

YOUTH MIGRATION & BRAIN DRAIN IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Institutional Responses to Youth Migration and
Brain Drain in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia

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This Policy Paper is prepared by the Migration Team of the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme 2025/2026 (RYLMP).

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Executive Summary

Youth migration and brain drain have become some of the most significant challenges facing Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, shaping not only demographic trends but also the region's long-term economic development. Over the years, large numbers of young and educated people have left the three countries in search of better employment opportunities, fairer labor markets, professional advancement, and stronger institutional environments. As a result, the region is beginning to experience labor shortages in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, engineering, and information technology, while population decline and ageing place increasing pressure on public systems and economic sustainability.

This policy paper examines how existing institutional responses in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia address youth migration and brain drain, and whether current measures are coherent, accessible, and meaningful from a youth-centered perspective. The research combines analysis of national youth strategies, employment and migration policies, diaspora engagement frameworks, and legislative measures with qualitative findings gathered through focus groups and stakeholder interviews conducted in the three countries.

The findings reveal strong similarities across the region. Young people consistently perceive education systems as overly theoretical and insufficiently connected to labor market realities. Many study participants described limited access to internships, practical training, mentorship, and career guidance, leaving them feeling unprepared for professional life. At the same time, employment prospects within their countries are widely viewed as weak due to low wages, unstable working conditions, and limited opportunities for professional advancement. The research also highlights a broader crisis of institutional trust, as many young people remain disconnected from public institutions and are often unaware of existing support mechanisms such as youth employment programmes or the Youth Guarantee. Weak coordination between institutions, fragmented implementation, and poor communication reduce the visibility and credibility of otherwise comprehensive policy frameworks. While all three countries have adopted strategies aimed at improving youth employment, strengthening education systems, and engaging the diaspora, implementation gaps limit their real impact.

The paper concludes that addressing youth migration requires a long-term and coordinated approach that moves beyond short-term policy responses. Stronger education-to-employment transitions, improved career support services, merit-based recruitment practices, better inter-institutional coordination, and more meaningful youth participation in policymaking are essential to rebuilding trust and creating conditions in which young people can realistically envision their future within their own countries.

List of Acronyms

EEAS	European External Action Service
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
INSTAT	National Institute of Statistics of Albania
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MAKSTAT	Database of the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia
NEET	"Not in Education, Employment, or Training"
NSZ	National Employment Service (of the Republic of Serbia)
NYS	National Youth Strategy (North Macedonia)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WB	World Bank
YIHR	Youth Initiative for Human Rights

1. Introduction

Youth migration and brain drain have become defining structural challenges across the Western Balkans, shaping not only demographic trends but also the region's long-term economic stability and prospects for European Union (EU) integration. When large numbers of young and educated people leave, countries lose critical human capital – the very resource needed to drive innovation, productivity, and institutional development. This is not only a short-term labor market issue but also a long-term development risk (World Bank, 2023; OECD, 2022). Research shows that when skilled young people continue to leave, it can weaken the economy, slow down technological progress, and put pressure on public systems (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; World Bank, 2023). Over time, shrinking and ageing populations mean fewer taxpayers, while costs for healthcare and pensions increase, making it harder for governments to invest in future growth. While remittances provide temporary financial backup for households, they rarely compensate for the structural loss of skills, knowledge, and social capital (OECD, 2022). If migration is not properly managed, it can increase inequality between countries and keep poorer economies stuck in cycles of dependence and slow development (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2020).

Across the Western Balkans, the scale and urgency of this issue is striking. In all three countries examined in this paper – Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia – youth unemployment remains persistently high, large shares of young people express a desire to emigrate, and critical sectors such as healthcare, engineering, education, and ICT face growing skills shortages. As a response, the three countries have introduced a range of policies on youth, education, employment, and migration. They aim to improve opportunities domestically, encourage return migration, and strengthen engagement with the diaspora. However, despite these efforts, many young people still want to leave. Coordination between institutions is often weak, and limited monitoring makes it

difficult to assess how effective these policies really are. This raises an important question: do these policies actually influence young people's decisions to stay, leave, or return? This paper examines that question by assessing how clear, accessible, and effective current policies are, and by exploring how these countries can move from short-term reactions to more long-term and sustainable solution

1.1. Albania

Migration has been closely tied to Albania's post-1990 political transition and economic transformation. After the collapse of the communist regime, the country experienced one of the largest waves of outward migration in Europe. More than three decades later, migration has become a defining element of Albania's demographic trends, labor market dynamics, and household economic strategies — particularly among younger generations, who increasingly view their futures outside Albania (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024).

The country faces one of the highest emigration rates in the Western Balkans: nearly 40% of Albania's workforce is estimated to be living and working abroad (IOM, 2024), while remittances remain a critical pillar of the economy, accounting for approximately 9–10% of GDP in recent years (World Bank, 2024 a). Population decline has accelerated, with Albania's total population decreasing by over 400,000 people between 2011 and 2023, largely driven by emigration (INSTAT, 2023). This trend is accompanied by rapid population ageing, declining fertility rates, and increasing dependency ratios (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2022).

