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Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme

Redefining Youth
Employability
Through Youth
Guarantee
Program



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List of Acronyms

ESA	Employment Service Agency of North Macedonia
NEET	Not in employment, education, or training
NGO	Non-governmental organization
MFE	Ministry of Finance and Economy of Albania
MLEVSP	Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy of Serbia
NES	National Employment Service
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WB	Western Balkans
YG	Youth Guarantee

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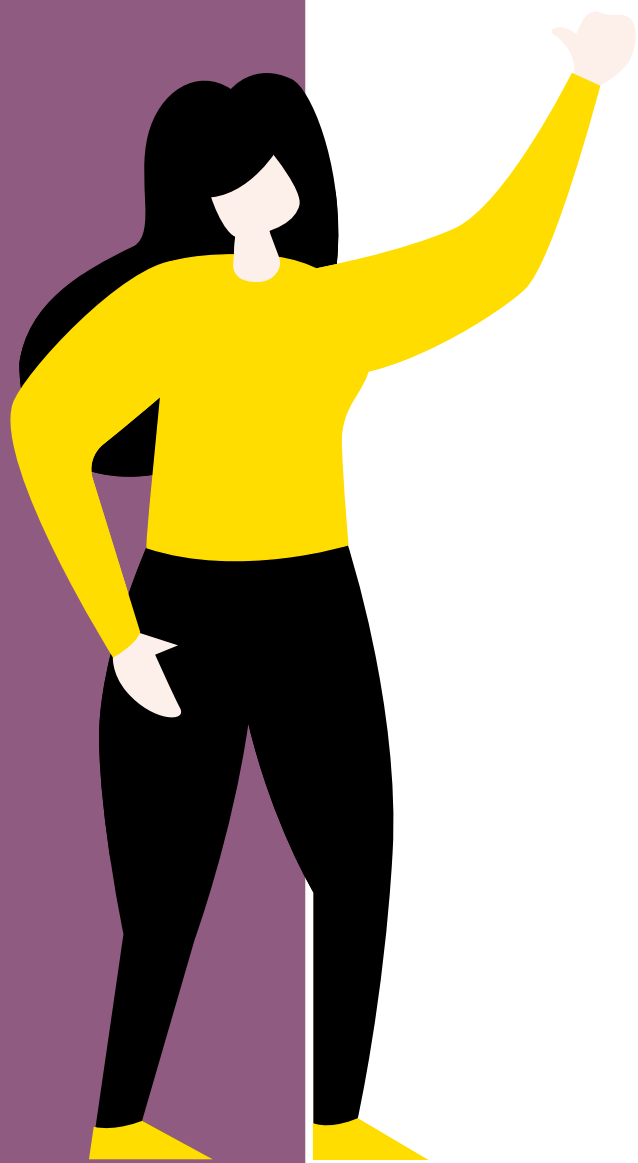
Executive Summary

This policy paper examines the Youth Guarantee (YG) program with the objective of understanding its theoretical and practical aspects within the context of the Western Balkan (WB) countries, particularly Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

YG programs are designed to address unemployment by specifically targeting individuals who are not engaged in any form of employment, formal education, or training (referred to as NEET). Crucially, these programs seek to reduce (and ideally eliminate) the challenges that young people face when entering the job market. Empirical evidence from European regions where YG programs have been implemented demonstrates significant outcomes, notwithstanding the fact that the program's effectiveness may vary across different micro- and macroeconomic contexts.

To that end, a scholarly investigation – comprising desk research and fieldwork – was undertaken to explore the implementation of YG programs in the contexts of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Research findings indicate varying levels of development of YG programs across the three countries. Specifically, North Macedonia has made significant strides in the integration of YG principles, while Serbia and Albania have initiated preliminary preparations for program implementation. The institutional framework responsible for the formulation and implementation of the YG program also varies. In Albania, efforts are spearheaded by the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MFE); in Serbia, by the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy (MLEVSP); while in North Macedonia, by the Employment Service Agency (ESA). Despite the collaborative efforts between analogous institutions within the respective countries, the divergence in lead institutions underscores disparities in the infrastructure of the YG program across them. In addition, findings reveal that youth is not sufficiently aware of the YG program and instruments at their disposal for navigating their qualification and employment needs.

