

Youth brain drain from the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye



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Youth brain drain from the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye

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Executive summary

In the dynamic social and political landscapes of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia (the Western Balkan region), Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine (the Eastern Partnership countries) and Türkiye, a pervasive demographic phenomenon has been shaping the future of the people living in the three “geographies”¹ examined in this study. For decades, youth brain drain has been generating demographic imbalances, hindering social and economic development, and depleting these areas of their youth population – one of the most valuable resources of the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye. This study emerged in response to requests from policy makers and youth sector representatives from these countries and as an endeavour to shed light on the nuances of youth brain drain, with a specific focus on its repercussions for the youth sector, aiming to contribute valuable insights for policy initiatives in the youth sector in these regions.

As global connectivity intensifies and opportunities arise beyond state borders, an increasing number of talented young individuals from the studied geographies choose to pursue educational and professional opportunities abroad, mostly in European Union (EU) countries. The fact that some of the countries covered in this study are candidates for the EU and have a considerable emigrating youth population adds to the relevance and timing of this research. In this context, the emigration of young people often results in a massive loss of human capital, which can lead to long-term economic and social challenges.

* All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

1. In this study, the term “geographies” is used as an umbrella term for two regions, the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, and one country, Türkiye, covered by this research.

The phenomenon of youth brain drain is complex and multifaceted in its nature. Its effects are also profound for the youth sector, posing overall societal challenges beyond the individual decisions of those who depart. This study presents an overview of the causes of youth brain drain from the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye, and corresponding consequences pertaining the youth sectors of these geographies. As such, the study provides a background for discussing how youth migration affects the demographic, political and social prospects of the sending countries and the geographies covered in this analysis. In the face of challenges in the places where they live, many young people from the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye seek better opportunities abroad.

Theoretical aspects of youth brain drain encompass a wide array of factors, including the determinants and consequences of highly skilled emigration, the impacts on human capital formation, economic growth and the interplay of socio-economic development with the propensity to emigrate. Therefore, this research delves into the socio-economic and cultural repercussions on young people and the youth sector. Since the definition of “young people” varies in the legislation currently in force in the geographies covered by this research, the study applies a broader interpretation of this term, without limiting it to the age range of 15-29 years, as defined by the EU (Eurostat n.d.).

There are five chapters in this study. The first chapter presents the aim and methodological framework of the research. It also offers a comprehensive overview of the current situation in the three studied geographies. The second chapter offers additional context by presenting the causes of youth brain drain from a regional perspective, considering the influence of national and regional policies and institutions on this demographic challenge. The third chapter analyses the detrimental consequences of youth emigration with a special focus on the youth sector. A discussion of policy implications and youth sector interventions are examined in the fourth chapter. Finally, the fifth chapter provides a conclusion and ideas for further research into what potential solutions could transform youth brain drain into brain circulation.



1. Aim and methodology

1.1. Aim of the study

This study builds on available research and data focusing on the phenomenon of youth brain drain, its causes and consequences, as well as ways of counteracting its negative impact and harnessing young talent in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye.

The purpose of this research is to provide the youth sector in these geographies with a more nuanced understanding of the scope of the issue, its causes and effects, as well as current and possible policy solutions to better guide youth policy and youth work. As such, this study puts a particular focus on the youth sector in the context of growing youth depopulation from the geographies covered by this research. The study was developed in response to multiple requests from youth policy makers and youth sector representatives via regional capacity-building seminars.

In line with the aim of the study, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- ▶ What are the major causes and consequences of youth brain drain for the studied geographies in the political, demographic, economic, social and cultural spheres?
- ▶ What are the scope and effects of youth brain drain in the geographies covered by the research?
- ▶ What role could the youth sector play in preventing and mitigating the negative effects of youth brain drain in the studied geographies and what more can be done?

1.2. Methodological framework

The research is founded on an extensive desk review and analysis of existing relevant studies. With the youth sector's role underrepresented among the relevant studies, the researchers conducted interviews and a survey with experts and youth workers to collect their opinions. This dimension brings an added value to youth brain drain through the perspective of the youth sector, which has not been fully covered in literature and reports.

Due to the breadth and number of countries and regions covered, these surveys and interviews should not be regarded as representative, but should rather give access to further data and discussion topics related to the field and topic. In this regard, the 12 individual interviews were conducted to investigate further the regional context and national initiatives in the specific regions regarding youth brain drain. Therefore, besides looking at the issue of youth brain drain from a regional perspective, the interviewees also shed some light on the causes and effects of youth brain drain in the geographical context.

The profiles of the interviewed experts comprise a diverse range of professionals, including youth workers, consultants, representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), regional and international organisations, former government representatives, educational experts and researchers. These individuals have each accumulated over five years of professional experience in youth work in the studied geographies and have specialised in topics such as youth work, youth mobility, brain drain, emigration and immigration processes. To maintain confidentiality, the respondents' names are anonymised in this report.

The expert interviews were held around the following questions:

- ▶ What do you think about the scope and significance of youth brain drain in your country, region or geographical area?
- ▶ According to your observations, what are the main causes driving young people from the geographical areas where they live (including economic, political and governance, cultural and social, and educational dimensions)?
- ▶ What are the consequences of youth brain drain in the political, demographic, economic, social and cultural spheres?
- ▶ What are the lessons learned and are there any good practices that might be replicated in other places?
- ▶ In your view, what should be researched further regarding youth brain drain?
- ▶ Where do you see the role of the youth sector in preventing and mitigating the negative effects of youth brain drain, and promoting positive outcomes of youth mobility?
- ▶ How do you assess the effects of brain drain for the youth sector in the area you live and work in (work of youth NGOs, involvement of young people in the activities of youth organisations and networking with young people on the local level)?



2. Youth brain drain: from theory to practice

Taking into consideration 21st-century migration trends, the term “brain drain” emerged as one of the phrases dominating popular discourse on migration of highly skilled individuals (Gibson and McKenzie 2011). But this widely used academic term, also known as “human capital flight”, is not new. It was coined by the British Royal Society to refer to the emigration of scientists from the United Kingdom to the United States of America and Canada in the 1950s and early 1960s (Cervantes and Guellec 2002). More than 60 years later, the United Kingdom no longer suffers from emigration of its scientists, but the term still refers to a similar exodus of highly educated individuals from their home country. Since then, brain drain has been studied as a global phenomenon, affecting countries worldwide.

Today, brain drain is broadly defined as the international migration of highly educated people from developing to developed countries (Docquier 2014). More specifically, the term refers to the migration of engineers, physicians, scientists and other highly skilled professionals with university education from their home country to a host country, which is usually a developed country. Although a concern for rich countries, brain drain has been traditionally considered an obstacle for the development of countries undergoing social and economic transition.

While not the main focus of this study, another important concept worth mentioning in the context of youth migration patterns is brain circulation. Unlike brain drain, brain circulation is a demographic phenomenon that often benefits developing countries. It is defined as a concept where emigration further develops migrants’ human capital, which is then used either by a third country or by the home country upon the migrants’ return (Gaillard and Gaillard 1997). In this case, highly educated people continue to migrate with additionally acquired knowledge, skills and contacts gained in their host countries.

Youth brain drain, the emigration of young highly skilled individuals from their home country to host countries, has been a subject of extensive theoretical and empirical research. The theoretical concepts of brain drain have been studied from various perspectives, including economic growth, human capital and the impact on sending and receiving countries (Docquier and Rapoport 2012). The literature on brain drain encompasses diverse theoretical frameworks, such as the brain gain hypothesis, the impact on economic development, the role of institutions and the dynamics of brain circulation (Lodigiani, Marchiori and Shen 2015).

Youth mobility can have positive effects, including addressing youth unemployment, remittances, brain gain in case of return migration and diaspora engagement. Nevertheless, a continuous outflow of young, educated people can lead to brain drain, with negative consequences for the development, sustainability and demographic dynamics of the countries of origin.

There are several studies on youth brain drain, both at global and European levels. For instance, Stankovic et al. (2013) mention the acceleration effect of globalisation on brain drain. The work of Balaz, Williams and Kollár (2004) importantly differentiates between brain drain in cases of permanent migration and brain circulation in cases of temporary migration, using the example of mobility from central Europe following the EU enlargement to the east.

Current research also points to various mitigating factors and measures of the youth brain drain phenomenon aimed at weakening the push factors, as well as tapping into the resources resulting from youth mobility. Research on financial (International Organization for Migration 2023), cultural and social (Levitt 1998), as well as political and democratic (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2019) remittances demonstrates the ways migrants can contribute to the development of their sending countries both during and after their stay in the receiving country, and in the event of their return to the home country (Fomina 2021).

