

A stylized map of Southeast Europe composed of a grid of dots. Some dots are grey, some are red, and some are white, creating a dotted outline of the region. The map is centered behind the title.

# Youth in South East Europe

## Lost in Transition

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- A set of representative national youth studies conducted in South East Europe (SEE) between 2011 and 2015 reveals an alarming distrust of political institutions among young people and their dissatisfaction with the state of democracy. Being politically socialized in an environment of prolonged transition to democracy, youth in SEE have a conservative outlook and constitute an unwilling agent for supporting democratization.
- Unemployment, poverty and job insecurity are the biggest concerns for youth across SEE. Therefore, emigration intentions are high, which is the strongest threat to any potential youth contribution to a better future.
- Support for the EU, and expectations from the EU, are higher among SEE's youth in aspirant countries, whereas the younger generation in EU member states is disillusioned with the EU and has a lower potential to support further democratization.
- Innovations in education, youth inclusion in politics, mobility and the labor market could help to retain and inspire young people to be a force for democratic change in SEE.

## Distrust in Democratic Institutions

Youth are the future, is a common saying across many countries, and there is an expectation that young people will be the agents of positive change in society. This expectation is amplified in new democracies. Countries that face democratization challenges often turn to youth in a promise that the future will be better. What, however, are the perceptions and extent of support by youth in SEE nations for democratization and the EU integration processes? And what impact does a nation's EU membership status have on youth perceptions of democratization and institutions? Are young people in each nation of interest likely to support or advance democratization processes in their home countries? For example, some authors have high expectations that young people in Kosovo can be agents of democratic change.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the younger generation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has managed to contribute toward overcoming ethnic divisions.<sup>2</sup>

To assess the views and aspirations of youth in SEE, young people, aged 14 to 29, from eight countries were interviewed between 2011 and 2014.<sup>3</sup> The results of these youth studies show an unsettling message for the future: Young people in SEE are alarmingly dissatisfied with the state of democracy in their home countries.

On average, only 17 percent of youth in SEE are satisfied with the state of democracy, and 38 percent are not satisfied. The remaining 45 percent are indifferent about this question. The gap between satisfaction and dissatisfaction is especially wide in Slovenia and Macedonia. In Macedonia, only 6 percent are satisfied with the state of democracy, while 44 percent are not satisfied. In Slovenia, almost 8 percent are satisfied, and 60 percent are not satisfied with the state of democracy. This gap is lower in Albania, Kosovo and Croatia.

This dissatisfaction is reflected in young people's very low levels of trust in the current democratic institutions. The least trusted institutions in this regard for youth in

Table 1: Percentage of youth who are (dis)satisfied with the state of democracy in their respective countries, combined answers for »very« and »somewhat«

	Satisfied	Not satisfied
<b>Albania</b>	24,1	27,8
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	18,4	36,3
<b>Bulgaria</b>	12	46
<b>Croatia</b>	25,7	21
<b>Kosovo</b>	24,3	23,8
<b>Macedonia</b>	6,2	44,5
<b>Romania</b>	18,3	43,9
<b>Slovenia</b>	7,9	59,8
<b>Mean</b>	17,1	37,9

SEE are the political parties. On average, only 15 percent of youth trust parties. This percentage is extremely low in Romania (5.5 percent) and Slovenia (8.6 percent), but even in Macedonia, where young people place most confidence in parties compared to youth in other countries, this figure does not exceed 27 percent. Concerning the young people's attitude towards their parliaments and governments, the picture is similar: Only one-fifth of youth trust in their national parliament or government. Again, the trust in parliament is lowest in Romania, only 8.6 percent, and »highest« in Kosovo, with roughly one-third. Confidence in government is lowest in Romania and Slovenia, about 12 percent in each, and highest in Macedonia, at 41 percent.

One reason for this lack of confidence might be that in SEE almost 70 percent of the young people think that their views and interests are not represented in politics; only 20 percent consider themselves to be appropriately represented. This gap is particularly alarming in Romania and Croatia, where only 10 percent and 11 percent, respectively, of youth feel represented in politics, while in both countries 77 percent say that they are not represented. Corresponding to these figures, only a minority of young people believe that they can influence the political institutions in their countries. On average, about a quarter believe they can influence the national governing institutions; concerning local institutions, young people are slightly more optimistic.

1. Feltes, T. (2013): »Youth and democracy: The promotion of youth participation by the international community in Kosovo«, in: *Security and Human Rights*, 24 (2): 195–209.

2. Hromadzic, A. (2011): »Bathroom mixing: Young negotiate democratization in postconflict Bosnia and Herzegovina«, in: *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 34 (2): 268–289.