As such, there is a pressing need for bridging the gap between diverse legislative and institutional structures associated with YG programs on the one hand, as well as between the responsible institutions and youth on the other. Therefore, this policy paper puts forward a set of recommendations for the effective implementation of the YG programs in the Western Balkan by advocating for improved inter-institutional coordination and better outreach to youth. The latter can be achieved both through increased cooperation with NGOs and grass-roots organizations, as well as via national information campaigns that are tailored to the communication needs and channels best fit to serve the targeted young audience.



1. Introduction

Young people in Western Balkan (WB) countries face significant challenges in entering and navigating the labor market. Specifically, finding high-quality jobs that fit their abilities and aptitudes might be difficult for WB youth. A 2021 study by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) finds that there are four types of factors influencing youth employability in the WB, including (i) factors related to the education system (inadequate work experience during school or university, weaknesses in the education systems, high level of skills mismatch); (ii) factors related to the job search process (insufficient support for the education-to-work transition, insufficient career advice and counseling services, lack of information on job vacancies); (iii) factors related to the labor market (inadequate number of jobs – especially in the private sector, high level of informality on the labor market); and (iv) factors related to policy (inadequately targeted youth employment policies; barriers to youth entrepreneurship; insufficient consultation and discussions with young people). The structural and systemic nature of these factors is a clear indication of the gravity of the challenges that WB youth faces. These are further compounded by the lack of awareness of or information on the various support programs that are available to young jobseekers in the region.

RCC (2021) reports that the average “proportion of young people neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) for the age group 15–24 [...] is 23.7% in the Western Balkans compared to just 11.1% in the EU27” (p. 9). The Directorate General for Employment Social Affairs, and Inclusion of the European Commission states that between 2013 and 2019, the number of young people in the EU who were not in education, employment, or training declined by 1.7 million (European Commission 2022). Official records reveal that just before the pandemic hit in February 2020, youth unemployment had decreased to a historic low of 14.9%. Though an “improved macroeconomic context certainly played a role, evidence suggests that the Youth Guarantee had a major transformative effect.”

The Youth Guarantee (YG) programs are an innovative initiative which seeks to empower young individuals and help them overcome the difficulties they encounter in the labor market, ensuring that no young person is left behind. At their core, such programs intend to guarantee that within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education, all young people under the age of 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship, or a traineeship. These programs became part of the European Commission recommendations to Member States for increasing the employment of young people (up to 25 years of age) in 2012.

Inspired by these findings, and building on the hypothesis that YG programs can achieve similar outcomes in the region, this policy paper seeks to analyze the implementation and potential of YG programs in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

Albania

Youth unemployment in Albania has continuously shown higher rates compared to the other age groups. Data of the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) for the second quarter of 2023 shows that unemployment in the age group 15–29 stands at 22.3% compared to the 7.7% of the general population. The proportion of young people aged 15–24 not in employment, education or training has remained quite high during the period 2012–2021, fluctuating between a minimum of 24% in 2021 and a maximum of approx. 31% in 2013¹.

Some of the key challenges that young Albanians face in the labor market include a shortage of suitable jobs in the private sector, which causes widespread migration and hinders the growth of young entrepreneurship; low enrollment in vocational schools, due to the underdeveloped Vocational Education and Training (VET) school system; the high level of informality and lack of transparency about available opportunities; and a lack of awareness on how to demand work rights like health insurance and social security (RCC, 2021).

North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia has one of the region's highest youth unemployment rates. The Employment Service Agency recorded 156,608 unemployed people in the first quarter of 2021. This indicates a 51,876 increase over the first quarter of 2020 (23.9% of these people are under the age of 29) (National Youth Council of Macedonia, 2022). In 2022, the youth unemployment rate equaled 34.91%, representing a decrease – albeit at an unsatisfactory pace – since 2003². This rate is high mostly due to the poor employment of young people, which is 2.5 times lower than the national average. According to data from the National Employment Strategy, just 15% of employees are between the ages of 15 and 24.

