

Outcome of the discussions on thematic areas

Intro

On the sidelines of the 2026 Western Balkans Summit in Montenegro, the Youth Policy Dialogue brought together 20 young people from the Western Balkans (WB6) and the wider European neighbourhood. Working across three thematic areas (the EU as a reliable geopolitical partner, Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), and Youth, Peace and Reconciliation), we developed shared recommendations on how the EU and national governments can empower young people to engage and act in their home countries. This document sets out concrete recommendations to the EEAS and other EU institutions that we consider critical to strengthening youth engagement and the EU's credibility across the Western Balkans.

The EU as a reliable geopolitical partner in the context of the EU-Western Balkans Partnership

The topics discussed

In our discussions, we focused on the EU's partnership with the Western Balkan countries (WB6), and its intersection with the prospect of EU Enlargement. We made this connection because we believe that **Enlargement is the result of a close partnership.**

We see close cooperation between the EU and Western Balkan countries, especially when it leads to EU Enlargement, as beneficial for both the EU and the WB6. A larger and more diverse EU can strengthen its credibility and relevance on the world stage. The willingness of neighbouring countries to join also shows that European cooperation and values continue to have international appeal. Furthermore, Enlargement can contribute to peace and stability in the region, promote shared values, and strengthen cooperation on common challenges, standing as an expression of the EU's capacity to advance democracy, the rule of law, human rights, media freedom, transparency, and sustainable development, while enabling citizens to exercise their right to development through greater freedom of movement, access to education and employment, and deeper economic and social integration.

At the same time, we identified multiple threats to this cooperation:

- **Polarisation within and between countries**, which can lead candidate countries to decrease support for EU accession and lead EU Member States to limit support for EU Enlargement.
- **Exclusivistic understandings of national identity,** when presented in opposition to European cooperation, can reinforce bilateral tensions and competing national interests, creating obstacles to regional cooperation and European integration.

- **The EU can feel distant or even be perceived as a threat** if people do not feel connected to, or seen by, European institutions. This is especially the case when it is not clear to them how EU cooperation benefits their lives.
- **Authoritarianism, corruption, and a lack of institutional transparency** in candidate countries are potentially undermining progress towards EU accession and influencing public opinion on EU Enlargement in Member States.

Our action proposals

Proposal 1: The EU should lead with its values

We propose that EU values should be at the centre of EU foreign policy. It is at times paradoxical that the EU promotes the rule of law while cooperating with governments in candidate countries where credible evidence points to developments that undermine these values. A weak or delayed response can undermine trust in the accession process and support for Enlargement. At the same time, the EU has an opportunity to act as a global beacon of democracy. Concretely, this means:

- Taking a stronger stance against authoritarian regimes, democratic backsliding and threats to European values in candidate countries. Ensuring EU responses are timely and evidence-based, drawing on the European Commission's Enlargement Packages and internationally recognised assessments.
- Strengthening cooperation between the EEAS and anti-corruption institutions, watchdog organisations, democracy defenders, and civil society in candidate countries, through longer-term, locally led support.
- Avoiding double standards that undermine the EU's credibility and ensuring that European values consistently guide the EU's foreign policy and engagement with candidate countries. The EU should prioritise a pre-emptive media presence and strong outreach to the general public directly, instead of leaving the EU positions to be interpreted, and this should include taking clear stances in conflicts and making decisions on the treatment of refugees.

Proposal 2: Make EU integration gradual, tangible, and visible

Our second proposal focuses on the process of EU accession for Western Balkan countries. We propose making the accession process more tangible for both governments and citizens in candidate countries. Reform progress should lead to visible and gradual benefits, while people, particularly young people, should be able to see and shape what closer European integration means in practice.

- Link progress on reforms to gradual access to EU programmes, initiatives, and elements of the Single Market, building on existing forms of gradual integration such as Erasmus+, DiscoverEU, Horizon Europe, visa liberalisation, and regional roaming.
- A WB6 Youth Solutions Fund can be founded as a fund for youth-led solutions to shared European challenges. Successful solutions could then be piloted or scaled even in EU Member States.
- Make the benefits of European integration more visible to citizens, particularly young people, by involving them in communicating EU-supported reforms, opportunities, and tangible improvements in their communities.

What young people can do:

- To make the benefits of European integration more visible to youth, there are already many networks and youth organisations the EU can build on, for instance, the Young European Ambassadors in the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans, young content creators, and the EEAS's OurVoiceOurFuture community. These networks should get the means and opportunity to spread a simple and accessible narrative to peers to increase support and understanding for the EU Enlargement process in their region.
- Furthermore, collaboration with non-EU-specific youth organisations, such as national youth councils, can spread the pro-EU message to audiences it has not yet reached.
- To involve young people in shaping the Enlargement process, the EU can invite young people from the Western Balkans to youth participatory mechanisms within the EU, such as the EU Youth Dialogue, the President's Youth Advisory Board, and the Youth Policy Dialogues.