3. Studies were conducted in Albania (2011), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014), Bulgaria (2014), Croatia (2012), Kosovo (2012), Macedonia (2013), Romania (2014) and Slovenia (2013).

Table 2: Percentage of youth who believe that they can influence governing institutions

	National	Local
<b>Albania</b>	40,4	50,8
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	15,6	17,5
<b>Bulgaria</b>	22,7	23,8
<b>Croatia</b>	17,4	19,3
<b>Kosovo</b>	41	48,3
<b>Macedonia</b>	30,9	38,9
<b>Romania</b>	25,7	31,6
<b>Slovenia</b>	14,4	24,3
<b>Mean</b>	26	31,8

Of all these countries, it is the youth in the non-EU states Albania and Kosovo who seem to be most confident that they can influence the governing institutions, while youth in the EU member states of Croatia and Slovenia are as skeptical that they can have any influence as their age-mates in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As a consequence, a very large percentage of youth in SEE is disengaged from politics. Whereas in Kosovo and Macedonia more than half say that they are interested in national politics, this percentage drops considerably in Albania, Bulgaria and Croatia, where only 36 to 41 percent are interested in national politics. The situation is even worse in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with about one-fourth of young people being interested in national politics, and in Romania only 14 percent. On average, only a quarter of young people across SEE said that they had voted in all elections since they obtained the right to vote. Reported electoral participation is highest in Macedonia (41 percent) and lowest in Slovenia (13 percent). Romania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are very special cases in this regard: In both countries there are twice as many young people who report being active in politics than those who are interested in national politics or participate in elections. At the same time, in both countries trust in parties is extremely low. The reason for this seeming contradiction may be that youth see involvement and activity in a political party as a route to future employment or better socioeconomic opportunities. Therefore, youth may dislike parties, but also consider them as the only vehicles yielding a chance for future prospects.

## Alternative Forms of Youth Engagement in Politics

It is remarkable that in some countries in SEE the willingness of young people to volunteer (to do public work, help the disabled or old people etc.) is reciprocal to their reported electoral participation: In Slovenia, for instance, the highest level of volunteering is reported (38 percent), while youth in Macedonia are among those that volunteer the least (13 percent). Volunteering seems to be more common among youth in Romania, Bulgaria and Kosovo (21 to 23 percent). Also, for youth in Kosovo and Slovenia, civil society activism (going to seminars, conferences and other informal education or taking part in sport or cultural activities) is much more popular (45.9 and 27.9 percent, respectively), compared to being active in politics (32.4 and 9.3 percent, respectively); in the other countries this ratio is more balanced.

It seems that youth choose different pathways to be socially active. The ones who are disappointed with politics are more likely to volunteer or to be active in civil society, since they trust these institutions more than they trust political parties, parliament and the government: Prolonged democratic deficiencies, including an increase in political polarization and frequent political deadlocks have lowered youth's trust in political institutions. Instead of delivering improvements in public goods and services, political institutions are judged as being more geared towards serving the interests of the political elite. Corruption and patronage practices are widespread. Civil society institutions are not so much connected with abuse of power and are therefore more favored by young people. Nevertheless, even in this realm the younger generation remains mainly skeptical: In none of the countries is there a majority that trusts NGOs. The percentage is relatively high in Kosovo (44 percent) and Slovenia (43 percent), and very low in Romania (28 percent) and Bulgaria (16 percent).

In general, youth have greater trust in those institutions which perform a control function, especially in the media and the judiciary, than in those which perform an executive function. The trust in the media is highest in Kosovo (56 percent) and Albania (55 percent), and the trust in the judiciary is highest in Kosovo and Macedonia (44 percent in each). Youth in Romania have the lowest level of trust in the media (28 percent), and youth in Bulgaria have the least trust in the judiciary (21 percent).

Besides media and the judiciary, young people place the most trust in institutions such as religious leaders (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Romania), the police (Croatia), the European Court of Human Rights (Bulgaria), the EU (Macedonia) and educational institutions (Slovenia). Slightly less than 30 percent of youth in SEE display trust in unions. The level of trust in unions is higher in Macedonia (46 percent) and Kosovo (40 percent) and lower in Romania (15 percent) and Bulgaria (11 percent).

## Disillusionment with the EU and High Emigration Potential

The youth studies revealed great threats and weaknesses in regard to the future role of youth in SEE during the democratization process. Especially disturbing seem to be the findings about the desired impact of a nation's EU membership status on youth perceptions of democratization and institutions: Young people in aspirant and candidate countries are more supportive of the EU than are those in EU member states. The corresponding figures are very high in Albania (88 percent), Kosovo (82 percent), Macedonia (73 percent) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (55 percent), but low in Bulgaria (45 percent), Croatia (42 percent) and Slovenia (33 percent).

