



# FOSTERING YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL COHESION IN KOSOVO: A PATHWAY TO EU INTEGRATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Youth cohesion in Kosovo, like in many regions, is a multifaceted concept characterized by the solidarity, mutual support, and collective identity among young people. It involves their ability to come together to celebrate their commonalities and navigate their differences, fostering a sense of belonging and community. In Kosovo, this cohesion is particularly vital due to the region's complex socio-political history and the diverse ethnic and cultural makeup of its population. However, to enhance youth cohesion, several particularities need to be addressed. These include improving access to education and employment opportunities, which can alleviate economic disparities and reduce social tensions. Additionally, promoting inclusive activities such as sports and art and dialogue that transcend ethnic lines is crucial for building mutual understanding and respect. Strengthening civic education to instill a sense of shared responsibility towards community and national development can also play a pivotal role in enhancing youth cohesion in Kosovo. By focusing on these areas, efforts to bolster youth cohesion can contribute significantly to the region's stability and prosperity.

This article aims to take stock of three main pillars of social cohesion among the youth in Kosovo: Employment, Sports and Culture, and Civic Engagement. Each pillar represents a critical avenue through which young people can connect, share experiences, and contribute to the fabric of their society. By examining practical and current examples, this article explores how employment initiatives are not just about job creation but also about fostering environments where young people can learn, grow, and envision a future within their communities. In the realm of Sports and Culture, we'll delve into how these activities serve as powerful platforms for transcending social and ethnic divides, promoting teamwork, understanding, and shared joy. Civic engagement will be scrutinized through the lens of youth participation in decision-making processes, volunteerism, and social activism, highlighting how these engagements empower young Kosovars to shape their society actively. Together, these pillars form the backbone of a cohesive society, where the youth are not just passive observers but active participants in crafting a collective future.



# A HOLISTIC SNAPSHOT - KOSOVA TOWARDS ITS BEST POTENTIAL

The high level of youngsters not in employment, education, or training (NEET) standing at approximately 30%, suggests a critical situation to be addressed.

The NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rate within the European Union stood at 11.7% in 2022, as reported by Eurostat. This figure contrasts with the much higher rate in Kosovo, suggesting a significantly more challenging situation in terms of youth engagement in Kosovo compared to the EU average. Further, access to cultural and sportive activities remains limited, with only a third of youth participating in some organized events, hindering social interaction and engagement. Moreover, disparities in public service access persist, particularly in rural areas, affecting around a quarter of the youth. Tackling these challenges is imperative to ensure equitable opportunities and promote social cohesion among Kosovo's youth.

The success of Kosovo in dealing with such issues will be reflected in its journey towards joining the EU. Kosovo's journey towards the European Union (EU) integration

demands strategic navigation through socio-economic reforms crucial for aligning with EU policies and standards.

Kosovo's EU integration entails a strategic maneuvering through a complex web of socio-economic reforms that are pivotal for harmonizing the nation's policies and standards with those of the European Union. Adherence to the recommendations outlined in the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) stands as paramount for Kosovo to forge ahead on this trajectory. Key among these recommendations is youth empowerment, healthcare improvement, the cultivation of cultural and sporting activities and the support to CSOs which are essential for fostering social cohesion, regional cooperation, civic engagement and sustainable development. This discourse delineates Kosovo's comprehensive strategy, centered on fostering social cohesion through the empowerment of its youth, thereby serving as a linchpin for achieving alignment with EU standards and fostering inclusive, sustainable development.

In recent years, a confluence of policy

frameworks and financial initiatives, underscored by a steadfast commitment to attaining the highest EU standards, has taken place. Ranging from the establishment of the Youth Guarantee as a national platform for institutional and policy reform to fostering regional cooperation aimed at creating conducive conditions for youth, this exposition assesses the most prominent and

persistent processes currently underway and outlines Kosovo's strategic approach to empower its youth, ensuring a pivotal role in meeting EU criteria and promoting inclusive growth.



