



What's in for youth in the Economic and Investment Plan for the WB6?

Position Paper

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About Connecting Youth

Connecting Youth is a platform established in 2017 to promote youth connectivity in the region. It is the only initiative of its kind that works as a methodical tool to promote the cooperation and dialogue between youth as means for a resilient and diverse region. The initiative is built upon an impact-oriented approach, sustainability, and systemic presence in the policy-making areas relevant to youth.

Connecting Youth's main target group is youth in the Western Balkans Six. Throughout its life, the platform has operated based on an online and offline approach, thus involving our target group in these two dimensions. For our online target group Connecting Youth offers a unique and tailor-made space for youth in the region and beyond where they can meet, plan, organise, implement, and voice up their action. Through this online space, youth can find partners for joint activities, exchange ideas, consult a youth library, and build and carry outreach and lobbying action.

Our offline dimension strives to reach out and involve youth in the region through practical interventions that aim to address the challenges of youth on the ground. We achieve this through our partnership with six umbrella organisations in the Western Balkans Six – National Youth Congress of Albania, Youth Council of Federation of B&H, Kosovar Youth Council, High School Students Union of Montenegro, National Youth Council of Macedonia, and National Youth Council of Serbia.

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Introduction

In October 2020, the European Commission adopted the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans which aims to foster the post pandemic recovery of the region, its economic development and convergence with the European Union¹. The 30 billion Euro investment aims to spur public and private investments by the EU and International Financial Institutions. Six themes with ten flagship projects within this plan, have been designed to support human capital development, sustainable connectivity, competitiveness and inclusive growth, and the twin energy and digital transition.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of such investment, within the human capital theme is foreseen the development of the Agenda for the Western Balkans on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. The ever-growing challenges of youth in the Western Balkans such as emigration, brain drain, unemployment and low-quality education, aim to be addressed through brain circulation, sustainable innovation ecosystems and knowledge-based economies. This document appears as essential for more inclusive policy-making and better perspectives for youth in our region. In addition, the main Flagship project under this theme, will be Youth Guarantee as a solution - oriented intervention that offers employment, further education, training or apprenticeship.

As the Economic and Investment Plan is built on a project and performance-based model with a reform-oriented approach, governments ought to create mature project-proposals in line with the required legal framework, infrastructure, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Moreover, EC is currently working on the IPA III Programming Framework, the main strategic document for planning the financial assistance and the annual action plans are expected to be approved in December 2021. The WB6 governments have in the meantime started proposing specific interventions. While the EIP is still in the phase of planning and preparation, there is lack of information on the ground from all involved stakeholders. IPA III Regulation foresees that the Commission should ensure that relevant stakeholders, including civil society organisations and local and regional authorities, as appropriate, are duly consulted and have timely access to relevant information to allow them to play a meaningful role during the design and implementation of programmes and the related monitoring processes².

As such, within the 2021 Action Plan, Connecting Youth (CY) platform has initiated the assessment of the EIP from the perspective of youth, thus aiming to encourage youth active involvement in such

¹ DG NEAR. (2020). News article: EU and WBIF partners step up support to key infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans. Access through: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/eu-and-wbif-partners-step-support-key-infrastructure-projects-western-balkans-2020-12-11_en

² Official Journal of the European Union. (2021). *Regulations: Establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III)*. Access through: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R1529&qid=1632834466688&from=EN>

sectoral policy-making processes from their initiation to implementation, under the emphasis that rather than just being a beneficiary, youth should be an actor of change throughout the whole process.

Based on CY partners perspective, infrastructure projects mean mobility, connectivity means wider networks, digitalization means getting closer to global trends, and green transition means being able to live a better life. This position paper raises the issue of involving youth not only in EIP projects that are directly connected to them such as Youth Guarantee, but of considering youth as a group that should be involved and consulted in different sectors as well - through the opening of those sectors toward youth. The current consultative mechanisms and/or strategic planning processes in which youth involvement/engagement is not mainstreamed should be revised for the opening of these sectors towards youth to materialize. To strengthen this argument, the paper brings insights collected from six youth umbrella organizations in the Western Balkans in different sectors where youth involvement can be maximized ever since the planning/initiation of flagship projects in the region.

Do we have the preconditions to implement the EIP from the youth perspective?

The Economic and Investment Plan becomes more familiar for youth when accompanied by the key words: IPA Funds. As IPA III funds are in the preparation phase for distribution, the attention shifts on the impact of such funds and the development to be reached through them.

Political and economic challenges in Albania remain key factors why youth believe they are under-represented and not fully integrated in different areas such as: politics and decision-making processes, private sector, labor market, education and media. While the potential is very high³ opportunities in sectors according to youth remain low due to a chain of unstructured mechanisms.

