

# Youth Partnership

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Partnership between the European Commission  
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## The impact of Covid-19 on young people and the youth sector in South-East Europe

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## Contents

LIST OF ACRONYMS	2
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES	2
Executive Summary	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Methodology	7
3. COVID-19 impact on young people and policy responses	8
3.1 Employment and economic situation	9
3.2 Education	13
3.2.1 Formal education – impact and immediate response	14
3.2.2 Non-Formal Education and Learning Mobility	19
3.3 Health, mental health, and well-being	20
4. COVID-19 impact on youth sector	23
5. Conclusions & Recommendations	26
REFERENCES	29
Annex 1: List of Experts Interviewed	35
Annex 2: Sample Interview	36

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

Covid-19	Coronavirus disease, an infectious disease caused by the SARS-nCoV-2 virus
EKCYP	European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy
EU	European Union
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
NEET	Not in Education Employment or Training
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SEE	South-East Europe
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
WB	Western Balkans
WHO	World Health Organisation

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table 1:** State of Emergency declared across region

**Table 2:** Overview of school closure per country

**Figure 1:** Youth priorities per country

## Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected every realm of young people's lives. This study examined its impact since early 2020 on young people and the youth sector in South-East Europe (SEE) region, with a special focus on non-EU countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye. The review focuses on the pandemic's impact on youth employment and young people's economic situation, (formal and non-formal) education and mental health and well-being. Other aspects of young people's lives, such as participation and digitalisation, were also considered when relevant to the analysis, but they were not the focus of the study.

Based on desk research and interviews, the following trends were observed in the region.

- The pandemic has exposed existing systemic political and economic weaknesses, particularly in terms of social protection and rights of young people and has highlighted an increase in corruption and authoritarian tendencies.
- Youth unemployment has increased during the pandemic, especially in the service industries.
- Quality of education has deteriorated across the SEE region, with teachers and educational institutions lacking training and skills for online teaching.
- A digital gap and digital inequality within and across countries were observed, particularly highlighting the impact of the pandemic on marginalised groups of young people and putting them at risk of exclusion, due to limited access to digital devices and the internet.
- Learning mobility, especially mobility to places outside of the region and to EU countries, was particularly affected by additional restrictions and administrative procedures.
- Digital mobility was not very effective, because of digital fatigue and the inability of online tools to capture all human interactions.
- Young people across SEE have experienced high levels of stress and anxiety due to the pandemic.
- Most youth organisations faced challenges to adapt to online working because of the nature of youth work. They also had to deal with the additional burden of financial insecurity, as the donor dependency of the youth sector remains an overarching trait across all countries analysed.
- Finally, the youth-policy response was limited and mainly focused on public health and regulation of formal education activities, without any special focus on young people or children, but rather as macro-level policies to respond to the overall health crisis.

Taking into consideration these overall findings, this report provides evidence-based recommendations for policy makers, the youth sector, the international donor community and youth researchers, with the aim of improving the post-Covid-19 recovery of the youth sector in the region.

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\* 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. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted and reshaped young people's lives. This research examines the ways in which the pandemic has affected young people and the youth sector in the South-East Europe (SEE) region, with a special focus on non-EU countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye.

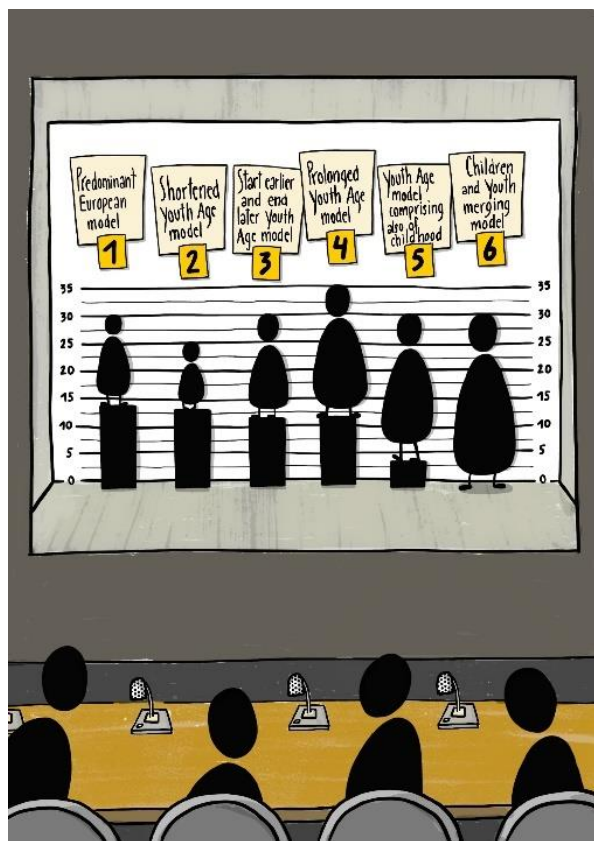
One of the immediate responses to the pandemic in early 2020 was the adoption of a variety of measures, such as lockdowns, declarations of states of emergency and curfews. The closure of schools, cancellation of non-formal education activities, limited mobility, adaptation to online activities, lack of capacities and infrastructure in remote areas, high unemployment rates and high levels of economic and social inequality, closed EU borders, as well as constant fear and pressure due to the global health situation, significantly affected young people and the youth sector in the region.

<b>Country</b>	<b>Date of first declared state of emergency</b>
Albania	24 March 2020
Bosnia and Herzegovina	17 March 2020
Kosovo*	15 March 2020
Montenegro	No state of emergency declared
North Macedonia	18 March 2020
Serbia	12 March 2020
Türkiye	No state of emergency declared

**Table 1:** State of emergency declaration dates across the SEE region

This study analyses the countries in the region which, due to shared history, culture and socio-economic features, tend to respond to crises, including the pandemic, following similar patterns. The countries in question are also not members of the European Union (EU), so they were not concerned by EU-wide regulations related to the pandemic and devised their own responses.

Countries of South-East Europe included in this study are characterised by generally young populations, with Kosovo\* being also the youngest country in Europe (World Bank, 2016) with 51% of its population under the age of 30 (Kosovo Agency of Statistics 2017). The definition of youth differs across countries, with Albania, North Macedonia and Türkiye considering the age range 15 to 29, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro use ages 15 to 30 and Kosovo\* 15 to 24. This report considers young people across the region to be aged 15 to 30.



*Youth age models across Europe  
Illustration by: Mireille van Bremen*

The population of the region has been in systematic decline for the past few decades, due to migration and brain drain, and the pandemic risked further worsening of the situation (De Feo 2021). According to Eurostat, the number of young Albanian people who have left the country in the last decade has reached 140 390 (roughly 21% of the young population<sup>1</sup>). Demands to leave the country during 2019 increased by 24%, ranking Albania high among the countries that risk rapidly ageing population and its depopulation in the long run (Partners Albania 2021). In a survey conducted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2021, 47% of the young respondents had considered emigrating, with almost a quarter (24%) considering leaving permanently (UNFPA Bosnia and Herzegovina, proMENTE and Ipsos 2021).