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# CHARTING THE COURSE: THE YOUTH GUARANTEE INITIATIVE

The Youth Guarantee stands as the 10th cornerstone initiative of Kosovo's European Integration Process, offering under-30s opportunities for employment, education, or training shortly after leaving school or becoming unemployed. This groundbreaking scheme progresses through development, preparation, pilot, and rollout phases. Kosovo's commitment is further evidenced by the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan, launched in November 2022, with the pilot phase starting in January 2024.

Successful implementation necessitates strong political commitment from national governments and tailored policies such as upgrading Active Labor Market Measures (ALMM), implementing training and retraining programs, reforming Public Employment Services (PES), and enhancing coordination

among national stakeholders. To this end, Kosovo is in the process of adopting a comprehensive new Law on Employment Promotion, coupled with new regulations governing ALMM. Efforts to bolster PES reforms and capacities have been underway, evidenced by the significant strides in staffing the Employment Agency (EARK) and instituting an improved administrative structure. Notably, despite the obstacles, the EARK has formalized a system of contracting private providers with regard to offering professional training. Additionally, to facilitate stakeholder coordination, three different institutional task-forces have been established, which are tasked to coordinate the implementation of Youth Guarantee Scheme and several CSOs have been identified as partners in the process.

Similar reforms have been witnessed under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and Innovation (MESTI). As of 2022, the ministry has started a piloting phase of dual education system in a couple of municipalities and high-schools, and since 2023 it has expanded it towards reaching a considerable number of municipalities and high-schools throughout Kosovo. Put into translation, this means offering youngsters better career prospect linked to labour market needs, thus bridging the gap between the skills supply and demand.

Overall, the Youth Guarantee scheme, as a conduit for fostering youth cohesion, demands bold and tailored actions, commensurate with the contextual intricacies of national economies. While empirical predictions regarding

its precise impact remain premature, Kosovo has already seen positive outcomes from complementary programs such as SUPERPUNA, introduced by the government in February 2023. Since then it is estimated that around 10,000 new jobs have been created, thus making considerable achievement towards lowering the number of unemployed youth. As the Youth Guarantee scheme enters its piloting phase, the incorporation of SUPERPUNA as a permanent active measure is expected to amplify its efficacy, thereby bolstering its outcomes positively.





# TOWARDS A BETTER SOCIAL

## SAFETY NET, SPORT &

## CULTURAL HERITAGE

Improving healthcare is vital for both well-being of the youth and economic development. Investing in healthcare infrastructure, training healthcare professionals, and ensuring access to quality healthcare services can lead to a healthier and more productive population. Kosovo is in a good track to establish its first social security fund, which will provide the care ground for unemployed youth, the financial stream of which is based on a shared societal contribution.

For the first time, Kosovo's social fund is set to create significant provisions for paid maternity leave, marking a pivotal step in regulating this crucial issue and providing much-needed security for young women in the labor force. This initiative guarantees that women do not risk losing their jobs or being replaced while on maternity leave, offering them stability and

peace of mind. By empowering young women in the labor market through paid maternity leave, the burden on the private sector is alleviated, fostering a more inclusive and supportive work environment. This progressive measure not only enhances gender equality but also contributes to the overall social and economic well-being of Kosovo. This undoubtedly complements the social care architecture of the country and provides a solid base for youth cohesion.

Furthermore, Kosovo recognizes the importance of promoting its rich cultural heritage and fostering a vibrant sports scene. Cultural initiatives not only preserve Kosovo's identity but also contribute to tourism development and economic growth. One example to be brought to attention is the intervention to rebuild the multiethnic village of Janjeva, with a significant Croatian community. It serves

as a beacon of hope for preserving cultural heritage and fostering social cohesion. By investing in the restoration of Janjeva, Kosovo demonstrates a commitment to honoring the unique identity of minority communities and preserving their cultural heritage. This project not only revitalizes historic architecture and traditions but also provides opportunities for economic development and community engagement. Furthermore, the initiative to rebuild Janjeva contributes to the overall well-being of the region by promoting tourism, creating jobs, and fostering a sense of pride and belonging among residents. In essence, this intervention represents a multifaceted approach to sustainable development that benefits both Janjeva and Kosovo as a whole, strengthening cultural bonds and enriching the social fabric of the nation.