Most young people in aspirant and candidate countries have high expectations and think they stand to gain from EU membership. Their main expectations are connected to economic opportunities and free movement. At the same time, youth in member states agree that there have been some positive benefits from EU membership, but they also share their disappointment. For example, about one-third of the youth in Bulgaria recognize that there were benefits from EU membership in regard to travel possibilities, new friendships and improvement of minority rights.

However, many are disappointed that their living standard, employment and economic development did not improve as anticipated. Disillusionment with the EU has therefore lowered support for the EU among youth in member states. Also, the effects from the economic crisis have taken their toll. The expectations of youth that their standard of living would increase and that they would have better economic opportunities with accession to the EU were not met. On the contrary, in recent years, new EU member states have experienced sluggish economic growth. At the same time, national policy

making is heavily influenced by decisions made in Brussels. Altogether, this has led youth to question whether it was a good idea to enter the EU.

In Croatia, for example, young people expected cultural, educational and economic benefits from EU membership, but since their country became a member of the EU in 2013, they consider that there have been negative consequences in regard to dependency on Brussels, economic exploitation and limits to their country's development. Only 28 percent of youth in Croatia trust EU institutions, but 21 percent do not trust them, while the rest of the youth in Croatia are unable to express their attitudes toward EU institutions. The situation in Slovenia is even more alarming. Most young people are not satisfied with EU integration. 67 percent consider that EU integration has had negative effects on the economy, and 66 percent consider EU integration to have exerted a negative effect on politics. 45 percent think Slovenia should drop the Euro and leave the EU altogether.

This dissatisfaction also decreases youth willingness to push for political change. Being dissatisfied with domestic political institutions and being disillusioned with the EU has led the younger generation in new member states to be more passive and therefore less willing to contribute to further democratization.

Another weakness among the youth in SEE is that they show limited potential to develop social capital and cross-cutting cleavages. For example, most of the youth in SEE place the greatest trust in their family and relatives, and they are more trusting of their friends and colleagues than of their neighbors. Additionally, most youth in SEE place considerably less trust in persons whose religion and political beliefs differ from their own. At the same time, youth in SEE have limited potential for accepting social or cultural diversity. For example, asked about what kind of family they would like to have as neighbors, they would much prefer a family from Western Europe than one from the region. Youth would welcome students or pensioners as neighbors; however, they would not like to have a Roma or gay family as their neighbors. These results cast a shadow over the willingness of youth in SEE to be agents of democratic change.

One would have expected young people to be more progressive, but the results of the youth studies corroborate the point that youth in SEE have a rather conservative

outlook: For example, about 90 percent of youth consider that religious affiliation is important for their personal identity, and in some countries a large majority say they believe in the existence of heaven and hell. Youth in all SEE countries pointed out that personal dignity is the most important value for them. To have a career and to be independent is also highly popular, along with completing their educations. This shows that youth place more value on honor and individualism than they do on tolerance toward diversity and cooperation. Young people in SEE have lived through a period of prolonged transition to democracy. At the same time, nationalistic and authoritarian tendencies remain strong in their countries. The problems of democratic development have had an effect on youth's political socialization. In the absence of a stronger infusion of democratic values, some young people have appropriated socially conservative values that are strongly present in SEE countries. If the youth are not exposed to progressive ideas, than it is quite likely that they will be influenced by the social environment in which they live.

However, the greatest threat for the future of SEE is the very probable loss of human capital. The results of these youth studies show that emigration intentions are high across different countries.

Table 3: Percentage of youth, by country, expressing an intention to leave, combined answers for »very« and »somewhat«

	Emigration
<b>Albania</b>	66,7
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	49,2
<b>Bulgaria</b>	42,5
<b>Croatia</b>	26,7
<b>Kosovo</b>	55,1
<b>Macedonia</b>	52,8
<b>Romania</b>	39,9
<b>Slovenia</b>	30,8
<b>Mean</b>	45,5

When asked for the main reasons for leaving, most young people say that they want to improve their standard of living, while gaining access to better employment

possibilities and better education. For example, in Kosovo about half of those planning to leave cite an improved standard of living as the main reason, and one-fifth say they plan to leave to access better education.

