and a need for more stable jobs due to their fear of being unemployed. These factors usually positively correlate with migration, trust in institutions and, politically, with support for a strong leader.

Apart from the self-employed, the desire to emigrate has increased in 2024 compared with 2018 across all employment statuses. Among the employed, 29.6% of young people engaged in some form of precarious work show a strong desire to leave the country, particularly those with temporary contracts for part-time jobs (33.8%) compared with those in permanent full-time positions (22.9%). Similar ambitions are seen among 29% of overeducated and 30.3% of undereducated individuals, compared with 23.3% of those adequately matched to their jobs. This desire is consistent across all observed groups, with more significant differences apparent across countries (see Chapter on Migration by Dragan Stanojević).

There is a weak but positive correlation between fear of having no job and trust in national institutions, such as parliament, government, or even political parties. This reflects a reliance on governmental and political institutions for job security or economic stability. Also, a positive correlation may be discerned between fear of unemployment and favourable opinions toward democracy. For example, 62% of those who fear not having a job agree that democracy is a good form of government in general. Seen possibly as a safeguard against economic instability, those with higher levels of fear of joblessness share a stronger belief in democracy as a favourable political system. However, with 41.6% in favour, there is also a weak but positive correlation between fear of unemployment and support for a strong leader. This suggests that while fear of unemployment may increase support for democracy, it may also foster support for authoritarian leadership, indicating the possibility of adverse perceptions of leadership in times of economic uncertainty. On the other hand, a lower level of trust in governmental and political institutions' ability to address economic challenges effectively is observed among those among whom unemployment is a persistent fear. With weak support for democracy, the ongoing fear of unemployment may lead to greater support for authoritarian leadership, regarded as more capable of tackling economic challenges decisively.

When it comes to protecting workers' rights, trade unions do not enjoy significant trust among young people in the region. Only 15.6% of young people in SEE shared trust in trade unions, with the highest levels among those who have a permanent contract and a full-time job (23.1%). Additionally, only 10% of respondents who stated they are in some form of employment are union members, of whom 51.6% hold permanent, full-time positions. Beyond general mistrust, which also stems from an association between unions and the interests of the government or employers, together with a general passivity inherited from the socialist era, this also points to the challenges facing union organizing in the private sector and a lack of awareness about unionization among precarious and self-employed workers. The data reveal that only 18.8% of the employed are willing to join a union, 25.4% of whom hold permanent, part-time positions.



Despite the prevalence of non-standard, precarious work, the previous FES youth surveys revealed that young people in the ten SEE countries under examination are mostly satisfied with their jobs (Jusić 2018, 32). These findings of job satisfaction can be partly explained, on one hand, by the seemingly paradoxical, simultaneous and pervasive fear of unemployment, which is equally present among permanently, fully-employed young people. This fear makes young people willing to accept any job, often in an awareness not only of the invisible hand of “market forces” but also of the structural and political dynamics that prevail within the labour market.

These insights are in line with recent debates on the rise of illiberal politics in SEE and the consolidation of informal political power by the ruling political and economic elites through the capture of state institutions via clientelist networks – in both the public and private sectors – leading to the overall capture of societies (cf. Fiket et al. 2024; Hasanović et al. 2024; Cvetičanin et al. 2023; Kapidžić 2020; Lavrič and Bieber 2020; Radeljić and Đorđević 2020). Given the low average self-perception of economic welfare and employment, together with overall pessimism about the future of their societies and rising fears and concerns about various sociopolitical issues – corruption and unemployment in the first place – it is unsurprising that these factors also influence youth perceptions with regard to finding a job.

In comparison to the previous 2018 survey, there has been a notable decline in the perceived importance of various factors in finding a job among young people, including both merit-based and non-merit-based factors. On average, young people in the region still see expertise as the most important factor in finding a job in their country ( $M_{2024} = 3.5$ , down from  $M_{2018} = 4.2$ ). However, these trends vary significantly across countries, in which we can observe a variety of dynamics (Figure 12).

The data reveals a dichotomy between countries that prioritize merit-based factors, such as job expertise or experience from abroad, and those in which non-merit-based connections and political affiliations are more significant. Connections with people in power are also highly valued, ranked second in the region ( $M_{2024} = 3.4$ ). However, the overall importance of network-based or politically influenced employment practices – such as ties with influential people and party membership – over meritocratic principles highlight broader socio-political dynamics separating young people in EU and non-EU countries.

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**Precarious workers show a stronger desire to leave the country, with a share of 33.8%, compared with 22.9% of those in permanent full-time positions.**

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Thus, in Slovenia and Greece, job expertise is prioritized over connections with people in power, which, by contrast, seems crucial for young people in Kosovo and Türkiye when finding a job. However, differences also exist among EU Member States. Although young people in Bulgaria and Slovenia attach the lowest importance to connections with people in power, more than half of young people in Croatia highlight their importance for employment. Meanwhile, for young people in Romania, influential connections are more important than expertise, which is seen as the least important factor in finding a job among all the observed countries. Expertise also appears to be least important for young people in countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

Also interesting is the overall difference in the perceived importance of different factors within each country. In countries such as Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, or Serbia, everything seems equally important, compared with other countries, such as Bulgaria, Slovenia or Montenegro, where one factor is prioritized over others.

While the focus on meritocracy can be considered desirable, it is important to note that expertise also shows a positive correlation with the fear of unemployment. This apparent contradiction can be explained by the fact that if young people are employed, even permanently, they might fear unemployment due to the perception that their skills and expertise might not be sufficient, which can undermine confidence in their job security. Thus, securing future employment might be seen as possible through political or other influential connections. On the other hand, reliance on personal connections, especially in countries where it is valued more highly than merit, can exacerbate a sense of job insecurity among young people. This perception may lead them to believe that the sustainability of their employment opportunities depends more on maintaining external connections and relationships than on individual skills or competence.

In line with findings from the last survey, party membership and affiliation continue to play a significant role in finding employment across the region, mostly in non-EU and WB6 countries. With the highest levels of concern about future job security among the overeducated and those working outside their profession, young people in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina also value party membership most when it comes to employment, in contrast to young people in Bulgaria or Slovenia, who rank it as less important.

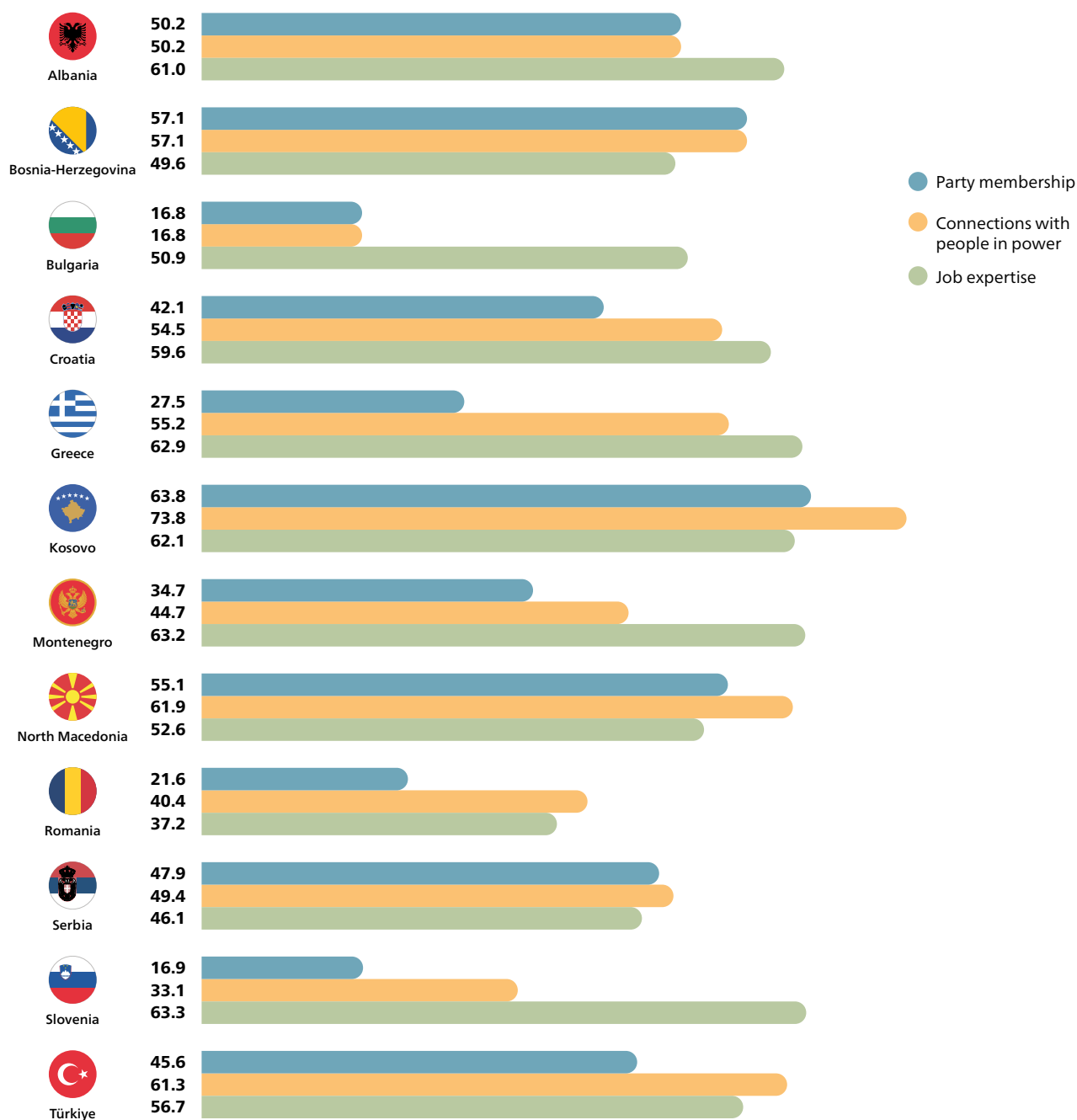
In nine out of ten countries for which we have comparable data, however, this influence has decreased ( $M_{2024} = 2.8$ ) in contrast to previous findings ( $M_{2018} = 3.4$ ). Kosovo is the sole exception, registering an increase from 57% in 2018 to 64% in 2024. Except in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the impact of party membership aligns with personal connections, it is not a dominant factor elsewhere. A noteworthy change can be seen in Croatia, however, which previously was among the bottom quartile of states in the ranking and has now risen, while Montenegro has gone in the opposite direction.

The overall impact of party membership on finding employment is also evident in terms of a positive correlation with working for a party or political group. Analysis shows that at the regional level 23.8% of unemployed persons have worked for a political party or political group, while 27.9% of permanent, full-time employed young people share the same experience. Looking at individual countries, it is indicative to see, for instance, that 36.4% of unemployed young people in Kosovo have participated in political party or political group activities. A notable share – 41.7% – of permanently employed young people in Croatia have been involved in the same activities, suggesting that despite the polarization among EU and non-EU countries in terms of the importance of merit-based or non-merit-based factors, political parties remain well positioned as important employers and guarantors of job security.

Fig. 12 **Young people's views on important factors for finding a job in SEE (in %)**

*How important are the following factors when it comes to finding a job for a young person in your country?*

Share of 'mostly agree' and 'completely agree' answers



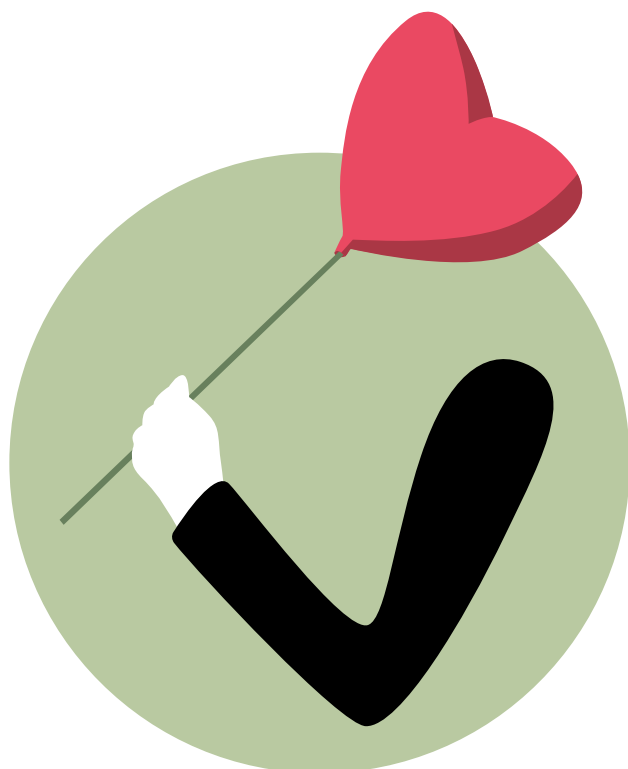
## Main takeaways

1. A significant proportion of young people with full-time permanent jobs continue to pursue further education. Balancing work with ongoing studies, these young individuals aim to enhance their skills and qualifications, indicating a commitment to lifelong learning and professional development.
2. There are notable gender disparities in unemployment and job-seeking behaviour. Women are more likely to be unemployed and face greater challenges in self-employment compared with men due to structural factors such as patriarchal norms, but also educational dynamics, such as a tendency to pursue social sciences and humanities.
3. Every second respondent stated that they are currently employed in a position in line with their formal education, but there is a discernible decline in this trend compared with the previous survey.
4. Most respondents stated that they are currently employed in a position in line with their formal education, but there is a discernible decline in this trend compared with the previous survey.
5. Precarious employment is the predominant mode of employment among young people in the SEE region, reflecting overall job instability and insecurity. As the survey shows, there is a significant proportion of non-standard and freelance work, with overeducated individuals accounting for 43.6 % of occasional jobs and undereducated individuals accounting for 10.4 %.
6. Young people in the region still see qualifications and expertise as the most important factor in finding a job in their country, making it the highest-ranked factor. However, the data reveal a dichotomy separating young people in EU Member States, who prioritize merit-based factors such as job expertise, and those from non-EU countries, where non-merit-based connections and political affiliations are more significant.
7. Consistent with the last wave of the survey, party membership and affiliation remain significant factors in securing employment across the region, especially in non-EU and WB6 countries. In nine out of ten countries with comparable data, however, this influence has decreased.

# 5. Sociopolitical values, religion and trust

**Miran Lavrič** Young people's values and attitudes are crucial not only because they directly influence their social and political behaviour, but also because they serve as strong predictors of their future values, attitudes and behaviours. In other words, they provide insight into a generation, that is, a group defined by specific historical circumstances that develops its own unique worldview, set of values and behavioural patterns (Mannheim 1952).

The previous wave of FES youth surveys conducted in ten countries of Southeast Europe (Lavrič, Tomanović, and Jusić 2019) revealed a generation that was quite optimistic and very pro-European. The European Union was associated largely with positive attributes across various domains, particularly regarding employment and economic welfare. Conversely, young people expressed significant dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in their home countries and exhibited very low levels of trust in their national institutions. The study also highlighted a notable presence of ethnonationalism in some countries, while religion (still) played an important role in young people's lives in most countries. Importantly, the research found overwhelming support for a strong welfare state.



## Support for a strong welfare state and personal autonomy

According to data collected in 2024, there has been a pronounced and nearly universal decline in support for a strong welfare state over the past six years. For example, in the ten countries that were part of the 2018 FES youth study, 56.9% of young people fully agreed that the incomes of the poor and the rich should be made more equal. By 2024, this share had fallen to only 38.3%, while the proportion of those strongly opposing this idea doubled from 4% to 8%. Similar trends are observed with regard to two other statements measuring support for a strong welfare state: "Government ownership of business and industry should be increased" and "Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for". These three items were combined into a single variable "Support for a strong welfare state", in line with the conceptualization by Lavrič et al. (2019).

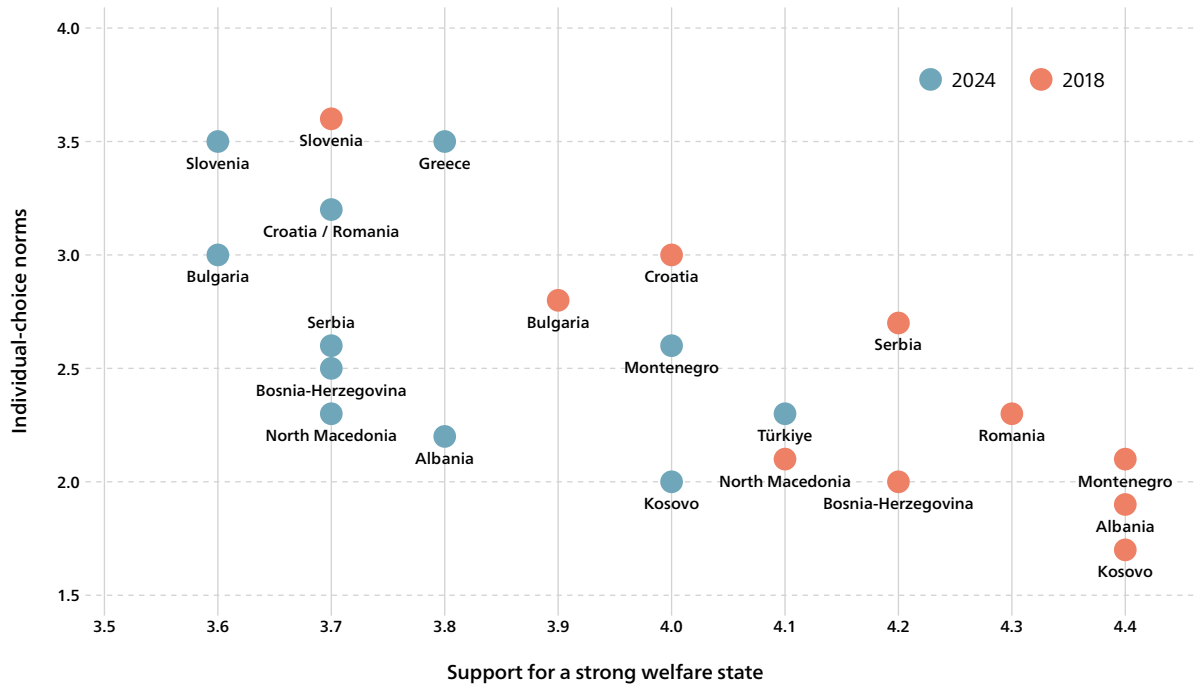
It should be emphasized that the general level of support for a strong welfare state remains very high. For example, in the twelve countries surveyed in 2024, 79.3% of young people still believe that their government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. Thus, while young people in the region might have become somewhat disillusioned with the idea of a strong welfare state, it is crucial to remember that support for welfarism remains very high among young people across the region.

The analyses also revealed a notable parallel trend in attitudes towards sexual orientation and reproductive practices. Specifically, there has been a significant increase in acceptance of abortion and homosexuality among young people in nine out of ten countries surveyed in both rounds. For instance, at the level of all ten countries as many as 36.8% of young people considered abortion as never justifiable in 2018, whereas by 2024, this percentage had decreased to 22.8%. Again, three indicators measuring these attitudes were consolidated into a single variable labelled "Individual-choice norms"<sup>3</sup>.

Fig. 13 **Support for a strong welfare state and individual-choice norms among young people in SEE**

Mean values on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always), 2024 and 2018\*

\*Answers were collected on a scale of 1–10 and regrouped to 1–5



At first glance, Figure 13 reveals a very strong negative correlation ( $r = -0.742, p < 0.001$ ) between the two observed concepts. Notably, this correlation remains robustly negative even when the analysis is restricted to either of the two observed years, 2018 or 2024. From the perspective of political theory, the upper left corner of the graph can be denoted “libertarian”, combining low support for a welfare state with strong support for individual autonomy. Conversely, the lower right corner indicates “authoritarian welfarism”, a political orientation characterized by strong support for a welfare state and reduced emphasis on individual autonomy.

This qualification is further supported by the data, where our central measure of political authoritarianism<sup>4</sup> at the country level correlates positively with support for a welfare state ( $r = 0.764, p < 0.001$ ) and negatively with individual-choice norms ( $r = -0.623, p < 0.01$ ).

As shown in Figure 13, virtually all countries moved towards the libertarian corner between 2018 and 2024. The crucial finding is that the political values of young people in the region are trending away from authoritarian welfarism and towards libertarianism. The change is smallest in Slovenia, which already had the most libertarian young people in 2018. In contrast, the most significant changes are observed in countries that were the least libertarian, particularly Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Albania.

**Although the general level of support for a welfare state remains very high, the political values of young people in the region are trending away from authoritarian welfarism and towards libertarianism.**

The extent of these changes was slightly more pronounced among young people from lower strata in terms of economic status, especially in relation to individual-choice norms. However, the differences were rather small, and the change occurred in the libertarian direction across all strata. Furthermore, this shift was largely independent of gender, age or type of residence, making it virtually universal across all socio-demographic subgroups.

It is important to note that the shift towards individual-choice norms does not necessarily coincide with efforts to ensure more rights for the LGBTQIA+ community. In fact, our data suggest that youth opinion on this issue is trending in the opposite direction. Specifically, in the ten countries where we can compare data from 2018 and 2024, the share of young people who believe that members of the LGBTQIA+ community “have too many rights” has increased sharply, from 25.2% to 37.5%. Moreover, this shift was consistent across all ten countries.

How can this apparent contradiction be explained? One possible explanation is that while young people increasingly support freedom of choice, including in terms of sexual orientation, many also disapprove of granting special attention and rights to members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Our data at least partially support this notion, showing that the share of those who believe LGBTQIA+ members have “too many rights” has increased even among those who are generally very tolerant towards homosexuality.

Another part of the answer lies in the fact that this shift in opinions about LGBTQIA+ rights was most pronounced among young people who identify as far-right and those who consider homosexuality as never justifiable. The core of this explanation is that the conservative turn is not manifested in decreased tolerance of homosexuality in everyday life, but rather in opposition to public and political issues related to LGBTQIA+ rights. In a broader sense, this disproportionate shift on the far-right can be understood in terms of ideological polarization.

Some young people, particularly boys or young men according to our data, are becoming extremely conservative, probably in reaction to rapid progressive cultural changes. This explanation aligns with Ronald Inglehart’s (2021) reasoning, which connects such polarization trends to secularization. Therefore, it makes sense to examine secularization trends within our national samples.

## The declining role of religion

According to the results presented in Figure 14, we can confirm significant secularization tendencies in at least eight out of ten countries with comparable data for 2018. In all ten countries, the share of non-religious young people – those who do not attend religious services and/or do not belong to any religious community – has increased. In most countries, there was a parallel decrease in the share of regular attenders. The only exceptions are Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Montenegro, where both religious extremes have increased.

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**The proportion of non-religious young people has increased across the region, with signs of religious polarization emerging in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. The decline in religiosity has been more pronounced among women than among men.**

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These pronounced secularization tendencies are theoretically expected given the already established rise in individual-choice norms. Ronald Inglehart’s book “Religion’s Sudden Decline” explicitly elaborates on the connection between secularization and the rise of individual-choice norms.

Inglehart argues that increasingly unpopular pro-fertility norms, which are the opposite of individual-choice norms, are so closely linked with traditional religious worldviews that abandoning them undermines religiosity. In turn, the decline of religiosity causes pro-fertility norms to fade even more, creating additional pressure for a further decline in religiosity. It seems that such a spiral, identified by Inglehart particularly in the United States, has also taken place among young people in Southeast Europe. The entanglement of religion with pro-fertility norms might also explain why young women, who are generally expected to sacrifice more for their children than men, tend to abandon religion more quickly. In our sample of ten countries with comparable data from 2018 to 2024, the proportion of regular church attenders among women decreased significantly, from 30.4% to 20.1%. In contrast, the drop among men was much smaller, declining from 28.3% to 24.7%.

The established trends of secularization also align well with the more general revised theory of modernization developed by Inglehart and Welzel (2005). Based on extensive empirical evidence, this theory holds that modernization is a process in which economic development triggers cultural changes that substantially increase the likelihood of liberal democracy emerging. Economic development increases people's material, cognitive and social resources, and decreases their sense of existential insecurity. Consequently, people tend to replace survival values, which include an ethnocentric outlook and low levels of trust and tolerance, with self-expression values that prioritize subjective well-being and quality of life. Simultaneously, there has been a shift from traditional values, which emphasize the importance of religion and traditional family structures, to secular-rational ones. This shift is well described by Engelbrekt and Nygren (2014:31) as "essentially the replacement of religion and superstition with science and bureaucracy as the basis of behaviour and authority relations in a society".

## Mixed trends in national pride and ethnonationalism

Given that the established trends so far point toward a pronounced shift in the direction of self-expression and secular-rational values, we can also expect a decline in ethnonationalism, which is one of the elements that comprise survival values.