Young people in the region were particularly affected by the pandemic, as age-specific curfews and limitations on mobility were imposed on citizens during the first months of lockdown. In April 2020, age-restricted curfews were applied in 18 municipalities of Albania, allowing senior citizens and mothers with small children to take a walk outside (Top Channel Albania 2020). In Serbia, age-related curfews were also in place, mainly for the elderly population, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the age-related curfews differed at the entity and the cantonal level. Where imposed, the curfews targeted mainly young people under the age of 18 and the elderly above the age of 65 – a decision declared by the Constitutional Court to be in violation of the right to freedom of movement under the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms by the end of April (Zuvela 2020). Young people in Türkiye were also subjected to increased age-specific restrictions, curfews and regulations that prevented them from exercising their economic and social rights (Haktan et al. 2022).

Compared to EU countries, the restrictions imposed, particularly on the economy and hospitality sector, were generally of a short-term nature, due to the countries' limited social protection

<sup>1</sup> The percentage has been calculated by the authors, based on data of youth population in Albania in 2021, according to INSTAT. The total population aged 15-29 is 643 059.

measures and income dependence on economic activity. The population was also highly sceptical of the imposed restrictions due to low trust in government. The Gallup World Poll (OECD 2019) indicates that trust in national governments in the Western Balkans is generally lower than in OECD countries. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is only 23%, in Albania 34%, while in Serbia it is 48%, the highest in the region. Young people (15-29) in the region have shown to have the lowest confidence in their governments – 31% (OECD 2019). Government behaviour during the pandemic maintained these low trust levels at all levels. Transparency International’s 2020 report indicates that the countries in the region are struggling with anti-corruption efforts, despite aspirations towards EU membership (Transparency International 2020). This became even more evident during the pandemic. Rather than being treated as a serious health emergency, the “Covid-19 pandemic crisis produced a golden opportunity for authoritarian forces to undermine the rule of law and the state of democracy in the region” (Hoxhaj and Zhilla 2021). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the government procured 100 inadequate ventilators for over €5 million through a raspberry farm, rather than through a certified agency for medical equipment and supplies (OCCRP 2020).

In Serbia, the government lifted all Covid-19-related restrictions ahead of the parliamentary elections and was accused of downplaying the data in order to go ahead with the elections. The reintroduction of measures following the elections resulted in a series of anti-government protests (Janjevic 2020).

Protests were common throughout the region, with the pandemic causing political divisions in societies, polarisation and a rise of right-wing movements. In Albania, restrictions imposed by curfew in late 2020 resulted in a series of youth-organised protests across the country, motivated by the murder of 25-year-old Klodjan Rasha, who had apparently refused to stop after being spotted outside his home during the Covid-19 curfew and was shot by the police (Exit.al 2020).

This was not the only case of protests during the pandemic in Albania. In May 2020, civil society actors, including many youth organizations and activists, protested the demolition of the National Theatre in Tirana. The decision was taken overnight by the Municipal Council and immediately implemented in the evening of 18 May 2020, making the action legally questionable according to activists and protesters (Balkan Insight 2020).

In Türkiye, the pandemic caused political polarisation and rivalry. In the early months of the pandemic, the central government launched its own National Solidarity Campaign, asking citizens to make donations. When the campaigns organised by the local municipalities held by opposition parties were banned, the issue became divisive, creating polarisation between “our” campaign versus “their” campaign. Consequently, young people on social media and in opposition were very critical of the national shortcomings and failures, resulting in young people becoming politically mobilised and more likely to join opposition parties.

Taking into consideration this political and social context, this report captures the impact of the pandemic on young people in the region regarding education, employment, mental health, and the impact on the youth sector. It builds upon the findings with evidence-informed recommendations, addressing youth policy, youth work and youth research.

## 2. Methodology

The overall objective of this study was to conduct an in-depth analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people and the youth sector in South-East Europe, more precisely in the six countries of the Western Balkans region and Türkiye. The work builds on previous research on the immediate impact of the pandemic on young people and the youth sector, including the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership's [COVID-19 Knowledge Hub](#), the [research on the impact of the pandemic on Eastern Europe and South Caucasus](#) and other research and sources such as national reports and publications, with the aim to develop further recommendations targeting different stakeholders.

Methodologically, this study applies a qualitative research design approach, which allows for in-depth and thorough explorations. The research team used primary and secondary data sources for the study: desk research (documentary analysis) and expert interviews with youth-sector stakeholders. During the desk research phase, the team analysed published research, policy briefs, documents and reports from governments and official institutions; United Nations agencies (notably the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UNFPA, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Labour Organization (ILO)), the World Economic Forum, the World Health Organization (WHO), the EU, the Council of Europe and the Youth Partnership. Publications and research reports by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), universities and youth councils were extensively used. The authors were able to use sources in all the regional languages covered by the study (Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, English, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Serbian and Turkish).

Complementing the desk research, twelve in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with youth workers, researchers and policy makers. Interviews were carried out online, from May to October 2021, respecting the principle of informed consent and anonymity.

In addition, the authors participated in and collected data from the following events:

- the consultative meeting of the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy correspondents (EKCYC) and the members of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) (8 June 2021);
- EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership consultative meeting (10 June 2021);
- Expert Reflection meeting, "COVID-19 impact on youth sector in SEE" (25 June 2021);
- EKCYC-PEYR annual meeting (17 November 2021);
- Youth Mental Health in Action: Eastern Europe and Central Asia, UNICEF and Orygen global (25 August 2021);



- 5<sup>th</sup> Eastern Partnership Youth Forum, EaP Youth Forum Team, Ministry of Foreign affairs of Slovenia (23-24 November 2021);
- OECD Youth Week – series of events (20-24 September 2021);
- Western Balkans Digital Summit (11-13 October 2021);
- European Youth Forum and ILO Solutions for a youth-inclusive recovery (26 October 2021);
- EU Western Balkans Summit (6 October 2021).

### 3. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people and policy responses

In addition to the impact of the pandemic on political and democratic stability in the region, lowering trust in national governments and increasing authoritarian tendencies and political instability, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on young people particularly in the areas of employment and economic situation, education (formal, non-formal and mobility), and health, mental health and well-being. According to the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Balkan Barometer 2021, 49% of respondents consider unemployment to be the biggest problem facing their economy, an increase from 45% in 2020. Similarly, 63% of young people consider inadequate employment opportunities to be their greatest challenge (RCC Balkan Barometer, 2021). The pandemic further highlighted the existing challenges for young people in the region, exposing complex structural weaknesses and the need for policy interventions.

