Imagining Europe from the Western Balkans:
Youth Perspectives from Serbia

Young people in Serbia express a strong commitment to the European Union, particularly to the values of democracy, solidarity, and the rule of law. Europe is widely perceived as a model of good governance, high quality of life, and opportunity, as well as a functioning social and political system. Participants largely identify culturally with Europe, while also recognizing Europe as a central reference point for their personal and collective futures. At the same time, many young people feel politically excluded from the EU and distant from its complex decision-making processes. Their views are shaped by personal experiences such as study exchanges, civic engagement, and interest in EU governance, alongside domestic narratives that frame European integration as uncertain or contested. Overall, the tone combines strong pro-European orientation with critical distance and growing frustration over stalled integration and limited visibility of European benefits in everyday life.

> “ We are Europe, period. As for why we’re not in the EU, that’s a difficult debate with a thousand reasons, but it’s the path we should follow.

How Young People Understand Europe

What Europe Means for Young People in This Context

Participants primarily referred to the European Union when discussing Europe, which is widely seen as a *model and standard to aspire to*: an orderly and functional system in which human rights are generally respected, and a high quality of life is attainable. Europe was consistently framed as a space where *democracy, solidarity, and the rule of law* are not abstract ideals, but principles embedded in everyday institutional practice. For many young people, the EU represents what one participant described as “the pinnacle of civilization and culture,” grounded in equality, social policy, and civic awareness.

> “ The EU is a model – quality of life, opportunities for all, education, a functioning system.

Europe is also strongly associated with a desirable way of life, particularly in relation to *education, science, mobility, and personal development*, as well as the broader possibility of social security and stability. The ideas of unity and cooperation, overcoming differences among member states in pursuit of common goals, were emphasized as especially important, offering a contrast to the region’s history of conflict and division.

At the same time, Europe is not perceived uncritically. Alongside positive associations, participants pointed to *bureaucracy, passivity, and hypocrisy*, particularly when Europe fails to act decisively in moments of crisis. This duality reflects a strong orientation toward European values combined with growing disappointment in how these values are implemented in practice, leaving persistent dilemmas about the EU’s current functioning.

Europe and the Western Balkans

Young people in Serbia largely identify *culturally with Europe*, while also acknowledging a *regional Western Balkan identity*. However, they frequently described feeling *politically excluded* from the EU. Europe is often equated with its most developed member states, while the Western Balkans are positioned as peripheral and conditionally included.

> “ (“It’s hypocrisy... we receive demands that are beyond realistic capabilities.”)

Participants expressed frustration with what they perceive as *inconsistent EU engagement* in the region. While Europe is expected to support democracy and stability, its actions toward the Western Balkans were often described as unclear, hesitant, or contradictory. This reinforces a sense of belonging without membership, and identification without recognition.

Europe in the World

On the global geopolitical level, the EU is strongly criticized for passivity, especially compared to the U.S., Russia, and China. It is seen as weak and powerless, serving others’ interests, especially regarding current conflicts.

> “ They’ve fallen asleep, living on past glory; not active in any way.

Europe is expected to act as a *clear, consistent, and proactive global political and moral actor*, particularly in defending democratic values, human rights, and international law. Participants criticized the EU’s perceived *weakness and inconsistency in foreign policy*, especially in its responses to global conflicts and regional crises. Europe’s credibility was seen as dependent on its ability to act decisively and speak with one voice; silence, delayed reactions, or ambiguous positions were interpreted as signs of political and moral weakness that undermine trust and security.

Young people expect the EU to be *more visibly engaged in global affairs*, to promote the rule of law, solidarity, and democracy with greater clarity, and to lead by example in times of conflict.

The Role of Youth and Political Agency

How Young People See Their Own Role and Limitations

Young people in Serbia expressed a strong desire for *more direct and meaningful engagement* with the European Union, while also acknowledging limited access to channels through which they could actively participate. Rather than seeing themselves as passive observers, participants emphasized the need for clearer pathways into political and civic engagement, particularly for those interested in public life but unsure how to begin.

Participants highlighted several ways in which youth agency could be strengthened. These included *direct communication between EU institutions and young people*, often mediated through civil society organizations, as well as *peer-to-peer connections between Serbian and EU youth*, which were seen as especially important for reaching politically neutral or disengaged groups. Informal formats, such as cultural or sports events where EU support is visible and positively framed, were mentioned as effective entry points for engagement.

In addition, participants stressed the importance of *identifying and supporting young potential leaders*, as well as creating mechanisms through which young people’s views on controversial issues (i.e. Rio Tinto) can be meaningfully considered. Public opinion research and inclusive consultation were seen as ways to align youth perspectives with EU-related debates and integration processes.

Key Topics for Young People

Participants identified several key areas where they expect stronger European engagement and impact. These topics reflect both normative priorities and everyday concerns, as well as differences in emphasis across participant groups:

- Environmental protection and climate action
- Greater citizen participation in political decision-making
- Strengthening individual rights and improving quality of life and work–life balance
- Migration governance and safe integration
- Reducing administrative burdens and supporting innovation through economic and technological reform

These priorities point to expectations that Europe should contribute not only to structural reforms, but also to tangible improvements in everyday life, democratic participation, and long-term sustainability.

Emotional Landscape and Differences

Participants expressed a clear sense of belonging to Europe and a strong affinity toward the European Union, yet this attachment was marked by nuance and ambivalence. While Europe is widely perceived as the natural political and value-based horizon, many young people also articulated feelings of being overlooked or taken for granted, particularly in the context of prolonged integration and limited recognition. This emotional mix combines *identification with Europe and frustration over perceived neglect*, rather than rejection or disengagement.

The emotional differences were less about opposing positions and more about varying intensities of hope, disappointment, and persistence, reflecting a generation that remains committed to the European path despite fatigue and uncertainty.

Concluding Insights

Young people in Serbia *strongly support EU membership* and consistently affirm European values such as democracy, solidarity, and the rule of law. However, this support is accompanied by clear *criticism of the EU's perceived inconsistency, bureaucratic inertia, and passivity*, particularly in its foreign policy and engagement with the Western Balkans. Europe is thus approached not as an idealized project, but as a demanding normative horizon against which both domestic and European actors are judged.

Although participants largely identify culturally with Europe, many continue to *experience political exclusion* and distance from EU institutions. Expectations toward Europe are therefore explicit and conditional: *young people call for a more active, decisive, and communicative EU* that acts consistently on its stated principles, offers clearer political signals, and builds more direct channels of dialogue with youth. Sustaining Serbia's pro-European orientation, they suggest, depends on Europe's ability to align values with action and to recognize young people as credible partners in shaping the region's future.

Methodological note

The deliberative workshop in Belgrade 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 Serbian youth population.

The level of interest in the topic was relatively high. All participants, regardless of their background, showed high interest in the topic and acknowledged the relevance of the EU for the current political situation in their

country. This was evident not just during the intense discussions within the workshop, but also during the coffee and lunch breaks.

Participants' levels of knowledge varied, though most were actively engaged. Those with academic background in political science or professional experience in policy-related fields tended to have a deeper and more coherent understanding of Europe and EU-related matters. In contrast, other participants displayed a lower level of knowledge and awareness, shaped mainly by media narratives, or occasional exposure to information. As a result, they, at the time, lacked a clear grasp of the rights, responsibilities, and everyday implications associated with EU citizenship and institutions. For instance, this was sometimes manifested by proposing measures that the EU is already implementing.

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