



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 09 2023



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# Kosovo's youth: Overcoming challenges and creating opportunities

## Policy Recommendations

1. Kosovo needs to make significant investments to improve the quality and equality of education, as a main driver of personal empowerment.
2. Both formal and non-formal education need to incorporate the teaching and nurturing of essential life skills that will enable children and young people to meaningfully participate in a democracy.
3. Youth empowerment should be fostered through active participation in decision-making from an early age by institutionalising youth engagement and participation in schools as well as in local and national policy-making.

## Abstract

Kosovo has a unique demographic and a window of opportunity for capitalising on it, which will be closed sooner than expected if no action is taken. Over half of its population is under 30, whereas the current key indicators relating to human capital development are very low, with education outcomes being the most concerning. On the other hand, whether in creative entrepreneurship or in electoral process participation, young people in Kosovo demonstrate a clear willingness to become active citizens. In order to give them the tools to thrive, targeted interventions in the ed-

ucation system are urgently needed, as research confirms that education is a key factor in individual empowerment. This Policy Brief focuses on three ways to foster youth empowerment by addressing a few key challenges in education: improving the quality of education, building essential skills in formal and non-formal education, and encouraging active participation in decision-making from an early age. It includes short-term as well as long-term policy recommendations for nurturing civic participation and building a progressive society that will lead Kosovo into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



# Kosovo's youth: Overcoming challenges and creating opportunities

## Introduction

Kosovo is often highlighted for having the youngest population in Europe, with 55% of its population under 30 and over one third under the age of 18. There is a unique window of opportunity, expected to close by 2036,<sup>1</sup> to use this immense potential for growth. However, the current indicators are not encouraging.

Youth unemployment in Kosovo currently stands at 29%,<sup>2</sup> with even higher figures among women, marginalised groups and non-majority communities. Over a third of young people aged 15-24 were not in employment, education or training in 2020.<sup>3</sup> The high unemployment among those with university degrees (between 13.7% and 20.7% in the last few years) further highlights a significant gap between education outcomes and labour market needs, which is not surprising given the alarmingly low national scores in standardised student tests. The COVID-19 pandemic has only further exacerbated these outcomes. Without immediate action, Kosovo's potential can quickly become its liability.

While young people are sometimes seen as having no agency or power, in the most recent parliamentary elections they demonstrated their actual potential – as vectors of socio-political transformation by overwhelmingly voting to bring to power Vetëvendosje for the first time, a political party that started out as a grassroots activist movement and which, since it ran for elections in 2010 for the first time, has been sitting in opposition for more than a decade. The exact turnout percentage by age is not available, but since at least 2016, the turnout among young people, especially those aged 18-21, has consistently been the highest among all age groups,<sup>4</sup> in stark contrast to many other developed democracies.

***Their vote was one for inclusion and active participation, and this needs to be the primary focus of the new government.***

The 2021 elections result wasn't just an anti-establishment vote; looking at the pre-election polls, the winning party's social-justice-heavy campaign attracted pri-

- 1 UNICEF Kosovo, June 2016, The Demographic Dividend - A Time Sensitive Window of Opportunity for Kosovo, <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/press-releases/demographic-dividend>.
- 2 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Labor Force Survey Q3 2021, <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/7072/afp-tm3-2021.pdf>.
- 3 Kosovo Education Center (KEC), May 2021, Evaluation of the Implementation of the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021 - Insufficient achievement, <http://kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Evaluation-of-the-Implementation-of-KESP-2017-2021.pdf>.
- 4 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), July 2016, Voter Turnout Among Youth of Kosovo, <https://www.ifes.org/publications/ifes-kosovo-works-engage-youth-political-and-electoral-processes>.



marily young people and women, two very large marginalised groups in Kosovo. These are the people who constantly feel disenfranchised at all levels: being denied access to quality education in schools (currently only 33% find it very satisfactory<sup>5</sup>), being denied access to institutions and national decision-making (only 10% think their interests are “well” represented<sup>6</sup>), and even being denied free movement in the EU and beyond. Their vote was one for inclusion and active participation, and this needs to be the primary focus of the new government.

***The only way to ensure their sustained empowerment is through the education system.***

The main question is still unanswered: how to provide these young people with the necessary tools for active and constructive civic participation in Kosovo and, perhaps, the EU? After all they will be leading the country in the next decade. The only way to ensure their sustained empowerment is through the education system. Although there are many brilliant young Kosovars who have paved their own way to success independently of the existing systems, especially in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector, they are the exception, not the norm.

There are many issues that have a direct impact on the empowerment of young people and can be addressed through the prism of education. Deeper structural problems that exist in the Kosovo education system, such as a lack of accountability and monitoring mechanisms, the dysfunctionality of school governing bodies, or the need for curriculum reform and textbook revision, are not the focus of the recommendations.