Migration is especially pronounced among young people. Surveys show that a significant number of young Albanians want to emigrate, often citing limited job opportunities and low wages (Regional Cooperation Council [RCC], 2023). Student migration further reinforces this pattern:

around half of Albanian students studying abroad do not plan to return immediately after graduation, while an additional 30% intend to return only after gaining work experience (King & Gëdeshi, 2023). These patterns indicate that migration is increasingly structural rather than temporary, contributing to long-term brain drain and skills shortages in key sectors such as healthcare, education, and ICT (OECD, 2022).

These dynamics are closely linked to broader economic challenges. Albania's GDP per capita remains about one-third of the EU average (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2025), reflecting persistent productivity gaps and limited high-quality employment opportunities. Youth unemployment and unstable jobs push many young people to leave the country (World Bank, 2025), while continued emigration puts pressure on public finances – particularly pensions and social services – as a shrinking workforce is left to support an ageing population (World Bank, 2025). Migration should therefore not be viewed only as a labor market issue; it affects fiscal sustainability, human capital development, and Albania's long-term path toward EU membership.

In response to these challenges, public policies in Albania have increasingly recognized the link between education, employment, and migration. The National Youth Strategy 2022–2029 places education reform, youth employability, and institutional coordination at the center of efforts to reduce emigration pressures (Government of Albania, 2022). However, gaps remain between policy design and implementation, highlighting the need for more comprehensive, evidence-based, and forward-looking approaches.

1.2. North Macedonia

North Macedonia faces an acute demographic crisis, driven by persistent (youth) emigration and brain drain. The country lost approximately 200,000 inhabitants between 2002 and 2021, with migration identified as the primary driver. Official data illustrates the scale and volatility of

outgoing flows. From 2015 to 2023, registered departures fell to a low of 141 in 2017 before rising sharply, peaking at 2,034 in 2022 and remaining high at 1,476 in 2023, with a total of 9,827 recorded emigrants over the period, predominantly oriented toward Germany and Switzerland (MAKSTAT database, 2026). According to the Draft National Strategy for Cooperation with the Diaspora 2025-2030 (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025), the Macedonian diaspora numbers approximately 700,000 individuals globally – nearly one-third of the current resident population. What is particularly concerning, is the composition of this group: given that emigrants are disproportionately tertiary-educated skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, North Macedonia ranked sixth globally for brain drain intensity between 2007 and 2024 (Bajrami Ollogu & Xhelili, 2025).

North Macedonian youth (aged 14 to 29) constitutes the most emigration-prone demographic. According to the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2024), 42.67% of young people express strong or very strong desire to emigrate. The country is already witnessing a contraction of the working-age population (15–64) by 6% since 2012, with projections indicating a further 15% decline by 2050 if current trends persist (Bajrami Ollogu & Xhelili, 2025). Youth unemployment stands at 30.33% for those aged 15–24 (The Global Economy, 2024), while the rate of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) reaches approximately 25% for those aged 15–29, significantly above EU averages (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2023). Critical skilled labor shortages affect healthcare, information technology, education, and engineering. Migration is also linked to a loss of investments in human capital and creative work, the social policy and economic condition of the country (Dinkovski & Markovska-Simoska, 2018). In fact, the education system increasingly produces graduates with internationally marketable

skills but limited domestic absorption capacity, creating what might be described as “emigration-ready” rather than “employment-ready” graduates.

North Macedonia’s policy response increasingly combines youth-retention measures with diaspora engagement and EU-accession reforms. The National Youth Strategy 2023–2027 addresses migration indirectly through goals on education quality, employability, participation, and well-being, targeting a reduction in youth unemployment from 26.4% in 2021 to 18% by 2027. The Draft National Strategy for Cooperation with the Diaspora 2025-2030 proposes more structured cooperation mechanisms, including diaspora mapping, investment facilitation, and knowledge transfer, shifting from ad hoc ties toward institutionalized brain circulation. These efforts are linked to the EU Growth Plan (EEAS, 2024), and to the Reform Agenda’s emphasis on VET modernization, active labor market policies, and public-sector reform. Additional programmatic measures include the national Youth Guarantee (targeting NEETs up to age 29), the Law on Work Engagement of Persons (Official Gazette No. 104/2025), which supports student employment formalization, and housing-support schemes designed to strengthen incentives for young people to build livelihoods domestically.

Despite this breadth of policy activity, North Macedonia risks becoming caught in a self-reinforcing “emigration trap” (World Bank, 2024), wherein initial outflows generate conditions that accelerate further emigration. Implementation gaps, resource constraints, institutional fragmentation, weak municipal capacity, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation may constrain the effectiveness of otherwise comprehensive policy frameworks.