According to Figure 15, ethnonationalism indeed declined in five out of ten countries for which we have comparable data for 2018 and 2024. In two of these countries, Kosovo and Serbia, the change was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ) according to an independent samples t-test. This leaves only three countries – North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia – where there was a statistically significant increase in ethnonationalism. It should also be noted that in some countries, such as Türkiye, Albania and Kosovo, the levels of ethnonationalism remain very high. Based on the nationalism literature (for example, Bonikowsky and DiMaggio 2016; Bieber 2018), these differences between countries should be interpreted through detailed analyses of specific national contexts, but that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

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**There is a general trend of decline in ethnonationalism in the region. However, there are three countries in which ethnonationalism has increased significantly and an additional three where it has remained at very high levels.**

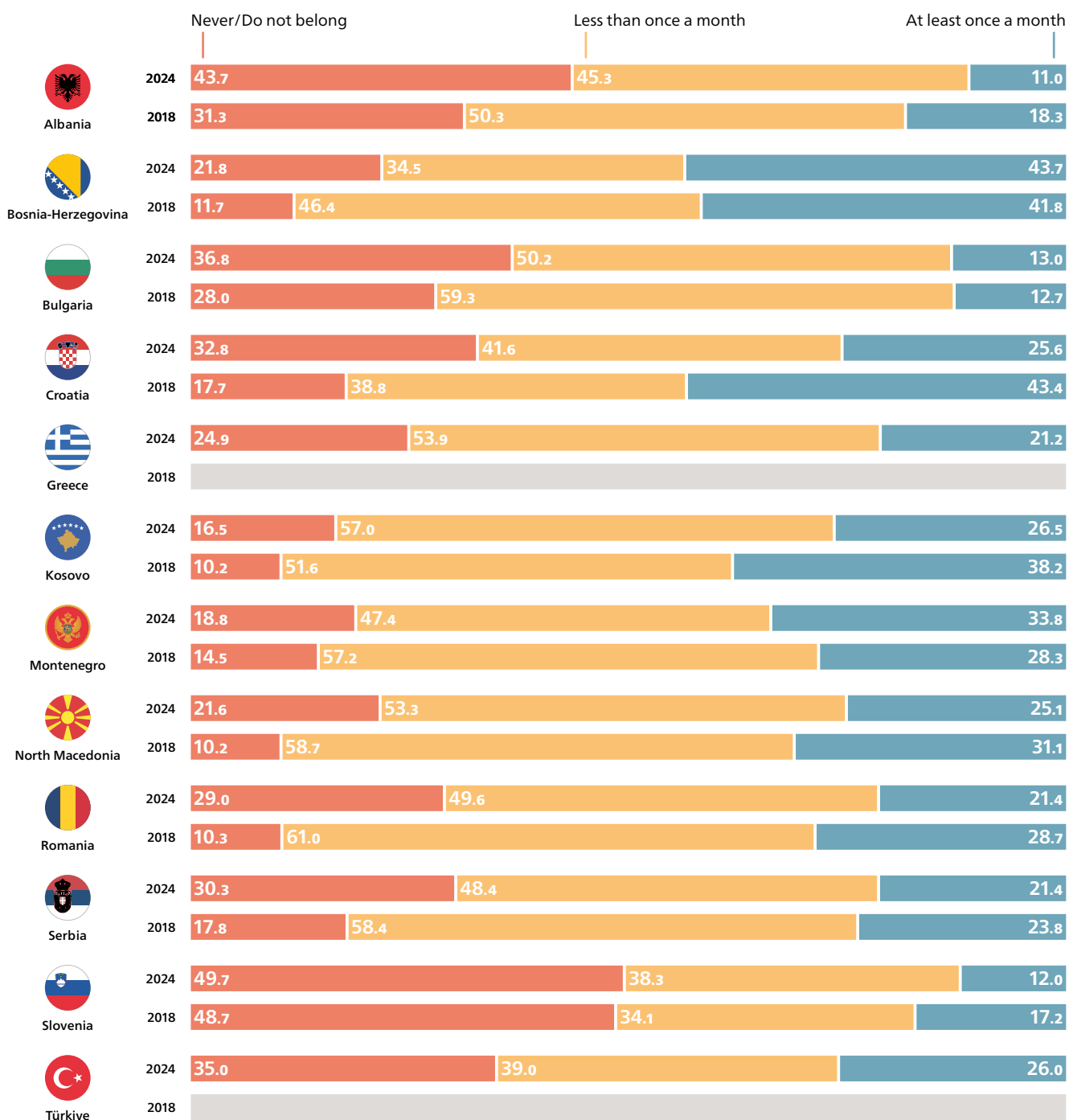
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Importantly, the prevailing trend is in line with our theoretical expectations and points to a general decline in ethnonationalism in the region. To illustrate this point, the share of those with a very high level of ethnonationalism (over 4 on a 1 to 5 scale) was 19.5% in 2018 and fell to 15.3% by 2024.



Fig. 14 Attendance of religious service by young people in SEE\* (in %)

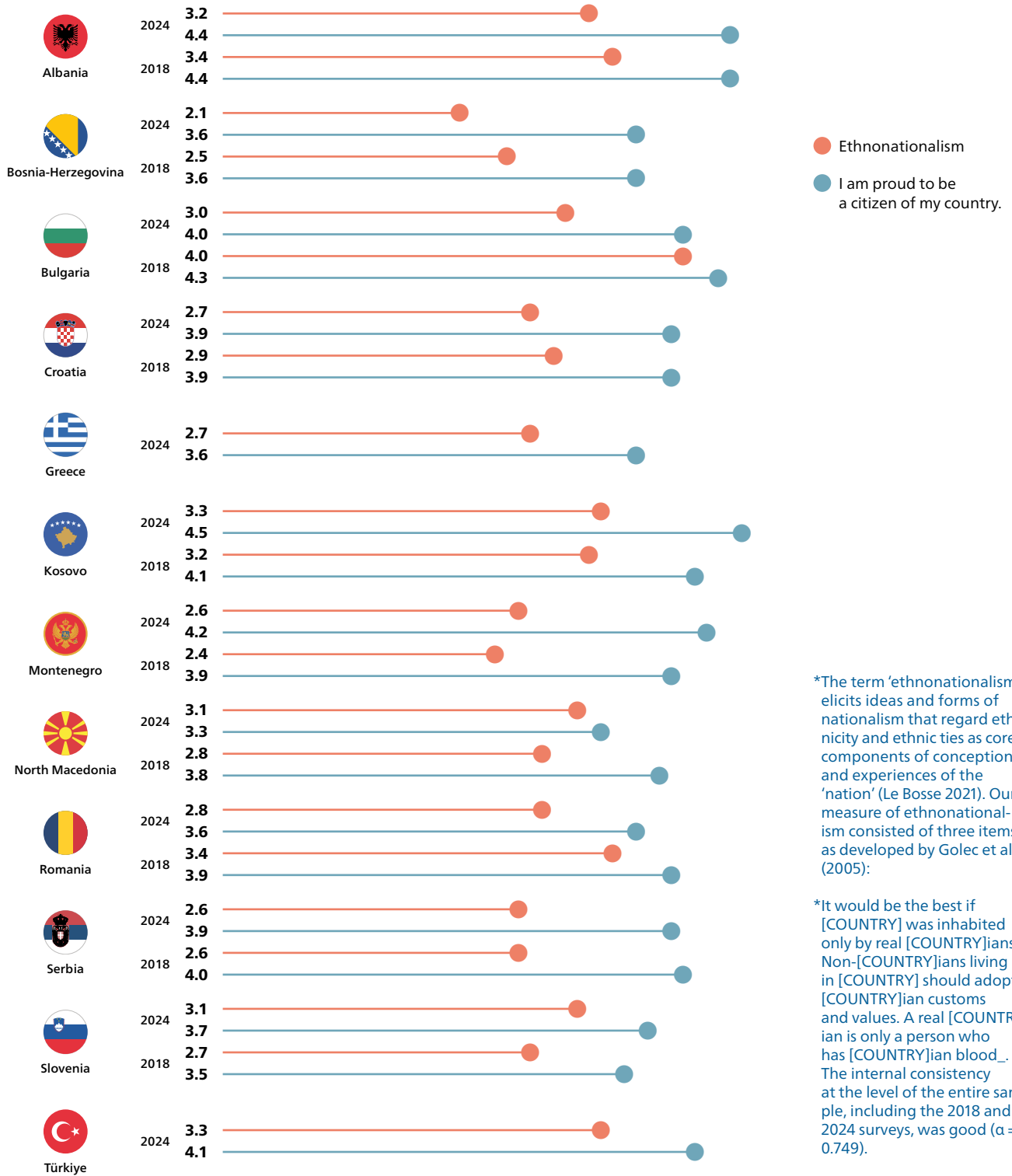
*Apart from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?*



\*Note: In 2018, the question about attendance at religious services was posed to all respondents. In 2024, only respondents who previously indicated that they belong to a religious community were asked about their religious attendance. To make the results of the two surveys comparable, those who do not belong to any religious community and/or never attended religious services were merged into one category labelled 'Never/Do not belong'.

Fig. 15 National pride and ethnonationalism\* among young people in SEE

Mean values on a scale from '1 – not at all' to '5 – fully', 2024 and 2018 (There was no data available for Türkiye and Greece in 2018).



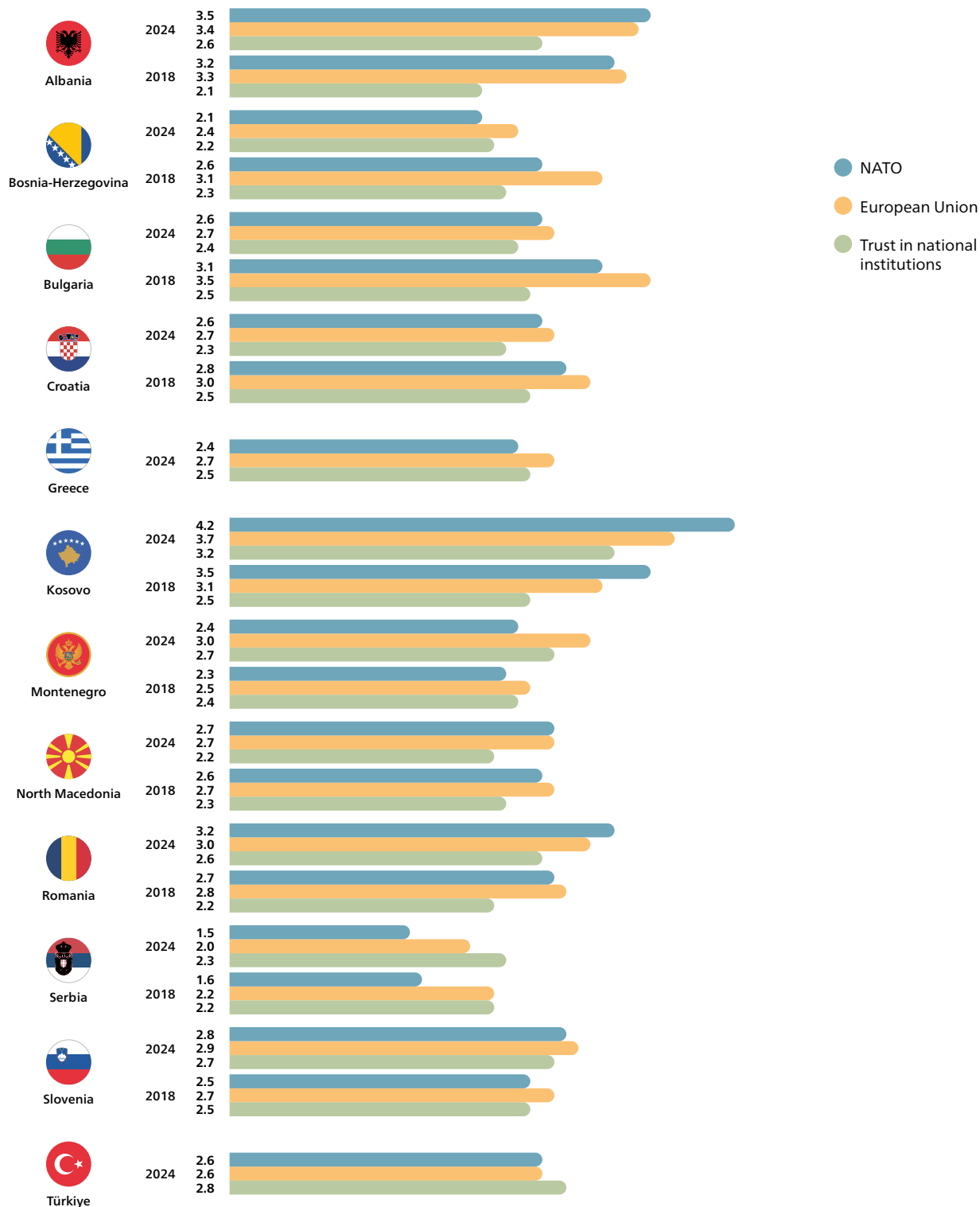
\*The term 'ethnonationalism' elicits ideas and forms of nationalism that regard ethnicity and ethnic ties as core components of conceptions and experiences of the 'nation' (Le Bosse 2021). Our measure of ethnonationalism consisted of three items, as developed by Golec et al. (2005):

\*It would be the best if [COUNTRY] was inhabited only by real [COUNTRY]ians. Non-[COUNTRY]ians living in [COUNTRY] should adopt [COUNTRY]ian customs and values. A real [COUNTRY]ian is only a person who has [COUNTRY]ian blood\_. The internal consistency at the level of the entire sample, including the 2018 and 2024 surveys, was good ( $\alpha = 0.749$ ).

Fig. 16 Trust in national and Euro-Atlantic institutions among young people in SEE\*

*On the whole, how far do you trust the entities listed below?*

Mean values on a scale from '1 – not at all' to '5 – fully', 2024 and 2018 (There was no data available for Türkiye and Greece in 2018).



Additionally, the results of this study confirm that nationalism is still a “gendered phenomenon” (Thomson 2019). Across all twelve countries observed in 2024, our findings indicate that men are more likely to exhibit strong ethnonationalist sentiments than women ( $t(8,200) = 5.7, p < 0.001$ ; Cohen’s  $d = 1.2$ )<sup>5</sup>. Interestingly, these gender differences have slightly decreased in the ten countries with comparable data for 2018 (Cohen’s  $d = 1.3$ ) and 2024 (Cohen’s  $d = 1.2$ ). This decrease stems from the fact that the average level of ethnonationalism declined slightly more among men than among women.

## Matters of trust and satisfaction

According to Inglehart and Welzel’s (2005) theory, trust in public institutions should increase along with the more general shift from survival to self-expression values. In line with these expectations, Figure 16 reveals that trust in national institutions<sup>6</sup> increased in six out of ten countries, with the increase being especially strong in Kosovo. While there were no statistically significant changes in North Macedonia and Serbia, three countries – Croatia, BiH, and Bulgaria – saw a decline in public trust.

Interestingly, across the ten countries with comparable data from 2018 to 2024, the increase in trust in national institutions was slightly more pronounced among men than among women. Consequently, in 2024, men expressed statistically significantly higher trust in national institutions than women ( $t(5,562) = 3.4, p < 0.001$ ; Cohen’s  $d = 0.89$ ).

Looking at the ranking of individual countries, it is striking how young people in Kosovo and Albania stand out with very high levels of trust in institutions, particularly Euro-Atlantic ones. A related finding highlights the enormous, though not surprising, differences in trust in NATO, particularly between Serbia ( $M_{2024}=1.5$ ) and Kosovo ( $M_{2024}=4.2$ ). Similarly, the EU is least trusted in Serbia, which is the only country where the EU is not more trusted than national institutions.

Additional positive signs of democratic development can be observed in Figure 17, which shows the average satisfaction of young people with various aspects of their home countries and the EU. Although the EU is still viewed more positively than home countries, the gap has narrowed considerably. For instance, in 2024 young people perceived the EU as less democratic ( $M_{2018}=3.4$

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**In most countries, men are more likely to exhibit stronger ethnonationalist sentiments than women, although the gender difference has slightly diminished since 2018.**

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compared with 2018 ( $M_{2018}=4.0$ ). Conversely, their home countries were seen as slightly more democratic, on average ( $M_{2018}=2.7$ ;  $M_{2024}=2.8$ ). While the gap remains significant, it has decreased substantially over the observed period.

In fact, the gap has narrowed in six out of seven dimensions, the only exception being security. Notably, there has been an improvement in satisfaction with home countries in five dimensions: democracy, the rule of law, human rights, economic welfare, and employment. While perceptions of the EU have weakened in these areas, views of the home countries have improved, reflecting a positive trend in domestic democratic development.

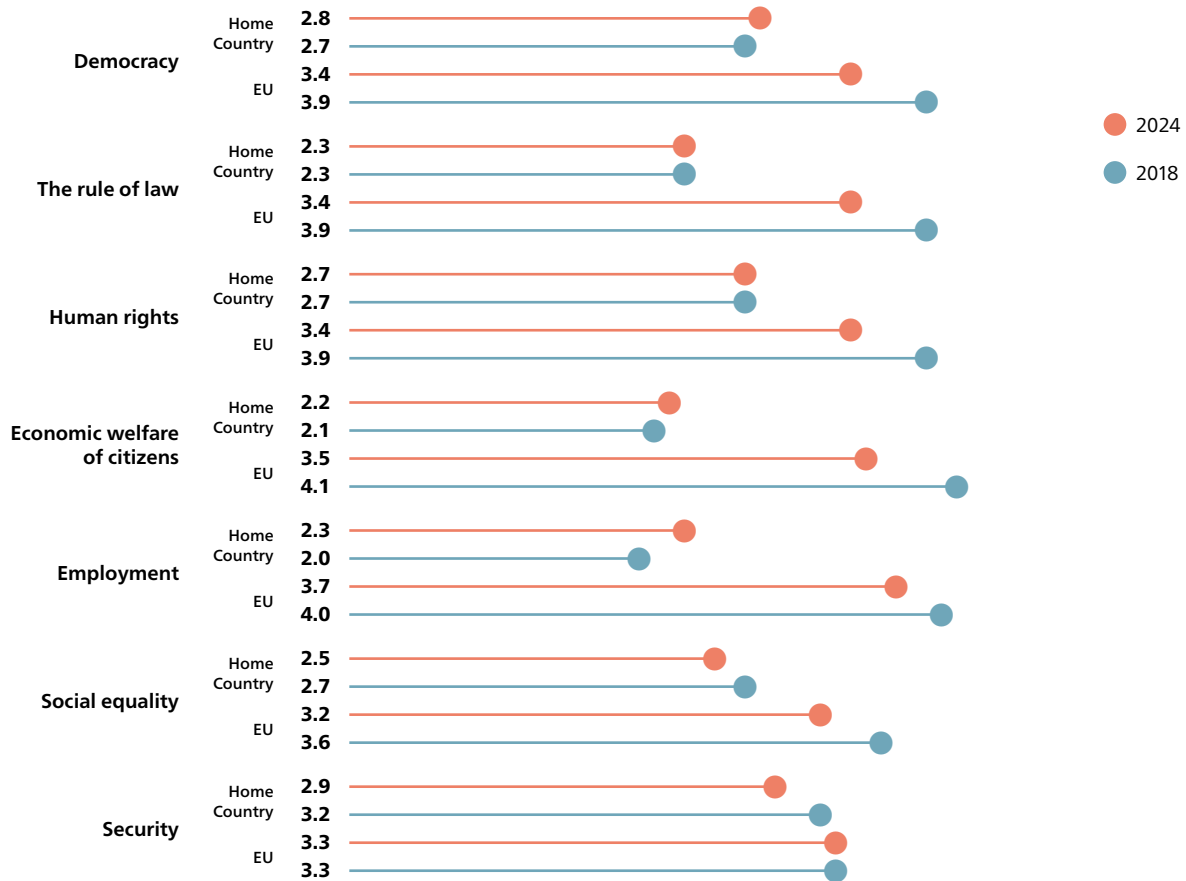
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**On average, young people in the region are increasingly satisfied with the democratic and economic outlook of their home countries. Although the EU is still viewed more positively, the gap has narrowed considerably.**

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Fig. 17 **Perceptions of the situation in their home country and in the EU with regard to the most important socio-political values\***

*How good or bad, in your view, is the status of the following listed values in your country and in the EU? Mean values on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good), 2018 and 2024*



\*Averages refer to respondents from the ten countries for which comparable data exist for both 2024 and 2018. Only those respondents who ranked a particular value as one of the three most important were allowed to express their satisfaction with that particular value.

## Visions of the future

Despite the many optimistic findings regarding democratic development, young people in the region are increasingly pessimistic about the future of their societies. In eight out of ten countries with comparable data for 2018, there was an increase in the percentage of those who view the future of their country as worse than the present.

This rise in pessimism was especially sharp in Croatia, where the share of pessimistic young people increased from 11.3% to 46.1%. A similar trend is observed in other EU Member States. Taken together, in 2024 the share of pessimistic young people reached 45.2% in the five EU Member States, while it was only 32.2% among young people from the seven countries that are not currently EU members.

Fig. 18 The perceived future of their home country among young people in SEE (in %)

*How do you see the future of your country in general?*

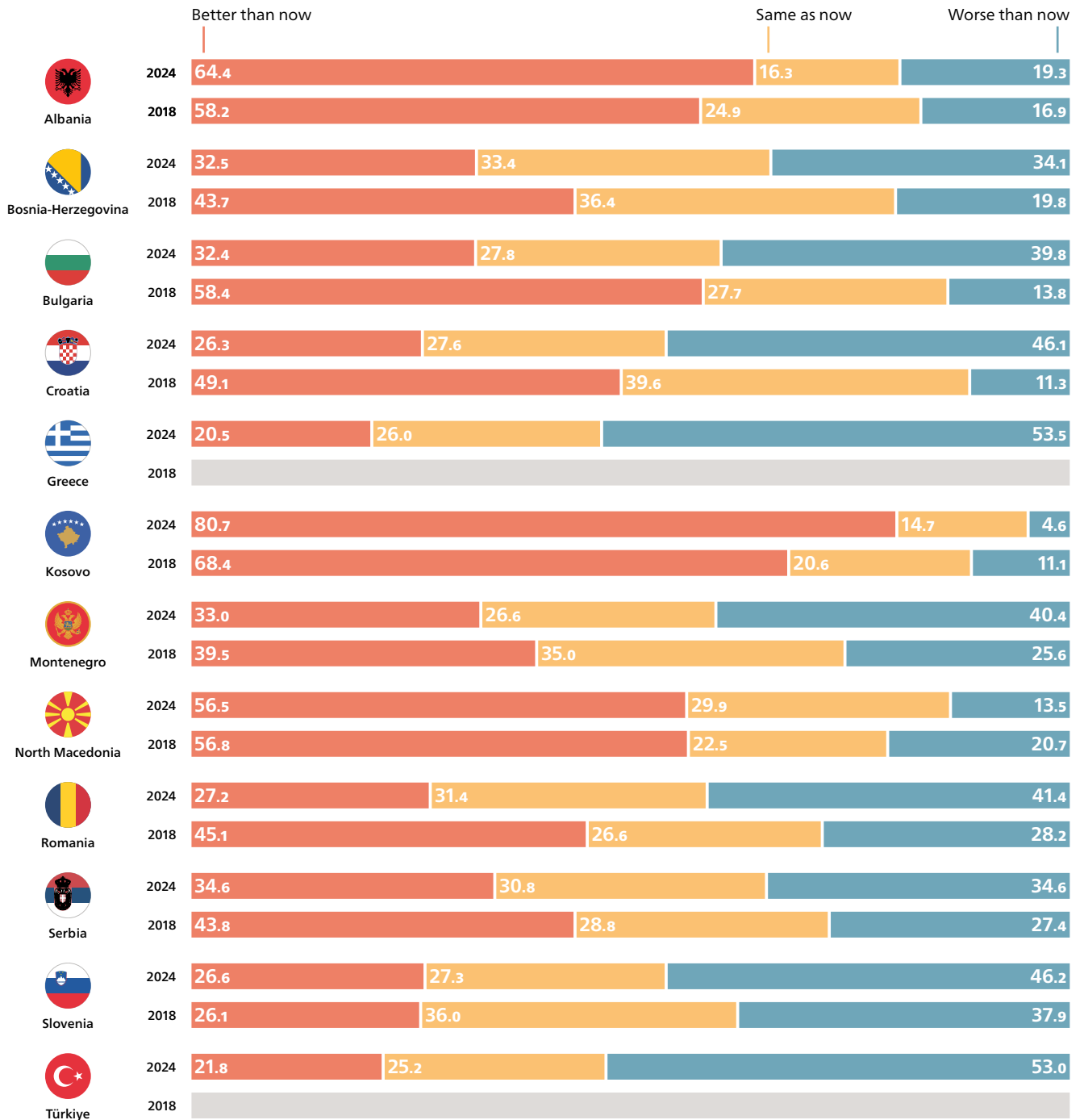
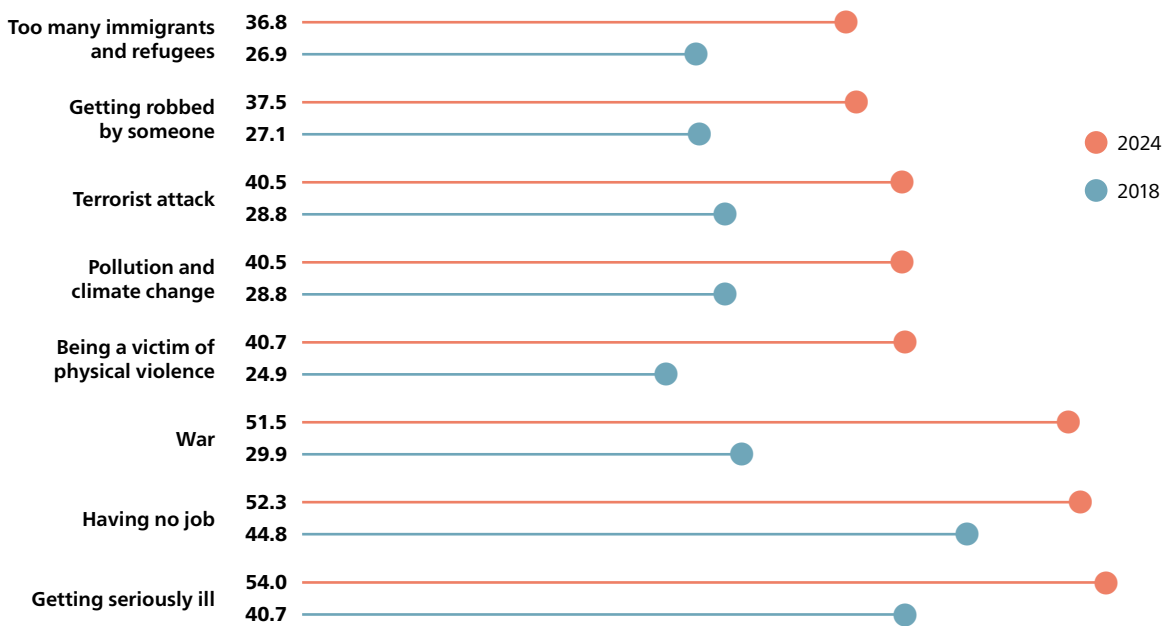


Fig. 19 **Fears and concerns of young people in SEE (in %)**

To what extent are you frightened or concerned in relation to the following things?  
Share of 'a lot'-responses, 2018 and 2024. Percentages refer only to respondents from the ten countries for which comparable data exists for both 2018 and 2024.



