



# Policy Dimensions of Youth Work Recognition in the Western Balkans

## Comparative Thematic Analysis and Implications for Future Avenues

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# List of abbreviations

- 
- CoE** - Council of Europe
- CRNVO** - Centre for Development of Non-Governmental Organisations (Montenegrin)
- CSO** - Civil Society Organisation
- CYAC** - Central Youth Action Council (Kosovar)
- EIP** - Economic and Investment Plan
- EESC** - European Economic and Social Committee
- EU** - European Union
- ICT** - Information and Communication Technologies
- IPA** - Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
- LYAC** - Local Youth Action Council (Kosovar)
- LYC** - Local Youth Council (Albanian)
- LYPYP** - The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (North Macedonian)
- NAPOR** - National Association of Youth Work Practitioners (Serbian)
- MoTY** - Ministry of Tourism and Youth (Serbian)
- NEET** - Not in employment, education or training
- NGO** - Non-governmental Organisations
- NYC** - National Youth Council
- OSCE** - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- RYCO** - Regional Youth Cooperation Office
- SAA** - Stabilisation and Association Agreement
- UNDP** - United Nations Development Programme
- WB** - Western Balkans
- WBC6** - Western Balkans Countries 6 (referring to six countries in the Western Balkans)
- YW** - Youth Work
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# Author's note

This document examines the evolving framework of youth policy and youth work in the Western Balkan region, a socio-politically complex landscape within the European continent and neighbouring the European Union. The analysis acknowledges the socio-cultural, economic, and political influences that have shaped the region's youth work sector, as well as the unique challenges faced by young people. By aligning with the European Union's strategic priorities, including democratic sustainability and social cohesion, the Western Balkan countries are engaging in a transformative process to enhance youth development, actively integrate young people into society, and harmonise youth policy frameworks with EU standards. However, this alignment process also raises questions regarding the adaptability of EU frameworks in accommodating the region's distinctive needs and contexts.

Given the region's historical context, this document also emphasises the significance of adaptable, cross-sectoral approaches in youth policy, reflecting both EU and Council of Europe perspectives on empowerment, participation, and opportunity. The development of youth work as a field in the Western Balkans is further strengthened by the integration of formal and non-formal educational practices, aimed at addressing convoluted socio-economic issues and ensuring that young people are positioned as pivotal agents of change. Nonetheless, the extent to which these practices are inclusive and adequately funded remains a critical point of consideration for sustainable development in the sector.

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# Background information about the project

**U**nlocking Potentials of Youth Work in the Western Balkan Region – YWWB aims to support the quality youth work development and recognition in the Western Balkan region through multi-country cooperation, networking and design of innovative practices.

It has the following specific objectives:

Specific objective 1: To acknowledge multilayer impact of youth work and to create favourable conditions for quality youth work development and standardisation in the WB region.

Specific objective 2: To network and enable growth of the youth work community of practice in the WB in order to foster EU Youth Strategy and European Youth Work Agenda implementation across the region.

Specific objective 3: To support youth work recognition processes across the region by effectively communicating the impact of youth work to different audiences.

Specific objective 4: To foster meaningful multi-sector and regional cooperation in order to advance young people's position in the WB region, especially young people with fewer opportunities.

The core of the project activities is to facilitate implementation of EU Youth Strategy and the Bonn process in the Western Balkans regarding promotion and quality assurance of youth work; foster cooperation on regional and EU level among youth work community of practice; capacitate organisations working with young people outside formal learning; and enable professional development of the Western Balkans youth workers and share of experiences and best practices with their EU counterparts.

Project is implemented by Forum MNE (Montenegro) in partnership with Youth for Social Change (Albania), Human Rights Education Youth Network (Belgium), PRONI Center for Youth Development (Bosnia and Herzegovina), NGO THY (Kosovo<sup>1</sup>), Union for Youth Work (North Macedonia), and National Association of Youth Workers - NAPOR (Serbia).

<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.





## Overview of the region

**T**he term “Western Balkans” is of socio-political origin and denotes a group of countries in Southeastern Europe that are at varying stages of integration with the European Union (EU). These comprise Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. These European states are geographically encircled by EU member countries, with which they share historical, cultural, and political attributes.

The Western Balkans have historically been influenced by both European and regional dynamics, shaping their current sociocultural landscapes. The region’s youth population plays a critical role in driving social, economic, and cultural transformation, although it faces unique challenges posed by the complex sociopolitical environments of their respective nation states.

In the context of youth policy and youth work, the Western Balkans have made significant progress in recent years, although these efforts are shaped by the region’s distinctive sociocultural context. Youth policy in the Western Balkans is primarily focused on addressing key challenges, such as high youth unemployment, social inclusion, and political engagement. While these countries have developed youth policies that align with certain EU frameworks, their implementation often reflects the specific needs and conditions of the region. The role of youth work is increasingly recognised, not only as a means of fostering personal development and civic engagement but also as a crucial element in promoting social cohesion and addressing the economic disparities that are prevalent in the region.

Moreover, youth work in Western Balkans is often characterised by its adaptability and reliance on both formal and informal education. This dual approach is essential for addressing the diverse needs of young people in the region who are navigating the challenges of post-socialist transitions, economic instability, and the ongoing process of EU integration. The Western Balkans’ approach to youth policy and youth work is thus grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the region’s unique socio-cultural context, aiming to empower young people while addressing the broader societal challenges that impact their lives



# European integration and the role of youth policy

The European Union (EU) and Council of Europe (CoE) prioritise this region within their broader strategic agenda, which seeks to foster stability, democracy, and economic development. The Western Balkans occupy a central position in Europe, and their integration is viewed by the EU as crucial for both regional stability and the overall coherence of the Union (Western Balkans Investment Framework, n.d.). All Western Balkan countries have entered into Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) with the EU, which serve as foundational frameworks for aligning their national policies and institutions with EU standards and norms.

This is also true in the field of youth policy. The EU defines youth policy (European Economic and Social Committee, n.d.) as a framework established to promote the well-being and active participation of young people in society. This definition includes the following key elements.

**Empowerment:** The youth policy aims to empower young individuals to become active citizens, engage them in democratic processes, and encourage their participation in various societal aspects.

**Participation:** The emphasis is on fostering an inclusive environment in which young people can express their opinions, be involved in policy-making, and participate in community initiatives.

**Opportunity and integration:** Youth policy

focuses on providing opportunities for learning, employment, and social integration, and addressing challenges such as unemployment, social exclusion, and marginalisation.

**Support for development:** This policy aims to create conditions that allow young people to develop their skills, knowledge, and competencies, preparing them for future challenges in a rapidly changing world.

In essence, the EU's approach to youth policy seeks to ensure that young people are provided with the necessary resources and frameworks to thrive, both personally and socially, thereby contributing to society's overall development. Therefore, in Western Balkans, youth policy is intricately linked to the region's socioeconomic development and its integration into the EU. The SAAs that these countries have signed with the EU serve as foundational frameworks, not only for economic and political alignment, but also for harmonising youth policies with European standards. This alignment is evident in the legal and strategic frameworks that govern youth work, which increasingly emphasise the role of young people as active agents in societal transformation. Moreover, investment in youth work through both formal education and non-formal learning has become a critical element in addressing issues such as unemployment, social inclusion, and civic participation. The ongoing challenge lies in ensuring that these frameworks remain flexible and responsive to the dynamic needs of young people, thus enabling them to meaningfully contribute to the region's future within the broader European context.

In addition, the Council of Europe advocates for youth policies that are anchored in human rights and democratic principles, are opportunity-oriented, and involve young people as active agents, establishing conducive environments for

learning and gaining experiences. The CoE also strived for youth policies to be underpinned by rigorous data collection. Both concepts ‘value the role of youth work and non-formal learning, stress the importance of a cross-sectoral approach, and emphasise the need for evidence and dialogue with young people.’ (Lavchyan & Williamson, 2019). All of the Western Balkan countries have established laws governing the variety of youth policies that aim to protect the rights of young people, promote their participation in decision-making processes, and enhance their overall well-being. (European Union, n.d.)

It is imperative to acknowledge that the definition of ‘youth’ varies across Western Balkan countries, indicating that the concept is socially constructed and generally refers to the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood. Consequently, as a category, youth are more fluid than other fixed age groups. However, age remains the predominant criterion used to define youth as a distinct group, particularly in educational and employment contexts. This is primarily due to the association of ‘youth’ with the period between completing compulsory education and securing initial employment. For the United Nations, the youth age range is defined as between 14 and 24 years, whereas for most European Union countries, this range extends from 15 to 29 years. The same age range was applied in Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. However, in some policies within North Macedonia, the range is specified as 15–30 years, a range that is also adopted in Serbia.

Youth policy has become increasingly structured through a comprehensive framework that spans local, national, regional, and European levels, encompassing policy development, funding strategies, cooperation initiatives, and quality assurance mechanisms. This evolving

framework reflects the growing recognition of youth as a vital instrument for addressing the wide array of challenges that young people face in contemporary society. In Europe and the Western Balkans, public authorities have responded by implementing legal and strategic frameworks and providing the necessary financial and material resources to support youth work.

While these developments indicate a specific commitment to youth empowerment, they also prompt reflection on the implications of formalising youth work within institutional structures. The emphasis on formal education and professional training has helped legitimise youth work as a discipline, ensuring its alignment with broader socio-political objectives. However, it remains essential that these frameworks remain adaptable and inclusive, ensuring that they continue to meet the diverse needs of young people in various contexts. The integration of youth work into formal policy frameworks represents significant progress; however, it must be accompanied by a commitment to ongoing evaluation and adaptation to fully realise its potential benefits.

# A brief overview of youth work policy and current situation - the promise of youth work in the Western Balkan region

**T**he Western Balkan region currently faces significant challenges, characterised by fragmentation and numerous socio-economic issues. High youth unemployment, substantial brain drain, and elevated migration rates persist. There is widespread distrust in public institutions, predominantly due to entrenched corruption; economies remain fragile and environmental degradation continues to be a concern.

In response, the European Union seeks to address these challenges through various supporting mechanisms implemented, such as the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans – EIP (European Parliament, n.d.), Erasmus+ programme, the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility, and the Horizon Europe framework. In the field of youth, these include the European Solidarity Corps and the Youth Guarantee Initiative. These mechanisms focus on human capital development, sustainable connectivity, competitiveness, inclusive growth, and dual energy and digital transitions, all of which are essential for the region's recovery

and alignment with EU initiatives. However, the inclusion of youth in these initiatives remains limited. Although some initiatives are dedicated to youth, most others only briefly acknowledge the importance of involving the next generation.

The EIP, adopted by the European Commission in October 2020, presents a valuable opportunity to enhance youth involvement in sectoral policy making. It advocates youth participation from the initiation to the implementation stages, positioning young people not merely as beneficiaries, but as active agents of change throughout the process.

The development of the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth, and Sports underscores the significance of ensuring the long-term sustainability of investments in human capital. This agenda aims to address the persistent challenges faced by the youth in the region, including emigration, brain drain, unemployment, and inadequate education. By promoting brain circulation, fostering sustainable innovation ecosystems, and building knowledge-based economies, the agenda seeks to create more inclusive policymaking and offers improved prospects for the region's youth. Additionally, the Youth Guarantee, a key flagship project under the EIP, provides targeted solutions by offering employment, further education, training, or apprenticeship opportunities.

However, youth policy initiatives in Western Balkans are beginning to align more closely with European Union standards. This alignment encompasses the adoption of youth policy documents from the EU and investment in evidence-based practices that address the developmental challenges faced by the youth. Such an alignment is crucial, particularly as young people in the region express a desire for more robust participation in social, economic, and political processes. This progress is described by

the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in their opinion (n.d.) on youth policy as part of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans. Despite these efforts, a fully operational youth system that ensures effective empowerment, engagement, and participation in decision making remains underdeveloped. This shortfall is attributed to broader political challenges and a lack of commitment to prioritising youth as a cross-sectoral and inter-institutional policy. Furthermore, specific obstacles persist, particularly in the systematic monitoring and evaluation of youth policy development as well as in the areas of data collection and dissemination.