(All respondents, N=6000, share of total, %) scale from 1 to 5, share of total, %)

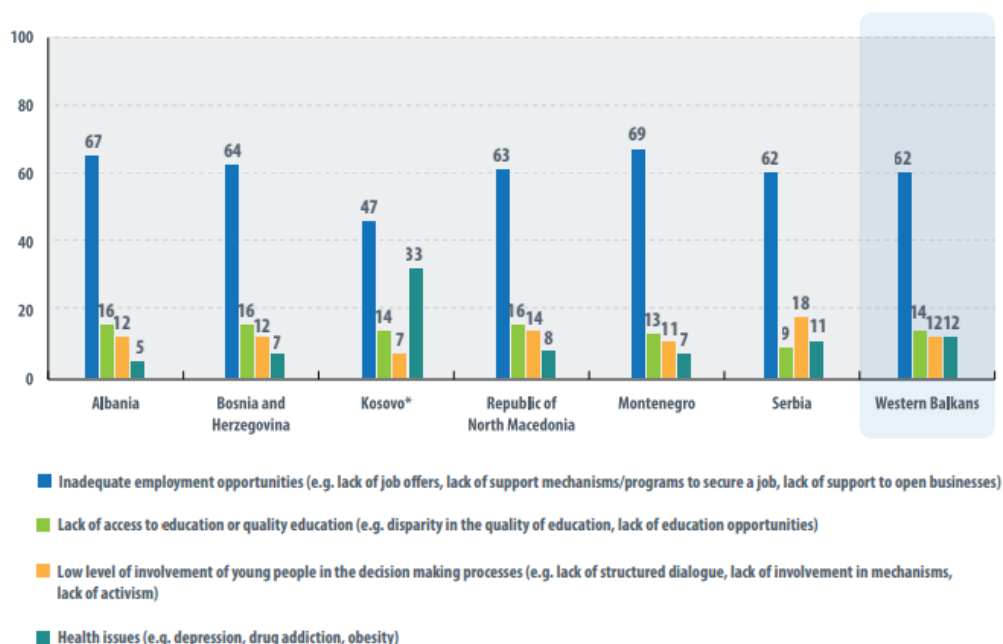


Figure 1: Youth priorities per country

*What, in your opinion is the biggest problem that young people face today?*

Source: RCC Balkan Barometer Public Opinion 2021

Most policy responses focused on immediate reactions to the pandemic, delivery of education, limited economic support to the unemployed, and almost no support for mental health and well-being. Youth-sector and civil-society organisations, themselves deeply affected by the crisis, tried to fill the gap in terms of service delivery where it was possible, in the context of limited interaction. It is important to emphasise that the impact of the pandemic on young people in the region is multidimensional and interconnected – it affects their work opportunities, income, educational outcomes and mental health. Therefore, any recovery efforts and interventions need to be cross-sectoral and holistic.

### 3.1 Employment and economic situation

The high youth unemployment rate was one of the main challenges in the region before the pandemic – in most countries in this study, youth unemployment was double that of adults. In 2013, the average youth unemployment rate in the European Union was about 26.4% , while in South-East Europe it was 48%. Labour-force participation averaged 53% for adults but was about 34% for youth aged 15-24 years (World Bank 2016). By 2020, right before the pandemic, the region was on the path towards economic recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. By 2019, unemployment had reached an all-time low in all Western Balkans countries – although it still remained higher than in EU countries. Unemployment rates ranged from around 10.3% in Serbia and 11.5% in Albania to 25.2 % in Kosovo\* (World Bank 2020).

The pandemic affected labour markets everywhere, impacting young people more than other age groups. The drop-in employment rates was much more pronounced in middle-income countries (ILO 2021). The ILO described the early impact of the crisis on young people as “systematic, deep and disproportionate” (ILO 2020). In 2021, the term “lockdown generation” was used to describe the impact on young people (ILO 2021).

Globally, youth employment fell by 8.7% in 2020, compared with a 3.7% decrease for adults. Younger workers either lost their jobs or experienced a delayed entry into the labour market. Based on the findings of the OECD (2021a, 2021b and 2021c), Konle-Seidl and Picarella (2021) identified major reasons why young people’s employment status and economic situations were affected more severely: young people generally work in sectors most affected by lockdown and social distancing measures, such as the hospitality industry; many young people working on temporary contracts lost their jobs as temporary workers were among the worst hit by the Covid-19 pandemic; and the lack of work-based learning opportunities and apprenticeships hampered the school-to-work transition and first entry to the labour market. Young people are mostly employed in retail, hospitality, tourism and entertainment industries, and they have considerably higher rates of part-time, freelance, casual, and precarious jobs (Dhillon and Cassidy 2018).

South-East European countries followed overall global trends: lockdowns, border closures and movement restrictions contributed to reduced activity, interrupting supply chains and the production and sale of goods and services. The impact was observed in two economic areas in particular: youth unemployment and the situation of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs).

As the pandemic began, in 2020, the youth employment rate for the 15-24 age group was below 27% in all Western Balkans economies, while the youth unemployment rate for the 15-24 age group was above 26% (compared to 16.8% in the EU-27 for the 15-24 age group) later in 2020 reaching 24.9% in Türkiye (TUIK 2020) and almost 50% in Kosovo (RCC 2021). Overall in the region, there was a 30% increase in registered youth unemployment between February and December 2020 (RCC 2021). Based on the data from the International Labour Organization (ILO 2021a), the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-21 led to a temporary reduction in employment (65% in spring 2020), but employment rates quickly rebounded to their old levels in late 2020. For instance, in Albania, in 2020, the youth unemployment rate for the 15-24 age group was 26.5 % (RCC 2021). The youth unemployment rate in North Macedonia in 2015 was 47%, almost double the national average of around 25% (ILO 2020).<sup>2</sup> However, as of 2019, unemployment remained an issue for North Macedonia (Petreski et al. 2019). In 2020, the overall unemployment rate dropped to 16%, while youth unemployment remained very high at 35.7% (RCC 2021).

Montenegro was badly affected by the collapse of its important tourism industry causing the youth unemployment rate to rise from 24% in 2019 to 36% in 2020. A large gender gap was also noted – with 41.6% of young men being active compared to just 31.1% of young women (RCC 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has only increased this gap across the region – the most vulnerable groups in the labour market remain women, youth, Roma and Travellers<sup>3</sup> and low-skilled workers. In addition, the share of young people (ages 15-29) not in education, employment, or training increased between 2019 and 2020 from 21.3% to 26.6% (European Commission 2020). It ranged from 15.9% in Serbia to 37.4% in Kosovo, compared to just 11.1% in the EU27 (RCC 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, Türkiye's late-2018 economic recession not only ended a period of increasing employment levels but also slashed more than 700 000 jobs. These losses affected young people (ages 15-24) in terms of a tougher labour market and can be measured by increases in their NEET rate (21.9 to 23.5%, 2018-2019) and unemployment rate (20.3 to 25.4 %, 2018-2019). Just when the economy had started growing again, the Covid-19 pandemic increased the NEET rate further, up to 27.1 % as of November 2020 (ILO 2021b), while by mid-2021 it reached 28.8%, the highest in the OECD (Bianet 20 May 2021).

