# Imagining Europe from the Western Balkans:
## Youth Perspectives from Montenegro

*Young people in Montenegro express a cautious and ambivalent relationship with Europe and the European Union. Europe is associated with higher living standards, stability, and opportunity, but also perceived as distant, slow, and weakly connected to the realities of younger generations. Uncertainty surrounding the accession process, particularly the absence of clear timelines and outcomes, reinforces confusion and limits Europe's perceived relevance in everyday life. EU-related issues are often framed as matters for older generations, contributing to emotional distance and limited youth engagement. At the same time, Europe remains an important reference point, especially in relation to governance, mobility, and long-term prospects. Overall, the tone is mixed, combining moderate optimism with uncertainty and apprehension, and pointing to the need for clearer communication and more youth-oriented engagement with European processes.*

> "We talk a lot about the EU but rarely understand how it actually works.

## How Young People Understand Europe

### What Europe Means for Young People in This Context

Europe is primarily understood as a space associated with *higher living standards, better economic opportunities, and more stable social and political systems*. Participants most often linked Europe with order, institutional predictability, rights, and security, framing it as a reference point for *"how things should work,"* particularly in contrast to domestic political instability and uncertainty. Europe was frequently described less as a political project and more as a union of values, associated with fairness, social protection, and everyday security.

Concrete aspects such as *freedom of movement, fairer labour conditions, and access to safer public spaces* further shaped how Europe is perceived. These elements were often mentioned as tangible indicators of European standards, reinforcing the idea of Europe as a space of opportunity and protection, especially for young people. At the same time, Europe remains distant and abstract for many. The EU was described as *complex, bureaucratic, and difficult to understand*, with its relevance to young people's everyday lives remaining unclear. Uncertainty surrounding the accession process, particularly the absence of clear timelines and visible outcomes, contributes to a sense of waiting and reinforces Europe's role as a long-term horizon rather than an immediate political reality.

> "My attitude has changed significantly after I travelled and saw how people live there... I realised that the European Union is not primarily a political union, but a union of values.

### Europe and the Western Balkans

Europe is commonly understood in *contrast to the Western Balkans*, with participants

emphasizing differences in governance quality, economic development, and institutional functioning. The region was often described as lagging behind Europe, not only in material terms but also in political stability and administrative capacity. In this comparative framing, Europe functions as a benchmark, while the Western Balkans are positioned as transitional and still "catching up."

At the same time, discussions revealed a strong sense of frustration regarding the EU's approach toward the Western Balkans. The accession process was frequently described as *slow, conditional, and uneven*, with perceptions that certain countries or political actors are favoured over others. Montenegro's status as the most advanced candidate country generated ambivalent reactions: while it suggested proximity to the EU, it also intensified frustration, as prolonged negotiations have not resulted in visible progress or tangible benefits for young people.

> "We are a very small country, so we would not have any real say, and we would not have extensive rights, because there are much stronger and bigger countries than us.

Participants also referred to a broader sense of *enlargement fatigue*, affecting both the EU and the region. EU-funded programmes were often viewed as inefficient or insufficiently visible, contributing to skepticism about their real impact. While many expressed a *desire for faster integration*, this was accompanied by calls for clearer communication regarding criteria, timelines, and responsibilities, particularly toward younger generations. As a result, Europe was often perceived as both an aspirational reference point and a selective gatekeeper: setting standards without offering transparent or predictable pathways to inclusion.

### Europe in the World

Europe is generally perceived as an *important global actor*, but not as a particularly decisive or coherent one. Participants often referred to the *EU's internal divisions, slow decision-making, and bureaucratic complexity* as factors that limit its ability to act effectively on the international stage. As a result, Europe's global role was more commonly associated with regulation, standards, and economic influence than with political leadership or strategic action.

In relation to global crises and geopolitical tensions, participants expressed *uncertainty about the EU's capacity to respond* in a unified and timely manner. Europe was rarely perceived as a strong security actor, and its influence was often seen as constrained by competing national interests within the Union. This contributed to a more cautious assessment of Europe's global relevance, particularly when compared to other international actors.

