YOUTH PERCEPTIONS ON PEACE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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FOREWORD

Since the conflicts in the Balkans and the fall of communism in Albania in the 1990s, a new generation has risen to adulthood in the Western Balkans. Whether born during the conflicts or since, young women and men under 30 continue to experience the legacies of the past in their everyday lives – yet their views are often missing from debates on peace and development in the region.

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, adopted in 2015, offers a clear framework for engaging young people in sustaining peace and recognizes their positive contribution in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Its five pillars of action: meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding; protection of youth activists; prevention of violence; engaging in equal partnerships with youth; and ensuring the re-integration of those engaged in violence are pathways for peace in the region. Five years since the adoption of this milestone resolution, youth-led peacebuilding is taking centre stage in the Western Balkans.

Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans is a strong testimony to just that. Young people have become vital actors in the building of sustainable and peaceful societies. Drawing on the voices of over 5,400 youth from different walks of life, the study sheds light on how young people experience and perceive the past, what they would like to do about their present and what aspirations they have for themselves and their societies. Shared Futures shows that young people's hopes and values are often closely aligned. They are united in the belief that hatred and conflict are not inevitable, and they are optimistic about their role in realizing a more just and peaceful world.

How we respond to this optimism is of the essence. Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans sends a strong signal to governmental policy makers and international organizations alike. It is time to listen to and

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understand young people's concerns and aspirations and prevent the disillusionment that many young people feel through amplifying their platforms, supporting their active participation in the decisions that shape their societies, and by fostering opportunities for young people to meet and build relationships across ethnic, religious and geographic lines.

Placing young people at the centre is the right strategy – for empowering a new generation to find the solutions to challenges yet to be resolved and for creating a strong force for a more peaceful and sustainable world.

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KEY MESSAGES

MORE THAN 5,400 YOUNG PEOPLE aged 15-29 years from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia participated in the regional study *Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans.* This report highlights the voices of youth and their perceptions and experiences related to peace and social cohesion in their societies and in the wider Western Balkans region.

The key messages emerging from the study are the following ones:

● **Young people are central actors in the building of sustainably peaceful societies** in the Western Balkans. They share many commonalities and mostly view one another with trust and curiosity, although at times with caution. Their hopes and values across the region are closely aligned. Most are confident that their generation is a positive force in their society and are optimistic about being able to resolve some of the persistent challenges in the region.

● **Trust between government and society** is a critical aspect of peace and social cohesion. Across the region, young people's satisfaction with their governance systems and institutions is relatively low, while satisfaction in civil society and youth organizations is ambivalent although similarly low. Unsurprisingly, the lowest satisfaction of youth is with employment opportunities. When asked if the pandemic had negatively impacted their trust in government and decision-makers, 58 percent of youth felt it had done so. Repairing the broken connections and trust between young people and decision-makers is an essential task.

*   For the UN, all references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). For RYCO, this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with Security Council Resolution 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

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- **Civic space** is the foundation of any open, cohesive and democratic society. Young people recognize that they have an important role in effectuating change. Yet only an average of 19.5 percent of youth in the region participate in civic activities. Still, a huge potential appears to exist for civic engagement, with over 65 percent across the region reporting interest in being more actively involved. Young people's sense of self-efficacy and agency are associated with open-mindedness towards other groups and more optimism about peace in the region. Paving the way for young people's increased engagement and sense of agency is therefore critical.

- Young people's **democratic and egalitarian values** are importantly related to attitudes of social cohesion and peace. Young people's alignment with democratic values appears to be directly related to a recognition of the similarities between Western Balkan peoples and hope for improved future relations in the Western Balkans. Further, there appears to be a negative correlation between supporting authoritarian values and satisfaction with government in most countries/territories. Hence, it is important to understand what drives young people to support authoritarian views, address the root causes behind them, and reinforce transparent and inclusive government.

- When it comes to **important social causes,** young people indicate helping the poor and marginalized, democracy and human rights and building peace and reconciliation as their top choices – pointing to an important and untapped potential for wider engagement of youth in peacebuilding and strengthening social cohesion. There is also a gap between young people's areas of interests and what some of them eventually engage in, indicating a need for more diverse, formal and informal platforms for civic participation.

- **Freedom from fear and violence** lie at the very foundation of cohesive and prosperous societies. There were a few unifying safety and security concerns that youth in the Western Balkans expressed. Organized crime and internet safety were among the top concerns among youth in most societies. Young people across the region rated hate crime as a relatively high concern – young women expressed higher concern for hate crime, internet safety

and domestic violence in comparison to young men.

- **Hate speech online or offline** was the most reported form of violence or discrimination, with an average of 12 percent of young people reporting it across the region, significantly more than was bullying. Discrimination based on age, political affiliation or ethnicity were also frequently reported. Young women reported gender discrimination and sexual harassment much more often than men did. Out of those who had experienced violence or discrimination, only 17 percent reported this to anyone and just 58 percent felt that reporting had brought any positive results. This indicates a need for better mechanisms for youth to report experiences of discrimination and violence and for institutions and authorities to address these issues.

- Peace and social cohesion are strengthened by **inclusive social policies and the protection of marginalized and disadvantaged groups of people.** Ethnic, political or religious discrimination is a much more common experience for non-majority youth than their majority peers. Youth of non-majority ethnicity are also more likely to report being victims of physical violence or the threat of violence, much less likely to participate in civic activities and express significantly less satisfaction with governing institutions across the whole region.

- Exceptionally high rates of youth **outward migration** represent a problem for both the youth themselves and for the societies they leave behind and are a symptom of other societal ills. An average of 52 percent of youth say that they envisage themselves living outside of the region in 10 years. Yet they also express clear hesitations about migrating: fears of disillusionment and being treated as second-class citizens abroad, as well as a reluctance to leave family, friends and a familiar lifestyle. Outward migration while serious, is not irreversible.

- **Trust, relationships and interactions among people,** across societal divisions such as identity or other social constructs, are important aspects of peace and social cohesion. The region's divisions and conflicts have not left young people entirely untouched, but for the most part, young people express openness to friendship with members of different groups. When measuring social distance, youth in Albania stand out from their peers by

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expressing much lower levels of social distance toward other groups, followed by young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina expressing the lowest social distance out of the remaining five. Young people with close friends from other groups and those who live in multiethnic and fully integrated communities show lower social distance towards other groups than their peers. Some 47 percent of respondents in the region reported trusting other groups despite past conflicts, while 24 percent of youth said they did not trust other groups in the region – these attitudes vary among the Western Balkan societies and different socio-demographic groups.

● **More young people are optimistic than not about peace and improved relations** in the region. There is relatively little variation between societies, while young women tend to be more optimistic. Even in the most pessimistic case, 42 percent of respondents expected relations to improve. Just 8 percent expected regional relations to deteriorate, while the rest expected no change. When evaluating possibilities for peace, a forward-looking frame of reference resonated better with youth, something to consider when approaching the topic of dealing with the past.

● Asked to name up to three most effective factors for peace and stability, up to 47 percent of youth think the EU accession process is the most important **factor in creating long-term peace and stability** in the Western Balkans, although responses vary highly by ethnicity. A well-functioning democracy, teaching peace and tolerance, dialogue between leaders and economic prosperity were also seen as important factors for peace and stability by more than 25 percent of young people in the region.

● Intergroup contact has often been used as a tool for improving intergroup trust and relations. *Shared Futures* found that when it comes to intergroup social relations, the **quality of intergroup relationships** not only trumps quantity; the two may possibly have different consequences. Having mere acquaintances from other communities, particularly in specific social environments characterized by segregation or other forms of discrimination, can be counter-productive in that it could in some cases facilitate more negative attitudes towards others. Opportunities for young people to meet and build friendships across

ethnic, religious and geographic lines should be fostered, because they are associated with a wide range of positive outcomes.

- Youth who express a **focus on the past** and feel that they and their societies have been negatively impacted by the past conflicts report lower intergroup trust and less positive perceptions of other ethnic groups in the Western Balkans. A considerable proportion of young people in the region, ranging from 15 to 63 percent, say they are unwilling to forgive others for past deeds. There is a need to engage young people in constructive dialogue about the past and its effects on their current realities.

- **Divisive narratives** represent an important obstacle to the achievement of social cohesion within the region as a whole. Some 42 percent of youth say it is common to see content offending their society on social media. Between 49 and 75 percent of young women and men are concerned about fake news and conspiracy theories. While most young people did not endorse freedom of expression extending to the right of hate speech, important proportions in each society thought this was acceptable, and many had personally experienced it.

- The most important sources of information for youth to **learn about the other peoples in the region** are parents and family members, friends and social media. Schools, books and traditional media are also important sources of information while cultural activities, regional projects and youth exchanges are much less so. Yet between 61 and 91 percent of young people agree that youth exchanges can have a positive impact on regional relations, pointing to a potential opportunity to advance interaction between youth.

- **Travel experiences** of youth are associated with their sense of agency, interest in civic engagement and lower social distance to other groups, all which were also found to be associated with pro-social behaviour and more optimistic views about peace. Overall, about 36 percent of Western Balkan youth have been outside of the region in the past two years, while an average of 50 percent of young women and men have travelled within the Western Balkans. Lack of finances, the consequences of past conflicts, preference for travelling elsewhere and prejudices against other peoples of the Western

Balkans are seen as obstacles for regional travel.

Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans was compiled by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). It was developed through a uniquely participatory research process which involved a youth advisory group, representing youth across the Western Balkans region, in the design of the study framework and the analysis of its findings. The study is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected through a regional survey and several focus group discussions between December 2020 and April 2021.

INTRODUCTION

YOUNG PEOPLE PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE in efforts for sta-
bility and peace and in strengthening social cohesion in
societies. As asserted in the United Nations Security Council
Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (2015), youth
can play a decisive role in the prevention and resolution of
conflicts and are a key aspect of the sustainability, inclusive-
ness and success of peacebuilding efforts.[1] Yet while it is
generally accepted that the legacies of conflict continue to
affect the everyday life of youth in the Western Balkans, the
views of young women and men from different walks of life
on how they experience and perceive the past, what they
would like to see change in the present and how they want
their societies to develop in the future have been missing
from policy debates and dialogues on regional cooperation.

With a combined population of nearly 18 million people,[2] the
Western Balkans – for the purposes of this report, Albania,
Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Mace-
donia, and Serbia – is home to a multitude of ethnic and
nationality groups, and to one of the youngest populations in
Europe.[3] The region has experienced profound transforma-

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1   United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015)
2   European Commission, Western Balkans: A Market of Close to 18
     Million People.
3   More than half of the population in Kosovo is under 25, making it the
     youngest population in Europe. United Nations Development Pro-
     gramme (UNDP) and Folke Bernadotte Academy: Social Cohesion
     in Kosovo: Context review and entry-points, 2019.

tions in recent decades set off by the collective experiences of the breakdown of communism across Eastern Europe and the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the attendant violent conflicts. As the region has transitioned from conflict to post-conflict settings, governments have embarked on ambitious socio-economic and governance reforms and new forms of regional collaboration have emerged, with the European Union (EU) accession path further advancing economic development, institutional reforms and regional efforts in sustaining peace.

Yet important challenges to peace and regional stability remain. In many parts of the region, a legacy of unaddressed bilateral and regional disputes persists, while transitional justice processes remain uncompleted. Polarizing and ethnic-nationalist discourse have the potential to negatively affect regional relations, as do the lack of constructive dialogue, competing narratives about the past, present and future, and disputes over the fate of missing persons and ethnic minority rights. Many aspects of public life – politics, public spending, the media, and employment – are dominated by networks of patron-client relations with access to wealth and the ability to operate outside formal channels with impunity, thereby contributing to perceptions of high levels of corruption.[4] Youth unemployment in the region has been consistently high: at around 30 percent in 2019, it was more than twice as high as the EU average.[5] Challenges to good governance and peace have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic,[6] as have pressures on young people in terms of accessing employment and education.[7]

The Western Balkans' efforts to rise above the challenges may depend to a large extent on their ability to foster regional collaboration and to strengthen social cohesion

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4   Transparency International, Examining State Capture: Undue Influence on Law-Making and The Judiciary in The Western Balkans and Turkey, December 2020.
5   World Bank, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020, March 2020.
6   Carnegie Europe, Filling Democracy's Gaps in the Western Balkans, 7 December 2020.
7   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), The COVID-19 Crisis in the Western Balkans: Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions, 2020.

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within and among their societies – social cohesion meaning people's trust in governments and in each other, and their willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals.[8] Regional cooperation has been supported by diplomatic initiatives, including the Berlin Process led by EU Member States[9] and the EU's Western Balkans engagement strategy. The 2018 EU enlargement strategy[10] highlighted the importance of reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres included the region in his list of 12 global priorities in 2018.[11] Leaders of the region have set up regional structures promoting regional connectivity and understanding, including the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).

However, building and sustaining peace in the region also demands a radical shift and reorientation of governments and the multilateral system towards the transformative potential of young people. Recognizing and supporting the many ways in which young people wish to or already engage in building their societies is an essential step towards developing a cohesive and prosperous region. Compared to their predecessors, the younger generation in the Western Balkans has no memory of a time before the conflicts, and either experienced it as infants or grew up listening to its accounts – while living in post-conflict segregation along ethnic lines. Some have observed that through the inter-generational transfer of traumas and divisive narratives, this generation is more hardened in its identity lines, making prospects for social cohesion more difficult to attain. Yet others have suggested that young people could be more inclined to move beyond division and interact freely both online and offline. What is clear, however, is that we need better and regionally comparable evidence on young peo-

8   UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and programming implications, 2020.
9   In November 2020, a Berlin process Western Balkans Summit was jointly presided over for the first time by an EU member (Bulgaria) and a Western Balkans candidate (North Macedonia).
10 European Commission, A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, 2018
11 United Nations, Warning that 'peace remains elusive,' UN chief outlines areas for action in 2018,

ple's attitudes and perceptions to develop impactful policies and programming on youth-led peacebuilding.

The study *Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans* provides just that, outlining the key messages and priorities of young women and men, between 15 and 29 years of age in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.[12] The research process was conducted through a unique youth-inclusive and participatory approach, involving young people in the design and analysis phases, and paid particular attention to capturing a representative sample of youth of diverse ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. The study was developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), with the support of the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund. By bringing the voices of youth to the forefront, *Shared Futures* represents a commitment to advancing the Youth, Peace and Security agenda as a core dimension of the regional work efforts to build and sustain peace.

In the sections that follow, *Shared Futures* provides further details on the methodology and key concepts employed, then proceeding to present key findings from the data taken together with insights from the wider literature. The findings are organized into two parts: the first is a description of social cohesion in the region from a youth perspective; the second an analysis of opportunities for and risks to strengthening peace and social cohesion. The final section reflects on the implications for policy and programming, identifying key takeaways.

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12   There is no one definition of youth, and age brackets vary depending on the context. For the purposes of this study, data was collected from young people aged 15-29 years. The United Nations, however, for statistical purposes, defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.

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METHODOLOGY

Participatory approach

In an effort to practice what is preached, *Shared Futures* was developed through a uniquely participatory research process which involved a youth advisory group of 23 young women and men across the Western Balkans region in the design of the study framework and the analysis of its findings. The advisory group was put together through an open call and included students, young activists and young professionals engaged in various peacebuilding and community work, ranging from advocacy and academic efforts to grassroots activities. The co-design process consisted of 7 online consultations with the youth advisory group for the design of the study including training on conflict analysis, 6 training sessions on behavioural aspects of peacebuilding and 6 locally organized face-to-face data analysis workshops.

Data for this study is representative of the youth population in the Western Balkans and included respondents of diverse ethnicities and educational and socio-economic backgrounds as well as youth living in urban and rural areas. The data was collected through quantitative and qualitative methods that included a region-wide survey and focus group discussions.

Quantitative survey

The survey data consisted overall of 5,435 interviews, with approximately 900 interviews each in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, with a margin error ±3,26% confidence interval level of 95% (Table 1).

The sample ensured national coverage, was representative of 15-29-year-olds and was distributed proportionally between urban and rural areas. The written consent of the parent or guardian was obtained for interviews with minors (those 15-17 years old). The methodology used for the collection of the data was in-person Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews, whereby the interviewer used an electronic device to record the responses. For specific sections of the survey, dealing with the respondent's experiences of violence or discrimination or personal identification, the device was handed over to the respondent for answering privately. An interview was considered successful when the selected respondent was contacted and they agreed to participate in the study, and their answers were appropriately recorded. Interviews with more than 30 percent of empty or non-valid responses (such as do not know or refuse to answer) were considered unsuccessful and excluded from the data.[13]

When selecting the primary sampling units, stratification and probability were applied. Households were selected via the random route method, and the sample distribution reflected official data in the region as pertains to gender and age parameters.

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13   During and following the data entry phase, the data was subject to five kinds of checks: range checks, checks against reference data, skip checks, consistency checks and typographic checks. The quality of the data was controlled for the first few interviews by each interviewer and through 10–15 percent random backchecks of each interviewer's completed interviews. An additional 10 percent of randomly selected questionnaires were checked through a follow-up with the respondent via telephone/mobile.

	Achieved sample
Albania	901
Bosnia and Herzegovina	924
Kosovo	900
Montenegro	902
North Macedonia	908
Serbia	900
Total	**5,435**

Table 1. Achieved sample across the Western Balkans.

The sample included young people of different age groups and educational and economic backgrounds as well as young people living in urban and rural areas (Figure 1). About 20 percent of the young people interviewed said they were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and 40 percent reported living in households with a modest or poor economic situation.

The data collection placed a special focus on representativeness of ethnicities in the region (Figure 2). Ethnicity was ascertained through the self-identification of the respondent. When needed, boost samples were applied. Boost samples were not applied when the various ethnicities were captured sufficiently in the main sample (Table 2).

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Type of settlement
- Rural/village — 45.3
- Urban/city — 54.7

Reported household economic situation
- Not available — 2.0
- Enough money for anything wanted or needed — 21.9
- Enough money for some expensive items like a TV or a refrigerator — 35.6
- Enough money for food and clothing but not enough for more expensive items — 34.0
- Enough money for food but not enough for clothing — 5.5
- Not enough money for food — 1.0

NEET
- Not in education, employment or training — 19.7

Current activity status
- Unemployed — 15.0
- Inactive — 6.3
- Employed part-time — 6.6
- Employed full-time — 29.2
- Still in education — 39.4

Highest completed edu.
- Tertiary (ISCED V) — 20.5
- Secondary (ISCED III, IV) — 35.2
- Primary (ISCED I, II) — 4.8

Age
- 25-29 — 35.9
- 18-24 — 46.9
- 15-17 — 17.2

Sex
- Female — 50.7
- Male — 49.3

Figure 1. Survey respondent profiles, percentages of the whole sample. ISCED: International Standard Classification of Education. Note: analysis weight applied, weight adjusted for the size of population and ethnicity.[14]

14 For analysis purposes, two weights were created. The sampling weight adjusted the sizes of ethnic groups in the overall sample on the level of each society, while the analysis weight included the proportion of ethnic groups and population size on the regional level. The first weight was used for presenting data on the local level, and for comparison between societies. The second weight was used for presenting the data for the region as a whole.

Albania	Albanian	98.6
	Roma	1.2
	Other	0.3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bosniak	52.1
	Serb	31.0
	Roma	1.0
	Croat	15.5
	Other	0.4
Kosovo	Albanian	92.5
	Serb	4.0
	Roma	1.9
	Bosniak	1.5
	Other	0.1
Montenegro	Montenegrin	45.9
	Serb	29
	Bosniak	12.4
	Albanian	6.0
	Roma	1.4
	Other	5.2
North Macedonia	Macedonian	65.4
	Albanian	25.4
	Roma	4.4
	Other	4.8
Serbia	Serb	88.6
	Bosniak	2.7
	Roma	3.1
	Hungarian	3.5
	Other	2.3
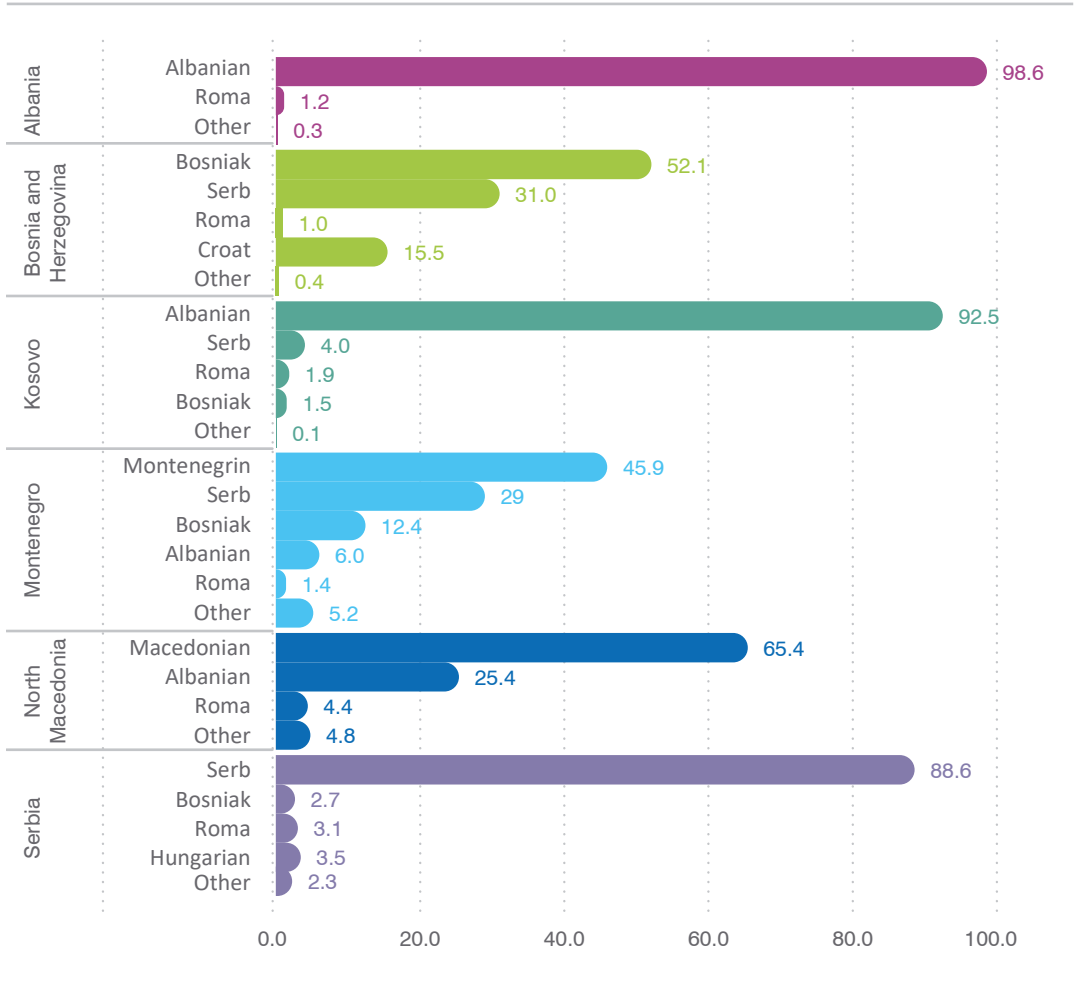
Figure 2. Ethnic distribution of respondents.
Percentages.

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	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia
Roma	100	35	80	105	100	85
Albanian	-	-	-	-	100	-
Serb	-	88	100	-	-	-
Bosniak	-	70	70	-	30	85

Table 2. Boost samples applied in data collection. Boost samples were not applied when the ethnic group was captured sufficiently in the main sample.

The survey tool consisted of 242 questions divided into the following sections:

Section A: Demographic questions I (age, sex, language, relationship status, living situation, education, citizenship and ethnicity)
Section B: Me (my values and beliefs, my identity and other groups)
Section C: My society (participation, systems and institutions, feeling of safety and security)
Section D: The Western Balkans (regional identity and group relations, dealing with the past, the potential for peace and regional collaboration and mobility)
Section E: Demographic questions II (gender, family educational background, employment status, economic situation, identification with religious and minority communities and voting behaviour)

The survey was prepared in English and translated into local languages (Albanian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Montenegrin and Serbian), and back-translated for quality assurance.

Focus group discussions

To support the quantitative data, 12 focus group discussions were conducted in April 2021: 2 in Albania (one for women only, one for men only), 3 in Bosnia and Herzegovina (one

each for Bosniak, Croat and Serb participants, mixed gender), 2 in Kosovo (one for Albanian participants and one for Serb participants, mixed gender), 1 in Montenegro (mixed gender), 2 in North Macedonia (one for Albanian participants and one for Macedonian participants, mixed gender) and 2 in Serbia (one for women only, one for men only). Due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussions were held online on Zoom. Participants were screened by age, gender, ethnicity, education level, employment status and intention to migrate.

Altogether 83 young people took part in the discussions, 42 women and 41 men. The age of the participants in the discussions ranged between 18-29 with an average age of 23-24 years. The focus group discussions lasted for two hours each and were moderated by a trained moderator, who guided the conversations to include topics such as perceptions of a good society, gender equality, intergroup relations within society and in the Western Balkans region, coming to terms with the past and migration abroad.

Limitations

Despite best efforts, there were several limitations to this study. First, the data collection was conducted during the exceptional times of the COVID-19 pandemic which introduced additional challenges with regards in-person interviews. Although appropriate safety measures were observed, there was a reluctance on the part of respondents to spend too much time in the vicinity of the interviewer, and parents were particularly reluctant to grant permission to interview minors. This may have had an impact on the profile of respondents who agreed to participate in the survey in full. On the other hand, for the same reason, focus groups discussions were held online which may have impacted the profile of respondents, due to accessibility, as well as their openness to discuss. Second, as is often the case in social scientific research, the face-to-face approach to survey data collection potentially elicited socially desirable responses to questions that dealt with sensitive topics such as attitudes towards others, peace and forgiveness. It may have also influenced the reporting of experiences of violence or discrimination or other types of negative experiences. Third, although some

focus-group discussions were held with young women only to ensure a safe environment for sharing experiences, in most cases young women and men participated in mixed groups. This limited the study's ability to cross-examine the specific experiences of young women and young men in a more in-depth manner. Finally, the design of this study was cross-sectional meaning that the data has been collected only once. This does not allow tracking correlations over time or to control for pre-existing data values. In other words, the analysis remains largely at a descriptive level as causal interpretations were not possible.