## **Empowerment through improving the quality of formal education**

The role of education in personal empowerment cannot be understated, in addition to providing pathways out of poverty, as each additional year of schooling is estimated to contribute to a 10% increase in income per individual.<sup>7</sup> Children in Kosovo not only spend fewer years in school than those in more developed countries, but they also learn significantly less – a learning gap of 5.3 years,<sup>8</sup> meaning that out of the average 13.2 years spent in school by age 18, they only learn the equivalent of 7.9 years of schooling – yet quality of education is essential in the development of socioemotional skills.<sup>9</sup> Young people in Kosovo are seemingly aware of these problems, as surveys suggest only 33% are very satisfied with the quality of education.<sup>10</sup>

- 5 UNDP Kosovo, January 2021, Youth Challenges and Perspectives in Kosovo, <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/publications/youth-challenges-and-perspectives-kosovo>.
- 6 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), 2019, Youth Study Kosovo 2018/2019, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15264.pdf>.
- 7 Montenegro, C. E., & Patrinos, H. A. (2014), Comparable Estimates of Returns to Schooling around the World, World Bank Group, Education Global Practice Group, September 2014.
- 8 World Bank, October 2020, Kosovo Human Capital Index 2020, [https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext\\_download/hci/HCI\\_2pager\\_XKX.pdf?cid=GGH\\_e\\_hcpeexternal\\_en\\_ext](https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/hci/HCI_2pager_XKX.pdf?cid=GGH_e_hcpeexternal_en_ext).
- 9 World Bank, March 2020, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020, <https://wiw.ac.at/western-balkans-labor-market-trends-2020-dlp-5300.pdf>.
- 10 UNDP Kosovo, January 2021, Youth Challenges and Perspectives in Kosovo, <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/publications/youth-challenges-and-perspectives-kosovo>.



***Considering that the school population at the primary and lower secondary levels will continue to decline, now is the time to increase the quality of education by making long-term, strategic investments.***

A good education system costs money, and the pre-requisite for any coherent reform of the education system in Kosovo is committing sufficient funding as well as ensuring efficient distribution of funding. In 2020, public spending on education was 4.7% of GDP, or 11.3% of total government spending.<sup>11</sup> While the EU spends the same proportion of its GDP on education, the outcomes are wildly different. Most of these expenditures in Kosovo are on salaries and the occasional capital investment, leaving a notable gap in development and innovation. It is crucial that more funds are dedicated to: a) teaching and learning resources, including libraries, information and communication technology, even the outdoor environment; b) professional development programmes for teachers; and c) innovation, which has been completely sidelined so far. Considering that the school population at the primary and lower secondary levels will continue to decline,<sup>12</sup> now is the time to increase the quality of education by making long-term, strategic investments.

***Apart from the urgent pedagogical training needed for all teachers, it is imperative to implement the teaching performance evaluation at full speed.***

After parents, teachers have the second most important impact on children's personal empowerment, far beyond just imparting knowledge. Their actions in the classroom determine whether children grow up wanting to be active citizens, confident enough to demand and enact political change, yet unfortunately, many students in Kosovo report feeling very disappointed that their opinions are not taken seriously by their teachers.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the urgent pedagogical training needed for all teachers, it is imperative to implement the teaching performance evaluation at full speed. So far, only 2% of teachers have undergone a performance appraisal. This would open the way for the promotion of better performing teachers and the requalification of others to lower levels as needed, while also creating higher standards of admission for new teachers. While teachers have been asking for higher salaries, which is absolutely essential for ensuring quality, without a re-evaluation of current teachers' abilities and performance, any significant blanket increase would be an inefficient use of resources. Finally, for empowerment, equality in education is as important as quality. Enrolment and access to education need to be prioritised in particular for early childhood education (ECE) programmes and pre-primary levels, as they are crucial not only for child development but also for enabling women to labour market

- 11 ARISE – Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education, January 2021, Policy Brief: Kosovo, <http://www.kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Policy-brief-Kosovo-ENG-Final.pdf>.
- 12 Kosovo Education Center (KEC), May 2021, Evaluation of the Implementation of the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021 – Insufficient achievement, <http://kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Evaluation-of-the-Implementation-of-KESP-2017-2021.pdf>.
- 13 UNICEF Kosovo, January 2022, Youth Voices from Kosovo, <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/reports/youth-voices-kosovo>.



participation.<sup>14</sup> In Kosovo, individuals attending ECE were seen to have more “grit”,<sup>15</sup> to be more open to new experiences, and to be more emotionally stable, all of which are essential for their empowerment. It is equally critical to incorporate targeted policy interventions to provide better access as well as continued pedagogical support to poorer and rural households, as well as girls, children from non-majority ethnic communities, and children with special needs.

A few policy interventions that require less investment and are more easily implementable but that can have an equally important and direct impact on youth empowerment in addition to supplementing the above recommendations are: a) the establishment of a feedback mechanism that would allow students to evaluate their teachers; b) consulting children and young people to define easily implementable short-term curricula interventions; and c) building on and expanding existing higher education exchange programmes, such as the EU-funded Young Cell Scheme.