Additional analyses suggest that the prospect of joining the EU is a major factor behind the optimism of young people in non-member states. For example, 47.9% of young people from these countries who support the idea of joining the EU are optimistic about the future, compared with only 32.4% among those who oppose EU membership for their country. It is therefore not surprising that the most optimistic young people are found in Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro, the three non-member countries in which young people also have the highest trust in the EU (see Figure 16).<sup>7</sup>

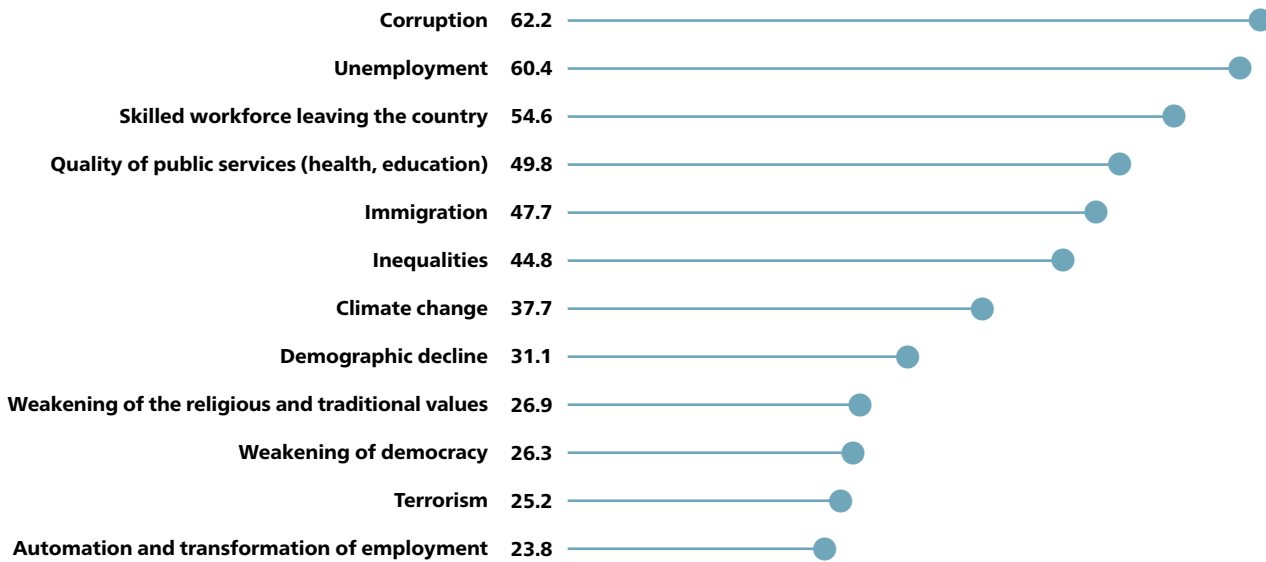
**The prospect of joining the EU keeps optimism among young people in many non-member countries very high, while pessimism is high and rising among young people in EU Member States.**

Not surprisingly, societal pessimism also correlates with personal pessimism. Young people who are more optimistic about the future of their societies are also more optimistic about their personal future ( $r_{2024} = 0.387, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, they tend to be more satisfied with their lives ( $r_{2024} = 0.272, p < 0.001$ ). It is evident that outlook with regard to societal future significantly impacts the personal outlook of young people.

Interestingly, while there are no significant gender differences in relation to societal optimism, gender proved to be a significant predictor of personal optimism across all countries. Women expressed slightly higher levels of personal optimism than men in both 2018 ( $t(9,703) = -3.8, p < 0.001$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.44$ ) and 2024 ( $t(8,112) = -4.0, p < 0.001$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.68$ ).

Fig. 20 **Concerns for their country among young people in SEE (in %)**

*Which of the following do you think will be the biggest issues facing your country in the next decade? Respondents could choose any number of items*



Consistent with the prevailing rise of pessimism, data show a sharp increase in fears and concerns among young people. As Figure 19 reveals, the shares of those expressing high levels of fear related to all eight issues measured in both 2018 and 2024 have increased. The most significant rise was in the fear of war, which joined the two previously highest fears from 2018, unemployment and serious illness. In 2024, the fear of war was most pronounced among young people in Türkiye (65.3%), followed by Romania (61.4%) and BiH (57.9%).

Analysis of the entire sample from all countries included in the survey revealed that gender significantly impacts the level of all observed fears, with women expressing significantly higher levels of fear in both 2018 and 2024. For example, in 2024, within the sample of all twelve included countries, 50.9% of women expressed a high level of fear regarding being a victim of physical violence, compared with only 35.1% of men. The difference is even greater in the case of sexual violence, with 56.2% of women expressing the highest level of fear. In countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (69.7%), Türkiye (69.3%) and Romania (66%), these percentages approach 70%.

An analysis of additional items that were measured only in 2024 (Figure 20), reveals that the top public concerns among young people are corruption (62.2%) and unemployment (60.4%). These findings are in line with the results from the previous survey round (Lavrič et al. 2019), in which the same two issues were also the most prominent fears among the region’s young people.<sup>8</sup>

**Fears and concerns about various sociopolitical issues have risen sharply since 2018, particularly the fear of war. In 2024, young people in the region were most concerned about corruption, unemployment, emigration, and the quality of public services.**

Interestingly, issues such as climate change or immigration, which the media and politicians often associate with young people, are far from being the main worries of young people in Southeast Europe. Young people’s priorities are much more focused on matters directly related to the management of the country and public systems, particularly corruption and health care.



## Main takeaways

The main findings regarding young people's sociopolitical values in Southeast Europe can be summarized as follows:

- 1. Trending towards libertarianism:** Although the general level of support for a welfare state remains very high, the political values of young people in the region are trending away from authoritarian welfarism and towards libertarianism.
- 2. Secularization:** The share of non-religious young people has increased across the region, with some signs of religious polarization in certain countries. The decline in religiosity has been more pronounced among women than among men.
- 3. Ethnonationalism:** There is a general trend of decline in ethnonationalism in the region. However, there are three countries in which ethnonationalism has increased significantly and an additional three in which it has remained at a very high level. In most countries, men are more likely to exhibit stronger ethnonationalist sentiments than women, although the gender difference has diminished slightly since 2018.
- 4. Satisfaction with democratic and economic outlook:** On average, young people in the region are increasingly satisfied with the democratic and economic outlook of their home countries. Although the EU is still viewed more positively, the gap has narrowed considerably.
- 5. The rise of pessimism and the role of EU membership prospects:** The prospect of joining the EU keeps optimism among young people in many non-member countries very high, while pessimism is high and rising among young people in EU Member States.
- 6. Rising fears and concerns:** Fears and concerns about various sociopolitical issues have risen sharply since 2018, particularly the fear of war. In 2024, young people in the region were most concerned about corruption, unemployment, emigration, and the quality of public services.

From a broader perspective, value shifts among young people in Southeastern Europe offer some basis for optimism regarding the democratic future of the region. Collectively, these trends point towards an embrace of self-expression and secular-rational values. According to Inglehart and Welzel's theory (2005), such cultural shifts are conducive to institutional changes favouring a functional liberal democracy.

These shifts also indicate a pronounced trend of convergence with the sociopolitical values that prevail in more western countries of the European Union (see, for example, World Values Survey Association, n.d.). This is particularly significant in the context of global divergence of values, as recently identified by Jackson and Medvedev (2024). The authors note that self-expression values have diverged most sharply, especially between high-income Western countries and the rest of the world. However, geographic proximity remains a strong factor in value similarity. In other words, while sociopolitical values have diverged globally, they have converged regionally.

From this perspective, in an increasingly culturally diverse world, young people in Southeast Europe appear to be trending towards the core European prodemocratic values. This potential should not be overlooked by policymakers across the region and in the EU.

# 6 Political attitudes and participation

Jasmin Hasanović

The topic of political participation among young people remains a highly contested issue in the literature. With particular regard to various barriers and incentives, the central question revolves around the political and symbolic role of young people and the extent to which they actively engage in the political process.

This ongoing debate on young people and political participation could roughly be divided into two main polarized paradigms.<sup>9</sup> The first starts from the conventional assumption that young people are *disengaged*, *alienated* or *apathetic* political agents. As one scholar put it, “young people are less concerned with politics, less politically knowledgeable, do not participate in social or political activities, are more apathetic, and have low levels of political interest” (Quintelier 2007, 165). Such perceptions are in line with broader debates on the crisis and decline of political participation, an overall institutional distrust and electoral disengagement over recent decades (cf. Mansbridge 2020; Akram et al. 2014; Merkel 2014). A more optimistic view sees young people as *engaged*, but in terms of less traditional forms of political participation, within the framework of which disappointment with mainstream politics does not indicate a lack of political interest or activism (cf. Sloam 2017; Rainsford 2017; O’Toole 2003).

Arguing that young people’s political behaviour is different from that of adults, some scholars posit that the former are more inclined towards alternative, non-traditional forms and means of political participation: “it seems as if the problem of youth political participation is less a matter of whether they participate, and more a matter of where they participate” (Rainsford 2017, 2).

However, changing repertoires and agencies of engagement, such as replacing voting and political parties with street protests and non-governmental organizations (Norris 2002), are not limited to young people. Instead, this shift reflects a broader trend as citizens’ involvement has evolved significantly and the scope of what constitutes political engagement has expanded, leading to new forms, typologies and repertoires of political participation (Kaim 2021). The normalization of once unconventional practices has broadened the understanding of political participation, blurring the distinction between traditional and conventional, and non-traditional and unconventional means of political participation. With the integration of various new forms and modes of political engagement, such as cyber-attacks, AI-generated content and deepfakes influencing elections, or digital participation through online activism and mobilization (cf. Rose-Stockwell 2023; Vatreš 2021; Tufekci 2017; Morozov 2009), and various forms of democratic and participatory innovations in which governments engage with *unconventional* citizens’ actions (cf. Fiket et al. 2024; Elstub and Escobar 2020), this redefinition of political participation has shown that the distinction between conventional and unconventional is no longer adequate.

Recent discussions often distinguish between engagement within the institutional framework, such as joining a political party or elite selection, and actions that take place outside this framework, such as protests or signing petitions. Although this distinction may appear relevant for research on youth participation – as young people are seen as more likely to engage through non-institutionalized means (cf. Sloam 2017; Norris 2002) – in reality, these forms are increasingly intertwining and mutually influencing each other, making such dualist thinking overly simplistic and misleading when dealing with youth engagement through only one type of engagement.



However, a significant shift in this trend is noticeable in this year's European Parliament elections, with the highest voter turnout since 1994 (Statista 2024). Analyses of this turnout and election results suggest that it may be attributed not only to increased youth electoral participation but also to how young people, who previously felt unheard, unrepresented and existentially insecure, have been mobilized and engaged through non-institutional means, in the first place by the far right (cf. Chazan 2024; Edwards 2024; Hockenos 2024). Using media and digital platforms to gather and mobilize young voters has boosted institutionalized forms of engagement among them, increasing their support and participation within formal political structures and processes such as elections or party membership (Cokelaere 2024). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the key factors in youth participation and its specific challenges and opportunities. Interest in and knowledge of politics should also be considered important prerequisites for youth political engagement, regardless of form.

## Is politics coming back?

Interest in and self-estimated knowledge of politics appear to have slightly increased among respondents compared with the previous research wave (Figure 21).

While 11.6% of respondents in the ten countries covered by the 2018 FES Youth Study stated that they were "mostly" or "very interested" in politics, 18.1% from the same countries reported similar levels of interest in 2024. Nevertheless, despite the increase in (almost) all the countries observed in this research wave, more than half of the respondents (53.5%) still share minimal or no interest in politics at all, while 28.4% of them rather appear ambivalent towards politics. In contrast to Türkiye and Greece, where we see the highest concern with political matters, those questioned in Kosovo and Albania remain fairly indifferent towards politics, even below the regional average. Additionally, compared with the last survey, there has been a slight decrease in political interest only in Kosovo and North Macedonia.

A noticeable variation in political interest may be observed between EU Member States and non-members, with interest being higher in the former (25.5%) than in the latter (18.9%). The survey results also indicate that the level of political interest is influenced by various factors, including gender, age, type of residence or education level.

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**Despite a slight increase overall, interest in and self-estimated knowledge about politics remains very low. On average, only one-fifth of respondents show interest in politics, while four out of ten hardly know anything about it.**

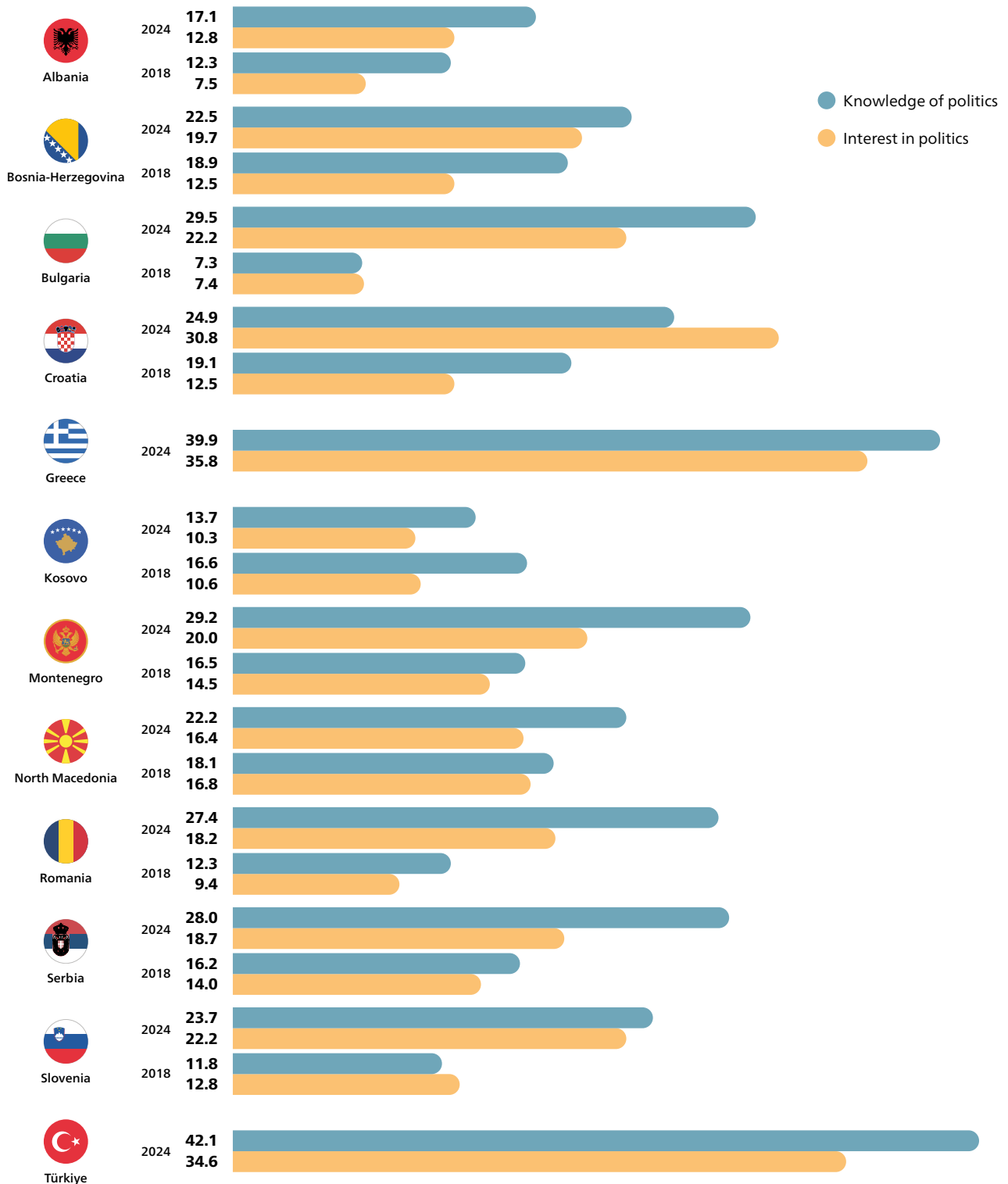
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Notably, men seem to demonstrate a higher level of interest in politics than women. Regionally, concern with political issues (over 4 on a 1 to 5 scale) is reported by 18.4% of woman compared with 26% of men. Only Türkiye and Serbia stand out as exceptions to this general perception that politics is predominantly a male domain. Finally, a higher level of political interest is seen among the cohort of older and well-educated respondents situated in more urbanized areas and with a more favourable social standing.

Interest in politics also shows a positive correlation with people's self-assessed level of political knowledge. When asked to rate their political knowledge, as many as 61.1% of those who show an interest in politics also indicate that they possess a high level of knowledge of politics. Although the self-assessed level of political knowledge was measured differently in the last wave of youth surveys, the regional trend over the past six years shows an increase from 15% of respondents who felt they knew a lot about politics in 2018 to 28.3% in 2024 across the countries covered by the earlier study.<sup>10</sup>

Fig. 21 Knowledge of and interest in politics among young people in SEE (in %)

Percentages of those choosing answers 4 ('mostly interested') or 5 ('very interested') on a scale from 1 to 5 when asked 'How much are you personally interested in politics?'; as well as answers 4 or 5 ('I know a lot') when asked 'How much do you know about politics?' on the same scale of 1 to 5. No data was available for Türkiye and Greece in 2018.



Similar to the level of political interest, the regional distribution of political knowledge remains very low, with the majority of respondents (39.3%) acknowledging that they have little or no knowledge about politics. At the same time, countries in which young people show the least interest in politics also tend to exhibit the lowest levels of political knowledge, as seen in the cases of Albania and Kosovo. Conversely, Türkiye and Greece display a different trend, namely that respondents believe that they have a higher awareness of the importance of politics. Moreover, the share of self-assessed knowledge on politics also appears to be higher among the young people who participated in the survey within the EU (29.1%) rather than among those outside it (25%). As the results suggest, political knowledge also appears to be more prevalent among males with MA or PhD degrees and older young adults between 25 and 29 living in urban areas with a more affluent social background.

Political interest and knowledge are also increasingly aligned with ideological self-identification. Although political knowledge and interest are more prevalent among those who identify mainly at the centre of the ideological spectrum, statistical analysis indicates a subtle tendency for individuals interested in politics to lean towards the right. For example, high interest in politics is shared among 37% of respondents who identify as being on the far right compared with 28% of those who identify as being on the far left. This trend extends to political knowledge as well, indicating that those on the far right not only engage more with political topics, but also perceive themselves as more knowledgeable about politics. Noting the slight increase in interest in national politics, this could imply that far-right individuals may prioritize keeping up with political discourse, possibly due to stronger ideological convictions or a greater perceived need to influence political outcomes. On the other hand, despite an overall sense of detachment and alienation from politics, characterized by a strong lack of interest and low levels of political knowledge, young people in the SEE region who participated in this round of the youth survey generally call for stronger representation of youth interests in national politics. This indicates that their interests are still not adequately represented, as illustrated in Figure 22.<sup>11</sup>

Although aware of its importance in daily life, the positive correlation between the representation of young people's interests in national politics and their interest and self-expressed level of knowledge in politics indicates that they perceive a direct link between their involvement and tangible outcomes that matter to them. Thus, given that young people perceive that their voices are ignored or inadequately represented it is not surprising that young people may become disheartened and lose interest in political activities, feeling that their participation will not make any difference.<sup>12</sup> In other words, when young people feel that their concerns and needs are not being effectively addressed by their representatives, they are more likely to experience a sense of detachment and dissatisfaction with political processes.

The findings indicating how youth interests are represented in national politics has consistently been assessed as "not well", with 58% of respondents in 2018 and 58.1% expressing this view in 2024, remain unchanged in both rounds of the youth survey. However, a noteworthy shift may be observed among the negative responses. The percentage of respondents who felt that youth interests were "not at all" represented decreased from 23.7% in 2018 to 16.1% in 2024. In contrast, the proportion of those who opined that they are represented "poorly" increased to 42% in 2024. Although these findings could indicate a slight improvement in perceptions of youth representa-

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**Despite feeling detached from politics, young people in the SEE believe that their interests are underrepresented and call for better representation in national politics.**

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tion, they might be shifting from a stance of complete neglect to a recognition of inadequate but existing representation. With minimal differences, the situation is nearly identical among respondents across EU Member States and non-EU countries. However, a noticeable gender gap is evident in the responses as women are more likely to consider that the interests of young people are represented "poorly" or "not at all" in national politics, while men generally tend to have a more favourable view.

Fig. 22 Views among youth in SEE on the representation of their interests in national politics (in %)

*How well do you think young people's interests are represented in national politics?*

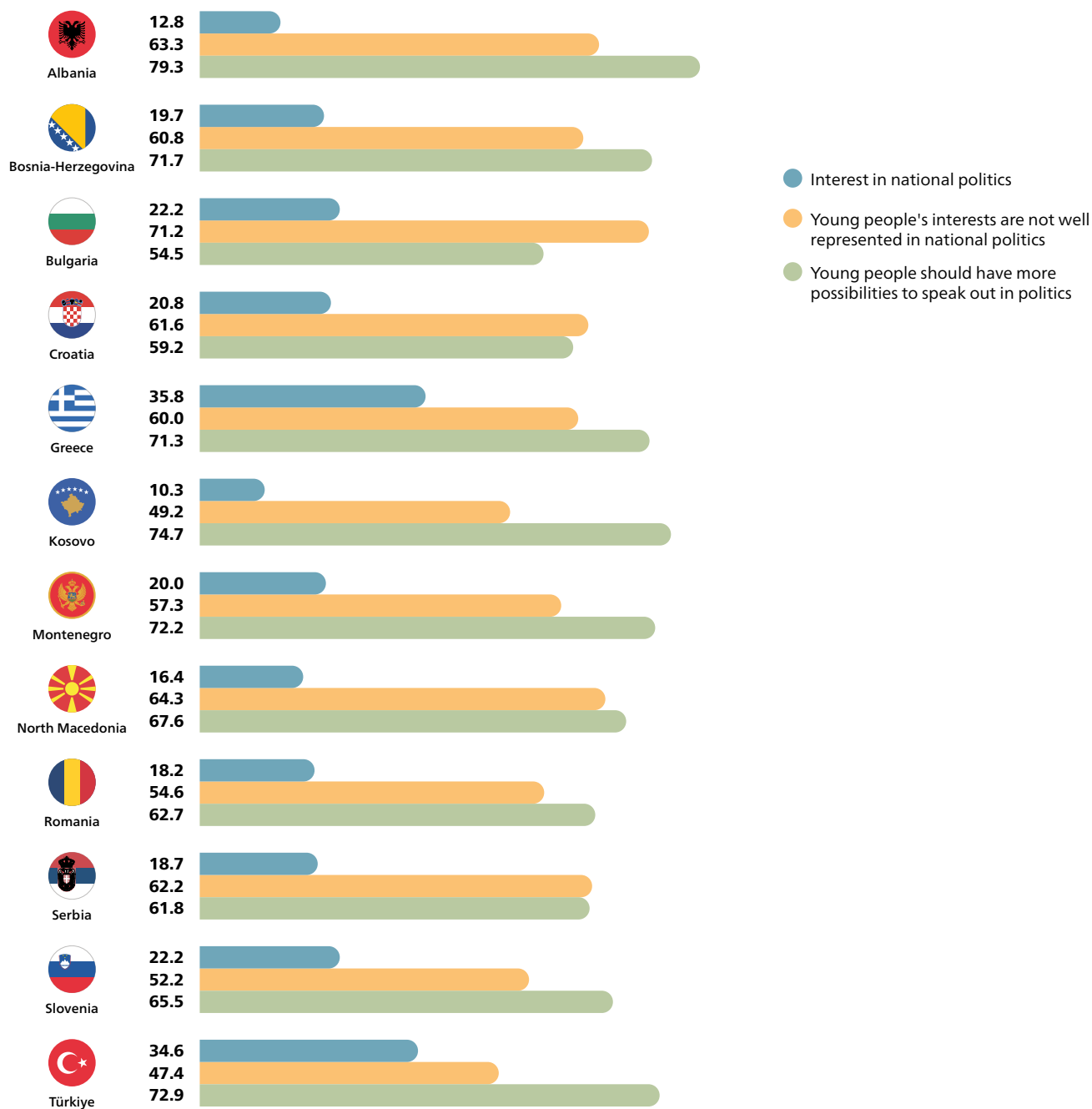
		Not at all	Poorly	In between	Quite well	Very well
Albania	2024	27.0	36.3	25.7	8.7	2.2
	2018	34.7	19.1	33.3	8.0	4.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2024	15.0	45.8	27.9	10.1	1.2
	2018	27.2	37.2	27.1	6.7	1.8
Bulgaria	2024	15.4	55.8	18.7	8.5	1.6
	2018	29.5	29.9	26.6	11.0	3.0
Croatia	2024	12.7	48.9	29.5	6.5	2.4
	2018	20.0	33.3	33.9	11.5	1.3
Greece	2024	18.6	41.4	29.3	8.0	2.7
Kosovo	2024	17.3	31.9	40.1	8.7	2.0
	2018	32.3	24.1	32.8	7.0	3.8
Montenegro	2024	17.9	39.4	34.2	7.0	1.4
	2018	25.7	24.6	26.5	16.7	6.5
North Macedonia	2024	21.6	42.7	26.3	7.5	1.9
	2018	22.5	23.7	32.9	13.9	7.0
Romania	2024	16.0	38.6	30.5	10.5	4.3
	2018	44.3	23.6	20.1	7.9	4.0
Serbia	2024	11.9	50.3	26.0	9.0	2.7
	2018	33.7	31.1	24.2	8.6	2.5
Slovenia	2024	9.7	42.5	32.7	7.2	7.9
	2018	19.5	42.9	29.0	7.3	1.2
Türkiye	2024	13.4	34.0	33.5	13.3	5.8

It is thus not surprising that as perceptions of youth representation in national politics slightly improve, the belief that young people should have more opportunities to voice their opinions in politics decreases, revealing also an overall moderately positive correlation with personal interest in politics. In other words, as young people perceive their interests to be better represented in national politics, their interest in politics also tends to increase (Figure 23).