SOCIAL COHESION AS A KEY ASPECT OF PEACEBUILDING

IN ITS GOAL TO DESCRIBE youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans, and to outline opportunities to advance sustainable peace and risks to it, *Shared Futures* employs the concept of social cohesion as a framework for analysis. Social cohesion, defined here as a society's reserves of trust in government and among people, and the willingness to work collectively toward shared goals, is crucial for preventing conflict, sustaining peace and promoting reconciliation, as it can help overcome fragility by staving off polarization and identity-based differences. Cohesive societies are characterized by high levels of trust, a shared vision for a common future and responsive, legitimate governance institutions that all together contribute to peace and development. They tend to have better individual health outcomes, greater income equality and more extensive social support and protection systems, and they often reflect stronger norms of citizenship and support for democracy and popular participation.[15]

Social cohesion is therefore an important determinant of a peaceful, democratic and prosperous societies. It gener-

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15 UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and programming implications, 2020. See also: D. Schiefer and J. van der Noll, The Essentials of Social Cohesion: A Literature Review, Social Indicators Research, 2017; Search for Common Ground and UNDP, Social Cohesion Framework: Social cohesion for stronger communities, 2015; C.A. Larsen, Social cohesion: Definition, measurement and developments, Institut for Statskundskab, Aalborg Universitet, 2014; and OECD, Perspectives on Global Development. Social Cohesion in a Shifting World, 2012.

ates stronger ties within and across different groups and fosters people's trust in public institutions. Strengthening social cohesion should be an integral part of policy and programming where multiple identity groups co-exist – it is even more important in post-conflict contexts where mistrust between different identity groups or the government and its peoples may exist.

While there is no single way to define social cohesion, it is useful to understand the concept by looking at two dimensions:

● Vertical social cohesion: the vertical dimension refers to people's satisfaction and trust in public institutions, confidence in national, sub-national or local government actors, institutions and processes, and a commitment to laws, institutions and a common or shared future. From this dimension, a cohesive society is governed by responsive, inclusive and accountable institutions, provides safety and security for its people and rejects discrimination, and is enriched by an open civic space for formal engagement, political change, interaction and voicing concerns that people use for participation.
● Horizontal social cohesion: the horizontal, society-centred dimension refers to trust and cohesion among people in a society and within and between groups (intergroup dynamics), reflected in the extent to which they have a sense of interdependence, overarching identity or belonging and common destiny. A cohesive society exhibits an inclusive vision of the community, lower levels of social distance among different groups, shared goals and values, acceptance and tolerance, and provides inclusive economic and social opportunities, cross-cutting social networks and positive inter-community relationships.

For the study *Shared Futures*, young people's views and experiences of social cohesion were measured using the following key concepts and constructs:

● Satisfaction in institutions and services: measured through self-reported indication of degree to which they were satisfied with a range of different institutions and

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services such as government, the judicial system, the police and the education system.

- Civic engagement: measured with a self-reported indication of participation in any civil society activities in the past 12 months.
- Authoritarian views: endorsement of governance with one strong leader.
- Experiences of violence and discrimination: measured through self-reported indication of past experiences of different forms of violence (physical, online, verbal) and discrimination (e.g. ethnic, gender, age, political orientation).
- Intergroup contact: measured with self-reported indication of how many acquaintances and how many friends a respondent had from other groups in the area they lived in.
- Prosocial behaviour: measured using five, closely related variables:
    - Intergroup trust: measured as a level of trust in peoples of the Western Balkans despite past events.
    - Intergroup forgiveness: measured as the level of willingness to forgive other groups for what had happened in the past.
    - Intergroup similarity: conceptualized through a set of beliefs measuring the degree to which participants perceived similarities between different peoples of the Western Balkans. Examination of such beliefs is important for understanding processes related to prosocial intergroup relations and social cohesion.
    - Social distance: measured as the level of willingness to marry someone from another social group taking into account a range of relevant dimensions such as religion, ethnicity and political views. This concept captured a respondent's general distance to a range of different social groups.
    - Approach behaviour: in the regional intergroup context, this concept measured the degree of approach orientation (as opposed to avoidance) towards the one specific people in the Western Balkans who was identified as the most distant.
- Optimism about peace: measured with a range of different self-reported questions and conceptualized as a general optimistic and hopeful outlook on questions

related to peace, intergroup cooperation, the past and the future.

These measures were analysed against different demographic variables. For most of the analysis of these dimensions and as discussed in the following sections, gender differences were either small, inconsistent, or not significant. The questions where important gender differences emerged are pointed out separately. Disaggregation for ethnicity, urban and rural youth, different age cohorts and economic status were also applied, and findings that were consistent across all societies in the region are reported. In addition, data was analysed against the respondent's self-reported community type: respondents were asked if they lived in a mono-ethnic or multi-ethnic area. Those who reported living in multi-ethnic communities were further asked to indicate whether they saw their area as ethnically segregated (more than one ethnic group with few or no opportunities for contact), partially integrated (more than one ethnic group with some opportunities for contact) or fully integrated (more than one ethnic group with many opportunities for contact).

Through these concepts, in the following sections *Shared Futures* aims to paint a comprehensive picture of the state of vertical and horizontal social cohesion in the Western Balkans, as seen through the eyes of young women and men. Further, the report will highlight both opportunities to strengthen and risks that may weaken a sense of cohesion within and across societies of the region – these insights should serve to inform policies and programming on youth and peacebuilding. The findings also serve to highlight young people's distinct role in creating societies where trust and interdependence contribute to people's personal and collective security, where relationships across ethnicity, religion, neighbourhood and region are fostered, and where a sense of a shared vision of the future exists.

PEACE AND SOCIAL COHESION FROM A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Youth perceptions on public institutions

Trust between government and society is a critical aspect of social cohesion. Public policies shape, alter and inform relations among different groups, and the delivery of public services impacts whether governments are perceived to be fair and just. If public institutions and particularly the security and justice systems are perceived as inefficient, biased or discriminatory, social cohesion can erode quickly.[16]

Broadly, the trend in the Western Balkans region is of progress in governance and rule of law in the years after the conflicts of the 1990s followed by a partial reversal of this positive trend in more recent years. This is a complex story, encompassing many fields including free and fair elections, government accountability, judicial independence, media quality and various aspects of civil and human rights. Yet data aggregated from a wide array of sources suggests an overall pattern of progress in the Western Balkans region followed by stalling or decline.[17] While government performance has recently enjoyed a surge in public approval, people's trust in rule of law institutions has deteriorated further and their dissatisfaction with poor track records in battling

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16 UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and programming implications, 2020

17 See for example European Commission Neighbourhood Enlargement Strategy Reports for 2020 and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Global State of Democracy (GSOD) indices.

corruption is evident.[18] Corruption remains a major problem and a complex phenomenon, with its high-level form (patronage and clientelism) appearing to be more resistant than low-level corruption (petty bribery) where notable progress has been made.[19]

GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONS

I think that the young people are increasingly losing trust in public institutions and party leaders and so on, because the focus is not on young people at all, but on some other matters.

23-year-old man, Montenegro

Overall, looking at the data collected for *Shared Futures*, young respondents' satisfaction with their governance systems and institutions is relatively low (Figure 3). In most of the region, when asking to rate government, parliament, judiciary, police and media on the scale of 1-5 (where 1 indicated completely dissatisfied and 5 completely satisfied), the average satisfaction of youth in these is 3 or below. Satisfaction in civil society and youth organizations was ambivalent. These views were largely consistent across the region.[20] When asked about a range of potential concerns related to safety and security, a number of young people expressed concern with violence or harassment by the authorities – though this issue was eclipsed by others, such as environmental threats and organized crime.[21] This dissatisfaction of youth reflects findings from previous research whereby on average, trust in governments in the Western Balkans is lower for the younger generations: people aged 15 to 29

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18   Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Balkan Barometer 2020.
19   International IDEA, GSOD absence of corruption ratings range from a low of 0.36 (Albania) to a high of 0.51 (Kosovo).
20   With only few partial exceptions when looking at ethnicity. For example, respondents who identified as Croat in Bosnia and Herzegovina were slightly more satisfied with all three branches of government than their peers who identified as Bosniak or Serb.
21   Respondents were asked to rate 13 potential sources of concern for safety and security on a scale of 1 (I am not at all concerned) to 10 (I am extremely concerned). The average responses in the region for concern over violence or harassment by authorities ranged from 4.8 in Serbia to 6.4 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

have been found to have the least confidence in their governments in the region (31 percent expressed confidence) compared to for example people aged 50 and above (37 percent).[22]
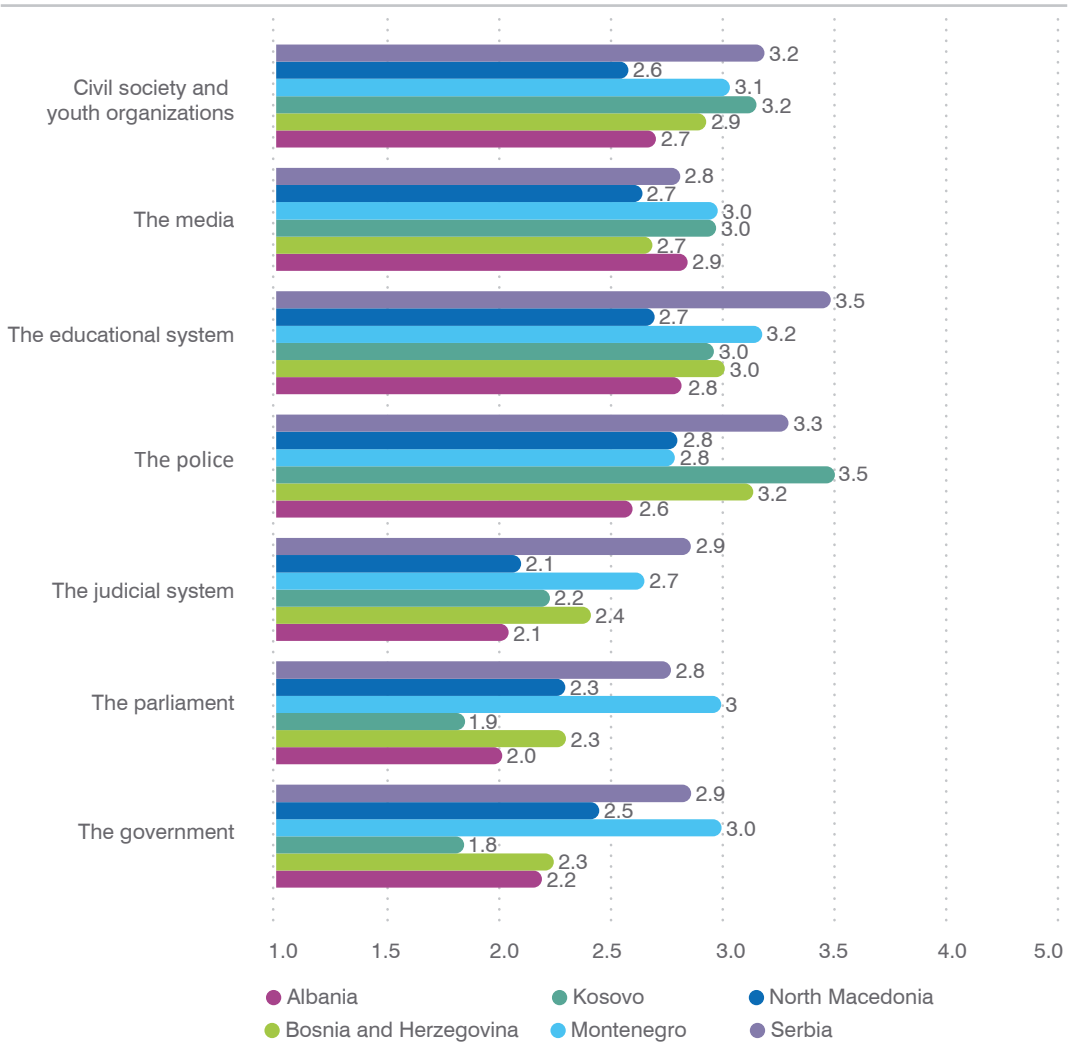
Figure 3. Satisfaction in public institutions. Average scores (1: completely dissatisfied, 5: completely satisfied).

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22   OECD, Government at a Glance: Western Balkans, 2020.

Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

In focus group discussions, views about governing institutions and leaders were unanimously and sharply critical. Participants expressed the view that officials tended to make decisions based on personal factors rather than principles, merit or the public interest. One young woman stated: "If I encounter a problem, I know I will not find a solution if I don't pay a bribe or know someone that knows someone."[23] Another put it even more bluntly: "I don't know how to trust anyone anymore."[24]

Young people's satisfaction in the civil society sector, youth organizations and media were similarly low, although slightly higher on average than the satisfaction in government or the judicial system. This points to a need to strengthen the credibility of and public support for civil society and the media in their oversight role for more accountable democratic governance. With a few exceptions, the traditional media landscape in the region has deteriorated sharply in recent years, after demonstrating impressive achievements in the post-transition and post-conflict years. Apart from North Macedonia, indices show that media integrity has declined across the region.[25]

In some contexts, civically engaged young people who had taken part in some civic activity in the past 12 months were more likely to be satisfied with their governments, such as in Albania (30 percent of those active were satisfied compared to 19 percent of those inactive) and North Macedonia (38 percent of those active were satisfied compared to 18 percent of those inactive). By contrast, in Serbia, those who had taken part in activities for promoting democracy or human rights were less likely to be happy with governing institutions (74 percent of active youth were dissatisfied compared to 36 percent of inactive youth). Also, in Serbia, young people who

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23 Focus group discussion, Albania, 19-year-old woman.
24 Focus group discussion, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 27-year-old woman.
25 International IDEA, GSOD media integrity rankings. Serbia's score in 2012 was the best in the region and is now the worst.

endorsed authoritarian values[26] were moderately more likely to be satisfied with governing institutions than their peers.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education and employment are factors that tie closely to a society's growth and development and through that to strengthening social cohesion and active citizenship. The Western Balkans region is overwhelmingly literate, and access to primary and lower secondary school is widespread. Still, Western Balkan economies fall behind the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) average in all three tested fields (reading, mathematics and science): across most locations and subjects, less than one percent of students attain the top two levels of achievement.[27] The exception is Serbia, which leads the region and alone has significant numbers of top-achieving students, but which has also been stagnant for most of the last decade.[28] A gender comparison shows girls outperforming boys across the region. Schools with a high proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students generally do not have lower staffing or less qualified teachers.[29]

While a large proportion of *Shared Futures* respondents across the region ranked schools and universities at an average of 3 out 5 (Figure 3), there were also high percentages of dissatisfaction: in North Macedonia (40 percent were not satisfied with the educational system), Bosnia and Herzegovina (33 percent), Kosovo (30 percent), Montenegro (25 percent) and Albania (23 percent). In contrast,

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26   A respondent was deemed to hold authoritarian views if he/she agreed with the statements, "We need to have one strong leader", "Sometimes, a good leader must break the law for the common good", and disagreement with the statement "In general democracy is a good system of governing"; correlations (p<.01) between 0.2 and 0.3. In most other locations, the correlations were weakly negative.

27   OECD, PISA 2018 results. For example, in reading, across the OECD an average of 9 percent of all students reach the top two levels, meaning they can "comprehend lengthy texts, deal with concepts that are abstract or counterintuitive, and establish distinctions between fact and opinion, based on implicit cues".

28   Data from OECD, PISA 2018 results, Snapshots.

29   OECD, PISA 2018 results.

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57 percent of respondents in Serbia were satisfied with their education system (against 16 percent not satisfied).[30]

Unsurprisingly, the lowest satisfaction of youth is with employment opportunities (Figure 4) – in line with the general population that regularly cites the economy and unemployment as among its most pressing concerns.[31] Except for Albania and Serbia, there seems to be higher satisfaction of young men with regard to employment opportunities compared to young women. The economies of the region face large skills mismatches, persistent informal economy, a brain drain, a low labour market participation of women, low levels of innovation, poor access to finance for businesses and a low level of regional integration and connectivity.[32] All of these patterns disproportionately impact youth, who are about twice as likely to be unemployed than average.[33] The region has one of the world's highest youth unemployment rates (15-24 years of age), ranging between 17 percent in Montenegro and Serbia to 55 percent in Kosovo.[34] Young job searchers are also confronted with unfair competition in a small job market that often favours those with family and political links.[35]

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30   Respondents who self-identified as Serbs in Kosovo also reported very high satisfaction with education, higher than in Serbia. It is worth noting that most Serbs in Kosovo attend schools and universities administered by Serbia.

31   RCC, Balkan Barometer 2020, p.26.

32   European Commission, Communication on EU enlargement policy, 6 October 2020, p.14.

33   Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Why Western Balkan Labour Markets are Different, Forecast Report, Autumn 2018.

34   World Bank Group, The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2019.

35   One Way Ticket No More: Seven Ideas for a Prosperous Western Balkans. Background paper for the conference "Young People, Migration and the Demographic Challenge in the Western Balkans" that took place in the context of the German Presidency of the Council of the EU, October 2020.
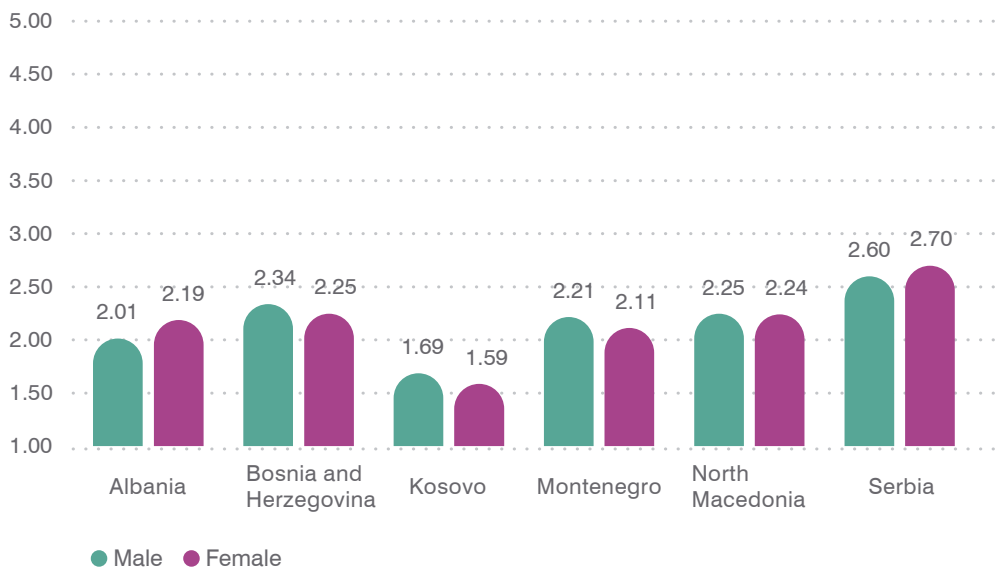
Figure 4. Satisfaction in employment opportunities. Average scores (1: completely dissatisfied, 5: completely satisfied).

In focus group discussions, young people frequently noted that jobs were handed out through connections rather than merit. This belief suggests that those in positions of responsibility throughout society are not necessarily perceived by youth as the best qualified but rather those with personal connections, which may further erode young people's trust in institutions and their leaders. One discussion participant argued: "When applying for a job, personal qualities are not taken into consideration. The positions are filled, institutionally by law, according to national quota – this number of Croats, this number of Bosniaks, this number of Serbs and so forth. Thus, it's an impossible situation from the start."[36]

RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
Since the data collection for *Shared Futures* took place during an unprecedented global pandemic that had import-

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36   Focus group discussion, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 23-year-old man.

ant governance implications across the globe, a section in the survey was dedicated to young people's perceptions on how their institutions had dealt with the crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the region hard.[37] Tourism came to a near halt, causing a steep economic decline in places heavily dependent on it,[38] and mortality in the region has been among the highest in the world.[39] Globally and within the region, COVID-19 has affected certain groups disproportionately and exposed an underlying vulnerability to both the virus and its secondary impacts. In fragile contexts gender inequality has been exacerbated during the pandemic.[40]

When asked if the pandemic had negatively impacted their trust in government and decision-makers, some 58 percent of youth interviewed for *Shared Futures* felt it had done so. While young people were generally discontented with the governments' overall response to the pandemic, there was a slightly higher degree of satisfaction with local governments' responses. In line with previous research,[41] two public institutions earned relatively higher degrees of average satisfaction, both in general and with respect to their performance managing the COVID-19 pandemic, although with considerable variation across the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia, the police scored slightly better than the average 3 (not satisfied or dissatisfied), while in Albania and North Macedonia the police scored just under the average but still much better than did governing institutions. Respondents also gave relatively good scores to the military for its handling of the pandemic.

Trust and social cohesion within a society are tested in times of crisis. The global spread of COVID-19 has been mirrored

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37 OECD, The COVID-19 Crisis in the Western Balkans: Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions, 2020.
38 World Bank, Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 18: An Uncertain Recovery, Fall 2020, p.4.
39 Our World in Data, cumulative deaths per million, figures for 16 March 2021.
40 UNDP, Overcoming the Setbacks: Understanding the Impact and Implications of COVID-19 in Fragile and Conflict-affected Contexts, March 2021.
41 The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. Young people expressed highest trust in the church, military and police.

by a spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories about its origins and preventive measures like vaccination, social distancing, and face masks. Who people trust as a source of information gives interesting insight to the level of social cohesion in a society. Respondents for *Shared Futures* tended to trust friends and family foremost as sources of information during the pandemic, while being more doubtful about national authority health websites and international information sources such as the World Health Organization (Figure 5). Young people tended not to trust traditional media such as TV, radio and newspapers or social media and internet platforms, which were both rated equally low for trustworthiness.
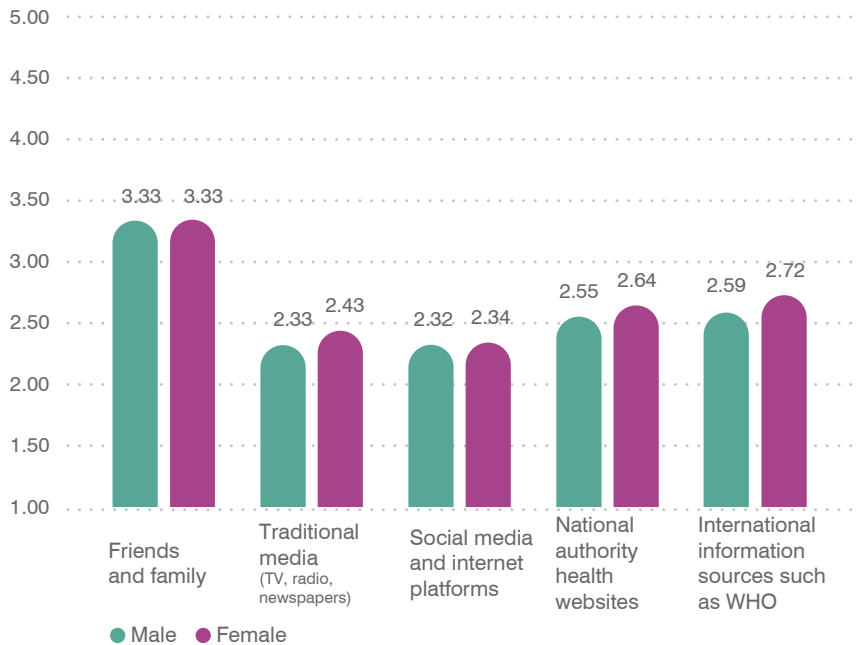
Figure 5. Trust in different information sources about COVID-19. Average scores (1: do not trust at all, 5: totally trust).

When asked about the impact of the pandemic on trust, 50 percent of the respondents across the region reported that it had negatively affected their trust in people outside

their own family or closest groups. Even a higher proportion of young people (60 percent) felt the crisis had negatively impacted the overall relations between people in the areas where they lived. Some 56 percent of youth reported that the pandemic had a negative effect on their mental and physical well-being, while even more reported an unfavourable impact on their finances or study and career prospects (66 percent and 59 percent respectively).

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In summary, young people have low levels of trust in and satisfaction with many of their societies' institutions, notably those involved in governance. Still, there is a recognition among the youth interviewed in focus group discussions that they also have a role in effectuating change. As one participant put it: "Improvement must start with each individual so that little by little society takes shape. If we work on ourselves, open our minds, acquire more knowledge, these values will be reflected in society."[42] Paving the way for young people's increased engagement and sense of agency is therefore critical.

Young people's civic engagement

> The reason why I want to be active in society is that I do not want to give myself the luxury of remaining indifferent to the things that affect us... young people are often not active because they are disappointed in the non-responsiveness of institutions and perhaps this frustration makes them passive.
>
> *24-year-old man, North Macedonia*

Civic engagement can be understood as actions aimed at influencing policy-making processes, holding public institutions accountable, shaping cultural norms and practices and complementing the government's delivery of goods and services.[43] Civic space is the foundation of any open and democratic society: an environment that enables different

42   Focus group discussions, Albania, 28-year-old woman.
43   UNDP Civil Society Advisory Committee Operating Framework, 2016.

civic actors and groups to freely and meaningfully participate in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies.[44] When civic space is open for young people, they are able to claim their rights, influence the political and social structures around them and shape public policies to address their specific concerns. Importantly, in an open civic space, young individuals and groups are able to interact free from acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals.

The civic space in many parts of the Western Balkans can be described as narrowed.[45] On the one hand, restrictions on civic space include detaining of protesters and the use of intimidation as a tactic to deter journalists; in particular, several cases of intimidation of women journalists have been documented, with threats often gendered in nature – the targeting of women and LGBTQI groups being some of the key trends documented in the region.[46] Civil society organizations have on occasion been criticized for not being sufficiently independent from foreign influence and serving third party interests and face interference and violations of guaranteed freedoms.[47] On the other hand, there is a trend of apathy and disengagement of the region's population as a whole from participation in decision-making – polls have found that 42 percent of people in the Western Balkans admit to never discussing affairs of the government while a third do so only with friends and family, and just 15 percent admit to taking part in public events.[48] Despite this, an overwhelming majority consider citizen action and civil society organizations to be the best functioning democratic safeguard, superseding parliaments, ombudsman institutions and the media.[49]

The definition for civic engagement used for *Shared Futures* included participation in activities by civil society actors such as non-governmental organizations, unions, clubs, religious

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44 UN Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, 2020.
45 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, 2020.
46 Civicus: Europe and Central Asia 2020 report.
47 9European Fund for the Balkans and European Policy Institute: Civil Society and Youth Engagement in the Western Balkans, 2019.
48 RCC, Balkan Barometer 2020.
49 RCC. Balkan Barometer 2020.