Serbia

Data from Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia highlight the need for a program specifically targeting the NEET population. In 2022, youth unemployment stood at 24.85%³, showing a 1% decrease from 2021. However, data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia for the same year show that the NEET rate⁴ equaled 13% for the 15–24 age group, vs. 15.1% for the 15–29 age group. In the wider age group, the situation is worse off for the female portion of the population.

These statistics indicate that there is a substantial portion of youth that remains unengaged and likely unable to succeed in the labor market. It is imperative to address the issue by implementing targeted programs that provide opportunities, support, and resources to help young individuals, particularly NEETs, to continuously develop their skills and (re)integrate into education or gainful employment.

1 For more information, please, see here: <https://www.instat.gov.al/en/statistical-literacy/unemployment-in-albania/>

2 For more information, please, see here: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812208/youth-unemployment-rate-in-macedonia/>

3 For more information, please, see here: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812963/youth-unemployment-rate-in-serbia/>

4 For more information, please, see here: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/240003020301?languageCode=en-US>

2. An Overview of the Problem

Undoubtedly, entering the labor market is a pivotal moment in a person's life. The transition from education to gainful employment can be challenging for many young people. Typically, one of the biggest adjustments is the need to close the gap between what one learns in an educational setting with what is actually demanded in the workplace. Research reveals that young people frequently lack the relevant abilities, skills, and expertise to succeed in the labor market, which can result in underemployment, unemployment, longer job search periods and lower wages (Allen & Van der Velden, 2001; Holmes & Mayhew, 2015; McGowan & Andrews, 2015; Brunello & Wruuck, 2021).

However, dedicated programs, such as internship or apprenticeships schemes, can help young people fill in the skills gap and increase employability by providing those entering the labor market with the exposure and preliminary experience that will help them secure gainful employment (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron 2011; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2016). These types of experiences are very crucial as they are a channel through which young people get to interact with prospective employers and demonstrate their readiness for the labor market (Chillas, Marks & Galloway, 2015; Kapareliotis, Voutsina & Patsiotis, 2019).

Similarly, it is important to help young people build the soft skills like problem-solving, teamwork, and communication, which are becoming increasingly crucial in the modern labor market (Cimatti, 2016; Payne, 2018; Sosa, Rajusha & Hunting, 2022). These can be further complemented by cultivating networking skills (Sosa et al., 2022), which can be seen as an integral feature of the job search process (Mowbray, Hall, Raeside & Robertson, 2018).

Unfortunately, young people in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have limited possibilities to gain labor market exposure and develop the necessary skills due to an underdeveloped employment ecosystem. In fact, a 2018 study by Đurović et al. articulates the main barriers that WB youth faces in making informed decisions and effectively navigating their career paths. Among these, we note:

Lack of coordination and cooperation among stakeholders: The absence of coordination and cooperation among key stakeholders hinders the ability to identify and access available career guidance services. The fragmented nature of the system makes it difficult for young individuals to navigate through the various options and find the support they need.

Limited access to reliable career-related information: Young people have limited access to reliable, comprehensive, and up-to-date career-related information, which creates challenges for them in making informed choices regarding education, training, and career options.

Quality assurance of traineeships: The lack of quality assurance of traineeships can have a negative impact on the overall learning experience and career prospects of young individuals.

Underutilization of training on youth employability skills: Key employability skills are insufficiently developed through formal education. However, other forms of training on youth employability skills are not fully/sufficiently utilized. Despite the availability of such training programs (even under non-formal set ups), there are barriers preventing young people from effectively accessing and benefiting from them.

2.1. Approach and methods

The central research question informing this policy paper seeks to understand what is the current state of affairs regarding YG programs in the three countries of interest, and if/how it can be improved. The analysis takes a comparative approach, looking at youth in general, as well as how it was defined within the formal presentation of the YG program. Secondly, the policy paper explores how to make YG programs more appealing and accessible to the wider public, with a particular focus on the target 15–29 age group.