Governments in the Western Balkans are encouraged to align more closely with key EU youth policy frameworks, with a particular emphasis on developing evidence-based policies to address the specific challenges faced by young people in the region. This alignment is not merely a formal requirement but is essential for fostering effective youth development. Ensuring that adequate and transparent budget allocations are dedicated to these policies is critical, as such financial commitments are necessary to drive meaningful and positive changes in youth outcomes.

Involving social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs) in broader reform processes is crucial for improving social rights and enhancing the prospects of young people. These stakeholders play a vital role in ensuring that youth are not only represented but also actively engaged in all aspects of policy development and implementation, including collective bargaining processes at both national and sectoral levels. Moreover, the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans should adhere to the Council's recommendations, ensuring that it is conducted in partnership with relevant stakeholders. Strengthening the capacities of public employment services is identified as a key

component in making this initiative effective, as it directly impacts the ability of these services to support young people in finding employment, education, and training opportunities.

Reinforcing EU programmes and regional structures constitutes another area of focus, with the objective of extending the reach of these initiatives to engage more young people in the Western Balkans. These programmes can contribute significantly to the social and economic development of the region by providing increased opportunities for education, mobility, volunteering, and employment. Identifying key areas for fostering change, particularly through enhanced regional youth policy dialogue and support for youth structures, is essential to this process. Furthermore, the positive correlation between educational or training mobility and young people's civic and political engagement is acknowledged, highlighting the necessity for continued EU support in improving youth participation. This support is deemed critical for ensuring that the Western Balkans become regions where young people can envision and pursue prosperous futures, thereby contributing to the region's overall stability and growth.

The potential of youth work in the Western Balkan region is increasingly recognised within the framework of broader European initiatives, notably the EU Youth Strategy (European Union, nd) and the European Youth Work Agenda (Council of the European Union, 2020). These frameworks provide a vital context for understanding how youth work can function as a transformative force in addressing the socioeconomic challenges that persist in the region. The EU Youth Strategy, with its focus on "Engage, Connect, Empower", advocates for the active involvement of young people in democratic life, fostering their connections across Europe and empowering them to reach their full potential. This strategy is particularly

relevant in the Western Balkans, where youth work has the potential to bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that young people are not only beneficiaries of policies, but also key actors in their development and implementation.

Youth work, as defined by the Council of Europe, encompasses a broad range of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental, and political nature, delivered both by paid and volunteer youth workers. These activities are grounded in non-formal and informal learning processes, focusing on young people and voluntary participation. Youth work is, at its core, a social practice that facilitates young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and decision-making processes. This definition aligns closely with the European Union's perspective, which also views youth work as encompassing a wide range of activities that span social, cultural, educational, and political domains, including sports and services for young people. Youth work, according to the EU, belongs to the sphere of "out-of-school" education and is fundamentally based on non-formal learning and voluntary engagement.

In the Western Balkans, however, there is no unified definition of youth work, reflecting the diversity of practices and approaches across the region. The project and, therefore, the associated policy will aim to offer a coherent definition that aligns with European standards while addressing the unique contexts of the Western Balkan countries.

Recognising this, the European Youth Work Agenda further reinforces the significance of youth work by emphasising the necessity for quality, accessibility, and recognition of youth work across Europe. This agenda advocates for a strategic approach to youth work, underscoring the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration

and integration of youth work into broader social and economic policies. For the Western Balkans, this implies that youth work can function as a catalyst for social cohesion, fostering a sense of community and belonging among young people, and contributing to the mitigation of the effects of unemployment, migration, and social exclusion. By aligning youth work with the priorities delineated in these European frameworks, Western Balkan countries can not only address immediate challenges but also establish the foundation for long-term sustainable development.

Moreover, the integration of youth work into the Western Balkan region's development strategies aligns with the EU's broader objective of fostering inclusive growth and social stability. Through structured youth work initiatives supported by both the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Work Agenda, the region can enhance young people's capacities, equipping them with the skills and opportunities necessary for active participation in their societies. This approach not only contributes to the personal and professional development of young people but also to the overall resilience and stability of the region, ensuring that the next generation is adequately prepared to address future challenges.

# Relevant policy framework

## European youth work policy framework

Both EU and CoE define youth work quite broadly, which allows to benefit diverse praxis across the continent (Council of European Union, 2009). Concerning defining youth work, some European states have it defined under law, some under norms, and some allow non-governmental actors to define it (Taru et al., 2020).

## Council of Europe youth work recommendation

Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers' recommendation on youth work is the first pan-European soft law, which recognises youth work and pledges to enhance support for youth work by ensuring its integration into local, regional, and national policies. It highlights the need for strategies, legislation, and resources that ensure equal access to youth work for all young people. It brings governments to commit to develop a competency-based framework for the education and training of paid and volunteer youth workers, through adopting frameworks, creating pathways of education, training, and recognition of skills gained through practice. It calls for increased research, evaluation, and dissemination of best practices, as well as the promotion of the Council of Europe's existing resources and tools (Council of Europe, 2017).

The recommendation is values-charged - it emphasises that youth work should be guided by principles of voluntary and active participation, equality of access, openness, and flexibility. It should be rights-based, inclusive, and focused on young people's needs and abilities. Partici-

pation is key, recognizing young people, youth workers, and organisations as active partners in developing and evaluating youth work policies (Council of Europe, 2017).

The proposed measures under the recommendation invites member states to create a supportive environment for both traditional and innovative youth work, especially at the local level, while recognizing the benefits of regional, national, and international cooperation. They emphasise strengthening youth work's role to enable cross-sectoral collaboration with areas, such as social issues, health, education, and justice. The measures also promote coordination across different levels, recognition of youth work's value, and equal access. They advocate for empowering youth work by informing young people of their rights, fostering active citizenship, and enhancing non-formal learning. The paper calls for the youth organisations to be respected, and promote knowledge-based youth work which can adapt to societal changes (Council of Europe, 2017).

## European Youth Work Agenda

European Youth Work Convention is an institution-supported gathering of the youth work community representatives in Europe setting political agenda for the sphere. In 2020 the third convention took place digitally from Bonn, Germany, which brought together around 1000 participants - youth workers, policymakers, educators and young people from across 50 European countries. The primary aim was to solidify and support operationalisation of European Youth Work Agenda. The convention served as a platform for the youth work community to discuss and develop strategies, actions, and measures that would guide youth work practices across Europe.

The final declaration from the convention out-



lined several key outcomes aimed at strengthening youth work in Europe. It emphasised the need for a cohesive approach to youth work, integrating it into broader social, educational, and political frameworks. The declaration highlighted the importance of sustainable structures, cross-sectoral cooperation, and the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes. It also stressed the necessity of quality education and training for youth workers, recognition of youth work's value, and the development of innovative practices. The declaration serves as a roadmap for the Bonn Process, providing a strategic vision for the future of youth work in Europe.

In 2020 the European youth work community mustered enough political momentum to gather support both in the Council of Europe and European Union institutions, which resulted in the European Council's resolution on establishing the European Youth Work Agenda (Council of the European Union, 2020). This document outlines the European Youth Work Agenda, which provides a strategic framework for strengthening and recognizing youth work across Europe. It emphasises the importance of youth work as a critical element in fostering social inclusion, active citizenship, and the personal development of young people. It also recognises the diverse forms of youth work across different EU Member States and aims to harmonise and elevate its practice through shared principles, quality standards, and coordinated efforts across various levels of governance. The resolution carries a potential importance for the Western Balkan countries, where youth work lacks visibility, recognition and quality assurance, and young people are facing challenges such as unemployment and social exclusion.

The content of resolution partially re-iterates ambitions set by the Council of Europe's 2017 recommendation, aiming to further develop and

improve the quality of youth work, ensuring it is innovative and widely recognized. It focuses on enhancing the framework within which youth work operates, promoting cross-sectoral cooperation, and adopting evidence-based approaches. The Agenda also emphasises the importance of empowering young people, fostering their active participation, and supporting their contributions to democratic, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

EU states are responsible for integrating youth work into existing and future youth policies, ensuring its quality and innovation, and increasing its recognition. They are tasked with informing and involving relevant actors at national, regional, and local levels, and facilitating cooperation and dialogue within the youth work community. Member states should also support cross-border exchanges and ensure the sustainability of youth work structures, particularly at the local level. The resolution invites the European Commission embed the Agenda within the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy, creating synergies with other international organisations, particularly the Council of Europe, and supporting the development of digital platforms and other tools to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices. The Commission also plays a key role in promoting evidence-based approaches and ensuring the visibility and evaluation of the Agenda's outcomes. All sides are invited to extend cooperation to the member States of the Council of Europe.

As key points, the Agenda aims to:

- promote quality, innovation and recognition in youth work,
- integrate the agenda into EU Youth Strategy and national policies,
- ensure sustainable structures and resources for quality youth work, especially on local level and rural areas,
- strengthen and extend common principles

- of youth work Europe-wide,
- enhance competency-based education and training of youth workers,
- regularly monitor, evaluate and respond to youth work developments, and allow youth work practise to be fed by the evidence about young peoples' needs,
- develop strategies to recognize and validate non-formal and informal learning in the realm of youth work,
- support youth work for youth empowerment to contribute to sustainable, inclusive, democratic and peaceful societies,
- increase cross-border and cross-cultural interactions between young people via youth work across Europe,
- develop agile mechanisms for youth work to withstand and respond to crises,
- Strengthen cooperation between EU member states and the Council of Europe.

### **The role of European institutions in youth work**

It is not a coincidence that youth work receives due attention from the institutions such as the Council of Europe and European Union, youth work is sought as a tool for promoting values underpinning the functioning of both organisations, which on itself is motivated by long-term peace, social cohesion and human rights. This is why the EU supports development of youth work as an institution in its neighbourhood and especially in countries that have aspirations to become a member of the union.

The interest of development youth work as it is prescribed within the European standards is quite apparent within each Western Balkan nation, this is recognised in numerous declarations, strategies and statements by states and by the civil society. Hence, working out the European standards as a benchmark for youth policies carries a weighted role in youth work field development.

### **Conceptual framework for this brief**

We have conceptualised a new youth work policy area framework based on above mentioned standards. These are the key criteria of this framework :

- Policy integration - international, national, regional and local dimensions integrated, cross-sectoral anchoring - education, social welfare, employment, health etc.
- Legislative framework - youth work recognized in laws, policies, standards etc.
- Funding - consistent funding of youth work activities, from various sources.
- Resources - ensuring sites where youth work happens.
- Education and training for youth workers - competence-based frameworks, professional development pathways, continuous education.
- Validation of non-formal education and informal learning.
- Knowledge to action support - evidence gathering, actionable resources.
- Participation - participation of young people, and youth worker community at shaping youth work policies, allowing youth workers to network and unionise.
- Cross-sectoral cooperation - cooperation between state, business sectors and civil society sectors.
- Monitoring and evaluation of existing youth work policy, services, practises against quality standards.

# Youth work in the Western Balkans

**A**cross the Western Balkans youth work faces several common challenges and emerging trends. Each country exhibits unique approaches but shares overarching issues that impact the efficacy and sustainability of youth policy, legal frameworks, funding, and training for youth workers. The following section describes the situation of youth work in each country based on the literature review examined with the proposed youth work policy area framework.