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or volunteer organizations, as well as personal and community initiatives. Relatively few young respondents reported taking part in any kind of civic activity in the past 12 months, although the proportion ranged from a low of 8.5 percent in Albania to a higher of 32.2 percent in Montenegro, with an average of 19.5 percent of youth in the region participating in civic activities in the last 12 months (Figure 6). This confirms earlier research showing very low rates of young people's civic engagement, especially in politics, across the Western Balkans and more broadly in South-eastern Europe.[50]

With this in mind, have you in the last 12 months participated in activities that could be described as civic engagement or civil society activities?
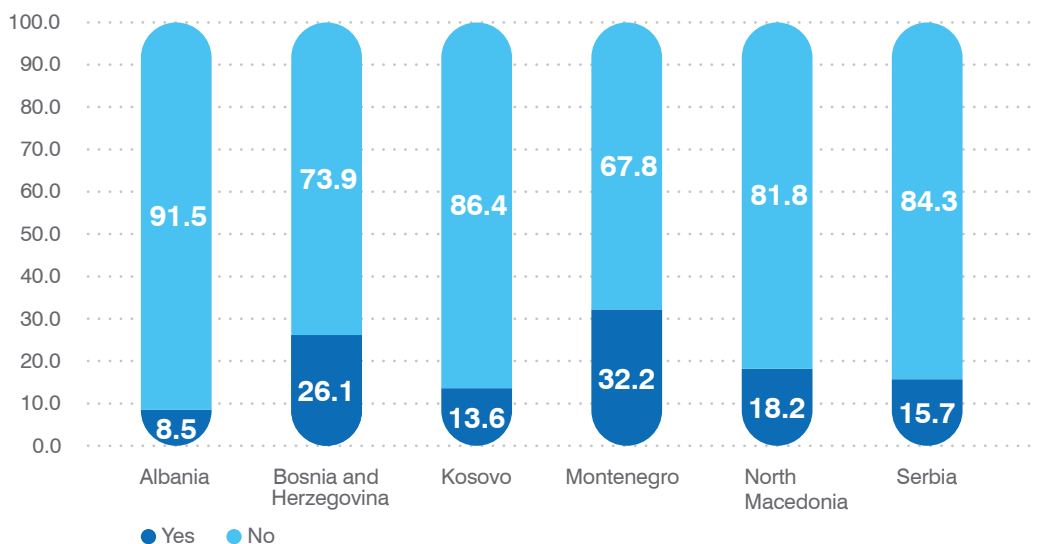
Figure 6. Have you participated in civic activities in the last 12 months? Percentages of respondents.

One point of note: among those who reported not having engaged in civic activities in the past 12 months, a huge

50   FES, Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. In this study, the average number of young people who had ever participated in civic activity ranged from 5 percent (working in a political party) to 15 percent (signing a petition).

potential appears to exist for civic engagement, with an average of over 65 percent across the region reporting interest in being more actively involved.

There is a correlation between young people's attitudes and their actions: those who felt most strongly that it was important to be active and participate in decision-making were much more likely to take part in civic activities.[51] Yet even within this group, only a minority followed through: out of those who assigned maximum importance to being "an active member of the community" and "having a say in policies", the percentage who actually participated in any form of civic engagement over the past year ranged from 11.7 (Albania) to 38.5 (Montenegro).

Education and employment emerge as important factors for civic engagement. Across the Western Balkans, higher educated[52] youth valued being an active member of society more than those with a lower education. They also valued having a say in policies and decision-making more than others. Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) were much less likely than others to have taken part in civic activities. Education also correlated significantly with an interest in taking part in youth events across the Western Balkans. In all societies, education level also correlated strongly and significantly with self-efficacy beliefs – a person's sense that they can achieve their goals and make choices with confidence. Arguably, this type of efficacious outlook can foster intrinsic interest and involvement in activities, including civic engagement.[53]

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51 Young people were asked to rate the importance of the different aspects that comprise a good personal life, such as marriage and family, jobs, education and health care, freedom of choice and a clean environment, and while they valued having a say in public decision-making and contributing to their communities, these were consistently the least valued across the region.

52 Respondents were asked about their highest obtained degree: basic education (compulsory level), secondary/high school, professional school (including vocational school), university graduate degree, post-graduate degree.

53 No correlation was found in this study between a respondent's reported economic status and inclination for civic engagement.

I think there is no ideal society, there is ideal behaviour. Improvement must start with each individual so that little by little society changes. If we work on ourselves to improve, open our minds, acquire more knowledge, these actions will be reflected in the overall society.

28-year-old woman, Albania

To foster wider youth participation in creating peaceful and cohesive societies, it is important to understand what kind of civic activities young people already engage in or are interested in (Figure 7). Looking at the data collected for *Shared Futures*, active young people reported being mostly engaged in activities oriented towards helping the poor and marginalized populations, promoting democracy and human rights as well as politics. On the other hand, when asking those who had been inactive in the past year what causes they would be interested in advancing, helping the poor and marginalized, democracy and human rights and building peace and reconciliation featured as top choices – pointing to an important and untapped potential for wider engagement of youth in peacebuilding.

Other important areas were interest of youth supersedes their actual engagement were gender equality and environmental issues. The environment was seen by young people as an important issue, unifying the region's youth in its perceived importance, although fewer reported being engaged in environmental activities. On another note, young people who were active were often engaged in political activities, while those disengaged were least interested in conventional politics. Fewer women were interested in politics than were men (3,8% of women regionally against 8% of men). All this points to a gap between supply and demand when it comes to opportunities for youth to engage in public life, both in formal and informal platforms.

When examining the self-reported voting behaviour of young people for *Shared Futures*, the rates of voting in elections were surprisingly high, and notable differences within the region could be observed. Over 70 percent of young people

in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia said they had voted in the last elections, while a considerably smaller proportion of youth claimed to have done so in Albania and Serbia.[54] These figures are higher than official numbers, potentially due to the fact that this was self-reported behaviour, but also as the survey targeted youth living in the region while official censuses may account for the voting behaviour of youth abroad as well.

When talking about young people's civic engagement, it is important to recognize the activism and engagement carried out by young people through the internet and digital media as key platforms for mass mobilization and social and political action. Young respondents were asked separately about the modalities of engagement they used to advance social causes. Indeed, the most common ways of participating were posting material on social media, signing petitions online and volunteering (Figure 8).

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Figures 7. Actual participation of youth and their expressed interest in different civic activities. Percentages of respondents. Note: expressed interest was asked of youth who reported not having been active.

Politics

- Actual participation
- Expressed interest

Helping the poor and marginalized

- Actual participation
- Expressed interest

Cultural diversity

	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Expressed interest	6.5	10.0	13.7	12.9	9.6	12.3
Actual participation	0.6	4.6	2.1	8.9	3.1	4.5

● Actual participation ● Expressed interest

Democracy and human rights

	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Expressed interest	24.7	12.1	26.7	17.3	18.9	13.5
Actual participation	2.8	8.5	3.9	12.9	6.1	5.8

● Actual participation ● Expressed interest

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Building peace and reconciliation

Country	Expressed interest	Actual participation
Albania	15,1	0.3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	16,2	4,4
Kosovo	25,0	2.1
Montenegro	15,7	8,0
North Macedonia	18,5	2.4
Serbia	13,0	0.8

● Actual participation ● Expressed interest

Gender equality

Country	Expressed interest	Actual participation
Albania	26.3	1.0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	9.1	3.4
Kosovo	25.2	3.1
Montenegro	11.9	5.5
North Macedonia	7.7	1.3
Serbia	8.9	0.9

● Actual participation ● Expressed interest

Youth exchanges across the Western Balkans

Albania: 6.5 / 0.5
Bosnia and Herzegovina: 13.6 / 3.1
Kosovo: 8.7 / 1.3
Montenegro: 15.7 / 4.9
North Macedonia: 15.9 / 1.8
Serbia: 10.6 / 0.8

● Actual participation ● Expressed interest
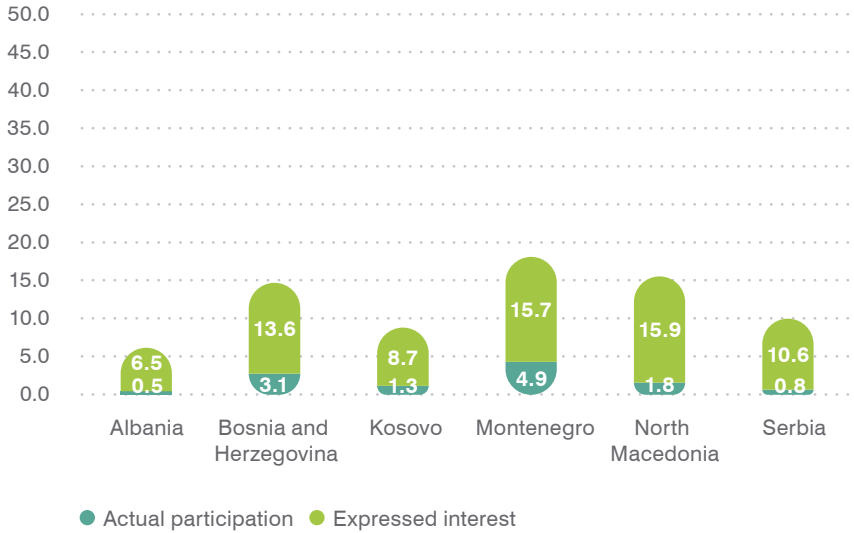
Environment and climate change

Albania: 7.6 / 1.1
Bosnia and Herzegovina: 10.4 / 3.1
Kosovo: 12.6 / 2.2
Montenegro: 13.5 / 6.4
North Macedonia: 14.7 / 4.9
Serbia: 16.4 / 3.9

● Actual participation ● Expressed interest

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Religious activities

- ● Actual participation
- ● Expressed interest

Country	Expressed interest	Actual participation
Albania	2.7	0.6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5.7	4.1
Kosovo	7.9	1.4
Montenegro	6.4	6.8
North Macedonia	6.3	2.1
Serbia	5.0	1.3

Animal rights

- ● Actual participation
- ● Expressed interest

Country	Expressed interest	Actual participation
Albania	5.5	0.1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	11.1	5.1
Kosovo	8.2	0.6
Montenegro	10.9	2.5
North Macedonia	12.0	2.6
Serbia	17.0	2.3

Figure 8. The most common modalities of engagement during the past 12 months. Percentages aggregated for the whole region.

DETERRENTS TO PARTICIPATION

To understand the discrepancy between the reported interest in civic activities and the actual engagement of young people, *Shared Futures* asked respondents about the reasons that they and their peers did not organize themselves around shared concerns (Figure 9).[55] The most common reasons given were the belief that activism would make no difference, that young people were not interested in activism and that they were not aware of the opportunities to act. In focus group discussions, a sense of futility was the dominant explanation: "Young people aren't active because they think it is in vain – they won't be heard, their demands won't be met. As if the institutions are literally deaf. That makes them passive from the very beginning because they think everything is in vain."[56]

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55   The question was asked of those respondents who felt that young people did not act together to shape decision-making (34 percent of the overall sample).

56   Focus group discussion, North Macedonia, 28-year-old woman.

Young people think it will not make any difference	47
Young people are not interested in civic activity	40.6
Young people are not aware of the opportunities to act	32.7
Young people cannot afford it financially	28.5
Young people are worried about being persecuted	21.2
Young people are too busy with other obligations	21
Friends or families do not encourage youth participation	20.3
Only privileged young people have the opportunity to engage	18.2
There are no credible groups working on issues that matter to youth	16.8

Figure 9. Why do young people not organize themselves around shared concerns? Percentages aggregated for the whole region.

When it came to evaluating intergenerational relationships overall, young people across the region tended to clearly agree that "the opinions of young people and older people matter equally" in their communities. Nevertheless, youth interviewed for *Shared Futures* expressed a lot of scepticism about leaders' openness to young people's contributions and to understanding their concerns (Figure 10). Across the region, young people tended to disagree with the statements, "Political leaders know and understand young people's concerns" and "Young people like me have space to influence governments and hold them accountable". On the other hand, some young people's positive perceptions about the openness of leaders to their contributions correlated strongly with their engagement in politics, democracy or

human rights issues.[57] The political leadership's perceived lack of commitment to young people and their interests may therefore be a significant obstacle to their engagement as active citizens.

- ● The political leaders know and understand young people's concerns.
- ● Young people like me have space to influence governments and hold them accountable.
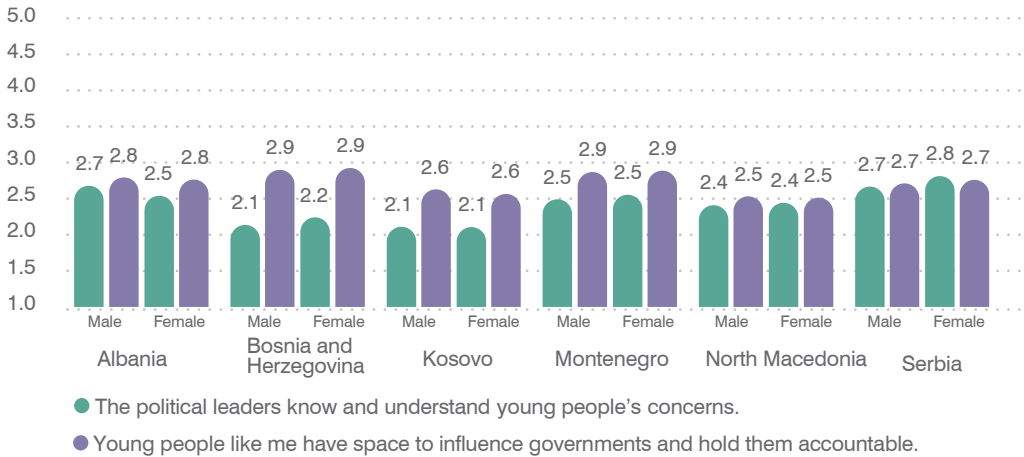
Figure 10. Perceptions of the openness of the political field for youth. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

One point of concern is that as many survey respondents cited fears of persecution as they did lack of time to explain why young people do not get civically organized (Figure 9). In group discussions, fear of reprisal (rather than persecution) was frequently mentioned, especially in relation to the workplace: "We do not feel free to go out in protest after threats to fire you or your family members."[58] While youth reporting these as obstacles are a relatively smaller percentage, people in a cohesive society should be able to live without these fears. This concern is more pervasive in

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57   The positive correlation between leaders' openness and respondent's engagement in some aspects of civic engagement holds in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (political activities), and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia (human rights activities). No correlation was found for respondents in Albania.

58   Focus group discussion, Albania, 23-year-old woman.

some communities, notably among ethnic minorities. Young people in Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia who reported being highly active also reported discrimination on political grounds much more often than their peers who did not civically engage.

Youth experiences of safety and security

Freedom from fear and violence lie at the very foundation of cohesive and prosperous societies. *Shared Futures* measured young people's experiences of personal and community security[59] through a series of questions pertaining to concerns about personal safety and intergroup or identity-based tensions and crime, as well as about experiences of physical violence, bullying and discrimination.

MAIN CONCERNS

The most pressing concerns for young people vary across the region, although with a few clear unifying issues (Figure 11). Organized crime[60] was among the top concerns among youth in most societies (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) while internet safety[61] was also often cited among top concerns (Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia). In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the arrival of migrants and refugees was the top issue cited, likely because of their location on the so-called Balkan route of international migration, as the last stops before reaching the EU.

Overall, young people across the region rated hate crime[62] as a relatively high concern – the concern was even higher for youth in urban communities and those who were more educated. There were also differences noted between youth of different ethnicities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, those

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59 United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, Human Security Handbook, 2016.
60 Defined as transnational, national or local groupings of enterprises run by criminals engaging in illegal activity such as financial crimes, violence, drug, arms and human trafficking.
61 Defined as scams, misuse of personal data, cyberstalking, cyberbullying and offensive content.
62 Defined as assault, harassment, damage to property or verbal abuse directed at someone due to prejudice based on the person's ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, nationality or other factor.

who self-identified as Bosniak were more concerned about hate crime than their Croat or Serb peers, in Kosovo, Albanian youth were more concerned than their Serb peers, in Montenegro, youth who self-identified as Albanian or Serb were more concerned than those who identified as Montenegrin, and in North Macedonia youth who identified as Macedonian expressed larger concern than their Albanian peers about hate crime.

Furthermore, young women across the region expressed higher concern for hate crime, internet safety and domestic violence in comparison to young men. Roma respondents across the region indicated hate crime and domestic violence as their top concerns. When it comes to ultranationalist groups,[63] young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro expressed moderate concern.[64]

Youth in some parts of the region were moderately concerned about the possibility of armed conflict, whether within their society or somewhere in the Western Balkans. In Bosnia and Herzegovina youth expressed concern about an internal or regional armed conflict breaking out – youth who self-identified as Bosniak or Croat were more concerned than their Serb peers. In Kosovo, youth who identified as Serbs were clearly more concerned about an armed conflict breaking out than their Albanian peers who did not by large see this as a major concern. In Montenegro, Albanian young people were more concerned about this than their Montenegrin counterparts. On the other hand, and worth noting, in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, this scenario did not feature among the major concerns of youth.

The region also remains an area of concern when it comes to the illicit accumulation and trafficking of small arms and

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63 Defined as extreme nationalism where nationalism is the identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations.

64 In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there were no differences in concern about ultranationalist groups between youth who self-identified as Bosniak, Croat or Serb, while in Montenegro Albanian and Serb youth were more concerned about ultranationalist groups than those who self-identified as Montenegrin. In Kosovo, youth who self-identified as Serbs were more concerned about ultranationalist groups than their Albanian peers.

light weapons, fuelling insecurity within the region.[65] On average, 26 percent of respondents for *Shared Futures*, across urban and rural areas, expressed feeling threatened by the illegal possession and misuse of weapons in their neighbourhoods – in instances of crime, domestic violence and celebratory shooting, for example.[66]

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65 UNDP South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the
Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC).

66 In Albania approximately 19 percent, Bosnia and Herzegovina 35
percent, Kosovo 25 percent, Montenegro 31 percent, North Macedonia 22 percent and Serbia 26 percent said they felt threatened or
very threatened.

Groups of sports fans that are sometimes violent
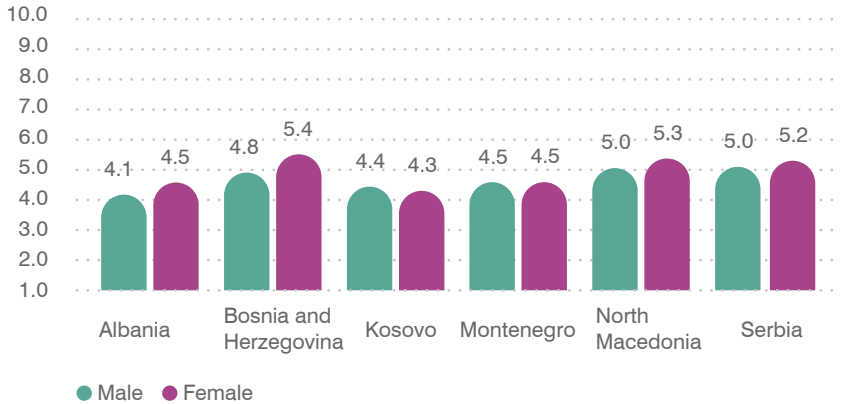
● Male ● Female

Domestic violence

● Male ● Female

#SHAREDFUTURES

Hate crime

Country	Male	Female
Albania	4.8	5.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	6.3	6.9
Kosovo	6.7	6.7
Montenegro	6.0	6.4
North Macedonia	5.7	6.2
Serbia	5.2	5.6

● Male ● Female

Internet safety

Country	Male	Female
Albania	5.7	6.6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5.8	6.4
Kosovo	7.0	7.3
Montenegro	5.7	6.2
North Macedonia	5.0	5.7
Serbia	5.3	5.7

● Male ● Female

The arrival of migrants and refugees

Male ● **Female**
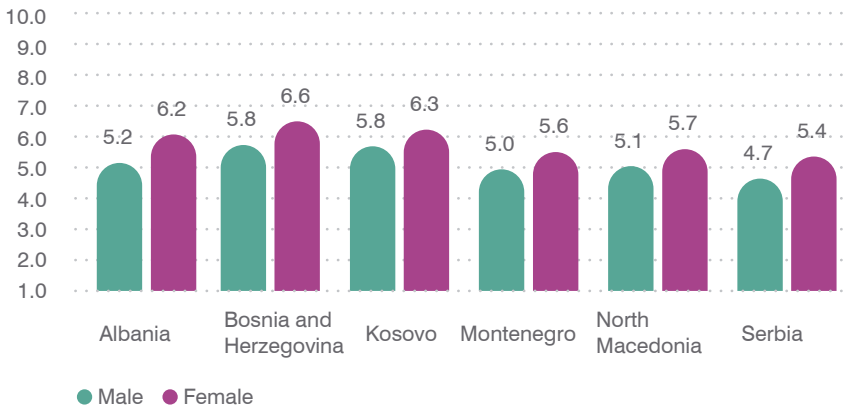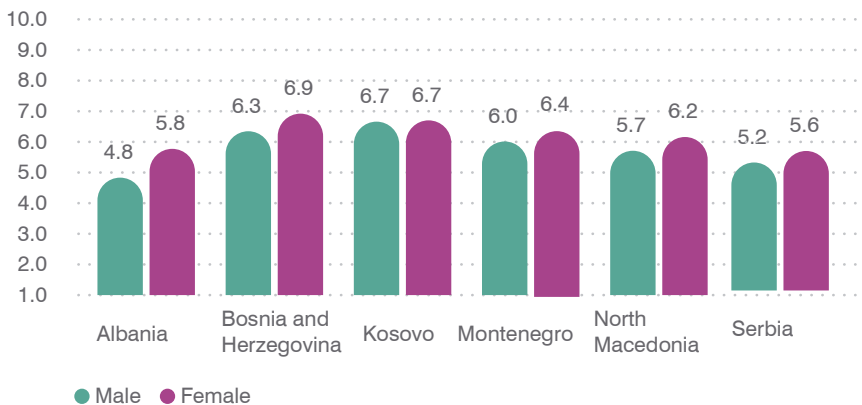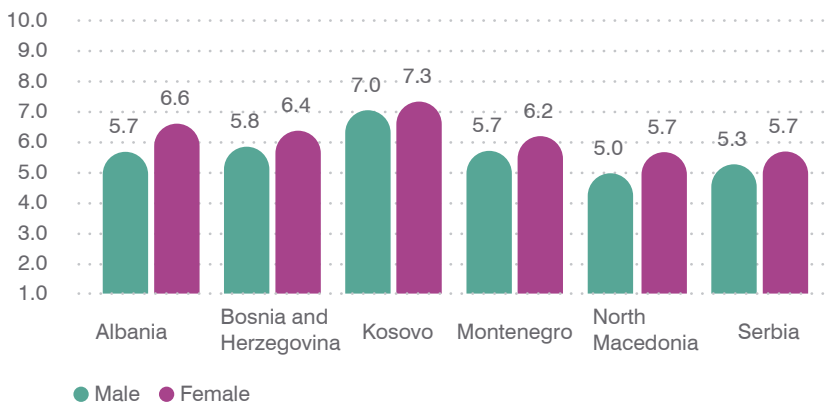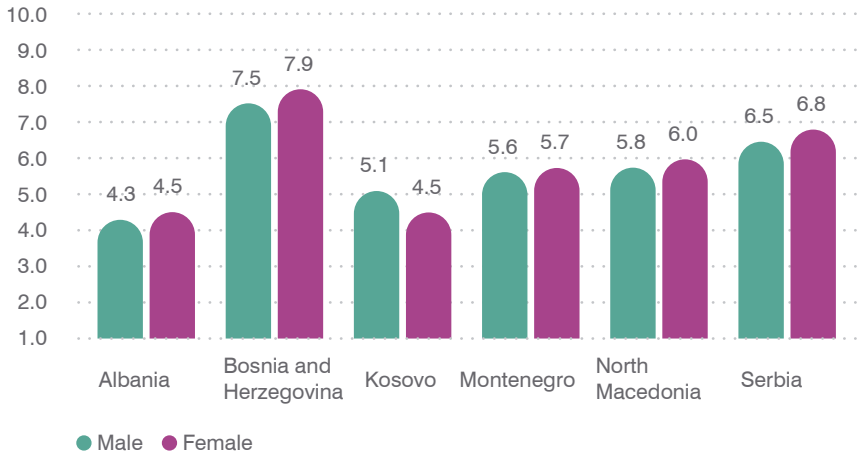
International terrorism
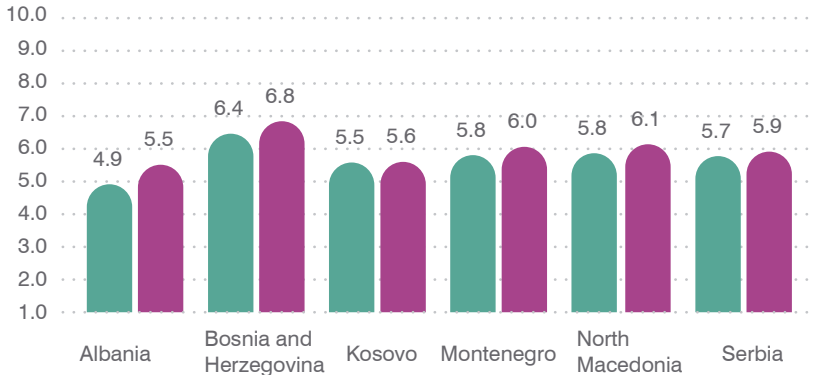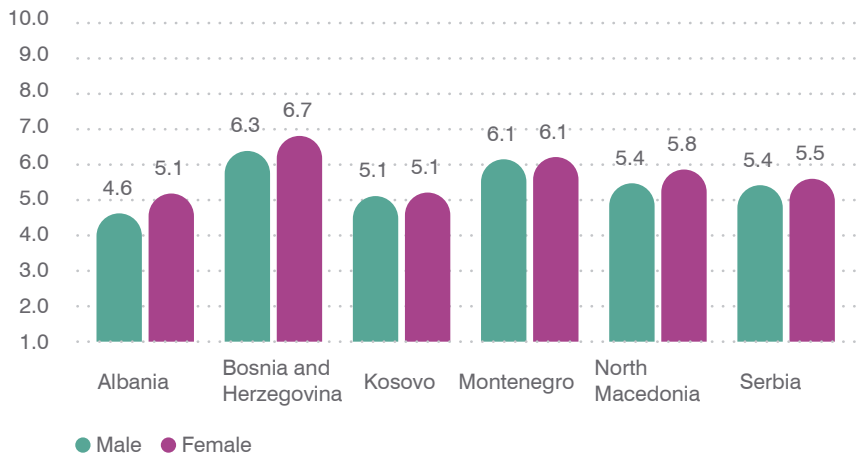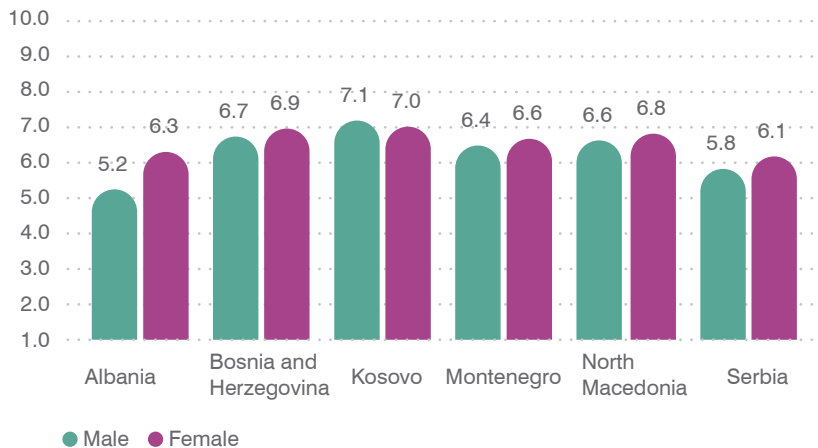
Shared Futures