Some of the more specific questions that informed the research process include:

1. **Strategic Communication and Policy Promotion:**
 - a) How is the Youth Guarantee policy presented, promoted, and communicated to the target audience in each country?
 - b) What communication strategies and channels are utilized to ensure effective dissemination of information about the policy?
 - c) How do the stakeholders oversee and monitor the implementation of the policy from a perspective of strategic communication?
2. **Process Improvement:**
 - a) What are the strengths and weaknesses observed in the implementation process of the Youth Guarantee policy in each country?
 - b) How do the countries' approaches differ in defining and addressing the needs of youth?
 - c) What successful practices can be identified from each country's implementation process?
 - d) In what areas can the implementation process be improved to better meet the needs and aspirations of young individuals?
3. **Learning from Each Other:**
 - a) How is the concept of youth defined in each country, and how does it shape the implementation of the Youth Guarantee policy?
 - b) What lessons and insights can be gained from the experiences of each country in implementing the policy?
 - c) How can countries learn from each other's approaches, successes, and challenges to enhance their own implementation processes?

To address these research questions, the authors employed a mixed-methods approach. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to gather relevant information about YG programs,

including relevant definitions, objectives, and relevance in addressing youth unemployment and improving employability, while emphasizing the key benefits and potential solutions it offers. This was complemented with desk research of relevant literature and reporting about the state of affairs and key challenges in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Finally, the team conducted 9 interviews, with a total of 10 interviewees over the period April to June 2023 (for more details, please, see Annex 1). These include sector experts and key national stakeholders.

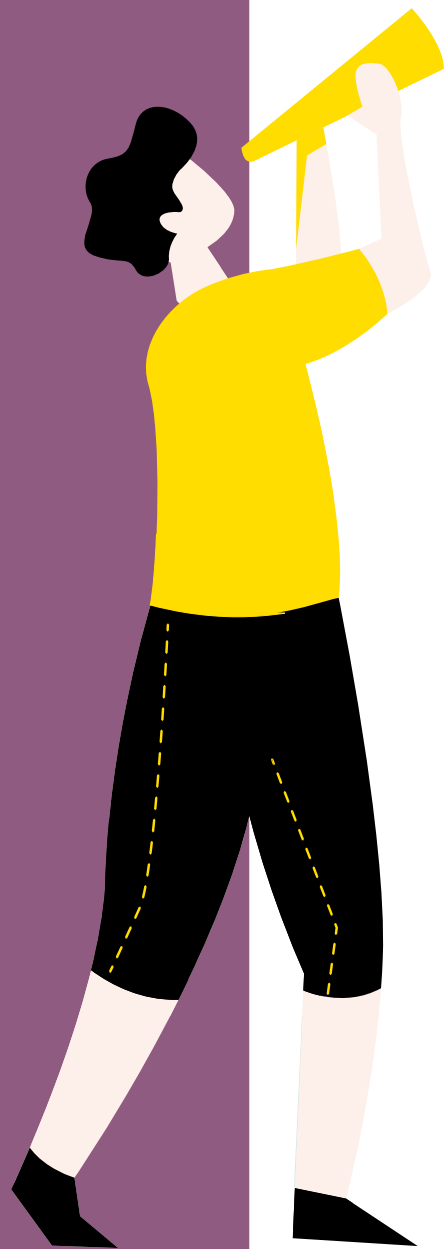
2.2. Merits and limits

This research is based on the idea of regional collaboration to strengthen data-driven advocacy efforts. However, as this regional research involves studying diverse countries with different socio-economic contexts, policy frameworks, and cultural backgrounds, this heterogeneity sometimes poses challenges in terms of establishing common research frameworks, definitions, and indicators, making direct comparisons difficult.