## The case of Albania

Youth policy areas	Achievements	Gaps
1. Policy integration	Albania's Youth Strategy 2022-2029 integrates multiple cross-sectoral policies aligned with international frameworks, including the EU Youth Strategy, Sustainable Development Goals, and Council of Europe Youth Strategy. The strategy addresses diverse sectors like health, education, and employment (Muço, 2024)	Despite alignment, cross-sectoral cooperation remains limited. Integration with other policy sectors like social welfare is not consistently actionable, indicating a need for more robust intersectoral coordination mechanisms. (Muço, 2024)
2. Legislative Framework	Albania's Law on Youth (2019) established a legal basis for youth policies, ensuring rights and participation mechanisms, like the National Youth Council (NYC) and Local Youth Councils (LYCs). (Muço, 2024)	The law lacks clear definitions for "youth worker," impacting formal recognition of youth work as a profession. Further amendments, requested by youth CSOs, are pending to enhance framework inclusivity and operational clarity. (Muço, 2024)
3. Funding	The Youth Agency of Albania has a dedicated budget, with significant funding from the national government and EU support. (Muço, 2024)	Funding for youth initiatives is still inconsistent, with insufficient guarantees for long-term financial support. Local youth funding mechanisms are mostly project-based and lack strategic continuity. (Muço, 2024).  Youth workers report precarious financial situations to perform their duties in the long run and even find it difficult to get support for their work and instead follow the donor's needs and interests (Potočnik & Drosopoulos, 2024).
4. Resources	Youth centres have been established in several municipalities, providing dedicated spaces for youth engagement and development. (Muço, 2024)	Access to youth centres is limited in rural areas, and existing centres lack alignment with the Council of Europe's Quality Label standards. There is also a need for more comprehensive mapping of youth work sites to enhance access and utility. (Muço, 2024)

<p><b>5. Education and training</b></p>	<p>Competency-based frameworks in education, supported by the Youth Strategy, focus on skill development, particularly in ICT and digital fields, to increase youth employability. (Muço, 2024).</p> <p>The National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020 outlines educational pathways for professionals working with youth across various topics (such as sports, leisure, health, and delinquency prevention) and through diverse methods (like peer-to-peer education, seminars, and training courses) (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Formal pathways for youth work professional development are limited, lacking structured, continuous education for youth workers. The absence of training standards for youth workers hinders quality and professional growth in the sector. (Muço, 2024).</p> <p>Apart from the general guidelines provided by the Law on Youth, Albania lacks a unified framework regarding the specific skills, competencies, or educational qualifications required for youth workers. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<p><b>6. Validation of non-formal education</b></p>	<p>Non-formal education is recognized in Albania's youth policies, with specific initiatives by the National Youth Agency to fund CSO-led non-formal education programs. (Muço, 2024)</p> <p>National Strategy on Youth pledged to have a recognition system of learning outputs from youth work by 2023. (Albanian Government, 2022)</p>	<p>There is no systematic framework to validate or certify non-formal education and informal learning, limiting young people's ability to transfer these competencies to formal employment contexts. (Muço, 2024)</p>
<p><b>7. Knowledge to action support</b></p>	<p>The Youth Strategy highlights the need for evidence-based policymaking, with the National Youth Agency managing data collection efforts. (Muço, 2024)</p>	<p>Data collection and evidence gathering remain inconsistent. There is limited access to actionable data on youth needs, hindering targeted program design and resource allocation. (Muço, 2024)</p>
<p><b>8. Participation</b></p>	<p>The establishment of NYC, LYC, and the Parliamentary Youth Club offers formal avenues for youth participation in policymaking. (Muço, 2024)</p>	<p>Youth engagement is low at the local level, with limited representation and decision-making power. The Parliamentary Youth Club has not yet actively promoted youth issues, and participation initiatives lack sustained outreach. (Muço, 2024)</p>
<p><b>9. Cross-sectoral cooperation</b></p>	<p>The youth policy framework includes partnerships between government bodies, CSOs, and international donors, enhancing program diversity and support. (Muço, 2024)</p>	<p>Effective cooperation is challenged by limited intersectoral dialogue and engagement with the private sector. Local governments struggle with integrating youth policies with broader social and economic programs. (Muço, 2024)</p>
<p><b>10. Monitoring and evaluation</b></p>	<p>The Youth Strategy includes provisions for annual and semi-annual monitoring reports. (Muço, 2024)</p>	<p>Monitoring practices are still underdeveloped, and there is a need for standardized evaluation frameworks. Local-level accountability mechanisms are weak, making it difficult to assess program outcomes. (Muço, 2024)</p>

## The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Youth policy areas	Achievements	Gaps
<p><b>Policy Integration</b></p>	<p>Youth policies are influenced by European and international standards, with cross-sectoral youth policies evident in education, employment, and social welfare at various government levels, including Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, and Brčko District. (Beharic, 2024)</p> <p>RS adopted a youth strategy in 2016 and has a 2023-2027 youth policy with four strategic goals and various measures and projects. Brčko District developed a draft youth strategy (2021-2025) in cooperation with the local youth council, though it remains under review (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>There are positive steps taken in some regions, where action plan of youth policy have been developed, this would be the canton of Tuzla (Beharic, 2024)</p>	<p>Despite an initiative to adopt a youth strategy, it has been implemented due to procedural delays and subsequent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving significant gaps in strategic youth policy (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Implementation of youth work provisions varies significantly across municipalities, with some areas actively supporting youth councils and others facing operational challenges or lacking the infrastructure to support youth work. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>The Commission for Coordination of Youth Issues oversees youth roles but lacks executive power, only providing recommendations (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<p><b>Legislative Framework</b></p>	<p>Bosnia and Herzegovina has a unique and decentralised legal framework for youth work, with jurisdiction over youth policy divided among three entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, governed by the Youth Law of 2010, Republika Srpska, governed by the Law on Youth Organisation of 2004 (amended in 2008 and 2012) and Brčko District governed by the Youth Law of 2017. (Beharic, 2024; Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024)</p> <p>In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, "youth worker" is formally recognized as an "expert-associate in working with youth" and is listed in the official Classification of Professions (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Implementation challenges persist due to administrative complexity and limited enforcement mechanisms, especially in municipalities with insufficient youth representation (Beharic, 2024). Improving legislation on youth work is a critical issue for young people and the youth sector.</p> <p>Each entity's youth laws define "youth work" differently, resulting in inconsistent approaches and understandings of youth work across regions, although all recognize youth work as a policy priority.</p>
<p><b>Funding</b></p>	<p>International donors contribute significantly, with some local budgets allocated to youth initiatives (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>Republika Srpska allocated €100,000 and €204,000 for youth policy and projects in 2022, but funds are widely seen as insufficient. The youth sector depends heavily on international donors, like the EU and RYCO, for support, affecting sustainability. Some municipalities fund youth centres, but this support is rare and not mandated (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Funding remains inconsistent and fragmented, lacking dedicated budget lines for youth at the national level. Municipalities often lack sufficient resources, hindering youth program sustainability (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>Dependency on international funding creates instability. No legal requirement for local youth funding results in inconsistent support across municipalities.</p>

<b>Resources</b>	<p>Several youth centres and dedicated youth spaces have been established, particularly in urban areas (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>Youth work relies heavily on youth centres and NGOs, such as PRONI and M.O.C.A.R.T., which support the establishment of youth centres and offer non-formal education (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Rural areas lack youth centres, and existing facilities often do not meet quality standards, limiting their effectiveness as youth engagement sites (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>Dependency on international donors due to a lack of sustainable national funding sources for youth work facilities (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Education and training</b>	<p>Youth policies highlight skills development and promote non-formal education initiatives (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>The PRONI Centre for Youth Development, in collaboration with Jönköping University (Sweden), offered university-accredited courses, training the first cohort of youth workers in the region. Since the university program ended in 2007, youth civil society organisations have bridged the gap, offering year-long modular courses on youth work. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>The Institute for Youth Development provides training and certification specifically for youth officers in local and cantonal authorities, addressing practical needs within public institutions (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>There are no structured career pathways for youth workers, and professional development for youth work remains underdeveloped without a standardised competence framework (Beharic, 2024). After the Jönköping University program ended, no formal, state-backed educational pathway for youth workers has been reestablished, leaving a significant void in the structured development of youth work professionals. Although each organisation offering modular courses has its own ethical guidelines, no state-level or entity-level ethical code or standards exist for youth work, creating inconsistencies in training quality and practices. Modular courses and certifications by NGOs are not standardised, leading to a lack of recognized, cohesive credentials across regions and institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Validation of non-formal education</b>	<p>Non-formal education is partially recognized, supported by civil society initiatives (Beharic, 2024)</p>	<p>A formal validation system is absent, limiting youth workers' ability to demonstrate non-formal skills in the job market, which reduces the value of non-formal learning. (Beharic, 2024)</p>
<b>Knowledge to action support</b>	<p>Some data is collected by the Ministry of Civil Affairs to guide youth policy, and international agencies conduct surveys to gather youth statistics (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>NGOs like the Institute for Youth Development KULT are involved in research, drafting legal documents, and lobbying for youth laws (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Data collection remains inconsistent, with limited access to updated, actionable data, weakening evidence-based policymaking and policy adjustments. (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>Limited governmental support for evidence-based policy-making, with few systematic research or data-collection mechanisms to guide youth policies. Insufficient resources to create actionable research and support effective policy changes and program development for youth work.</p>
<b>Participation</b>	<p>Youth councils exist at various levels, providing young people a formal role in policy discussions (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>Youth organisations, particularly at the local level, drive most youth work initiatives, providing platforms for youth participation and non-formal education (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024)</p>	<p>Participation mechanisms are inconsistent, especially at the local level, where youth engagement is low, and councils lack decision-making authority (Beharic, 2024).</p> <p>Lack of formal mechanisms for youth workers to contribute to shaping policies, network, or unionise. Limited institutional support for youth councils or councils that are only formally active, not fostering genuine youth engagement.</p>

**Cross-sectoral cooperation**

Some cooperation exists between governmental bodies, civil society, and international organisations (Beharic, 2024)

Effective cross-sectoral cooperation is hindered by limited private sector involvement, fragmented governance, and a lack of coordinated inter-ministerial efforts (Beharic, 2024).

Weak cross-sectoral collaboration between the state, businesses, and civil society sectors, resulting in uncoordinated efforts and missed opportunities for comprehensive youth support.

Limited integration of youth work with sectors like education, employment, and health, impeding holistic youth development.

**Monitoring and evaluation**

Monitoring provisions exist in some youth policies, such as the Youth Policy of Republika Srpska (Beharic, 2024)

Monitoring and evaluation practices are inconsistent across regions, with limited standardised evaluation frameworks and transparency at the local level (Beharic, 2024). Absence of a standardised, nationwide system for monitoring and evaluating youth work against quality standards.

