



EU-BALKAN YOUTH FORUM 2023 **“Western Balkans Future: how can YOUTH shape Europe?”**

**13-15
DECEMBER
2023**

EU-Balkan Youth Forum 23

-Conclusions-

The 2023 edition of the EU-Balkan Youth Forum (EUBYF), titled “*Western Balkans Future: How Can You(th) Shape Europe?*” was funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and organized by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).

This vibrant conference served as a platform for discussions on European integration, offering a unique space for youth to exchange ideas, foster mutual understanding and contribute to the development of a shared perspectives through interactive discussions and debates.

The goal of the Forum was to empower young civil society activists by equipping them with the tools and knowledge needed to make a positive impact in their communities and raise awareness about concrete opportunities offered by the European Union (EU) membership. This was achieved by focusing on three key areas: regional integration, environmental protection, and human capital. Divided in three Working Groups, 32 participants (from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia) and 8 ex-delegates for the first edition of the Forum (from Albania, Italy, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, and Serbia)

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

explored how the EU and regional cooperation can drive and inform positive changes in these fields, and how youth can benefit from these perspectives and related instruments.

After three days of intense deliberations and discussions young participants in each Working Group (regional integration, environmental protection, and human capital development) reached the following conclusions/recommendations that were presented to representatives of Italian and Serbian governments, as well as to the European Union and Regional Cooperation Council:

1. Regional Integration

- **History, reconciliation and “ghosts” of the past**

Recommendations: Investing into research dealing with the past conflicts, reconciliation and peacebuilding;

- **Education access, mutual recognition, and mobility across the region and access to Erasmus+**

Recommendations: Giving full Erasmus+ membership status to all EU candidate countries and potential candidates;

- **Recognition and cooperation of Umbrella Youth Council with governments, their resources and financing at the economy level**

Recommendations: Advocating for the legislative reform for the Umbrella Youth Councils to gain access to consistent funding and legal recognition and subsequent integration in all questions on youth based on good practices, legal frameworks and mechanisms in other economies;

- **Underrepresentation and under-participation of youth in politics and public life, lack of EU youth dialogue in the Western Balkans**

Recommendations: Reforming policies and opening them towards youth participation in decision-making and governing through initiatives, such as the EU-Balkan Youth Forum. Establishing a Joint Regional Accredited Youth Leadership Academy;

- **Enhancing connectivity within the Western Balkan region**

Recommendations: Making a joint initiative with the European Investment Bank to subsidise infrastructure projects connecting Western Balkan (WB) economies. Encouraging inter-Balkan tourism.

2. Environmental Protection

- Bolster regulatory frameworks to facilitate sustainable urbanization, seamlessly integrating urban forest planning into the city's holistic development;
- Proactively endorse and oversee initiatives for ecosystem restoration, championing projects that revitalize and safeguard our natural habitats;
- Promote non-formal educational strategies, cultivating sustainability awareness through dynamic platforms like workshops, conferences, training programs, and cross-cultural exchanges;
- Support inclusive decision-making, with a specific focus on execution of already existing laws regarding youth participation to shape environmental action plans;
- Encourage and support data-driven research on local flora and fauna, creating basic atmosphere for advocacy and financial support for biodiversity;
- Strengthen monitoring mechanisms to uphold existing environmental laws, ensuring transparency by publicly disclosing the process and progress;
- Implement routine audits, engage citizens through accessible reporting systems, and foster collaboration between enforcement agencies and environmental organizations for effective implementation and respect for legal frameworks.

3. Human Capital Development

- Urge the Western Balkans to increase human capital and invest in intelligent use of resources to increase economic growth and combat brain drain, especially for young people, as well as encourage innovation;
- Urge the WB to establish mentorship programs connecting experienced professionals from EU with students, providing guidance and support in various fields, including education and career development;
- Establishment of mentorship programs connecting experienced professionals from EU with students, providing guidance and support in various fields, including education and career development;

- Development of a comprehensive framework for funds aimed for improvement of education quality and implementation measures;
- More opportunities for practical work in specific fields between WB and EU institutions;
- Due to the EUBYF's positive effects in regional cooperation, our recommendation is for the forum to be implemented annually with novel themes based on pressing WB matters, including an evaluation of the institutions' response to the previous recommendations.

Participants, together with previous delegates, also expressed their wish for the EU-Balkan Youth Forum to continue in the future as they believe it brings significant added value to the young people of the Western Balkans and the European Union to come together and shape the future of Europe. Previous delegates also committed themselves to:

- establish a robust alumni network, fostering enduring connections among ex-delegates to facilitate ongoing collaboration, knowledge exchange, and support for future initiatives;
- contribute to the design and organization of the next editions of the Forum, ensuring its continuity and contribution to regional development and integration, drawing from the past editions outcomes and participants' networks;
- engage in addressing the recommendations presented to the EU and Western Balkan governments, working collaboratively to translate these insights into tangible policy improvements and impactful actions.

In order to secure the continued success of the EU - Western Balkan Youth Forum, we present the following strategic proposals to the Forum's stakeholders:

- to establish a comprehensive framework for continued support, including financial and logistical support within a multi year plan with the goal to improve the Forum's sustainability in the long-term;
- to implement an impact assessment mechanism to systematically evaluate the outcomes and effectiveness of the forum;
- to participate in the development and implementation of a strategic plan aiming at involving a broader spectrum of communities and stakeholders in the forum process, events, and post-forum outreach. This plan should include targeted initiatives to engage diverse demographics, ensuring representation from youth of various backgrounds.