Additionally, the timeframe and access had an impact on collecting data and analysis. The identification of the relevant stakeholders was supported by the local organizations and researchers. They supported in the scheduling of meetings with stakeholders at the central level. However, the team was unable to meet with stakeholders at the local level, whose field experience on YG implementation would have added a deeper, and perhaps more nuanced perspective.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the research does not include perspectives from young individuals belonging to marginalized groups. This omission was due to resource limitations and the timeframe of the programme supporting this policy paper. Consequently, a direct recommendation for future research would be to incorporate perspectives of marginalized youth through primary data collection.

Despite these limitations, this regional policy paper generates valuable insights and fosters cross-country learning, contributing to evidence-based policy development.



3. Findings and Analysis

In July 2021, the Western Balkan economies agreed to gradually establish and implement YG programs as modeled after the EU's Youth Guarantee programs, which guarantee jobs or training for those under 30. The goals of YG can be outlined as:

- **Youth Empowerment:** The program is grounded on the inherent potential of every young person and their ability to make a significant contribution to society. They are empowered to discover their abilities and skills by having access to high-quality education and training, which instills confidence and a sense of purpose.
- **Breaking the Cycle of Youth Unemployment:** Youth unemployment can have long-lasting effects such as economic instability, individual disillusionment, and societal unrest. By providing early intervention and assistance, YG programs break this pattern and make sure that young people are not trapped in the cycle of unemployment, but they are actively participating in the labor force.
- **Economic Prosperity:** YG programs address the needs of the labor market by providing young people with the necessary skills and qualifications, generating a productive workforce that promotes entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic prosperity.

In line with their commitment, the majority of WB governments established inter-ministerial expert groups to create YG strategies. RCC (2021)⁵ suggests the following stages for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee scheme in the Western Balkans:

- 1) Phase 0: Awareness raising, Political Commitment and Creation of a Task Force
- 2) Phase 1: Mapping and institutional and policy design
- 3) Phase 2: Outreach to unregistered NEETs
- 4) Phase 3: Operational preparation
- 5) Phase 4a: Pilot phase
Phase 4b: Full implementation

5 Please, refer to the leaflet listed in the Bibliography

3.1. The legal and institutional framework regarding YG

In setting up its preparations for creating a YG Program, **Albania** has reviewed the legislative system and conducted a mapping of NEETs with the help of EU technical assistance. On February 24, 2022, Order of the Prime Minister No.28 for the 'Establishment of Inter-Institutional Working Group and Technical Group for the Development, Implementation, and Monitoring of the National Youth Guarantee Scheme, and Appointment of the National Coordinator' was adopted, setting the wheels in motion for the implementation of this vital policy directive. During May-June 2022, the National Youth Guarantee Action Plan was sent to the technical and inter-institutional working group for consultation. However, by December 2022 there had been no official decision on the plan's approval. Yet, the Economic Reform Program 2023 – 2025, published by the Ministry of Finance and Economy on 31 January 2023⁶, states that the National Implementation Plan for the Youth Guarantee Scheme has been finalized, while the National Agency for Employment and Skills (NAES) is preparing its employment services for the piloting, which is expected to take place during 2023.

In **North Macedonia**, the Employment Service Agency started implementing the Youth Guarantee in 2018, as a pilot activity in three employment centers (Skopje, Strumica and Gostivar), expanding to the entire country in 2019, though with special focus in three regions (Polog, Northeast and Southwest), where the largest number NEETs resides. In 2021, the YG process in North Macedonia engaged a total of 19,322 participants. Among these, 8,064 individuals (or about 41% of the total) were young people under the age of 29. Notably, these young individuals either secured employment or acquired skills that enhanced their employability, thereby becoming more competitive in the labor market.