Meanwhile, governments of sending countries face the challenge of addressing the causes and symptoms of unfavourable migration patterns, as well as designing policies and instruments to mitigate the negative consequences of brain drain and harness the potential of young, economically active citizens living abroad. Given the number of programmes and policies already in place across the region to address these issues, it is important to not only review the causes, effects and dynamics of youth brain drain from the discussed geographies, but also to analyse the effectiveness and transferability of some policy solutions.

2.1. Western Balkans

The Western Balkan region, which consists of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, shares a common history while navigating the challenges of low birth rates, rapid population decline and mass emigration. During the 1990s, this region was marked by a series of devastating wars and intense conflicts, fuelled by ethnic tensions and national aspirations that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia. During this time, the wars in Croatia (1991-1995), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Kosovo* (1998-1999) were characterised

by mass displacements of populations, ethnic cleansing and genocide (United Nations International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals 2024). To this date, numerous politicians deny the war atrocities, honour the convicted war criminals and glorify the Srebrenica genocide that not only resulted in significant loss of life and destruction, but also exposed the limitations of international diplomacy and reconciliation, causing many young people to continue leaving the region even two decades after the wars. Youth brain drain is particularly noticeable in this region, given its high proportion of young people, especially in Kosovo*, which now has the youngest population in Europe (Kelmendi 2023).

Looking at the research examining the geographies covered by this study, Atoyan et al. (2016) document that during the period from 1995 to 2010, countries in the Western Balkans lost up to 18% of their population to emigration, mostly men of prime age with average or above average educational levels. It is important to note that these were the war and post-war years in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*. However, even in times of peace, the emigration of young people has continued, which is a worrying trend with serious and profound consequences that will become fully apparent in the coming years.

Many young people from the Western Balkans are either migrating or planning to do so, as evident from a 2018 youth study conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, according to which around 33% of young people in the Western Balkans expressed a strong or very strong desire to emigrate. The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung estimates that young people in this region wish to leave in order to enhance their overall quality of life, which takes into account both non-economic and economic variables. Youth are now leaving the region for better governance, high-quality education and reliable healthcare. In the past, most young people primarily departed due to high unemployment rates, low salaries and a lack of job opportunities. Compared to their peers in eastern European EU member states, young people from the Western Balkans are generally more motivated to migrate to western Europe in the long term (Lavrič 2019).

According to Eurostat (2024a), the number of people moving in the long term from the Western Balkans and receiving a residence permit in the EU has almost tripled, from 55 797 in 2013 to 161 247 in 2018.² In 2018 alone, a total of 228 000 citizens from the Western Balkans immigrated to the EU, with Albania recording 2.2% of its total population (62 000 people) migrating to the EU that year. The Covid-19 pandemic has reduced the pace of emigration of citizens of the Western Balkans to the EU, but in 2022, a total of 173 943 residence permits were issued in the EU to citizens of the Western Balkans (ibid.). It is important to note that in contrast to 2013 and 2018, the 2022 Eurostat statistics do not include the residence permits issued by the United Kingdom, which was still an EU member state in 2013 and 2018.

Western Balkans authorities do not officially track and publish the exact data on how many of its young citizens leave the country, which represents a challenge not only for research but also for creating solution-oriented policies on the ground (Judah and Vracic 2019). Estimates have usually been made based on the number of

2. The figures refer to the total number of residence permits issued to citizens of the Western Balkan states for the duration of at least 12 months.

individuals who requested criminal record certificates from local police administrations in order to obtain a visa in one of the host countries. However, such data do not give an accurate insight into the total number of those who emigrated (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 2021).

Countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina have not conducted a census since 2013. Therefore, there are no official data about the number of young people living in Bosnia and Herzegovina today. Such developments keep the public in the dark, especially lawmakers who are not in a position to develop effective youth policies without reliable, accurate and up-to-date statistical data. The data available do not offer relevant information on youth brain drain from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Similar statistical uncertainties apply to the Western Balkans as a whole.

The most relevant estimates on youth brain drain stem from research conducted by regional and international organisations. According to the public opinion survey *Balkan Barometer*, published in 2023, a total of 71% of youth aged 18-24 are considering leaving the Western Balkan region, which is 10% more than in 2020 (Regional Cooperation Council 2023). In 2020, the three primary causes of youth brain drain from the Western Balkans were high youth unemployment, a weak economy and widespread corruption (Regional Cooperation Council 2020). However, a UNFPA study on youth migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina indicates that almost a quarter of respondents have seriously considered leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina permanently, and an additional 23% think about prospects of temporary migration abroad. The pursuit of better prospects and living standards is a major driver of migration motivations (UNFPA 2021). Young Bosnians studying abroad during Covid-19 have been an especially vulnerable category. Many of them experienced a lack of support from Bosnian Herzegovinian state institutions during the pandemic, which caused some to reconsider or even completely change their plans to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina after studying abroad (Beharić, Berbić and Šarić 2024).

A recent study on youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, published by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2023), indicates that youth interest in emigration is lower than in 2018, but those intending to leave are more determined and prepared to do so. While most young Bosnians are pessimistic and dissatisfied with the situation in the country, particularly with employment opportunities and corruption, the study also underscores potential pull factors that motivate young people to stay. These are all work related and include competitive salaries, more job opportunities and better protected workers' rights.

The situation is similar in the rest of the region. A survey by the National Youth Council of Serbia (2021) found that 50% of young people want to emigrate and 25% are in the planning stages. Data from the study on youth in Montenegro, published by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2019b), suggest that 50% of young people are driven by the desire to leave Montenegro in search of a better future. This number has meanwhile decreased to 38% of young people having a clearly defined attitude that they want to leave Montenegro, according to research conducted by the Centre for Civic Education (2022). According to this research, the dominant reasons for leaving the country are the desire for a better standard of living, the lack of prospects in Montenegro and the possibility of easier employment abroad.

In terms of data availability, policy response and general attitudes of young people towards emigrating from their home countries, the desk research has identified certain similarities between the Western Balkan region and Eastern Partnership countries. According to the World Economic Forum's global competitiveness report (2019), many of the geographies covered by this research scored poorly on their "capacity to retain talent", with Bosnia and Herzegovina ranking 135th (out of 137 countries), Serbia 134th, the Republic of Moldova 133rd and Ukraine 129th.

2.2. Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership is a joint initiative of the EU, its member states and six eastern European partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. This region has been marked by a complex web of conflicts, rooted in historical, ethnic and geopolitical tensions.

One of the most notable conflicts is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which flared up intermittently for decades until a significant escalation occurred in 2020. Additionally, there are ongoing tensions in Georgia, particularly concerning the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which declared independence in the 1990s with Russian support. In the early 1990s, the Republic of Moldova experienced a brief but intense conflict known as the Transnistria War, which erupted shortly after the country declared independence from the Soviet Union. Efforts to find a lasting political solution to the Transnistrian issue have continued, but the conflict remains unresolved, contributing to ongoing tensions in the region.

Since 2014, Ukraine has been embroiled in three major conflicts: the war in the Donbas region, the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, and Russia's full-scale war of aggression. At this moment, the country is defending itself from a Russian aggression that has resulted in thousands of casualties, displacement of civilians and severe humanitarian crises. The conflicts that have occurred across the Eastern Partnership region since the early 1990s have caused significant human suffering, displacement and economic instability in the region, and this has only exacerbated the depopulation from the Eastern Partnership countries.

When it comes to the EU prospects of the six Eastern Partnership countries, they are divided into two groups. Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine signed the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement with the EU back in 2014. The other three Eastern Partnership countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus – chose a different path and are not interested in step-by-step integration with the EU. Belarus and later Armenia decided to join the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia. Meanwhile, in June 2022, the EU granted candidate country status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. In November 2023, the European Commission recommended that the European Council open accession negotiations with these two countries (European Parliament n.d.).

Since October 2020, Belarus has been under EU sanctions for its involvement in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and as of June 2021, Belarus has suspended its membership in the Eastern Partnership (Council of the European Union n.d.). For decades, the Eastern Partnership member states analysed in this paper have struggled

with unemployment, corruption and youth brain drain. Some of those challenges have been further exacerbated in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine. In this regard, it is important to underline that Ukraine's young people are currently facing not only a demographic but also an existential threat, which was underlined by the experts interviewed for this research.

When it comes to statistics available for the past decade, according to Eurostat (2024a), in 2013, a total of 73 640 citizens from the six Eastern Partnership countries received long-term residence permits in the EU and by 2022, this number had already risen to 289 301 people. During this period, the largest jump was recorded for Ukraine, which increased from 43 699 in 2013 to 195 752 in 2022.

