Imagining Europe from the Western Balkans:
Youth Perspectives from Albania

Young people in Albania express a cautious but lasting connection to Europe. Europe is seen less as a political reality in everyday life and more as a reference point shaped by shared values, opportunities, and responsibilities, while EU accession remains an important but contested issue. This outlook combines hope in Europe's potential with frustration over exclusion, double standards, and the limited involvement of young people in political decision-making, resulting in an overall forward-looking yet reserved view of Europe's future.

> "Europe is like a Swiss Clock. The moment the smallest part of the clock stops working, the whole clock stops.

How Young People Understand Europe

What Europe Means for Young People in This Context

The focus group discussions revealed a predominantly hopeful yet nuanced perception of Europe among young people in Albania. Europe is largely seen beyond the European Union as a continent of values, opportunities, and responsibilities, while EU accession remains an important but contested reference point. Participants expressed strong interest, critical reflection, and emotional engagement, combining optimism about Europe's potential with frustration over exclusion, double standards, and limited youth inclusion.

Europe represents opportunity, peace, freedom, mobility, and standards. For many, Europe is a future-oriented reference point rather than a lived daily reality. Across the responses, the following were mentioned: Europe is primarily seen as a continent and region, but also as a shared political, economic, and cultural space. Young people associate it strongly with *diversity, culture, cooperation, and human rights, alongside ideas of opportunity, wellbeing, security, and future prospects*. At the same time, several describe Europe as a family-like space structured by rules and equality, yet one that offers belonging, stability, and hope.

> "We don't experience Europe in our daily life, but we plan our future around it.

Europe and the Western Balkans

Europe is often understood through the lens of EU accession, but many participants stressed that Europe is broader than the EU. The Western Balkans were implicitly positioned as "part of Europe," yet often treated as *external or peripheral*. This was evident in what one participant said:

> "When we say, 'Western Balkans,' it already puts us outside Europe, even though we are part of it.

Europe in the World

Europe was discussed as historically and structurally interconnected with the rest of the world. *Participants rejected the idea of a*

self-contained or isolated Europe. Europe is perceived as part of a global cause-and-effect system, not an isolated continent. Young people expect Europe to act as a *responsible global actor*, especially in times of war and crisis. Europe's credibility is linked to consistent value-based action beyond its borders. An inward-looking Europe was explicitly rejected as unrealistic and undesirable.

Europe should act as a value-based global actor, standing for peace, freedom, unity, and responsibility, and responding more decisively and coherently to international crises. Participants referred to the war in Ukraine and the protests in Serbia as examples where they expected a clearer and stronger European stance.

The Role of Youth and Political Agency

How Young People See Their Own Role and Limitations

Young people see themselves as part of Europe's future and as carriers of European values, but they do not feel sufficiently included in decision-making or shaping Europe's direction. They explained that their views are mainly formed through education, participation in civil society, and mobility experiences, which expose them to European systems and values while also making the lack of real influence and equal access more visible.

Participants stressed that *Europe's future should be built on cooperation, shared responsibility, and inclusion*, with young people actively involved rather than consulted symbolically. They expressed a desire for Europe that genuinely listens to youth perspectives, adapts to social and generational changes, and evolves beyond rigid institutional frameworks by translating values such as diversity, equality, and participation into everyday practice.

Young people emphasized the need for meaningful inclusion, not symbolic consultation. Participation should go beyond programs and projects, and allow youth to influence decisions, priorities, and narratives about Europe. *Education, civil society engagement, and mobility were seen as key pathways*, but access should be more equal, transparent, and diverse.

These views can be summed up by a sentence heard during the discussion:

> "Young people are expected to carry European values, but we are rarely asked to shape them.

Key Topics for Young People

Participants frequently grounded their views on Europe in personal experiences and lived realities, rather than abstract concepts. Several young people cited their educational paths, interest in politics or history, and involvement in civil society as key factors shaping how they understand Europe and its role.

Experiences of studying, travelling, or participating in European or regional programmes were repeatedly mentioned as moments when Europe became tangible and meaningful. Participants frequently referred to concrete experiences like traineeships in the European Parliament, participation in Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) programmes, and involvement in Erasmus+ study and training exchanges.

Collective language was commonly used, with participants referring to themselves as *"we as young people"* and to *"our region"*, particularly when discussing inclusion, opportunities, and Europe's relationship with the Western Balkans. These expressions reflected strong generational and regional framing, emphasizing shared challenges, expectations, and aspirations, as well as a sense of collective responsibility in shaping Europe's future.