1.3. Serbia

Brain drain is one of the most significant challenges facing the Republic of Serbia, with the significant outflow of young and educated people contributing to severe labor shortages in key

sectors such as healthcare, engineering, information technology, and technical professions (YIHR, 2024). The European Training Foundation [ETF] highlights the compounding problem of skills mismatch in the labor market alongside the continuous outflow of qualified workers, while research shows that Serbian youth express a desire to emigrate (ETF, 2019). The loss of this workforce not only diminishes human capital but also represents a substantial loss of public investment in their education.

Serbia's population has been experiencing a continuous and significant decline, shrinking by approximately 0.5% each year. Official data shows that the population decreased from 7.52 million in the 2011 census to an estimated 6.95 million inhabitants by 2019. This is the result of both a persistent negative natural change (i.e., deaths significantly outnumber births), as well as high rates of emigration. One of the most concerning trends is the rapid ageing of the population: the average age reached 43.3 years in 2019, while the percentage of people aged 65 and above rose to 23.06%. By comparison, the average age of those leaving Serbia is 28.7 years. This outflow of young and skilled professionals results in an estimated economic loss of approximately 1% of the national GDP annually (IOM, 2012).

Migration has been especially shaped by a combination of economic and structural factors. RCC's Balkan Barometer (2022) identified low wages, a lack of adequate jobs, and the perception of nepotism and corruption as key motivations for emigration. Young people often view foreign labor markets as offering clearer career paths and a higher standard of living. With a GDP per capita of roughly 43% of the EU average (in 2021) and a poverty and social exclusion rate of 29.8%, the structural conditions driving emigration remain significant. The resulting brain drain of young, tertiary-educated professionals is estimated to cost the Serbian economy approximately 1% of GDP annually.

At the same time, public perceptions towards migration are ambivalent: while emigration is recognized as a threat to long-term development, remittances remain a vital source of household income and a stabilizing element for local economies. The diaspora generates an average annual remittance inflow of €4 billion, which plays a crucial role in supporting household consumption and offsetting weak domestic labor markets (Vojvodina ICT, 2022).

In response, the Government of the Republic of Serbia has adopted a range of strategies and measures aimed at youth development, employment support, and active diaspora engagement. Key institutions involved in these efforts include the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, and the Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region.

The legislative framework supporting these efforts spans several policy domains. The Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance (Official Gazette numbers: 36/2009-195, 30/2010-145 (other law), 88/2010-186, 38/2015-24, 113/2017-192 (other law), 113/2017-274, 49/2021-3) aims to increase employment and reduce long-term unemployment through active labor market measures including employment subsidies, self-employment support, and training programmes ([Article 1](#), [Article 43](#)), with the National Employment Service (NSZ) playing a central role in career counselling, professional orientation, and the protection of workers employed abroad ([Article 6](#), [Article 97](#)). The Law on the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Serbia (Official Gazette numbers: 27/2018-3, 6/2020-3, 129/2021-15 (other law), 76/2023-19) works to align qualifications with European standards, reduce skills mismatches, and expand youth employability through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the promotion of lifelong learning pathways ([Article 3](#), [Article 9](#), [Article 10](#)). The Law on Dual Education (Official

Gazette numbers: 101/2017-3, 6/2020-25, 76/2023-15) connects the education system more directly to the economy by enabling students to acquire practical competencies in real work environments, with accompanying rights to financial compensation designed to incentivize participation ([Article 4](#), [Article 33](#), [Article 34](#)). On diaspora engagement, the Law on Diaspora and Serbs in the Region (Official Gazette number: 88/2009-45) establishes mechanisms for preserving ties and improving economic cooperation, supported by the Economic Council of the Diaspora and a dedicated Budget Fund for diaspora projects ([Article 4](#), [Article 24](#), [Article 34](#)), while the Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Serbia (Official Gazette numbers: 135/2004-10, 90/2007-3, 24/2018-70) facilitates acquisition of citizenship for members of the Serbian nation abroad as a step toward facilitating return and reintegration ([Article 23](#)). The Law on Prevention of Corruption (Official Gazette numbers: 35/2019-6, 88/2019-3, 11/2021-3 (Authentic interpretation), 94/2021-3, 14/2022-47), though more indirect in its effects, addresses one of the primary structural drivers of emigration by working to strengthen institutional integrity and create a fairer environment for living and working ([Article 1](#), [Article 93](#)). Finally, the Law on Agriculture and Rural Development (Official Gazette numbers: 41/2009-71, 10/2013-3 (other law), 101/2016-3, 67/2021-10 (other law), 114/2021-186, 19/2025-52) supports rural competitiveness and quality of life in ways that can reduce migration pressure from rural areas ([Article 12](#)).

Despite the breadth of the legislative and strategic framework, challenges remain. Unequal access to opportunities at the local level, weak coordination between institutions, and a gap between formal policies and the lived experiences of young people limit the real impact of these policies. Understanding how young people themselves perceive and engage with these policies is therefore central to the shift from reactive brain drain management toward more sustainable, long-term approaches to mobility and knowledge circulation.

