

JOINT DECLARATION ON YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND POLICY COMMITMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Adopted at the High-Level
Regional Conference:
"Together We Lead: Youth Are the
Changing Power of the Balkans"
February 28, 2025
Skopje, North Macedonia

PREAMBLE

We, the youth of the Western Balkans, representing diverse backgrounds and perspectives from North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo, come together to assert our shared vision for a future where young people are empowered, engaged, and active participants in democratic processes and social development.

Recognizing the challenges we face, including limited political participation, education and employment gaps, poor access to mental health and SRH services, social exclusion, and environmental threats, we are united in our demand for meaningful and structured engagement in shaping the future of our region.

Guided by consultations with our peers and key stakeholders, and informed by research and experiences across our countries, we issue this Joint Declaration as a clear and urgent call to action.

OUR VISION

We envision a Western Balkans where youth are empowered as equal partners in decision-making, have access to quality education and employment opportunities, enjoy comprehensive health services, participate fully in cultural life, and lead climate action for a sustainable future.

KEY COMMITMENTS AND DEMANDS

I. Systematic Youth Involvement in Decision-Making

We DEMAND well-resourced youth councils at national, local, and regional levels with clear, apolitical mandates to represent youth voices and obligatory usage of digital tools to democratize policymaking, overcome geographic barriers, and empower young citizens to engage.

- Governments must institutionalize meaningful youth consultations and establish transparent feedback mechanisms to ensure youth inputs shape policies. A digital platform must be created to empower youth to propose, discuss, and prioritize policy initiatives and community projects.
- Youth councils should receive consistent, meaningful funding and capacity-building support to develop their leadership and advocacy skills.
- Education programs on activism and democratic participation must be integrated into school curricula to foster informed and engaged youth.

II. Education & Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)

We DEMAND inclusive, high-quality education that equips youth with the knowledge and skills needed for active participation in society and the labor market. Education must be modern, accessible, and aligned with global standards to foster critical thinking, civic engagement, and gender equality.

- Integrate Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) into formal curricula to ensure young people have scientifically accurate, age-appropriate, and rights-based knowledge on relationships, consent, gender equality, and reproductive health.
- Expand digital learning platforms and innovative teaching methods to bridge educational gaps, especially in rural and marginalized communities.
- Strengthen collaboration between educational institutions, civil society, and policymakers to ensure education policies reflect the needs of youth.
- Guarantee youth participation in education reforms through student councils and structured consultations.

III. Strategic Focus on Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Employment

We URGE governments and educational institutions to bridge the gap between education and the labor market.

- The learning outcome standards of VET programs must be aligned across all Western Balkan countries to ensure compatibility with market demands, with programs developed in partnership with private sector stakeholders.
- Innovation hubs, mentorship programs, and funding opportunities should be made accessible to young entrepreneurs.
- Employment initiatives, such as Youth Guarantee programs, must be expanded to address the high rates of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth.

IV. Investments in Comprehensive and Youth-Friendly Health Services

We DEMAND open access to Mental Health and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services, with youth-led service design.

- Mental health programs should be integrated into schools and community centers, offering counseling and support.
- Youth must be directly involved in the design and evaluation of mental health and SRHR services to ensure they are inclusive and tailored to our needs.
- Awareness campaigns should be launched to destigmatize mental health and promote formal and informal education and information on SRHR.

V. Inclusive and Decentralized Cultural Initiatives

We CALL FOR the development of cultural programs that actively engage young people and promote the inclusion of marginalized youth.

- Governments and cultural institutions must empower and support youth to lead and participate in creative and cultural events.
- Governments must provide free and accessible public spaces on regional, national, and local levels for development of young artists and implementation of mutual cultural initiatives.
- Efforts must be made to ensure equitable access to cultural programs, especially for rural and marginalized communities.

VI. Environmental Engagement and Climate Action

We DEMAND urgent and meaningful youth involvement in environmental advocacy and climate action.

- Youth-led environmental councils should be established to represent our voices in policy discussions.
- Hands-on opportunities for environmental projects and advocacy must be provided through collaborations with NGOs and educational institutions.
- Digital platforms should be leveraged to raise awareness and educate youth on environmental issues.

FINAL APPEAL

We DEMAND that the governments of Western Balkan countries allocate budgets for youth initiatives, programs and policies implementation, and we URGE the effective implementation of youth-focused programs and policies in all the sectors emphasized in this Declaration.

We also CALL FOR enhanced cross-border cooperation and regional youth engagement through structured forums, exchange programs, and capacity-building workshops that empower young people to actively participate in shaping the future of the Western Balkans.