Furthermore, by the end of 2021, some 1.57 million Ukrainian citizens were authorised to stay in the EU with a valid residence permit, which represents the third-biggest group of non-EU citizens in the EU. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine undoubtedly contributed to issuing long-term residence permits in 2022, although in 2019, the EU issued almost the same number of such residence permits to Ukrainians.

The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine has boosted the brain drain from this country. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2022), 47% of Ukraine's 8 million refugees have a university degree, compared to around 24% in the general population. Historically, Ukrainian youth brain drain has been a challenge for the country, even before the Russian war of aggression, when this Eastern Partnership country was dubbed as "Europe's Mexico" due to its striking similarities with Mexico in terms of reasons for young people to emigrate (Düvell 2006).

However, according to research conducted by the International Republican Institute Ukraine (2023), 65% of young people aged 16-35 living in Ukraine said they would not like to move abroad. Of these respondents, 44% said they are satisfied with their current place of residence in Ukraine and do not want to change it. A total of 40% of surveyed young people said they would not want to leave their family and friends, 20% cited sufficient financial support for life and 15% would not want to emigrate due to their patriotic sentiments for Ukraine. The same study also surveyed Ukrainians who have emigrated to Poland due to the Russian war of aggression. Among these young Ukrainians, 47% of respondents intend to return to Ukraine after the end of the war and 15% do not plan to return at all (ibid).

Youth brain drain in Ukraine has followed the main direction of labour migration prior to the Russian war of aggression. Many Ukrainians who study abroad consider their time abroad as the first step to emigration. Between 2007 and 2019, the number of students who left increased from 25 000 to 78 000, but between 2019 and 2023, the dynamics of the outflow of students from Ukraine slowed down and currently stands at 85 000 (3.5% 2023). Ukrainian students who studied in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland before the Russian war of aggression had similar reasons for leaving their country, according to a survey of Ukrainians attending universities in these countries (Leontiyeva and Kopecká 2018). The majority stated that their poor living conditions in Ukraine motivated them to pursue a degree in order to work in the EU in the future; few intended to return home after graduation. Moving forward to the time after the Russian war of aggression, research on the emigration intentions

of young scientists in Ukraine shows that by the autumn of 2022, about 18.5% of the population of Ukrainian scientists had fled the country (De Rassenfosse, Murovana and Uhlbach 2023). It will be worthwhile to monitor how many will return once the Russian war of aggression is over and Ukraine has been rebuilt.

Brain drain has become a significant challenge, especially for those Eastern Partnership countries governed by illiberal rulers (Stern and Dixon 2021). A typical example is Belarus, a country that found itself under EU sanctions over assisting Russia in its war of aggression against Ukraine. It saw a surge in brain drain with one in five information technology specialists leaving Belarus in 2022 due to sanctions (Wilson and Giczan 2023). Many of them emigrated to the EU. Poland proved the most popular destination, followed by Georgia and Lithuania. In October 2022, Poland issued 53 000 visas to Belarusian citizens, mainly information technology professionals, which is 20 000 more compared to four months earlier (ibid.).

Youth brain drain from the Republic of Moldova has been a significant challenge for several decades. Following independence, many people emigrated in the 1990s due to high unemployment and poverty. As a landlocked country inhabited by fewer than 3 million people and bordering Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova's population has been split between pro-Russian and pro-west sentiments for decades (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2017). Despite its new, pro-western leadership that aims to revive the country's economic situation, the Republic of Moldova still ranks among the poorest countries in Europe.

However, young people are emigrating not only for economic reasons, but also because they are dissatisfied with social, political and security developments. Brain drain and low fertility rates have led to a plummeting number of students in the Republic of Moldova in less than 15 years. As indicated in research conducted by IDIS Viitorul, a think tank from the country's capital *Chişinău*, in 2010, there were almost 424 000 young people aged 19-24. In 2022, this number had dropped to 245 000. The study suggests that the number of university students in the Republic of Moldova had fallen from 128 000 in 2007 to 59 600 in 2022, which represents a 50% drop (Balkan Insight 2022). Meanwhile, the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine combined with high inflation and the recent Covid-19 pandemic have not helped the situation.

As indicated in the European Commission's 2023 report on the Republic of Moldova, the country has not yet developed a strategy to tackle youth brain drain, despite the fact that the outflow of researchers has been higher than the inflow (European Commission 2023). This has created vibrant but neglected highly educated diaspora networks that have a potential to boost the country's development also from abroad.

However, youth brain drain and low fertility rates are not the only demographic challenge that the Republic of Moldova is currently facing. The Republic of Moldova is home to an increasingly ageing population. According to World Bank Group's (2017) projections, high brain drain figures and low fertility rates will lead to a 29% decrease in the Republic of Moldova's population by 2060, while the share of the elderly will triple to 30%.

Despite these challenges, there are also positive examples of programmes and projects that help the Republic of Moldova to turn the brain drain into brain gain. Foreign investment programmes aimed to support local businesses, foster community engagement and boost student skills show some positive results. Such projects, financed by foreign governments, have helped young people find jobs and enhance their soft skills (Chemonics n.d.). At the same time, countering brain drain is one of the priorities of the EU's Economic Investment Plan for the Republic of Moldova (EU Monitor 2021).

The remaining three countries of the Eastern Partnership – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – all suffer from brain drain, even though some of them have developed policies to tackle the phenomenon. Young people across the Southern Caucasus are looking for jobs, better education opportunities and equality in society, which they struggle to find at home. When it comes to the desire to leave the homeland, Armenia tops the ranking in the Southern Caucasus with a brain drain index score of 7.2 (Fund for Peace 2023).

Brain drain in Armenia has long been regarded as a high-priority topic. Stronger emigration flows from Armenia began with the country's independence in 1991. More recently, Armenia also faced immigration from war-affected regions of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and Ukraine following the Russian war of aggression, which caused thousands of people from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine to migrate to Armenia (United Nations Armenia n.d.). Therefore, security issues represent a central influence on emigration and immigration to Armenia.

A study conducted by the Armenian Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) (2022) reported that besides unemployment, security concerns play a key role in motivating young people to emigrate. The same study raises the issue of data collection and points to unreliable emigration statistics that hinder creating effective government policies that would tackle youth brain drain in the long term. A year earlier, the same NGO published the results of the Caucasus Barometer (CRRC 2021), an annual household survey about social-economic issues and political attitudes. A third of respondents said they are seeking to leave the country permanently but the majority of those surveyed, 57%, said they are looking for temporary emigration. In May 2021, the Government of Armenia developed certain policies to tackle brain drain by passing an action plan aimed at managing migration in the country. This action plan seeks to “prevent brain drain, reduce unwanted emigration flows from the point of view of sustainable human development of Armenia” (ARLIS 2021).

International organisations have also contributed to reducing youth emigration from the country by working together with policy makers. A study by the International Organization for Migration (2020) looking into the assessment of migration in Armenia recommended that the country improve education quality, enhance employment prospects for young people and boost efforts to address inequality in society – all in order to tackle emigration of highly educated young people. Co-operation with the diaspora was underlined as an opportunity for the country to use the potential of its citizens living abroad.

In terms of demographic development, one of the most dynamic countries of the Eastern Partnership is Azerbaijan with its growing youth population. With an excess

in the number of births over the number of deaths, the country reached 10 million inhabitants in 2018 (UNFPA Azerbaijan n.d.). In terms of population growth, immigration to Azerbaijan plays a rather minor role.

As outlined in the 2015-2025 Development Strategy of Azerbaijan Youth, people aged 14-29 “play an important role in the country’s demographic development” and their representatives are invited “to participate more closely in the improvement of legislation” (President of Azerbaijan 2015). According to the same document, a total of 2.7 million people, which corresponds to almost 30% of the population, live in Azerbaijan today.

However, what differentiates young people in Azerbaijan from their peers in most other places covered in this research is their willingness to stay in their country. According to a 2023 Azerbaijan youth study conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2023c), 80% of young people do not want to emigrate for the purpose of employment or studying abroad. The same research indicates that the desire to remain is highest in Baku among female respondents, those who are married and those who have a higher education diploma. It is, however, also important to note that only 13% of young people have ever travelled abroad (UNFPA n.d.). Those who have already been abroad or plan to leave the country said the main motivator to emigrate would be a higher salary (51% of respondents) and better educational opportunities (44%) (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2023c).

Such attitudes are largely confirmed by the human flight and brain drain index, based on which Azerbaijan holds the top position among Eastern Partnership countries with a 4.6 value (Fund for Peace 2023). Compared to all other geographies analysed in this paper, only Montenegro has a lower human flight and brain drain index (4.5) than Azerbaijan. This is relatively low compared to other geographies presented in this research, but it still does not mean that Azerbaijan is a success story in curbing youth brain drain.