2. Research methods

This policy paper investigates the hypothesis that existing institutional responses in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have limited impact on reducing youth migration and brain drain because they do not sufficiently address the structural drivers behind these trends, namely low wages, limited career opportunities, weak governance, and a lack of trust in public institutions.

The research is guided by the primary question: *to what extent do existing institutional responses in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia address youth migration and brain drain in ways that are coherent, accessible, and meaningful from a youth-centered perspective?* This is further explored through five secondary questions:

- What education-, youth-, employment-, and migration-related policies and programmes currently exist in each country that directly or indirectly target youth migration and brain drain?
- How coherent and coordinated are these policies across institutions and sectors?
- How do young people perceive the relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness of these measures in shaping their education, employment, and migration decisions?
- What gaps or implementation challenges limit the impact of current institutional responses?
- What policy and institutional adjustments could strengthen the shift from brain drain toward brain circulation?

The study adopts a systematic analysis of official policy documents (including national youth strategies, employment frameworks, diaspora engagement strategies, and legislative texts), as well as triangulation with primary qualitative data across all three countries. This design is deemed appropriate because youth migration is not solely a personal decision; it is shaped by

structural factors including government policy, labor market conditions, and institutional performance. Analyzing policy documents allows the research team to assess whether current institutional efforts target the root causes of migration or address only its symptoms. The comparative dimension enables patterns, divergences, and transferable lessons to be identified across the three national contexts.

2.1. Approach and methods

The research was conducted in two main phases: secondary research (document review) and primary data collection (focus group discussions and interviews).

Secondary research involved the review of policy and institutional documents, such as national youth strategies, employment and migration policies, diaspora engagement strategies, and relevant legal frameworks in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. In addition, reports from international organizations such as the World Bank, IOM, RCC, and others were considered. The document review focused on identifying policy objectives, target groups, implementation mechanisms, and monitoring systems.

Primary research was conducted through a series of semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders, as well as one focus group per country. Similar interview and focus group guides were used in all countries to ensure that findings are comparable. Details about focus group participants and interview respondents are outlined in the Findings chapter.

2.2. Merits and limits

This research approach has several methodological strengths. First, the combination of multiple data sources strengthens the internal validity of the analysis by allowing findings to be cross-checked across different types of evidence. Second, the inclusion of youth and stakeholder perspectives serves an important bridging function, connecting the logic of policy design with the

lived realities of those the policies are intended to reach. This is particularly valuable in a field where the gap between formal institutional commitments and experienced outcomes is often wide. Finally, the comparative dimension across the three countries enables the identification of shared structural challenges, generating insights that a single-country study could not produce.

The research is, however, subject to a number of limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. The study relies substantially on secondary data and existing reports, which vary across the three countries in terms of methodological approach and level of detail. This introduces unevenness in the comparative analysis. Furthermore, the research treats policy documents as meaningful evidence of government priorities, an assumption that may not necessarily always hold in contexts where significant gaps exist between formal commitments and actual implementation. Finally, the primary research component is limited in scale and is not statistically representative; findings drawn from it should therefore be read as indicative and exploratory rather than generalizable to broader populations.

Despite these constraints, the methodology provides a useful foundation for identifying key policy gaps and generating practical recommendations, provided they are interpreted with appropriate caution.

3. Findings and Analysis

3.1. Albania

Primary data collection in Albania comprised one focus group discussion and one stakeholder interview. The focus group was conducted on 30 March 2026 with twelve participants aged 18 to 30, including master students and young professionals. As the session was facilitated by a single researcher (without a rapporteur/note-taker), it was complemented by a written

questionnaire distributed to participants. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions designed to capture the nuances of participants' views and served as a methodological mitigation measure; it should not be understood as a standalone survey instrument. Its responses have been integrated in the analysis below.

With respect to the stakeholder interviews, invitations were extended to representatives from several relevant institutions, including the Career Offices of the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Law at the University of Tirana, as well as departments within the Ministry of Education and Sports responsible for pre-university education policy. None of these actors agreed to participate, which constitutes a notable limitation of the research, as it restricts the extent to which institutional perspectives on policy design and implementation can be assessed. The sole interview was conducted with a representative of an international organization managing a project on the Youth Guarantee, whose insights are incorporated below.

Perceived gaps between education, the labor market, and institutional support

The focus group findings reveal a pervasive sense among young Albanians that the education system inadequately prepares them for labor market entry. Participants consistently described their academic experience as heavily theoretical, with limited opportunities for practical training, internships, or employer engagement. While some noted that their studies provided general familiarity with their field, they nonetheless felt ill-equipped for the requirements of the working environment. This perceived disconnect between academic preparation and labor market demands was a source of considerable frustration. It also aligns with the structural mismatch identified by the interviewee, who highlighted that university graduates often find themselves competing in oversaturated markets, while vocational education continues to carry a social stigma despite stronger employment potential in certain sectors.