In comparison with 2018, when 77.3% of young people agreed that they should have more opportunities to speak out in politics, only 67.6% hold the same view in 2024. However, the majority still firmly believe that more opportunities are needed for young people's political expression. In both waves of the survey, women are more likely than men to advocate for greater youth involvement in politics, while in 2024 men are less supportive of the idea that young people should have more opportunities to speak out in politics.

Fig. 23 **Political interest, advocacy, and representation among young people in SEE (in %)**

On a scale of 1 to 5, the percentage of respondents choosing answers 4 ('Mostly Interested') or 5 ('Very Interested') for the question: "How much are you personally interested in politics?"; 4 ('Mostly Agree') or 5 ('Complitley Agree') for the question, "How much you agree/disagree with the following statement: Young people should have more possibilities to speak out in politics?" and 4 ('Quite well') or 5 ('Very well') for the question, "How well do you think young people's interests are represented in national politics?"





Detailed analysis at the country level reveals further complexities in the relationship between young people's interest in politics and their views on representation, focusing on how well they feel their voices are heard and their interests are represented. As we have seen, dissatisfaction with youth representation varies significantly, from 47.4% in Türkiye to 85.3% in Bulgaria. Alongside Croatia and Serbia, Bulgaria also exhibits a trend in which dissatisfaction with how young people's interests are represented in national politics exceeds the perceived need for more opportunities for young people to speak out in politics. On the other hand, countries showing a higher interest in or knowledge of politics tend to have a lower level of dissatisfaction with youth representation. This is most evident in countries in which political interest is the lowest in the region, such as in Kosovo and Albania, where the rate of young people who believe they should have more opportunities to speak out in politics is among the highest, at 74.7% in the former and 79.3% in the latter. A different trend may be observable in countries such as Türkiye or Greece, where a higher interest in politics often goes together with a stronger demand for better representation.

Although personal interest in politics is significantly correlated with political participation and trust in political institutions, it is not necessarily the case interest and advocacy in politics could be increased by increasing youth participation in politics.<sup>13</sup> It is not enough that young people are merely included, they must also be substantively and programmatically represented in the political process, with policies that engage with and address their interests and concerns, focusing primarily on security of their livelihoods, for example, in terms of health care, housing, employment, job security and access to education. These issues seem crucial for getting young people across the region to feel involved and heard within national institutions.

## Electoral and non-electoral political participation

But what is the relationship between the political engagement of young people in SEE, whether institutional or non-institutional, and their overall interest in politics? To understand how levels of political interest, knowledge, advocacy, or representation influence youth political participation in the region, we will focus on three elements based on the theoretical framework of political participation provided earlier in this chapter: electoral participation, non-institutional forms of participation, and willingness to hold a political function. As respondents were asked only about their involvement in various initiatives rather than their membership of political parties or any other political organizations, we will classify voting in the last elections as an institutional form of political participation. Other activities the respondents were questioned about, such as protests, signing petitions, boycotts, volunteering, civil society work, and online activism, mainly follow Grasso's (2016) and Pickard's (2019) conceptualization of unconventional participation. Although we argue that such a strict dichotomy is not entirely feasible, for clarity's sake these activities will be classified rather as non-electoral forms of participation.

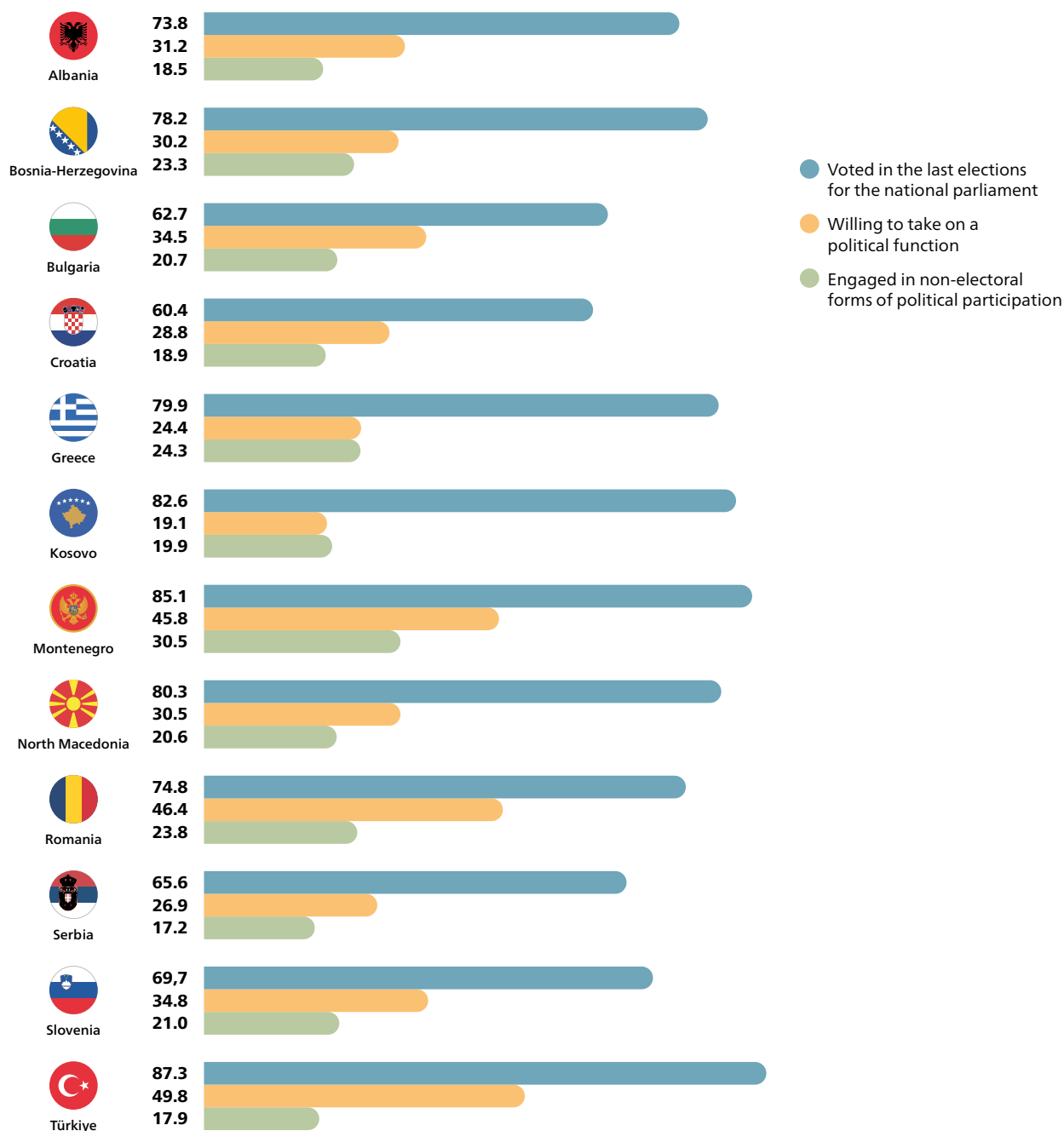
## Young people and voting

Regionally, the proportion of respondents eligible to vote who reported voting in the last elections has remained relatively stable since the 2018 survey, showing a turnout rate of 72% in 2024, a fall of just under 2% (from 74.1% in 2018). However, when including Greece and Türkiye, newcomers to the study, the rate among eligible young people who have actually voted rises to 75.2%. Even though young people in the SEE region demonstrate a broader, general lack of interest in political affairs and attach relatively low importance to their own political participation, their electoral participation has remained consistently stable, reflecting a continued commitment to the voting process.



Fig. 24 **Political participation and engagement among eligible voters in SEE (in %)**

Percentage of those choosing the answer 'Yes' for having voted in the last parliamentary elections and willing to take on a political function and who selected 'I've done this' for any of the different activities to show political engagement.



However, significant differences can be discerned among the individual countries. The number of young people who reported voting in the last elections increased in only four countries: Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania and Slovenia, while it decreased in all the remaining countries. Although turnout was the lowest in Croatia and Bulgaria, it was strongly pronounced also among respondents from Türkiye and Montenegro (Fig-

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**Compared with our previous survey, voter turnout among respondents in EU countries is increasing, but still remains lower than in non-EU countries, where it is currently decreasing.**

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ure 25). This high turnout can be attributed to the significance of the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections in Türkiye, with 5.2 million first-time voters from Generation Z, who thus far had spent their entire lives under the same leader and regime (two decades). Additionally, political upheavals in Montenegro between 2020 and 2023, culminating in the fall of long-time president Milo Đukanović and his political party, may also have played an influential role in the higher electoral turnout among young people.

Different dynamics across countries become even more apparent when distinguishing between EU Member States and non-EU countries. Compared with the 2018 survey, voter turnout among respondents decreased in non-EU countries, but increased in EU Member States. On the other hand, voter turnout remains significantly higher in non-EU countries than in their EU counterparts.

Statistical analysis at the regional level reveals a number of factors that influence voter turnout. Although there is no significant difference in voting behaviour based on gender – men and women are equally likely both to vote and not vote – there are significant correlations between voter turnout and other socioeconomic factors. It is important to note differences in terms of age and type of residence. While older young people between 25 and 29 years of age appear more likely to vote, 49.5 % of respondents aged 19 to 24 abstained from voting in the last parliamentary election. Voter turnout seems to be higher in urban areas (62.1 %), although they also report the lowest turnout rate in this survey (56.4 %). Not surprisingly, the data also show that respondents with a better understanding of political issues are more likely to participate in the electoral process. Similarly, there is a correlation between voting and interest in politics, trust in political institutions, and perception of the representation of youth interests, suggesting that those who are more engaged and trust the system are more inclined to vote. Additionally, respondents who believe that young people should have a greater voice in politics also show a higher propensity to vote. In other words, those who participate in elections tend to perceive that their interests are effectively represented in national politics.

The results also offer insights into the various motives behind the decision not to vote of young people who participated in the survey. The most common practical reason cited by respondents who did not exercise their voting rights was being prevented from voting (22.4 %). More importantly, however, focusing on political reasons, the largest number of respondents felt that “it would have not changed anything if I had voted” (21.9 %).

Fig. 25 Youth voter turnout in SEE (in %)

No data was available for Türkiye and Greece in 2018.

	Voted in the last elections		Did not vote in the last elections	
	2018	2024	2018	2024
Albania	76.8	73.8	23.2	26.2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	79.9	78.2	20.1	21.8
Kosovo	80.0	82.6	20.0	17.4
Montenegro	78.5	85.1	21.5	14.9
North Macedonia	88.7	80.3	11.3	19.7
Serbia	75.9	65.6	24.1	34.4
Türkiye	–	87.3	–	12.7
<b>Non-EU Member States</b>	<b>80.0</b>	<b>76.4</b>	<b>20.0</b>	<b>23.6</b>
<b>+ Türkiye</b>		<b>77.6</b>		<b>22.4</b>
Bulgaria	74.6	62.7	25.4	37.3
Croatia	60.8	60.4	39.2	39.6
Greece	–	79.9	–	20.1
Romania	72.3	74.8	27.7	25.2
Slovenia	59.6	69.7	40.4	30.3
<b>EU-member countries</b>	<b>66.8</b>	<b>68.0</b>	<b>33.2</b>	<b>33.1</b>
<b>+ Greece</b>		<b>70.0</b>		<b>30.5</b>

Additionally, many reported that “there was no party I wanted to vote for” (12.9%), along with an overall lack of interest in politics (12.7%) while regarding their decision to abstain as a matter of principle (10.5%). A smaller proportion of respondents (7.9%) cited not being “informed enough to decide about voting” as their reason for not voting.

Perhaps the most crucial finding is that a significant proportion of those who abstained from voting in the last election were respondents with at the lowest socioeconomic level (23.1%), unemployed (35.8%) or working outside their profession (47.7%).

Therefore, to engage young people who are disenchanted with politics it would seem necessary to tackle such societal issues as unemployment, corruption and housing more effectively in election campaigns, especially on the part of the left-wing and progressive political parties and actors. According to various studies and analyses, recently these issues have been taken up more often by far-right populist parties, making inroads into young people who feel themselves unheard and left behind. This might also be important in the SEE region, where respondents’ ideological self-assessment shows that those who are more likely to participate in voting identify slightly further to the right.

Fig. 26 **Non-institutional political participation among young people in SEE (in %)**

Share of those respondents who chose 'I've done this' regarding the different forms of political engagement.

	Overall	Voted in the last election	Abstained in the last election
Signed a list of political demands/online petition	21.8	30.7	17.1
Participated in a demonstration	19.0	25.9	13.5
Participated in volunteer or civil society organization activities	23.3	28.5	18.3
Worked for a political party or political group	8.8	11.7	6.4
Started to boycott goods for political or environmental reasons	22.2	26.6	17.6
Participated in political activities online/in social networks	15.3	19.5	11.9

## Experiences with political engagement beyond elections

In contrast, when it comes to non-institutional forms of political participation, the results reveal a noticeable disparity compared with the levels of electoral participation. Respondents generally report limited experience with non-electoral activities, a trend that has persisted over time and since the last round of the survey. Although a slight increase in non-electoral political activities can be seen across the ten countries under comparison (from an average of 1.3 in 2018 to 1.6 in 2024), such activities are still relatively uncommon in the region.<sup>14</sup> The average range of participation varies significantly between countries, however, from a high of 1.8 in Greece and 1.7 in Bosnia and Herzegovina to a low of 1.4 in Albania and 1.5 in North Macedonia and in Kosovo.

As Figure 26 shows, a significant number of young people in the region are generally inclined towards online activism. Specifically, 37.1% reported signing a list of political demands, participating in online petitions or engaging in political activities on social media. Participation in volunteer or civil society organization activities was reported by 23.3% of respondents, whereas involvement in political parties or groups was the least favoured. Given the low trust in political parties, this is not surprising. Additionally, the survey did not cover formal membership of political parties, which should be considered separate from working for a political party or political group. Finally, only 19% of respondents participated in demonstrations, highlighting a notable lack of engagement in this form of political expression. This may appear surprising given the significant role young people have played in major protests over the past decade across the region, from Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, Greece to Türkiye.

A similar pattern of non-electoral political participation is observed among those who had the right to vote. Both those who voted in the last elections and those who were eligible but chose not to vote are involved predominantly in online political participation and volunteer work or civil society activities. Interestingly, online activism is especially significant among young voters, with half of the respondents who voted in the last elections engaging in some form of online political activity. This trend highlights a shift towards digital platforms as a preferred medium for political engagement among young people. Generally, older young people aged 25 to 29 are more inclined towards various forms of non-electoral political engagement, except for participating in volunteer work or civil society organizations and online political activities, which is reported more frequently by respondents in their early 20s (19–24).

Unlike participating in protests and demonstrations, it seems that young people in SEE have moved their political participation online and are most likely to sign a list of political demands, online petition or engage through social media. This indicates a preference for quick, one-off participation and short-term activity without a long-term commitment. Although digital platforms represent an important space for engagement, recent debates and ongoing discussions try not only to fit online activism into existing concepts

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**Young people in SEE report limited experience with non-electoral activities. Most of them have moved their political participation online rather than participating in protests or demonstrations.**

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of political participation (cf. Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009) but also to denigrate online activism as mere “hashtag” activism, “slacktivism” or armchair activism, which tend to be passive rather than proactive (cf. Vatreš and Alispahić 2024; Frost 2020; Tufekci 2017; Chayko 2016; Morozov 2009).

Driven by an attention economy which relies on so-called “netizens”, and stirs up outrage and dissatisfaction online, while also subject to algorithmic biases, online activism is seen as failing to fulfil the conditions of a participatory culture. Instead, as Morozov (2009) suggests, this creates rather an illusion of participation by giving a false sense of achievement through ad hoc online reactions and merely capturing more attention.

Despite weak correlations, survey findings indicate that men from more urban areas are also generally more prone to all forms of non-electoral participation than women, particularly through forms of online activism or party involvement. Significant gender differences emerge in individual countries. The data shows that women most frequently engage in volunteer work, civil society activities and boycotts for political and environmental causes. In countries such as Croatia, Serbia and Greece, women are actively involved in various forms of participation, except for their involvement in political parties and groups or political activities online, where no positive correlation is found among any of the observed countries. Concurrently, the data show that young women in Kosovo and North Macedonia are less likely to engage in any non-electoral political activities.

Socioeconomic factors also play a significant role, as engagement in certain non-electoral forms of political participation correlates positively with urban residence and higher social and educational levels as expressed among the study’s participants. The data also suggest that voters generally are more engaged in a variety of non-electoral political activities than people who abstain from voting. In this sense, the correlation between voting in elections and participation in non-electoral political initiatives suggests that those who vote in elections are also likely to engage in other forms of political participation, primarily online activism and demonstrations. Also, elections continue to be the primary mode of political participation among young people in SEE, despite a more positive correlation between political interest and participation in non-institutional forms of engagement. Experience with different forms of non-electoral participation is positively correlated with trust in political institutions.

These insights correspond to the previous study, which also showed that young respondents in the SEE region have very little experience with different forms of political engagement, and that young adults have not significantly changed their repertoire of political engagement, as observed by a number of authors (cf. Rainsford 2017; Norris 2002). Rather, our research aligns more closely with findings that indicate lower levels of participation in unconventional modes and the divide among young people between the core and the periphery, regardless of the form and type of political participation (Kovačić and Dolenc 2018). This is characterized by a lack of political literacy and political resignation due to concerns about overall security of livelihood and their inability to be heard, which leads among other things to distrust in national institutions. Additionally, it may also reflect the paradox between the saturation of politics within SEE societies, on one hand, and the low degree of democratic consolidation on the other.

## Taking risks and political responsibilities

Finally, it becomes evident why young people in the region, despite believing that their interests are insufficiently represented and desiring a greater voice for young people in politics, are generally unenthusiastic about accepting political positions. Only 32.9% of respondents at the regional level demonstrate a readiness to assume a political role. Interestingly, this willingness is shared by 32% of unemployed respondents, indicating that they may believe that engaging in politics could offer opportunities or be perceived as a viable alternative to their current situation. They may view politics as some sort of business or as a means of improving their circumstances. Comparing EU Member States to non-EU countries, we observe a slight but notable difference in the average willingness of young people to accept political positions.

In EU Member States, the average willingness is 33.8%, while in non-EU countries it is slightly lower, at 33.4%. However, this willingness varies significantly by country. For example, the highest willingness is noted in Türkiye, while in Greece it falls as low as 24.4%, reflecting a deviation from the overall average trend observed among EU and non-EU countries.

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**The relation between institutional political engagement and non-electoral activism suggests that while many young people place their trust in political institutions rather than in non-institutional activism, three out of ten are still ready to take on a political position.**

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A greater willingness to accept a political position is found among young people in urban areas with higher self-perceived political knowledge, who lean towards the political right. As is the case with other forms of political participation, unwillingness to engage politically also stems from a low trust in institutions, combined with a perceived lack of efficacy in effecting change. As seen among those who engage in unconventional forms of activism, the lowest number report that their activities are driven by partisan motives. On the other hand, there is a higher likelihood of partisan involvement among young people who vote, which may indicate a deeper engagement with political processes.

This is supported by statistical analyses at the regional level, which reveal a correlation between trust in institutions and active, institutionalized political engagement, such as holding a political office. Specifically, young people who vote and are politically active are more likely to adopt a constructive attitude towards political participation and active engagement in the political process. Willingness to take on a political function is also correlated with the perception of being underrepresented and the desire to have more possibilities to speak out in politics. It can thus be concluded that while fewer young people tend to trust political institutions, they nevertheless perceive limited potential for effecting change outside these institutions.

Fig. 27 **Democratic vs. authoritarian tendencies among youth in SEE**

The values represent the mean level of agreement with the statements above, measured on a scale from '1 – Completely Disagree' to '5 – Completely Agree'.

	Democracy is a good form of government in general	We should have a strong leader who does not have to bother with Parliament or elections	Under certain circumstances dictatorship is a better form of government than democracy
Albania	4.1	2.8	2.4
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.2	3.2	2.5
Bulgaria	3.2	3.2	2.6
Croatia	3.4	2.9	2.4
Greece	3.8	2.9	2.1
Kosovo	4.2	3.3	2.5
Montenegro	3.7	3.3	2.4
North Macedonia	3.6	3.4	2.4
Romania	3.6	3.1	2.6
Serbia	3.1	2.9	2.2
Slovenia	3.5	2.9	2.5
Türkiye	3.9	3.0	2.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>2.4</b>

This further indicates that other, non-institutional and non-electoral forms of political engagement might not be seen as sufficient to compensate the lack of youth representation or their general distrust of national governments and political parties. In other words, the relationship between institutional political engagement and non-electoral forms of activism suggests that a greater number of young people rather place their trust in political institutions than in the potential for change outside them. This is also evident through the emergence of novel forms of participation in SEE, such as citizens' assemblies, participatory planning or alliances between political parties and social movements, which in various ways interact with formal institutions (Fiket et al. 2024). Another example are political movements advocating for representation in local or national legislatures, often evolving or transforming into political parties.

## Authoritarian tendencies and the state of democracy in SEE

Another important consideration are the attitudes and values that underlie youth political participation, influencing and motivating their engagement. Given the low levels of interest and knowledge observed among young people, who often feel unheard but seek a stronger voice, this is particularly significant with regard to the implications for SEE democracy of the overall mistrust in political institutions, parties and leaders.

While detachment can weaken already fragile democratic institutions in most countries, rising fears and insecurity among young people compound concerns about the normalization and acceptance of authoritarian practices and feelings among young people, such as support for strong leaders or dictatorship.



Although the body of research on political participation in Southeast Europe has been steadily growing in the past decade (Ilić and Markov 2024), there is still insufficient evidence of the relationship between declining participation and democratic backsliding, particularly with regard to the rise in competitive authoritarian regimes. This gap exists because participation develops over an extended period. Hence, it is crucial to study the long-term effects of these trends, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and prolonged research. This is particularly important for young people, as their engagement and attitudes towards political participation will shape the future trajectories of democratic development and resilience in the region.

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**There is a noticeable regional trend of decreasing trust in democracy as the preferred form of government. However, authoritarian tendencies remain positively correlated with support for democracy. This is best illustrated by the fact that almost half of young people in SEE who strongly support democracy also show a readiness to endorse a strong leader.**

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In that regard, as seen in Figure 28, there is a noticeable regional trend of decreasing trust in democracy as the preferred form of government compared with the last survey wave. Although there has been a decline in both support for democracy (63.4 % in 2018; 58.6 % in 2024) and strong leaders (60 % in 2018; 39.6 % in 2024) or dictatorships (2018 = 22.6 %; 2024 = 21.9 %), it is important to note that these results may not be entirely comparable to the previous survey.<sup>15</sup> That is, a similar question was asked in previous research regarding respondents' agreement with the statement about having a leader who rules their country with a strong hand for the public good.

Presenting the strong leader in a more positive light, focusing on the idea of the public good, could make young people more likely to express positive and favourable opinions in contrast with the current question, which presents a more authoritarian perspective on having a strong leader who ignores elections or parliament. Also, we should be cautious about socially desirable responses that favour democratic ideals as they could obscure respondents' true opinions on authoritarianism. Thus, authoritarian tendencies among young people can also be seen in the fact that 34.7 % of respondents at the regional level would sacrifice some of their civil liberties for a higher standard of living, while 39.3 % believe that civil liberties should sometimes be restricted for the sake of security.