Western Europe, especially Germany but also Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Austria and Italy, has the strongest gravity pull when it comes to emigration destination; nevertheless, there are country variations in the most preferred destination. There are several reasons behind these results. Notwithstanding their disappointment with the effect of their country's EU membership, most young people in SEE still recognize their future in the EU and therefore are more likely to move to an EU country. They want to go to Western Europe because it is more prosperous and has a better standard of living than East central and Eastern Europe. Also, Western Europe has been a frequent destination in recent emigration trends from SEE. It is likely that youth in SEE have networks and contacts (e.g. family or friends) on which they can rely in Western Europe. Also, EU educational programs have supported mobility of students from SEE to EU member states. After having the experience of living in another country, perhaps youth in SEE are more open to the idea of moving there.

## Critical Times: A Call for Youth to Engage in Political Change?

In a comparative analysis based on the youth studies, ten attitudinal and behavioral indicators were selected that represent values, political interest and participation and emigration expectations, to assess youth's democratization potential. Higher results in terms of the values and political interest and participation were assumed to denote greater democratization potential. This means that, if youth were more engaged in politics or in civil society, if they had greater trust in political institutions, took more interest in national politics, believed that they were politically represented and thought that they could influence governing institutions—then the assumption is that they would be more willing to contribute toward democratic change. On the other hand, higher results in emigration expectations were assumed to diminish the democratic potential of youth.

The results for youth responses in each country were assessed in relation to the other SEE countries. The summary of the assessment is that youth in Kosovo have the

highest democratization potential, followed by Albania, Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia. It would seem that youth's democratization potential is higher when the challenges for democracy are greater. Bosnia and Herzegovina is an exception; however, in the other countries, if democracy is more stable, then youth's drive for further democratization is lower. For example, Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia still face some challenges with democratization, but according to the results, young people in these countries are more willing to get involved in politics than in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia, which are more stable democracies.

The status of the country vis-à-vis the EU could provide another explanation for the results. For example, youth in SEE countries that aspire to join the EU show greater potential than youth in countries that are already EU members. The youth in the former still have high expectations from the EU, and therefore hope that things can be changed at home; in contrast, youth in the latter are disillusioned with the EU and dissatisfied with domestic politics and therefore are less likely to push for change.

This is an interesting and somewhat counter-intuitive finding. One would expect youth to support democratization if they are provided with more opportunities. However, it appears that youth are more willing to support democratization if they have higher hopes from a future in the EU, along with a political setting that is still in transformation. This resonates with findings from other studies which claim that, if the youth are dissatisfied and frustrated or if they see their personal interests at stake, then they are more likely to be active in political change. As explained by Chisholm and Kovacheva, »major political crises with potential consequences for the future of democracy clearly mobilize young voters, whereas their participation falls when democratic political life is stable and seems to be running smoothly«.<sup>4</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

The slogan »youth are the future« is no self-fulfilling prophecy. Franklin D. Roosevelt believed that »we cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can

build our youth for the future«. How can we inspire the young to stay in their home countries and get involved in improving democracy? In the first place, labor market policies are needed to retain young people in SEE. Technical and vocational education should be reformed so as to bear a direct relation to labor market needs. National governments should put in place policies to support youth job creation, for example, giving grants or subsidies for youth self-employment and subsidies for youth employment. SEE countries should develop a set of »brain gain« programs and start to make greater efforts to attract back the human capital which they have lost.

Furthermore, governments and NGOs should start with improvements in the education system. Policy innovations are necessary to strengthen the democratic capacities of youth in SEE. These might include compulsory courses on civic education, with elements of experiential learning (e.g. study visits, guest lectures), in primary or secondary school and more support for youth informal civic education. Support for youth organizations would be beneficial to expand informal education possibilities, but also to empower youth engagement. Furthermore, compulsory civil service in the final year of high school should be considered. This would increase the sense of civic duty and social solidarity, while helping youth to develop social skills.

A third set of policy innovations is needed to include young people more in policy making processes. Youth should at least be consulted when their interests and needs are concerned. According to the results of the studies, it would be more advisable to include youth in local governance. Local governments deal with practical, hands-on issues. If youth are included, it is likely that they will develop a greater sense for participatory collective action; they would learn about the policy process and contribute to it.

Greater youth mobility in the SEE region and the EU would also be beneficial for overcoming historic divisions and for developing an understanding of and appreciation for social diversity. Mobility allows for new experiences to be gathered. It also allows for diffusion of values and standards. If youth from SEE, are more exposed to environments which are democratically consolidated, then it is more likely that this will induce higher expectations of and demand for their domestic environment.

4. Chisholm, L./Kovacheva, S. (2002): *Exploring the European Mosaic: The Social Situation of Youth in Europe*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe: 36.



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