Participants also described the transition from education to employment as poorly supported by formal institutions. Career guidance, mentoring, and information about professional development opportunities were widely reported as insufficient or inaccessible. In the absence of effective institutional frameworks, participants reported relying primarily on informal networks, peers, and social media to navigate employment decisions. This pattern points to a broader failure of the formal support infrastructure — including universities and public employment services — to serve as credible or accessible points of reference for youth in transition.

Labor market conditions and perceptions of fairness

Most focus group participants rated employment prospects within Albania as average to weak. A frequently cited structural barrier is the expectation that entry-level positions require prior work experience, a condition that creates a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion, as graduates cannot obtain experience without employment, yet cannot obtain employment without experience. Beyond this, participants raised concerns about the prevalence of nepotism, favoritism, and the absence of meritocratic recruitment practices. The perception that qualifications and effort are insufficient to guarantee professional advancement significantly erodes young people's confidence in the domestic labor market and weakens their incentive to remain in the country.

Economic conditions compound these concerns. Participants described wages as failing to reflect educational investment and pointed to poor working conditions and limited prospects for professional growth as further disincentives. These economic grievances were frequently linked to wider governance issues, including corruption and weak institutional accountability, reinforcing a broader sense that the systemic conditions necessary for professional fulfilment are absent.

Institutional trust and the Youth Guarantee

The interview with a representative of an international organization managing a Youth Guarantee project provided a complementary institutional perspective. Albania formally launched a pilot phase of the Youth Guarantee in 2023, targeting young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) in Tirana, Shkodra, and Vlora. Approximately 27.2% of young people in Albania fall into the NEET category (an estimated 100,000 individuals), making this a population of particular policy concern. The programme aims to ensure that registered participants receive a concrete offer of employment, education, or vocational training within four months of enrolment.

The interviewee identified low institutional trust as one of the most significant obstacles to implementation. Many eligible young people remain disengaged from public employment services even where support mechanisms exist, reflecting deep-seated skepticism towards state institutions. As a result, outreach has become one of the most operationally challenging aspects of the programme. Reaching young people is increasingly dependent on civil society organizations, youth councils, and peer ambassadors, as these are perceived by youth to be more credible. Weak coordination between institutions was identified as a further structural constraint, limiting the coherence of the policy response. The interviewee also noted that particular groups, such as Roma and Egyptian youth, rural youth, young people from low-income households, and those with disabilities, remain systematically underrepresented in the scheme, facing compounding barriers of poverty, discrimination, and limited access to services.

Migration intentions and the limits of current policy responses

Migration emerged as a dominant theme across the focus group. A significant proportion of participants either intended to leave Albania after graduation or remained undecided about their future in the country. Motivations went beyond wage expectations; they concerned access to better

educational opportunities, fairer and more transparent recruitment systems, stronger professional recognition, and greater prospects for personal development. The interviewee similarly underscored that migration is driven not solely by economic factors but also by a loss of confidence in institutional structures and limited social perspectives within the country.

Notably, many participants retained an affective attachment to Albania and indicated a willingness to stay or return, contingent upon meaningful improvements in governance, labor market fairness, and institutional support for youth. This suggests that migration intentions are not irreversible, and that targeted policy reforms, particularly those addressing meritocracy in hiring, the quality of career support infrastructure, and university-employer linkages, could contribute to reversing brain drain trends. However, the current evidence suggests that existing measures fall short of addressing the structural drivers of youth frustration. The Youth Guarantee represents a coherent policy framework aligned with European standards, but its impact on reducing youth migration and brain drain is likely to remain limited without stronger institutional coordination, more meaningful employment offers, and a sustained effort to rebuild trust between young people and the state.

3.2.North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, the research team held one focus group discussion on 16 April 2026 with twelve participants aged between 18-24. They were graduate and postgraduate university students. In addition, six key informant interviews were held with one Member of Parliament, civil servants from the Ministry of Education and Science, and Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, the National Coordinator for Demography, the youth advisor to the Prime Minister, and a university professor.

Perceived gaps between education, the labor market, and institutional support

Evidence from the focus group discussion points to a broadly shared perception that the education system in North Macedonia inadequately prepares young people for labor market entry. Participants described their academic experience as theoretically grounded but practically insufficient, with internship placements and employer engagement considered as scarce and inconsistently available across disciplines. While students acknowledged gaining subject-matter knowledge, they reported feeling ill-prepared for actual work requirements. This was best captured by one participant's observation that their university had provided knowledge but not a career path. This perceived disconnect reflects the structural diagnosis offered by key informant interviewees, who identified the mismatch between an education system producing graduates and a labor market unable to absorb them in adequate roles as the primary structural driver of youth emigration.