Some NGOs have established quality assurance standards, and the PRONI Center signed agreements with multiple municipalities to adopt these standards (Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024)



## The case of Kosovo

Youth policy areas	Achievements	Gaps
<b>Policy Integration</b>	<p>The Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports is responsible for youth policy, including developing strategies, identifying vulnerable youth, and supporting youth organisations and clubs (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Kosovo's youth strategy aligns with international and EU standards, incorporating cross-sectoral policies across education, employment, and social welfare (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p> <p>Established in 2021, State Commission on Youth to coordinate youth strategies and evaluate national youth policy, promoting a horizontal, cross-sectoral approach as recommended by the Council of Europe (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Cross-sectoral cooperation remains fragmented. Despite alignment with broader policies, there is limited integration across all government levels, weakening effective implementation (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024)</p> <p>Responsibilities for youth policy enforcement among various ministries are unclear, weakening cross-sectoral integration (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Kosovo lacks an independent youth agency, with the Department of Youth under the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports handling policy but with limited implementation mechanisms (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Legislative Framework</b>	<p>Kosovo's legal framework includes the newly adopted Law on Youth (August 2024), which acknowledges youth rights and promotes youth activism, defining youth as individuals aged 15 to 29.</p> <p>Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth (2009) defines core responsibilities for strengthening the youth sector, including central and local government obligations, youth participation in decision-making, voluntary work, and non-formal education.</p>	<p>The Constitution provides limited specific protections for youth, and implementation is inconsistent across regions, affecting local youth engagement. (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024)</p> <p>While the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth mentions "youth work" and "youth worker," the profession is not formally recognized. Recognizing youth work has been a key demand of Kosovo's youth sector for over a decade (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Funding</b>	<p>The government's budget allocation for youth has grown, with significant support for the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports and from international donors. (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p> <p>A specific budget code for youth was created on the recommendation of the Parliamentary Committee to prevent municipalities from reallocating youth funds for other purposes (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Funding is inconsistent, especially at the municipal level, affecting long-term youth programs. Project-based funding lacks continuity, impacting program sustainability (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p> <p>Youth sector sustainability relies on external funding, impacting the long-term viability of youth programs and reducing organic civic engagement (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Resources</b>	<p>Youth centres have been established in multiple regions (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>	<p>Resource allocation is uneven, with rural areas facing limited access to youth centres. Many centres do not meet quality standards (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>



<b>Education and training</b>	<p>Kosovo's youth policies support non-formal education, with vocational training programs and some frameworks for skill development (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p> <p>Youth workers receive structured, annual training facilitated by the Department of Youth, with a focus on safety, including protection from online threats, violence, and terrorism. Some local NGOs actively provide training for youth workers, though quality and selection practices vary. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Formal pathways for youth work professional development are underdeveloped, with limited structured training and certification for youth workers (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p> <p>Kosovo lacks formal, accredited educational programs, competence-based frameworks, and ethical standards for youth workers. Training often relies on non-formal experiences within youth organisations or voluntary involvement. Inconsistent quality and transparency in NGO-provided training courses hinder effective skill-building for youth workers, especially in rural areas. Due to a lack of formal pathways, youth workers gain skills predominantly through volunteer experience rather than structured educational programs.</p>
<b>Validation of non-formal education</b>	<p>Non-formal education is recognised, and various programs support informal skill-building activities (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024). Among service providers, there is NGO THY delivering Youth Work Programme and licensing youth workers.</p>	<p>Despite recognising youth work and licensing youth workers, Kosovo lacks a systematic validation process for non-formal learning, limiting the transferability of these skills to the job market (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>
<b>Knowledge to action support</b>	<p>Data collection initiatives are in place, with international support for evidence-based youth policymaking. (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>	<p>Data collection is sporadic and often lacks actionable insights, impacting the ability to make informed decisions and adjustments in youth policy (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>
<b>Participation</b>	<p>The Central Youth Action Council (CYAC) and Local Youth Action Councils (LYACs) facilitate youth representation and participation (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p> <p>Kosovar Youth Council is a strong voice of youth civil society (Kosovar Council on Youth, n.d.), though without a formal recognition as a national youth representing body.</p> <p>With the new Law on Youth, steps to enable central or rather local youth councils as the representing bodies have been made.</p>	<p>Youth participation at the local level is still somewhat limited, though the new Law on Youth seems more promising; also, local councils seem to lack a clear role and power in decision-making processes, hindering youth influence on policy (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p> <p>It is also unclear if there is any role of youth work in this participatory action.</p>
<b>Cross-sectoral cooperation</b>	<p>Kosovo collaborates with international organisations and civil society, with efforts to coordinate between sectors on youth initiatives (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>	<p>Private sector involvement is minimal, and inter-ministerial cooperation is underdeveloped, limiting comprehensive youth policy impact (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>
<b>Monitoring and evaluation</b>	<p>The Youth Strategy includes monitoring provisions, and annual progress reports are required to assess implementation (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>	<p>Monitoring is inconsistent, and the lack of standardised evaluation frameworks makes it difficult to track and measure program effectiveness. (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024).</p>

## The case of Montenegro

Youth policy areas	Achievements	Gaps
<b>Policy Integration</b>	<p>Montenegro's youth policy aligns with the EU and international frameworks, featuring a cross-sectoral approach involving education, employment, and social welfare (Mićanović, 2024).</p> <p>Youth Strategy 2023-2027 gravitates heavily on youth work; it pledges to create a quality assurance system for its provision. It also speaks of establishing a functional financing system of youth services within the municipalities, it also promises to train key municipality actors in understanding youth work (Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2023).</p>	<p>The lack of cohesive integration across local, regional, and national levels results in inconsistent policy applications. Political instability and frequent changes in government impact effective cross-sectoral anchoring. (Mićanović, 2024)</p> <p>Integration of youth policy at local and regional levels remains uneven, with challenges in harmonising data and ensuring consistent implementation across administrative boundaries. Greater cooperation among various levels of government and civil society is necessary for effective policy integration (Hadžibegović et al., 2023).</p>
<b>Legislative Framework</b>	<p>The Law on Youth (LoY) provides a formal structure for youth policy, defining youth rights and institutional roles, such as the Youth Council. (Mićanović, 2024). The Law on Youth has been positioned as a key legal instrument, with recommendations to broaden its scope to formally include youth work and participation. New definitions within the law aim to better support youth empowerment and active participation, aligning with European best practices in recognizing youth work as a public interest (Hadžibegović et al., 2023).</p> <p>The Law on Youth (2019) in Montenegro defines youth work as activities aimed at supporting young people's transition to adulthood, independence, learning, and development through non-formal education methods. Montenegro's youth policy framework clearly defines roles and actors within youth policy, contributing to a structured approach to youth work (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Youth Strategy 2023-2027 promises to amend youth law to provide more legal avenues for youth work practise and recognition (Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2023)</p>	<p>LoY's implementation varies at the local level, and youth work is not distinctly recognized as a profession, limiting professional identity and protections for youth workers. (Mićanović, 2024).</p> <p>The law on youth lacks clear standard setting on youth work (Hadžibegović et al., 2023). Decentralisation measures are recommended to empower municipalities, enhancing local youth engagement and tailored youth work interventions (Hadžibegović et al., 2023).</p> <p>Absence of professionalisation and a formal regulatory structure for youth work limits long-term development and stakeholder commitment in the youth sector (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>

<p><b>Funding</b></p>	<p>International funding from the EU and UN plays a significant role in supporting youth activities, complemented by government allocations (Mićanović, 2024).</p> <p>Youth Strategy 2023-2027 promises to create youth work programmes. It also speaks of establishing a functional financing system of youth services within the municipalities (Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2023).</p> <p>Youth NGOs in Montenegro receive funding mainly from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports, and local governments. Occasionally, other ministries contribute to youth-focused activities. International funding, such as the Erasmus+ programme and Western Balkans (WBC6) initiatives, supports youth work in areas like mobility, intercultural exchange, participation, and non-formal education (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Over-reliance on donor funding creates vulnerabilities, and local budgets for youth are often inconsistent, limiting sustainable support for youth projects and activities (Mićanović, 2024).</p> <p>Youth law does not define financial obligations within to ensure sustainable funding for youth programs, including provisions for co-financing youth organisations and projects. Existing funding mechanisms are largely centralised and project-based, which can create challenges in continuity. A more decentralised funding structure is recommended to empower local self-governments and improve the sustainability of youth programs at the municipal level. (Hadžibegović et al., 2023).</p> <p>This qualitative study on NEET youth examined the funding for non-formal education, while the government and EU provide funding for non-formal education, resources are often concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural NEET youth underserved. Furthermore, project-based funding lacks continuity, hindering long-term program impact. A decentralised funding approach, with dedicated support for rural youth programs, could improve access to non-formal education for all NEET youth (Kandić, 2023).</p> <p>Youth Strategy 2023-2027 plans are not complemented with clear budget lines and calculations (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2023), the amount foreseen for the activities seems severely underfunded.</p> <p>The Centre for Development of Non-Governmental Organisations (CRNVO) analysis indicates that many grant recipients lack significant experience in the youth sector, suggesting potential biases or insufficiently merit-based evaluations in grant distribution. Funded projects primarily target active, educated youth, with limited support for youth with fewer opportunities (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>International funds are essential for youth NGOs, yet they remain insufficient for sustained, high-quality youth work, leading many NGOs to focus only on basic project work. Youth NGOs struggle with unstable funding, which affects the stability of employment in the sector; this instability drives skilled youth workers toward more stable, better-paying jobs (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<p><b>Resources</b></p>	<p>Youth centres and clubs serve as physical spaces for youth engagement, especially in larger municipalities (Mićanović, 2024).</p>	<p>Resource allocation is uneven, with limited youth facilities in rural areas and existing centres lacking adequate support and maintenance, hindering their operational effectiveness (Mićanović, 2024).</p> <p>Youth centres are primarily concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural areas underserved. There is a recommendation for establishing additional youth-friendly spaces in rural areas and ensuring these sites meet quality standards (Hadžibegović et al., 2023).</p>

<b>Education and training</b>	<p>Training programs exist for youth skills development and employment readiness, supported by international collaborations (Mićanović, 2024).</p> <p>There is no occupational standard for youth work in Montenegro, given that it is not recognised within the Qualification Framework of Montenegro (EU-CoE Youth Partnership, na).</p> <p>Alongside with quality framework for youth work, Youth Strategy 2023-2027 aims to create an educational programme for youth workers as a profession (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2023).</p> <p>Youth work was taught as an extra-curricular programme at the Faculty of Philosophy in Nikšić, following a contract signed between Jönköping University and the University of Montenegro in 2007/08, with financial support from SIDA. Efforts were underway to continue the program as a Master's degree.</p> <p>With the patronage of Forum MNE, the vocation of Youth Activist (which is similar to youth leader in other European countries) was accredited by the Ministry of Education in 2017. (Forum MNE, na).</p>	<p>Structured, continuous education pathways for youth workers are lacking, and professional development opportunities are limited, impacting the quality of youth work (Mićanović, 2024).</p> <p>The ministry of Youth and Sports is quite ambitious in its plans to support professionalisation of youth work in the statement and argumentation modules, however, this ambition is severely nivalled in the funding section (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2023).</p> <p>Efforts should be directed in assessing the impact of Youth Activist recognition and learning lessons for the contextual and tailored approach.</p>
<b>Validation of non-formal education</b>	<p>Non-formal education is recognized within youth policy, with civil society organisations offering informal learning opportunities (Mićanović, 2024).</p>	<p>There is no formal system to validate non-formal learning outcomes, limiting recognition of these skills in formal employment contexts (Mićanović, 2024).</p> <p>Non-formal education achievements remain unrecognised by formal systems, limiting NEET youth's employment prospects (Kandić, 2023).</p>
<b>Knowledge to action support</b>	<p>International partners aid evidence-based policymaking, and the Ministry conducts needs analyses (Mićanović, 2024). Non-formal education practice often lacks integration with skills required for employment, particularly for young people with minimal qualifications (Kandić, 2023).</p>	<p>Data collection is sporadic, with gaps in translating research into actionable youth programs, limiting data-driven decision-making (Mićanović, 2024).</p>
<b>Participation</b>	<p>Youth councils and the Representative Alliance of Youth Organisations enable youth participation in policymaking (Mićanović, 2024).</p>	<p>Youth participation mechanisms lack efficacy, especially at the local level, where councils have limited influence over decisions that impact youth (Mićanović, 2024).</p>
<b>Cross-sectoral cooperation</b>	<p>Cooperation with civil society organisations and international bodies contributes to youth policy diversity (Mićanović, 2024).</p>	<p>Private sector involvement is minimal, and inter-ministerial cooperation needs strengthening to ensure holistic policy integration and resource sharing (Mićanović, 2024).</p>
<b>Monitoring and evaluation</b>	<p>The Youth Strategy includes provisions for monitoring, and annual reports are mandated for tracking progress (Mićanović, 2024).</p>	<p>Monitoring practices lack transparency and are inconsistent, with limited public access to evaluation outcomes, impacting accountability (Mićanović, 2024).</p>