Youth perceptions on peace
in the Western Balkans

Ultranationalist groups

Male   Female

Organized crime

Male   Female

Possibility of armed conflict breaking out within the Western Balkans

	Male	Female
Albania	4.6	5.2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	6.2	6.6
Kosovo	4.5	4.6
Montenegro	5.4	5.8
North Macedonia	5.0	5.5
Serbia	5.0	5.4

Possibility of armed conflict breaking out within the Western Balkans

	Male	Female
Albania	4.6	5.2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	6.2	6.6
Kosovo	4.5	4.6
Montenegro	5.4	5.8
North Macedonia	5.0	5.5
Serbia	5.0	5.4

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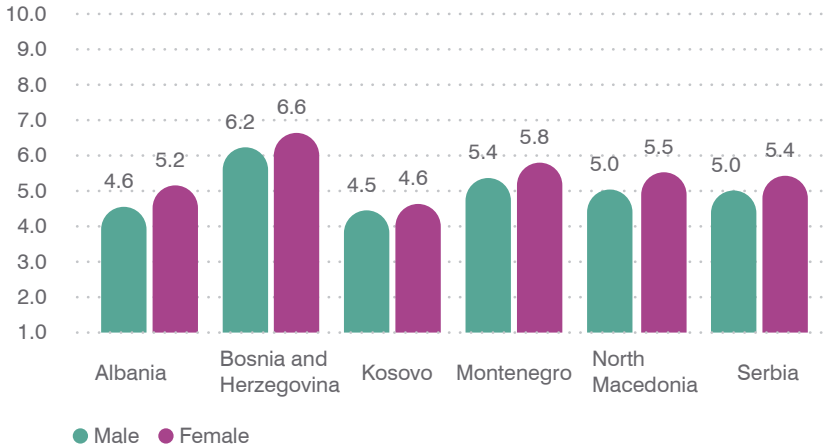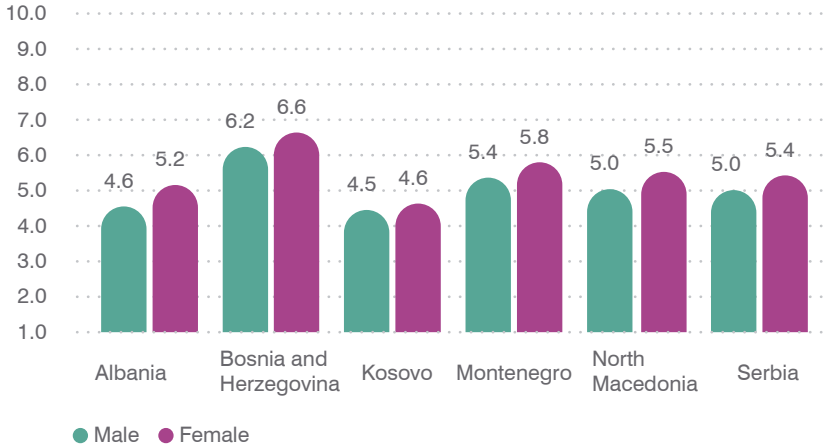
EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

Respondents were also asked to indicate any personal experiences of violence, discrimination or bullying in the past 12 months (Table 3). This was done by handing over the survey tablet to the respondent so they could answer privately. Overwhelmingly, hate speech online or offline was the most reported experience across all societies, with an average of 12 percent of young people reporting it across the region, significantly more than was bullying (either online or at school or work). In particular, young respondents in the age group of 18-24 reported experiencing hate speech significantly more than their younger or older peers.

Discrimination based on age, political affiliation or ethnicity were also frequently reported, although in some societies much more than in others (Table 3). When it comes to gender discrimination, in all locations, young women reported gender discrimination much more often than did men, by a factor of up to ten.[67] In most locations,[68] women experienced significantly more sexual harassment than men, while in Albania and Kosovo, young women said they experienced more bullying and intimidation both at work and online. By contrast, in four locations – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – notable percentages of men reported being victims of violence or threat of violence outside the home (in addition, in Montenegro, more women reported this than men). There was no significant difference found in the experiences of young women and young men relating to violence inside the home, although this was overall reported more often in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

Out of those who had experienced violence or discrimination, only 17 percent reported this to anyone. Of those who reported the incidence, just over a half (58 percent)[69] felt it had brought any positive results, indicating that there needs to be better mechanisms in place both for youth to report

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67 Discrimination was defined as a person being treated worse than other people due to discriminatory traditions, policies, ideas, practices and laws.

68 Respondents in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia.

69 Women tended to report incidents much more often than men, and men tended to see the result of reporting as positive less frequently than women.

experiences of discrimination and violence and for institutions and authorities to address these issues.

It is important to note that although respondents were given the privacy to answer the questions about experiences of discrimination and violence, they may have been hesitant to disclose such sensitive experiences, even anonymously. In other words, the rate of discrimination experiences may be even higher than reported in this study.

		Physical violence or threat of physical violence		Discrimination based on				Hate speech online or offline	Sexual harass-ment or GBV	Bullying/ intimida-tion at school or work	Bullying/ intimi-dation on the internet or social media
		outside the home	inside the home	gender	age	political affilia-tion	ethnicity				
Albania	Male	1,5	1,0	1,2	2,2	3,4	2,9	3,8	1,2	1,3	2,0
	Female	1,8	1,9	5,7	5,5	3,9	1,5	6,5	3,3	5,6	4,5
Bosnia and Herzegov-ina	Male	12,4	3,3	1,8	8,8	6,2	8,6	14,6	0,7	5,6	5,7
	Female	3,7	3,1	9,3	8,4	4,2	7,8	13,9	1,4	5,9	6,1
Kosovo	Male	3,4	1,4	4,5	8,0	11,9	5,2	15,5	1,8	4,3	6,5
	Female	3,3	2,1	11,4	7,0	6,1	3,3	15,1	11,0	9,1	13,1
Montenegro	Male	5,9	2,0	2,0	2,3	11,6	8,1	18,3	2,6	5,0	7,1
	Female	6,4	2,4	4,7	2,7	12,0	10,4	17,8	4,3	4,6	8,2
North Macedonia	Male	6,1	1,1	3,0	5,2	8,5	6,8	14,7	1,6	3,4	8,2
	Female	3,1	1,1	6,2	4,6	5,4	6,4	17,0	5,8	3,1	7,3
Serbia	Male	15,5	3,2	1,2	2,8	3,3	3,0	13,0	0,9	5,7	8,5
	Female	5,2	3,0	6,8	4,3	3,0	3,7	9,4	4,6	5,8	5,6

Table 3. Experiences of violence or discrimination in the past 12 months. Percentages. (GBV: gender-based violence).

Youth perceptions on intergroup relationships

Trust, relationships and interactions among people in a society across divisions such as identity or other social constructs is an important aspect of peace and social cohesion. Greater social cohesion suggests that different groups in society exhibit trust and a sense of interdependence and common destiny. These aspects can be measured by looking at the values, attitudes and beliefs that people develop about their communities and other groups within them.[70]

The Western Balkans was besieged by turbulence and armed conflict in the 1990s. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia found evidence of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. In Albania, a government collapse in 1997 led to civil strife in which about 2,000 people lost their lives.[71] The physical scars have almost entirely healed. The region scores highly on most measures of basic welfare, including life expectancy, literacy, absence of extreme poverty and chronic hunger, and free access to secondary education. Standards of living (as measured by GDP in purchasing power parity terms, per capita) have been trending modestly upward since the 2007-2009 global recession ended.[72] Yet the legacy of the past remains potent, especially in the societies most deeply affected.

To understand young people's perceptions about the relations between different ethnic and national groups in the region, *Shared Futures* focused on three dimensions: social distance, approach behaviour and intergroup trust. Traditionally, social distance measures the acceptance of a variety of social relationships with members of a different group such as having a member of the other group as a close relative by marriage, as a next-door neighbour, as a co-worker or as a boss.[73] *Shared Futures* focused first on a single kind of relation – marriage – and asking about groups defined in

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70   UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and programming implications, 2020.
71   I. Jusufi, Albania's Transformation Since 1997: Successes and Failures, Croatian International Relations Review 23 (2017), pp.81-115.
72   World Bank data.
73   UNDPA, Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and programming implications, 2020.

various ways: members of a different ethnicity, religion or outlook on religion, persons from elsewhere in the region or supporters of a different political party. Respondents were also analysed for their approach behaviour (as opposed to avoidant behaviour), in other words their preparedness for different levels of social relations (neighbours, colleagues or schoolmates, friends, marriage) with the peoples in the rest of the region that they viewed as most distant to themselves. Intergroup trust, on the other hand, focused on regional relations and was measured by asking participants to indicate the degree to which they trust other peoples in the Western Balkans region, despite past events. Finally, the study also assessed to what extent youth in the region shared values and a regional identity.

Shared Futures

Youth perceptions on peace
in the Western Balkans

Female

Belongs to a different religion
Albania 1.8, Bosnia and Herzegovina 3.0, Kosovo 3.9, Montenegro 3.6, North Macedonia 4.0, Serbia 3.3

Has a different outlook on religion
Albania 2.0, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.9, Kosovo 3.7, Montenegro 3.2, North Macedonia 3.5, Serbia 3.1

Votes for a political party or leader you disagree with
Albania 1.5, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.1, Kosovo 1.5, Montenegro 2.5, North Macedonia 2.4, Serbia 2.6

Belongs to a different ethnic community
Albania 2.4, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.4, Kosovo 3.7, Montenegro 2.8, North Macedonia 3.2, Serbia 2.9

From elsewhere in the Western Balkans and belongs to a different ethnic community
Albania 2.2, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.5, Kosovo 3.8, Montenegro 2.9, North Macedonia 3.2, Serbia 2.9

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo
- Montenegro
- North Macedonia
- Serbia

Male

Belongs to a different religion
Albania 1.7, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.9, Kosovo 3.2, Montenegro 3.2, North Macedonia 3.9, Serbia 3.2

Has a different outlook on religion
Albania 1.8, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.8, Kosovo 3.2, Montenegro 3.0, North Macedonia 3.4, Serbia 3.1

Votes for a political party or leader you disagree with
Albania 1.6, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.1, Kosovo 1.5, Montenegro 2.5, North Macedonia 2.3, Serbia 2.6

Belongs to a different ethnic community
Albania 2.2, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.4, Kosovo 3.4, Montenegro 2.7, North Macedonia 3.1, Serbia 2.8

From elsewhere in the Western Balkans and belongs to a different ethnic community
Albania 2.1, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.4, Kosovo 3.4, Montenegro 2.7, North Macedonia 3.0, Serbia 2.8

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo
- Montenegro
- North Macedonia
- Serbia

Figure 12. Social distance. How difficult would it be for you to marry someone who...? Average scores (1: not at all difficult, 5: very difficult).

The average social distance score (Figure 12) ranges from very low in Albania to neutral in Kosovo and North Macedonia. In other words, on average, youth in the region said they were more willing than not to marry someone different from themselves. Averages, however, do not tell the whole

story, and the study did not probe into the reasons behind the responses given. Looking at the results, youth in Albania stand out from their peers by expressing much lower levels of social distance toward other groups, followed by young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina expressing the lowest social distance out of the remaining five – this applied across all ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[74] In Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia, women expressed significantly greater social distance than men, which deserves greater attention .

In most of the region, political affiliation was the least, and religious affiliation the most powerful distancing factor, with young people expressing greater reluctance to marry across the religious divide than to marry someone of a different ethnic group.[75] Religious outgroups barely register in Albania, with very few respondents showing any hesitation, while many respondents identifying themselves as part of a non-majority community whose religious affiliation differs from the majority – for example, Albanians in North Macedonia, Serbs in Kosovo and Bosniaks in Serbia – expressed stronger reservations. Many young people reported it would be "not at all difficult" to marry someone of another ethnic community: fully half in Albania, and almost a third in Bosnia and Herzegovina, felt this way.[76] However, as already mentioned, it is hard to know whether these patterns pertain to the respondents' personal positive or negative attitudes towards other groups or to social norms related to the specific dimension selected, marriage.

Shared Futures also looked at the types of communities that

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74   Some differences were noted between ethnicities in Kosovo, where youth who identified as Serb expressed more social distance than their Albanian peers, and in North Macedonia where youth who identified as Albanian expressed larger social distance than their Macedonian peers. In Montenegro, Albanian youth expressed less social distance compared to the youth who identified as Montenegrin or Serb.
75   In Albania, where neither ethnicity nor religion were a major contributor to social distance, religion is even less important than ethnicity.
76   For the rest of the region, percentages for the statement it would be "not at all difficult" to marry someone of another ethnic community are as follows: Kosovo 17 percent, Montenegro 20 percent, North Macedonia 18 percent, Serbia 17 percent.

Shared Futures

Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

young people lived in and their contact with other groups to see how these impacted their expression of social distance towards others. Respondents were asked to indicate whether the area they lived in was mono-ethnic or multiethnic, and if the latter, whether they perceived the coexistence of different groups as segregated, partially integrated or fully integrated.[77] These concepts were defined to the respondent who answered based on their self-assessment. Respondents were then asked how many acquaintances and friends they had of different ethnicities.

What emerges, perhaps unsurprisingly, is that young people who saw themselves living in fully integrated communities showed lower social distance towards other groups than respondents living in what they described as mono-ethnic, segregated or even partially integrated communities. On the other hand, those youth with close friends from other groups tended to express lower levels of social distance than their peers. Importantly, merely having acquaintances seemed to have no significant effect – in other words, simply being in contact with members of other groups does not necessarily change how close or distant a person sees these groups. It is the quality of contact and friendships that decreased perceived distances.

I have friends of other ethnicities and I'm very glad to see examples of cities where everyone lives together. My city is a divided city, a city with two schools under one roof and it is by no means a good example for children.

20-year-old woman, Bosnia and Herzegovina

When examining the overall significance of socio-demographic characteristics on social distance, the results indicate that young persons who reported living in more seg-

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77 Definitions for different types of communities were as follows: Mono-ethnic (consisting almost entirely of one ethnic group); Segregated (more than one ethnic group with few or no opportunities for contact); Partially integrated (more than one ethnic group with some opportunities for contact); Fully integrated (more than one ethnic group with many opportunities for contact).

regated communities and those who were less educated, older and living in poorer economic conditions reported higher levels of social distance. On the other hand, those young people who reported to have good quality intercommunity ties and who had been travelling either within the Western Balkans or abroad, reported lower levels of social distance towards other groups.

APPROACH BEHAVIOUR AND INTERGROUP TRUST

When examining the views of youth about those peoples in the region whom they perceived as being most distant to them, half of the young respondents reported they would mostly find it easy to include this group in their social circles, while half disagreed (Figure 13). This type of approach behaviour towards groups perceived as distant to oneself was highest in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, lowest in Kosovo.[78] As before, both the quality of relationships with members of any other ethnic group, and residence in a community that was seen as fully integrated, correlated with more comfort in embracing a member of the most distant group.

. . . .

78 Mirroring the social distance results, there were no significant differences in approach behaviour observed in the ethnicities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while in Montenegro Albanian youth demonstrated stronger approach behaviour than their Montenegrin and Serb peers, while in North Macedonia Macedonian youth reported higher rates of approach behaviour than their Albanian peers.

Shared Futures

Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

Female

- ● Albania
- ● Bosnia and Herzegovina
- ● Kosovo
- ● Montenegro
- ● North Macedonia
- ● Serbia

Male

- ● Albania
- ● Bosnia and Herzegovina
- ● Kosovo
- ● Montenegro
- ● North Macedonia
- ● Serbia
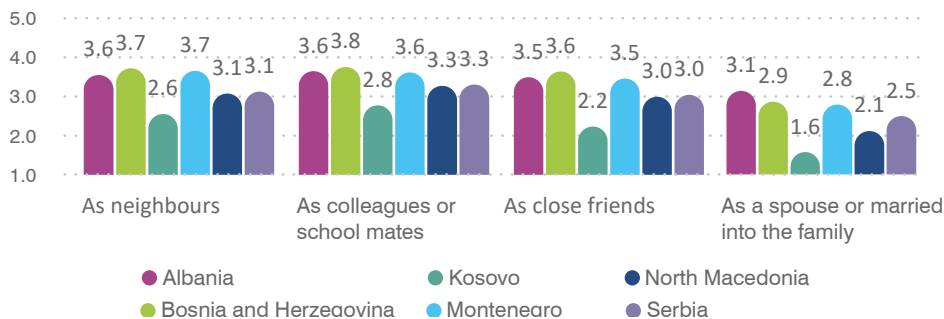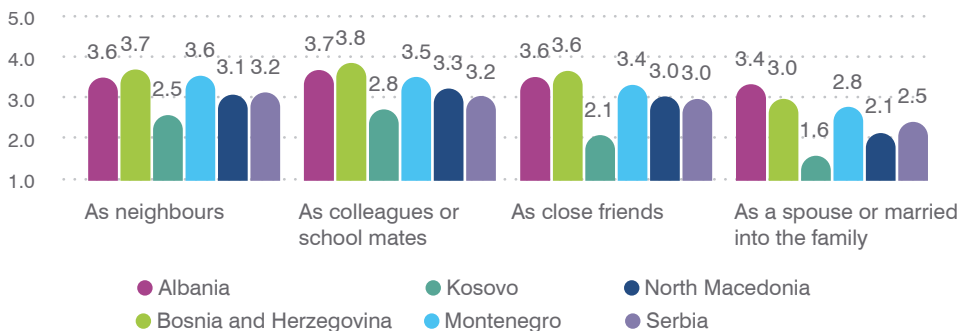
Figure 13. Approach behaviour. Inclusion of the group perceived as the most distant in one's social circles. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

When asked to evaluate to what extent other Western Balkan peoples were trustworthy, despite events in the past, the responses of young people across the region fell on both sides of the neutral value 3, as shown by Figure 14. The average level of reported trust was 3.25 (where 1 shows no trust and 5 maximum trust). Some 47 percent of all respondents in the region reported trusting other groups while 24 percent of youth said they did not trust other groups in the region despite the past.
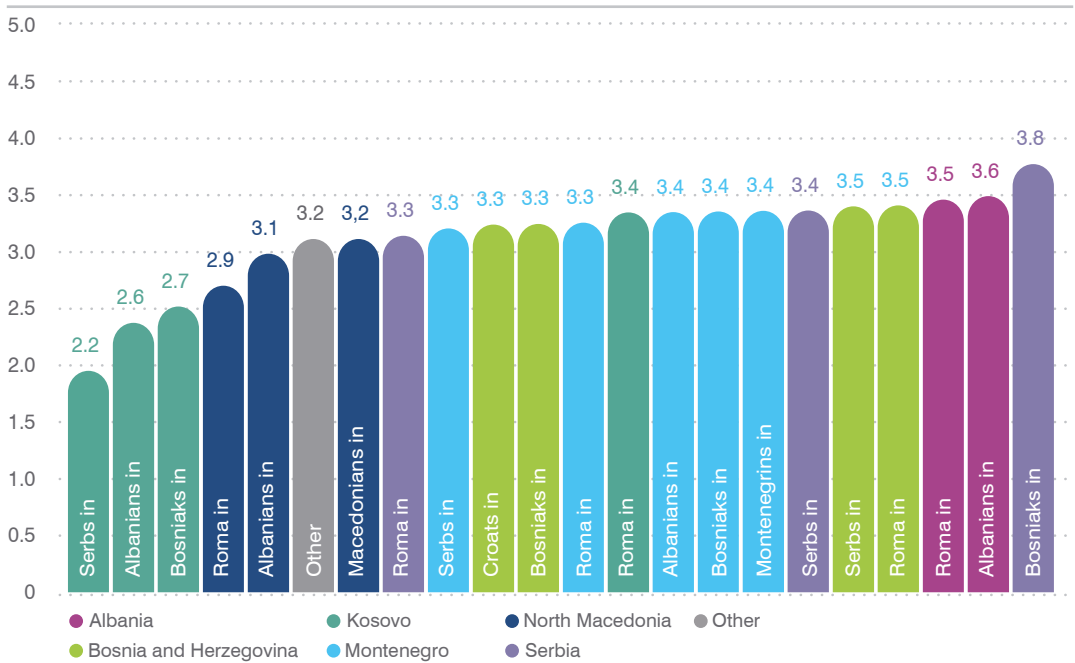
Figure 14. I trust most peoples of the Western Balkans despite events that may have occurred in the past. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

In focus group discussions, for the most part, participants said they were open and often eager to make friends with members of other peoples of the Western Balkans or with those of other religious affiliations, including those they had been in conflict with in the past. They made a distinction between those most responsible for past injustices and the people in general, especially their peers who are too young to bear responsibility. Generally, young people viewed intolerance as more characteristic of the older generations: "For example, if my friends are in a relationship and they are of different nationalities, their parents get involved because it bothers them. Young people are not bothered. We accept those differences while older persons find it harder to accept."[79] That is not to

. . . .
79   Focus group discussion, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20-year-old woman.

Shared Futures

Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

say that the past does not weigh heavily on this generation, as several participants described feeling reserved with friends from certain groups: "Even young people are sometimes discriminatory as history negatively affects their views."[80]

In summary, while many young people demonstrate a willingness to interact across divides and an openness towards other groups in their communities, these attitudes vary among the Western Balkan societies and different socio-demographic groups – there remain challenges to building a tradition of tolerance and acceptance of others in the region.

SHARED VALUES AND REGIONAL IDENTITY

Peace and social cohesion also entail shared norms and values and a sense of commonality and inclusive solidarity among different groups. *Shared Futures* found that young people across the region share a core of deep-seated personal aspirations. Almost without exception, they assign very high importance to marriage and raising a family, holding a good job, having access to good schools and health care, to personal freedom and living in a harmonious society free of conflict.

Youth across the Western Balkans also share a strong desire for a cleaner environment. Indeed, air pollution is the region's most pressing environmental problem, and one in which several Balkan cities frequently rank among the most polluted in the world.[81] Ageing coal-fired power plants and motor transport account for much of the problem. The region is among those most exposed to the effects of climate change, with temperature changes of up to 5 degrees Celsius projected by 2100.[82] Young respondents for *Shared Futures* placed a great importance on an environment free from pollution, and cited air pollution, climate change and environmental problems as either their primary or second biggest concern in all locations – although they were more

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80   Focus group discussion, Albania, 19-year-old man.
81   Health and Environment Alliance, Chronic Coal Pollution: EU Action on the Western Balkans will improve health and economies across Europe, 19 February 2019.
82   European Commission, Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, 6 October 2020.

ambivalent about sacrificing economic growth to protect the environment and to fight climate change (Figure 15). Young people also agreed in their dissatisfaction with their respective governments' records on environmental protection. In most of the region, support for such environmental

A clean environment free from pollution is important for me

Country	Score
Albania	4.7
Bosnia and Herzegovina	4.4
Kosovo	4.8
Montenegro	4.5
North Macedonia	4.5
Serbia	4.3

Protecting the environment and tackling climate change issues is more important than economic growth

Country	Score
Albania	3.3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.2
Kosovo	3.3
Montenegro	3.5
North Macedonia	3.6
Serbia	3.8

values correlated significantly with activism, suggesting it is an important driver for youth engagement across societies.

Figure 15. Environmental attitudes. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5 strongly agree).

Young people were also asked about the similarity of the Western Balkan peoples. Their perceptions were gauged from three statements: "The peoples of the Western Balkans have a common culture and shared way of life", "There are more things that unite us than separate us" and "Most peoples of the Western Balkans are just as moral as my people". Most respondents across the region demonstrated a similar degree of agreement, as shown in Figure 16.

Shared Futures

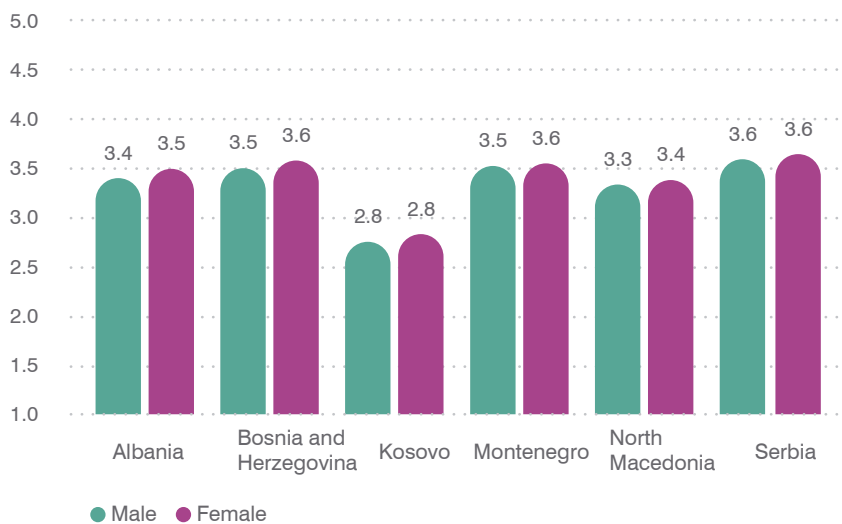Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

Figure 16. Perceived similarity of the peoples of the Western Balkans. Average scores (1: strongly disagree on similarity, 5: strongly agree on similarity).