In recent years, youth structures in Albania have played a crucial role in ensuring the legal framework related to youth is comprehensive and institutionally regulated to address youth needs cross-sectorally. Similarly, when it comes to the Economic and Investment Plan, the National Youth Congress of Albania, argues on the needed emphasis in intensifying the dialogue between government institutions and youth organizations *to ensure alignment of such investments with government strategic documents for the upcoming seven years*. Further involvement of civil society is crucial to ensure the effectiveness of such investments. So far, there is no monitoring mechanism established, which brings forward the *urgency of establishing monitoring platforms or mechanisms that also involve youth agencies and youth umbrella organizations*.

³ According to the INSTAT third quarterly report in 2020, youth represents 53,3% of the working force in Albania. Access through: <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/7812/lfs-q3-2020.pdf>

Broad and uninclusive policies are present in the rest of the WB6 as well. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the *disparities between education and labour market play a significant role in the existing high rates of unemployment*. Several government measures have been focused on incentivising self-employment through start-ups and entrepreneurship programs. However, the Youth Council of the Federation of BiH highlights that while there has been progress to incentivize the private sector and boost their competitiveness on the market, measures/policies intended for youth are undervalued. *Due to inadequate design and poor implementation of these policies, youth employability is not sufficiently boosted as it would if such measures were adequately implemented*.

Kosovar Youth Council highlights the digital transformation witnessed in different public sectors in the last five years. However, the COVID-19 further put to surface all shortcomings that youth face when transiting from paper to digital. According to the Kosovar Youth Council, *the skill barrier remains an important obstacle to e-service acceptance from citizens. Socioeconomic challenges, lack of education and lack of technical skills knowledge influence to a high extent the use of the e-services*. The effect is seen not only in the fact that a majority of the population is deprived of getting the benefits, but it also limits the efficiency and the effectiveness of institutions which should still stick to the traditional devices due to the low use of the e-services.

Rather than operational challenges, the High School Students Union of Montenegro raises the issue of the regulations when it comes to employment opportunities for youth in the country. While many young men and women choose to study and work at the same time to develop professional skills, *institutional regulations* put some barriers in front of them. In many cases, where companies/organizations want to organize training/internships in cooperation with higher education institutions, their implementation is not possible because currently there is no legal regulation for internships/practical-work of students during their studies.

When it comes to more concrete measures directed to youth, North Macedonia is a pioneer in the region with the piloting/implementation of Youth Guarantee, which provides further education, employment, training or internship for recent graduates. According to the National Youth Council of North Macedonia, although there are many gaps to be filled, such policies have an impact not only for improving the living standards, and in general, the living conditions for the young unemployed persons, but also in perspective for the euro-integration processes of the country.

Youth Guarantee has also been considered as a solution for the situation of youth employment in Serbia as well. Research conducted by the National Youth Council of Serbia finds that, while the recent years have shown an increase in the labour force participation rates, the improvement of the quantity of youth employment was not accompanied by an improvement in quality. Studies have shown that a proper introduction of a Youth Guarantee policy framework modelled on the one implemented in the European Union, would double the stock of young people eligible to receive a quality offer of employment, continued education and training.

Conclusions and recommendations

While EIP Flagship projects promise a lot when it comes to recovery and regional cooperation, on the field we see that through the lenses of youth there is still a lot to be done to ensure inclusiveness, impactful and shorter policy timelines. Mobility, environment, entrepreneurship, education and development are benefits of EIP Projects that will be lived by youth. To ensure they get the best of these opportunities, Connecting Youth recommends the following:

- 1- Country Sectoral Development Strategies and relevant institutional mechanisms should “open” and prioritize youth embedment in the programme and project cycle. Youth organizations and civil society must be a key partner in identifying the main issues related to youth aimed to be addressed through such programmes and projects;
- 2- Education institutions should foresee and consider the inclusion of informal learning in sectors such as STEM, maritime, energy, vocational programs, etc. Scholarship schemes in such sectors must be further encouraged from institutions;
- 3- Youth Guarantee schemes must be specifically designed to reach hard-to-reach youth who lack the opportunity to continue their development professionally and/or academically. In order to have stronger and more tangible results, youth organizations should be involved in the design of the policy, as well as in its implementation;
- 4- Harmonization of all legislation related to the Youth Guarantee to overcome the obstacles that prevent young people from making use of the measures in the YG. A monitoring and evaluation mechanism is crucial to ensure youth is getting a quality service through the measures offered within the YG;
- 5- Designing policies/schemes to aid the creation of start-ups with lower norms of interest, to encourage entrepreneurship and starting new businesses by young people. Easen the process of getting a loan and affording one.
- 6- Encourage creation of new regional sectoral hubs or support existing ones in sectors such as agriculture, environment, technology, energy and infrastructure, under the aim of youth employment mobility, information and experience exchange. Boost sectoral regional cooperation between universities, businesses, experts, government representatives etc.
- 7- Invest in enhancing the culture of dialogue between youth and institutions, by embedding the community interest as a shared value and principle served by just and accountable programmes and projects.

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