QUOTE: *"The success rate of 41% is far from the forecast of 30%. Therefore, in 2022, we continued the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Plan. The fact that as of the first half of July 2022, of the total number of people who entered the Youth Guarantee (8,840) young people up to 29 years of age, 3,754 people or 42% were employed, that is, they were involved in some of the employment measures, shows that this year we will exceed last year's percentage, which makes us particularly proud of the decision to introduce the Youth Guarantee."*

Jovanka Trencева, Macedonian Minister of Labour and Social Policy

The **Serbian** Government established a Coordination Body and expert group for the "Guarantee for Youth" program's Implementation Plan. The Ministry of Labor is developing the plan based on European Commission, International Labor Organization, and European Training Foundation guidelines. The plan aims to allocate resources, form working groups, and be ready by June 2022. The Ministry is also working on new laws for work practice and volunteering. The Western Balkans Declaration envisions implementing the Youth Guarantee based on EU principles.

3.2. Research findings

The findings from the literary review and analysis of interviews suggests the following key findings:

The YG program design and implementation requires collaboration between many actors: it does not necessitate the involvement of line ministries only, but crucially also of national employment agencies, as

⁶ Please, see more here: <https://financa.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Economic-Reform-Programme-2023-2025.pdf>

well as civil society organizations that work directly with youth. Experience from the one-year pilot phase in Macedonia, the two-year pilot phase in Serbia and the upcoming pilot phase in September 2023 in Albania should serve to observe and adjust the program to best serve its target population.

Particularly, as YG programs support youth, they should also *involve complementary measures that develop the capacities of personnel and case officers in the national employment agencies – at the central level, as well as in the local employment centers*, which are the citizen-facing desks of the employment service – to meet the needs of young adults in a fast-changing labor market. One dimension that is becoming increasingly pressing is the *need to digitize the employment service and take advantage in the opportunities that ICT solutions offer in assisting jobseekers*.

Concerning employment services, YG programs *should encourage the creation of mentorship programs that support young entrepreneurs*, thus boosting economic development, innovation, and job creation in the three countries.

Finally, *effective dissemination YG program measures to youth remains a challenge*. In fact, it was identified as a significant challenge by the responders to this study. Discussions during the meetings emphasized the importance of exploring different communication channels utilized by other organizations to engage youth effectively.



4. Improving Youth Employability through Youth Guarantee

Reflecting on the different policy options and strategies for bolstering YG programs necessitates the consideration of several factors, such as the crucial role of effective promotion through adequate dissemination channels, the imperative of tackling the culture of inactivity, the adoption of a holistic approach, the customization of messaging for distinct target demographics, and the cultivation of collaborative partnerships among stakeholders from different sectors. These considerations are meant to amplify the effectiveness and influence of YG program in addressing youth unemployment. The results of this policy paper suggest several recommendations and actions.

4.1. Principles for promoting YG programs

Regardless of the country, our analysis reveals that adequate awareness and promotion of YG programs are key for their success. Crucially however, promotion does not simply imply disseminating information about the program. It also means that the information is presented in the right way. The problem of youth unemployment is not the result of only not there being enough jobs, but also of a culture of inactivity among the youth. Thus, a successful YG program should embrace the following approach to its promotion and outreach messaging:

1. Present the program as the national one. Although YG programs are originally an EU-level idea and are part of the accession conditionality, they should be presented as a national endeavor, that seeks to address national challenges. First this is because trust in the initiative is likely to be higher if ownership rests in the government of the given country. This avoids the possible negative effect of “Euroscepticism” and anchors the narrative in the local context and challenges. In fact, notwithstanding the fact the YG funding will likely come mostly from EU development assistance, the details of the program design and its implementation will rest with national institutions.

2. There are needs to be a collaborative effort in promoting the program. The success of any YG program promotion will require the collaborative effort of multiple stakeholders. Furthermore, it

has been widely observed that national employment agencies often struggle to effectively promote their programs in isolation. As such, it becomes essential to foster partnerships and collaborations with various entities such as youth offices, schools, universities, and civil society organizations, that can support not only with insights on message creation, but also amplify its reach due their more direct exchanges with youth.

By involving these entities in the promotion of the program, a wider and more diverse range of channels can be utilized to reach the target audience. Youth offices, for instance, often have direct access to young individuals and can leverage their existing relationships to effectively disseminate information about the program. Similarly, schools and universities can provide platforms such as career guidance sessions or student assemblies to raise awareness and encourage participation.