Similarities were described through both a positive and negative lens. One focus group participant said: "What we are famous for is the Balkan mentality. But when someone mentions that I think of negative things such as crime and corruption... There are more negative than positive things [in common]".[83] Others referred to more positive commonalities such as "culture, traditions, customs, food, connection to family".[84] The contrast between perceptions of intergroup similarity in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the two societies most deeply affected by armed conflict and still hosting international peacekeeping forces, is noteworthy. Youth from all ethnic communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported among the highest degrees of agreement with statements of intergroup similarity, while young people in Kosovo reported the lowest.

83   Focus group discussion, North Macedonia, 24-year-old-man.
84   Focus group discussion, Albania, 24-year-old woman.

> I think for young people in the Balkans, insecurities and complexes are our main similarities among each other. I also think that these complexes hold us back, whether in economic, political or social terms, they hinder us from developing further. I am also including myself, since I am part of the Balkans.

> *22-year-old woman, Kosovo*

Overall, there is a sense that despite divisions that remain resistant to change and continue to foster mistrust and otherness among different populations in the Western Balkans region, some positive change can be seen, not least of which is the openness of many youth to interact with others and their shared priorities and identity. The voices of young people must therefore become central rather than peripheral both in public debates and policy and programming in this area.

> The key link [between Balkan peoples] is: it's about food, sports and music, and none of these three things involves nationality or political affiliation. We can argue about political parties while eating burek and watching Djokovic play and go to Exit together.

> *24-year-old man, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

#SHAREDFUTURES

PEACE
AND SOCIAL
COHESION:
OPPORTUNITIES
AND RISKS

THIS SECTION EXPANDS THE ANALYSIS of the youth perceptions data collected for *Shared Futures* to highlight some of the opportunities that governments, multilateral actors, civil society and other stakeholders in the Western Balkans could pursue to build peace and strengthen social cohesion in the region. It also outlines some of the risks that undermine social cohesion and stability, from the young person's perspective.

Optimism about improved relations

While young people in the region mostly came of age in a time of peace, so that only the oldest cohorts have any memory of armed conflict, they grew up in societies with dramatically different historical experiences and levels of conflict-related disruptions.

Throughout the Western Balkans, young people tend to agree with a range of sanguine views about the region and its communities; there is a reservoir of goodwill and optimism here (Figure 17). *Shared Futures* measured young people's optimism about peace by asking whether they agreed or disagreed as to the interest in peace of different peoples of the region and whether their societies could deal with the past, build good relations and promote regional cooperation. Across all ethnicities and all questions, more people seemed optimistic than not about peace.
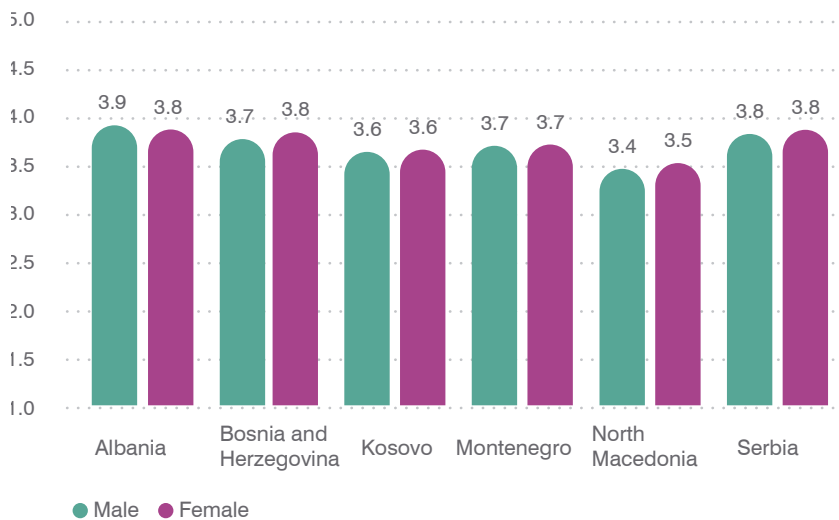
Shared Futures

Youth perceptions on peace
in the Western Balkans

*Figure 17. Optimism about peace. Average scores
(1: low optimism, 5: high optimism).*

There are some interesting nuances. Young people tend-
ed to be more convinced about the genuine interest in
peace of the peoples in their own society, than they were
in the genuine interest for peace of other peoples across
the region.[85] This may either suggest a more positive view
about one's own group or alternatively that youth are less
concerned with intra-society cleavages but are slight-
ly more cautious – while still optimistic – about relations
across the region. Respondents also strongly agreed that
regional cooperation would lead to security and stability
and demonstrated a relatively high confidence in being
able to better prevent conflicts, as a younger generation,
than previous ones.

Additionally, young people agreed significantly more when
asked whether the region "will be able to have good rela-
tions if we focus on solving current challenges instead of

85   For some young people, the difference is large. When asked
     about people's willingness for peace in their own society, Kosovo
     Albanians averaged 4.2 (out of a maximum of 5), but only 3.3 when
     assessing the willingness for peace of others across the region
     (where 3 is neutral).

looking to the past" than when asked whether the Western Balkans "will be able to deal with the past and leave it behind", although they tended to agree with both statements. One focus group discussion participant said: "I think what we have in common is that we are all mostly focused on the past and on the events in the past. I think that prevents us from looking to the future and focusing on the problems we need to deal with now instead of looking at how it was before."[86] This suggests that a forward-looking frame of reference may resonate better with youth, something to consider when approaching the topic of dealing with the past.

Shared Futures also looked at how young people's optimism about peace and openness to others associated with other attitudes or behaviours.[87] What emerged was that friendships across different ethnic groups yielded stronger optimism and openness – whereas mere having acquaintances did not. When it comes to ethnically diverse communities, young respondents who described their communities as multi-ethnic and fully integrated tended in most societies of the Western Balkans to show the highest levels of optimism about peace and to be open compared to their peers living in other types of communities.[88] On the other hand, optimism about a peaceful future in the region correlated significantly across most of the region with a wide range of other prosocial orientations, such as approach behaviour, belief in democracy

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86 Focus group discussion, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20-year-old woman.
87 Comparison of the top and bottom 20 percent on two composite indexes: one measure on societies' ability to deal with the past and leave it behind, the willingness to forgive past wrongs, and improvement of relations within the region; and a second measure that combined a respondent's approach behaviour and views of others (such as "there are more things that unite us than separate us").
88 This was true in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The relationship varies in complex ways, and in Albania and North Macedonia it does not appear to be a factor at all. Young people who identified their communities as multi-ethnic but segregated reported the lowest levels of optimism in Kosovo, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina it was youth living in mono-ethnic communities who were the least optimistic. In Serbia, young people who reported living in partly integrated and segregated communities were especially optimistic.

Shared Futures

Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

and gender equality, and a willingness to forgive other groups for past deeds.[89]
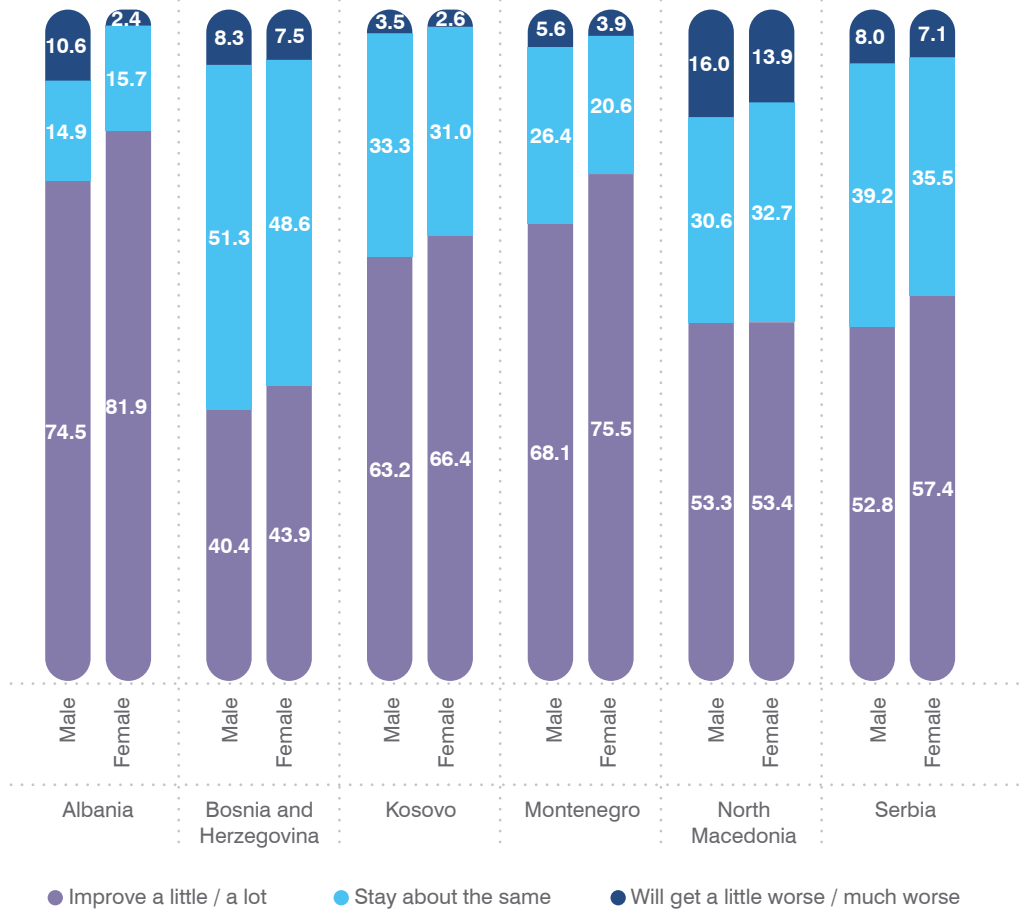
Figure 18. How do you believe relations among the peoples of the Western Balkans will evolve over the next decade? Percentages.

89 There were relatively few other patterns. Older respondents tended to be less optimistic in Kosovo and Serbia, but more optimistic in Albania and Montenegro. Young people in their late 20s may remember suffering from armed conflict and its immediate aftermath in the former, but not, for example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there was no significant correlation between age and optimism about peace.

Further, by quite large margins and across all societies, young people expected relations among the peoples of the Western Balkans to improve over the next decade (Figure 18). There is relatively little variation between societies, while women tended to be more optimistic. Even in the most pessimistic case, 42 percent of respondents expected relations to improve. Just 8 percent expected regional relations to deteriorate, while the rest expected no change.

Nevertheless, and as noted previously, the overall optimistic perceptions of youth were mixed with the moderate concern of some people about the possibility of an internal or regional armed conflict. These concerns were prevalent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro, while in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, they did not feature among the major concerns of youth.[90] Understandably, the experiences of people in each society is unique, and the effects of the conflicts of the 1990s loom larger in some places than others.

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90   In Bosnia and Herzegovina youth who self-identified as Bosniak or Croat were more concerned than their Serb peers. In Kosovo, youth who identified as Serbs were clearly more concerned about an armed conflict breaking out than their Albanian peers who did not by large see this as a major concern. In Montenegro, Albanian young people were more concerned about this than their Montenegrin counterparts.

Shared Futures   Youth perceptions on peace
                                   in the Western Balkans

Perceived factors of peace

Shared Futures explored what young people thought were the most effective factors in creating long-term peace and stability in the Western Balkans (Figure 19).
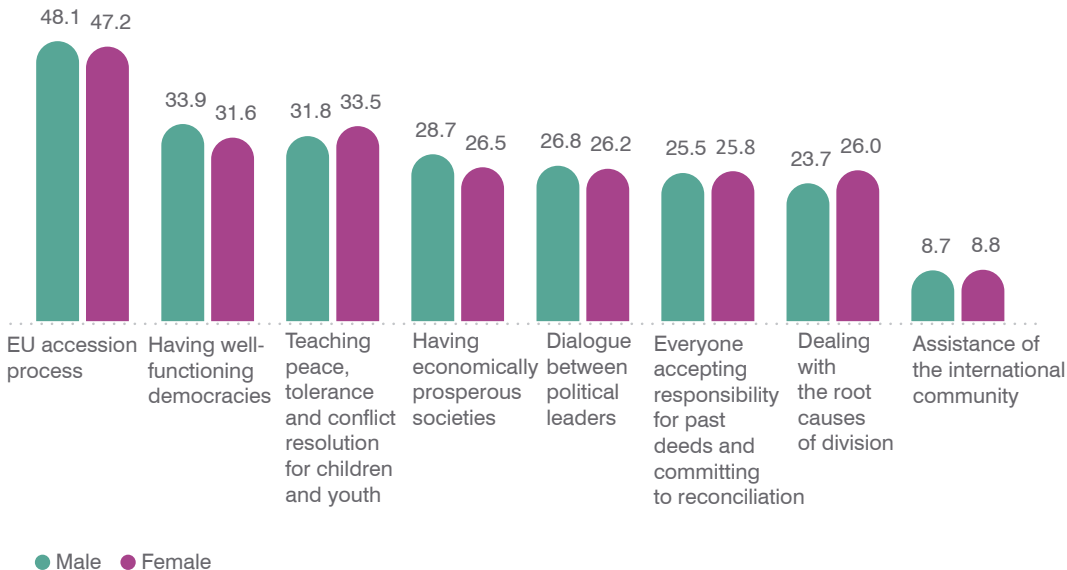

Figure 19.The most effective factors in creating long-term peace and stability in the Western Balkans according to survey respondents. Percentages.

Asked to name up to three factors, the young respondents chose the EU accession process by far the most frequently (47 percent), although the distribution varied highly by the respondent's self-identified ethnicity: in Bosnia and Herzegovina, youth who self-identified as Bosniak were more prone to see the EU accession as a positive factor for peace than their Croat or Serb peers (55 percent, 42 percent and 33 percent respectively). In Kosovo, an overwhelming 75,5 percent of Albanian youth felt the EU accession process would be important for peace against only 6 percent of Kosovo Serbs. Similarly, in Montenegro, Albanian youth

assigned importance to the EU accession process (63 percent) much more often than their peers (44 percent of those self-identifying as Montenegrin and 35 percent Serb); as they did in North Macedonia (71 percent of Albanian youth and 54 percent of Macedonian youth). In Serbia, around 23 percent of those who self-identified as Serbs compared to 53 percent of Bosniak youth saw the EU accession process as important for peace in the region. Overall, the lowest confidence that the EU accession process would contribute importantly to peace was in Montenegro (45 percent) and Serbia (30 percent) – interestingly, both have advanced furthest in the EU accession process.

Other studies have indicated that generally speaking, views on all aspects of EU integration vary widely across the region. On the basic question of whether membership would be a "good thing", opinions have been shown to range from a high of 87 percent in Albania to a low of 26 percent in Serbia.[91] Among young people, support for EU membership has been found to be higher, ranging from 56 percent in Serbia to 95 percent in Albania.[92] The public has also demonstrated optimistic expectations of the speed of the accession process.[93] Evaluating where each economy stands on its path to EU integration can be challenging.[94] Membership requirements place a strong focus on fundamental reforms in the rule of law, the economy and functioning of democratic institutions and public administration.[95] The 2018 EU Western Balkans Enlargement Strategy included regional reconciliation and transitional justice as crucial areas that

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91   RCC, Balkan Barometer 2020 pocket edition, p.14.
92   FES, Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019, p. 58.
93   RCC, Balkan Barometer 2020, p.41. Expecting EU membership by 2025 (and in parentheses, by 2030): in Albania 28 (72), Bosnia and Herzegovina 17 (53), Kosovo 38 (82), Montenegro 45 (68), North Macedonia 28 (63), Serbia 11 (42). Of these, Montenegro has been in membership negotiations the longest, since June 2012, followed by Serbia, since January 2014 and most recently Albania and North Macedonia (since March 2020). Neither Bosnia and Herzegovina nor Kosovo have started membership negotiations.
94   European Stability Initiative, Hamster in the Wheel: Credibility and EU Balkan Policy, 15 January 2020.
95   European Commission, Communication on EU enlargement policy, 6 October 2020, p.4.

require comprehensive and convincing reforms.[96]

> I think that tolerance is important for peace in the region, but knowledge of history itself is also important. Even if we don't accept it, our children need to know about history. Not versions of history but facts. And then we need tolerance and acceptance of diversity.
>
> *20-year-old woman, Serbia*

In *Shared Futures*, a well-functioning democracy, teaching peace and tolerance, dialogue between leaders and economic prosperity were also seen as important factors for long-term peace and stability by more than 25 percent of young people in the region. Young people's perceptions about the role of the international community for securing peace and stability were mixed, and their confidence in the impact of international involvement bland at best. Among all factors contributing to peace, help from the international community attracted the least support at just below 11 percent. When asked if the international community should not intervene in solving past conflicts, young people were mostly non-aligned, not agreeing or disagreeing (Figure 20).[97] Respondents also had varied but on average somewhat neutral views of the importance of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in reconciliation and in coming to terms with the past.[98]

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96   European Commission, Enlargement Package: Commission Publishes Reports on the Western Balkans Partners and Turkey, press release, Brussels, 17 April 2018.

97   Across the region, respondents who self-identified as Serbs, especially from Serbia but also from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, tended to agree that "the international community should not intervene at all in solving past conflicts", while respondents of other communities were mostly neutral, and Bosniak youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo Albanian youth tending slightly to disagree.

98   Some respondents were quite positive, notably Albanians in Albania and Bosniaks across the region, while others were negative, notably Kosovo Serbs. This question was one of the very few in which respondents from the different communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina differed significantly: respondents who self-identified as Croats and Serbs were much more guarded about the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.
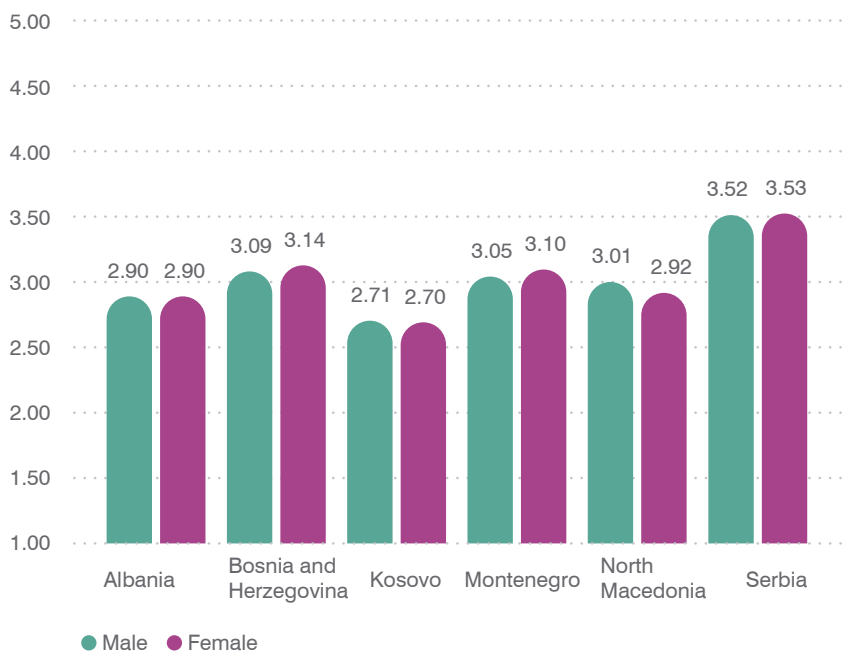
Figure 20. The international community should not intervene at all in solving past conflicts. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

To summarize, on average and across all societies, young people reported more sanguine attitudes about a peaceful future and regional relations in the Western Balkans. Such hopeful attitudes and responses appeared to be higher among young women and among respondents who saw themselves living in more integrated communities. The EU accession process, the establishment of democratic institutions, dialogue and peace education were viewed as the most important factors contributing to establishing a peaceful and stable future.

Intergroup friendships vs. mere contact

Scholars and practitioners have long considered contact in which members of two groups work together to achieve common goals to be one of the most effective tools for im-

proving intergroup trust and relations.[99] The contact hypothesis has increasingly motivated policy interventions, especially peacebuilding programmes. Yet there is also evidence that negative intergroup contact experiences may associate with increased prejudices towards other groups.[100] Other studies have examined the role of intergroup contact in promoting support for peacebuilding and youth civic engagement, and findings have suggested that youth who are living with the legacy of protracted intergroup conflict can support peacebuilding and engage in constructive behaviours such as civic engagement, recognizing the peacebuilding potential of youth.[101]

With that in mind, *Shared Futures* looked more closely at the types of contact young people reported with members of other ethnic communities and their perceptions of the Western Balkan peoples. The analysis pointed to two important findings: on the one hand, many young people who reported having close friends in ethnic groups other than their own tended to have higher trust in the other peoples of the region and agreed more with the premise that the different peoples of the Western Balkans were similar.[102] On the other hand, for respondents who reported having a few or many acquaintances in other ethnic groups – but not friends – the situation emerges as less clear: they tended to report lower degrees of agreement on intergroup similarity, and lower levels of trust in other peoples of the Western Balkans region. The exception was Bosnia and Herzegovina, where even respondents having more acquaintances reported higher levels of perceived intergroup similarity. In Albania, Kosovo,

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99   See e.g. M. Hewstone et al., Intergroup contact and intergroup conflict, Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 20(1), 2014, pp. 39-53.

100 S. Paolini et al., Negative Intergroup Contact Makes Group Memberships Salient: Explaining Why Intergroup Conflict Endures, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 6(12), 2010, pp. 1723-1738. R. Maleady et al., Examining the role of positive and negative intergroup contact and anti-immigrant prejudice in Brexit, British Journal of Social Psychology, 56(4), 2017, pp. 799-808.

101 S. McKeown and L. K. Taylor, Intergroup Contact and Peacebuilding: Promoting Youth Civic Engagement in Northern Ireland, Journal of Social and Political Psychology 5(2), 2017, pp. 415-434.

102 A significant and positive relationship appeared in both similarity and trust questions in Kosovo and Montenegro, and in North Macedonia on trust only.

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and Montenegro, on the other hand, there was a negative correlation. There was no statistically significant relationship in North Macedonia and Serbia.

This would indicate that when it comes to intergroup social relations, the quality of the relationships not only trumps quantity; the two may possibly have different consequences. Having mere acquaintances from other communities, particularly in specific social environments characterized by segregation or other forms of discrimination, can be counter-productive in that it could in some cases facilitate more negative attitudes towards those perceived as 'other'. As noted above, these differential patterns – having mere acquaintances versus friendships – are in line with recent intergroup contact literature.

Interestingly, having close friends from other ethnic communities, rather than acquaintances, was also associated with greater interest in civic engagement.[103] The association is strong, with young people who afforded importance to community engagement and having a say in decision-making almost 50 percent more likely to have many friends from other communities than those who saw civic engagement as less important. This held across the Western Balkan region. Further, in most of the region, quality contact with other community members and actual participation in civic life (as opposed to valuing it in principle) were also strongly associated, with those reporting many friends from other communities up to four times more likely to have participated in at least one form of civic activity over the past year. While difficult to explain with existing data, this may point to other underlying factors for those who have friends from diverse communities, such as openness to other people and new things as well as prosocial behaviour. Alternatively, civic engagement may facilitate the development of these intergroup friendships.[104]

103 Measured here as the importance given to being an active member of the community and contributing to change in society, as well as to having a say in policies and decision-making.

104 In contrast, interest in civic activity tended to be lower among youth who described their place of residence as being in an ethnically segregated area; levels of interest were higher for those who said their areas were either partly or fully integrated. It is worth noting that interest in civic activity was also higher among respondents who said they lived in a mono-ethnic community.

Together, all these findings point to the importance of both societal conditions and structures in addition to personal experiences and opportunities for strengthening social cohesion and peaceful community relations.

Youth agency improves cohesion

The agency of young people and their space for participation enables them to contribute to processes of peacebuilding and social cohesion, either in political, socio-cultural or economic ways. A young person's sense of agency is influenced by individual and collective, conscious and unconscious motivations, identities, hopes and frustrations. Youth agency for peacebuilding is therefore influenced by surrounding cultural, political and economic contexts.[105]

> If we want some changes in society, we first have to start from our homes and from ourselves. If we change our views of society, we will initiate a chain reaction and it all starts from there.
>
> *Montenegro, 29-year-old woman*

Shared Futures measured the young respondents' sense of self-efficacy and agency by asking them if they felt they were able to achieve their goals in life and felt confident making decisions and life choices (Figure 21). This was then compared with their attitudes towards other groups in the region. An important finding was that young people's self-efficacy beliefs and agency were associated with more open-mindedness, less distance to other groups and more optimism about peace in the region. Young respondents with more confidence and agency also saw others as more similar to themselves than their less confident peers. Education and employment play an important role in agency – across all societies, respondents who had a higher level of education or were in employment also had higher self-efficacy beliefs than their peers.

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105 M.T.A. Lopes Cardozo et al., Youth Agency and Peacebuilding, Research Consortium Education and Peacebuilding, University of Amsterdam, 2016.
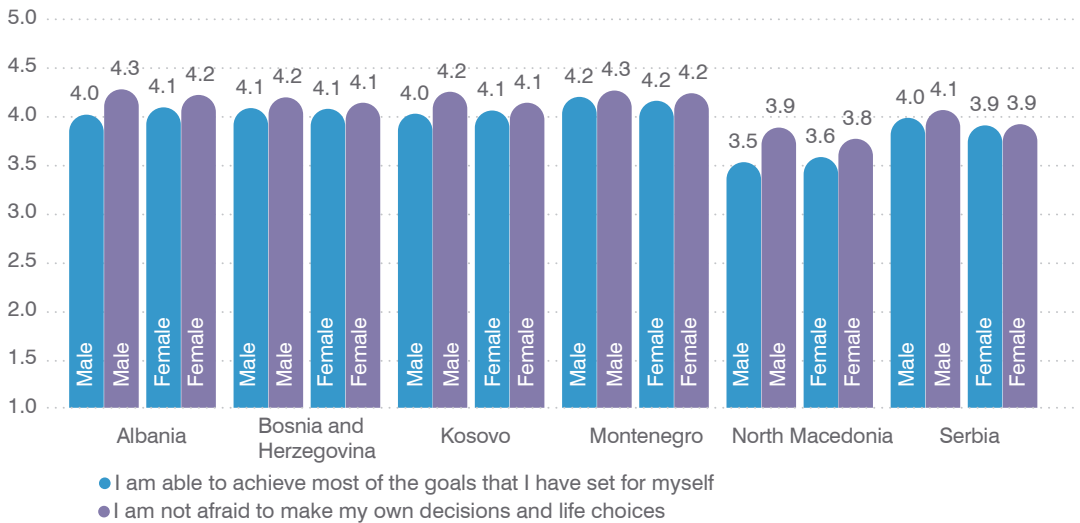
Figure 21. Self-efficacy and agency. Average scores
(1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

On the other hand, young people interviewed for *Shared Futures* tended to agree, across the region, that they played a useful role in their communities – this view was held equally by women and men, but more so in Albania and Montenegro than in other societies. However, and as previously indicated in this report, youth expressed doubts about leaders' openness to their contributions and to understanding their concerns – indicating a perceived lack of commitment to young people and their active engagement.