Many of those who left Azerbaijan during the last decade cite endemic corruption, lack of job opportunities and the clampdown on journalists and civil society as some of the main reasons for leaving the country (Geybullayeva 2015). At the same time, poor quality of education, lack of independence in teaching and research, as well as an outdated educational system are considered key education-related reasons for many young people to emigrate (Geybullayeva 2017). Such developments have also led to a steady but constant increase in the average age of Azerbaijan’s population. The 2022 Revision of World Population Prospects data show that in 2020, the median age³ of the Azerbaijani population was 31 years (United Nations n.d.). Taking into account several factors, including youth brain drain, the projection for 2040 indicates the median age will rise by more than 10 years.

The Government of Azerbaijan offers scholarships to its young people to study abroad (Mammadova 2022). Some of the students who received a scholarship never returned home since youth unemployment rates in Azerbaijan are still high.

3. The median age is the age that divides a population into two numerically equal groups; that is, half the people are younger than this age and half are older. It is a single index that summarises the age distribution of a population.

According to reports, only one out of 25 young people aged 20-25 is able to find a job (Azadliq Radiosu 2022). This also includes those educated in Azerbaijan, where the educational system is not always synched with the real needs of the job market.

Georgia's highly educated young people have often been regarded as its most valuable export for the past three decades. Between 2010 and 2020, some 860 000 people emigrated from Georgia, which is 23% of the country's population (PMC Research 2022). The EU visa liberalisation agreement, signed in 2017, allowed even more people to reach the EU without many administrative hurdles. Since 2017, emigration flows from Georgia have increased together with remittances from EU countries (ibid.). It is important to note that some political parties have been misusing visa liberalisation as an argument to downplay both the reasons for migration and the number of people emigrating. However, the visa liberalisation agreement did not cause a specific emigration track towards the EU, which is also observable in a growing number of Georgians pursuing the risky and expensive attempt to illegally reach the United States of America through Mexico (Lomsadze 2022). This type of emigration has been characterised as labour migration driven by social and economic factors (Gabritchidze 2022a).

A 2022 National Democratic Institute (NDI) poll showed that 20% of people from Georgia are considering emigration to find work abroad during the upcoming 12 months. This figure is significantly higher among those younger than 50, reaching a third of the population of Georgia (NDI Georgia 2023). Poverty and unemployment are often cited as reasons for emigration, but a feeling of hopelessness was also presented as a relevant factor motivating young people to leave (Shamanauri 2022). During the same year, Georgia experienced surprise economic growth partly because of the high influx of Russian citizens to Georgia due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Laff 2023). However, economic struggles for the citizens of Georgia lingered due to high inflation, youth unemployment and rising housing and food prices, which prompted waves of labour protests across the country (Gabritchidze 2022b).

The overall economic situation motivated private high-end high schools in Georgia to profile themselves as schools that equip their students with skills needed to leave the country and study at universities in the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe. In one such private high school in Tbilisi, 90% of graduates continue their studies abroad (GZAAT n.d.). Many of those who graduated abroad might never come back, which might have long-term economic consequences for the country (Sharadze 2022).

2.3. Türkiye

Young people living in Türkiye have been facing numerous challenges, increased by the impact of the economic crisis and high inflation in recent years. Moreover, the burgeoning influx of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, notably from Syria following the eruption of the civil war, has significantly altered the demographic landscape of the country. Presently, Türkiye hosts approximately 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees, a sizable portion of whom are actively seeking international refuge. Within this demographic, roughly 35% are youth, falling within the age bracket of 15 to 30 years old (Özerim, Telli and Karaca 2020).

Turkish citizens are not allowed to travel visa-free to the Schengen area and Türkiye still has a visa regime with the EU. Applying for a Schengen visa is a long, costly and bureaucratically demanding procedure that does not guarantee the applicant will be granted a visa. However, this does not prevent young people from seeking opportunities abroad, causing Türkiye to suffer from youth brain drain.

The number of people emigrating from Türkiye increased by 62.3% in 2022 compared to the previous year and reached 466 914, the highest figure of the last seven years (Turkish Statistical Institute 2022a). The highest percentage of emigrants were in the 25-29 age group with 15.8%, followed by the 30-34 age group with 13.4%, and the 20-24 age group with 12.8% (ibid.). These data clearly demonstrate the youth aspect of brain drain from Türkiye.

According to the latest data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (2022b), youth make up 15.2% of Türkiye's total population. The results of the address-based population registration system, as of the end of 2022, reveals that Türkiye has a total population of 85 279 553, while the population in the 15-24 age group consists of almost 13 million people. The male youth population accounts for 51.2% and 48.8% is female. Population projections made by the Turkish Statistical Institute based on these data indicate that the proportion of young people in the total population is expected to decrease to 14% in 2030, 13.4% in 2040, 11.8% in 2060 and 11.1% in 2080 (ibid.). This projection clearly demonstrates a declining trend in the youth population of Türkiye, compared to a few decades ago.

Based on the results of the life satisfaction survey published by the Turkish Statistical Institute (ibid.), 67% of young people stated that they are satisfied with the education they have received so far. Despite this, a recent study highlights that 84.6% of youth believe that there is excessive unemployment in the country (Çağlar and Çağlar 2023).

Furthermore, 52.5% of young people are moderately satisfied with their lives – neither happy nor unhappy with difficulties in meeting their basic needs. According to the same study, 63% of the young people surveyed stated that they would consider living in another country if they had the opportunity (ibid.). The most important reasons for young people's desire to live in another country are that they think they will find a job more easily and that they want to improve their living conditions.



3. Analysis of the causes of youth brain drain within the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye

While economic factors are commonly attributed as primary drivers of brain drain, the findings from the desk review of relevant policy documents and expert interviews underscore a broader perspective among young people in the respective geographies. Beyond economic challenges, they perceive the issue as a manifestation of a general decline in living conditions, indicating a more comprehensive understanding of the problem. Therefore, it is rather a cumulative assessment, not a single factor, that determines the resilience of young people to stay in their country. Although still a prominent factor in migration processes of young people, low wages or low employment rates are not the only explanation.

As the previous chapter has shown, the rich literature on youth brain drain discusses the root causes, push and pull factors, effects and mitigating factors of the mass emigration of young, educated people. The main reasons for such outflows include a lack of economic opportunities and career growth, and an unfavourable political situation that undercuts entrepreneurship and curbs citizens' rights and freedoms. The consequences include the critical decline of human capital in the migrant sending country, which further contributes to economic, political and social stagnation. At the same time, however, an increasing body of literature has focused on ways to retain talent and on the positive engagement of migrant and diaspora communities in the life of people in the sending countries.

This chapter analyses some of the most common causes of youth brain drain.

3.1. Challenges in using education, skill-sector mismatches and lack of job satisfaction

In interviews, experts often cited the mismatch between education and jobs available to young people as an important incentive to emigrate. The causes of young people's emigration cannot be summarised simply as "lack of job opportunities" but rather as "not being able to find a job suitable for their education".

For example, one youth expert stated that young people worry about not being able to transform the education they received into economic success by emphasising the recent difficulties faced by professionals, such as doctors or engineers, who feel that their education is not translating into economic viability in their home regions. Similarly, most of the interviewed experts highlighted that quality of jobs is a major concern for young people by claiming that even when there are improvements in employment figures, there is still a perceived challenge with the quality of jobs due to a mismatch between the qualifications of young people and the jobs or pay available. Specifically for the studied geographies, experts noted that most companies extend entry-level positions to young graduates, and individuals with advanced degrees such as PhDs and master's degrees are being recruited for these roles. Hence, in addition to the low employment rate in these geographies, a key catalyst for youth emigration is the persistent challenge faced by young people in accurately assessing their education and securing a job that aligns with their potential and qualifications (European Training Foundation 2022).

The interviews revealed as well that young people migrate not solely in pursuit of employment but also to seek enhanced opportunities for acknowledgment based on their individual merit. Limited access to high-quality education and research facilities often leads talented individuals to pursue academic and professional opportunities abroad, with the intention of gaining exposure and enhancing their skills. Considering that the governments in the studied regions rarely develop brain gain strategies that would bring back foreign-educated young people, those young professionals often decide not to return home. Many of them decide to leave after graduating from local universities, which creates a considerable financial cost for the region.

As an example, education migration from Georgia and other countries also contributes to depopulation of the countries of origin, since many of the highly educated migrants start families of their own while living abroad (Bogishvili 2021). Using the example of Georgia, Ivaniashvili (2014) refers to merit-based recruitment and diaspora knowledge networks as a way of mitigating brain drain. Considering that the youth brain drain rates in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye are often among the highest in various world rankings (World Economic Forum 2019), this particular problem can cause long-lasting effects for these countries' growth since many of their best and brightest young people are emigrating.