The economic downturn, the loss of jobs and income and increased difficulties in entering the labour market also had an impact on young people's everyday lives: in Türkiye, a survey showed that 26% of respondents indicated they could not pay for their expenses such as rent, electricity and water; 18% borrowed from the bank or from acquaintances; 14% lost their jobs; 10% started to work from home during the pandemic (Habitat 2021).

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<sup>2</sup> Data for 2015 refers to the age group 15-34

<sup>3</sup> The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

As a result of the surge in Covid-19 cases, the Turkish government imposed weekend-long curfews in addition to restricting activities during weekdays from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. Similar restrictions were in place in Serbia. Some sectors were exempt from these restrictions (manufacturing, health, agriculture) and many professionals who performed their duties during weekdays continued their working lives as usual. However, hospitality establishments like cafes, bars and restaurants were not allowed to offer in-person dining services and other culture and social establishments like Turkish baths, theatres, cinemas and similar entertainment venues were closed altogether. As a result of such strict lockdowns of operations, many businesses started cutting down on employment and related costs.

Although the government put in place different schemes, such as unemployment benefits for certain groups, overall, the social security programmes could not prevent increasing unemployment. Young Turkish people faced a number of severe problems with regards to their working lives during the pandemic. Wage cuts, implementation of short-term work allowances or unpaid leave; unpaid overtime work; non-implementation of weekly and annual leave rights and cuts from transportation or food payments due to remote work; and difficulties benefiting from the Unemployment Insurance Fund were among the challenges experienced. Young female workers suffered comparatively more negative impacts of the pandemic (Kocak, 2021).

Although experts argue that the recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is different from previous ones in several ways and that once the pandemic passes, economic recovery is likely to take place at a faster pace than during a typical recession (Konle-Seidl & Picarella, 2021), for the South-East European countries, the negative consequences may not be so easy to remedy and will definitely have mid- and long-term impacts. For students who sustained themselves through temporary jobs, financing education and living costs became very difficult, which in turn may cause increased absence and dropout rates in formal education. Young people without income and suffering seriously from economic difficulties would also find it difficult to benefit from opportunities for non-formal education, learning mobility and opportunities for developing their competences.

The worsening economic conditions in the region also have the potential for increasing the brain drain. The prospects for long-term unemployment can also push many discouraged young people to abandon the labour market and education altogether and to migrate.

### *Policy and other responses*

As discussed above, restrictions and curfews targeted at young people deprived them from working and violated their working rights. The immediate consequences on youth employment required rapid responses from governments, especially with regard to social security.

In Albania, unemployment benefits were doubled during the pandemic, to the level of minimum wage. In September 2020, the Albanian government also launched an employment support

programme to provide subsidies to employers up to the level of the minimum wage, and social and health insurance for those who lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 pandemic (RCC 2021). In some countries, there were one-off interventions by the public authorities towards certain groups of young people facing economic and social difficulties: for example, in North Macedonia, unemployed young people received financial vouchers to purchase goods or travel nationally. Young people who worked in the industries particularly affected by the crisis were also directly supported with vouchers. “I think all of these measures were helpful to alleviate immediate challenges, but they are not able to provide sustainable, long-term support that can seriously improve the position of young people and youth organisations” (Dragan Atanasov, interview excerpt).

In Serbia, emergency one-off assistance equivalent to €100 was paid to all citizens over the age of 18. In North Macedonia, a similar one-off assistance (around €50) was paid to persons with low income and the youth population aged between 16 and 26 years in full-time education (ILO 2021c). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there was no national-level intervention and the measures differed across administrative entities. General support was provided for the business sector but there were no specific measures to protect youth employment (RCC 2021). Kosovo\* also implemented certain financial aid schemes, offering one-off payments to different groups of individuals affected by the economic downturn. However, they were not sustainable or sufficient (RCC 2021). Similarly in Montenegro, mitigation measures were taken in the form of subsidies on wages, with particular emphasis on the tourism and hospitality sectors. In Türkiye, municipalities covered young people’s utility bills and offered free internet schemes, food packages and tutoring for students who were having difficulties accessing online education (Atik and Genc 2022).

In Türkiye, the government announced an ambitious youth employment plan. The policy proposal aimed to bring down the youth unemployment rate from 25.3% in 2020 to 17.8% by 2023, according to the National Youth Employment Strategy document published in October 2021. The document, which covers the period until the end of 2023, was prepared with contributions from public institutions, faculties and non-governmental organisations (CSGB 2021).

Overall, the public health measures and associated lockdowns implemented by governments to limit the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic produced significant economic consequences that have exacerbated social and economic inequalities. An increase in poverty and inequality rates has been particularly felt in the economies already experiencing high levels of inequality, including the SEE countries, creating an additional challenge for their social and economic stability. Therefore, in most of the countries in the region, economic concerns quickly outweighed health concerns, and without the necessary financial backing for the economy, most restrictions were lifted in the first half of 2020 (Perugini and Vladisavljević 2021).

## 3.2 Education

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's education was one of the most obvious and immediate, in both formal and non-formal sectors. Schools and universities closed just at the start of the new semester, in March 2020, and non-formal activities were cancelled. All educational activities were transferred online, as a substitute to in-person education. The move to the digital format did not take into consideration various challenges, namely the need to adapt the curriculum to online teaching, lack of digital skills among educators and lack of access to technology, including devices and internet connection for young people. A particular impact was felt by young people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds due to lack of access, resulting in further social exclusion and lack of quality education. This section analyses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on formal education, non-formal education and youth learning mobility.

### 3.2.1 Formal education – impact and immediate response

Governments across the region closed schools and turned to a variety of online tools for the provision of formal education at all levels. As shown in Table 2, in most of the countries, full physical classes at all levels of education were resumed only in September 2021. In specific cases like Albania, Kosovo\* and Serbia, physical classes were resumed in September 2020 but with reduced hours. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the school closures and provision of in-person education differed per entity and canton.

In Albania in September 2021, the government attempted to apply reduced hours of teaching in primary and secondary education, however due to parents' protesting, full, regular hours were put in place. The longest school closure in the region was in North Macedonia.

In order to provide education services, governments introduced TV schooling as a region-wide solution for primary and secondary education, as an alternative to and in support of formal education. In Albania, Serbia and Türkiye the public TV broadcasters launched 3 channels dedicated to formal education by broadcasting lectures and classes. In Kosovo\*, TV classes continued during the 2021 school year as well.

For primary education students, TV ownership is widespread in the Western Balkans (at 98%), which is encouraging as mass broadcast was the preferred emergency delivery mode for primary students. Nevertheless, while Western Balkans countries have widespread access to television, which helps to guarantee a minimum level of equity, this medium is not sufficient for quality instruction, teacher-student interaction and individualised approaches to learning (World Bank 2021).

At higher education levels, according to Support HERE, Albanian higher education institutions (HEIs) created online platforms for their students using Google classroom (mostly in public universities), Moodle, Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc. Through these platforms, didactic materials were made available for all study programmes at the bachelor and master's level. Consequently, in the last week of March, in Albania, the online delivery of lectures, exercises, seminars, and course assignments began, reaching 55 000 students from public HEIs and 10 000 from private HEIs (this is partial information, since not all private HEIs have reported the statistical data). At the same time, the teaching management revised curricula in accordance with the teaching conditions (HERE 2020).