Focus group participants rated the institutional support for the school-to-work transition as weak and largely inaccessible. Career guidance services at universities were perceived as negligible, and government employment agencies were characterized as bureaucratic and slow to respond to student needs. In the absence of effective formal support, participants reported relying primarily on informal channels (social media, campus notices, and peer networks) to access information about scholarships, vacancies, and professional opportunities. None of the focus group participants mentioned the Youth Guarantee or any other state-sponsored programme, indicating a systemic failure of institutional outreach and communication. This is largely confirmed by interview respondents who talked about persistent youth disengagement from public services.

Labor market conditions and perceptions of fairness

Focus group participants believed that employment prospects within North Macedonia are limited, with the exception of fields such as ICT and engineering. A recurring concern was the expectation of personal connections as a precondition for securing a suitable job, which

participants perceived as undermining meritocratic hiring and eroding confidence in the domestic labor market. Low entry-level wages and limited opportunities for professional advancement were cited as additional disincentives for remaining in the country. These perceptions reflect a broader pattern identified by interview respondents: an economy that has not yet generated the volume or quality of high-skilled positions necessary to retain educated graduates, creating a structural tension between the supply of university-qualified young people and the capacity of the labor market to absorb them.

Interview respondents acknowledged a policy inconsistency in this regard. Efforts to expand access to higher education have not been met by sufficient investment in the private sector development and economic diversification needed to provide adequate employment. Indirect retention measures, such as the dual education reform, vocational training, startup grants, and innovation support, are described as being under development within the National Youth Strategy (NYS) 2023–2027, but officials admitted that these instruments have yet to produce tangible results.

Institutional coherence and the National Youth Strategy

At the institutional level, the NYS 2023–2027 is presented by government representatives as a methodologically sound and politically committed response to the structural drivers of brain drain. Officials emphasize its participatory development process, drawing on the Youth Trends Survey of 2022, engaging over one thousand participants across eight thematic working groups, and utilizing digital tools such as UNICEF’s U-Report for crowdsourced feedback, as well as its deliberate alignment with European frameworks. The strategy introduces a dedicated “Security” priority, measurable indicators, clearly assigned institutional responsibilities, and a monitoring mechanism, reflecting explicit lessons learned from the weak coordination and absent evaluation

practices that characterized the preceding 2014–2022 strategy. Interviewees consider the Youth Guarantee scheme as a flagship model of coordinated, cross-sectoral action capable of directly reducing emigration incentives.

However, every interview respondent also acknowledged that implementation is hampered by institutional fragmentation and siloed working practices. This gap between strategic goals and actual implementation is identified as the main constraint on the strategy's effective delivery.

Migration intentions and the limits of current policy responses

Migration was as a near-default consideration among focus group participants, framed as a rational response to structural conditions rather than a purely aspirational choice. They described emigration as dependent on whether personal or family networks could help secure professional prospects at home; for many, that calculation favored departure. Economic and professional considerations were the primary driver, but factors such as living conditions, air quality, and affordable housing were also mentioned. Participants noted that peers who had secured positions abroad rarely returned, and that those who did had typically done so for personal rather than professional reasons; their acquired skills and experience were often perceived as underutilized in the domestic context.

Interview respondents framed the migration challenge in comparable terms: low institutional trust, unemployment and/or underemployment, and the absence of transparent, merit-based career pathways were mentioned as the core factors driving emigration. They identified some direct retention instruments, such as scholarship programmes for top global universities that include contractual return obligations, as well as diaspora engagement strategies, but their scale and reach remain limited. On the other hand, the EU accession process serves as a meaningful psychological anchor for youth optimism, and perceptions of institutional credibility are

themselves a retention factor that policy can leverage. Nevertheless, the overall assessment of current measures, both from focus group participants who remain unaware of them, and from officials who acknowledge their implementation deficits, is that existing responses fall short of adequately addressing the structural drivers of youth emigration.

Focus group participants articulated concrete demands that broadly align with the NYS's stated objectives: guaranteed internship pathways, transparent and merit-based recruitment, higher entry-level wages, entrepreneurship grants, and improvements in living conditions. These priorities reflect official strategy goals, but young people do not see them as reality. This points to North Macedonia's key institutional challenge.

3.3.Serbia

Primary data collection in Serbia comprised two focus group discussions and interviews with institutional actors. The focus groups, conducted on 2 and 7 April 2026, engaged a total of ten participants aged between 20 and 28, the majority of whom were undergraduate, master's, or doctoral students at public universities, predominantly based in Niš, the third largest city in Serbia. Institutional perspectives were provided by one representative of the Ministry of Education and a local non-governmental organization closely engaged with youth policy. The following analysis integrates findings from both sources.

Perceived gaps between education, the labor market, and institutional support

Focus group participants consistently described their academic experience as theoretically strong but insufficiently connected to the practical demands of the labor market. Curricula were perceived as outdated and weakly aligned with employer expectations, while mandatory internship placements were characterized as formal requirements rather than meaningful learning experiences. The dominant view was that real professional preparation begins only after

employment, suggesting that the education system does not function as an effective bridge to the world of work. This perception varied to some extent by discipline: students in medicine and the natural sciences were more optimistic about their employability, while those in the social sciences reported a stronger sense of uncertainty about their professional prospects. Across fields, however, the disconnect between academic training and labor market readiness was identified as a primary source of frustration. For participants who had been working alongside their studies, graduation was not perceived as a transformative milestone but as a minimum formal requirement for labor market entry (i.e., a credential rather than a guarantee of professional opportunity).