## Empowerment through building essential life skills

Today, essential life skills include those that give young people better access to jobs – marketable skills – but also basic skills that allow them to meaningfully participate in public life, such as communication and critical thinking skills. The fact that most young active labour market participants in Kosovo do not work in their occupation<sup>16</sup> confirms the mismatch between education and labour market needs.

Communication and digital skills are among the top three most sought-after by Kosovo employers, especially those that offer higher wages.<sup>17</sup> The impression among young people in Kosovo is that the formal education system does not nourish these two essential skills at all and that it focuses too extensively on theoretical knowledge rather than its application, resulting in a lack of critical thinking skills development.<sup>18</sup> Teaching methods and lesson plans should urgently be revamped to build practical knowledge and develop skills needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ideally, this should be accompanied by capital investments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) capacities in both formal and non-formal education.

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The importance of strengthening non-formal education is increasingly being seen as a priority, but results are lacking. Vocational education and training (VET) programmes are not considered attractive career options, again, mostly due to the low

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14 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), February 2020, The Social Dimension of Enlargement Policy, <https://soe.fes.de/features/social-dimension-of-eu-enlargement>.

15 World Bank, March 2020, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020, <https://wiiw.ac.at/western-balkans-labor-market-trends-2020-dlp-5300.pdf>.

16 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), 2019, Youth Study Kosovo 2018/2019, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15264.pdf>.

17 Ibid.

18 UNICEF Kosovo, January 2022, Youth Voices from Kosovo, <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/reports/youth-voices-kosovo>.



quality of teaching and the lack of government investment in those programmes.<sup>19</sup> It is essential that these programmes are not only donor needs driven but that there is a regular review of profiles available so that they respond to evolving market needs.

Another key priority is to strengthen and build on the few existing programmes that support linkages between education and the labour market, as well as programmes that build skills through opportunities for entrepreneurship. Employers should also be involved in curriculum development so that they can continue supporting students with on-the-job learning opportunities. Young people who had internships during their studies in Kosovo seem to have an advantage in finding jobs in their occupations,<sup>20</sup> thus it is important that the existing donor-funded internship schemes continue to be expanded.

***Employers should also be involved in curriculum development so that they can continue supporting students with on-the-job learning opportunities.***

## Empowerment through active participation in decision-making

Lastly, in addition to improvements in education, all institutions, teachers, and parents should work to actively engage children and young people in decision-making by maximising youth engagement and participation in and outside of schools. Giving them this agency would serve in parallel to build their capacity to participate in a democracy from an early age and to build civic awareness.

Every small step makes a difference, even if it is as simple as including a suggestion box in every school. From the re-functionalisation of youth councils in both schools and municipalities to the appointment of youth focal points in local and central institutions, these are non-costly options that only require the determination needed to succeed. In the long term, it is important that volunteering is institutionalised in schools and recognised as practical work experience by state institutions.

Finally, it is time for the decision-makers to stop treating young people as beneficiaries and to start considering them as capable actors. Strategies should not be developed *for* them but *with* them. For the first time in Kosovo, young people were being consulted for the new National Development Strategy. However, youth consultation processes need to become systematic and consider the inclusion of young people in the implementation of relevant strategies as actors.

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There have been some positive steps towards strengthening national youth policies, such as conducting consultations with youth and using those inputs to draft

19 Kosovo Education Center (KEC), May 2021, Evaluation of the Implementation of the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021 - Insufficient achievement, <http://kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Evaluation-of-the-Implementation-of-KESP-2017-2021.pdf>.

20 World Bank, March 2020, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020, <https://wiw.ac.at/western-balkans-labor-market-trends-2020-dlp-5300.pdf>.



the Concept Document on Youth<sup>21</sup> which will set the basis for the new Kosovo Youth Strategy. While it is encouraging that the document acknowledges the importance of a cross-sectoral approach and highlights youth participation in decision-making as one of its primary objectives, it remains to be seen how much of these policies will be prioritised and implemented.

## Conclusions

Various opinion polls continuously suggest high percentages of young people wanting to leave Kosovo – possibly around half<sup>22</sup> of them definitely or likely considering emigration. Perhaps because they find little perspective in their environment, they have started to create opportunities for themselves. It is no coincidence that the most successful sectors in Kosovo are those where the youth are at the wheel, despite the many limitations under which they are developing and operating. In order to give them the necessary tools to become fully empowered, an education that nourishes active citizenship is key.

Significant targeted investments for improving the (e)quality of education are urgent. As the saying goes, if you think education is expensive, try ignorance. It is equally important that the education system will foster the skills needed in the 21st century, especially by making use of non-formal education opportunities. Finally, active involvement of children and young people in all types of decision-making during their school years should not only be encouraged, but it also needs to be institutionalised to build their civic awareness.

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21 Government of Kosovo, Public Consultations Platform, November 2020, <https://konsultimet.rks-gov.net/viewConsult.php?ConsultationID=41590>.

22 UNDP Kosovo, January 2021, Youth Challenges and Perspectives in Kosovo, <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/publications/youth-challenges-and-perspectives-kosovo>.



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