Empowering young people to achieve their own goals and increasing their sense of agency can therefore be seen as an essential precondition for social cohesion and sustaining peace, a view that is also supported by previous behavioural research.[106]

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106 P.W. Speer et al., The Relationship between Social Cohesion and Empowerment: Support and New Implications for Theory, Health Education & Behavior, 28(6), 2001, pp. 716-732.

Shared Futures

Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

Interest in travel within the region

Travelling within the Western Balkans is also an important factor that may reduce perceived differences and exclusive attitudes towards other communities. Travelling outside of the region could also be a very important factor for the same reason.

Analysis of the data collected for *Shared Futures* found that the travel experiences of youth was associated with their sense of agency, interest in civic engagement and lower social distance to other groups, all which were also found to be associated with pro-social behaviour and more optimistic views about peace. This is in line with previous data on youth in the region which reveals that spending more than six months abroad tended to decrease young people's support for exclusionary or nativist attitudes, although only among those whose views were already somewhat moderate: travel made no difference to the opinions of those with strongly held nativist views.[107]

In focus group discussions, participants who had travelled outside their home areas – whether to regions within their own borders inhabited by other groups, elsewhere in the Western Balkans, or further abroad – attributed some of their openness to others to that experience. Conversely, they felt that friends who had not travelled were missing out on what one participant called "enlightenment through travelling".[108]

Data collected for *Shared Futures* reveals significant differences in young people's travel experiences. Overall, about 36 percent of Western Balkan youth had been outside of the region in the past two years, while an average of 50 percent of young women and men had travelled within the Western Balkans (Figures 22 and 23). Youth from Kosovo and Roma throughout the region travelled outside the Western Balkans much less often – probably due to visa requirements,

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107 FES, Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. What is here designated as 'nativist' attitudes refers to the following measure in the study: "It would be best if our country was inhabited only by real (name of country)ians". Additional analysis was conducted of data reported on p.47 and figure 7.3.
108 Focus group discussion, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 23-year-old man.

poverty and other causes, respectively. On the other hand, Kosovo youth often travelled within the region, with over 60 percent doing so. Young people across the region reported similar reasons for travel within the Western Balkans, the most frequent ones being tourism, visiting family or friends and work (Figure 24). It is noteworthy that among those who reported not having travelled within the Western Balkans in the past two years, over 50 percent of respondents across all societies indicated an interest in doing so (Figure 25).
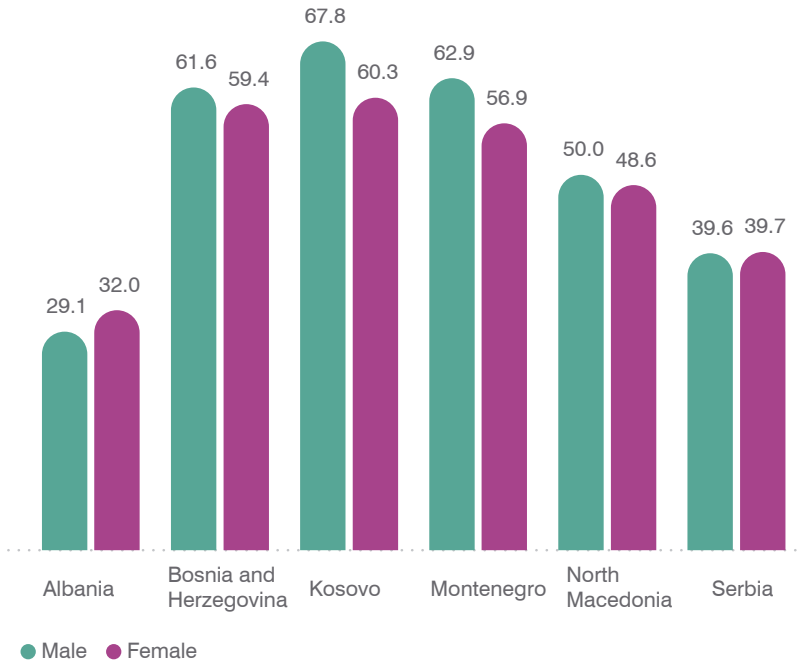

● Male ● Female

Figure 22. Percentages of young people who have travelled within the Western Balkans in the past two years.
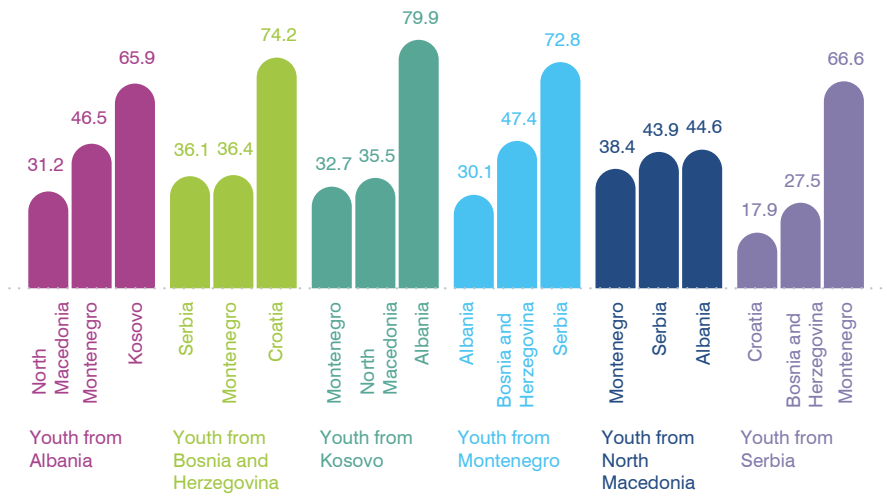
Figure 23. Where have you travelled within the Western Balkans? Top three destinations for youth in the region, percentages.
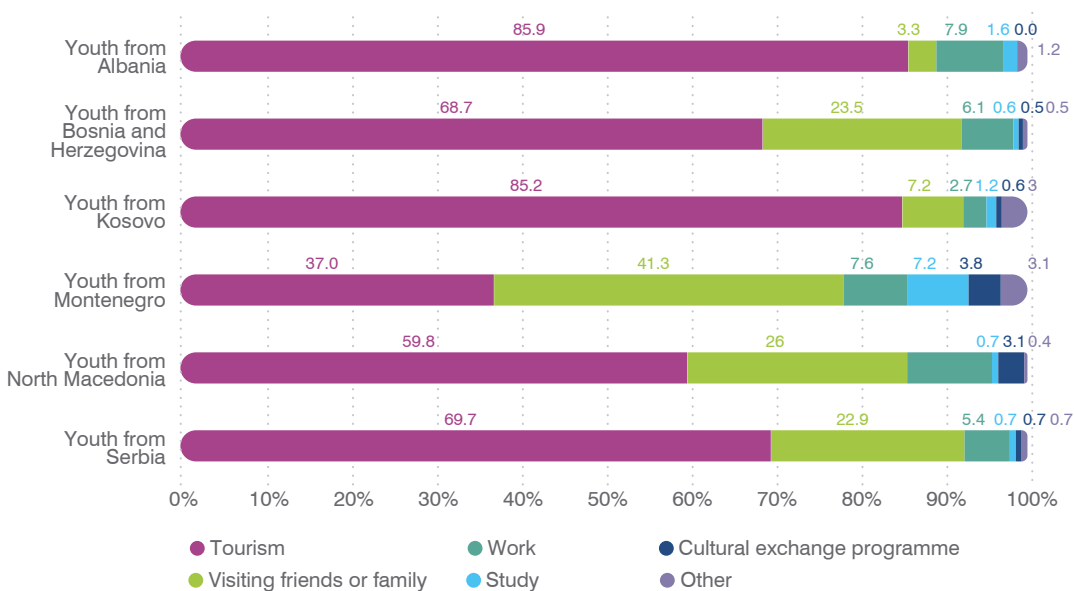

Figure 24. Main purpose of the last visit of youth within the Western Balkans. Percentages per respondent's origin.
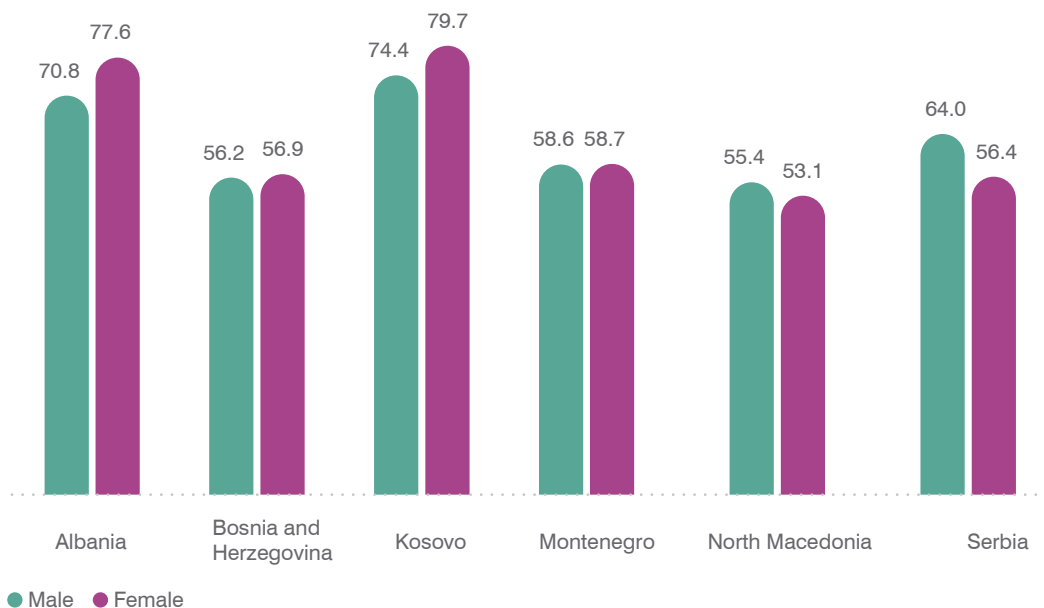
Figure 25. Expressed interest in travel within the Western Balkans for those with no prior experience. Percentages.

When asked about obstacles that impeded mobility among youth in the Western Balkans region, the predominant reason given by youth across the region was the lack of finances (Figure 26). The lack of government programmes to support youth mobility and the lack of information on this issue were also pointed out as obstacles by nearly a fifth of respondents. These findings are backed up by previous research: 91 percent of young people in the Western Balkans had never used mobility programmes of local or national governments, while only 18 percent of young people used some of the EU programmes for young people.[109]

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109 European Association for Local Democracy ALDA, Youth Mobility in the Western Balkans. The Present Challenges and Future Perspectives, 2016. Reinforcing the findings of *Shared Futures*, this study found that the biggest obstacle for the mobility of young people in the Balkans was economic in nature, but also the lack of programmes supported by the government, prejudices and the consequences of the wars were mentioned.

Other common responses included the consequences of the conflicts, preference for travelling elsewhere and prejudices against other peoples of the Western Balkans.
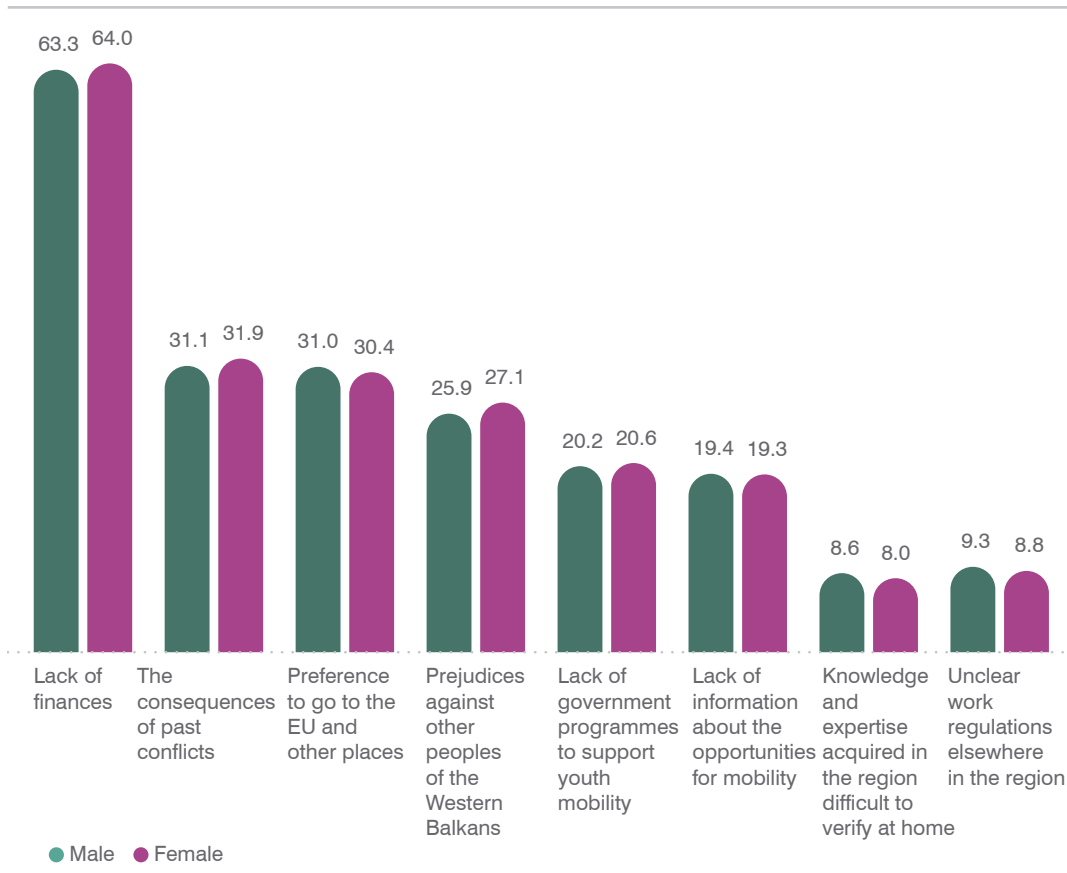

Figure 26. Biggest perceived obstacles impeding the mobility of young people within the Western Balkans. Percentages.

Willingness to forgive – views are mixed

One important measure of social cohesion in a post-conflict context is people's propensity for forgiveness – the extent to which people feel that the way to resolve a conflict is to

forgive the other side.[110] Youth interviewed for *Shared Futures* were asked about regional relations and their willingness to forgive "other groups for what they did to my people in the past." This specific question was asked in relation to views about the past conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and thus excluded respondents in Albania. The responses were mixed and perhaps surprisingly ambivalent, although on average most young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia reported being cautiously more willing to forgive than not (Figure 27). There are observable differences between some societies. However, ethnic groups within each society by large gave very similar average answers.[111]

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110 UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and programming implications, 2020.

111 In Kosovo, respondents who self-identified as Albanian and as Serbs gave almost identical responses and were equally reserved about willingness to forgive. Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina tended to be willing to forgive, as did those in North Macedonia where armed conflict took place most recently.
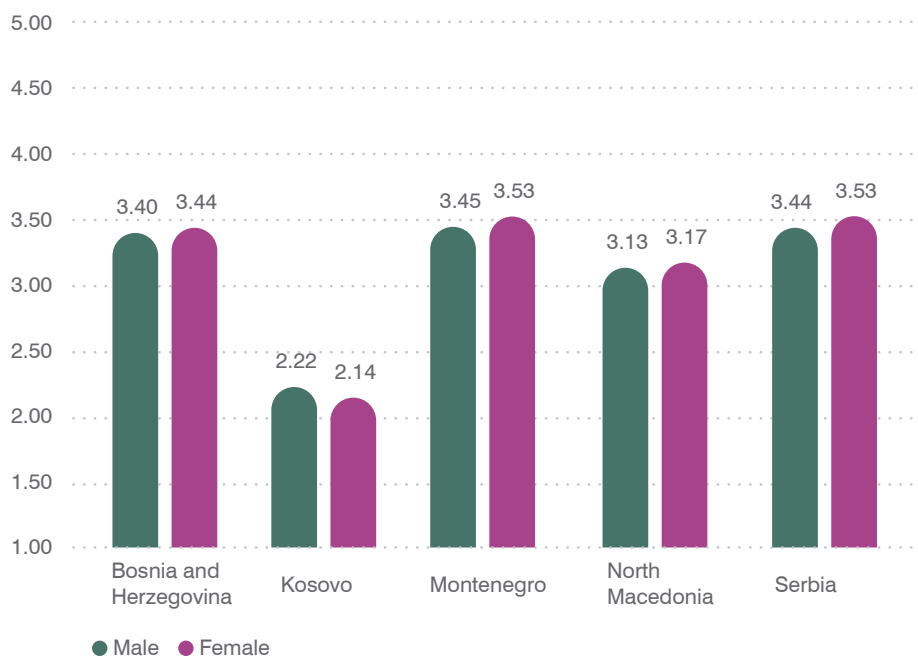
Figure 27. I am willing to forgive other groups for what they did to my people in the past. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree). Albania was not included in this question.

Although on average young people tended to be willing to forgive other groups for past transgressions, some were less prone to do so, and an important proportion in each society was resolutely unwilling (Figure 28). In Kosovo, the majority of young people were unwilling to forgive (around 63 percent), while in North Macedonia some 23 percent of youth were unwilling to do so. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia the rates were lower but still significant (from 15 to 17 percent of youth). Gender patterns differed: in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, men were less willing to forgive, while in Kosovo and Montenegro more women were unwilling to forgive than men. Unwillingness to forgive correlated with some other negative attitudes: youth who were not ready to forgive also tended to be less trusting of other groups and less inclined

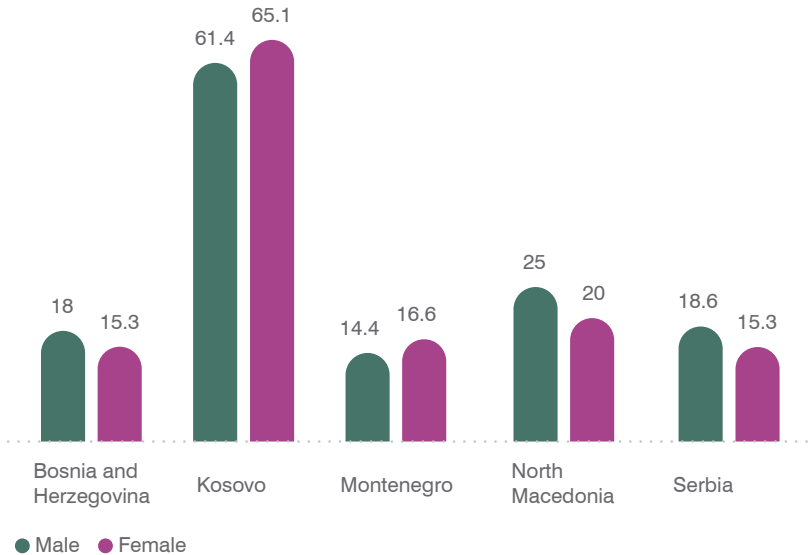to believe that other peoples in the Western Balkans were equally moral.

Figure 28. Percentages of youth not willing to forgive other groups for past deeds.

The study also examined the young respondents' attitudes towards the past overall – specifically whether they viewed their lives as marked by events that happened before their birth, and that many problems in society were rooted in the past conflicts (Figure 29).[112] In most cases, young people who focused on the past tended again to be less trusting of other groups and less disposed to believe other peoples were moral.[113] They were also less likely to have travelled.[114]

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112 Although respondents in Albania were not asked about forgiveness of other groups in the region, they were asked about their views of the impact of the communist past: "Even though I was very young or had not been born at the time, the communist years have affected me" and "Many of the problems in my society have their roots in the communist years". The agreement to these statements on the scale of 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) was 3.3, meaning respondents on average neither strongly agreed nor disagreed.

113 Except for respondents in North Macedonia.

114 With the exception of respondents in Serbia.

Shared Futures Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

Across the Western Balkan societies, young people who held a combined orientation of reluctance to forgive and a focus on the past were less likely to approach others from groups they perceived as distant. In summary, youth who felt they had been impacted by the past conflicts and found it hard to overcome its negative impact reported lower intergroup trust and less positive perceptions of other ethnic groups in the Western Balkans. One focus group participant expressed: "I think that hate is so imposed on us that, in some situations, we are not even aware that it is present within us."[115]

On the other hand, intergroup friendships correlated with forgiveness. Those young people with friends in other groups tended to be more willing to forgive and less focused on the past. Either friendships facilitate forgiveness, or a forgiving attitude allows for intergroup friendships to blossom. In any event, the finding speaks to the importance of opportunities for quality relationships between young people of different communities.

In summary, these findings point to a need to engage with young people in constructive dialogue about the past and its effects on the current realities of youth. Overall, across the region, both young women and young men were undecided on whether their societies had done enough to deal with the past – whether we were talking about the past conflicts in former Yugoslavia or the communist years in Albania – not strongly agreeing or disagreeing on the matter. They were also ambivalent about knowing sufficiently about past events in their societies or discussing the past more whether in public or in cross-border youth events. However, no clear resistance was detected either, which would indicate a window of opportunity for creating appealing and meaningful opportunities for youth to engage in discussions about the past and for overcoming its negative associations.

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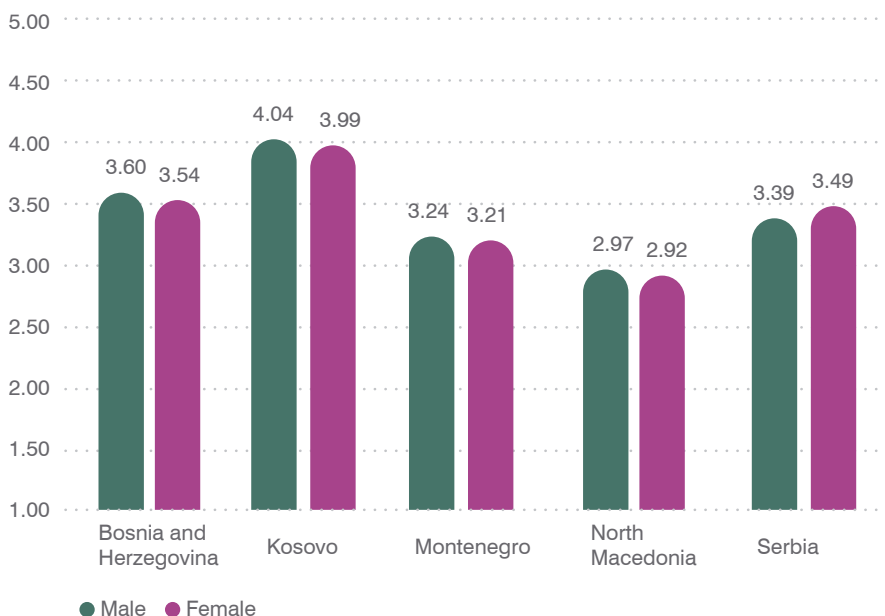115 Focus group discussion, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 24-year-old woman.

Figure 29. Impact of the past. The conflicts in former Yugoslavia have affected me and many problems in my society have their roots in them. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

When we mention the past I think of the period of communism. We still have not confronted it properly. Traces of the communist mentality are still present in our society. Young people are not given the space to build the society with the principles of the new century.

19-year-old woman, Albania

A history book may sometimes be a bad teacher because every kind of history is available. There will always be mentions of things that logically only suit us, at least in the official literature. Many things are hidden as far as history is concerned.

24-year-old man, Montenegro

Divisive narratives and information disorder

Throughout the region, ethno-nationalist discourses have the potential to negatively affect neighbourly relations, which are marked by a lack of constructive dialogue and competing narratives about the past, present and future.[116] The persistence of these divisive narratives represents an important obstacle to the achievement of social cohesion within the region as a whole.

Social media, in particular, can be an enabler the political agency of youth and their positive social connections, but it can also drive polarization, hate speech and violence. While still far from a mainstream tool when it comes to building peace, there is a growing recognition among peacebuilding practitioners of the relevance of social media platforms and their influence on peacebuilding efforts.[117]

When youth interviewed for *Shared Futures* were asked about social media content by other groups in the Western Balkans that offended their society or its past, some 42 percent of all respondents across all the region reported that it was common to see this type of divisive content on social media, whilst 28 percent were not sure. Rates varied significantly when comparing the societies of the region, and in some societies men and women viewed this differently (Figure 30). In focus groups, participants often attributed divisive narratives to older generations and public figures and viewed the lack of independent media as a major challenge. As one participant put it: "Hate speech is growing day by day on social media. Not to mention the divisive language used by public figures. They should be an example of correct behaviour, but they are the ones who bully and send out divisive messages."[118] Another participant said: "The idea of division is the biggest problem, I think we are too poisoned

116 European Parliament, Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, 2021.
117 International Alert, Realising the potential of social media as a tool for building peace, Policy Paper, November 2020.
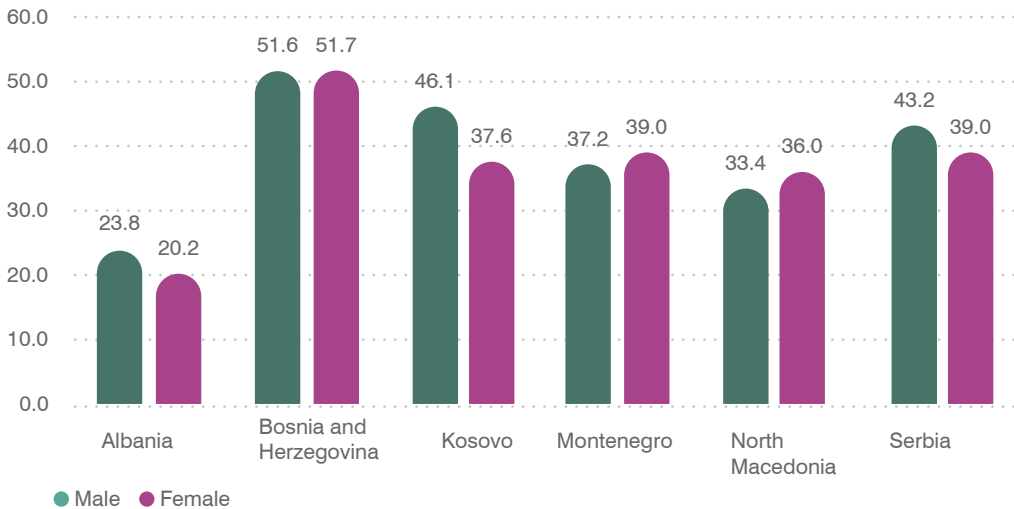118 Focus group discussion, Albania, 26-year-old woman.