According to a 2021 study by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, between 2010 and 2019, there was net emigration of young people from the Western Balkans, with differences in the number and age patterns from country to country (Leitner 2021). For instance, according to this study, significant youth brain drain of highly educated people from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*

has been recorded for the past two decades. However, compared to roughly 6% of those from Bosnia and Herzegovina, nearly 40% of the young emigrants from Albania had advanced degrees. In 2022, Albania was the only non-African country in the top 10 for high rates of brain drain and emigration (Euronews Albania 2023). This has potential to create challenges for the economies of the particular regions and countries aspiring to join the EU.

3.2. Perceived lack of future opportunities, trust issues and a sense of insecurity

As highlighted by several interviewees, young people's perceptions and emotions are considered to be among the most important factors determining their motivation to migrate. "Uncertainty" is an important issue expressed, particularly linked to internal or external security threats. This factor is important for those young people who prefer a more settled and stable life during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and who might see emigration as one of the means to overcome this uncertainty.

Two important factors that fuel this uncertainty are "lack of trust in the system" and "lack of confidence that they will find future opportunities". This is especially visible in the Western Balkans, where young people tend to have less confidence in their national governments than their counterparts in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and OECD-EU countries. While trust in institutions has increased from 34% to 48% in Serbia, in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina only 23% of surveyed citizens trust the country's government (OECD 2023). According to the same study, citizens aged 15 to 29 have the least confidence in their governments in the region. As youth workers interviewed for the purpose of this study emphasised, low levels of trust in government create a spiral of concern for young people living in this region.

Similar to the Western Balkans, an interviewed researcher from the Eastern Partnership region stressed that employment and security concerns are some of the major drivers for people leaving the region. This does not only apply to Ukraine, which is directly affected by the Russian war of aggression, but also to other countries that have been experiencing Russian malign influence for decades (Sahakyan and Lieberman 2022). Young people from Armenia, for example, strive to leave their country to avoid the uncertainty and tensions stemming from the unstable political environment. In line with this trend, Santos-Ortega, Muñoz-Rodríguez and Grau-Muñoz (2021) argue that the experience and expectations derived from intensified individualism, increased value of human capital and greater future uncertainty result in an increased pressure to succeed as "entrepreneurs of themselves" among young people.

Youth experts from the Western Balkans report on disillusioned and dissatisfied young adults who often see emigration as a solution to the problems they experience at home. In line with this, Radonjić and Bobić (2020) point out a pessimistic vision of their future in their home country as one of the main push factors for young people in Serbia. Focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Palalić et al. (2021) discovered that the shortcomings of the country's legal framework and its negative impact on the standards of living were among young people's top motivations to emigrate. The

enabling factors include Schengen visa liberalisation and EU migration programmes targeting certain types of professionals both in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries.

As reiterated by youth experts from the Eastern Partnership countries, dissatisfaction of young people often plays a role in young people's decision to migrate from this region, especially from those countries affected by war and conflict. In Armenia, young people are disillusioned with public institutions and political leadership, and excluded from policy development (Khachatryan, Tadevosyan and Yeghoyan 2017). The experts stressed that the disappointment with the EU integration process sometimes leads to frustration and disenchantment among the youth of those Eastern Partnership countries aspiring to become EU members. In Georgia, young people are particularly disillusioned with the state of Georgian politics, as indicated by a recent NDI (2024) survey. As we heard from youth experts from Ukraine, youth in this country are currently focusing on surviving the Russian war of aggression, even though the distrust in politics and political apathy among young people in Ukraine have been high prior to this war (Sasse 2018).

Respondents in this study expressed shared apprehensions akin to those of Turkish youth concerning the ecosystem in which they reside. Concurrently, recent reports highlight a discernible decline in the trust of Turkish youth towards political parties (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2023). This erosion of trust reflects a broader disillusionment with traditional political structures, as young people increasingly seek alternative avenues for meaningful civic engagement and representation. Such findings illuminate not only the pressing concerns of Turkish youth but also the evolving socio-political landscape in which they navigate, underscoring the imperative for responsive and inclusive governance frameworks to address their needs and aspirations effectively.

Interviewed experts from all three geographies argued that the prevailing fear of not knowing what the future holds, despite hard work and productivity, puts political and administrative concerns at the forefront. In the Western Balkans, political and governance issues are seen as a key driver of brain drain, with experts from the region pointing to the disillusionment of young people whose hopes for a better democracy have not yet been realised.

3.3. Geopolitical concerns

Although it is difficult to generalise for all geographies in this study, political instability and conflict-prone situations stand out as one of the factors that cause young people to migrate. In addition to living in conflict regions, the proximity to conflict-prone or conflict-affected regions can also be seen as an element of anxiety that causes young people to leave their home countries. At this moment, this is most tangible in the case of young Ukrainians and some young people affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, who are leaving not for employment or education-related reasons but primarily for existential reasons. Interviewees from the Eastern Partnership countries stressed that discussing the return of young Ukrainians who fled their country will be possible only once Russia ends its war of aggression against Ukraine. According to them, it would be "illusory" to discuss new employment opportunities that would attract talent in time of an active armed conflict.

Besides Ukraine, interviewees mentioned Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, the Republic of Moldova and Montenegro as places where Russia presents a security threat either directly or through its proxies. This has already caused young people to leave or consider leaving, especially after witnessing the extent of the visible destruction by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

Interviewed experts from the Western Balkans said that the war in Ukraine creates anxiety among young people, not only in terms of life safety but also in terms of its economic and social effects, and leads them to establish a life outside their own region. This has been especially underlined by a youth worker from the Western Balkans, who stressed many people are being retraumatised by the pictures coming from Ukraine. This pertains especially to the older generations living in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*, parents of young people who then motivate their children to leave the country due to security concerns and fear that a new war might also break out in the Western Balkans.

The conflict in the Middle East has also had an impact on the security perceptions of young people in the geographies examined in this document. Youth experts from Türkiye stated that the general climate of conflict in the Middle East, most recently in Gaza, has negatively affected young Turks who are following the political turmoil in the region and considering finding a job or study in western Europe.

3.4. Normalisation of emigration in youth discourse and life projects

A notable concern that surfaced during the interviews is the normalisation of emigration as an inherent component of the post-education journey for young individuals due to a lack of life satisfaction in the homeland. The prevailing perception that aspiring for professions and opportunities abroad is integral to the life trajectory of every young person in these countries is indicative of a systemic influence, potentially serving as an incentive for youth brain drain.

For example, some experts described it as worrying that some young graduates from the health sector increasingly see emigration to a western European country as a natural part of the process, describing it as the best career path. Migration can therefore become a fixed item on the agenda of young people and even their pre-graduation education process involves language courses, research, networking efforts and participation in certificate programmes, indicating a proactive approach to preparing for migration. A local youth expert from the Western Balkans noticed that vocational schools educating medical nurses are producing a workforce for the EU market, knowing they would have greater chances of getting a job in Germany rather than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* or North Macedonia. This trend is observed across the region.

This challenge has also been recognised by international organisations that conducted their own research on causes and consequences of this trend. According to International Organization for Migration (2022) research, the number of unemployed nurses in Bosnia and Herzegovina is rapidly decreasing due to their emigration to western Europe, mainly Germany. Taking into account emigration rates of young

female nurses, medical doctors, dentists and pharmacists, Bosnia and Herzegovina may face a shortage in the medium or long term if this trend persists. Without accurate statistics, it is even more difficult to track the number of health professionals leaving the country, to assess the actual damage to the country's health sector, and to predict the potential consequences that lie ahead.

The Covid-19 crisis has further cemented this notion and led to a new wave of migration in recent years. This has been particularly visible in the Western Balkans, although it is still understudied and insufficiently discussed in the scope of youth brain drain. The inability of certain geographies examined in this study to stimulate and revitalise their economic systems after the pandemic is seen as a factor that encourages young people from underdeveloped communities to migrate to areas that have proven more resilient in overcoming the pandemic obstacles.

3.5. Rising social conservatism

The perception among young people that the social distance between themselves and the members of their society has widened may be another reason for their migration decisions. For instance, when exploring the Western Balkans, especially Albania, Kosovo* and North Macedonia, an interviewed expert highlighted that a significant wave of emigration occurred in recent years. This was attributed to the disappointment stemming from unfulfilled expectations for a better democracy in these regions. Although discussions on democracy are shaped around media freedom and freedom of expression in these societies, the feeling of exclusion due to increasing social conservatism can also increase the social distance of young people.