Janjeva, however, is not the primary nor the only example. As this article ponders around the latest strategic approaches and concrete initiatives, it has been noted that Kosovo has adopted a new Law on Culture and initiated several programs and interventions, such as the scholarships scheme of the Ministry of Culture (MCYS) for youngsters who want to study certain fields of cultural heritage; 'Arti në Shkollë' (The Art into Schools) is another program aiming at giving a chance all students to involve in creative work and express themselves; Numerous interventions have been witnessed aiming at restoring a large number of cultural sites and objects all around Kosovo, giving all communities a sense of belonging and historical identity. Several new regulations, incentives and mechanisms have been established by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports in order to better the institutional and strategic response to cultural heritage.

Nonetheless, much more concrete and

strategic efforts are needed if Kosovo is willing to rank itself among the league of developed countries that use cultural heritage as a mean to consistently foster social youth cohesion.

Sports represents another area where Kosovo falls short, impacting the social cohesion among its youth. Investing in sports infrastructure and programs not only promotes physical well-being but also instills values such as teamwork, discipline, and resilience among the youth. Moreover, sports can serve as a platform for social cohesion and diplomacy, fostering positive relationships both domestically and internationally. In this context, Kosovo's limited sports infrastructure and cultural engagement pose significant challenges. With only around 30% of youth participating in organized sports or cultural events, there's a notable gap in promoting physical activity and fostering a sense of belonging. This lack of engagement not only impacts individual well-being but also hinders social cohesion. Despite efforts like investments in sports infrastructure, addressing these issues remains crucial to creating a more inclusive society where youth thrive physically, mentally, and socially. When talking about infrastructure, there is some good news. Kosovo's hosting of the 2030 Mediterranean Games stands as a testament to its commitment to sports excellence and regional cooperation. This prestigious event is expected to attract athletes and spectators from across the Mediterranean region, providing a platform for cultural exchange and mutual understanding among nations. To support this endeavor, Kosovo plans to invest around 200 million euros in building and upgrading sports infrastructure, including stadiums, arenas, and training facilities. This significant investment not only enhances the country's



sports capabilities but also ensures that youth have access to modern and well-equipped facilities, thereby promoting active and healthy lifestyles.

Kosovo's approach to promoting sports among its youth integrates national initiatives and European Union support, particularly through the Erasmus+ program. This EU initiative, with its significant budget, aims to enhance young people's engagement in sports by focusing on social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and digital integration. It supports a wide range of activities, from participation and physical activity promotion to addressing societal challenges via sports and building capacity within the sports sector. On a national level, Kosovo's sports policy, developed in cooperation with the Kosovo Olympic Committee and various sports federations, provides structural support for sports activities, emphasizes international cooperation, and secures funding for sports infrastructure and programs at both central and municipal levels.

On a more practical level, Kosovo has

embraced judo as a national sport, underscored by the "Kosovo, the State of Judo" initiative, which highlights the sport's significant role in the country's identity and international presence. This commitment was further demonstrated by hosting the European Judo Championship in 2023, showcasing Kosovo's capabilities on the European stage and celebrating its athletes' achievements with four medals. Additionally, the opening of a national judo training center in Peja, supported by international and national leaders, signifies a strategic investment in nurturing future talent and solidifying judo's place in Kosovo's sporting and cultural fabric.

As Kosova progresses on its path toward EU integration, it is crucial for the government to prioritize these areas of reform outlined in the ERP. By focusing on youth empowerment, healthcare improvement, and the promotion of culture and sports, Kosova can not only meet the EU's standards but also foster inclusive and sustainable development for its citizens.