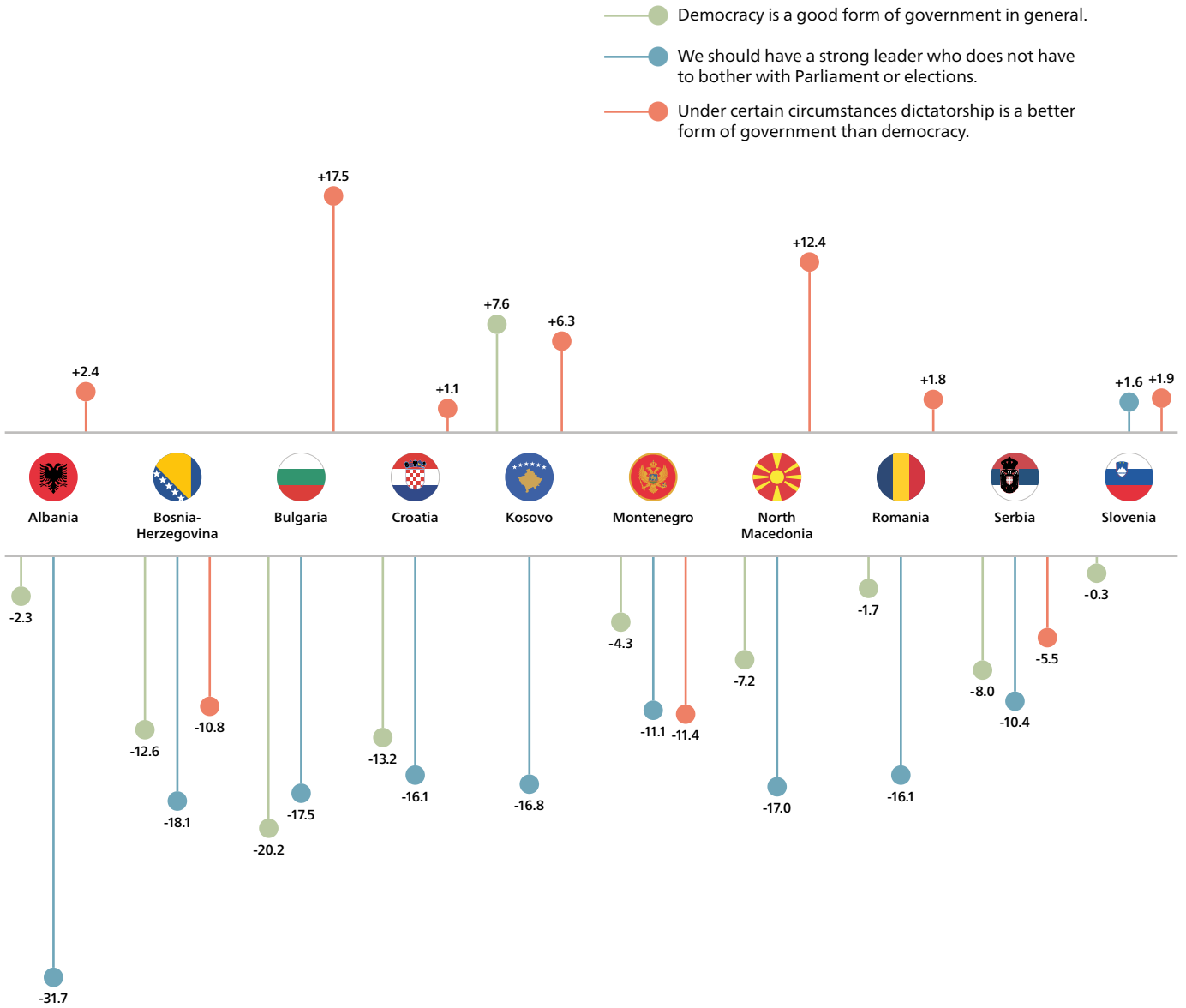
At the level of individual countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Serbia exhibit a greater inclination towards a strong leader rather than democracy. These countries also display the lowest levels of trust in democracy within the overall sample. In contrast, the highest trust in democracy is observed among young correspondents in Türkiye, as well as Kosovo and Albania, which share the most uninterested and apathetic attitudes towards politics but at the same time are most optimistic towards the future. As already seen, the demand for a strong leader is most pronounced not only in those countries which young people are concerned about existential and socio-economic issues but also in ethnically pluralist states currently experiencing heightened ethnic tensions, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. Support for democracy is higher in non-EU countries (61.3 %) than in EU Member States (53.3 %). Conversely, the preference for a strong leader is also more pronounced in non-EU countries (42.9 %) than in EU Member States (36.8 %).



Fig. 28 **Change in authoritarian tendencies\* among youth in SEE**

*How much do you agree with the following statements?*

\*Values represent the % of change in the average mean agreement levels from 2018 to 2024.



Although support for a strong leader is more aligned with dictatorial tendencies, it is important to note that such support is also positively correlated and coexists alongside support for democracy. This phenomenon, seen in the overall support for right-wing populism or sovereign democracy, reflected in the rise of illiberal or competitive authoritarian regimes in the region (cf. Bieber 2020; Kapidžić 2020; Lavrič and Bieber 2020), is also illustrated by the fact that 45% of young people who strongly support democracy also show a readiness to endorse a strong leader who is not limited by elections or parliamentary oversight. This paradox can be explained by David van Reybrouk's observation that, with the global trend of democratic deconsolidation, people continue to long for democracy even though their belief in it has significantly waned (Reybrouk 2017, 9). Having in mind the overall weakness of democratic institutions in the region, it is not surprisingly then that support for both democracy and a strong leader are positively correlated with trust in institutions. In other words, trust in institutions is not solely a matter of supporting democratic values, but also includes a willingness to endorse authoritative figures for the sake of the stability and legitimacy that democracy represents.

This is evident in the fact that those who support both strong leadership and democracy are also likely to feel that young people should have a stronger voice in politics. However, a weaker correlation between the support for a strong leader and more possibilities for young people to speak out suggests that respondents who favour strong leadership might not necessarily have a strong belief that their interests are being properly addressed.

While young men lean mainly towards supporting dictatorship, the data reveal stronger support for a strong leader among young women, the unemployed (48.6%), and people in insecure employment (29%). This support among young people who may feel economically or socially marginalized is further reinforced by the fact that 68.8% of them belong to the middle socio-economic stratum. Although authoritarian tendencies are more closely aligned with right-wing ideology, such support is also linked to a strong preference for a welfare state, illustrating a strong inclination towards greater government control over the economy among those who support strong leadership. The highest correlation is observed with the belief that *“government ownership of business and industry should be increased”*. Hence, while both democratic and authoritarian tendencies may be influenced by structural factors such as economic conditions, employment status, and education, these findings indicate that they may vary across countries due to different local dynamics and individual characteristics among young people in the region that must also be taken into account.

## Ideological polarization among SEE young people

Compared with the previous study, the overall political self-identification of young people in SEE has shifted notably. While most respondents see themselves as centrist, both in 2018 (16.9%) and 2024 (17.3%), there has been a significant realignment on the political spectrum. The data show that 54.6% of young people in 2024 identify with the centre-right, whereas in 2018, 59% of them leaned more towards the centre-left. This slight shift becomes more pronounced when comparing means. On a scale from 1 (far left) to 10 (far right), the mean value in 2018 was 5.3, whereas in 2024 the mean value has increased to 5.7, indicating a shift to the right.

Although the correlation between gender and ideological self-identification is small, there is a noticeable ideological division between the sexes. Young women tend to hold more left-leaning views than men. For example, 43.5 % of men position themselves slightly left of centre, compared with 47.7 % of women. Additionally, 6.6 % of young men identify with the far-right, while 5.7 % of young women align more with the far-left, compared with 6.4 % of women and 5.3 % of men overall. Leftist views are more common among young people in urban areas, whereas polarization is most pronounced among young people in rural areas, with 10.6 % identifying with the far-right and 9.6 % with the far-left. While a range of demographic and social factors may influence right-left polarization, with more educated people tending to lean left, this right-leaning trend is apparent across all groups on a regional level. The data show no significant correlation between ideological self-orientation among the respondents and their educational, social or employment status.

To summarize, despite a slight overall increase in political engagement in comparison to earlier surveys, a notable lack of interest in politics remains constant among young people in Southeast Europe, who often acknowledge their limited understanding of political matters. However, elections continue to be the primary mode of political participation among young people. A relatively acceptable level of voter participation in elections is still observed. It is highest among non-EU countries, although it has been increasing in EU countries. Other, non-electoral forms of political engagement also remain mostly uncommon. A positive correlation between voter turnout and the non-institutional activities the respondents were questioned about – such as protests, signing petitions, boycotts, volunteering, civil society work, and online activism – shows that those who vote are also likely to engage in other forms of political participation.

With young people unwilling to take on political roles, it seems they prefer to leave political responsibilities to their representatives, despite having little trust in political institutions, parties and politicians. This explains their low motivation with regard to personal political involvement and their reduced drive to assume political responsibility, stemming from a perceived lack of ability to effect change. On the other hand, it becomes clear that political engagement must be perceived beyond a simplified dualistic divide into conventional and unconventional, institutional and non-institutional forms of political participation. Different forms of engagement increasingly intertwine and mutually influence each other. As the survey shows, despite the low trust in political institutions and the lack of representation of youth interests in politics, which is rated prominently among the respondents, non-institutional forms of engagement should not be seen as a substitute for institutional participation. Rather, they run parallel to electoral interest and voter turnout.

Despite a general decline in trust in democracy, most young people still hold democratic values. However, it is increasingly evident that existing democratic institutions – weakened in many of the countries observed – are inadequate to meet their demands. This trend is equally prevalent among young people within and outside the EU. While various individual, demographic and cross-country dynamics may be observed, an age and gender gap persist across nearly all forms of engagement and willingness to engage, with older youth and men exhibiting higher levels of political involvement. Additionally, political engagement is positively linked to cultural, socioeconomic and educational factors, and thus higher among well-educated and urban young people from better social backgrounds. Negatively linked to unemployment and lack of education, social inequality continues to be a major barrier to participation, posing a threat that may be used and exploited to support autocratic tendencies and further democratic backsliding in the region.

## Main takeaways

1. While the study's results reveal a slight increase in political interest and self-estimated knowledge about politics compared with previous SEE Youth Studies, both remain very low among the respondents. Political interest is greater among men, older young people and those with higher education and urban residence, reflecting similar trends in knowledge of politics.
2. Despite this general lack of interest, the vast majority of young people feel underrepresented in national politics, with women more likely to see representation as inadequate, highlighting the need for greater representation and inclusion in political processes. On the other hand, even though there has been a slight decrease in the belief that young people should have more opportunity to voice opinions, the majority still support this notion.
3. There is direct link between youth involvement and actual outcomes as shown by a positive correlation between the representation of young people's interests in national politics and their political interest and self-expressed level of knowledge. Thus, young people's interest in politics tends to increase in line with the perception that their interests are represented. Conversely, young people may lose interest and are more likely to experience a sense of detachment from political activities if they feel that their concerns and needs are not being addressed effectively or that their participation will not make a difference.
4. While electoral participation remains the primary mode of political engagement among young people in the region, with a stable voter turnout, it is still rare for young people in SEE to accept political positions. The vast majority of those abstaining from voting do so because they don't feel their vote will effect change or because none of the parties appeal to them. Additionally, non-voters often face socio-economic challenges such as unemployment or underemployment and are typically from the lowest socioeconomic levels.
5. Respondents in the EU Member States exhibit lower voter turnout with an increasing trend in electoral participation, compared with non-EU countries, which have a higher turnout but a decreasing trend.
6. Despite stable electoral participation, non-electoral activities remain modest. Online activism and volunteering are the most common forms of non-electoral engagement. Voters tend to be more involved in non-electoral activities compared with those who abstain from voting, indicating that those who vote are also more likely to engage in other forms of political participation. In contrast, involvement in political parties or groups is the least favoured form of participation among respondents.
7. Across the region, young people who identify more with right-wing ideology show higher levels of political engagement. They have a greater interest in politics, perceive themselves as more knowledgeable, and exhibit a higher willingness to assume political positions and participate in both electoral and non-electoral activities.
8. Most young people in the region adhere to democratic values despite a general decline in trust in democracy as the preferred form of government. However, support for authoritarian leaders is positively linked with democratic values, as nearly half of the young people who strongly support democracy are also open to endorsing a strong leader.
9. Political engagement is strongly influenced by demographic, cultural, socio-economic and educational factors. It tends to be higher among well-educated, urban young people from more advantaged social backgrounds. A gender gap also persists across nearly all forms of engagement, with men exhibiting higher levels of political involvement and willingness to participate. Conversely, unemployment and lack of education negatively impact political participation, with social inequality remaining a significant barrier.

# 7 ■ Media engagement

**Emina Adilović** The media landscape is undergoing profound and seemingly never-ending transformations, driven by technological advancements and shifting audience preferences. In this context, analysing contemporary trends and engagement patterns is essential in order to understand the evolving dynamics between media outlets and their audiences, particularly among younger generations in Southeast Europe. Recent research highlights a disengagement from traditional media among young people. A study published in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (Bădescu and Sum 2024) underscores these findings, revealing that social media platforms are the primary source of news and information for the majority of young people in the region. The study notes that traditional media are increasingly viewed as less relevant, and younger audiences have been gravitating towards platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube for their media consumption needs. Before looking at specific aspects of media consumption, it is important to explore how these shifting preferences, such as for immediacy, interactivity and customization, impact media engagement among young people.

## Media engagement patterns

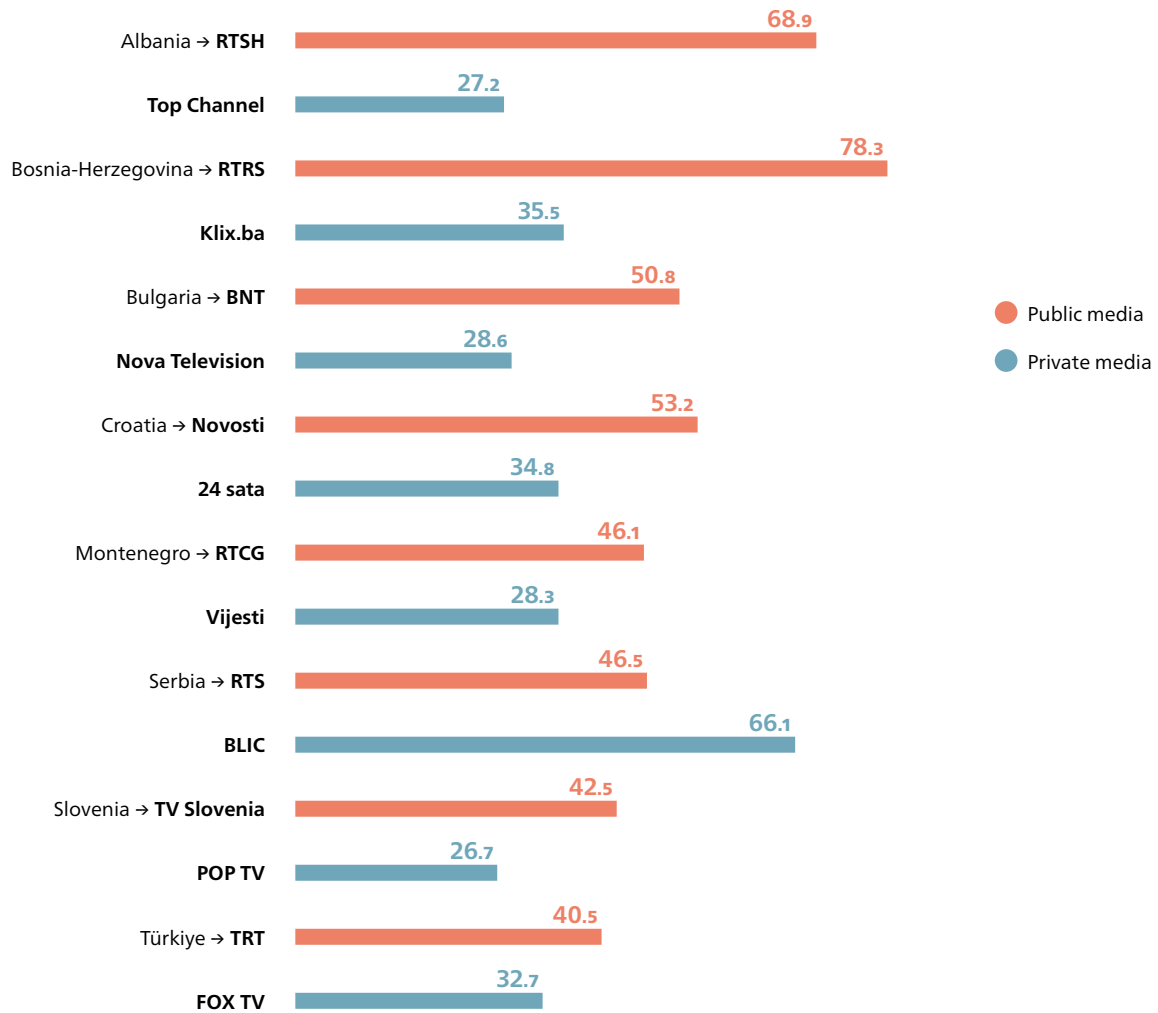
A comparative analysis reveals a marked decline in traditional media usage among young people, as digital platforms have increasingly become their primary source of information and entertainment. According to the FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019, almost all young people in the region have regular access to the internet. Countries such as Croatia boast nearly universal access (98%) and even at the lower end Albania, for example, has significant penetration (93%).<sup>16</sup> This shift towards digital media has fundamentally altered consumption patterns.

Respondents in numerous countries report no longer engaging with certain media outlets (Figure 30). For instance, in Albania, SYRI TV and Panorama have non-usage rates of 75.6% and 83.7%, respectively. This trend is also seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where RTRS and Nezavisne novine have non-usage rates of 78.3% and 75.7%. Similar patterns are evident in North Macedonia, with TV 24 at 75.2% and Alsat at 74.1%. High non-usage rates show that these outlets do not resonate well with younger viewers, who seek content that is more engaging, dynamic and reflective of their lifestyles and concerns. In contrast, Türkiye presents a more balanced engagement pattern. Babala TV shows varied levels of engagement, with 34.1% of respondents reporting no time spent watching and 20.7% spending less than half an hour, while 2.7% spend 5–10 hours. While a notable part of the audience does not engage with Babala TV, a notable segment dedicates considerable time to it, which indicates that their content strategy might be more effective in engaging certain demographics.



Fig. 29 Lack of youth engagement rates by media ownership in SEE (in %)

Share of respondents who spent no time consuming the following media:



Certain media outlets demonstrate lower non-usage rates and higher engagement times. Figure 31 shows that in Romania, PRO TV and Antena 1 have relatively lower non-usage rates. In Serbia, RTS and N1 show engagement, reflecting their somewhat dominant positions. RTS, as a public broadcaster, often has a critical role in delivering news and educational content, which can lead to consistent viewer loyalty. In Croatia, 24 sata stands out, with balanced engagement across various time slots. The outlet's success can be attributed to its versatile content strategy that includes timely news updates, lifestyle pieces and interactive features.

In Albania, a high percentage of young people spend no time watching channels such as ABC NEWS and RTSH (64.5% and 68.9% respectively), although a substantial portion engage for less than half an hour. The preference for brief engagement indicates that younger audiences may favour quick news snippets, highlights and concise reports over longer, more in-depth programming. This aligns with global trends as so-called "digital natives" prefer content that is easily accessible and quickly digestible.

There is a notable trend of minimal engagement exceeding 10 hours per week across all countries. The pattern indicates that young audiences tend to diversify their media consumption across multiple sources and social media rather than committing extensive time to a single outlet. Some media show balanced engagement across different time categories. For example, Nova Television in Bulgaria maintains substantial engagement in short to moderate time slots, showing they are effective at keeping young people engaged without overwhelming them. In Kosovo, Kallzo.com and Nacionale have substantial non-usage rates (52.5% and 54.7%), but those who do engage often spend moderate amounts of time, highlighting the role of digital media in offering targeted content that resonates deeply with certain users. This balance may be achieved through varied and appealing content that meets the diverse interests of young viewers.

Certain media outlets, despite high non-usage rates, maintain strong engagement within specific audience segments. Bljesak.info in Bosnia and Herzegovina and ABC NEWS in Albania exemplify this pattern. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, RTRS has a high non-usage rate (78.3%), yet those who do engage often spend varied amounts of time, from less than half an hour to 5–10 hours. These outlets might cater to niche interests or specific demographic groups, effectively capturing their attention even though they do not appeal to a broader audience.

## Public media's challenge and political bias

Public media across Southeast Europe is even less successful than its private counterpart in attracting younger viewers, as a higher percentage of young people report spending no time on such outlets. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 78.3% of young people report not spending any time watching RTRS. A lower but still significant 68.9% of young people report spending no time on Albania's RTSH.

There has been moderate disengagement with Bulgarian public media channel BNT, and Croatia's HRT, with 39.7% of young people reporting no time spent on it, demonstrates better engagement relative to other public broadcasters in the region, but still indicates that a lot of young people prefer other media options. In Serbia, 46.5% of young people report spending no time on RTS, showing that nearly half are disengaged from the public broadcaster.

Private media generally have higher engagement, as seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where only 35.5% of respondents report no time spent on Klix.ba. Figure 30 suggests that private, centrist media are more appealing to the young people of this region. Similarly, Bulgaria's Nova Television, with only 28.6% of respondents reporting no time spent, demonstrates a strong connection with young people. In Romania, 30.2% of respondents report no time spent on Pro TV. The finding reveals how private, right-leaning media can also appeal to young people, possibly due to their dynamic content and market-oriented approach.

Regarding political orientation, Bădescu and Sum (2024) highlight the complexities of media influence in Southeast Europe on young people's political engagement. This study reveals that, except for television, all information sources positively impact young people's interest in politics and their inclination to participate. Notably, digital media exerts the strongest influence, underscoring the critical role of online platforms in shaping political engagement. Despite the overall positive impact of digital media, left-leaning media consistently shows lower engagement. For example, N1 (operating also online in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia) consistently shows lower engagement. Overall, 54.4% of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 66% in Croatia, and 57.7% in Serbia do not have time for left-leaning international outlets, which demonstrates that leftist media are less successful in engaging young people across these countries. Similarly, 67.9% of respondents in Greece do not engage with EFSYN. However, this percentage is comparable with other regions, reflecting general trends in media consumption.

Fig. 30 Media usage rates among young people in SEE (in %)

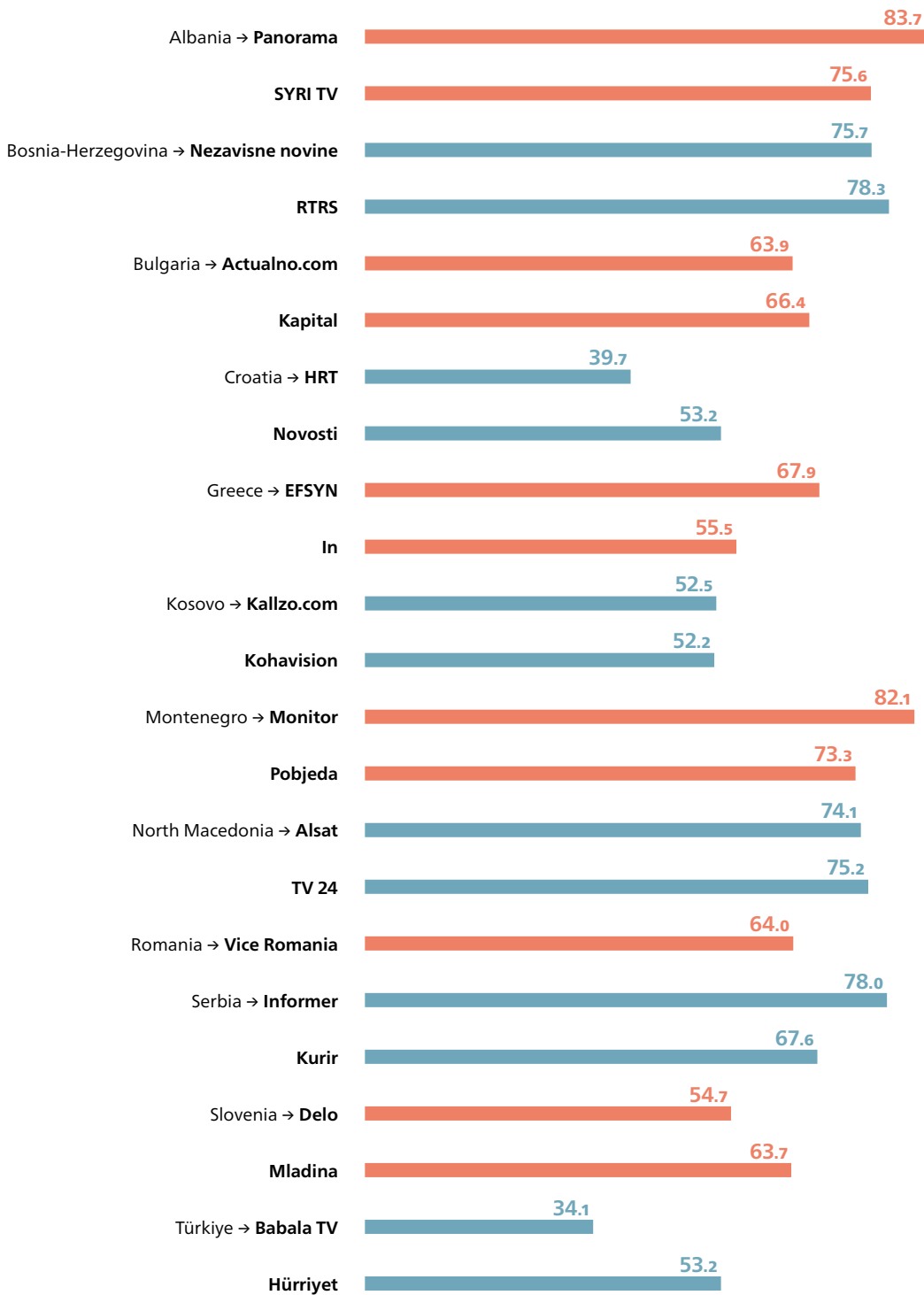
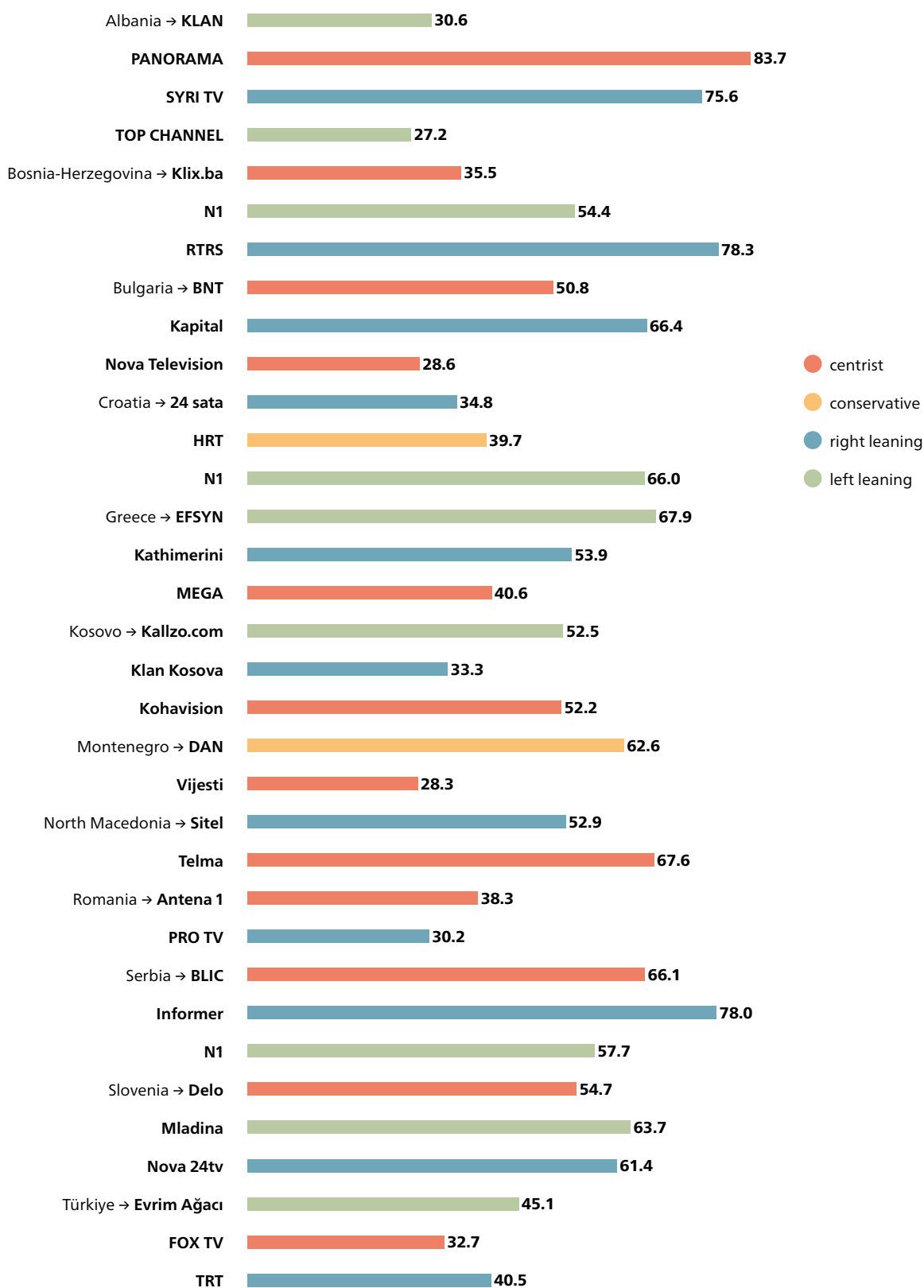




Fig. 31 Youth disengagement by political orientation of media in SEE (in %)



In other countries, right-leaning media outlets often show higher percentages of non-engagement. In Albania, for example, 75.6 % of young people do not engage with Syri TV. This trend is consistent across other right-leaning media, such as RTRS in Bosnia and Herzegovina (78.3 %) and Kurir in Serbia (67.6 %), suggesting that right-leaning media may struggle more to engage younger audiences.