## The Role of Youth and Political Agency

### How Young People See Their Own Role and Limitations

Young people in Montenegro articulated a *limited sense of political agency* in relation to the European Union. Rather than seeing themselves as active participants in European decision-making, they described their position as largely external to EU processes, with few clear channels for influence or engagement. Perceptions of the EU as distant, bureaucratic, and slow reinforced this sense of separation, contributing to the feeling that *European politics remain removed from young people's* everyday realities and concerns.

At the same time, participants identified several concrete constraints that shape their capacity to engage. Structural barriers related to mobility programmes, particularly *difficulties with diploma recognition* after returning to Montenegro, were cited as limiting the long-term value of participation and weakening links between mobility and future prospects. In addition, participants acknowledged that their understanding of the EU is often shaped by media discourse,

social networks, and misinformation, rather than by direct knowledge of EU institutions, decision-making processes, or opportunities for youth participation. *This lack of practical understanding* was explicitly recognized as a limitation, making it difficult for young people to articulate concrete expectations or proposals for Europe's future and reinforcing a broader sense of distance from political agency at the European level.

## Key Topics for Young People

Participants identified a set of key issues they associate with Europe's current role and future relevance for young people in Montenegro:

- Education and diploma recognition
- Mobility and exchange programmes
- Employment and economic security
- Governance and institutional credibility
- Information and knowledge gaps
- Sovereignty and political influence

*Education, mobility, and employment* emerged as central reference points, particularly where European standards were seen as offering alternatives to domestic uncertainty. At the same time, discussions revealed awareness of structural barriers that limit young people's ability to benefit fully from European opportunities. Participants repeatedly linked fear of change, concerns about sovereignty, and resistance to reforms to *insufficient and inaccessible education about the EU*. The discussion suggests that improving EU-related education and civic literacy is a prerequisite for meaningful youth participation, informed public debate, and reduced polarisation around EU integration in the Western Balkans.

## Emotional Landscape and Differences

The discussion reflected a *mixture of moderate optimism, fear of change, and frustration*. While positive aspects of the EU were often idealised as sources of stability and opportunity, critical perspectives were accompanied by uncertainty and emotional distance. Participants did not openly polarise into opposing camps; instead, a persistent tension emerged between hope for stability and anxiety about transformation, shaped by prolonged uncertainty and unclear prospects.

*Generational differences* were also implicit. Younger participants, particularly those born after 2000, expressed that EU-related topics are often poorly communicated to them and framed as distant or abstract, reinforcing feelings of exclusion, disengagement, and limited emotional attachment to European processes. In this context, participants also reflected on the disproportionate influence that *politically vocal students and academic figures can exert* within group settings and broader peer environments. Such dynamics were described as shaping discussions in ways that may marginalize quieter or less confident voices and reinforce ideological positions rooted in personal, familial, or historical experiences.

## Concluding Insights

Young people in Montenegro articulate *a mixed and cautious orientation toward Europe*, shaped by hope for stability and opportunity alongside distance, uncertainty, and apprehension. Rather than clear rejection or enthusiasm, the dominant stance reflects ambivalence, with Europe remaining relevant but insufficiently accessible or meaningful in everyday terms.

The findings point to a *strong need for more inclusive, accessible, and practice-oriented educational and participatory formats* that connect EU policies to the lived experiences of young people. Participants emphasized that without such engagement, expectations that youth articulate detailed visions or policy proposals related to the EU are premature. Limited knowledge and prolonged uncertainty do not necessarily lead to disengagement, but often result in silence, polarization, or re-

liance on simplified narratives and dominant voices.

Taken together, these insights suggest that Europe's future relevance for young people in Montenegro depends less on abstract commitments and more on *creating meaningful spaces* for learning, dialogue, and participation that reduce distance, clarify uncertainty, and enable plural voices to emerge.

**Methodological note**

The deliberative workshop in Podgorica 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 Montenegrin youth population.

*The level of interest was relatively high*, especially regarding practical life aspects. The level of knowledge was low to moderate, largely superficial and theoretical, with limited understanding of the EU's practical functioning. The discussion clearly highlighted the need for *more inclusive, accessible, and practice-oriented educational and participatory formats*, particularly those that directly connect EU policies to the everyday experiences of young people, before expecting them to articulate detailed visions or policy proposals related to the European Union.

**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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