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Working Group

The topic discussed

A strong and resilient media and information ecosystem is critical to the functioning of democracies. Where Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) interferes with public discourse, it threatens not only public trust in government and institutions, but also, by extension, the functioning of those institutions themselves.

We find this topic especially important since we are a working group formed predominantly by participants from the Western Balkan 6 countries, where FIMI risks are having a particularly pronounced and detrimental impact. Many of us have seen firsthand the impact on democratic processes and commitment to the rule of law that foreign-origin disinformation can drive.

The impact of false information frequently falls disproportionately upon targeted minorities, rural communities, and vulnerable populations, in turn perpetuating systemic inequalities and risking human rights violations.

The invocation of ‘freedom of speech’ to defend FIMI can also pose a particular risk, given the way it can actively dismantle the shared factual reality upon which our societies are built. For youth, living in a FIMI-impacted media environment can be particularly dangerous, with divergent political realities and weakened trust in democratic institutions driving affective polarisation, undermining reconciliation and peace efforts, and disrupting institution-building.

During our discussions, we identified a range of challenges related to disinformation, media manipulation, and declining trust in institutions. While different perspectives were shared, there was broad agreement that strengthening education and supporting independent media are the most effective long-term solutions, in line with the idea of ‘pre-bunking’; that is, preparing people to recognise and critically assess mis- and disinformation before they encounter it. The strengthening of media, digital, and AI literacy can further contribute to building a resilient information culture and environment.

In composing our policy recommendations, we considered diverse approaches, including funding for fact-checkers, information services, peer-to-peer networks, and trusted community voices.

Our Action Proposals

Proposal 1: Investing in targeted education and media literacy training, with a focus on tailored support for teachers

We arrived at a broad consensus that the EU should foreground education as the foundation of efforts to counter FIMI. Critical thinking, media literacy, and source evaluation should be accessible in school curricula and from an early age. We agree that the delivery of this education would best be supported by:

- **Funding specialised teacher training for educators** across the Western Balkans, with a view to supporting teachers across school contexts to teach media literacy to their students and pre-bunk key information that might be susceptible to targeted FIMI, for instance, on the EU, Regional Tensions, and Climate Change.
- **Developing tailored curricula** for a specific national context on FIMI. At present, most teacher resources on FIMI are overly generalised and do not reflect the domains that modern FIMI tends to target. Curricula must also be adaptable, for instance updating to reflect the changing nature of Deepfakes and AI-generated content, and how to identify these. The Union is uniquely positioned to co-create some of these resources, ensuring its role in the region and its values are effectively reflected in the education young people across the Region receive.
- **Creating initiatives/projects that empower young people to lead in combating FIMI**. Young people are well positioned to share and disseminate their knowledge about FIMI to older generations, and should be equipped to do so through ambassador, peer education, and outreach funding. Existing initiatives that promote European values, democratic participation, and media literacy, including Erasmus+ and the Young European Ambassadors network, should continue to receive safeguarded support and funding.

Proposal 2: Strengthening support for independent media

While recognising significant existing support for independent, quality, and trustworthy media outlets, we were unanimous in our view that a diverse and high-quality media environment, supported by the EU, is essential for providing accurate information, countering disinformation, and holding institutions accountable. We therefore propose:

- **Increasing financial and technical support for independent media outlets** from the EU and through EU member state-sponsored support, to insulate media outlets and keep them independent from government and political influence or preferential treatment.
- **Developing programmes for capacity building in information verification for local and regional media providers**. Those in rural and minority communities are often particularly vulnerable to FIMI. Working with local and minority media providers to support their skill development and ability to recognise manipulated information is thus critical to limit the effects of FIMI at the grassroots level. By investing in education and independent media, the EU and its partners can build more informed, resilient, and engaged societies better equipped to resist foreign information manipulation and interference. Local EU Delegations and independent media should hold regular consultations and maintain consistent cooperation during the development, monitoring, and evaluation of these programmes.

What young people can do:

Young people are on the front line of dealing with FIMI, and can serve as a critical source of pre-bunking and resilience building in their communities. Through schemes like the Young European Ambassadors and targeted interventions in schools, young people can be empowered to be trusted voices in their communities. Where young people have received media literacy training, they are also uniquely placed to support wider communities in understanding how to access trusted sources and verify information; particularly when engaging with older generations, for whom FIMI and manipulated content may be more difficult to identify, young people should be supported to challenge misinformation.

The EU and governments can support youth to challenge and counter FIMI by providing media literacy workshops and training, and by empowering information and knowledge sharing between national contexts, through support networks and NGOs. Resilience to FIMI is built through recognising patterns of manipulation, and the EU should ensure that youth have the resources to develop their awareness.

Youth, Peace and Reconciliation

The topic discussed

We discussed the topic, taking into account the lack of youth awareness, funding, and implementation monitoring for existing projects on YPS-related projects/policies.