#### **Online teaching: Issues of accessibility and quality of education**

There were several issues associated with the change of the mode of schooling from the traditional, face-to-face format to online teaching: the interruption in education impacted the quality of learning and access to information services; curricula were not adapted to the different mode of learning; it limited social interaction; both teachers and students needed to have access to the internet and digital devices and possess a high level of digital skills, which was not always the case for either of the two groups; and the apparent digital gap increased already existing social inequalities and the exclusion of vulnerable groups among young people.

In Albania, 572 000 students from preschools to higher education were affected by the change to online teaching. At least 11 000 students were identified as not having access to online learning, many of them living in remote and rural areas with no internet or devices at home. Roma and Traveller children and children with learning difficulties and disabilities were also not able to access online learning (UNICEF Albania 2021). Several local and regional campaigns aimed to provide young people with the necessary technological equipment (laptops, tablets) and offering free internet connections to enable students to continue online education. However, these were mainly in the forms of donations, not as part of a digitalisation strategy or policy goal.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, during 2020, almost 10 000 children did not have access to the internet. Children from minority communities, poor families and children with disabilities were particularly affected. Some schools went out to meet children from vulnerable families, including Roma and Traveller children, paid them for 200-300 megabytes of internet per week and gave out laptops and computers, and some NGOs distributed tablets to children in support of online classes (Diskriminacija.ba 2021).

In North Macedonia, likewise, learning losses were greatest among children and youth from poor households, Roma and Traveller children and children with disabilities. They experienced insufficient access to education, lack of quality parental support and lack of school support, exacerbated by insufficient resources of many schools in the areas where these children predominantly reside (UNICEF North Macedonia 2021).

In Türkiye, according to the Habitat (2021) survey, due to the closure of universities, many young people had to move back with their parents and relocate to another city. As a result, they had to live in more crowded households – 53% of the respondents in Türkiye indicated that they did not have a room of their own. Moreover, according to the TOG Survey (2020), the majority of young people stated that they needed certain support to continue their educational pathways: the following needs of the young people during the pandemic were identified: scholarships (24%), computers (20%), psychological support (18%), books (18%), internet packages (11%) and mentorship (7%). Young people also highlighted that in the post-pandemic setting, they will need: free courses and certificate programmes (71%), scholarships (59%), youth-friendly spaces (58%), psychological support (52%), books (52%), computers (48%), internet packages (31%), participatory spaces (28%) and mentorship (18%).

The decreased quality of education remains an important issue, as the formal education system was not prepared for the change in the mode of delivery. Across the region, the decision-making processes regarding the adaptation of the education system to the pandemic lacked co-ordination and communication and suffered from inconsistency and a lack of transparency, which caused a lack of confidence among stakeholders (Korlu et al 2021).

Governments appear to have focused solely on formal education through the replication of the classic “lecture” approach through TV broadcasts and online internet platforms. This approach has had three important consequences. First, it has created new forms of exclusion, between those who have the necessary access to technology and those who do not. Second, this inequality is creating an ever-expanding gap between those who managed to sustain their education, even



online, and those who could not do so. And finally, the absence of school as a space for peer interaction and socialisation appears to have seriously held back peer learning, as students could not benefit from organised or spontaneous opportunities to interact and learn from each other.

Another important issue with the school and university closures in the region is that the education remained affected by the lockdown measures long after the measures were lifted for the other sectors. Unlike in the countries of the European Union, the hospitality, tourism and other industries in the Western Balkans reopened by the late spring 2020, with short and very limited periods of closure again in autumn 2020 and spring 2021, while schools mostly remained closed throughout the pandemic until September 2021, meaning that the education sector and young people carried the longest burden of the pandemic.

Level of education	Country	Date of closure of schools and switching to online education	Date of re-opening of physical classes
Pre-university education	Albania	March 2020	May 2020 (reduced teaching hours) September 2020 (reduced teaching hours) September 2021 (fully physical with regular full-time schedule)
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	March 2020	Schools reopened on 1 September 2020 in Republika Srpska and in the Sarajevo and Gorazde cantons.  In the Federation, physical classes started from 1 September for grades 1 to 4 with shorter teaching periods, classes with up to 15 students, stricter hygiene measures and obligatory mask wearing. Older primary school pupils as well as high-school students followed classes online. The other eight cantons in the Federation started the school year on 8 September 2020.  September 2021: regular physical classes resumed everywhere.
	Kosovo*	March 2020	The school year 2019/20 was concluded online; the following school year 2020/21 was resumed physically in September 2020 with reduced hours. September 2021 schools resume physically but in case of infections in specific schools, online scenarios were planned.
	Montenegro	March 2020	The schools reopened in October 2020 for the age group 6-16, while the other age groups continued online, including in-person consultations at schools every 15 days.  All schools reopened on 1 September 2021, but the duration of the school lessons is 30 minutes, and the curriculum was adjusted to that duration.
	North Macedonia	March 2020	The school year 2019/20 was concluded online; the following school year 2020/21 was conducted mainly online, making North Macedonia the country with the longest school closure for in-person learning, with the majority of students attending distance learning for a total of 54 weeks, a number significantly higher than the Europe and Central Asia region average of 25 weeks (UNICEF North Macedonia 2021).

			September 2021: schools reopened for all pupils.
	Serbia	March 2020	Schools remained closed for the rest of the school year 2019/20 with online classes. Physical classes resumed in September 2020 with reduced hours. 1 September 2021 marked the start of regular in-person classes.
	Türkiye	March 2020	Physical classes started on 21 September 2020. For school year 2021/22, schools opened physically on 6 September.
<b>University level &amp; higher education vocational</b>	Albania	March 2020	In June 2020, only a few universities such as engineering and medicine resumed laboratory practices physically, while the rest concluded the academic year online. From October 2020, higher education continued online. October 2021: fully physical teaching with regular, full-time schedule. However, the Ministry requested obligatory vaccination for students and lecturers in order to join physical classes or provide a negative PCR test. This decision faced several protests from young people.
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	March 2020	Academic year 2021/22: physical lectures resumed.
	Kosovo*	March 2020	Academic year 2021/22: physical lectures resumed.
	Montenegro	March 2020	Academic year 2021/22: physical lectures resumed.
	North Macedonia	March 2020	Academic year 2021/22: physical lectures resumed.
	Serbia	March 2020	Academic year 2020/21: the lectures were held online and practical classes took place in person, as long as this conforms to social distancing requirements. Academic year 2021/22: physical lectures resumed.
	Türkiye	March 2020	Academic year 2021/22: physical lectures resumed.