Collaboration with non-governmental organizations is also crucial, as they often specialize in working with specific groups or addressing specific issues that are relevant to the target population. Their expertise and established networks can greatly enhance the reach and impact of the program's promotional efforts. By harnessing the collective resources, expertise, and influence of these diverse stakeholders, the program's message can be amplified and tailored to better resonate with the youth, ultimately increasing their engagement and participation.

3. Their message should be simple. Given the young age of the target audience of YG programs, messaging should be conveyed in a simple and straightforward manner. To ensure maximum impact, it is important to provide a range of promotional materials. This could include visually appealing posters that catch their attention, engaging videos that provide clear instructions for applying, and organizing public events and speeches that allow for direct interaction and dissemination of information. For optimal reach, these materials should be strategically distributed both online, leveraging the power of the internet, and through traditional media channels. By employing the right approach and ensuring an adequate quantity of materials, the campaign can effectively engage the target audience and inspire them to take action. Also, it is vital that the materials are presented in multiple languages, attending to different audiences.

4.2. Some recommendations at the country-level

Below we outline some key recommendations for each country:

Albania:

- Ensure the efficient collaboration between local advisers for youth, municipalities and regional offices to overcome the obstacles of the identification of NEETs and reaching out, paying special attention on the establishment of protocols for tasks and forms of cooperation,
- Commission a study to identify the best channels and outreach tools for promoting the YG program, ensuing an inclusive and comprehensive approach that adequately accounts for youth perspectives and needs.

North Macedonia:

- Amend the law on youth employment and stability to exclude the one-year ban if one fails to report themselves as a young person to Employment Service Agency. This can be tackled by utilizing the Youth MPs Club for advocating on the behalf of the young people and prioritize this law change in order to establish functioning of the YG.
- Improve the channels of communication of the different sectors included in the process of implementation.

Serbia:

- Establish a well-developed network of communication between the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy (MLEVSP) and the National Employment Service (NES), on the one hand, and youth organizations and NGOs on the other. Given that Serbia's NES is overloaded with applications, an incentive to utilize the Youth Guarantee should come mostly from other sources.
- Utilize the established networks of youth labor organizations to devise a comprehensive strategy aimed at addressing the segment of the youth population that faces disparities in opportunities. Primarily, this pertains to rural youth, as well as marginalized groups such as Roma youth and young parents with children.
- The Ministry of Youth and Tourism, as well as MLEVSP ought to establish a direct communication channel to effectively disseminate pertinent legal developments pertaining to the YG program. To enhance the efficiency of information flow to the youth, it is recommended to create specialized reports aimed at informing relevant stakeholders about key updates. This approach will contribute to streamlining the process of delivering information to the target audience.
- It is advisable to develop and implement a comprehensive program for promoting the YG program through social media platforms. The research findings have highlighted varying perspectives on different types of social media channels. Consequently, it is imperative for the Ministry to adopt a well-defined approach in addressing this matter. This includes formulating clear guidelines and strategies for utilizing social media effectively to enhance the visibility and reach of the YG program.

4.3. Sample Communication Package

A sample communication package developed based on the findings of our analysis and addressing various stakeholders follows.