It matters because young people deal with the consequences in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Dealing with propaganda, political polarisation, post-Soviet sentiments in society, human rights issues, and democratic backsliding in conflict-affected communities creates various hreats regarding security and affects our capacity to become future leaders and contribute to positive changes on the national level. This reality is compounded by severe, urgent threats to fundamental freedoms and safety, such as:

- **The War and Human Rights Crisis in Ukraine:** Youth in Ukraine face a catastrophic human rights situation driven by Russia's ongoing war of aggression. This includes continuous, indiscriminate long-range missile and drone attacks on civilian infrastructure, arbitrary detentions, and the systematic suppression of Ukrainian identity. Forced displacement and the psychological trauma of conflict severely undermine the basic rights to education, health, and security for an entire generation.
- **Democratic Backsliding and Civil Rights Gaps in Georgia:** Young peacebuilders in Georgia operate under acute threats of democratic backsliding. The civil liberties landscape faces severe pressure due to ongoing crackdowns on political opposition, independent media, and civil society. Additionally, the human rights of vulnerable and displaced populations remain highly precarious, with limited access to essential social services.
- **Regional Threats:** Across the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, massive state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, intense political polarisation, and the physical vulnerabilities of conflict-affected frontline communities directly threaten youth safety and stifle our capacity to step into future leadership roles.

Our Action Proposals

Proposal 1: Streamline and strengthen the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at the EU and national level.

- Increase youth representation on the institutional level by launching a youth mentorship program.

- Select competitive youth, recruit volunteers from national institutions to mentor young leaders, sensitise mentors about the YPS agenda, and organise weekly meetups for selected youth and mentors.
- YPS-sensitised mentors/educators; 20+ young people involved in decision-making.

Proposal 2: Increase accessibility to funding for young people and strengthen existing regional youth networks.

- Continue and increase funding for the existing youth networks, such as Young European Ambassadors.
- Prioritise funding for YPS-related projects.
- Monitor the implementation of the youth participation strategies and YPS projects.
- In 2017, youth in Kosovo developed a Youth, Peace and Security Roadmap through consultations of over 800 young people, facilitated by youth trained on YPS. Its 50 recommendations were later integrated into the Kosovo Youth Strategy 2019–2024 and reviewed at annual Youth Assemblies. The EU should encourage WB6 partners to adopt a similar mechanism.

Proposal 3: Establish an EU-Level Implementation and Accountability Mechanism for YPS.

- Introduce annual reporting on YPS implementation across Member States.
- Develop national YPS implementation indicators to track progress effectively.
- Ensure youth-led monitoring and review processes.
- Maintain regular dialogue between governments and youth organisations.
- Link existing EU youth and peacebuilding funding directly to demonstrable implementation.

What's Next?

To counter the growing human rights violations and geopolitical vulnerabilities in our regions, we urge EU decision-makers to prioritise the following:

1. **Sustained Financial Investment:** Allocate flexible funding to youth-led peace, security, and reconciliation initiatives in conflict-affected regions.
2. **Georgia-Specific Support:** Given Georgia's fragile political climate and shrinking civic space, we urgently need tools to combat Russian propaganda and defend the rights of young political activists. This is vital to protect and empower the next generation of pro-European democratic leaders.
3. **Serbia-Specific Support:** With forthcoming elections in Serbia in a highly unstable and contested political environment, the EU and its partners must work to apply direct, sustained pressure to protect the right to peaceful assembly and independent civil society and ensure free and fair elections.

Conclusions

Over the course of the Youth Policy Dialogue, participants converged on a shared message: that young people in the Western Balkans and the wider neighbourhood want to be partners in shaping Europe's future. Across

the three thematic areas, our recommendations point to the same underlying needs of credibility, visibility, and sustained investment.

For **the EU to be a reliable geopolitical partner,** it must consistently lead with its values and make the benefits of integration gradual, tangible and visible in people's daily lives. Delayed responses and double standards erode trust in the accession process and in Enlargement itself.

On **FIMI**, resilience is built through education and independent media. Tailored media literacy training for teachers, support for local and minority outlets, and youth-led pre-bunking initiatives stand to offer long-term protection against manipulation, particularly in rural and minority communities.

On **Youth, Peace and Reconciliation**, existing commitments must be matched by accountability. Youth-led monitoring, annual reporting on YPS implementation, and funding tied to demonstrable results must be advanced in order to turn ambition into practice. This applies particularly where civic space is under pressure, as in Georgia and Serbia.

Across all three areas, established networks such as the Young European Ambassadors, OurVoiceOurFuture and national youth councils already serve as a useful foundation for developing initiatives. These networks need safeguarded, flexible funding and genuine access to decision-making mechanisms.

Young people stand ready to contribute as partners. We urge the EEAS, the Commission and other EU institutions to act on these recommendations, and to continue to engage in ever-closer dialogue with young people from across the Western Balkans.

Participants

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