As elaborated on during the interview with youth experts from the Eastern Partnership, the rise of social conservatism among young people in this region is influenced by cultural traditions, religious beliefs, economic uncertainty and political developments. Conservative political parties in certain Eastern Partnership countries sometimes actively target young people with messages that resonate with traditional values and social norms. In relation to this, some young people may perceive western values as too imposing on the local way of life and undermining their national identity and cultural traditions. In such cases, embracing social conservatism is sometimes the way to protect their cultural autonomy and resist influences from abroad. However, those young people who do embrace western values and reject the conservative way of life might consider emigration as the way out, reducing their country's hope for economic growth and societal development.

The discourse related to these issues among young individuals in Türkiye revolves significantly around fundamental concepts such as strong leadership, authoritarianism, pluralistic democracy and freedom of expression. These themes form the bedrock of their discussions, reflecting their deep-seated concerns and aspirations for the future of their country. For instance, findings from a comprehensive report compiled by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2021) shed light on the prevailing sentiments among Turkish youth. Accordingly, when presented with the choice between endorsing a strong, authoritarian leadership model or advocating for participatory democracy, a resounding 66% of young respondents voiced their preference for democracy. This preference underscores their desire for inclusive governance structures that

prioritise citizen participation and civil liberties. Moreover, an overwhelming 83% of the surveyed youth emphasised the utmost importance of living in a society where freedom of expression is safeguarded. This statistic underscores the profound value placed by Turkish youth on the ability to voice their opinions, engage in open dialogue and challenge prevailing norms and policies. These statistics not only offer a glimpse into the ideological landscape shaping Turkish youth but also underscore their steadfast commitment to democratic principles and individual liberties. As such, it becomes evident that young people in Türkiye are actively engaging in critical discussions and advocating for a future characterised by pluralism, democratic values and unfettered expression.

Within this context, a decline in tolerance toward individual differences is noted as part of the broader trend of social conservatism. As exemplified by a key expert, in certain studied geographies, the prevalence of traditional values and stereotypes presents obstacles for individuals striving to live authentically. This challenge may compel some young people to conceal their true selves or contemplate migration as a means of finding acceptance elsewhere. As reported by an interviewed expert, young people who emigrate tend to cling to the traditional values with which they have been raised. However, living abroad offers an important chance to deconstruct deep-rooted stereotypes, not only about the Europeans living in these regions but also about the people from these regions who meet each other abroad.



4. Consequences of youth brain drain within the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye

Without properly utilising brain drain and putting policies in place to transform it into brain circulation, the emigration of highly educated young people poses a challenge for the home country and especially its youth sector. The consequences are multifaceted, spanning from emotional to serious economic repercussions for the sending country that invests in young people by educating them while having little “return on investment”.

As the youth experts interviewed during this research reported, besides the emotional price that many families pay by being separated from their family members who leave home, and parents missing time with their children, there is also a measurable financial price, on which most experts and media focus their attention. This section will explore the most relevant consequences already felt today and potential future ones.

4.1. Ageing society and social imbalance

An ageing society is considered as one of the directly observable effects of youth brain drain. Experts interviewed in this study argue that this problem, which might become more visible in the medium and long term rather than in the short term, would have an impact not only on pensions and social protection systems but also on social values. Many interviewed experts underlined femicide and other social issues in these regions, correlating them to the brain drain and growing conservatism. The absence or decrease of a dynamic and diverse youth population is seen as a major reason that shifts societal values and increases intolerance.

For instance, the challenging economic situation, depopulation and youth brain drain both in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership have contributed to some of the lowest fertility rates recorded in recent history. Fertility rates for Armenia in 2019, Azerbaijan in 2019, Georgia in 2020 and Ukraine in 2019 were 1.6, 1.8, 2.0 and 1.1 children per woman, respectively (Eurostat 2024b). These rates are well below the average of about 2.1 children per woman, which is needed to maintain a steady population level.

At the same time, Western Balkan countries also struggle with fertility rates. As observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2019, the country saw its lowest birth rates since 1948, which leads to numerous questions on the future of the population of this Western Balkan state (Klix 2020). As a youth worker shared, many young people complain about the aspects of life that young people miss, especially in smaller communities. Those are related to the lack of opportunities for young people to establish a family, poorly developed infrastructure to travel within the country and the region, and bleak employment prospects after graduating from high school or university.

Likewise, Türkiye is witnessing a decline in its youth demographic. Population projections indicate a notable decrease in the proportion of young people within the total population over the coming decades. By 2030, it is projected to shrink to 14%, followed by further declines to 13.4% in 2040, 11.8% in 2060 and 11.1% in 2080 (Turkish Statistical Institute 2022b). This demographic shift carries significant implications for various sectors, including education, workforce dynamics and social welfare systems, prompting the need for forward-thinking policies to address the evolving needs of an ageing population and ensure sustainable development in the long term.

4.2. Loss of human capital and labour market imbalance

In economics, brain drain is often discussed in terms of its medium- and long-term negative effects on sending countries. Emigration of young people to other countries can lead to a shortage of jobs, especially those requiring skilled workers. The interviewed experts mention it as a factor that may exacerbate economic challenges. This is also seen as a generational loss. Since these countries have traditionally been countries with high levels of emigration at regular intervals, the migration wave of each generation is characterised as affecting the social and economic dynamics of the next generation.

Some experts also highlighted the looming threat of a shortage in skilled workers, in particular engineers and doctors, with significant adverse consequences for certain industries and the economy as a whole. Several interviewees reported that employers struggle to replace workers who decided to emigrate, which represents a serious challenge prompting companies to “import” workers from neighbouring countries.

For the past decade, the geographies covered by this research have been experiencing not only a loss of human capital due to high youth brain drain, but also a loss of gross domestic product (GDP). In 2017, the Republic of Moldova registered a GDP loss due to emigration of its citizens to the EU amounting to approximately €2.2 billion, which corresponded to 25% of the country’s GDP (Eastern Partnership Civil Society

Forum 2022). This figure is even higher when taking into consideration Moldovan emigration to Russia and other non-EU countries. At the same time, emigration has also served as a boosting factor for GDP in the Eastern Partnership.

The governments in the Western Balkans spend considerable resources on educating young people, who often end up working abroad. According to research conducted by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2019), the average cost of higher education per person ranges between €18 283 in Albania and €34 139 in Serbia. Taking this into account, the estimated youth brain drain costs for Serbia range between €1 billion and €1.2 billion a year.

Educating medical workers tends to be even more expensive. Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, spends more than €50 million annually on educating health professionals who relocate to the EU, mainly to Germany, to find work (Al Jazeera Balkans 2018). The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2021) estimates that the annual costs of education lost to young people emigrating from the Western Balkans range from €840 million to €2.46 billion. At the time this study was authored, no comparative data were available for other geographies covered in this research.

4.3. Resentful youth

Interviews with experts and youth workers from the respective geographies also raised the issue of disgruntled youth. Firstly, there is a group of young people who want to migrate to another country but are unable to do so, and therefore feel isolated and resentful because they are stranded in the society where they live.

Secondly, there is another group that had a negative experience with emigration and returned. Some experts interviewed in this study stated that, although not talked about much, there is high potential for a negative experience when young people participate in migration processes blindly and unprepared, or accept jobs abroad that are below their skills and education level for an opportunity to live abroad. Conversely, some of the experts interviewed in Türkiye suggest that feelings of resentment among youth will likely become more pronounced in the medium and long term, particularly among individuals who have ventured abroad with high expectations only to find themselves disillusioned upon their return. This sentiment is expected to be exacerbated among those who settle for employment positions below their educational qualifications solely to sustain themselves while living abroad. The experts highlight the potential psychological toll of unmet aspirations and the challenges of reintegration into society after experiencing setbacks abroad. They emphasise that such experiences can breed feelings of frustration and disenchantment, particularly among young adults striving to build a successful career and secure a stable future. Additionally, they underscore the importance of addressing the root causes of this discontentment, including creating opportunities for professional growth and fostering an environment conducive to personal fulfilment and upward mobility within Türkiye.

Another dimension of the debate on youth resentment is that it might lead to a lack of motivation to bring about positive change. For example, one of the youth experts from the Eastern Partnership shared the assumption that if young people perceive

leaving the country as a more viable option, it might lead to a lack of motivation to bring about positive changes locally, which suggests that brain drain could potentially impact the overall motivation to contribute to the development of the country. A youth expert from the Western Balkans stressed that for many young people, the notion of emigrating to Germany evokes a feeling of “success”. As this expert stressed during the interview, returning from abroad is often seen as a “failure”, which creates an additional pressure on those considering to leave.

As an example, young people in parts of the Western Balkans prefer strong, autocratic political figures who can solve all of their problems for them (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2019a). Therefore, the region cannot afford to lose those who have spent years being engaged in civic initiatives that boost democratic participation in society. A youth worker from the Western Balkan region stated that the alternative is slipping further into illiberal democratic order ruled by populists who have already been exploiting the ongoing political challenges, while neglecting endemic corruption, a degrading health sector or environmental problems such as air pollution, which are some of the issues youth experts shared as relevant for young people’s decision to leave the country.