## EU (MEMBER STATES)

## SUPPORT – AN INCENTIVE TO

## PROGRESS BETTER & FASTER

Kosova benefits from various international mechanisms and partnerships that provide crucial support to achieve its development objectives, encompassing both technical assistance (TA) and direct financial aid. As a recipient of the Western Balkans Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), Kosova has secured significant funding, demonstrating the instrument's pivotal role in advancing Kosova's integration efforts. Notably, several projects under IPA have directly benefited youth, including initiatives focused on education, skills development, and entrepreneurship. For instance, the "Youth for Tomorrow" project, implemented with IPA funding, aims to provide training and support for youth to enhance their employability and participation in the labor market. Furthermore, through the IPA framework, Kosova has undertaken infrastructure projects to improve youth access to recreational facilities and cultural spaces, fostering social cohesion and community engagement.

The European Union (EU), as Kosova's largest financial supporter, offers comprehensive support through the Stabilization Association Agreement (SAA). Through this agreement Kosova

is able to participate as an associated member in numerous EU programs, including Horizont Europe, Creative Europe, Single Market Programme, Digital Europe, Erasmus+, and Employment and Social Innovation, among others, spanning the period from 2021 to 2027. The Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), which Kosova participates in, provides financing and technical assistance for infrastructure projects in the region. WBIF-funded projects, such as the construction of sports facilities, transportation networks, and cultural centers, positively impact youth cohesion by creating opportunities for community engagement and social interaction. Moreover, the New Growth Pact, a generous initiative of the EU, stimulates economic growth and job creation in Kosova, directly affecting youth empowerment through initiatives that promote entrepreneurship, innovation, and competitiveness. For instance, the "Youth Entrepreneurship Support Program," funded under the New Growth Pact, offers financial support and mentorship for young entrepreneurs to start and grow their businesses, contributing to youth employment and economic empowerment.





In addition to EU support, Kosovo receives assistance from bilateral donors, further enhancing its development efforts. For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) supports youth empowerment programs, including vocational training, leadership development, and civic engagement initiatives. Similarly, the German GIZ and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) funds projects aimed at improving youth access to education, healthcare, and

economic opportunities in Kosovo's rural areas. Such donor-supported initiatives play a vital role in complementing domestic efforts and addressing key challenges faced by Kosovo's youth population. Through effective utilization of these resources and strategic collaboration, Kosovo aims to enhance youth cohesion and bolster its overall socio-economic progress.

## COOPERATION IN THE REGION - CSOS UPHOLDING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & FOSTERING REGIONAL COOPERATION

Regional cooperation and youth mobility initiatives in Kosovo, propelled by civil society organizations (CSOs), are pivotal in fostering youth cohesion and enabling young people to actively participate in shaping their communities. With over 50% of the population being youngsters, these initiatives are vital for promoting transparency, accountability, and social inclusion.

The EU Guidelines for Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region provide a framework for EU support to CSOs in Kosovo and the wider Western Balkans. These guidelines emphasize

the importance of strengthening CSO capacities, promoting dialogue and cooperation between CSOs and governments, and supporting CSO-led initiatives that contribute to democratic governance, human rights, and social inclusion. Practical examples include EU-funded capacity-building programs for CSOs and grants for initiatives promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.

According to the Balkan Barometer report, 69% of respondents in the Western Balkans regard regional cooperation as crucial for economic

growth and prosperity, with 63% of young people seeing it as important for their future. In Kosovo, CSOs leverage regional cooperation to foster dialogue, reconciliation, and collaboration among youth from diverse backgrounds.

One practical example is the Youth Initiative for Human Rights Kosovo, which facilitates exchanges and projects bringing together young people from Kosovo, Serbia, and neighboring countries. Through initiatives like joint summer schools and youth forums, this organization provides platforms for dialogue, reconciliation, and collaboration, fostering solidarity and common purpose among youth. Similar to this particular example, under the Berlin Process, Regional Youth Cooperation Council (RYCO) was established with the aim to foster cooperation among youth in the region. Since then, grass-root and different scale projects have been implemented, where numerous youngsters from the Balkan region have benefited from joint activities.