**Table 2:** Overview of school closure per country

### 3.2.2 Non-Formal Education and Learning Mobility

Learning mobility opportunities for young people in non-EU countries of South Eastern Europe has been mainly developed by and within the youth sector and youth NGOs, empowered by several regional and EU-backed initiatives such as [the Erasmus+ Programme](#) of the European Union, the former Youth in Action programme and currently the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). The EU programmes were supplemented by the establishment of the [Regional Youth Cooperation Office \(RYCO\)](#) and [Western Balkans Fund](#), developed within the Berlin Process, and by the establishment of the National Agencies in three countries of the region – Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The initiatives within the Berlin Process were also created with the aim to empower youth reconciliation and peacebuilding in the countries of former Yugoslavia and Albania.

Like schools, places where non-formal education activities were held – youth organisations, clubs and centres – were also closed at the beginning of 2020, limiting non-formal learning and mobility opportunities for young people.

Regional and international learning mobility in the region was significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. While the European Commission advised universities hosting exchange students within Erasmus+ to take their own measures, most students and volunteers from the SEE region residing in the EU returned to their home countries (being non-EU citizens also imposed extra challenges in terms of visa and residency regulations). Young people from these countries require residence permits when conducting activities in the EU for more than 90 days, including work and education, while citizens of Kosovo\* require an entry visa.

The administrative procedures and restrictions related to the pandemic posed obstacles for young people's mobility. Furthermore, vaccine requirements further hampered their mobility, either due to age limitations, lack of availability of vaccines, or vaccination with vaccines not approved by the European Medicines Agency. For instance, in Montenegro, numbers of positive Covid-19 cases were still high at the time of writing up this study.

Other forms of learning mobility, such as work camps, high-school student exchanges and voluntary placements were also negatively affected. The work camp organizations in Türkiye had to cancel all the work camps planned for 2020, for instance. With the ongoing pandemic and travel restrictions, in 2021 very few work camps were organised. There was also concern about the reluctance of local communities and families to act as hosts to international mobility projects (expert interview).

With youth mobility halted, the youth sector tried to explore the opportunities offered by digitalisation, undertaking new initiatives – tackling health care services, digital skills training, youth participation and non-formal educational programmes. Switching projects to an online format had similar advantages and disadvantages across the region. While they provided an alternative and complementary way of engagement, online activities posed several challenges for the youth sector in the delivery of innovative and sustainable programmes for young people.

The saturation of online activities over a short period of time created a digital fatigue which, coupled with social isolation, caused reluctance and lack of interest among young people and youth workers to take part in online activities. Following Eurostat data, in 2020 an estimated 79% of EU citizens used the internet every day – a percentage that has risen steadily over the last decade. The figures for the SEE region are similar, ranging from 67% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to as much as 93% in Kosovo\*. However, daily internet use among those under the age of 25 approaches 100% in all the countries of the region (Eurostat 2021). Such high usage of internet mainly on formal education, social media and leisure time increased the fatigue.

Additionally, it was not possible to conduct some activities online due to their nature and length or due to a lack of access to digital tools, equipment and digitally competent youth workers. Some programmes still require physical presence, or at least a hybrid format, if young people are to be successfully engaged. However, a specific challenge in the SEE region is the lack of national policies that would enable a digital transformation that could benefit the youth sector and young people.

In 2021, efforts were made to restart mobility opportunities with a learning aspect, especially across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. One of the main drivers was RYCO, which promoted regional mobility through several schemes such as the ROUTE WB6 programme and the Super Schools programme.

Although learning mobility projects and opportunities for mobility were still limited at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, interest in international mobility projects was on the rise. In Türkiye, E. Certel (National Director and youth-worker/trainer at YFU Türkiye) points out that the increase in the quantity of applications was not matched by their quality and that the record number of applications was accompanied by a record number of rejections. There are two main reasons for this trend. E. Certel highlights that, first, young people would like to be mobilised after almost two years of lockdowns and restrictions. This is a sort of swing of the pendulum, from no mobility to the desire to be as mobile as possible. Second, the state of the Turkish economy and deteriorating future prospects for young people are also a strong motivating factor. Young people are starting to see international projects as a possible window of opportunity to leave the country or gain some form of an advantage among their peers in a very narrow labour and education market.

### 3.3 Health, mental health and well-being

Public health systems in the region are based on universal health coverage. People who are active in the labour market contribute to universal healthcare through national social security schemes. Although health coverage is universal, the quality of care and the ability of the health system to respond to new challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, are low. While young people were not significantly affected by the pandemic in terms of physical health, the lockdowns, restrictions and crisis situation had a serious impact on their mental health and well-being.

Globally, preliminary evidence suggests that, compared with the general population, young people might be at greater risk of developing fears related to the Covid-19 pandemic and of suffering the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness, which are the consequences of physical distancing measures (World Health Organization Policy Brief on Young People 2021).

Similarly, in the countries covered by this study, the fear of the unknown, uncertainty about economic and social status, political volatility and instability, online education and interruption of mobilities influenced the mental health and well-being of young people.

However, due to economic dependence on services and lack of social support system, in all the countries covered by the study, except Türkiye, unlike in most of the EU, a total isolation and restrictions were not imposed, and social and economic life was never completely shut down, ensuring that social support system remained in place. After a short period in spring 2020 bars, restaurants, ski resorts etc. reopened, allowing for an increased social interaction. Yet, the uncertainties related to the pandemic had its toll on young people's mental health. In a survey conducted by World Vision Albania and Kosovo\* (2020), about 35% of participants report high level anxiety symptoms experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Young people also spoke of the following issues and feelings of uncertainty (51%), anger (36%), fear (34.5%), depression (33.9%), sense of worthlessness (32, 6%), despair (21.7%), panic attacks (21.5%), but also concern for their family and friends (57.5%) and for the future (45.7%) (Balcani Caucaso 2020).

In Türkiye, the most visible issue for young people was widespread depression. According to a research conducted by the influential NGOTOG Community Volunteers Foundation in 2020, in terms of mental well-being, the participants in TOG survey (2020) scored 2.8 points on average in the depression index question, while the average score for the index is considered 2.5, placing Turkish young people in a high depression level in 2020. According to the same study, 81% of the respondents defined their psychological condition as negative or very negative, by stating that they were psychologically and emotionally affected by the process.

Future expectations, work and economic conditions were other parameters that were negatively affected. In the Habitat (2021) study, 44% of the respondents were very anxious about the pandemic, 83% were anxious about the health of their own and those around them, 33% were anxious about the economy, and 20% were anxious about being able to continue working, 58% of the young people indicated that they did not feel ready for such an ongoing pandemic.

TOG Survey (2020) in Türkiye also revealed that there was an increase in watching TV series and using social media; whereas there was a decrease in shopping habits during the pandemic. The research also identified a 57% increase in "online meetings". Young people turned to online social networks as an alternative to face to face interactions. Moreover, the lockdowns created a discrepancy in education and with more time at home, TV and online tools were the plausible alternative to other leisure time activities for young people.

In North Macedonia, youth worry least about their own health and most about the health of family and friends. Most of the young respondents pointed out that the crisis has affected the success of their studies. The most frequent negative tool for dealing with the crisis is the increased consumption of alcohol (Kenig and Spanovski 2020).