Regarding media consumption duration in general, young people in many countries prefer to consume media output for shorter periods. For instance, in Croatia, 24 sata shows balanced engagement across various time slots, suggesting that its content format aligns well with youth preferences for short, consumable content. In Türkiye, Babala TV, a YouTube channel, shows engagement in short to moderate durations, with a notable portion of young people spending less than half an hour to 1–2 hours on the platform. Media outlets that offer diverse and high-quality content tend to engage young people better. For example, in Albania, media such as Top Channel and Klan, which provide a variety of content, show more balanced engagement across different time categories.

## Navigating the digital landscape

The data provide detailed insights into the time young people in Southeast Europe spend on social media such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. This analysis compares the distribution of time spent across twelve different countries. Young people in SEE countries engage heavily with social media. Many spend a significant part of their day, between 2–3 hours and 3–5 hours, interacting on these platforms. For instance, in Albania, 26.2 % of young people spend 3–5 hours daily on social networks, while in Kosovo, 33.1 % of young people are online for 2–3 hours, and 21.3 % for 3–5 hours each day. In Bulgaria and Romania, there's a more balanced approach to social media usage, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, social media usage shows more variability. Many young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina spend 2–3 hours (21.9 %) and 3–5 hours (21.1 %) on social media, but 11 % are unsure about their exact usage.

The insights into the time young people spend on social media underscore the importance of algorithmic literacy (Head, Fister, and MacMillan 2020) in today's digital age. As social media platforms become increasingly sophisticated, understanding how algorithms shape the content we see and interact with becomes crucial. Algorithmic knowledge or awareness is essential for young people who spend time on these platforms as it impacts their information consumption. Moreover, the patterns of social media usage among young people in Southeast Europe also reflect the formation of digital clusters. These clusters, or groups of users with similar behaviours and interests, are shaped by algorithms that promote content likely to engage specific audiences. Consequently, youth media consumption is influenced not only by their preferences, but also by the algorithms that determine the visibility and prominence of content on their feeds. That is why understanding these dynamics is mandatory for fostering a critical and informed approach to digital media consumption among young people.

In conclusion, traditional media outlets face disengagement, with high non-usage rates observed across various countries because public broadcasters often struggle to capture the interest of younger viewers (Media Literacy Index 2022). Digital platforms, particularly social media driven by the convenience, accessibility and variety offered by streaming services, have emerged as the dominant source of information and engagement for young audiences. Young people in the region also prefer consuming media in shorter durations. This preference for short, consumable content highlights the importance for media outlets to offer diverse, high-quality and relevant information. Media that adapt to these preferences by providing easily digestible and varied content are more successful in maintaining the interest and viewership of younger audiences. Additionally, the political orientation of media outlets influences engagement levels, with both left-leaning and right-leaning media experiencing challenges in appealing to young viewers.

## Main takeaways

- 1.** Young people prefer short, consumable media content. Outlets such as Croatia's 24 sata and Türkiye's Babala TV align with this preference, maintaining balanced engagement across various time slots. This trend reflects a broader global shift towards brief, easily digestible content that fits into the fast-paced lifestyles of digital natives.
- 2.** The media landscape in Southeast Europe is shifting towards digital platforms, and traditional media usage is declining continuously among young people. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have become the primary sources of news and entertainment for young people in the region.
- 3.** Private centrist media generally show higher engagement rates. For instance, N1 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia has lower engagement rates.
- 4.** While left-leaning media can engage young people effectively, the level of engagement varies significantly.
- 5.** Right-leaning media outlets tend to struggle more to engage young people.
- 6.** Some media outlets, despite high overall non-usage rates, maintain strong engagement within specific audience segments. For example, Bljesak.info in Bosnia and Herzegovina and ABC NEWS in Albania cater effectively to niche interests or specific demographic groups, capturing their attention despite broader disengagement trends.
- 7.** Countries with the highest prevalence of private media outlets include Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania and Greece.
- 8.** Young people in Southeast Europe tend to diversify their media consumption across multiple digital platforms rather than committing extensive time to a single outlet. The upshot is a fragmented media landscape in which young audiences seek varied content from different sources to satisfy their information and entertainment needs.

# 8 Migration patterns and motivations to leave

**Dragan Stanojević**

The issue of youth migration is usually examined at the social and personal levels, in two contrasting ways, namely discourses of opportunity and discourses of loss (Belmonte and McMahon 2019).<sup>17</sup> At the social level, migration is seen as a favourable opportunity within the European common (tertiary) education area and single labour market, often within the framework of so-called “circular”<sup>18</sup> migration. One downside of this is the possible (human capital) loss associated mainly with the departure of many people from certain countries and areas, depleting their development capacity<sup>19</sup> (Lulle et al. 2021). This problem of depopulation is often linked with the “escape” discourse, which postulates that young people leave their home countries for political reasons or due to corruption, clientelism, unpredictability, lack of personal freedom and political transparency.<sup>20</sup>

On a personal level, migration can represent an additional favourable opportunity in one’s life. Learning mobility programmes are becoming increasingly important in the biographies of young people (Haldimann et al. 2021; Cairns 2022). Beyond direct educational benefits, these programmes offer opportunities to develop soft skills, intercultural competencies (Lorenzo-Moledo et al. 2023), self-esteem, expanded social networks across Europe, and many other benefits (Roy et al. 2018).

Research shows that participation among EU young people contributes to more significant support for and identification with the EU (Öz and Van Prag 2022). Outside education, the labour market also provides opportunities for young people from less developed regions to work in another country, earn a living and relocate either temporarily or permanently. However, there are also personal risks associated with migration, including institutional, social and cultural integration challenges in the destination country and weakening friendships and familial relationships.

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As Berg et al. (2013: 19) noticed, “access to mobility is socially differentiated”. Young people from underprivileged backgrounds migrate less frequently during their education, and if they migrate as part of labour transitions, they face more significant risks, such as illegal stays and precarious jobs.

European Union countries have experienced increased youth migration since the outset. Each new enlargement of the EU has led to many young people migrating for education, work and other reasons. Over the past decade, bilateral agreements with EU countries and mutual agreements among themselves have facilitated easier labour migration for Western Balkan countries, providing young people with new opportunities to leave, stay and return to their home countries.<sup>21</sup>

## Desire to migrate

The desire to migrate has changed in the past six years, becoming more uniform across the region. More and more young people would like to go abroad, but the intensity of the desire is weaker than previously (Figure 32).



Fig. 32 **Desire to emigrate among youth in SEE (in %)**

*How strong is your desire to move to another country for more than six months (emigrate)?*

No data was available for Türkiye and Greece in 2018.

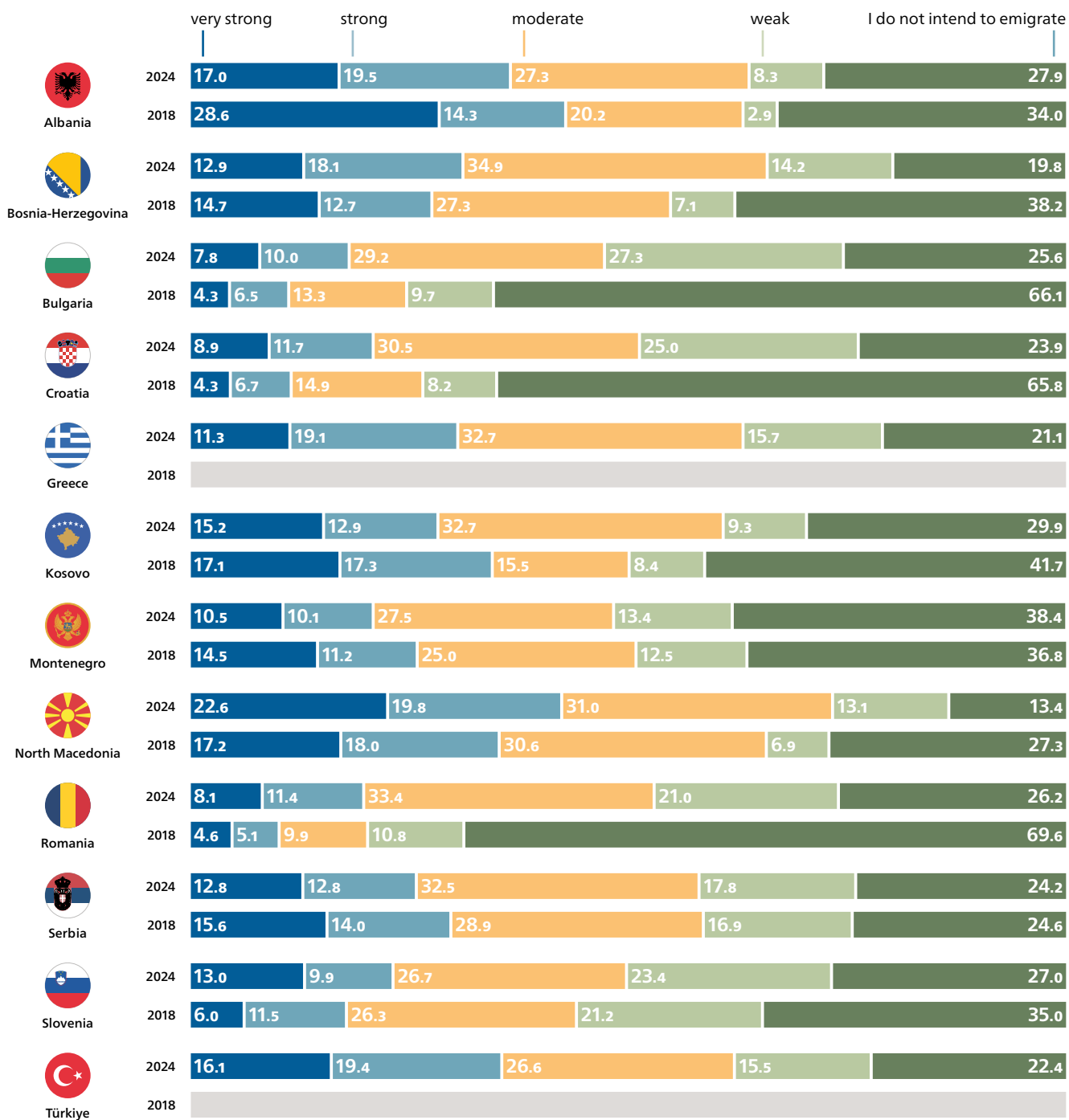
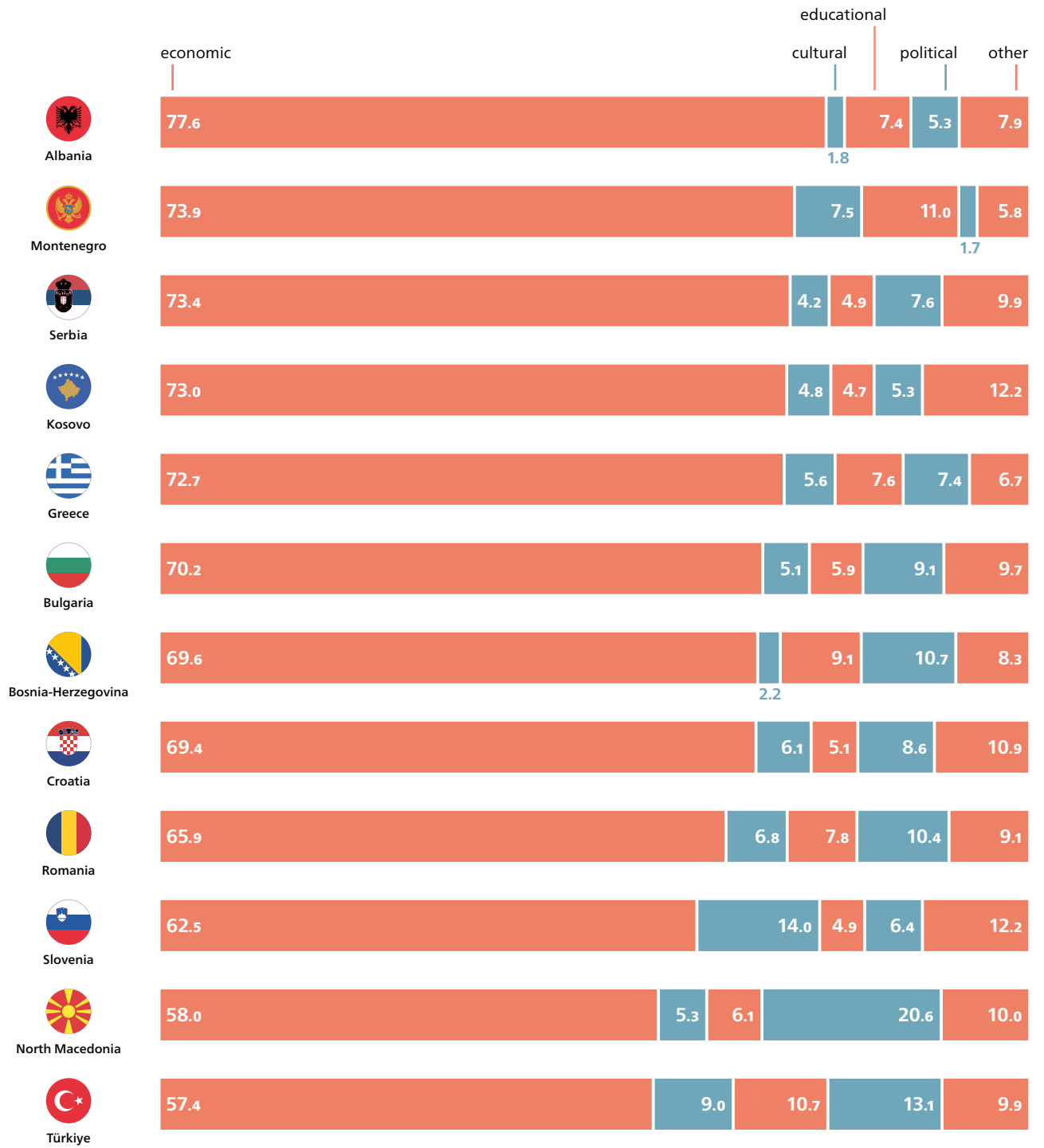


Fig. 33 Motivation for potential emigration among youth in SEE (in %)

Main reason for which respondents would move to another country



Compared with 2018, in 2024 a more significant number of young people would like to change their place of residence for six months or longer, and in almost all countries the percentage of those who explicitly say they do not want to migrate has fallen. This change is particularly pronounced in EU countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia. Considering that young people are predominantly in precarious and insecure jobs, which were among the first to be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, and that EU countries are part of an open labour market (the single market) in which it is much easier for young people to seek jobs abroad, job insecurity and the possibility of mobility have led to a higher willingness among young people to relocate to another country. However, among those who wish to leave their home country for at least six months, the intensity of desire has generally weakened in all countries except Slovenia.

In many countries, the profile of the youth population desiring to emigrate has also changed. This desire is now more pronounced among the poorer segments of the population in Serbia and Croatia. Furthermore, it is now present among young people from lower social strata in Albania and Romania, which was not the case previously. In Bosnia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, the desire was more pronounced among young people with lower social status in 2018, but has now become evenly distributed among young people regardless of their self-perceived social status.

The intensity of the desire to migrate can be linked to high perceived risks in the country of origin or optimistic expectations of mobility. On one hand, the desire to migrate increases when young people perceive the labour market in their home country as underdeveloped and anticipate challenges during the housing transition (leaving home). On the other hand, migration is driven by the individual's aspiration to build a successful career and accumulate wealth. Among young people in Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the strength of desire is positively associated with risks (in the labour and housing markets), while in Greece and Slovenia it is associated predominantly with optimism (career and wealth). In other countries, risks and optimism are associated with the desire to move abroad.

Regarding the political landscape, the desire to migrate across the region is closely associated with distrust in the national parliament and government. Except for Bulgaria and Romania, where this link is not statistically significant, the desire to migrate becomes stronger as distrust

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**The desire to migrate across the region is closely associated with distrust in the national parliament and government.**

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in key political institutions increases, highlighting that political disenchantment is an important contributor to this desire. In most countries (excluding Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and North Macedonia), non-institutional political participation (such as protests and petition signing) is linked to the desire to leave, indicating the significance of the discourse of "escape" among activist young people.

## Motivation to migrate

Most young people who wish to leave their home country state economic reasons: improving their standard of living, higher salaries, better employment opportunities, and opportunities to start a business. Economic motivation is more prevalent across the region among young people whose parents have a lower level of education. Still, this group does not demonstrate a strong sense of agency, as they have not taken significant steps in this direction so far (much less than young people with other motives).

Other motivations are derived from particular socio-cultural patterns within each society and their importance varies. Those who mention cultural and educational factors as reasons for migration more often come from families in which the parents are highly educated and themselves have experience living or studying abroad.

Across the region, one in ten young people state that their primary reason for potential migration is political. This motivation is most pronounced in North Macedonia, where 20 per cent of young people want to leave the country due to corruption, clientelism and political instability. Türkiye

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**Most young people who wish to leave their home country state economic reasons: improving their standard of living, higher salaries, better employment opportunities, and opportunities to start a business.**

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and Bosnia and Herzegovina follow, while this motivation is least pronounced in Montenegro, Albania, and Kosovo. Political motivation is more common among young people with highly educated parents.<sup>22</sup> This population shows a higher sense of agency, as these young people, both regionally and in specific countries (Albania, Greece, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Türkiye), are much more active (they have already taken some steps) compared with young people who report other motives for leaving. Although most young people have economic reasons for wanting to go, those with political motivations are more likely to act on their desire.

## Duration of potential stay abroad

The length of potential stay has also changed. Young people with a rough idea of how long they would like to stay in another country opt for a circular migration pattern in most countries, which involves leaving but returning (relatively quickly) to their country of origin. In 2018, young people from EU countries more frequently opted for circular migration patterns than those from non-EU countries. Over the past six years, there has been a slight decline in interest in circular migration and an increase in permanent migration in Bulgaria and Romania.

Croatia and Slovenia saw a slight decrease in permanent migration and increased desire for circular migration. In nearly all non-EU countries, too, there has been an increased desire for circular migration and a decrease in those opting for permanent migration. The data show that the region is gradually integrating into the European and global educational landscape and labour markets. Young people recognize the opportunities and significance of moving within European and international spaces and the benefits of returning to their home countries. The only exception to this trend is North Macedonia, where not only has there been an increase in those wishing to migrate permanently, but it is also the only country where more than half of the young people wanting to migrate prefer permanent relocation.

Across the region as a whole, to date, those who have been part of educational mobility programmes see circular migration more often as preferable to a permanent move. In contrast, those without such opportunities during their schooling tend to express a greater desire for permanent relocation. On the other hand, simply having the experience of living abroad for more than six months does not have a uniform effect; for some, it awakens a desire for more extended stays, while for others, it leads to a preference for shorter stays in the future.

Additionally, young people citing cultural and educational reasons for leaving are likelier to envision short-term stays abroad. In contrast, those citing economic and political reasons prefer permanent relocation. This difference is significantly pronounced when comparing EU and non-EU countries. One in four young people who cite political reasons for potential migration would permanently leave their EU country, whereas this figure is as high as one in two in non-EU countries. The situation is similar to economic motives. Significantly more young people in non-EU countries who cite economic reasons for leaving would like to stay long-term.



Fig. 34 Anticipated duration of potential stay abroad of youth in SEE (in %)

Only those who are willing to emigrate and know the length of the stay (excluding those who do not know).  
No data was available for Türkiye and Greece in 2018.

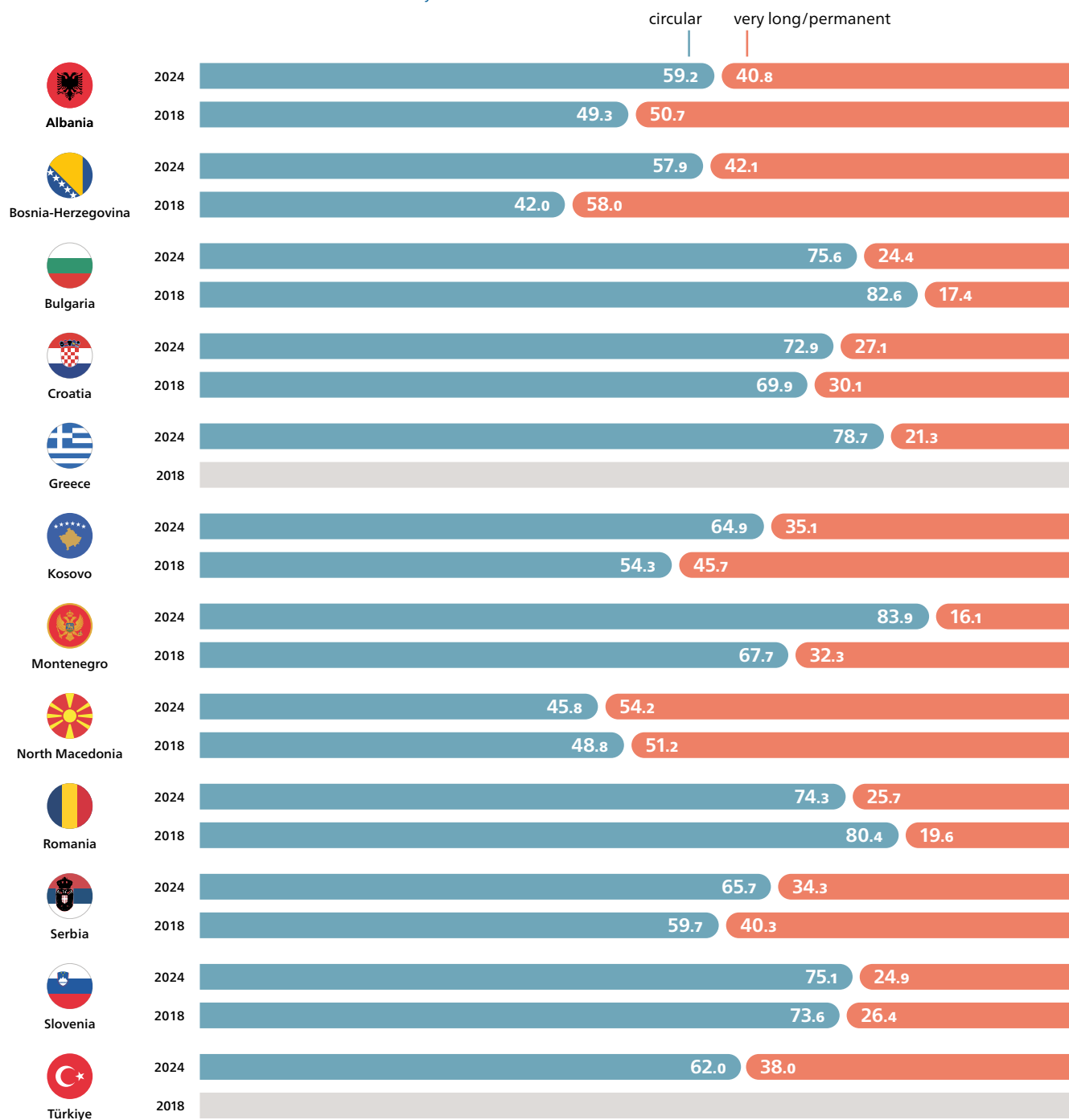


Fig. 35 **Relationship between types of potential migration and migration motives among youth in SEE (in %)**

All	Political	Economic	Cultural	Educational
Circular	58.9	66.0	86.5	83.6
Permanent	41.1	34.0	13.5	16.4
<b>EU Member States</b>				
Circular	72.9	73.8	87.6	86.1
Permanent	27.1	26.2	12.4	13.9
<b>Non-EU Member States</b>				
Circular	48.6	59.2	85.3	81.8
Permanent	51.4	40.8	14.7	18.2

A significant proportion of young people have already taken steps toward emigration. Most commonly, they have reached out to their informal networks (relatives and friends abroad) for support in contacting potential employers and other institutions (such as embassies and schools). Informal support is a crucial channel for leaving and integrating into the local culture abroad. It is more pronounced in non-EU countries. When young people from non-EU countries emigrate to EU countries, their institutional status is more precarious as they do not enjoy the same rights as EU citizens. Informal support networks are therefore crucial both for leaving the home country and during the period of their stay. Although there are no significant gender differences with regard to the desire to migrate, in all countries men are more likely to take action towards migration, which indicates different perceptions of opportunities and risks. Across the region as a whole, young people whose parents have a higher education are more likely to take action towards migration. Previous experience living abroad is the best predictor of whether they are currently taking steps to emigrate.