Figure 30. Percentages of youth who think it is common to see offensive social media content about their society.

Shared Futures also asked youth about their views on freedom of expression and hate speech (Figure 31). Most young people, on a regional average, did not endorse freedom of expression extending to the right of hate speech against others on the basis of their ethnicity, religion or other characteristic. However, there were still worryingly large numbers of young people who thought expressing hate should be permissible: 26 percent of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 32 percent in Kosovo, 38 percent in Albania, 42 percent in Montenegro, 46 percent in North Macedonia and up to 51 percent in Serbia held this opinion. Young men, youth living in rural areas and youth who were economically less well-off were more in favour of saying whatever they wanted, including to express hate, than young women, youth in urban areas and youth who were better off economically. Respondents who reported that they lived in

119 Focus group discussion, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20-year-old woman.

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ethnically segregated communities endorsed this attitude to a higher extent than their peers in integrated or mono-ethnic communities. On the other hand, the higher the educational level of the respondent, the less they endorsed this view, across all societies.
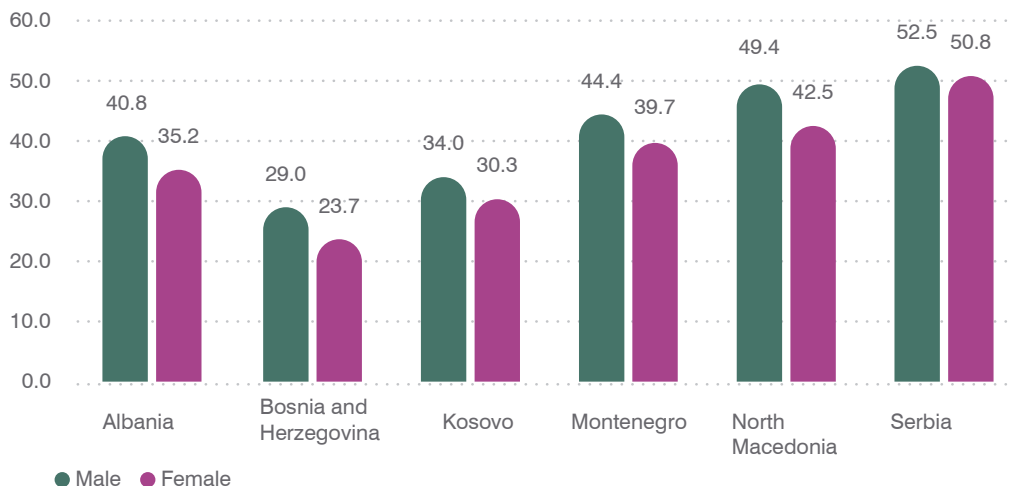

Figure 31. Percentages of youth who agree on the freedom of speech including the right to express hate.

When it comes to personal experiences of hate speech, online and offline, young people's experiences on that count varied within the region, as shown in Figure 32. Perhaps not surprisingly, young people who said they were engaged in civic activities reported more hate speech – this can point to the fact that they are more exposed to public opinion and engaged in debates, but it can also signal that civically engaged youth, who have more agency and confidence, are also more aware of their rights and have a keener opinion on what is permissible and what not.
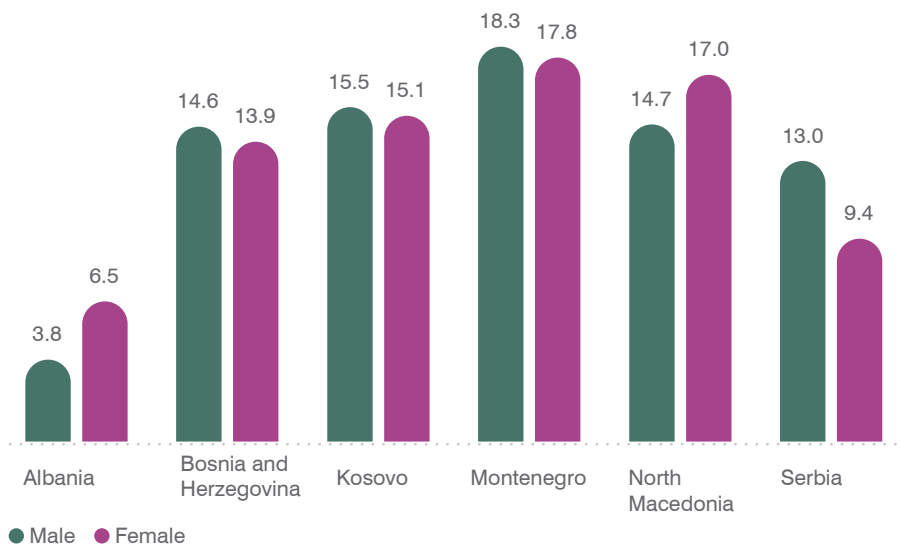
Figure 32. Percentages of youth who had experienced hate speech online or offline in the past 12 months.

Another closely related area of concern for peace and social cohesion is the phenomenon of information disorder, which according to the European Parliament is "an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception".[120] More broadly speaking, information disorder is a symptom of a deeper breakdown of social cohesion and democratic governance, rather than the cause of it. While the Western Balkans host numerous counter-disinformation initiatives, focusing on fact-checking, public education, civil society capacity building and media support, these projects often fall short of addressing the needs of societies on the ground.[121]

120 European Parliament, Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, 2021.
121 European Parliament, Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, 2021.

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> I started to notice a lot of fake news since I participated in a workshop on media literacy. There are many examples of news being conveyed in an ambiguous way. A situation is taken out of context with a headline that will attract attention, and then people's condemnation starts. This is how stories are written to provoke conflict.
>
> *19-year-old woman, Serbia*

Young people interviewed for *Shared Futures* across the region were relatively concerned about the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories, ranging from about 49 percent to up to 75 percent of young women and men being concerned. The concern was the highest among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (Figure 33). In particular, those youth who reported being civically engaged were more worried than others. In most societies, young women were more concerned than men about these phenomena.
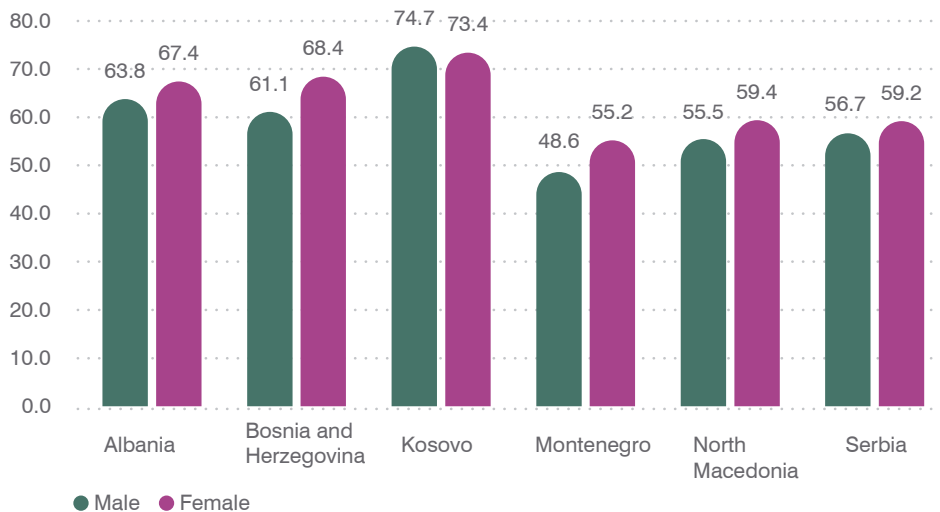

Figure 33. Percentages of youth concerned about fake news and conspiracy theories.

	Traditional media in my society	Social media	My friends	My parents & family members	Schools	Books	Cultural projects	Youth exchanges or other regional projects
Albania	35.1	58.6	25.5	33.5	38.5	28.7	7.0	7.7
Bosnia and Herzegovina	28.3	20.5	28.0	55.9	48.8	45.5	20.4	16.7
Kosovo	53.4	44.7	33.2	49.6	41.0	36.8	13.5	11.6
Montenegro	21.8	29.5	35.6	49.7	46.8	45.4	29.3	23.7
North Macedonia	25.7	58.6	34.7	56.5	31.1	25.2	17.1	17.6
Serbia	26.9	35.5	49.7	53.4	30.2	27.5	14.6	14.1

Table 4. Important sources of information for learning about other peoples in the Western Balkans. Percentages.

Many young people have little opportunities for exposure to positive interaction and dialogue with people of different backgrounds and are impacted by divisive narratives and stereotypes passed on from one generation to another, as well as in the media.[122] When *Shared Futures* asked about the most important sources of information for youth to learn about the other peoples in the region, for the most part, informal networks such as parents and family members, friends and social media were the most common sources (Table 5). Schools, books and traditional media were also

122 EU-UNDP, Socio-Economic Perceptions of Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2016. Learning from Reconciliation Initiatives in the Western Balkans, UNDP/DPA/CEDEM, July 2015.

mentioned as important sources of information. Cultural projects, regional projects and youth exchanges were much less so. Yet when young people were asked if youth exchanges could have a positive impact on regional relations, between 61 and 91 percent of youth in all societies agreed.[123] This strongly indicates a missed opportunity and a lack of attractive structured and formal opportunities for young women and men to learn about their peers and the societies in the wider region.

It is clear that cooperation among young people across the region needs strengthening, and work towards creating new types of narratives for a more stable and harmonious Western Balkans is called for. Peace education is of crucial importance in divided societies and to transform the way young people relate to the past – educational institutions in particular are key actors in this as they are microcosms which reflect societal social cohesion and which influence the social interactions of the youth they serve.

Persistent challenges to gender equality

The Western Balkans have taken steps to advance gender equality and women's rights. These include adopting or amending relevant legislation such as criminal and labour laws and establishing institutional mechanisms to carry out and monitor relevant policies. On the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, which covers a composite of 14 indicators covering economic participation, education, health, and political empowerment, the societies in the region rank relatively high.[124] Gender quotas have been introduced across the Western Balkans for the number of women in parliament, which have contributed to an increase of women's representation over the last decade.[125] However, women's participation at higher levels of decision-making, in government and the private sector is still limited – while some women have played leading roles in society and held high level official posts, women overall remain underrepre-

123 From 61 percent of youth in North Macedonia, and 68 percent of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo to 75 percent in Serbia, 77 percent in Montenegro and up to 91 percent in Albania.
124 World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2021.
125 OECD, Government at a Glance: Western Balkans, 2020

sented in public life.[126] Violence and discrimination against women are two of the most prevalent noted human rights violations across the Western Balkans. Domestic violence is a common problem, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and services to counteract it are often seen as inadequate.[127] The participation of women in the labour market is at low levels throughout the region,[128] representing a large loss of potential growth and prosperity.[129]

> This problem *[hate speech]* is most obvious when it comes to women, especially women who are public figures in the field of politics, more and more. And here we have the problem of misogyny which shows where we as a society really are.

> *23-year-old man, Montenegro*

> Gender equality is a delicate topic in our society, and with huge gaps. There are examples of independent women, of women who have equal opportunities compared to men. On the other hand, especially in rural areas, there are many women and girls who do not have freedom of speech and are not given the opportunity to work and live as they want.

> *24-year-old woman, Albania*

126 FES, Political Trends and Dynamics: Gender Politics in Southeast Europe, January 2018.
127 Women in the Western Balkans: Gender equality in the EU accession process, European Parliament, 2018, www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625139/EPRS_BRI(2018)625139_EN.pdf
128 Vienna Institute for International Economics, Why Western Balkan Labour Markets are Different, Forecast Report, Autumn 2018. Especially in Kosovo where just over one adult woman out of ten holds a paying job.
129 R. Atoyan and J. Rahman, Western Balkans: Increasing Women's Role in the Economy, IMF working paper, 2017. See also UNDP, Women's Economic Empowerment: Areas for joint actions in the Western Balkans, 10 December 2020.

> We have been a very patriarchal society, but the younger generations are on the right track. There is still a lot of room for improvement. I do not think that girls feel completely free to say their thoughts and behave without being judged by society.
>
> *24-year-old man, Albania*

Yet research has demonstrated that gender equality is an essential factor in a society's security and stability, being the number one predictor of peace – more so than a state's wealth, level of democracy, or religious identity.[130] For example, violence against women is a predictor of whether a society is generally prone to violent conflict; the larger the gender gap, the more likely a society is to be involved in inter-state and intrastate conflict and to use violence; while the more gender equality in society, the more likely grievances will be prevented from escalating into violent conflict.[131] The Global Study on UNSCR 1325 affirmed that preventing gender-based harm is critically linked to preventing armed violence.[132] Strengthening gender equality and women's human rights is therefore not only an obligation but also key for cultivating peace and social cohesion.

Young women and men's experiences as reported for *Shared Futures* reflect the general trends of the Western Balkan region. As previously discussed, there are large, statistically significant differences in young people's experience of gender discrimination: in all locations, young women report gender discrimination much more often than do men, by a factor of up to ten.[133] In most locations,[134] women reported

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130 V. Hudson, Valerie et al., Sex & World Peace, Columbia University Press, 2014.

131 C. Crespo-Sancho, The Role of Gender in the Prevention of Violent Conflict, Background paper for the United Nations-World Bank Flagship Study, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict, 2017.

132 Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace. A Global Study on the Implementation of the UNSC Resolution 1325, 2015.

133 Discrimination was defined as a person being treated worse than other people due to discriminatory traditions, policies, ideas, practices and laws.

134 Respondents in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia.

significantly more sexual harassment than men, while in Albania and Kosovo, young women reported more bullying and intimidation both at work and online (Figures 34 and 35).

scrimination based on gender
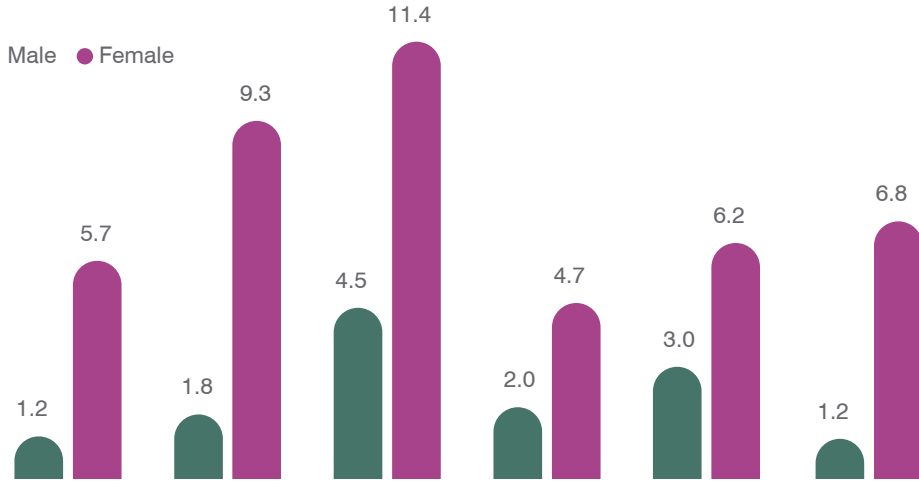
Male ● Female

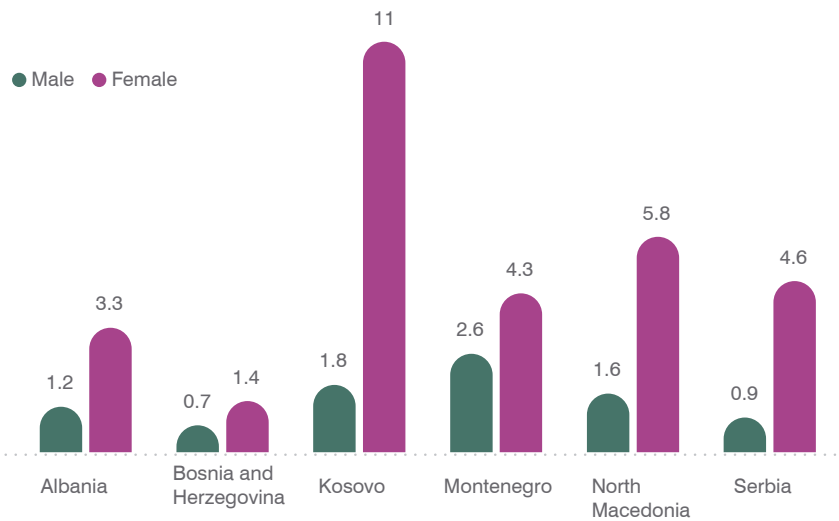*Figure 34. Experiences of gender discrimination in the past 12 months. Percentages.*

● Male ● Female

Figure 35. Experience of sexual harassment or gender-based violence online or offline in the past 12 months. Percentages.

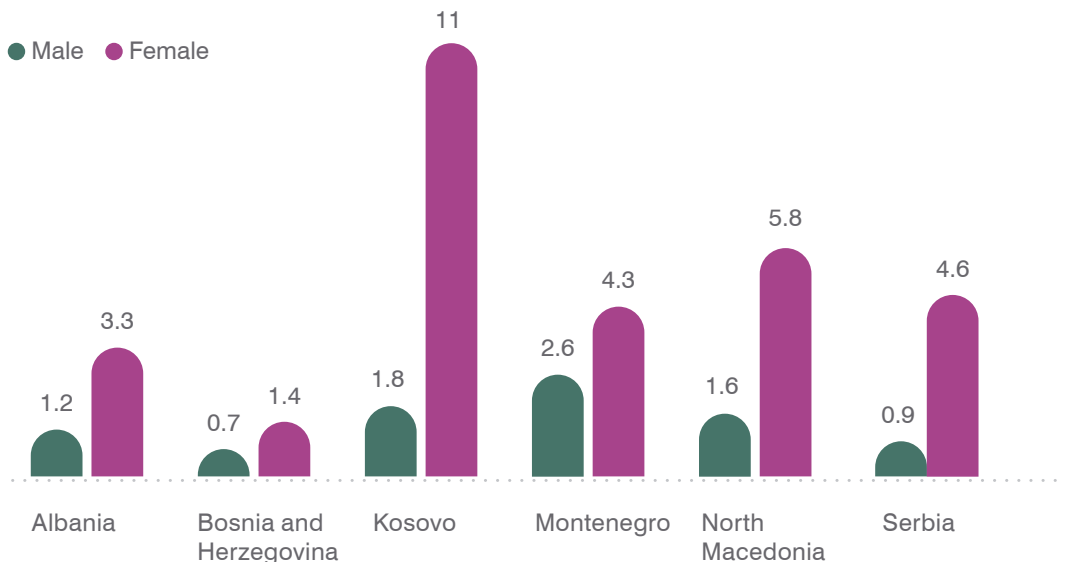Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

● Male ● Female

Figure 36. Concern about domestic violence. Percentages.

Across the region, young women were significantly more concerned about domestic violence that young men (Figure 36). When it came to reported experiences of violence inside the home, no significant differences between young women and young men were found. By contrast, in three locations – Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia – many more men than women reported being victims of violence or threat of violence outside the home.

In most of the region, young women respondents were more likely than men to not be in education, employment or training (NEET). Respondents in Albania were the exception, with equal proportions of men and women as NEET, while Kosovo showed the largest gap. However, when asked about the impact of gender on their opportunities – whether economic, status, power and freedom of choice – young women and men did not have strong or differing views on the issue. On the question of job discrimination, youth held different views. One

participant in focus group discussions said: "The government is working to ensure that in the institutions where the majority of employees are men, a certain percentage of women is also employed. It seems to me that this principle is respected. That is still not a satisfactory level [of gender equality], but I think it is getting better and better."[135] Others were of a different opinion: "I think there is a bit of gender discrimination and at work, men are preferred for certain positions. The family also has different expectations towards women and men."[136]

An analysis showed that there is a wide range of views among youth on gender and patriarchal values, although some egalitarian trends can be perceived. Support for gender equality can be seen in the above average support for more women in leadership positions throughout the Western Balkans, with the highest levels in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro (Figure 37). Young women agreed with this more often than young men. On the other hand, responses to a question about whether jobs, when scarce, should preferentially go to men elicited an interesting pattern of responses (Figure 38).
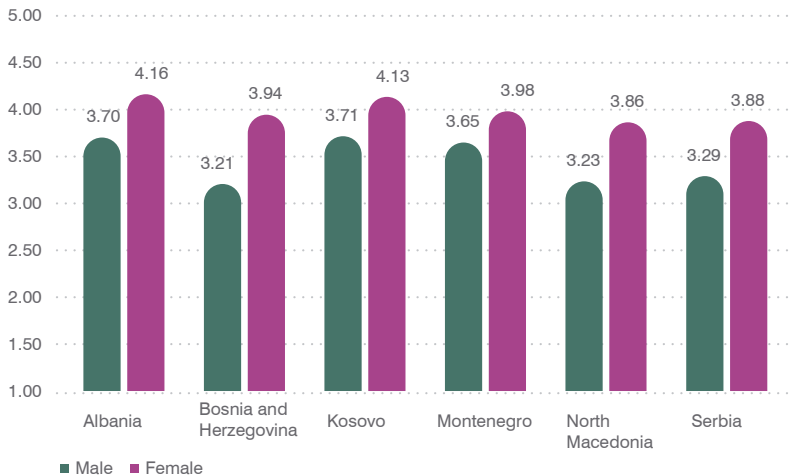

■ Male ■ Female

Figure 37. It is important that we have more women in government and leadership positions. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

135 Focus group discussion, Serbia, 26-year-old woman.
136 Focus group discussion, Albania, 24-year-old man.

Shared Futures

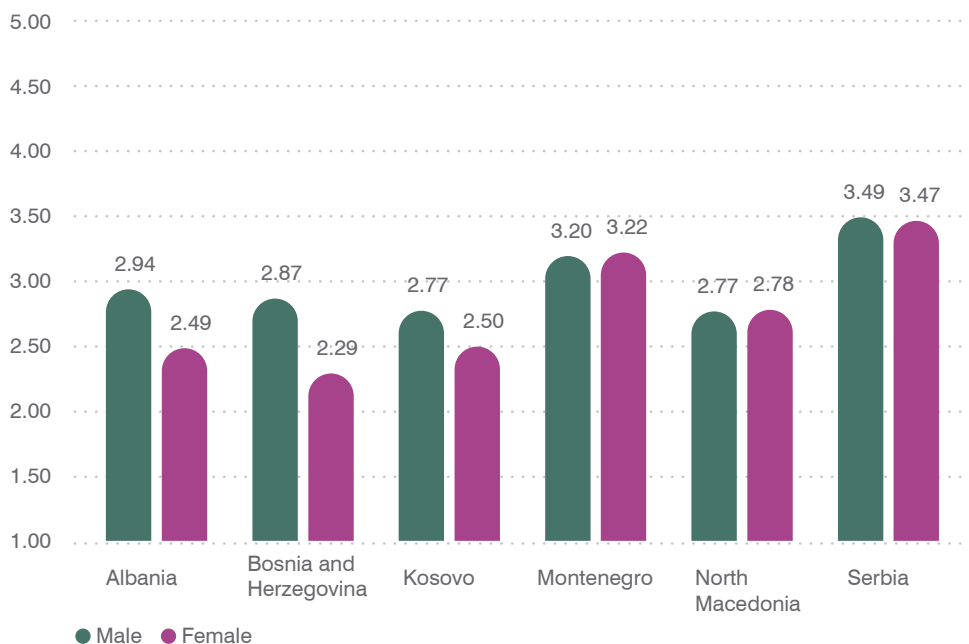Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

Figure 38. When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia a majority of all respondents disagreed with favouring men when jobs are scarce; women in the first three societies opposed this even more adamantly. In Montenegro and Serbia, a different pattern held, with more respondents agreeing that men should be preferred, and women and men respondents giving very similar answers on average. Yet these patterns are in some cases diametrically opposite to actual labour force participation and employment rates, with societies having the fewest women in employment expressing the strongest egalitarian views.

Support for equal rights and non-discrimination of people who identify as LGBTQI prompted a greater diversity of views among the region's youth. In most locations, there is an average or slightly above-average support for this, but it is not uniform or very strong. Across all societies, women

tended to agree more than men that persons who identify as LGBTQI should enjoy equal rights and be free from discrimination, although the average position of young men in the region was more ambivalent than opposed. Previous studies have demonstrated that even the region has introduced many laws in the past 10 years on protection from discrimination, the experiences of LGBTI people in reveal a collective experience of discrimination, harassment, exclusion and violence.[137]

Support for democracy yet authoritarian views

While scholars are divided on whether democracy actually leads to peace, there have been strong theoretical arguments for the positive impact consolidated democracy can have on peace:[138] a democratic system provides peaceful, transparent and open mechanisms for succession and the distribution of power, enabling diverse social groups to gain access to the government, to participate in decision-making, and to influence policy outcomes. A functioning democracy can work as a system of conflict management by responding to societal conflicts in an accommodating rather than a repressive manner. Inclusive governance and observance of fundamental rights help in overcoming challenges to peace and parting ways with past conflicts.

What emerged from the *Shared Futures* analysis was that young people's democratic and egalitarian values were importantly related to attitudes conducive to social cohesion and peace. Respondents' democracy, gender equality and non-authoritarian values were highly associated with a positive and optimistic approach to peacebuilding. The more

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137 World Bank and LGBTI Equal Rights Association for the Western Balkans and Turkey ERA, Life on the Margins: Survey Results of the Experience of LGBTI people in South Eastern Europe, 2018. Some 32 percent of the LGBTI community and up to 54 percent of transgender persons reported having been victims of physical violence in the previous five years. Discrimination was even more widespread, considering that 92 percent of respondents reported that discrimination based on sexual orientation was common.

138 See e.g. D. Reiter, Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?, Politics, 2017; and K. Mross, First Peace, then Democracy? Evaluating Strategies of International Support at Critical Junctures after Civil War, International Peacekeeping, 26/2, 2019.

a respondent's attitudes aligned with democratic values, the more they recognized the similarities between Western Balkan peoples. These respondents were also more hopeful than others about the potential for improved future relations across peoples in the Western Balkans.