## The case of North Macedonia

Youth policy areas	Achievements	Gaps
<p><b>Policy Integration</b></p>	<p>Agency of Youth and Sport manages the youth organisations registry, drafts national youth strategies, and oversees reports from youth officers across municipalities, but struggles due to being understaffed and more focused on sports than youth issues (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>North Macedonia's youth policy is aligned with EU standards and includes cross-sectoral priorities such as education, health, and employment. The recent Youth Strategy (2023–2027) reflects a broader inclusion of issues like security, mental health, and youth activism. The LYPYP introduces Local Youth Policy construct, which will support tailor-made youth policy-making in the municipalities.</p> <p>There have been activities to check the foundation of developing the law on youth work (Kulakov, 2024).</p> <p>The National Youth Strategy (2023-2027) aligns with EU standards and aims to integrate multiple dimensions (education, health, employment, etc.) to support youth development. Local governments have Local Youth Strategies and Youth Councils in many municipalities.</p> <p>(Youth Wiki, 2024). The National Youth Strategy 2016-2025 emphasises youth work recognition, integration in education, and quality access across municipalities (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Policy integration remains limited at the local level, with uneven implementation across municipalities. Many local councils have yet to adopt youth strategies or establish youth participation mechanisms. (Kulakov, 2024)</p> <p>Municipalities and the City of Skopje are required to establish local youth offices and appoint youth officers, yet these roles are often non-functional and appointed without merit-based processes, leading to underperformance (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Full cross-sectoral integration remains limited, particularly at the local level, where not all municipalities have adopted Local Youth Councils or Strategies as mandated by the national framework. (Youth wiki, 2024).</p> <p>Despite the law, cross-sectoral integration across health, education, and employment remains limited, with agencies struggling to coordinate effectively across ministries and local governments (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<p><b>Legislative Framework</b></p>	<p>The LYPYP (The law on youth participation and youth policy) is a significant milestone, formally recognizing youth work, youth participation, and youth organisations (Kulakov, 2024). The law includes a definition for youth workers and mandates local youth councils, youth offices, and centers, where youth workers are expected to play a key role (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Implementation has been slow, especially in municipal areas, with only partial establishment of local youth councils and youth offices. Tracking youth funding remains challenging (Kulakov, 2024).</p> <p>No specific youth work law exists, with efforts to draft one stalled (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024). The title "youth worker" is not formally recognized in the National Registry of Professions, which instead lists "worker with young people" (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024). The qualifications for "officers for youth" and responsibilities of municipal youth offices are not clearly outlined (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>

<b>Funding</b>	<p>The LYPYP mandates specific budget allocations for youth initiatives, including municipalities. The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020) mandates that the state allocate at least 0.3% of the annual budget and municipalities, including Skopje, set aside at least 0.1% "for the youth" (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>International donors continue to provide significant funding, supplementing government allocations (Kulakov, 2024). Delivered by the National Agency for European Education Programmes and Mobility, providing critical funding for youth projects. However, public trust in the agency has been impacted by a corruption scandal (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Funding consistency is a concern. The Agency for Youth and Sports allocates a minimal portion of its budget to youth initiatives, while municipalities often lack designated funds, impacting project sustainability and accessibility, especially in rural areas. Youth-related budgets are difficult to track, with most funds allocated toward sports rather than youth policy. Limited transparency in financial data and an over-reliance on donor funding prevent sustainable investment in youth services (Kulakov, 2024).</p> <p>No strict mechanism exists to ensure that the state and municipalities adhere to the funding requirements, leading to inconsistencies in youth-oriented financing (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>With insufficient domestic funding, North Macedonia's youth sector relies heavily on foreign grants, impacting its long-term sustainability (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Resources</b>	<p>Efforts to establish youth centres and appoint youth officers in some municipalities have been successful, enhancing spaces for youth work (Kulakov, 2024; Youth Wiki, 2024).</p> <p>Municipalities are required to provide 50-70% of the funding for youth centres, with the remaining 30-50% to be secured by civil society organisations selected through open calls (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Limited availability of youth centres in rural areas hinders accessibility for a broader youth demographic. Existing centres often lack adequate facilities, limiting their utility for skill-building and community engagement (Kulakov, 2024). Only a limited number of youth centres exist (7 out of 81 municipalities), with significant gaps in rural areas. This limits the accessibility and inclusiveness of youth work resources (Youth Wiki, 2024)</p> <p>The 2021 Rulebook for Quality Standards of Youth Work in North Macedonia offers specific, though not exhaustive, guidelines for youth centres. Centres meeting these standards receive a quality label, following the model of the Council of Europe's Quality Label for Youth Centres (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Smaller, rural municipalities may face difficulties in establishing and maintaining youth centres and other mandated structures due to financial constraints (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Technical expertise required for international grants often favours larger NGOs, marginalising smaller local NGOs that lack such resources (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>

<b>Education and training</b>	<p>The Union for Youth Work, in collaboration with the Faculty of Philosophy and the Institute for Social Work and Policy, is developing a master's programme in youth work. This programme, based on the curriculum of Tallinn University, provides a structured, high-level educational pathway (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>The establishment of a master's degree program for youth work at the University of St. Cyril and Methodius marks a significant step in formal training. Certification is available through the Union for Youth Work (Youth wiki, 2024). This is a four-month training module with 208 hours of teaching, including both theoretical and practical components. Certified by the Ministry of Education and Science, this module qualifies participants as "workers with youth" (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Youth workers in peripheral cities benefit from training organised by international bodies such as the European Commission and the Council of Europe. These opportunities support professional development, networking, and project partnership building (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>The Youth Strategy highlights the need for skill development, with a focus on informal learning and vocational training for youth workers (Kulakov, 2024).</p>	<p>The profession is not fully integrated into the national qualifications framework, and there is a shortage of structured continuous professional development options. Additionally, training is mostly provided by NGOs, which may lack formal recognition (Youth wiki, 2024).</p> <p>Despite educational advancements, a lack of attractive employment opportunities for youth workers limits the impact and sustainability of these training programs (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Most certified and structured training opportunities are concentrated in urban areas, especially Skopje, with fewer options in peripheral cities (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Validation of non-formal education</b>	<p>Progress has been made toward creating a validation system, supported by the Macedonian Qualifications Framework and adult education initiatives (Youth Wiki, 2024)</p>	<p>There is no formalised system for validating non-formal education outcomes, restricting the transferability of skills gained to the formal employment sector (Kulakov, 2024). A full validation system for non-formal learning remains in early development, and there is no unified framework ensuring that these skills are consistently recognized across sectors (Youth Wiki, 2024)</p>
<b>Knowledge to action support</b>	<p>Within the Youth Services chapter of the LYPYP, the Agency for Youth and Sports is envisaged to establish a research centre for topics related to youth (Kulakov, 2024). National surveys, such as the Youth Trends Survey, help inform policies based on youth needs. Research on youth labour market needs supports policy design in this area (Youth Wiki, 2024)</p>	<p>The implementation of youth law regarding this issue is lagging. Researches on youth issues are done on ad-hoc basis, instead systematically, creating a gap in youth data, and making the development of evidence-based youth policy a challenge (Kulakov, 2024).</p>

<b>Participation</b>	<p>The establishment of youth councils and the Youth Assembly of North Macedonia provides formal participation mechanisms (Kulakov, 2024). The law mandates the establishment of youth councils in all municipalities and a National Youth Assembly to encourage youth participation, with the OSCE providing training for local council representatives. Early implementation suggests formal establishment, though practical impact is not yet measurable (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024). National Youth Council, as a leading umbrella organisation, it facilitates coordination among youth organisations and strengthens youth advocacy within the broader policy framework (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024)</p>	<p>Representation remains limited, particularly at the local level. Young people report minimal influence in decision-making, indicating a need for stronger participatory channels (Kulakov, 2024). Youth workers do not have strong union representation or networking support structures.</p> <p>Although allowed by the law, the National Advisory Body has not yet become fully operational, limiting national-level coordination (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Cross-sectoral cooperation</b>	<p>Some partnerships exist between government bodies, local authorities, and the Union for Youth Work, with a memorandum supporting cooperative efforts. (Youth Wiki, 2024). Partnerships with international donors have enabled some municipalities to initiate youth centres and programmes, particularly in urban areas (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Cooperation remains fragmented, and frameworks are not fully established for inter-ministerial or public-private partnerships (Youth Wiki, 2024)</p>
<b>Monitoring and evaluation</b>	<p>The Youth Strategy includes provisions for monitoring and evaluation, with reports by the Agency for Youth and Sports (Kulakov, 2024).</p>	<p>Monitoring practices are inconsistent, especially at the local level, and there is limited publicly available data on the progress of youth policies, making accountability a challenge (Kulakov, 2024).</p> <p>Despite strategic objectives, formal regulation and quality assurance in youth work are inconsistent across municipalities (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>



## The case of Serbia

Youth policy areas	Achievements	Gaps
<p><b>Policy Integration</b></p>	<p>Serbia's youth policy framework recently shifted from the Ministry of Youth and Sport to the Ministry of Tourism and Youth and, which will require time to resolve all administrative adjustments (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Serbia's Strategy for Youth (2023-2030) aligns with European youth policies and emphasises cross-sectoral integration involving employment, health, and social welfare. Recent amendments aim to harmonise youth policies across all governmental levels. (Jokić, 2024). Cross-sectoral initiatives are embedded in Serbia's Youth Strategy, with involvement from various ministries and civil society (Klašna and Stojanovic, 2024). The document on Serbia's Youth Guarantee (2023-2026) highlights the role of youth work as central to supporting young people's integration into the workforce, especially those not in education, employment, or training (Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans, and Social Affairs, 2023).</p> <p>At the local level, youth councils and offices in Serbia facilitate consultative and policy-implementation efforts. Currently, 80 municipalities host advisory youth councils, and 137 youth offices support local youth initiatives and services. Since 2009, Local Youth Actions have been adopted in 144 municipalities. In 2014, the National Association of Youth Offices was established, uniting 110 cities and municipalities. However, differences in funding and capacity exist, as local budgets vary. Some municipalities have appointed youth program coordinators, while others rely on volunteer coordinators (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>	<p>Integration at local levels is inconsistent due to uneven implementation capacity, which limits effective coordination across regions and sectors (Jokić, 2024; Đukić, 2022). More robust integration mechanisms at the municipal level are necessary to bridge gaps across different governance levels (Youth Wiki, 2024).</p> <p>Practical implementation across sectors is uneven. More structured collaboration frameworks could improve integration and accountability across ministries (Klašna and Stojanovic, 2024). There is no mandate for local institutions to implement the Law on Youth, and reliable instruments for local-level application are absent (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>While the youth civic sector demonstrates good internal networking and advocacy, there is a noticeable lack of government commitment to policy and decision implementation (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024). Serbia's youth policy is evidence-based at the national level but lacks detailed local-level aims, operationalization, and budgets necessary for effective local youth policy implementation (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>Local action plans often replicate national plans without adaptation for local youth needs and lack dedicated budgets, limiting their feasibility and effectiveness (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<p><b>Legislative Framework</b></p>	<p>The foundations of youth work policy are supported by the Law on Youth, the National Youth Strategy (2015-2025), and the Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Youth Strategy (2018-2020) (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024). The Law on Youth (LoY) provides a formal structure, recognizing youth work as a priority. Youth work was officially recognized as a profession in 2019 and is in the process of further formalisation under the ongoing draft Law on Youth (Klašna and Stojanovic, 2024). Serbia is progressing toward amendments for LoY to address more comprehensive youth needs, including further professional recognition of youth work (Jokić, 2024).</p>	<p>The law's current framework lacks specificity regarding the professional standards for youth workers. The planned amendments aim to address these limitations but are pending finalisation (Jokić, 2024). The Law on Youth contains many declarative elements requiring inter-ministerial coordination, which is lacking; thus, the law has limited power to enforce youth work activities independently (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p> <p>The absence of explicit definitions for "youth worker" and standard youth work practices limits professional recognition (Đukić, 2022).</p> <p>Legislative updates to support youth workers' licensing and further formal recognition are pending. Enhanced legislative clarity is needed, especially regarding local government roles in supporting youth policy (Klašna and Stojanovic, 2024).</p>