## Actual migration

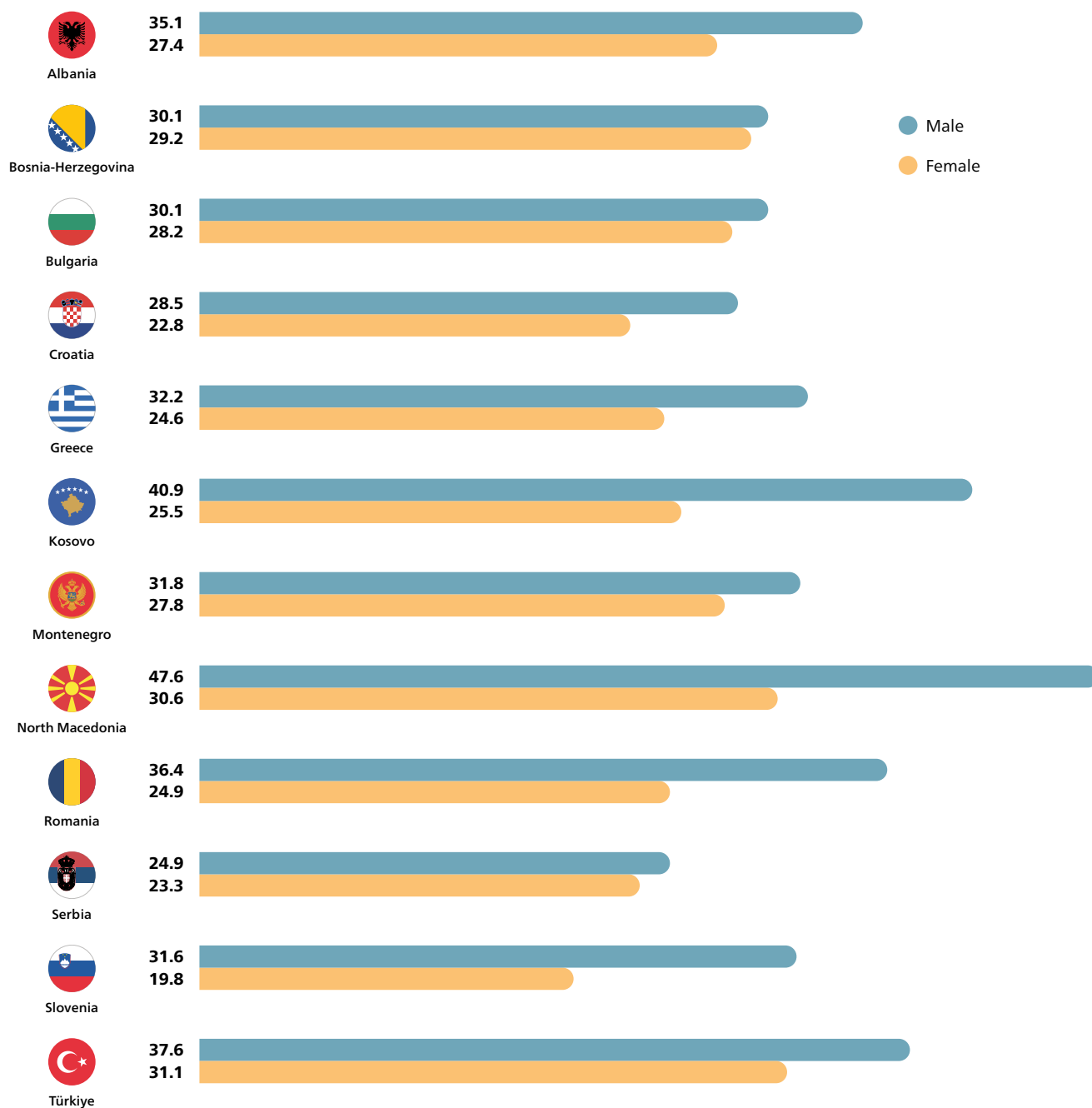
Longitudinal data show that the region is rapidly moving. More young people are spending part of their studies abroad, and an increasing number have experienced living in another country for several months.

**Although there is no significant gender difference in the desire to migrate, men are more likely to take action towards migration in all countries, which indicates different perceptions of opportunities and risks.**

The importance of mobility programmes during education cannot be overstated. Participation in international learning mobility programmes has increased in all countries, but this growth is significantly more pronounced in EU countries. EU educational policies emphasize the importance of and support learning mobility programmes, and the data highlight their significant effects. Data from 2024 show that one in four young people in EU countries had the opportunity to spend time in another country during their education. Among non-EU countries, such levels of mobility are present in Türkiye and Montenegro.

Fig. 36 **Emigration agency of young people in SEE (in %)**

*Share of respondents who want to migrate and have done something in preparation for it.*



In all countries, girls participate in educational mobility less frequently than boys, but gender differences are particularly pronounced in EU countries. For instance, in Croatia, 27.4 % of men and 16.3 % of women have participated in educational mobility programmes. The figures for Bulgaria are 27.9 % of men and 23.2 % of women; while in Romania they are 32.6 % of men and 19.8 % of women; in Slovenia, 32.9 % of men and 18.7 % of women, and in Greece, 27.1 % of men and 22.1 % of women. These differences have emerged over the past six years, as EU Member States previously had a relative gender balance concerning youth educational mobility, according to 2018 data. The most significant gender disparities are due to unequal participation in mobility programmes at the tertiary level.

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**In all countries, young women participate in educational mobility less frequently than men, but gender differences are particularly pronounced in EU countries.**

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In most countries, parents' higher education is associated with participation in learning mobility programmes. This is especially pronounced at the tertiary level, where children of parents with a higher education are more likely to take part and to pursue higher education than children from families in which the parents have a lower educational level. Educational mobility during secondary school is less selective than at the tertiary level. Parental education significantly influences migration during secondary school only in Croatia, where children with highly educated parents are more frequently part of mobility programmes. However, in vocational schools, young people with highly educated parents in Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Greece, and Slovenia are more likely to migrate for educational reasons. These analyses indicate that the cultural capital of the family of origin (parental education) is crucial in reproducing inequalities in learning mobility practices.

Additionally, more young people are spending a longer time abroad for other purposes. Except in Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, young people in the region report having had the opportunity to spend more than six months abroad. Once again, the most significant growth between the two survey waves occurred in EU countries. Interestingly, the differences with regard to the experience of living in another country between EU and non-EU countries are smaller than with regard to educational mobility.

## What does mobility bring (or take away)?

It is striking that in most countries (except Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia), young people who have participated in mobility programmes exhibit more authoritarian<sup>23</sup> attitudes and lower support for democracy<sup>24</sup> than those who have not participated in such programmes. As Figure 39 shows, learning mobility programmes are not positively associated with acceptance of democracy and critical questioning of autocratic political views; indeed, the opposite appears to be true. This connection is much stronger at the secondary and vocational levels than at the tertiary level. However, even during tertiary education learning mobility does not show positive associations with acceptance of democracy and rejection of autocracy.

These results raise questions about young people's experiences of these programmes and how they integrate them into their worldviews upon return. One might have expected that experiences in other countries would provide a broader perspective and encourage young people to be more open-minded, accepting democratic principles and values. Understanding why this is not the case requires us to rethink the design of these programmes.

Fig. 37 **Past migration patterns for educational purposes among youth in SEE (in %)**

Share of respondents who have stayed abroad for learning or training purposes (outside the country where they received their prior education) or are currently abroad

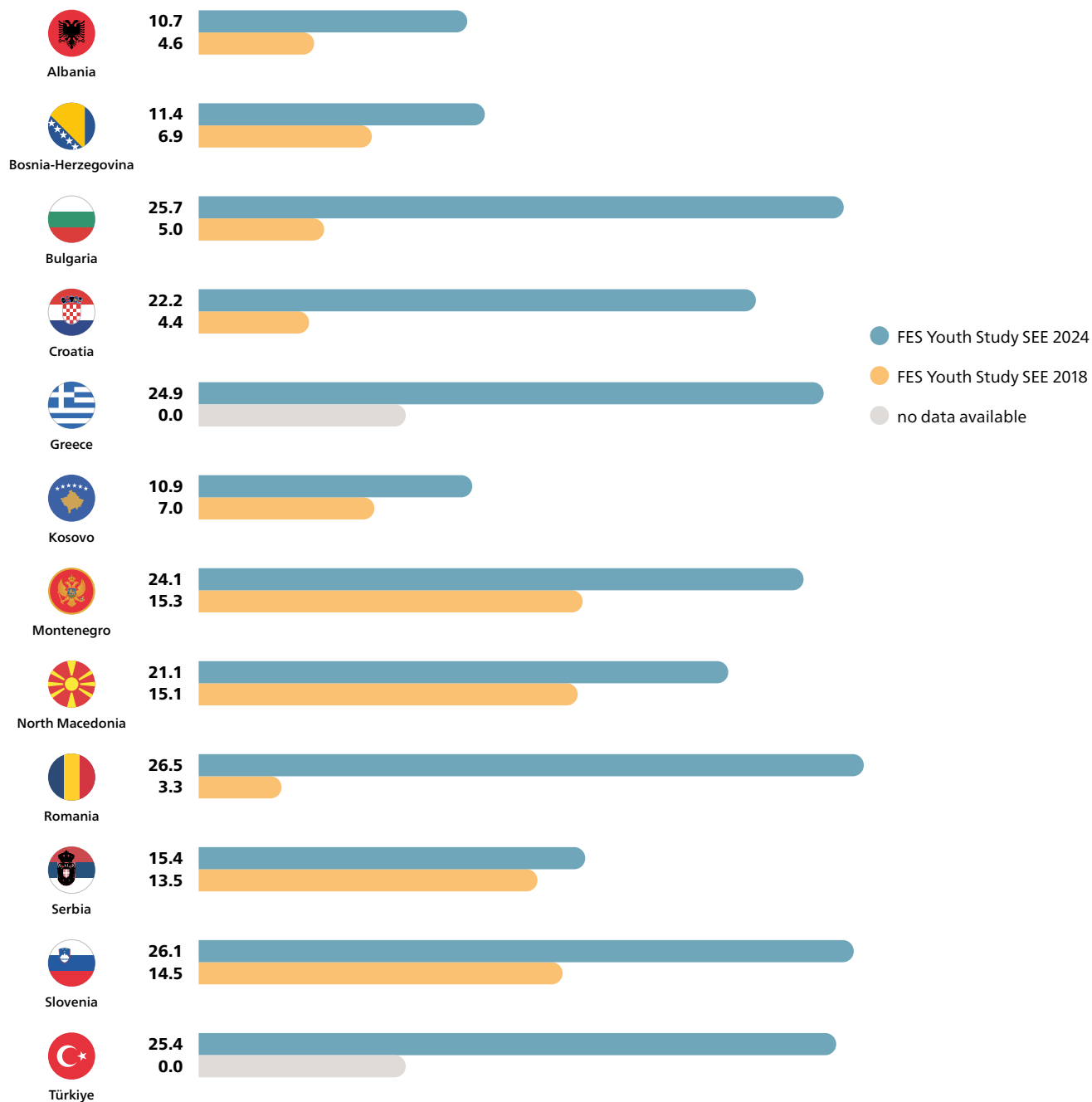


Fig. 38 Share of youth in SEE who stayed abroad for more than six months (in %)

*Have you ever been away from your native country for more than six months?  
Longitudinally*

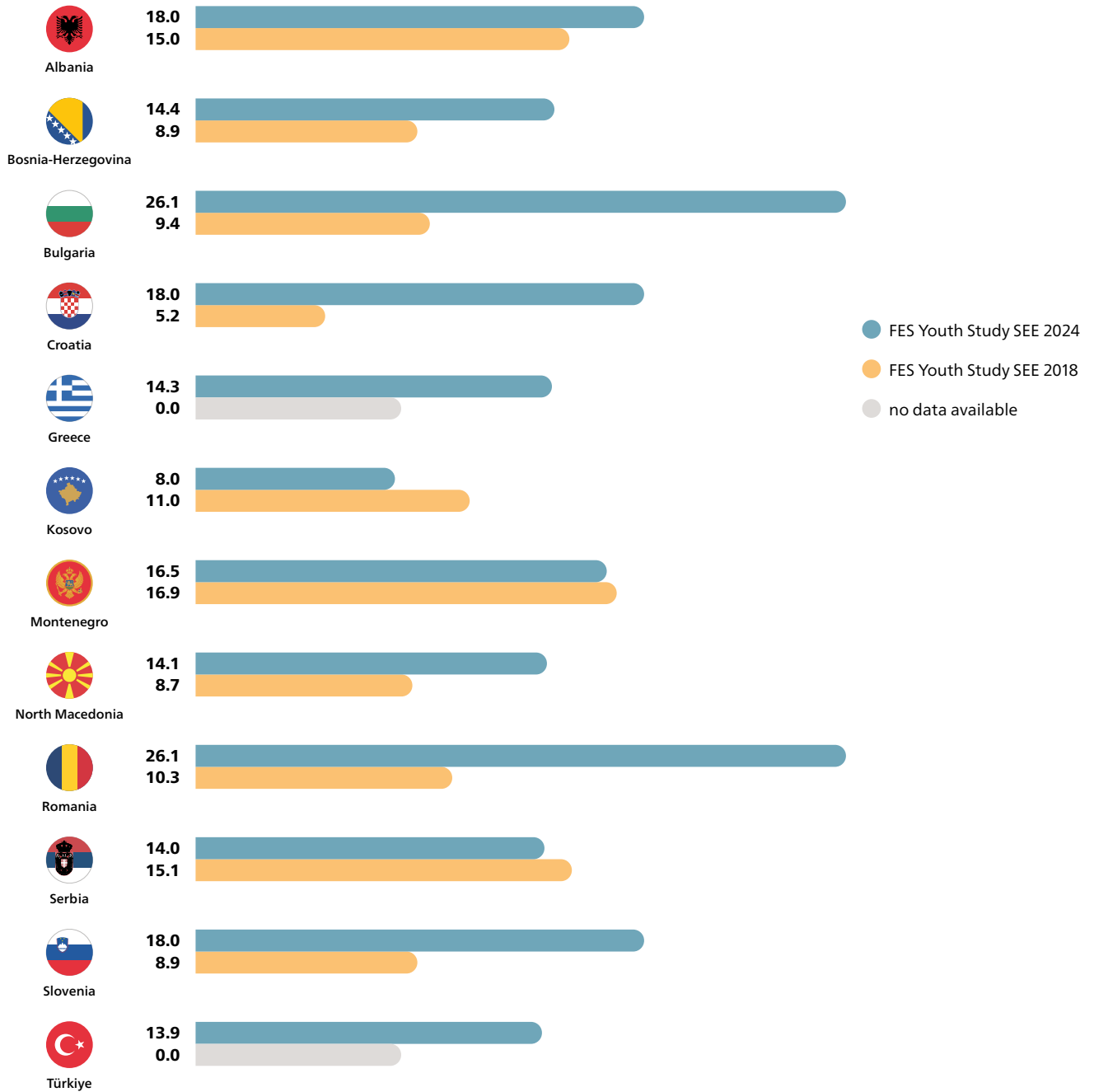


Fig. 39 **Relationship between participation in learning mobility programmes at different educational levels and political attitudes**

	Democracy +	Democracy –	Autocracy +	Autocracy –
Higher		Türkiye	Romania, Slovenia, Türkiye	
Secondary		Bulgaria, Kosovo, Romania, Greece, Türkiye	Croatia, Greece, Türkiye	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Vocational	Bulgaria	Croatia, Kosovo, Greece, Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania	Romania, Slovenia, Greece	

Even though young people who have participated in learning mobility programmes are less supportive of democracy, in all countries they are more willing to engage in political processes, both in person (demonstrations, volunteering, political parties) and online (petitions, sharing, and so on).

Although somewhat weaker, similar effects are observed in young people who have spent at least six months living abroad. This experience is associated with higher support for authoritarianism in Slovenia and Greece and lower support for democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Romania, Greece and Türkiye.

## Main takeaways

**1.** The desire to migrate has become more uniform across the region and is felt by more young people, although the intensity of the desire has decreased over the past six years.

**2.** There has been a shift from permanent to circular migration patterns in most countries. Non-EU countries show more interest in circular migration and less in permanent migration than previously.

**3.** Economic reasons are the primary motivators for moving abroad. However, political reasons also are present in the region. Political motivations lead individuals to take more proactive steps toward migration. Distrust in the national parliament and government, for example, correlates with a desire to move abroad, except in Bulgaria and Romania.

**4.** Young people with educational mobility experience prefer circular migration. Economic and political reasons tend to lead to a preference for permanent relocation, while academic and cultural migration motives more often point toward short-term plans for staying abroad.

**5.** Participation in educational mobility programmes has increased, notably in EU countries, but there are significant gender disparities, with young men participating more than young women.

**6.** Participation in mobility programmes is positively associated with authoritarian attitudes and lower support for democracy. On the other hand, such participants are more politically active.

# 9. Transitions to adulthood and family formation

**Dragan Stanojević**

The extended period during which recent generations have continued their education goes hand in hand with later entry to the labour market. This, in turn, has prolonged young people's financial and material dependence on their parents and the state (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). The structural patterns that characterise this relatively late transition to autonomy include high youth unemployment rates, low wages that are insufficient to enable the purchase or even rental of increasingly expensive real estate, unregulated housing markets and inadequate institutional support (Iacovou 2011: 4). Additionally, in Mediterranean countries, the value system also influences prolonged (semi)dependence. Among both the general population and young people familism is still very present and it highly values intensive family relationships and intergenerational solidarity (Walter 2006). This means that many young people remain in their parents' household for prolonged periods by choice and often start their own families while still living with their parents. Additionally, for many of them, there is no period of independent living between leaving their parental home and starting their own family. However, this situation can lead to intergenerational misunderstandings, conflicts and dissatisfaction, especially when new generations bring new individualist values that cannot be realized with existing personal, family and institutional resources.

In this chapter, we will attempt to identify patterns and changes in (1) intergenerational relationships within the family, (2) partnership transition, (3) parental transition, and (4) the overall transition into adulthood.

## More generational understanding within the family

Relationships with parents are generally positive, with minimal conflicts and misunderstandings, suggesting that families jointly address contemporary risks and challenges. Young people in Kosovo and Albania report the best relationships with their parents, with slightly more challenges reported by young people in Türkiye. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Romania, Serbia, Greece and Türkiye, girls (young women) are more likely than boys (young men) to report less harmonious relationships with their parents, which highlights a gender pattern in generational disagreements and suggests a potential challenge to the patriarchal legacy. Also, values associated with personal autonomy negatively correlate with the degree of agreement with parents (especially in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Türkiye), implying generational differences in views on personal autonomy as a possible cause of disagreements and potential conflicts. This relationship is stronger among boys than girls. While living with parents, disagreements are more frequent. When young people move out, the level of agreement increases, showing that residential autonomy brings other aspects of personal autonomy, lower levels of control and higher levels of agreement between young people and their parents. Comparisons with data from 2018 show that in all countries (except North Macedonia), intergenerational relationships within families have become less conflictual and have fewer direct disagreements.

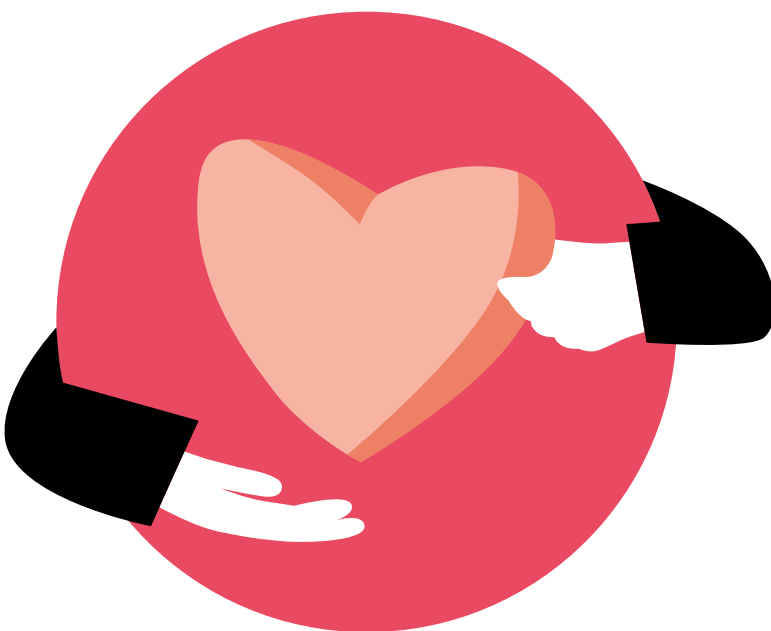




Fig. 40 Relationship with parents among youth in SEE (in %)

😊 is based on the response 'We get along very well'. 😞 'We do not get along' includes the answers 'In general, we do not get along, we often argue' and 'Very conflictual relationship'.

		2018			2024		
		All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female
Albania	😊	60.0	63.7	56.2	63.8	61.8	65.2
	😞	1.1	1.1	1.0	3.3	4.4	2.5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	😊	46.0	44.9	47.1	46.7	52.0	39.7
	😞	9.5	9.6	9.3	2.9	1.6	4.1
Bulgaria	😊	41.7	36.8	46.8	47.1	49.4	44.3
	😞	8.2	10.4	5.7	5.8	5.2	6.4
Croatia	😊	34.5	30.8	38.0	52.2	58.6	45.4
	😞	9.8	12.0	7.8	6.7	6.2	7.1
Kosovo	😊	61.8	60.1	63.8	67.7	60.9	71.5
	😞	1.7	1.6	2.0	2.8	3.1	2.7
North Macedonia	😊	54.4	55.7	53.0	46.3	43.8	47.9
	😞	7.9	9.2	6.7	6.8	9.0	5.2
Montenegro	😊	36.0	37.1	34.9	49.3	53.7	44.9
	😞	4.8	6.2	3.5	4.8	5.1	4.5
Romania	😊	50.2	49.6	50.9	49.7	52.4	46.9
	😞	4.8	5.4	4.2	5.7	7.4	3.7
Serbia	😊	30.6	27.5	33.5	42.0	47.8	36.3
	😞	7.0	8.1	5.9	5.8	3.8	7.6
Slovenia	😊	39.0	38.4	39.7	44.3	50.8	37.8
	😞	15.4	15.6	15.2	4.4	3.6	5.1
Greece	😊	-	-	-	44.6	46.3	42.6
	😞	-	-	-	6.2	4.6	7.8
Türkiye	😊	-	-	-	33.8	40.2	26.6
	😞	-	-	-	8.8	8.8	8.9

Fig. 41 **Important factors when choosing a partner for youth in SEE**

Mean values on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)

		Religious beliefs	National origin	Education level
Albania	2024	2.3	2.8	3.8
	2018	2.3	2.3	4.0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2024	3.2	2.7	3.2
	2018	3.9	3.7	3.8
Bulgaria	2024	2.7	2.8	3.5
	2018	3.4	3.7	3.8
Croatia	2024	2.7	2.3	3.0
	2018	3.2	3.1	3.4
Greece	2024	2.7	2.5	3.1
Kosovo	2024	4.3	4.3	3.9
	2018	4.2	3.0	4.1
Montenegro	2024	3.4	2.9	3.4
	2018	3.1	2.8	3.7
North Macedonia	2024	3.7	3.6	3.5
	2018	4.0	3.7	3.8
Romania	2024	2.5	2.2	3.3
	2018	3.2	3.0	3.9
Serbia	2024	2.7	2.2	3.0
	2018	2.7	2.7	3.5
Slovenia	2024	2.5	2.5	2.7
	2018	2.3	2.3	3.1
Türkiye	2024	3.2	2.9	3.7

## Partnership and family formation

The criteria for choosing a partner are changing, with young people in most countries becoming less traditional (Figure 41). Fewer individuals consider ethnic background, religion, virginity and family approval important when selecting a partner.