Table 1. Sample Communication Package

Communication Package	Why and HOW:
For Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Empowering Youth for Success”: Emphasize the program’s aim to empower young individuals by providing them with the necessary support, skills, and opportunities for success in the labor market. • “No Young Person Left Behind”: Highlight the program’s commitment to ensuring that no young person is left behind, irrespective of their socio-economic background. • “Skills and Aspirations Made Attainable”: Communicate how the program fosters the development of skills and makes aspirations attainable, enabling young individuals to realize their full potential. • With focusing on the Program Benefits, utilize social media to its full potential by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly outline the benefits and advantages of participating in the Youth Guarantee Program. • Emphasize the opportunity for young people to secure good quality offers of employment, continued education, apprenticeships, or traineeships within a short timeframe. • Highlight the long-term benefits, such as enhanced employability, career growth, and improved future prospects. <p>Stakeholder Engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the importance of engaging and collaborating with relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions, employers, youth organizations, and community partners. • Highlight the mutual benefits of stakeholder engagement, such as sharing resources, expertise, and networks to ensure successful program implementation.
For the institutions and public sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize the commitment to addressing youth unemployment and supporting young individuals in their transition to employment or further education. • Highlight the importance of the program in contributing to social and economic development, fostering a skilled workforce, and reducing inequalities. • “Unlocking Opportunities for Young People”: Communicate how the program aims to unlock opportunities for young individuals, enabling them to access quality employment, education, apprenticeships, or traineeships. • “Building a Stronger Future Together”: Highlight the program’s role in building a stronger future for both young people and society as a whole through skills development and sustainable employment. • “Collaboration for Success”: Emphasize the importance of collaboration between the public sector, stakeholders, and partners in implementing the Youth Guarantee Program effectively. <p>Call-to-Action for Collaboration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage relevant stakeholders to actively participate in the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Program. • Provide clear instructions on how stakeholders can contribute, collaborate, and align their efforts to support the program’s objectives. • Communicate the benefits of active engagement and highlight success stories of stakeholders already involved.

Communication Package	Why and HOW:
For the institutions and public sector	<p>Transparent Communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote transparent communication by providing regular updates and progress reports on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Program. Share relevant data and statistics to demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of the program. Encourage open dialogue, feedback, and suggestions from stakeholders to foster continuous improvement. <p>Capacity Building and Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate the availability of capacity-building initiatives and support for stakeholders involved in implementing the program. Provide information on training opportunities, resources, and best practices to enhance stakeholders' capabilities in effectively delivering the program's objectives.
Joint efforts:	<p>Collaborative Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize the collaboration between the program's stakeholders, including government entities, educational institutions, employers, youth organizations, and community leaders. Highlight the collective effort and support available to young individuals through this collaborative approach. <p>Collaborative Communication Channels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize a variety of communication channels to engage with stakeholders, including dedicated websites, newsletters, webinars, workshops, and conferences. Foster active participation through online forums, social media platforms, and offline networking events.



5. Conclusion

This policy paper investigated the implementation of Youth Guarantee programs in three Western Balkans countries, namely in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. In doing so, it has illuminated the intricate landscape of youth employment initiatives in the three.

The process of designing YG programs based on EU examples is a complex. The diverse contexts in which they are implemented also present significant obstacles to embracing the core principles of the program. Additionally, the attitudes of young individuals in the region towards state institutions cannot be overlooked. At the institutional level, there is a limited capacity to effectively coordinate programs that are relevant to the YG programs.

The recommendations put forth primarily revolve around enhancing cohesion among institutions involved in the implementation of YG programs and improving the dissemination of information about the program itself. The latter is accompanied by a proposed comprehensive framework for unified communication.

By implementing the recommendations outlined in this paper, it is expected that coordination and awareness on YG programs will significantly increase.



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Annex 1

List of Interviews

Table 2. Overview of conducted interviews

State	Institution/ Organization & Title	Name	Date
Albania	Ministry of Youth and Children	Bora Muzhaqi	18 April 2023
Albania	National Agency for Employment and Skills	Jonida Lika	14 June 2023
North Macedonia	Government Advisory for Youth Issues	Gjorgji Tasev	13 June 2023
North Macedonia	National Youth Council of Macedonia	Filip Kulakov	15 June 2023
Serbia	Ministry of Labor	Dragica Ivanović	8 May 2023
Serbia	National Youth Council (KOMS)	Katarina Živić	9 May 2023
Serbia	National Employment Service (NES)	Jasmina Šantić & Goran Gležnić	11 May 2023
Serbia	Ministry of Youth and Tourism	Marija Ivković Trkulja	12 May 2023
Serbia	Delegation of the European Union to Serbia	Matthew Penot	25 May 2023