The Western Balkans region continues to rank among the poorest in Europe, having significantly lower GDP per capita and living standards than EU members. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was predicted that the region would take roughly 60 years to catch up to the average income level in the EU, assuming an average annual rise in per capita income of roughly 3% (World Bank Group 2021). Furthermore, youth brain drain can cause significant concerns regarding the democratic backsliding of the Western Balkans and the region’s EU accession process. Considering young people’s preference for strong leaders and illiberal democrats ruling much of the region, the emigration of highly educated and democratically oriented young people makes this threat even more realistic (Dzihic 2019).

The resentment and dissatisfaction among young people in the Eastern Partnership region has been lingering for decades. According to youth workers from the Eastern Partnership region, it can be attributed to several factors that often result in youth brain drain. One of the most obvious reasons for such attitudes among youth is related to economic hardships, including high unemployment rates, low wages and limited opportunities for career advancement. This type of economic stagnation can lead to frustration among people who struggle to find meaningful employment. The second factor contributing to growing youth resentment stressed by the interviewed youth workers is political instability, corruption and lack of democratic governance in some Eastern Partnership countries. In Armenia, for example, more than half of young people are not interested in politics (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2023a).

Finally, youth experts consider access to quality education and vocational training to be limited, particularly in rural areas. In Azerbaijan, more than half of young people, especially students and recent graduates, are dissatisfied with the quality of education they receive or have received at school (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2023c). The lack of educational opportunities can hinder young people’s ability to acquire skills needed to compete in the job market, keeping them unemployed for longer

and causing them to feel frustrated. In such cases, many young people consider emigrating in search of better opportunities abroad.

4.4. Weakened youth sector

As highlighted by the interviewed youth workers in this study, the phenomenon of youth brain drain has exerted a significant and direct impact on the youth sector, extending beyond individual countries. The trend of youth emigration has fostered an environment where a considerable number of educated and actively engaged young people leave their home countries.

This phenomenon has led to significant societal gaps, also impacting the youth sector where youth organisations suffer the loss of knowledge and expertise. As articulated by a youth expert, the demand for critically thinking and socially engaged young people in their region has never been more pressing.

Youth brain drain is particularly evident at the local level, where youth organisations grapple with two distinct forms of brain drain. In smaller communities, these organisations contend with young people relocating to urban centres for higher education and with others leaving the country permanently. As explained by one of the youth experts, this dynamic creates a scenario in which local youth NGOs invest considerable time, financial resources and expertise in nurturing youth leaders, only to see them depart from the country. Training a new cohort of active young people entails not just resource allocation but also fostering motivation among the younger generation to engage in local youth work. Youth organisations in these regions take pride in fostering interreligious co-operation, combating ethnic segregation in education and championing regional youth exchange programmes. The tangible outcomes of youth activism are frequently most evident at the local level, where change often emerges from independent grassroots youth groups. Yet this migration of young people from small communities leaves a bigger void for such initiatives.



5. Interventions on youth brain drain: needs and possible policy responses

Considering the extensive and multifaceted repercussions of youth brain drain on the social, political and economic landscape, the youth sector has a role to play in alleviating the impact of this phenomenon. The study shows a diverse landscape of the youth sector and associated policies, which translates into a variety of interventions and impact.

However, there are commonalities on how to mobilise the youth sector to intervene in these processes. Going beyond civil society and youth organisations, national and local authorities and educational institutions have a role to play. Each organisation might have important responsibilities and roles in managing and mitigating the negative impact of youth brain drain. The complexity of this phenomenon highlights the need for cross-sectoral and strategic co-operation between different actors to address the multidimensional aspects of youth brain drain.

While the responses of the youth sector actors to brain drain may vary according to regional and country-specific dynamics, it is not easy to analyse or observe the direct effects of this process as the links are not often visible. Below is a list of needs and potential interventions expressed by youth sector experts interviewed in the three geographies.

Need 1 – Strengthening trust, the social ties of young people and their sense of belonging

The research underscores that the primary drivers behind the phenomenon of brain drain among young people stem from the disintegration of their societal connections and the erosion of trust in the institutional framework. Youth organisations could bolster participation and empower young people, thereby fortifying the bonds with their communities. These organisations can serve as dynamic platforms for young voices, enabling them to articulate grievances and apprehensions while serving as conduits for channelling these concerns to policy makers and practitioners, helping to mediate young people's ties to society. Cultivating leadership skills, enhancing education, promoting community development awareness and methodologies, and nurturing cultural competences are key arenas for intervention by the youth sector. The youth sector plays an important role in strengthening existing social and community bonds or reconstructing them anew, recognising that economic factors are not enough to fully account for the phenomenon of youth brain drain.

Interviewed experts highlighted the value of emotional ties and home country networks. Some experts emphasised that young people could benefit more from the power of their networks as passive capital in their home country. The youth sector could raise awareness among young people on how to use social and cultural skills, as well as networks. In the same line, some experts underlined that migration processes abroad do not always have a positive outcome for young emigrants. Good quality information about advantages and challenges of migration, not only for the country of origin but also for the young people pursuing it, would be useful.

While many interviewees in the study acknowledged that economic concerns are important in brain drain processes, they did not position the economy as the only reason and stated that, contrary to popular belief, finances are not the only concern of young people. Their feelings regarding overall quality of life, a sense of purpose and the adoption of cultural and democratic values matter for them beyond financial incentives. The youth sector can focus on helping young people deal with those perceptions while defining their life paths.

Feelings of being integrated and involved in society are another factor that stands out. Solutions to reduce the feeling of exclusion from political participation processes, especially within the framework of democratic processes, can reduce the motivation of young people to leave. At the same time, several interviewees noticed that some people who decided to leave felt excluded in their own country, which is yet another argument that highlights the importance of belonging and feeling included. In this respect, the need to make young people feel that they are part of local governance processes, through local youth councils and similar structures, was frequently highlighted in this research process.

This issue is closely connected to democratic values, a sense of ownership and civic engagement. The experts involved in the research highlighted that a considerable number of young people might be experiencing a loss of trust in political parties and lack of confidence in the institutions representing communities in which they reside. Through participatory processes developed or encouraged by the youth

sector, these young people may perceive an opportunity to actively contribute to preventing corruption, organised crime or other negative societal phenomena that they have personally encountered. In order to tackle youth brain drain, boost brain circulation and invest in the future of the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye, such activities implemented by the youth sector are needed more than ever.

Need 2 – Aligning policies and strategies

As emphasised by youth experts, the youth sector can play a crucial role in promoting brain circulation, contingent upon proactive government initiatives such as talent schemes, scholarship programmes and entrepreneurship incubators. These initiatives aim not only to attract young people to return to their home countries but also to incentivise their long-term residency. Investing in youth policy is central to institutional strategies to address brain drain. Policy development, strategic planning and the provision of financial incentives are primary avenues for intervention at this level. However, these interventions must be well informed by reliable statistical data, and aligned labour market, educational and migration policies to ensure efficacy.

The overarching objective of this process is to align policy frameworks and implementation strategies with the aspirations and needs of young people. Insufficient prioritisation of youth and associated policies exacerbates the disparity between needs and implementation. Furthermore, entrepreneurship, job creation and skills development constitute important policy domains and intervention areas at the state level. Effective implementation of programmes in these areas can significantly contribute to mitigating brain drain and fostering sustainable youth retention.

Need 3 – Increasing non-formal education opportunities

Many experts also underscored the pivotal role of non-formal education structures, such as youth organisations, which often find themselves at the forefront of grappling with the repercussions of youth brain drain. The youth NGO volunteers and staff are not immune to the prevailing societal conditions, prompting highly engaged young individuals to seek better opportunities abroad and leaving these organisations in need of fresh talent. Both formal and non-formal education structures have the capacity to mobilise support mechanisms within the youth sector. Initiatives on upskilling and enhancing accessibility and diversity of the labour market for young people, based on a tailored needs analysis of young people, can serve as a catalyst to encourage young people to remain rooted in their local communities. Recent experience shows that reliance solely on the education sector may prove insufficient in curbing brain drain. Instead, there is a pressing need for the education sector to refine its curricula and services through collaborative endeavours, particularly through partnerships with labour market stakeholders, focusing extensively on needs assessment.

It is also worth noting that the youth sector's involvement in youth brain drain processes does not mean a complete cessation of mobility as a powerful tool for non-formal learning. Cultural exchange can be promoted by the youth sector and it can maintain its traditional stance on the importance of experiences abroad.