Moreover, CSOs serve as watchdogs, monitoring public institutions and advocating for transparency and accountability. For instance, the CIVIKOS and Kosovo Civil Society Foundation and the NGOs that operates under the realm of these entities conduct regular assessments of public institutions' performance, contributing to greater accountability and trust between citizens and government.

CSOs also play a crucial role as think tanks, formulating evidence-based policies to address youth-related issues. The Kosovo Initiative for Stability (KIS), Democracy for Development and

several other NGOs conduct research and provides policy recommendations on youth employment, education, and participation, informing government strategies and programs.

Furthermore, CSOs mobilize citizens, including youth, to participate in civic activities and advocacy campaigns. For example, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights Kosovo organizes awareness-raising campaigns on human rights issues, encouraging young people to become active agents of change in their communities.

In collaboration with the European Union (EU), CSOs in Kosovo receive significant support and assistance to enhance their capacities and effectiveness in promoting youth cohesion and civic engagement. Through programs like the Civil Society Facility and Erasmus+, CSOs leverage EU funding to expand their initiatives and reach more young people. For instance, the European Union Support to Civil Society in Kosovo project provides funding to CSOs for initiatives promoting human rights, gender equality, and youth empowerment. Moreover, the Erasmus+ program offers opportunities for young people in Kosovo to participate in youth exchanges, volunteering activities, and training courses across Europe, fostering intercultural understanding and cooperation.

The EU Gender Action Plan aims to mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment across all EU external actions, including support to CSOs in the enlargement region. In Kosovo, CSOs like the Kosovo Women's Network advocate for gender-sensitive policies and programs that address gender disparities in the labor market.

Practical examples include campaigns to raise awareness about gender-based discrimination in hiring practices and initiatives to promote women's entrepreneurship and leadership.

The EU Pillar of Social Rights and the European Semester process provide opportunities for CSOs to participate in consultations on national Economic Reform Programs. By engaging with CSOs, governments can ensure that policies and reforms are inclusive, responsive to the needs of all citizens, and aligned with EU standards and priorities. CSOs like the Kosova Civil Society

Foundation conduct research and provide policy recommendations to inform government strategies on youth employment, social protection, and labor market reforms.

Actions taken by CSOs in Kosova, based on a Human Rights-Based Approach and promoting the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) principle and Agenda 2030, are

complementary to the EU integration process. CSOs like the Kosova Center for Human Rights advocate for human rights, social justice, and sustainable development, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society. Practical examples include legal aid services for marginalized groups, advocacy campaigns for policy reforms, and initiatives to promote environmental sustainability and climate resilience.

Kosova is taking steps towards implementing the Western Balkans Green Agenda and promoting regional common market development. Institutional reforms, policy initiatives, and cooperation with regional partners aim to address environmental challenges, promote sustainable economic growth, and enhance trade and investment opportunities in Kosova and the wider Western Balkans region. Practical examples include initiatives to improve energy efficiency, promote renewable energy sources, and support sustainable agriculture and tourism.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the pursuit of fostering youth empowerment and social cohesion in Kosova presents a multifaceted challenge that requires a comprehensive and strategic approach. Addressing the high NEET rates, limited access to cultural and sporting activities, and disparities in public service access are crucial steps toward creating equitable opportunities for all young Kosovars. Through initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee, investments in healthcare, and the promotion of cultural heritage and sports, Kosova is laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and cohesive society. The integration of these efforts with the strategic support of the European Union, through financial aid and development programs, further amplifies Kosova's capacity to foster social cohesion among its youth, thereby enhancing its journey towards EU integration.

Moreover, the active involvement of civil society organizations in promoting civic engagement, regional cooperation, and gender equality plays a pivotal role in shaping a society that values transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. By capitalizing on regional cooperation initiatives and leveraging support from international partners, Kosova can ensure that its youth are not merely spectators but active contributors to the nation's development. As Kosova continues to navigate its path towards EU integration, prioritizing youth empowerment and social cohesion remains key to achieving sustainable development and realizing its full potential as a vibrant and diverse society. These efforts not only contribute to Kosova's socio-economic development but also serve as a testament to the power of collective action and the importance of investing in the next





