Imagining Europe from the Western Balkans:
Youth Perspectives from Bosnia and Herzegovina

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina articulate a predominantly pragmatic and cautious relationship with Europe. The European Union is perceived neither as an idealized project nor as an object of outright rejection, but as a necessary yet imperfect partner that continues to shape expectations around education, mobility, and long-term life opportunities. While Europe is widely associated with peace, stability, and economic prospects, trust in the EU's fairness, consistency, and long-term commitment to the Western Balkans remains limited. As a result, young people both depend on Europe and remain skeptical of it, combining practical reliance with a weak and uncertain emotional connection, influenced by local and regional conditions.

> "As long as there is no shooting (war), things are fine.

How Young People Understand Europe

What Europe Means for Young People in This Context

Participants frequently described Europe and the EU as *external actors that impose rules and standards while distancing themselves from responsibility* for their long-term social, economic, and political consequences. The Western Balkans were widely perceived as geographically European yet politically and symbolically excluded from the European project. A repeated concern was that even in the event of future accession, *Western Balkan countries might continue to occupy the position of "second-class members"* within the EU.

In addition, participants raised *concerns about the EU's potential role in the exploitation* of natural resources, particularly in relation to mining and energy projects such as lithium extraction. Despite these criticisms, most participants agreed that the Western Balkans have no viable alternative to the EU, reinforcing the perception of European integration as a strategic necessity rather than a choice driven primarily by shared values.

Europe and the Western Balkans

For most participants, Europe primarily represents *opportunity*, particularly in relation to education (mostly Erasmus programmes), *improved employment prospects, higher living standards, and freedom of movement*. At the same time, the EU was rarely perceived as an actor that directly shaped young people's everyday lives. Instead, it was more often described as a future-oriented option or a safety net, especially for studying or working abroad.

European identity among participants was generally weak. Most young people identified primarily as Balkan, and only secondary or not at all, as European. This distinction between Europe and the Balkans was clearly articulated by one participant:

> The Balkans are completely their own thing; we have always been labeled as Balkan.

This suggests that Europe is understood mainly as an *institutional and economic space* rather than as a cultural or identity-based community. At the same time, Europe was described as an entity that imposes rules and standards perceived as both external and necessary, as one participant noted:

> The EU imposes rules on us, but at the same time, those rules are necessary.

Europe in the World

In a global context, the *EU was perceived as economically powerful but politically passive*. Participants most often described its influence as being exercised through rules, standards, diplomacy, and economic mechanisms, rather than through decisive political or security leadership. The EU was frequently characterized as a passive observer in global and regional crises. Europe was widely perceived as a *space where war is unlikely or unnecessary*. Interestingly, the war in Ukraine was largely absent from discussions. The EU was occasionally compared to the United States of America, particularly in relation to individualism and lifestyle, reinforcing *perceptions of cultural distance rather than political proximity*.

The dominant view among participants was that the EU should maintain a mediatory and observer role, with a strong focus on economic support, investments, and development projects – particularly for the Western Balkans. Most participants emphasized that local problems should be solved primarily by Western Balkan states themselves, with the EU acting as a supportive partner rather than a direct leader. *Criticism of double standards* was common, especially when comparing the EU's approach toward Ukraine and its engagement with the Western Balkans. This reinforced perceptions of inconsistency and selective commitment.

The Role of Youth and Political Agency

How Young People See Their Own Role and Limitations

Young people largely perceive themselves as important agents of future change, yet lacking real political power or influence. There was a strong sense of *exclusion from decision-making* processes, both at national and European levels.

Participants frequently expressed frustration that *high expectations are placed on young people*, while resources, institutional platforms, and trust remain insufficient. Older generations were often perceived as conservative gatekeepers, slowing down reform processes and limiting youth participation. This perception was particularly associated with the context of the Western Balkans.

Participants proposed several mechanisms through which young people could play a more active role in shaping Europe's future. These included *stronger and institutionalized youth participation*, the creation of Youth Advisory Councils at both EU and regional levels, and the expansion and redesign of Erasmus programs, particularly those focused on entrepreneurship and skills development. Additional proposals emphasized the need for ethical regulation of artificial intelligence and new technologies, as well as a stronger focus on green policies and climate action, including the extension of the EU Green Deal to the Western Balkans.

Key Topics for Young People

The most common ideas identified across discussions included a strong association of the *EU* with *peace, economic stability, education, and mobility*, while the *Western Balkans* were often described as *warm and collectivist*, yet *constrained by corruption and*

political stagnation. Young people were consistently described as having high potential but limited influence.

Participants identified a set of key issues they associate with Europe's current role and future relevance for young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting both immediate concerns and broader structural challenges:

- Education (particularly access to quality education);
- Employment and economic security;
- Rule of law and institutional reform;
- Corruption (identified as a central obstacle);
- Environmental protection and climate change;
- Digital transformation and artificial intelligence;
- Brain drain and youth emigration;

Participants generally expressed hopes related to improved living standards, access to quality education, and economic opportunities, while their concerns focused on brain drain, resource exploitation, the rise of far-right politics in Europe, and the potential marginalization of the Western Balkans within the EU.

Emotional Landscape and Differences

The emotional tone of the discussions was marked by a mix of *frustration, caution, and restrained hope*. Frustration was most strongly directed at domestic political conditions, perceived stagnation, and the slow pace of European integration, which many participants associated with uncertainty and limited personal prospects. This was often accompanied by skepticism toward the EU's capacity to act decisively or consistently, particularly in a changing global context.

At the same time, participants expressed cautious hope linked to concrete opportunities related to education, mobility, and the possibility of improved living standards. These expectations were typically pragmatic rather than idealistic and were framed in terms of individual futures rather than collective political transformation. Alongside these ambivalent feelings toward Europe, a noticeable sense of pride in Balkan identity emerged, functioning as an emotional anchor and a source of belonging amid broader uncertainty. Differences between participants were less about opposing emotions and more about their intensity, with optimism and skepticism coexisting rather than clearly dividing the group.

Concluding Insights

Overall, young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina *neither reject Europe nor fully trust it*. The European Union is perceived as a necessary but imperfect partner, one that offers important opportunities in education, mobility, and economic development, while also raising concerns about fairness, consistency, and long-term commitment to the region. Participants often expressed *internally ambivalent views*: while criticizing the EU for imposing rules, double standards, and potential resource exploitation, they simultaneously acknowledged the need for EU standards and legal frameworks, particularly in relation to governance, the rule of law, and institutional reform.

Despite *skepticism about the EU's relevance to everyday life*, many participants continue to link their educational, professional, and long-term personal futures to Europe. At the same time, Europe is widely imagined as a stable and secure space, with little anticipation of internal conflict, reinforcing its role as a reference point for peace and order. Taken together, these perspectives reflect a *pragmatic and cautious engagement with Europe*. The EU is seen less as an idealized project and more as a strategic reality: central to the region's future yet marked by fragile trust in its political leadership and enlargement process. From the perspective of young people, Europe's future relevance in the Western Balkans depends on more credible commit-

ments, meaningful inclusion of youth voices, and tangible investments that align declared values with lived realities.

Methodological note

The deliberative workshop in Sarajevo 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 participants 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 BiH youth population.

Interest in the topic was high, particularly in relation to education, mobility, climate action, and youth opportunities. *The overall level of knowledge was moderate to low*. Participants demonstrated strong awareness of EU values and benefits, but limited understanding of EU institutions, decision-making processes, and accession mechanisms.

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.

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