<b>Funding</b>	<p>Serbia has allocated funding from both national and municipal budgets, supplemented by EU and international donor support, with approximately €90 million earmarked for the Action Plan (2023–2025) (Jokić, 2024). Local governments have the option to allocate funds for youth work (Youth wiki, 2024).</p> <p>Youth work in Serbia primarily relies on public calls from the Ministry of Youth and Tourism, though these funds make up only a small portion of the overall budget for youth work compared to international sources. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024). Long-standing partnerships with international bodies foster stability and are crucial for the development and continuity of youth work projects in Serbia. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024)</p>	<p>Local funding remains project-based, limiting continuity for youth programs. Further decentralisation of funding could improve sustainability, especially for rural youth services (Jokić, 2024). A more sustainable funding structure is needed, particularly at the municipal level, to ensure continuity of youth services. (Youth wiki, 2024). Funding at the local level remains discretionary, leading to disparities in youth work support. Without mandated local funding, municipalities may deprioritize youth work, impacting sustainability (Klašna and Stojanovic, 2024).</p> <p>Many youth workers are volunteers or on temporary contracts, leading to high turnover as individuals seek more secure, better-paid positions in other sectors. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024)</p> <p>Both youth workers and experts highlight the need for greater transparency in fund allocation and increased financial resources at local and national levels to support the quality and sustainability of youth work. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024).</p>
<b>Resources</b>	<p>Youth centres and youth offices provide spaces for youth work, with government initiatives enhancing infrastructure in urban regions (Jokić, 2024).</p>	<p>Resources are unequally distributed, with limited facilities in rural areas. Existing youth spaces often lack quality standard operational support, impacting youth engagement and program quality (Jokić, 2024).</p>
<b>Education and training</b>	<p>Serbia has established a multi-level framework for youth worker qualifications (Youth Leader, Youth Worker, Specialist for Youth Work) and a multi-modular curriculum for non-formal education, overseen by The National Association of Youth Workers (NAPOR). (Klašna and Stojanovic, 2024). NAPOR offers skill-building opportunities, and the new Strategy emphasises the need for vocational youth work training (Jokić, 2024; Youth Wiki, 2024). NAPOR has defined qualification standards for three levels of youth worker roles—leader, worker, and specialist—but these are yet to be formally integrated into the National Qualification Framework. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024)</p>	<p>Structured certification pathways are limited. Implementation of formal, continuous training frameworks is essential for quality enhancement. Absence of formalised career pathway or certification for youth workers, which limits the sector’s professional standards. Competence-based frameworks and continuous professional development opportunities are needed to enhance quality. The public sector support for continuous professional development is minimal, relying heavily on NGO-provided training. Long-term youth workers often feel undervalued, as there is a lack of certification that acknowledges differences in experience levels. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024)</p> <p>Although NAPOR is working on a comparative analysis and curriculum proposal for a youth work master’s degree, there are concerns about a lack of academic support, as few professors are versed in youth work. (Potočnik &amp; Drosopulos, 2024)</p>

<b>Validation of non-formal education</b>	<p>Non-formal education is recognized and supported within youth programs, with initiatives aimed at enhancing employability (Jokić, 2024). Tools such as the Passport of Competences by NAPOR validate non-formal education, aiding skill recognition for youth employability. The YouthPass from Erasmus+ also supports this (Youth Wiki, 2024).</p> <p>In 2011, NAPOR established occupational standards for youth workers, aligning them with the European framework, with the objective of securing their inclusion in the Qualifications Register. The Republic of Serbia has formally recognised youth work as a profession, representing a crucial step towards enhancing institutional sustainability. However, further progress is required, including the implementation of mechanisms under the Law on the National Qualifications Framework and NAPOR’s application for publicly recognised adult education organiser status, which is necessary to ensure the official recognition of diplomas issued by the organisation.</p>	<p>Serbia lacks a formal system to validate non-formal education, limiting the transferability of these skills in the labour market. Establishing a certification framework could improve recognition and employment prospects (Jokić, 2024). The Passport of Competences, though valuable, is not yet integrated within the National Qualification Framework, limiting formal recognition. Developing a structured validation system would strengthen youth work’s credibility in Serbia’s education system. (Youth Wiki, 2024).</p>
<b>Knowledge to action support</b>	<p>Data collection efforts by the Ministry of Tourism and Youth support evidence-based policymaking, and international agencies contribute to research on youth needs (Jokić, 2024). Data collection on youth policy impact is supported by the Statistical Office and local governments, with NAPOR conducting competency research for youth employability (Youth Wiki, 2024)</p>	<p>Data collection remains inconsistent, especially at the local level, making it challenging to track youth program impacts and inform adjustments (Jokić, 2024). Data collection at the municipal level is limited, with gaps in NEET profiling and outcome evaluation, which restricts evidence-based policymaking. Improved monitoring tools are essential for targeted interventions (Đukić, 2022). Enhanced, systematic data gathering and research partnerships are needed for evidence-based policy adjustments (Youth Wiki, 2024).</p>
<b>Participation</b>	<p>Mechanisms such as the Youth Advisory Council and National Youth Council of Serbia provide formal participation channels, enhancing youth influence in policy discussions (Jokić, 2024).</p>	<p>Youth councils have limited decision-making power, affecting impact on local-level policies. Enhanced support for these bodies could enable broader youth policy influence (Jokić, 2024).</p> <p>NAPOR is a strong voice of youth workers in policy-making and discourse setting.</p>
<b>Cross-sectoral cooperation</b>	<p>Serbia collaborates with civil society and international partners, with some private sector involvement in youth initiatives (Jokić, 2024). NAPOR collaborates with public and private sectors, while inter-ministerial partnerships support comprehensive youth policy implementation (Youth Wiki, 2024)</p>	<p>Coordination between government sectors is limited. Establishing regular inter-ministerial collaborations would improve resource allocation and comprehensive support for youth (Jokić, 2024). Private sector involvement is minimal, and effective coordination across various ministries requires further improvement. Strengthening cross-sectoral mechanisms could enhance youth work’s impact and reach (Youth Wiki, 2024)</p>

**Monitoring  
and  
evaluation**

The Action Plan includes monitoring provisions, with annual reviews by the Ministry of Tourism and Youth (MoTY) to track progress on youth policies (Jokić, 2024; Youth Wiki, 2024).

NAPOR has developed quality assurance guidelines and an Ethical Code for youth work, setting standards across eight skills and values relevant to youth work. (Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024)

Monitoring practices lack consistency at municipal levels. Strengthened evaluation frameworks would ensure that policies meet quality standards and adjust to emerging youth needs. (Jokić, 2024).

In addition monitoring and evaluation does not cover the youth work practise qualitatively. Establishing standardised quality assurance frameworks would improve youth work outcomes and enable data-driven refinements.



# Comparative analysis - overall purpose in the project and specific objectives

This policy analysis within the context of the YWWB project serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it aims to evaluate the alignment of youth work policy frameworks in the Western Balkan region with those established in the EU. Secondly, it seeks to identify areas where these frameworks can be further harmonised and strengthened to support the development of quality youth work in the region. By examining the complementarities and divergences between the EU and WB approaches, the analysis will provide evidence-based insights that contribute to the project's objectives, particularly in fostering the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Work Agenda across the Western Balkans.

In addressing specific objectives such as the acknowledgement of the multilayer impact of youth work and the creation of favourable conditions for its standardisation, the comparative analysis will explore how EU and WB policies support or hinder these goals. For instance, while the EU's youth policies emphasise inclusivity, active citizenship, and social cohesion, the Western Balkans must adapt these principles to their unique socio-political contexts, characterised by post-socialist transitions and ongoing EU integration efforts. The analysis will assess the extent to which WB countries have adopted EU policy frameworks, and where gaps exist, offering recommendations for policy adjustments that better align with EU standards while addressing the region's distinct challenges.

Furthermore, in the context of networking and community-building within youth work, the comparative analysis will examine how the European Union's structured approaches to youth work can inform the development of a community of practice in the Western Balkans region. The analysis will elucidate exemplary practices from

the European Union that could be adapted to the Western Balkans context, fostering a more cohesive and integrated approach to youth work across the region. This will not only support the YWWB project's objective of enhancing the recognition and impact of youth work in the Western Balkans but also ensure that the region's youth policies contribute to broader European objectives of social inclusion and economic development. Through this comparative analysis, the project will ultimately facilitate a more coherent and effective youth work strategy that is both locally relevant and aligned with European standards.

## Applying comparative policy analysis (CPA) method - comparing cases between the EU and WB region

Applying the Comparative Policy Analysis (CPA) method entails a systematic approach to comprehending and evaluating the differences and similarities in policy frameworks between the European Union and the Western Balkan region. This method is particularly efficacious in the context of the YWWB project, where the objective is to enhance the quality and recognition of youth work across the WB region by aligning it with EU standards. CPA enables policymakers and researchers to assess the effectiveness of existing policies, identify gaps, and recommend improvements that are sensitive to the specific socio-political contexts of each region.

The CPA method comprises several key steps. Initially, it commences with *the selection of comparable cases*, which, in this context, are the EU and WB regions. These cases are selected due to their varying stages of development in youth work policy and their differing socio-economic conditions. The EU serves as a benchmark with well-established frameworks such as the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Work Agenda, while the WB region represents a transitional context where these frameworks are being adapted

and implemented.

Subsequently, the CPA method necessitates *a detailed examination of policy frameworks* in both regions. This involves reviewing relevant documents, legislation, and strategic plans to understand how youth work is conceptualised, implemented, and evaluated. In the EU, youth work is supported by an extensive and well-established policy framework that emphasises inclusivity, empowerment, and cross-sectoral collaboration. These frameworks have been developed and refined over time, reflecting the EU's commitment to fostering youth participation across its member states, although such progress is not uniformly distributed among its members. Similarly, the Western Balkan region has made significant progress in aligning its youth policies, and the region is still in the process of ensuring application of such aligned standardisation.

Another critical aspect of CPA is *the analysis of policy implementation*. This step involves evaluating how policies are put into practice, considering factors such as resource allocation, institutional capacity, and stakeholder involvement. In the WB region, challenges such as limited resources, political instability, and varying levels of institutional development can impede the effective implementation of youth work policies. CPA facilitates an examination of these challenges, comparing them with the EU, where implementation practices are more standardised and supported by different institutional frameworks. This analysis aims to elucidate insights into the necessary adjustments that WB countries might need to make to ensure successful policy implementation.

Moreover, CPA incorporates *the assessment of policy outcomes*. This involves measuring the impact of youth work policies on the target population, specifically young people. The EU

has established mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of its youth policies, ensuring that they contribute to social cohesion, economic development, and political engagement. In the WB region, however, such mechanisms vary, potentially resulting in a gap in understanding the full impact of youth work policies. CPA serves to bridge this gap by applying EU standard evaluation techniques to the WB context, enabling a more accurate assessment of policy effectiveness and areas for improvement.