Interviewees in this study emphasised the life-enriching dimension of these, as well as the potential role of the youth sector in developing skills and awareness on how to integrate the experience abroad into the home country. The youth sector in many countries is developing and using its capacity to promote mobility, intercultural exchange, recognition and understanding of different cultures.

For example, one of the interviewees mentioned the Future Capital programme (an opportunity offered after the European Voluntary Service) as an important example of such skills. Another interviewee from the Western Balkans stressed that similar opportunities can be acquired through student exchange programmes such as Erasmus+ and the Central European Exchange Program for University Studies (CEEPUS). An interviewee from the Eastern Partnership region cited international start-up programmes for young people as a solution that works in certain contexts applied to Ukraine. However, one missing link lies in the lack of initiatives on how to integrate the transformative power of these experiences abroad in the young people's home country. Therefore, apart from the above-mentioned areas, another important area to develop is guiding young people on how to integrate experiences abroad into the national context by also considering how favourable the national context is to the transfer of these experiences.

Need 4 – Strengthening cross-sectoral and holistic approaches to combating brain drain

A critical recommendation arising from the insights of experts in this study pertains to the pressing need for the development of cross-sectoral and holistic strategies to effectively tackle the challenge of brain drain. While traditionally perceived as a national matter only, it is imperative to recognise the significant role played by non-state actors in this phenomenon.

In addition to youth organisations, partnerships involving businesses, academia, educational institutions and all relevant local stakeholders are needed. The focus should be on fostering initiatives through collective efforts, recognising the multi-faceted and interconnected nature of the processes and challenges contributing to brain drain. It is only through such comprehensive and integrated approaches that meaningful progress can be achieved in mitigating the adverse effects of brain drain and fostering the sustainable retention of talent within communities.

Need 5 – Addressing the fragility of the youth sector

A key challenge that demands immediate attention is the fragility of the youth sector itself, as evidenced by the recurrent fluctuations concerning the formulation and implementation of youth policies. The lack of policy coherence or continuity and these oscillations emerge as prominent factors undermining the resilience and efficacy of the youth sector. This perceived instability is often attributed to waning interest and diminishing prioritisation of youth-related policies, posing a significant barrier to a youth sector that accurately reflects the aspirations of young people.

For instance, insights from interviewed experts shed light on the inherent vulnerability of the youth sector in most of the studied geographies. Rather than actively engaging with and advocating for young individuals, the youth sector frequently finds itself

occupied with addressing its own internal crises that often involve financial challenges. The consensus among interviewed experts overwhelmingly favours a shift towards collaborative endeavours involving key stakeholders such as educational institutions, academia and business leaders. By emphasising the potential of synergy with diverse partners, a youth expert from the Western Balkans highlighted the prospect of collaborative efforts in mitigating youth brain drain and fostering collective action.

A critical challenge facing the youth sector is its low or lack of action in some areas, including policy development, contribution to enhancing social solidarity and efforts to increase knowledge and awareness regarding youth brain drain. Experts have raised concerns about the potential instrumentalisation of the youth sector and NGOs for purposes other than addressing youth issues with an insignificant role played by youth work. Some respondents attribute this trend to the dominance of external funding sources, which may prioritise specific agendas over youth-centred programmes. It is imperative to address these challenges to ensure an active role of the youth sector in combating youth brain drain and supporting the needs of young people.

Need 6 – Addressing lack of spaces and infrastructure

A critical challenge facing the youth sector is the uneven visibility and implementation of community engagement and collective endeavours across the studied geographies. Experts have highlighted this disparity, noting its contribution to a fragmented and culturally diverse yet disjointed population in many communities. Activists within the youth sector underscore the urgent need to prioritise the establishment of common spaces, actively seeking and creating “shared points of connection”. Central to this effort is the reinforcement of social belonging among young people and the prevention of a “fragmented society”. Therefore, a series of proactive measures is essential to address this challenge effectively.

Table 1. Possible areas of further intervention for the youth sector

	Areas of intervention	How?
1	Access to quality education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Advancing educational opportunities through advocacy ▶ Enhancing curricula ▶ Providing vocational training and certification ▶ Implementing scholarship programmes to promote student mobility ▶ Strengthening joint degree programmes between the EU and the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye ▶ Creating support mechanisms for transitioning from education to work ▶ Revamping the education system ▶ Enhancing the quality of primary education based on the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results

	Areas of intervention	How?
2	Job creation and economic opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Collaborating with governments and businesses to foster job creation ▶ Developing initiatives or policies to drive job growth ▶ Designing high school and university education programmes aligned with the job market and economic demands ▶ Facilitating mobility in vocational education and training ▶ Acknowledging academic and professional qualifications obtained internationally
3	Cultural and social engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Creating opportunities for cultural exchange and community engagement ▶ Maintaining cultural and social ties ▶ Increasing regional mobility schemes and fostering exchange between young people
4	Policy advocacy and reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Advocating for policy changes and reforms that support youth development ▶ Keeping track of young people who leave the home country and then return home ▶ Creating a database of young people studying and working abroad ▶ Involving young people and youth NGOs in drafting policies fostering brain circulation ▶ Establishing co-operation platforms for young people from the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye to exchange experiences
5	Entrepreneurship and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Supporting entrepreneurial ventures ▶ Providing mentorship ▶ Creating start-up ecosystems ▶ Investing in digital transformation in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye ▶ Increasing connectivity between the EU and studied geographies, as well as within the regions
6	Mental health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Supporting counselling services and mental health awareness campaigns ▶ Bringing down air pollution to EU average
7	Digital connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Facilitating remote work opportunities and digital skill development

* Note: although the interventions listed are wide-ranging, they show that the youth sector can help to better manage the brain drain processes by taking on different roles in different dimensions.



Conclusion

Youth brain drain in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Türkiye has been a concerning phenomenon for these geographies for more than two decades. This phenomenon has occurred in parallel with challenging economic transformations, political transitions and even armed conflicts. In the midst of such developments and the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, the issue of youth brain drain emerges as a critical factor influencing the development trajectories of the studied geographies.

While international opportunities have undoubtedly driven a considerable number of young people abroad to seek education, employment or simply better living standards abroad, this emigration has left a visible mark on both the local and national level in the Western Balkan region, the Eastern Partnership countries and Türkiye. This has affected the youth sector as well, including grassroots youth activist groups, national youth NGOs and regional organisations dealing with youth issues. Youth brain drain has already caused considerable socio-economic consequences. The effects of this demographic phenomenon affect not only youth NGOs but influence the cultural and social tapestry of the affected geographies, as the emigration of young people diminishes the vibrancy of local communities and suppresses the diversity that fuels societal progress.

However, while youth brain drain poses an existential threat to the development of the youth sector in certain countries and regions, it also presents an opportunity for strategic intervention and transformative change. A comprehensive and collaborative approach can not only mitigate the consequences of youth brain drain but can also harness the potential of young people living and working abroad. Special attention should be given to young people's knowledge, skills, and regional and international contacts that have an opportunity to benefit the sending countries in numerous ways. By leveraging those, the studied geographies can benefit from brain circulation that injects fresh perspectives and know-how into local contexts.

Turning brain drain into brain circulation in the studied regions has the potential to use the talent of their young emigrants as catalysts for sustainable development, democratic resilience and economic growth. The concept of brain circulation will be even more relevant in the coming years, as the regions included in this research will be on their way to EU accession and will fully benefit from visa-free travel. It is important to keep in mind that this research focused on understanding the reality of migration, the needs and motivations of young people and the consequences for the countries of origin. Therefore, it is crucial to follow up with an analysis of programmes and initiatives that harness the talents and capacities of migrant youth and the potential of brain circulation for the development of these three geographies and, ultimately, how it can inform potential actions by the youth sector.



Biographies

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This study provides insights for policy initiatives related to the phenomenon of youth brain drain and its repercussions on the youth sector in the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Türkiye. As global connectivity intensifies, an increasing number of talented young individuals from these geographies pursue educational and professional opportunities abroad, predominantly in the European Union countries, resulting in significant human capital loss and long-term economic and social challenges for their home countries. The study offers a comprehensive analysis of the causes, consequences and potential policy responses to youth brain drain in the countries covered.

Following a detailed examination of the theoretical aspects and practical implications, it delves into the socio-economic and cultural repercussions on young people and the youth sector. The study applies a broad interpretation of “young people”, considering the varied definitions in current legislations across these regions. The five chapters cover an overview of the current situation, the regional causes of youth brain drain and its detrimental effects. It then discusses policy implications and youth sector interventions, concluding with recommendations for future research and potential solutions to transform youth brain drain into brain circulation. Interviews and surveys with experts and youth workers offer an added dimension to the understanding of youth brain drain through the perspective of the youth sector.

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