Institutional support for the transition from education to employment was similarly considered as inadequate. Participants claimed that information about scholarships, exchange programmes, and professional development opportunities is formally available but not actively communicated or equally accessible, thus requiring significant individual effort to find it. Participants relied mainly on informal networks, peers, and social media instead of institutional channels. This suggests that universities and public employment services are not seen as reliable or accessible sources of information. Institutional interviewees acknowledged this problem, noting that although support services exist, they are not well known, easy to access, or widely considered useful. Their responses support, rather than challenge, the findings from the focus groups.

Labor market conditions and perceptions of fairness

Focus group participants had largely negative perceptions about employment prospects within Serbia. Low starting salaries, limited opportunities for advancement, and the widespread influence of nepotism and political connections were cited as defining features of the domestic labor market. Participants described a cycle of exclusion in which graduates are expected to have work experience but cannot gain it without first getting a job. Those without informal networks

face even greater barriers. Many felt that qualifications and hard work alone are not enough to achieve professional success. This weakens confidence in opportunities within the country and reduces young people's motivation to stay.

These concerns extended beyond wages to include the broader conditions of early-career employment, including the lack of meaningful mentorship, administrative barriers, and what participants described as an environment in which knowledge is not adequately valued. While institutional interviewees acknowledged the importance of aligning the education system with labor market needs (citing dual education, and curriculum modernization as priority reform areas) the gap between these stated objectives and the employment realities experienced by young graduates remains substantial. Officials recognized that migration decisions are strongly shaped by factors outside the direct remit of educational institutions, including wage levels, macroeconomic conditions, and quality of life, implicitly conceding that education reform alone is insufficient to address the structural drivers of youth dissatisfaction.

Institutional coherence and the national policy framework

Institutional respondents described a broad and strategic framing of youth policy, conceptualized as an intersectoral concern requiring coordination across education, employment, and broader development objectives. The Ministry of Education representative presented the institution's mandate as extending well beyond curriculum design to encompass the modernization of educational pathways, the development of 21st century competencies, and the facilitation of smoother transitions from education to employment. Strategic priorities include the expansion of dual education, the development of digital and green skills, internationalization of higher education, and infrastructure investment — with the overarching goal of increasing the alignment between education and labor market demand.

Institutionally, support for young people is conceived as multilayered, comprising scholarship programmes, student loan facilities, internship schemes, and investment in student housing. The Law on Youth provides a formal basis for this support architecture, establishing youth offices and providing public funding for programmes targeting employment, self-employment, and non-formal education. International frameworks, particularly Erasmus+, and cooperation with organizations such as the OECD and Eurostat, are highlighted as instruments for strengthening both the quality and international benchmarking of national policies.

Nevertheless, institutional actors themselves acknowledged tensions in the effectiveness of current arrangements. They described coordination between ministries as complex and uneven, emphasizing that these are mainly technical and organizational challenges rather than political ones. They also recognized the need to improve information sharing and communication. In addition, institutional representatives also noted that some support mechanisms, while formally available, are not sufficiently recognized or utilized — an implicit acknowledgement that visibility and accessibility are real problems. These views align with the focus group findings and suggest that gaps exist not only between institutions but also between how policies are designed and how they are implemented.

Migration intentions and the limits of current policy responses

Emigration was a common consideration among focus group participants and was seen as a practical response to difficult conditions rather than a rejection of the country itself. Participants often mentioned economic and professional reasons, such as higher salaries, better working conditions, and greater recognition of qualifications. They also highlighted the importance of the wider institutional and social environment, including stronger legal security, more transparent governance, and the belief that their efforts would be more fairly rewarded abroad.

Institutional actors engaged with the migration question in more nuanced terms, viewing international mobility as part of broader global trends and emphasizing the potential for knowledge circulation rather than treating emigration solely as loss. This is consistent with a brain circulation perspective, which recognizes the limitations of purely retention-oriented approaches. At the same time, institutional representatives acknowledged that migration decisions are largely shaped by factors outside the remit of educational institutions, including macroeconomic conditions, labor market regulation, and quality of life, pointing to the need for whole-of-government responses that extend beyond the competencies of any single ministry.

A key finding is that focus group participants did not view emigration as an end in itself, but as a rational strategy in the face of an insufficiently supportive domestic environment. The implication is that existing institutional responses have not yet generated the level of trust, visibility, and credibility necessary to influence the migration decisions of the focus group participants. Bridging this gap will require not only continued policy investment, but a concerted effort to improve the accessibility, communication, and perceived fairness of institutional support mechanisms, alongside broader reforms to labor market conditions that lie at the root of emigration intentions.