The countries in which these traits remain more important to young people include Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Türkiye, and they are least significant in Slovenia, Greece, Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria. Among young people in all countries, a higher degree of conservatism in choosing a partner or spouse correlates positively with patriarchal values, ethnonationalism and political authoritarianism and negatively with the acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights and norms of individual choice.

This indicates a complex set of interrelated values that amplify each other. Social distance in the private, intimate sphere depends on the promotion and acceptance of authoritarian, nationalistic and patriarchal values, which are opposed to personal autonomy and the value of choice in one's own and others' lives.

## Attitudes on partnership and parenthood

Young people still highly value parenthood and marriage, but parenthood is slightly more important. The greater importance attached to marriage and parenthood is negatively correlated with individual choice norms across the entire sample (as well as in most countries) and positively correlated with patriarchal, authoritarian and ethnonationalist values. This suggests that traditional views underpin the significance of marriage and family life among young people. Conversely, less autocratic and patriarchal worldviews lead to a greater acceptance of alternative perspectives on personal, partnership and family life.

In all countries, attitudes toward parenthood and marriage are modernizing, and both are losing their importance as core values. The most significant decline can be observed in EU Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania). The most minor change, by contrast, can be seen in Kosovo and Albania, where there has been hardly any shift. Being within the EU framework correlates with the modernization of values, emphasizing individualism more and family and traditional partnerships (marriage) less.

There are significant variations in the desire for parenthood. The smallest shares of young people who do not see themselves as becoming parents are observed in Kosovo (0.9%) and Albania (4.3%), while the highest are in Bosnia and Herzegovina (42.6%) and Slovenia (46.9%). Individual choice norms are negatively associated with the desire for parenthood across the entire region (and in almost all countries).

Young people who emphasize the importance of personal choice are more likely to reject the idea of parenthood and see themselves as child-free. This result shows that starting a family is perceived as a form of pressure and conformity to the community (family, nation), so rejecting it becomes part of a discourse of resistance and the defence of personal freedoms.

However, although many people do not see themselves as parents, those who want children typically desire more than what is needed for simple population replacement. The lowest desired number of children is in Romania, at 2, while the highest is in Kosovo, at 2.8. The desired number of children also varies with individual choice norms, suggesting that higher birth rates are linked to norms that put less emphasis on individual freedoms and choice.

Although consensual unions can serve as a form of preparation for marriage (Bobić 2007), their prevalence indicates a process of partnership modernization. They offer an alternative to marriage, imply greater freedom and democratic relationships, and legitimize premarital sexual relations. Significant variations in cohabitation rates characterize the region. Higher rates of cohabitation are present in EU countries (Slovenia 21.5%, Bulgaria 18.2%, Romania 12.1%, Greece 12.1%), while the lowest rates are in Kosovo (0.2%) and

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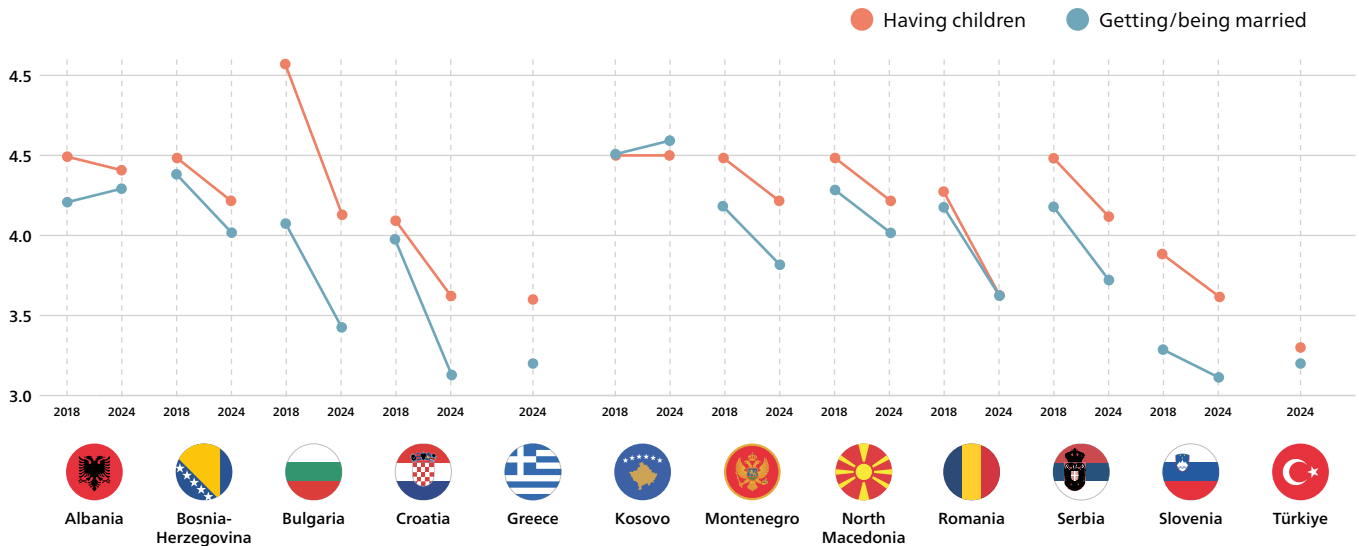
**Marriage and parenthood are more important to young people with patriarchal, authoritarian or ethnonationalist values and less important to those who prioritize individual choice.**

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Türkiye (1.5%), positioning the EU as a context of more intensive partnership modernization. However, all countries (except Kosovo) have recorded an increase in cohabitation since 2018, with the highest increase in Serbia (from 5.4% to 11.6%), indicating that processes of partnership modernization, though slower, are occurring everywhere under the influence of broader global processes, popular culture and the general modernization of gender and partnership values.

Fig. 42 Importance of family for youth in SEE

How important are the following things to you?  
Scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)



## Parenthood among young people

The region's highest proportion of young parents is in Türkiye (15.7%), followed by Slovenia (13.4%), Romania (12.6%), Kosovo (11.9%), Bulgaria (10.5%), Serbia (9.6%), and Croatia (9.4%). Lower percentages are found in Albania (6.9%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (6.6%), and Macedonia (6%). Compared with the last survey, the percentage of young parents has decreased in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria, while it has increased in Serbia and Slovenia.

Young people typically follow standard transitions that involve completing education, obtaining a job and starting a family. We find some interesting results and trends when examining the relationship between various life events. First, considerable regional diversity exists with regard to pursuing education and parenthood simultaneously. Among parents, those who are simultaneously studying are most common in Türkiye (64.7%), followed by Bulgaria (37%), North Macedonia (34.8%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (33.3%), Albania (26.1%), Slovenia (25.6%), Montenegro (23.7%), Greece (22.9%), Romania (21%), Serbia (17.6%), and Croatia (15.6%).

Kosovo brings up the rear with only 6.6%. Compared with 2018, the proportion of parents and students has increased in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, primarily at the tertiary education level. No country has experienced a decline in this trend. The combination of parenthood and schooling suggests two possible phenomena. First, it indicates prolonged periods of education, with young people attempting to integrate various transitions, deviating from traditional life-course models. Second, it points to an increase in the feasibility of combining family and educational transitions, whether due to institutional, market or familial changes in the nature and extent of support.

Regarding housing arrangements, on average, three-quarters of young parents live independently from their parents, while one-quarter live with their parents (in their household). The highest proportion of independent young parents is in Greece (97.4%), followed by Croatia (85.1%), Türkiye (84.1%), Romania (82.2%), Slovenia (81.7%), Bulgaria (79.5%), Serbia (73.6%), Kosovo (73.4%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (72.7%), Montenegro (70%), North Macedonia (67.7%), and Albania (66%).

No significant changes have occurred in this regard in any country, indicating that the challenges of establishing one's household and family remain persistent.

## The transition to adulthood

The overall transition to adulthood was operationalized through school-to-work and housing-partnership transitions. Entering the labour market, securing a sufficient income and ensuring long-term financial stability are prerequisites for transitioning to independent housing and starting a life with a partner or a spouse. We applied a similar approach, trying to identify the degree of young people's (in)dependence in terms of key life events. The model is based on Galland's (2003) independence model, which has been slightly modified given the changed social circumstances. Four key events were used as markers of autonomy: (1) completion of formal education, (2) employment (regardless of the type of contract), (3) independent housing, and (4) marriage or cohabitation. Data are presented for each event individually and together, but only for the oldest cohort, ages 25 to 29.

The figure for overall transition into adulthood (Figure 43) shows that young people in EU countries have faster transitions to adulthood. More than half of young people in Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia experience all four events by the age of 30. The slowest transitions are seen among young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania, where only slightly more than a third experience all four events by age 30. In Serbia, Türkiye and Kosovo, one in ten young people aged 25–29 have not experienced any key life events, indicating that they remained dependent on their parents for a long time.

In Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, the transition to adulthood has significantly accelerated in 2024 compared with 2018. In Slovenia and Romania, there has been a slight acceleration. Conversely, in Bulgaria and Albania, the transition may have slightly slowed. In other countries, there have been no significant changes compared with 2018.

Regarding individual events, the situation is as follows: In terms of education, the transition has been prolonged in some countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Albania), while in others this transition has accelerated (Slovenia, Serbia and Kosovo). In most countries, the pace of work transition has remained the same. It is somewhat slower in Bulgaria and Serbia, but faster in Slovenia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with more young adults aged 26–29 employed than in 2018. In all countries, the housing transition has accelerated, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia and Albania, bringing these countries closer to the high levels of housing autonomy seen in countries such as Slovenia and Romania (which has further accelerated the housing transition). However, the cause is probably an increase in participation in tertiary education and moving out of the parental home (probably temporarily) (White 1994). The pace of forming partnerships (cohabitation and marriage) is faster in Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, while it is slower in Croatia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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**A trend of leaving the parental household earlier than in 2018 is evident across the entire youth population (not just the oldest cohort) and is associated with a greater desire for independent living.**

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The trend of leaving the parental household earlier than in 2018 is evident across the entire youth population (not just the oldest cohort) and is associated with a greater desire for independent living. Few people still live with their parents, saying it suits them. Except in Slovenia, Montenegro, and Kosovo, the percentage of individuals who say "I live with my parents because it is the simplest and most comfortable solution" has decreased in all countries. Additionally, the number of those who would move out if they had enough money or if their parents did not oppose the decision has increased.

Fig. 43 (In)dependence of young people in SEE (in %)

Number of transitioning events into adulthood and autonomy for young people (ages 25–29).  
Data for individual events and total number of events.

		0	1–2	3–4	Finished education	Having a job	Independent housing	Marriage or cohabitation
Albania	2024	2.5	60.4	37.1	81.3	74.3	48.8	33.3
	2018	0.9	57.0	42.1	93.9	51.2	38.3	43.6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2024	4.0	61.0	35.0	65.0	66.9	46.0	32.3
	2018	10.4	53.9	35.7	85.7	48.6	29.8	43.0
Bulgaria	2024	2.2	40.7	57.2	76.7	70.2	68.6	49.1
	2018	1.0	36.9	62.1	89.2	82.8	57.1	55.9
Croatia	2024	5.4	46.2	48.4	76.4	77.8	58.8	33.5
	2018	6.2	44.1	49.7	88.0	75.7	45.3	45.7
Greece	2024	7.6	43.3	49.1	67.3	61.9	69.3	40.7
Kosovo	2024	8.8	54.7	36.5	83.9	54.1	38.9	40.5
	2018	10.9	52.0	37.1	72.5	42.6	35.6	45.5
Montenegro	2024	6.1	56.4	37.5	64.4	73.4	44.8	40.3
	2018	10.1	62.8	27.1	63.2	61.0	42.9	29.6
North Macedonia	2024	5.3	54.9	39.8	71.4	72.4	38.2	37.6
	2018	8.1	64.6	27.4	77.6	65.2	29.2	30.4
Romania	2024	2.3	35.8	61.9	73.5	72.2	69.1	60.6
	2018	3.4	38.8	57.8	90.5	76.8	55.2	54.6
Serbia	2024	10.9	47.7	41.4	67.1	54.7	54.1	42.6
	2018	14.4	55.5	30.1	57.5	61.8	39.5	28.5
Slovenia	2024	5.3	41.2	53.5	65.3	75.2	57.0	64.7
	2018	11.9	40.8	47.3	59.1	63.8	52.0	49.8
Türkiye	2024	10.9	46.0	43.1	36.0	71.6	61.7	46.6

The events are shown individually and grouped according to the number of events experienced. A 0 indicates that the individual has not experienced any listed events, 1–2 indicates they have experienced one or two, and 3–4 means they have experienced three or four life events, suggesting the pace of transition into adulthood.

## Main takeaways

- 1.** The relationships between generations are pretty good, with tiny misunderstandings and conflicts and more harmony than in 2018. In some countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Romania, Serbia, Greece, and Türkiye), girls face more challenges with their parents, but boys (in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Türkiye) also face difficulties if they have pronounced values of personal autonomy. This suggests that when patriarchal and conformist values are more prevalent in the parental generation, they are likely to lead to intergenerational misunderstandings and conflicts if their children hold opposing stances about their lives and autonomy.
- 2.** The criteria for choosing a partner are becoming less traditional. Where they are conservative, they positively correlate with patriarchal values, ethnonationalism, and political authoritarianism and negatively with the acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights and norms of individual choice. Given the decline of the former and the rise of the latter, it is clear that this involves a pattern change with regard to a complex set of interconnected values.
- 3.** Young people highly value parenthood and marriage, but attitudes towards partnership and parenthood have modernized in all countries, as these values are losing their importance, especially in EU countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania). There has been very little change in Kosovo and Albania, however.
- 4.** The increase in cohabitation rates suggests that partnership is modernizing, and young people are opting to live together outside marriage (even as a so-called “preparatory phase”).
- 5.** There is better alignment between parental and educational transitions, with more parents in most countries having the opportunity to pursue higher education. This indicates that institutional and personal resources are increasing in ways that provide more options for young people in organizing their lives.
- 6.** The housing transition among young parents has not changed in any country, indicating that young families’ challenges in acquiring property remain constant. In such cases, they commonly live with their parents even after having a child.
- 7.** The overall transition to adulthood is more favourable in EU countries, suggesting that a higher standard of living, better job opportunities, and institutional support help young people gain autonomy more quickly. Certain advancements in non-EU countries (especially Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) are bringing young people in the Western Balkans closer to their EU peers.



# Conclusion and policy recommendations

**Elena Avramovska**

The findings from the *Youth Study SEE 2024* highlight persistent socio-economic challenges, inequalities, and corruption that continue to shape the lives of young people in the region. Similar to the *Youth Study SEE 2018*, corruption in education remains a significant issue, manifesting in practices such as bribery for higher grades and unfair distribution of resources. Additionally, precarious employment continues to dominate the labor market in 2024, with corruption further eroding the quality and integrity of both education and employment. Party membership and political affiliation still play a notable role in securing jobs, particularly in non-EU and Western Balkan countries, though this influence has slightly diminished in most countries.

These findings underscore the need for comprehensive policy reforms, focusing on improving labor markets and education systems. Governments should enhance labor laws to protect young workers from precarious conditions, such as unstable contracts, low wages, and lack of benefits. Addressing gender disparities in employment is crucial, as young women currently face higher unemployment risks, are less likely to seek employment, and are more often employed in lower-paying professions such as education, healthcare, and the humanities. Encouraging youth representation in unions could help secure better job protections and mobilize political engagement. Expanding vocational education programs to align with labor market needs could also reduce youth unemployment.

To combat corruption, it is essential to restore trust and integrity in education systems. Implementing stringent anti-corruption measures and ensuring transparency in resource allocation are necessary to foster a trustworthy and equitable educational environment. In particular, Western Balkan governments must address the pervasive perception of corruption in securing employment through political connections.

In terms of socio-political values, the study reveals significant shifts compared to previous findings. Although support for a welfare state remains high, young people are increasingly moving away from authoritarian welfarism toward more libertarian attitudes.

The proportion of non-religious young people is also growing across the region, with some countries experiencing religious polarization. This decline in religiosity is more pronounced among women than men. While ethnonationalism is generally declining, it remains high or has even risen in some countries, particularly among men, although the gender gap has narrowed slightly since 2018.

These findings suggest the need for targeted measures to address ethnonationalism, particularly among young men. Political stakeholders should foster economic and educational initiatives that transcend cultural and historical divisions. Strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law should be prioritized, along with reconciliation and peacebuilding activities aimed at countering violent extremism. In addition to institutional reforms, ethnonationalism must be tackled in the discursive sphere. Combating disinformation and safeguarding media independence are critical to preventing the spread of ethnonationalist ideas, especially those targeting young men.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the move towards norms centered on individual choice does not always correlate with greater support for LGBTQIA+ rights. In fact, our findings reveal a notable shift in youth opinion in the opposite direction. In the majority of the countries that we surveyed, the proportion of young people who feel that the LGBTQIA+ community enjoys excessive rights has risen significantly. To address the shift in youth opinion towards perceiving LGBTQIA+ rights, it is crucial to implement comprehensive sex education and to advocate for inclusive policies.

On a positive note, young people in the region are increasingly satisfied with the democratic and economic outlook in their home countries, narrowing the gap in satisfaction with the EU. In non-EU countries, the prospect of EU membership remains a source of optimism. Governments should pursue domestic reforms to bring their countries closer to EU membership, addressing key concerns such as corruption, unemployment, and emigration.



When it comes to political perceptions and participation, the study shows a slight increase in political interest and self-assessed political knowledge among young people compared to previous studies, though both remain low. Despite this, the vast majority of young people feel underrepresented in national politics, with this sentiment particularly strong among women. To address this, governments should implement policies that increase youth participation in politics, with a special focus on young women. Enhancing political representation could boost both political interest and participation among young people.

Electoral participation remains the primary mode of political engagement, with stable voter turnout. However, it is still uncommon for young people in SEE to run for political office, and many abstain from voting because they feel no party appeals to them or that their vote won't make a difference. This underscores the need for political parties to address the specific needs of young people and to promote youth-targeted political education campaigns that emphasize the importance of voting and political participation.

Non-electoral political activities, widely embraced by young people in other parts of the world, remain limited in the SEE region. Gender differences are apparent, with women more frequently engaging in volunteer work, civil society activities, and political boycotts. Additionally, young people who identify with right-wing ideologies display higher levels of political engagement. Parties on the left need to find better ways to mobilize young people, while political actors should promote and fund civic education programs that emphasize the importance of non-electoral political engagement.

A concerning trend identified in the study is the declining support for democracy as the preferred form of government, alongside growing gender gaps in ideological orientation, with young women tending to hold more left-leaning views than men. While most young people in SEE still express support for democratic values, there is a growing openness to authoritarian leadership, reflecting uncertainty about democracy's ability to meet their needs.

Regional stakeholders must actively promote and defend democratic principles, emphasizing that no alternative system of governance can deliver better economic or societal outcomes for young people.

In terms of media consumption, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have become the primary sources of news and entertainment for young people in the region. Governments and educational institutions should implement comprehensive digital literacy programs to equip young people with the skills needed to critically assess and engage with digital media, helping them discern credible information from misinformation.

The study also highlights evolving migration patterns, with an increasing number of young people expressing a desire to migrate, although the intensity of this desire has decreased. Economic factors remain the primary motivation, but political considerations are also significant. Notably, there has been a shift from permanent to circular migration, particularly in non-EU countries. Governments should invest in job creation and economic development to address the primary economic motivations for migration and develop programs that encourage young people to return to their home countries.

Participation in educational mobility programs has increased, particularly in EU countries, with young men participating more than young women. Stakeholders should create policies to address this gender gap in educational mobility participation.

Finally, regarding the transition to adulthood, young people's attitudes toward parenthood and marriage are modernizing, especially in EU countries, while housing challenges for young parents remain significant. Policymakers should support young people's transition into adulthood by enacting employment policies that ensure stable jobs with secured employee rights and housing policies that provide affordable housing for young people.

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# Endnotes

- 1 Among those who responded that their current working field requires a lower level of formal education compared to their qualifications, 56.2% are male, 49.6% are from urban areas, and 50% aged between 25 and 29.
- 2 The dataset, however, only includes certain elements that could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of precarity in the region. Specifically, it lacks information on the number of jobs the respondents hold, the length of their employment with the same employer, as well as their financial independence, which could be assessed through the duration of their work. Additionally, the dataset does not cover self-assessment questions, such as whether temporary employment is a personal choice or the result of structural challenges, nor does it address job satisfaction. This limitation needs to be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.
- 3 The term comes from the recent book by Ronald Inglehart (2021), who coined it to denote tolerance of divorce, abortion and homosexuality, as well as support for equality. In our case, we merged items measuring tolerance towards homosexuality and abortion (both were recoded from a 1–10 to a 1–5 scale) and an item measuring social distance towards people from the LGBTQIA+ community. Cronbach's alpha at the level of the entire sample from 2018 and 2024 was 0.769.
- 4 Agreement with the statement "We should have a strong leader who does not have to bother with Parliament or elections".
- 5 It should be noted that gender differences are not statistically significant at the level of each individual country. In 2024, this was the case for Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Türkiye.
- 6 In order to make the results easier to interpret, we merged items measuring trust in eight different institutions. These institutions were: national government, national parliament, local government, political parties, judiciary, (courts), civil society organizations, police, and army. The Cronbach's alpha of internal consistency for the newly created variable was 0.895.
- 7 These are also the three countries with highest shares of young people who support EU membership.
- 8 Because concerns about corruption and unemployment were measured slightly differently in 2018, we cannot directly compare percentages across time. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that the rankings of these top issues have remained consistent.
- 9 This debate arises from the traditional, conventional understanding of political participation, which prioritizes holding governments accountable through voting, campaigning and party activities (Dahl 1973), in contrast to unconventional forms, such as protests, strikes or demonstrations, petitions and other civil activities such as volunteering or social movements (cf. Linssen et al. 2011; van Deth 2001; Verba and Nie 1972). One should also pay attention to the potential use and mobilization of role of young people by the regime to legitimize it. By intensifying their commitment through the ideological apparatus, political rituals, clientelist networks and economic dependence, this instrumentalized activism shows that governments would like to see a loyal youth focused on consolidating the status quo rather than being catalysts for societal change.
- 10 However, it is important to underline that the question on self-assessed political knowledge was both posed and measured differently in the previous wave of the FES Youth Study. In 2018, the question asked about political knowledge concerned the extent to which the respondents agree with the statement "I know a lot about politics" on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In contrast, the 2024 survey asked "How much do you know about politics?", with responses on a scale from 1 (nothing at all) to 5 (I know a lot). The question wording "a lot" could have influenced respondents to give lower agreement ratings because they feel less confident or more aware of their limitations with regard to political knowledge than a differently phrased question, like in the 2024 survey.
- 11 This trend has remained virtually unchanged from the last round of the youth survey. The share of young people who answered "very well" and "quite well" in the FES Youth Study in 2018 to the question how well are young people's interest represented in national politics is 13%, while the share of answers to the same question in 2024 is 13.4%.



- 12 As seen in this survey, 70.2% of those who refrained from voting as a matter of principle, and 67% who abstained from voting believing their vote wouldn't make any difference also reported very low levels of interest in politics.
- 13 As already noted, to make results easier to interpret, items measuring trust in national institutions and different political initiatives to show political participation were merged into one variable. New variables related to political initiatives include the following: signing a list of political demands/supporting an online petition; participating in a demonstration; participating in the activities of volunteer or civil society organizations; working in a political party or political group; ceasing to buy things for political or environmental reasons; and participating in political activities online/in social networks.
- 14 These scores are based on a 3-point scale, where 1 indicates "No", 2 denotes "I haven't yet, but I would", and 3 means "I've done this", based on the question: "Have you done or would you do any of the following?" with regard to the different forms of political engagement: "Signed a list of political demands/Supported an online petition"; "Participated in a demonstration"; "Participated in volunteer or civil society organization activities"; "Worked for a political party or political group"; "Stopped buying things for political or environmental reasons"; and "Participated in political activities online/on social media".
- 15 Percentages of those choosing answers 4 ("Agree") or 5 ("Completely agree") on a scale of 1 to 5.
- 16 Even with high internet penetration rates in Southeast Europe, it's noteworthy that these figures surpass those of countries such as Germany (91.6%), and Italy (around 86.4%) as of 2023 (DataReportal – Global Digital Insights 2023).
- 17 I would like to thank my colleague Prof Dr. Smiljka Tomanović from the University of Belgrade for valuable comments on earlier drafts of the chapters that I wrote.
- 18 Circular migration refers to short-term or medium-term movement patterns that involve leaving the country of origin and then returning, whether these movements are regular, occasional or one-time events.
- 19 Brain drain refers to the emigration of highly educated and skilled young people. In contrast, capacity drain refers to the emigration of young people of all educational levels who hold specific skills that are difficult to replace in their country of origin.
- 20 This discourse is particularly prominent in countries experiencing significant crises in democratic institutions, such as the Western Balkans.
- 21 Although migration from other parts of the world (Africa, the Middle East) and the forced migration of young people to Europe are significant for both the regional context and the EU, they were not the focus of this study.
- 22 With significant correlations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Serbia.
- 23 The Autocracy Scale is constructed from four 5-point items: "Under certain circumstances, dictatorship is a better form of government than democracy", "We should have a strong leader who does not have to bother with Parliament or elections", "I would sacrifice some civil liberties to secure a higher standard of living", and "sometimes civil liberties should be restricted to better protect citizens from terrorism or other threats". Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for all countries is .69, ranging from .53 in Albania to .75 in Romania.
- 24 The Democracy Scale is constructed from two 5-point items: "democracy is a good form of government in general" and "democracy is always and under all circumstances preferable to any other kind of government". Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for all countries is .81, ranging from .71 in Albania to .84 in Serbia.

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## **Imprint**

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