Analyses show that gender differences are present, with females (M = 9.32) reporting higher levels of anxiety than males (M = 8.41) (WVI 2021). For all aspects, except the connection with friends, women/girls demonstrated lower well-being than men/boys. In North Macedonia, based on the initial results of a survey developed by UNFPA and Y-PEER, young people in North Macedonia were particularly concerned about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their mental health and financial situation. The responses from 700 young people thus far indicated that their access to health services has been reduced, their civic engagement has drastically decreased, their access to comprehensive sexuality education is almost non-existent, and they lacked information on how to report and respond to domestic violence (UNFPA North Macedonia 2020).

### *Policy and other responses*

Overall there has been almost no state response in the region to the impact of the pandemic on youth mental health. In general, there is a lack of services for young people that would support their mental health, especially considering the lack of social interaction due to school closures. Across the region there is a general stigma regarding mental health issues, and lack of services, which impacts on the willingness and ability to request a treatment (Lee, 2019) . On the other hand, there has been an increase in advocacy efforts observed that aim to address the need of young people for mental health support and also projects to enhance media literacy and combat misinformation.

Some efforts have been made by civil society, businesses and international community to provide mental health support services. Ad-hoc response programmes were developed, mostly by NGOs, such as SOS lines, organising Hackathons and awarding solutions that provided mental health support, developed mental health awareness programmes and counselling. For instance, in Albania in times of full lockdown, the most popular platform was [www.nukjevetem.al](http://www.nukjevetem.al), which offers free online counselling services, by authorised psychologists and in full accordance with professional ethics. However, no substantial effort has been made to address lack of systemic support for mental health and well-being such as lack of practitioners in the field and especially within formal educational institutions.

## 4. Covid-19 impact on youth sector

The Covid-19 pandemic had different implications on the youth sector in non-EU SEE countries, including youth policy frameworks, youth organisations' funding, internal capacities in terms of human and financial resources, which additionally posed challenges that required adapting services and programmes to the online sphere and navigating digital youth work.

In some of the countries across the region, youth policy development and implementation were strongly affected. With constantly changing and challenging political climate, the legal frameworks related to youth have been delayed and sidelined, impacting on the availability of state funding for the youth sector, with negative consequences for youth participation.

In North Macedonia the implementation of the new Law for youth participation and youth policy and the preparation of the new strategy for young people have been delayed (Expert Interview). The current Youth Strategy (2017-2021) in Montenegro expired at the end of the 2021, and the development and implementation of a new one is yet to be announced.

Taking into consideration the shared history of the region, youth work is necessarily connected with peacebuilding processes in the Western Balkans. In this light, the Covid-19 restrictions have directly affected the activities of peacebuilding youth organisations (for example, most of them could be organised only with physical presence, the donor priorities have shifted, etc).

The funding landscape across the youth sector was impacted negatively, resulting in fewer funds for NGOs, youth organisations and youth services, as these are often the first to be cut at the time of crisis. While the EU funding for the youth sector remained relatively consistent during the pandemic (Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021), countries in the region lacked capacities to absorb some of these, because their human resources were affected by the pandemic.

Internal capacities of organisations across the youth sector including programme expansion, outreach capacities, national and international projects, training and research were affected by the complexity of the delivery during Covid-19 pandemic (Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021). The situation in the non-EU SEE countries has hardly been different, ultimately affecting young people. In general, with projects shifting online – donors accepted financial amendments, which shifted focus of the youth sector towards reshaping both the outreach processes and organisational capacities.

The daily operations of youth organisations, particularly those that work with young people directly – ceased to deliver services to young people, amidst Covid-19 pandemic. Youth centres and youth clubs closed completely and didn't offer alternative approaches, since organisations lacked the human resources to adapt to the needs that the pandemic posed and run programmes safely, at the same scale.



As mentioned in the section on non-formal education, youth sector across the region adapted to the digital format and tools, using alternative ways of operation and reaching out to target groups and stakeholders. This required proper training, additional resources in terms of time and staffing, but also access to tools and equipment. Youth workers delivering on a local level and across rural areas have suffered both economically and socially as their projects were cancelled and youth centres were subject to very strict regulations and lockdowns.

Youth workers also had to adapt to the challenges that Covid-19 pandemic caused in terms of their skillset – especially tackling digital skills, coupled with fears for their employment, whilst working hard to deliver online programmes and reach out to young people. As one of the respondents highlighted – this duality of reality had an impact on the mental health and well-being of his colleagues – youth workers.

Across the region, in the long run – the potential impact of Covid-19 pandemic may reflect in rising expectations from institutions and donors for youth sector to move some of the services and activities to an online format. The pandemic showed that it is possible to do some activities fully online (such as transnational meetings and exchanges), which is more economically efficient. There is a growing concern across the youth sector in the region that donors will try to push organisations to do more of their work online in the future, which would affect the quality of services, decrease the number of young people they can reach and move youth work away from some of its core principles and approaches. In that regard, it would be important to provide support and coordination by the state to the youth sector, to complement the international donor assistance, but also to reduce the donor or funding dependency.

### *Policy and other responses*

In order to support the sector, governments in the region launched funding programmes for youth organisations and youth activities. In Albania, within the National Youth Agency, a consultative body that provides policy orientation to the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth in Albania, a call for projects was launched in July 2021 for youth organisations. The total grant foreseen for the call has been 19.200.000 ALL (equivalent approximately to € 150 000) (National Agency of Youth 2021). In North Macedonia youth organisations received direct financial support from the government, a first in this sector. The government of Kosovo\* offered support for the youth sector and mitigating the Covid-19 impact. One of the main responses includes the increase of the budget for grants and subsidies to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports due to the impact on sports and cultural activities (€5 000 000) (OECD 2021).

Overall, the lack of a cross sectoral youth policy response is a concern for the future of youth policy development. With the emerging evidence on the negative consequences and the challenges in all youth related areas coupled with the shrinking civil society, the youth policy responses should be updated and more resources and time should be invested. Evidence based policy making, relying on the data from research on the impact of the pandemic on young people and youth

sector is important. Without the use of evidence, any policy response is likely to fall short of the needs and offer remedy to challenges.

### *Youth Sector Response*

The youth sector response, across the region, focused on the following areas: maintaining programmes and services, engaging with young people (in person and online), adaptation to digital delivery of projects, advocacy and managing donor partnerships.

Initially, youth work sector did not manage to respond well to emerging Covid-19 pandemic, partly because it was unprepared, chronically underfinanced and with a low level of human and financial resources. At this stage, youth participation in activities was also low. Majority of organisations did not have an adequate digital infrastructure, including human resources with the advanced level of digital skills to adapt swiftly to an online delivery. At the beginning of the pandemic, the initial reaction from the youth sector was to put most activities on hold hoping for the quick normalisation. However, after the initial phase, it quickly started setting up and running the programmes, whilst ensuring young people participation. They used institutional support and sponsorships for digital tools to purchase necessary applications, software and professional accounts and created online platforms for programme delivery. High levels of solidarity among the youth and civil society organisations were noted during this period, providing opportunities for young people's engagement. This has further contributed to more adaptive and collective response of the sector, in order to engage as many young people as possible directly and in both online, hybrid and live format where possible. Similarly, umbrella youth organisations in the region continued their operations online, sometimes with the support of donors. (interview, Atanasov).