The CPA method culminates in the formulation of policy recommendations. Based on the comparative analysis, it proposes specific actions that Western Balkan countries can implement to align more closely with EU standards, while also considering the unique challenges and opportunities in the region. These recommendations are integral to the YWWB project, as they provide a strategic framework for enhancing youth work in the WB region, ensuring that it not only meets European standards but also addresses the specific needs of young people in the WB.

In conclusion, this policy analysis method offers a systematic approach with insights into the development and implementation of youth work policies in both the EU and WB regions. By identifying similarities, differences, and areas for improvement, CPA provides a robust foundation for policy recommendations that can enhance the quality and recognition of youth work in the Western Balkans, ultimately contributing to the region's social and economic development.





# Results of comparative policy analysis

## Thematic analysis:

### Theme 1: Legislative foundations inspired by the European values

All countries have established some form of youth policy legislation, such as Albania's Law on Youth, Kosovo's Law on Youth Empowerment, and Montenegro's Law on Youth and others. These laws provide general frameworks for youth rights and participation but often lack specificity regarding youth work as a profession. Additionally, implementation at the local level remains inconsistent, as legal mandates are rarely paired with enforcement mechanisms, making it difficult for municipalities to execute policies effectively.

#### Subtheme 1.1. Legislative foundations through youth laws

Youth policy laws across the Western Balkans share a common foundation inspired by EU frameworks, though their definitions and implementation vary by country. Albania's 2019 Law on Youth establishes councils for youth engagement but lacks a clear definition of "youth worker," limiting professional recognition (Muço, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex, decentralised system includes separate laws in its entities, with inconsistent recognition for youth work across regions (Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Kosovo's 2009 law addresses youth empowerment but fails to formalise youth work as a profession, leaving the sector without a recognised career path (Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Montenegro's 2019 law defines youth work in non-formal terms, and amendments are proposed to establish more consistent standards (Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2023). North Macedonia's Law on Youth Participation mandates local councils and recognises "youth worker" roles, but delays and limited resources impede its full implementation (Kulakov, 2024). Serbia has made progress by formally recognising youth work as a profession, yet lacks comprehensive standards and continues to pursue legislative amendments for clearer guidelines (Jokić, 2024).

#### Subtheme 1.2. Incomplete devaluation of policies to local levels

Despite ambitious national frameworks for youth policy, implementation at local levels across the Western Balkans remains uneven and under-resourced. Albania's municipalities struggle to fund youth initiatives and often lack youth centres, especially

in rural areas, limiting outreach to marginalised groups (Muço, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina's decentralised structure leads to wide disparities, with only some municipalities providing adequate youth engagement infrastructure (Beharic, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). In Kosovo, laws mandate youth centres, but adherence is inconsistent, leaving vulnerable youth underserved in rural regions (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024). Montenegro also faces challenges with local support for youth work due to political instability, and rural municipalities are especially underserved (Mićanović, 2024; Hadžibegović et al., 2023). North Macedonia mandates local councils and youth offices, but many remain inactive due to resource shortages, particularly affecting disadvantaged youth in rural areas (Kulakov, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Serbia, lacking a mandate for local youth policy implementation, sees rural areas with few resources struggling to sustain youth programs, highlighting the need for stronger local support, however, Serbia has appropriated local youth offices structure, which covers 70% of municipalities, which gives avenues to youth workers to perform (Jokić, 2024; Youth Wiki, 2024b; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024).

### **Subtheme 1.3. Issues at clarity on youth work**

Despite having foundational laws on youth work across the Western Balkans, these frameworks generally lack the clarity needed to define youth work as a distinct professional field with specific standards and competencies. Albania's law omits a formal definition of "youth worker," blurring the line between youth work and general youth services, which complicates targeted funding (Muço, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, differing regional definitions lead to inconsistent approaches, while FBiH recognises "youth workers" in the Classification of Professions, though without defined competencies (Beharic, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Kosovo and Montenegro mention youth work in

their policies but lack competency frameworks or clearly allocated budgets, often bundling youth work funds with broader youth services, limiting professional development (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024; Mićanović, 2024). North Macedonia and Serbia have recognised youth work but still grapple with vague job classifications, unclear budgets, and pending legal updates to specify roles and standards, which collectively hinder the field's growth and impact (Kulakov, 2024; Jokić, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024).

## **Theme 2: Issues at reimbursing youth work**

Youth work sectors across the region heavily rely on international funding, with significant contributions from the UNDP, EU, RYCO, and other international or regional donors. This reliance affects the sustainability of youth initiatives, as domestic funding is limited, project-based, and lacks continuity. Over-reliance on foreign grants often marginalises smaller, local NGOs unable to meet complex grant application requirements, further centralising youth initiatives in urban areas

### **Subtheme 2.1. Insufficient funding of youth workers**

Across the Western Balkans, legal frameworks exist for youth work, yet a lack of mandated local funding and budget clarity leaves youth work financially precarious, often reliant on short-term, project-based funds. In Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, municipalities lack specific budget lines for youth work, frequently directing funds toward general youth services, which hampers the professionalisation and stability of youth work roles (Muço, 2024; Bokshi and Nuka, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Montenegro's Youth Strategy proposes a financing system, but without formal mandates, support is inconsistent, especially in rural areas (Mićanović, 2024). North Macedonia's law sets minimum funding requirements but lacks enforcement,

leading to funds often being allocated broadly rather than directly to youth work (Kulakov, 2024). Serbia has no local funding obligation, resulting in substantial disparities and short-term reliance on international grants, which undermine sustainable youth work (Jokić, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024).

### **Subtheme 2.2. Overdependence on international funding.**

Youth work in each country in the Western Balkans relies significantly on international funding, primarily from the EU and NGOs, creating dependency issues that limit local ownership and sustainability. In Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, donor priorities and short-term funding cycles often shape youth programmes, leaving organisations vulnerable when funding ends and hindering the creation of long-term, locally-driven initiatives (Muço, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Montenegro and North Macedonia face similar challenges; while international funds support essential programmes, they lack the stability needed for sustainable youth services, forcing organisations to align with foreign agendas (Mićanović, 2024; Kulakov, 2024). Serbia's limited national funding increases reliance on external grants, restricting youth work from addressing specific community needs (Jokić, 2024).

## **Theme 3: Limited professional development pathways**

Formalised training and certification for youth workers are limited in all countries. While Albania and North Macedonia have made strides in incorporating competency-based frameworks for youth skills development, structured professional pathways for youth workers are rare. Most training is facilitated by NGOs, and qualifications are not integrated into National Qualification Frameworks, impacting recognition of youth work as a profession.

### **Subtheme 3.1. Slow steps in professionalisation**

Across the Western Balkans, youth work professionalisation is progressing slowly, hindered by a lack of structured pathways, national standards, and formal qualifications frameworks. Albania and Kosovo lack formal recognition and accredited pathways, with youth work often indistinct from general youth services, limiting professional growth (Muço, 2024; Bokshi and Nuka, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina faces similar challenges due to fragmented governance, with training provided mainly by NGOs, yet inconsistently recognised across regions (Beharic, 2024). Montenegro and Serbia have taken initial steps; Montenegro's Youth Strategy outlines future educational programmes, while Serbia's NAPOR offers multi-level certifications, though these are not yet part of the National Qualification Framework, limiting recognition (Mićanović, 2024; Klačna and Stojanovic, 2024). North Macedonia has introduced a master's programme, but access remains limited to urban areas, highlighting regional disparities in professional support (Kulakov, 2024).

### **Subtheme 3.2. Lack of validation of skills or parity on experience**

Non-formal education and training are crucial for youth workers, who must stay current with evolving youth trends. However, policies or laws frequently fail to recognise the importance of validating and differentiating youth workers' skills across experience tiers, leaving experienced practitioners without fair validation for competencies gained through years of service. In Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, no formal systems acknowledge skills developed through non-formal learning or extensive experience, which restricts professional growth and lowers the perceived value of seasoned youth workers in the sector (Muço, 2024; Bokshi and Nuka, 2024; Mićanović, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina faces similar issues, where the decentralised

structure and reliance on NGO-led training create inconsistencies in recognising and standardising experience, limiting career advancement for those who have built skills informally over years (Beharic, 2024). North Macedonia's steps toward professionalisation, such as its master's programme, primarily benefit urban youth workers, while experienced practitioners in rural areas often lack access to formal validation (Kulakov, 2024). In Serbia, although NAPOR's Passport of Competences documents non-formal skills, its exclusion from the National Qualifications Framework limits recognition, preventing experienced youth workers from achieving professional parity with formally qualified individuals (Klašna and Stojanovic, 2024). Across the region, the absence of a structured, fair system to differentiate youth workers by experience level stifles professionalisation and undermines the long-term credibility of youth work as a career.

#### **Theme 4: Inconsistent validation of non-formal education**

While non-formal education is recognised in youth policies throughout the Western Balkans, the systems to validate these competencies remain underdeveloped. In Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, although non-formal education is supported through various initiatives, the lack of a structured validation process limits young people's ability to leverage these skills within formal employment or academic pathways. Bosnia and Herzegovina faces similar challenges, as fragmented governance results in inconsistent validation across its entities, impacting young people's ability to transfer non-formal competencies into recognised qualifications. North Macedonia has initiated efforts through the Macedonian Qualifications Framework, but these advancements remain unevenly applied, particularly for rural youth, and non-formal achievements are only partially acknowledged. Serbia's Passport of Competences and the YouthPass provide some

validation, yet without national integration, these tools fail to offer formal recognition that could enhance young people's employability. Across the region, this gap underscores the need for unified state-backed validation frameworks to ensure that non-formal education outcomes are broadly recognised and valued in both educational and employment settings, thereby maximising the impact of non-formal learning initiatives on young people's development (Muço, 2024; Beharic, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopoulos, 2024; Bokshi and Nuka, 2024; Mićanović, 2024; Kulakov, 2024; Klašna and Stojanovic, 2024).

#### **Theme 5: Research and monitoring limitations**

All countries highlight the importance of evidence-based policymaking, but systematic data collection and monitoring are inconsistent. National data on youth needs and program outcomes is sporadic, reducing opportunities for targeted youth policy adjustments. The absence of a standardised framework for monitoring and evaluation across municipalities also weakens accountability and transparency.

##### **Subtheme 5.1: Emphasised importance but delays in implementation of youth research**

In the Western Balkans, youth policies increasingly emphasise the need for data-driven decision-making, yet implementation remains inconsistent and fragmented across countries. In Albania, data collection is recognised as critical, though practical application is hampered by inconsistent efforts from the National Youth Agency, affecting targeted youth programming (Muço, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina's decentralised governance complicates unified data collection, with entities like the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, and Brčko District conducting separate, unsynchronised efforts, often supported by international organi-

sations (Beharic, 2024; Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Kosovo and Montenegro both recognise the value of data collection within youth policies, yet both face gaps in consistent data-gathering frameworks, relying on ad hoc, often externally-supported initiatives (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024; Mićanović, 2024). North Macedonia and Serbia show a relatively advanced approach, with national surveys and efforts by bodies such as NAPOR (in Serbia) and the Agency for Youth and Sports (in North Macedonia) laying groundwork for structured data collection. However, both countries still lack continuous, standardised systems, impeding consistent, evidence-based policy development (Kulakov, 2024; Jokić, 2024; Youth Wiki, 2024ba).