In addition to the qualitative insights from the focus groups, the wider group of participants identified a *set of priority issues they asso-*

ciate with Europe's present and future role. These themes reflect areas where young people expect stronger European engagement and impact:

- Education and educating youth (most frequently mentioned), including quality, access, and relevance to the labour market
- Youth employability and fair access to jobs
- Youth activism and civic engagement
- Rule of law, justice, and the judiciary, including anti-corruption efforts
- Corruption as a major concern affecting trust and opportunity
- Public infrastructure, including public transport and railways
- Environment and climate protection
- Cybersecurity and data security
- Humanity and human dignity as core European values
- A secure Europe, understood as social, political, and institutional security

Participants with policy studies or civil society experience demonstrated a deeper understanding of Europe and EU processes. Others showed fragmented knowledge, often based on media narratives rather than concrete institutional understanding. Some viewed Europe primarily as an opportunity structure. Others focused on identity, values, and long-term global responsibility.

Emotional Landscape and Differences

During the discussion, there were clear instances of hope, particularly in relation to *Europe's potential role as a peacebuilding, unifying, and value-based global actor*. At the same time, frustration was expressed with regard to the absence of a shared European political identity, the continued dominance of national interests, and the perceived gap between proclaimed values and political practice. In addition, a degree of skepticism was articulated by a smaller number of participants, mainly concerning the prospects for institutional change and the credibility of the EU enlargement process. Alongside this, participants spoke of Europe as an aspirational space defined by diversity, cooperation, and shared values, rather than by strong feelings of personal belonging.

Participants repeatedly expressed hope that Europe can remain *a peace project and a global reference point for democracy and cooperation*. At the same time, there was a strong concern that without sustained attention to youth perspectives and without addressing structural inequalities, *Europe risks losing relevance and trust among younger generations*. In this context, participants pointed to a recurring tension between Europe's inclusive discourse and practices marked by *unequal access and double standards*.

No clear urban–rural divide was explicitly articulated in the discussion, although differences in outlook were shaped by varying degrees of international exposure. One participant articulated a more pronounced skeptical position, grounded in a stronger nation-state-oriented perspective.

Concluding Insights

The overall tone of the discussions was predominantly hopeful, with most participants expressing belief in Europe's potential as a space of peace, cooperation, and shared values. This hopeful outlook was accompanied by elements of frustration, particularly regarding exclusion, slow institutional change, and the gap between European ideals and practice. A small number of participants expressed a more pragmatic or skeptical tone, mainly in relation to EU enlargement and the credibility of institutional transformation, resulting in an overall mixed but forward-looking mood.

Methodological note

The deliberative workshop in Tirana brought together young people aged 18–25 from a range of backgrounds. Discussions were guided by a trained team consisting of one moderator and two facilitators, and partic-

ipants were provided with relevant background materials in advance. While the workshop offered rich qualitative insights, the group was not intended to be representative of the broader Albanian youth population.

The level of interest in the topic was very high. This was evidenced by full participation throughout the entire workshop day, active engagement in all discussions, open and voluntary sharing of opinions, and continued conversations during breaks and lunch. Participants demonstrated sustained attention, curiosity, and willingness to engage critically with complex issues related to Europe and its future and expressed a high level of satisfaction at the end of the day.

The level of knowledge among participants varied, but engagement remained high. Participants with backgrounds in policy-related studies or active involvement in civil society demonstrated a stronger and more structured understanding of Europe and European Union–related issues. Other participants showed more fragmented knowledge, largely shaped by political discourse, media narratives, or sporadic information, and generally lacked clarity regarding the rights, responsibilities, and practical implications of being an EU citizen.

About the project

Youth Agency and New Political Imaginaries in the Western Balkans is a regional research and policy-oriented project that brings young people's perspectives into discussions on Europe and democratic change in the region. The project explores how young people understand Europe, political agency, and the future of the Western Balkans within Europe. It is structured around three interconnected pillars – RECAS postdoc fellowship, Academic Policy Lab and deliberative workshops that gathered 92 students in total. Through deliberative workshops conducted in seven Western Balkan capitals, youth views are articulated and synthesized into country snapshots that inform fellows' research and subsequent policy-oriented work. By connecting youth perspectives with collective analysis and targeted policy work, the project aims to support democratic innovation and regional cooperation while staying close to young people's lived experiences.

About RECAS network

The Regional Network of Centers for Advanced Studies (RECAS) is a collaborative academic network bringing together research centers across Southeast Europe. It aims to strengthen regional cooperation, support early-career researchers, and promote high-quality, interdisciplinary research on key societal challenges. Through fellowships, joint research activities, and policy-oriented initiatives, RECAS fosters knowledge exchange within the region and between Southeast Europe and wider European and global academic and policy communities.

Supported by:

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS
WESTERN BALKANS

ERSTE Stiftung

Rockefeller Brothers Fund
Philanthropy for an Interdependent World