Youth sector was also able to build upon certain flexibility of the donors and the institutions when it came to modifications and delays in delivery, and even budgetary changes – allowing for programmes to take place and young people to be slowly reached at a larger scale.

Although adaptation to digital delivery of projects and online communication with young people across the region was at a slow pace, it resulted in a variety of digital training and other programmes being delivered online, which allowed organisations to continue their outreach services, such as detached work to supporting the mental health and well-being of young people, but also those of their parents.

Finally, the youth sector needed to invest a significant effort in advocacy and managing donor partnerships, since the sector has been directly influenced by the response of international aid across the region. The presence of international donors remains high, often filling the gap and supporting/impacting governments' decisions. Overall, the support is through grant schemes on

project basis. The youth sector, on the other hand, has strengthened its flexibility and resilience in complying with donor requests, while maintaining advocacy efforts aiming at programmes' expansion and the introduction of new measures for the youth sector's recovery.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

This report has taken into consideration the impact that the global Covid-19 pandemic has had on young people and the youth sector in the non-EU countries of South-East Europe. The pandemic has impacted the political stability and state of democracies in the region, exposing existing political and economic problems. The effects on young people were particularly prominent in the areas of employment, education, mental health and well-being and the youth sector at large.

The policy response, besides immediate action in the areas of public health, regulation of formal education and economy, has been quite limited, without any special focus on young people or children, but rather as macro-level policies to respond to the overall health crisis. Civil-society organisations and youth organisations have tried to fill in the gap through projects that focus on youth activities. Taking into consideration the findings above, the following research-informed actions should be considered to mitigate the long-term impact on young people and the youth sector.

### **Youth policy**

- Recovery plans and other policy responses to the pandemic should be cross-sectoral and targeted to the needs and priorities of young people.
- Governments should allocate more funding to youth employment programmes and employment support schemes for young people to facilitate their school-to-work transition, gaining work experience and economic independence.
- Education ministries should take concrete measures in terms of provision of platforms and digital tools for learning and building capacities of teachers to use digital tools, such as provision of quality training programmes.
- School curricula and teaching methods should be adapted to online learning. Investments should be made in digital infrastructure in schools in remote areas and targeted support to children from vulnerable groups.
- There is a need for more funding for mental-health support services by governments, as well as increased availability of online mental-health support.
- To support young people's mental health and well-being, school psychologists can play a crucial role in supporting young people in education. At the same time, youth-friendly centres and facilities at a local level with adequate support should be strengthened, to ensure availability of support systems in youth spaces.
- Youth-friendly vaccination and information campaigns about Covid-19 could be organised.

## **Youth sector**

- Funding and recognition of youth work as such remains a priority for the sector. In this light, advocacy campaigns on the importance of non-formal education and youth mobility remain a necessity, as does advocacy for more funds aimed at addressing the young people's immediate needs caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- In order to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people and the youth sector, it is important to build the youth sector's capacities, especially youth-led organisations in terms of digital skills.
- Youth organisations should explore different modalities of learning, including hybrid, online and blended activities.
- The youth sector should design more capacity-building interventions focused on developing young people's employability skills to support their entry into the labour market.
- The youth sector has the knowledge and capacity to support school teachers with non-formal education tools that can be used during online teaching to improve the quality of teaching.
- Youth organisations should initiate projects and actions and create and provide support structures to promote mental health and well-being.
- Youth organisations should also signpost and increase the positive pressure on cases of fundamental rights abuses of young people during lockdowns.

## **International donors working on and with youth**

- The donor community should have specific programmes/funding schemes to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the youth sector.
- Grant application procedures should be simplified to lower administrative barriers and allow smaller youth organisations to apply for funding.
- The donor community can support bridging the digital gap among marginalised youth through specific inclusivity and capacity-building programmes to offer support and training to youth organisations working with vulnerable youth and in remote areas.
- More support for funding of youth organisations with a focus on outdoor and health-education activities is needed to support young people's well-being.

## **Youth research**

- There is a lack of systematic evidence-based research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the SEE region, as well as within each country. Detailed exploration of the effects of the pandemic on young people and the youth sector is needed.
- More in-depth targeted research is needed on the situation and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on marginalised young people and youth in rural and remote areas.
- This report has given a general overview of the impact of the pandemic in the last two years in the region, focusing on the most pressing issues. Future research should address other topics which are not fully analysed here such as youth participation, youth rights, digitalisation, etc.
- Finally, future research should also measure the mid- and long-term impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on young people and the youth sector.

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## Annex 1: Experts Interviewed

Anonymous, Programme Manager, civil society, Serbia

Anonymous, Youth Officer, Serbia

Anonymous, Political Assistant, Montenegro

Anonymous, Youth Worker and NGO Executive Director, Montenegro

Anonymous, Youth Officer, Montenegro

Asuman Goksel, PhD – Researcher, Academic; Türkiye

Blerjana Bino – Civil society, Albania

Dragan Atanasov – Youth worker/trainer, North Macedonia

Elda Zotaj – Youth researcher and working in higher education system, Albania

Emi Dautaj – Erasmus Student Network Albania, Albania

Eylem Certel – YFU Türkiye, Youth worker/trainer, Türkiye

Megi Ruka – RYCO, Albania

## Annex 2: Sample Interview questions

### Profiling – Warm Up:

- A- Name/Profession/Link with Youth and Youth Work (Role – Institution – Past Experience)
- B- How were you personally affected by Covid-19: personal life, challenges, difficulties, how did/do you feel?

### Covid-19 professional impact:

- C- How did your work responded to Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns initially?
- D- How did you change your practice and approach over time?
- E- What were the 3 most important difficulties you faced during the lockdown/because of pandemic?
- F- What were 3 most useful approaches-practices you used to face these challenges?
- G- What were the support mechanisms? Institutional /non institutional? (state – municipalities – other NGOs)
- H- How is your practice now? Did you start? What is different from before?

### Covid-19 youth & youth sector

- I- In general how would you evaluate the young people you work with/organisations you work were with affected from the pandemic?
- J- What are the elements that will affect the future of youth and youth work?
- K- What are the practices/policies you would like to keep?
- L- What are the practices/policies you would not like to come back?

### Digitalisation

- M- What do you think of the switch made to online practices? Did it work? What works and what not?
- N- To what extent you will keep digital practices? Why?

### Policy Responses

- i- How would you assess the responses by the state institutions to the pandemic, regarding youth and youth work?
- ii- How do you assess the responses of civil society and youth sector?
- iii- How do you assess the responses by young people?

Anything else you would like to add or discuss more?