### **Subtheme 5.2: Lack of systemised frameworks for data collection**

Across the region, a lack of systemised, unified data frameworks remains a significant barrier to effective youth policy. Albania's National Youth Agency, while tasked with data collection, operates without a continuous, centralised system, resulting in fragmented insights that fail to comprehensively inform youth policy (Muço, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina's decentralisation further complicates data collection, as independent data collection efforts lack coordination across entities (Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia similarly rely on sporadic data collection, often externally driven, with no dedicated national frameworks, limiting insights into youth needs. Serbia, though relatively more organised, still experiences inconsistencies at the municipal level, particularly in NEET profiling, underlining the necessity of a comprehensive, national data framework for all countries in the region (Jokić, 2024; Youth Wiki, 2024b).

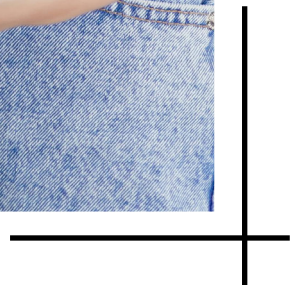
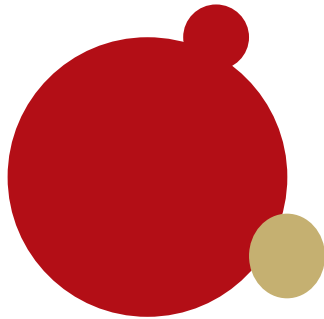
### **Subtheme 5.3: Efforts in quality standards and ethical codes of youth work**

Efforts to establish quality standards and ethical guidelines for youth work vary significantly across

the Western Balkans. Albania's youth strategy mentions broad youth engagement goals but lacks formal quality assurance for youth work practices (Muço, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina shows some progress, as NGOs like PRONI have developed localised standards, yet a unified national framework is absent (Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). In Kosovo and Montenegro, there are no established ethical or quality standards, leading to inconsistency in youth program quality (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024; Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2023). North Macedonia's Rulebook for Quality Standards represents a step forward but focuses on infrastructure rather than comprehensive standards or ethical codes, while Serbia's NAPOR-developed Ethical Code, though influential, lacks full integration into a national framework, demonstrating the region's fragmented approach (Youth Wiki, 2024ba).

### **Subtheme 5.4: Lack of impact assessment of youth work practice**

Impact assessment of youth work is limited across the region, preventing a clear understanding of its long-term effects. In Albania, monitoring efforts are minimal, and evaluation frameworks are largely absent, reducing the ability to refine youth programs (Muço, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina's fragmented assessment efforts by NGOs cannot measure youth work outcomes nationally (Potočnik & Drosopulos, 2024). Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have limited methodologies to gauge impact, while in Serbia, despite NAPOR's preliminary metrics, assessments remain NGO-driven and inconsistent. This lack of structured evaluation impedes data-driven improvements and accountability within youth services across the Western Balkans, highlighting a shared gap in robust impact assessment mechanisms (Bokshi and Nuka, 2024; Youth Wiki, 2024ba).



## Youth work recognition

The concept of **recognition** in youth work encompasses a multi-dimensional approach to validating, supporting, and embedding youth work within broader social, economic, and institutional frameworks.

The first dimension, **Institutional Recognition**, emphasises the importance of integrating youth work across state, regional, and local institutions. This involves the formalisation and professionalisation of youth work, including the establishment of clear standards and ethical guidelines. Institutional recognition legitimises youth work as a professional field and highlights its relevance within governmental structures, ensuring that youth workers have the recognition and framework needed to operate effectively within their communities. This also includes a political maturity from the decision makers to understand the concept of youth work, its needs and opportunities and their willingness to support the sphere.

**Operational Recognition** focuses on embedding youth work into concrete policy, planning, and financial structures in order to enable the youth workers to function. This includes for example creating pathways for youth workers to obtain essential qualifications through education and training, and upholding ethical standards and codes. This dimension highlights the necessity of securing budget lines and action plans that support youth work. On the other hand it may also mean supporting youth worker associations and fostering a sustainable revenue-generating community structure, ensuring that youth work is both practically supported and sustained over time. By mandating youth work for various youth populations, whether targeted or general, operational recognition cements youth work as a staple in social services.

Finally, **Socio-Cultural Recognition** pertains to fostering societal understanding and appreciation of youth work. This dimension advocates for widespread awareness of the role of youth work, encouraging the validation of competencies gained through youth work experiences. It seeks commitment from all stakeholders—including state entities, municipalities, donors, private sector partners, parents, and young people—to financially and socially support youth work, reinforcing its cultural value and importance in society. At the end of the day, this means that if you are a youth worker, your parents are not confused about what exactly you do.

## Key findings

**L**egislative Foundations and Institutional Recognition: Youth work is inconsistently recognized as a profession across the region, with varying levels of formal support and legislative definition in each country. Although some countries, like Serbia and North Macedonia, have national recognition that include specific provisions for youth work, local-level implementation remains inconsistent. Standardisation and clear definitions across the Western Balkans are necessary for effective policy transfer and implementation.

**Funding and Operational Sustainability:** Most youth work initiatives in the Western Balkans depend heavily on project-based funding from international donors, creating vulnerabilities in long-term program sustainability. Local funding mandates are limited, especially in rural areas, which exacerbates disparities in youth work service provision.

**Professional Development Pathways:** Professionalization of youth work is limited by the lack of formalised, competency-based training pathways and recognized qualifications. Only a few urban centres currently offer structured training for youth workers, with limited access for those in rural regions.

**Validation of Non-Formal Education:** While non-formal education is recognized in national policies, a unified validation system for these competencies is largely absent, restricting the transferability of skills acquired in non-formal settings to the formal employment sector.

**Monitoring, Evaluation, and Data Collection:** Monitoring practices are inconsistent, and data collection on youth work outcomes is sporadic, limiting evidence-based policy adjustments and resource allocation.

## Implications for policy-makers

**T**hese findings suggest several critical implications for policymakers. A first priority is strengthening legislative foundations by refining and clarifying existing laws to formally recognize youth work as a profession with well-defined standards and roles. Such legal adjustments would improve the standing of youth work and ensure structured development opportunities, while extending legislative commitments to the local level could address the inconsistencies in implementation.

To address funding vulnerabilities, national governments should create mandates requiring municipalities to allocate stable budgets for youth work. This financial commitment would mitigate the sector's dependency on international funding and foster a stable environment for youth programs. Consistent, local-level funding is especially vital for expanding youth services in underserved rural regions, helping to ensure equal access to support across urban and remote areas.

The professional development of youth workers should be prioritised through the integration of structured training programmes and certification pathways within formal education systems. Furthermore, these pathways should be incorporated into national qualification frameworks to ensure that youth work is recognised as a formal and accredited profession, enhancing the skills and competencies required for effective practice. Formalising these pathways would attract and retain talent within the youth work sector, bolstering the quality and sustainability of youth programs. Recognizing youth work as a legitimate and valued profession with established qualifications would improve sector stability and enhance service



quality across the region.

Developing a cohesive system for validating non-formal education would bridge the gap between non-formal learning experiences and formal employment. Policymakers should establish mechanisms that credibly certify skills gained through non-formal youth work programs, enhancing the employability of young people and youth workers by providing transferable, recognized certifications.

Lastly, a systematic data collection and monitoring framework should be implemented at both national and local levels, enabling regular impact assessments of youth programs. Comprehensive frameworks would make youth work policies more responsive to emerging needs and trends, reinforcing the sector's accountability and effectiveness. Moreover, quality standards and ethical codes for youth work practices would instil greater accountability, enabling evidence-based policy adjustments and driving improvements in service provision.

# Recommendations

## 1. Strengthen Legislative Foundations

Advocate for clear, cohesive legislation across the Western Balkans that formally recognizes youth work as a professional field. Include standardised definitions, roles, and responsibilities for youth workers to improve legitimacy, professional recognition, and alignment with European standards. Integrate youth work into state, regional, and local institutions, and foster political awareness about its impact. Encourage adoption of ethical standards, competency-based frameworks, and professional codes to strengthen the sector's credibility and consistency.

## 2. Increase Local-Level Implementation and Mandates

Establish mandates at municipal levels for implementing youth policies and creating budget lines dedicated to youth work. Ensure that local governments can effectively support youth councils and organisations with reliable funding.

## 3. Secure Sustainable and Transparent Funding Models

Develop co-financing mechanisms that combine national, municipal, and international resources to reduce dependency on short-term, donor-based funding. Prioritise stable, transparent funding models that support long-term sustainability of youth programs across urban and rural regions.

## 4. Establish Formal Training and Certification Pathways

Implement nationally recognised training and certification frameworks for youth workers that provide clear professional development pathways, with access to remote or hybrid training options for broader geographic coverage.

### **5. Develop a Unified Validation System for Non-Formal Education**

Create a cohesive, cross-regional system for validating skills acquired through non-formal education and youth work. Ensure these certifications are recognized within the formal employment sector to enhance the employability of youth workers and participants.

### **6. Promote Socio-Cultural Recognition**

Raise awareness among key stakeholders, including governments, private sector partners, parents, and young people, about the value of youth work. Encourage broad support and engagement, ensuring youth work is seen as an essential part of the community's social fabric.

### **7. Enhance Data Collection and Monitoring Frameworks**

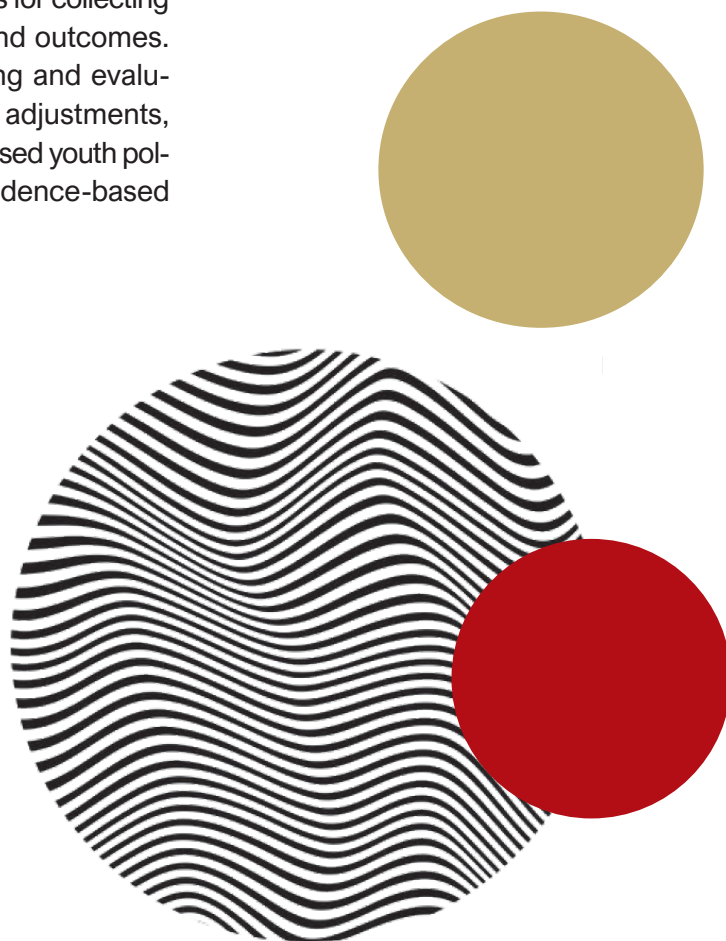
Implement systematic frameworks for collecting data on youth work practices and outcomes. Develop standardised monitoring and evaluation practices to inform policy adjustments, enabling responsive, evidence-based youth policies. Support deliberation of evidence-based youth work priorities.

### **8. Support Cross-Sectoral Cooperation and Partnerships**

Encourage collaboration between state bodies, civil society, private sector partners, and international organisations. Support the development of cross-sectoral initiatives that align youth work with broader policy goals in education, employment, and social welfare.

### **9. Empower Practitioners in Policymaking**

Support the networks, associations and unions of youth workers, increase their capacities and contributions to the national youth field priorities.



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