Overall, young people interviewed for *Shared Futures* clearly agreed with the proposition that "democracy is a good system of governance" (Figure 39). They also strongly agreed that free media and civil society were the backbone of a healthy society (Figure 40). Yet as previously mentioned, this positive attitude towards democratic principles is combined with a lack of participation of youth in the civic or political spheres of their societies, and a general sense of dissatisfaction in governance systems.
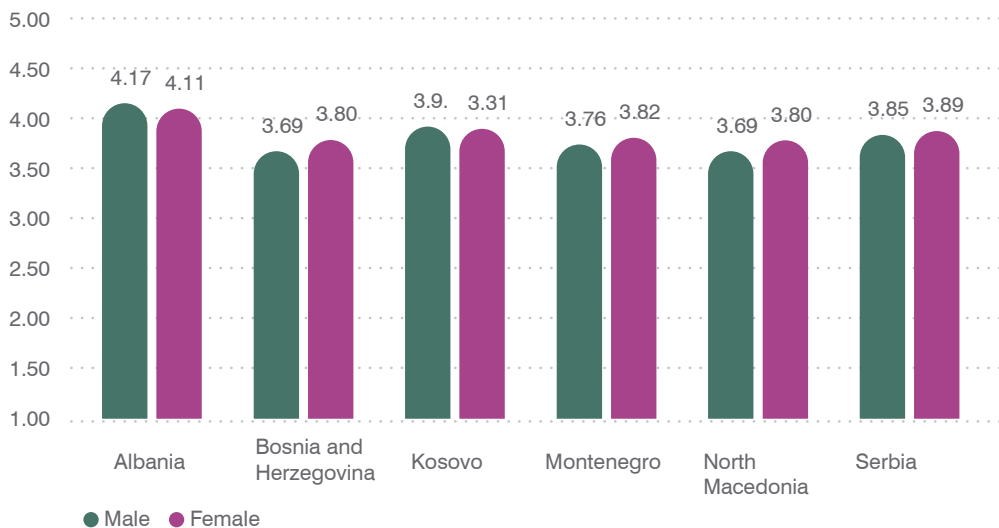
Figure 39. In general, democracy is a good system of governance. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).
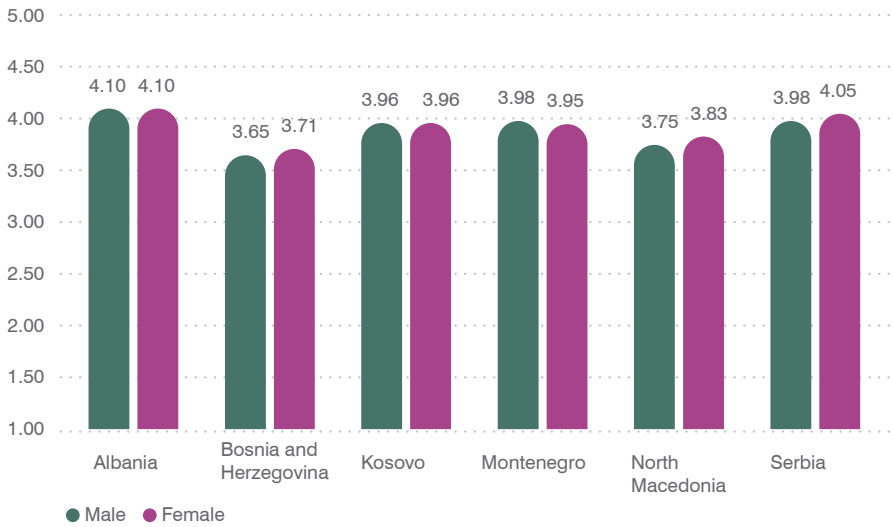
Figure 40. Free media and civil society are the back-bone of a healthy society. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).
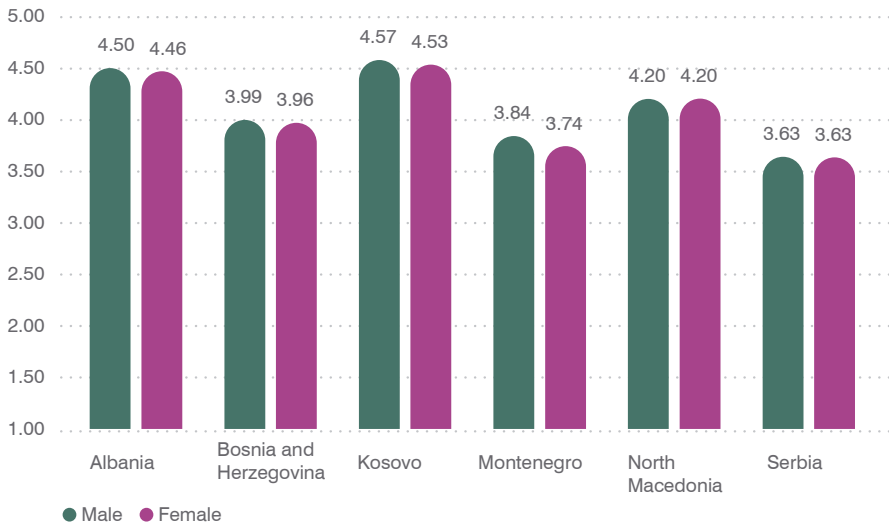

Figure 41. My society needs to have one strong leader. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

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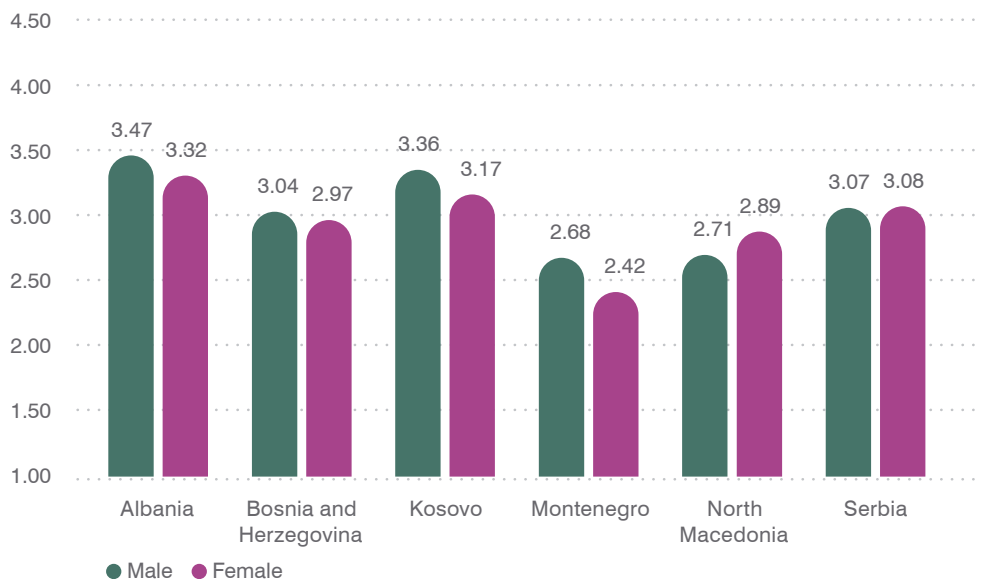Youth perceptions on peace in the Western Balkans

Figure 42. Sometimes a good leader must break the law for the common good. Average scores (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

On the other hand, youth also tended to support having a single, strong national leader – a finding corroborated by previous research (Figures 41 and 42).[139] Expression of au-

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139 FES, Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. Data collected for *Shared Futures* showed only a few exceptions where support for one strong leader was lukewarm (respondents who self-identified as Croats and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, respondents self-identified as Serbs in Montenegro and Serbia) – one group, respondents self-identified as Serbs in Kosovo, slightly disagreed. The FES study also found that support for having a leader who "rules with a strong hand for the public good" tended to fall slightly with education. The study also found a positive correlation between wealth and support for a strong leader. In contrast, the analysis conducted for *Shared Futures* showed a correlation of higher education level and support for one leader. Only in Montenegro the higher the respondent's education level, the less they supported the idea of one strong leader. For economic status, there was a positive correlation found in Albania and North Macedonia, and a negative one in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In other societies, no correlation was found.

thoritarian views was assessed by the respondent's agreement with the need for one strong leader, acceptance of a leader breaking the law for the common good and disagreement with democracy being a good system. In Serbia those who tended to express authoritarian views also tended to have a higher opinion of governing institutions and the media in general. In Montenegro, the same relation appeared with respect to the judicial system and the police. By contrast, in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, youth that expressed authoritarian values tended to be slightly less satisfied with government and media.

It is worth noting that this finding is not unique to the Western Balkans and may reflect a global trend of a "democratic disconnect", especially among younger people, including those in Western Europe and the United States: a weaker attachment to liberal democracy, a more fluid interpretation of democracy and a general scepticism about the impact of active participation in political processes.[140] The co-existence of democratic and authoritarian views in the region may indicate that these are not seen as necessarily fundamental opposites. Indeed, previous research on youth in the region found that support for a strong leader tended to correlate with support for a representative democracy, and may be driven by collective fears related to security, corruption and poor governance.[141] Yet from the perspective of peace and social cohesion, authoritarianism – centralized authority and its circumvention of legal norms – is characteristically opposed to pluralism and has been found to relate to ethno-nationalistic sentiments.[142]

It is therefore important to further understand what drives young people's support for authoritarian views, to address the root causes behind them and to reinforce transparent and inclusive governance that enables diverse youth groups to access decision-making and responds to their needs and priorities.

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140 R.S. Foa and Y. Mounk, The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect, Journal of Democracy, 27/3, 2016, pp. 5-17.
141 FES, Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019.
142 See e.g. B. Bonikowski, Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment, The British Journal of Sociology, Volume 68, Issue S1, 2017.

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Disadvantages of non-majority youth

> For several years I have been engaged in protecting of the rights of the Roma and Egyptian communities. Some of the issues I dealt with the most are legalization, housing, rental subsidy, and in that regard I have dealt with all institutions and decision-making bodies. I have encountered racism and inequality throughout. If I were to single out one institution that has been receptive and has helped our cause, it is the ombudsman and the commissioner for protection against discrimination. They are the only institutions I trust and where I found a solution.

> *Albania, 25-year-old Roma woman*

Peace, stability and social cohesion are strengthened by inclusive social policies and the protection of minority, marginalized and disadvantaged groups of people. Peace and social cohesion can be sustainable in the long-term only if respect for diversity is integrated into a society.[143]

The analysis conducted for *Shared Futures* revealed important differences in the experiences of those who belong to the most numerous ethnic communities and those who do not – to majorities and non-majorities.[144] The analysis aggregated the responses of all youth who self-identified as belonging to a majority community across the region and compared them to the responses of young people who had self-identified as belonging to a non-majority community.

What emerged is that non-majority youth were significantly more likely than majority youth to report living in an ethnically segregated community, a situation which in itself as previously stated, is associated with a range of undesirable outcomes. They were also more likely to describe their area

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143 UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and programming implications, 2020.

144 This report uses the terms "majority" and "non-majority" strictly in the quantitative sense, to refer to the largest ethnic group and to all others; the term "non-majority" is used in preference to the equivalent "minority" because the latter can have connotations of distinct legal status in some Western Balkan systems.

as fully integrated, and less likely to describe their area as a mono-ethnic community.[145]

In several societies across the region, non-majority young people were much less likely to participate in civic activities,[146] although they did not tend to cite fear of persecution as a deterrent to civic activity any more often than their majority peers.[147] Non-majority youth also expressed significantly less satisfaction with governing institutions across the whole region.
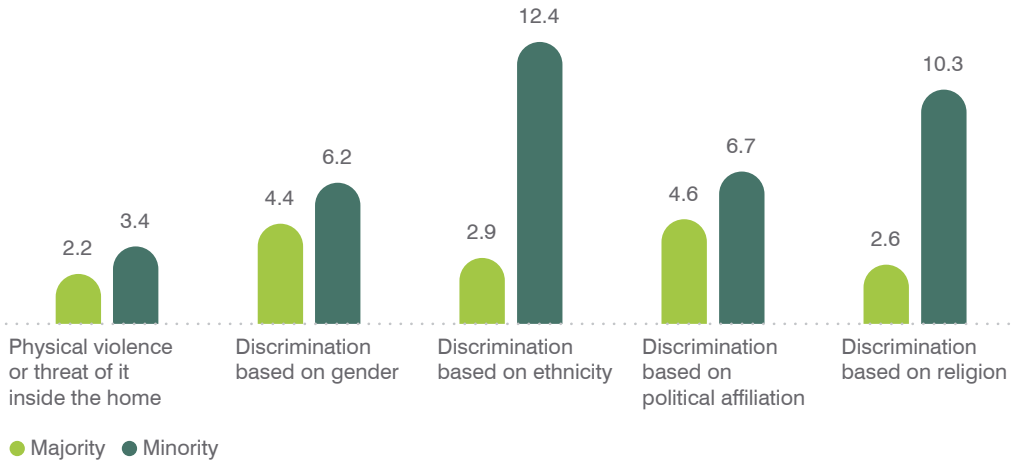
Figure 43. Majority and non-majority youth experiences of violence and discrimination. Percentages aggregated for the whole region.

Discrimination was a much more common experience for non-majority youth (Figure 43). The pattern holds across all

145 There were no correlations found with the type of community in Montenegro. In North Macedonia, non-majority youth were less likely to report living in fully integrated communities, and slightly more likely to report living in mono-ethnic communities.

146 Less than 1 percent of non-majority youth participated in Albania, compared to 8.6 percent of majority youth. There was no significant difference found among respondents in Montenegro or North Macedonia.

147 Except in Albania. However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, non-majority youth cited fear of persecution significantly less often.

six societies and the differences are dramatic, ranging from a factor of more than three to almost ten times regarding the greater incidence of discrimination towards non-majority young person compared to the majority. Not all non-majority youth were equally vulnerable, however – Roma youth being by far the most frequent targets of ethnic discrimination, with up to 62 percent reporting being the targets of such bias over the past year in some societies.

Youth of non-majority ethnicity were also more likely to report being victims of physical violence or the threat of violence: over the past 12 months, 3.4 percent of non-majority youth reported having experienced physical violence or the threat of it inside the home (compared to 2.2 percent of majority youth), while 7.3 percent had experienced these outside the home (compared to 5.4 percent of majority youth). Many non-majority youth communities across the region deemed firearms and crimes associated with them to be a much greater concern when comparing to the views of majority youth: in Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, more young non-majority people were concerned or very concerned than not on the issue.

At the same time, *Shared Futures* found an above average agreement among young people across the region that minority and marginalized groups should have additional support for their employment, education and living. While human rights and non-discrimination provisions have been put into place in the region, it may well be that the implementation process lacks clarity and thoroughness.[148] It is therefore important to ensure that relevant institutions are targeted and adequate political and civil society support are established to ensure the gap between the experiences of majority and non-majority youth is bridged.

Aspirations to emigrate

Together with the rest of Europe but more sharply, the Western Balkans are in the midst of a long-term demographic

148 T. Kempin Reuter, Including Minority Rights in Peace Agreements: A Benefit or Obstacle to Peace Processes after Ethnic Conflicts?, International Journal on Minority and Group Rights 19(4), 2012, pp. 359-397.

contraction, a trend that is affecting parts of the region more dramatically than others, with Bosnia and Herzegovina projected to decline by 29 percent over the period from 1989 to 2050, followed by Serbia (24 percent), Albania (18 percent), Kosovo (11 percent), Montenegro (5 percent) and North Macedonia (3 percent).[149] Generally, a shrinking population involves the risk of declining labour force, difficulty funding pensions and health care for the non-working population, and slower economic growth.[150]

Demographic decline is a complex process, including low birth rates, low immigration and high emigration. The last of these is especially relevant for young people, insofar as they are more mobile and are disproportionately represented among emigrants. All societies of the Western Balkans are experiencing out-migration, especially among young people, though the population flow is much greater in some than in others, ranging from almost 12 per 1,000 per year in Bosnia and Herzegovina to about 1 per 1,000 per year in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, with Albania and Kosovo in between.[151] Most of the people leaving have a relatively low degree of education, corresponding to completed secondary or vocational school, or less (some of these are young people moving abroad with their parents). For highly educated people, there are two different patterns, with a large brain drain in Albania and a smaller one in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, while Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia show a net influx – many of these are graduates of European universities returning home, while in Serbia, some are foreign students from the Western Balkans or from further abroad.[152]

Outward migration imposes costs on the sending societies, which invest in education and lose the economic contribu-

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149 T. Judah, Bye-bye Balkans: A Region in Critical Demographic Decline, Balkan Insight, 14 October 2019. A. Vracic, The Way Back: Brain Drain and Prosperity in the Western Balkans, European Council on Foreign Relations policy brief, 9 May 2018.
150 International Monetary Fund, Demographic Headwinds in Central and Eastern Europe, 2019, p. 2.
151 Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Evidence of brain gain for some Western Balkan countries, 11 March 2021.
152 Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Evidence of brain gain for some Western Balkan countries, 11 March 2021.

tions of those who leave. It can also provide benefits, mostly in the form of remittances. In some parts of the region, the benefits appear to outweigh the costs, although remittances are often transmitted informally and used to fund consumption rather than investment.[153] Germany is the most popular destination for Western Balkan migrants, receiving over 75,000 in 2018, while Italy and Greece receive many from Albania.[154] The region's exceptionally high rates of youth migration represent a problem for both the youth themselves and for the societies they leave behind and are a symptom of other societal ills.

Young people interviewed for *Shared Futures* expressed clear aspirations for moving abroad. Across the whole region, an average of 52 percent of youth reported that they envisage themselves living outside of the region in 10 years (55 percent of men and 50 percent of women). Only about 5 percent of these envisaged themselves living somewhere else within the Western Balkans region, with Western Europe overwhelmingly featuring as a destination in the visions of youth. Albania has the highest proportion of those expressing an interest in migration – 70 percent of young respondents said they saw themselves living abroad within a decade – followed by Kosovo (60 percent), North Macedonia (50 percent) and Montenegro (49 percent), with lower interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina (46 percent) and in Serbia, still quite high at 38 percent. The vision of migration abroad does not always translate into action, and other research shows the proportion that actually leave is lower than the figures cited above, although it is still an alarming trend.[155]

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153 Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Cost of Youth Emigration, 2020. Studies on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.
154 RCC, Balkan Barometer 2020, p.28.
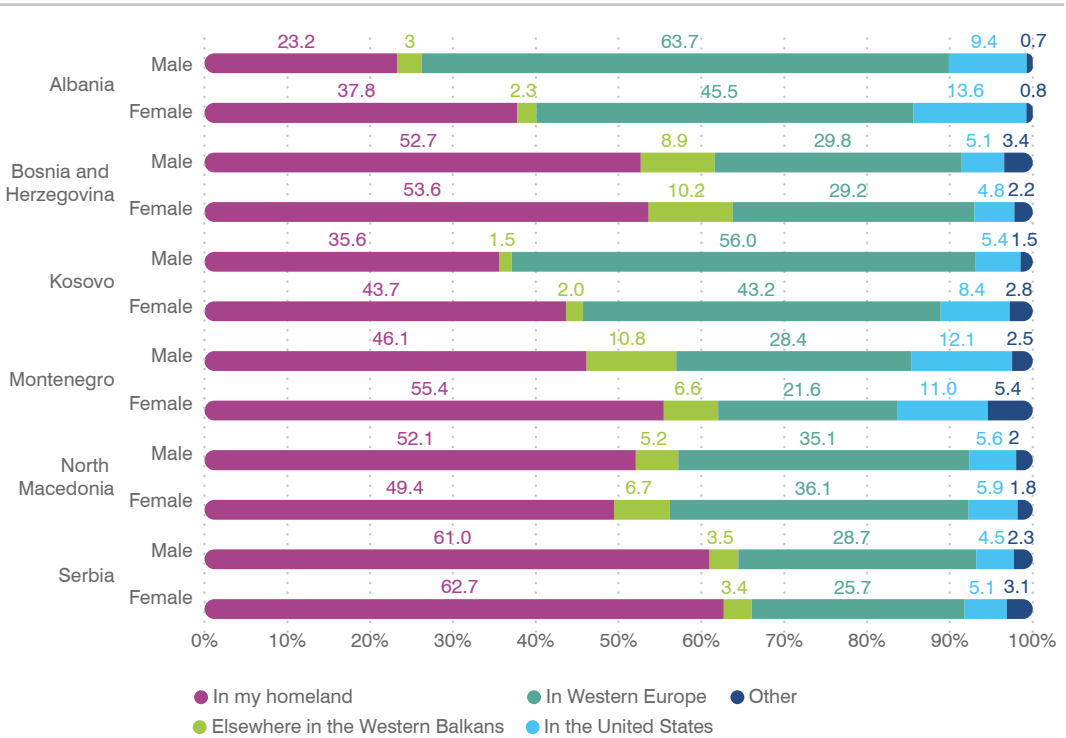155 FES, Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. pp. 74-78.

Figure 44. Where do you see yourself living in 10 years? Percentages.

Previous studies have found that the motivation for youth migration is overwhelmingly economic.[156] Other studies have also cited better life standards and political stability as motivations for Western Balkan youth to move abroad.[157] The analysis of the data collected for *Shared Futures* showed that in most of the region, those who expected to leave tended to express less confidence in governing institutions than did

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156 FES, Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. Economic factors were cited by 70-80 percent of youth as their reason for migration across Southeast Europe; the next most commonly cited reason, education, accounted for less than 20 percent. p. 76.

157 European Association for Local Democracy ALDA, Youth Mobility in the Western Balkans. The Present Challenges and Future Perspectives, 2016.

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their peers who planned to stay.[158] There was also a clear, positive correlation between concern with social injustice and corruption and the intent to migrate. The *Shared Futures* data showed that interest in migration tended to drop off with age; across the region's societies, the upper age cohort of young people (those 25-29 years old) expressed the lowest expectation of moving abroad. This may have to do with life transitions such as marriage and family, and importantly with employment: analysis showed that those young people who were employed and with permanent contracts envisaged moving abroad less than their peers – this held across all societies in the region. The education level seems to make relatively little difference in the respondents' intent to migrate. In terms of significant gender differences, young men in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro were more likely than young women to see themselves living abroad.

On the other hand, focus group discussants expressed clear hesitations about migrating: fears of disillusionment and being treated as second-class citizens abroad, as well as a reluctance to leave family, friends and a familiar lifestyle came up in several conversations. Moving abroad was also often seen as a temporary phase. As one participant put it: "I will never leave Albania. There are many problems, but I believe that there are still people who want to improve our society. Maybe I would just leave for a while to earn an income. But then I will come back and invest to make Albania a better place."[159]

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158 The same pattern also emerged in the Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. Additional analysis of data are reported on p. 74, figure 9.1. The correlation holds (p<0.01) across the region, but at the society level it holds in Albania and Serbia (also p<0.01); in the other four, the correlation is also negative but weaker and not statistically significant.

159 Focus group discussion, Albania, 25-year-old woman.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS SHARED FUTURES

Across the Western Balkans, young people living in a diverse array of communities and in different circumstances nonetheless share a core of common hopes and dreams. This shared vision is practical and achievable without conflict. None of the things young people care most about bring them into conflict with one another; rather, they are premised on peaceful and harmonious relations with neighbours. This common vision is itself a powerful yet largely untapped resource for peacebuilding and social cohesion in the region. Yet the youth who are well-placed to articulate and work toward this shared vision are largely excluded or disengaged from public life. The following is a set of key takeaways to help ensure that young people can fully claim their vital role in building more peaceful and cohesive societies:

REPAIRING TRUST BETWEEN YOUTH AND THEIR GOVERNMENTS.

The breakdown of trust between leaders and their people is unique neither to the young nor to the Western Balkans. It afflicts many societies around the world. Yet the problem is especially acute here where it complicates efforts to overcome the harmful legacy of the past and creates a damaging sense of futility. Leaders need to show they listen to and understand young people's concerns and aspirations. Public institutions would benefit from improving their responsiveness to youth needs and from reinforcing fair and non-discriminatory practices. Beyond that, young people need more diverse and effective platforms for their civic activism. Already engaged young civic actors deserve more support in becoming leaders and agents of change in their communities. Civil society organizations, media, multilateral actors and donors should further enhance young people's civic skills and amplify their voices.

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CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLOSE AND LASTING INTERGROUP FRIENDSHIPS.

Creating opportunities for quality and long-term relationships between peers from different ethnic, religious and geographic backgrounds should be a high priority. These relationships allow people to see members of other groups as individuals much like themselves, to understand their perspectives and respect their distinctive cultures. By contrast, simply meeting members of other groups, in superficial and short-term ways, can have the opposite effect, highlighting the differences that separate groups and often confirming pre-existing stereotypes. There is no guaranteed recipe for building friendships, but youth-driven, longer-term initiatives focused on bringing young people together around common objectives are essential. Peacebuilding programmes and policies focusing on youth should therefore be youth-led and co-designed with youth and have a longer life span and clear approaches for sustainability.

AMPLIFYING PEACEFUL VOICES.

Although Western Balkan youth are aware that they and their peers are too young to bear any responsibility for the past, many feel that their lives are marked by past events, and are surrounded by what they see as divisive narratives urging them to view other groups with distrust and fear. Social media platforms increasingly sow division and promote conflict narratives. Yet these and other platforms can also be harnessed for peace, to shape new and more hopeful public narratives and to create new spaces for people to connect, coordinate and mobilize around peace. The role of social media companies along with that of policymakers and multilateral stakeholders becomes important in efforts to amplify peaceful messages.

REGENERATING HOPE AND COMMITMENT.

The astonishing number of young people considering emigration is testimony to the painful dilemmas facing them today. Most would prefer to stay home, raise a family, build a career and contribute to their society, but feel they have no choice but to depart, even as many fear that life abroad would mean not only giving up the familiar comforts of home but also being treated as an outsider or a second-class citizen. The Western Balkans are facing an unprecedented

demographic crisis which a youth exodus would exacerbate. If governments are to persuade young people to stay home, they need to show their commitment to young people's needs and priorities. An overall more hopeful framework of thinking and communicating about the future of the Western Balkans is called for. This also entails having the courage to face the past but with a forward-looking lens. Media, public figures, local and regional leaders and international stakeholders can all play a part in that. Introducing more hopeful and less bleak perspectives on the future can be an important catalyst for peacebuilding processes aimed at building more cohesive societies.

Cohesive societies have reserves of trust between and within groups and institutions, which enable work toward shared goals. The young people of the Western Balkans hold an irreplaceable share of those reserves, and their importance will only grow with time as they mature into positions of leadership. Building sustainable peace cannot be done without them.

#SHAREDFUTURES

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The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an independently functioning institutional mechanism, founded by the Western Balkans 6 governments, aiming to promote the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region through youth exchange programs.

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