3.4.Common Threads Across the Three Countries

Despite the different national contexts, research findings reveal a high degree of similarity of experiences and structural challenges in the three counties.

From the perspective of young people, there are four recurring themes:

- i. An education system that is often perceived as too theoretical and not sufficiently responding to the labor market needs, leaving young people feeling ill-prepared to meet the challenges for the professional world.

- ii. A generalized distrust of public institutions, reflecting poor communication, and a sense that formal channels do not serve their interests. This in turn causes a lack of awareness of existing institutional tools and support mechanisms: most participants were unable to name a single state-sponsored program relevant to their situation and relied instead on informal networks and social media to navigate career decisions.
- iii. A sharp tension between individual aspiration and structural constraint: young people in all three contexts had high levels of motivation, educational investment, and professional ambition, while simultaneously expressing strong doubt that their home environments would fairly reward these efforts.
- iv. A widespread framing of emigration not as a desire to leave but as a strategy for professional security in the absence of credible alternatives at home.

From the policy perspective, the primary challenge is not one of insufficient policy design: the three countries have all developed substantive strategies addressing youth employment, education reform, and diaspora engagement. The core problem is implementation. Policies that are formally comprehensive frequently fail to reach their target groups, operate in isolation from complementary measures, or are not evaluated against meaningful outcome indicators. Inter-institutional coordination is weak, with ministries and agencies seeming to work in parallel rather than in concert. The link between education and the labor market remains structurally faulty in all three countries: graduates enter the workforce without the practical skills employers require, while the labor market itself lacks sufficient high-quality employment to absorb them.

4. Recommendations for Improvement

The findings presented in Chapter 3 reveal a consistent pattern across all three countries: youth migration is driven not by a single factor but by the compounding effects of weak education-to-employment transitions, limited institutional trust, poor labor market conditions, and fragmented policy delivery. The recommendations below are organized around cross-cutting themes, each reflecting a structural gap identified in the research. For each recommendation, country-specific considerations are noted where the findings diverge or require distinct attention.

1. Strengthen the transition from education to employment through mandatory work-integrated learning.

Across all three countries, focus group participants consistently described higher education as insufficiently connected to labor market realities. Universities and vocational institutions should embed accredited internship and apprenticeship components into degree programmes by regulatory requirement, supported by monitored employer partnership frameworks and publicly reported graduate outcomes. This structured approach is preferable to voluntary schemes, which have proven insufficient to shift the education-to-employment gap at scale.

Albania: Universities and vocational institutions should strengthen cooperation with private companies, public institutions, and civil society organizations. Vocational education should also receive additional investment in quality improvement and public awareness campaigns to reduce the persistent social stigma that discourages uptake, despite strong employment potential in several sectors.

North Macedonia: The education system increasingly produces graduates with internationally marketable skills but limited domestic absorption capacity. Embedding work-integrated learning must be accompanied by investment in private sector development and economic diversification.

Expanding dual education models, startup support, and high-skill sector development are essential parallel measures.

Serbia: Participants emphasized the importance of practical simulations, case-study learning, and project-based teaching alongside stronger support for internships and opportunities such as Erasmus+. Expanding dual education models and faculty-company partnerships could significantly strengthen the school-to-work transition.

2. Expand and improve career guidance, mentorship, and youth information services.

Young people across all three countries reported relying primarily on informal networks and social media to navigate career opportunities, indicating a systemic failure of formal support.

Albania: The National Youth Agency, universities, and employment offices should jointly establish career orientation centers. The outreach of the Youth Guarantee should be significantly expanded toward NEET youth and marginalized communities, including Roma and Egyptian youth, through partnerships with civil society and peer ambassadors.

North Macedonia: None of the focus group participants mentioned the Youth Guarantee or any other state-sponsored program, pointing to a failure of institutional reach. Outreach must be redesigned around channels young people actually use, access procedures simplified, and delivery capacity at the local level strengthened. A formally comprehensive instrument that is functionally invisible to its target group cannot influence migration decisions.

Serbia: Institutions and educational providers should strengthen outreach through centralized digital platforms, youth information centers, and targeted awareness campaigns. Improved communication between schools, universities, and youth organizations should ensure that opportunities reach young people from rural and vulnerable backgrounds equally.

3. Improve labor market conditions and enforce merit-based recruitment practices.

Perceptions of nepotism, political favoritism, and non-transparent recruitment emerged as consistent drivers of migration intentions. Public institutions and private sector employers should strengthen recruitment standards and monitoring mechanisms. Economic insecurity and low wages were repeatedly identified as major factors; targeted measures to encourage fair wages and stable employment contracts are urgently needed. All three governments should also strengthen the implementation and monitoring of labor regulations and establish mechanisms to protect young workers' rights.

Greater investment in innovation, entrepreneurship programmes, and startup support could create alternative career pathways and stimulate local economic development. Targeted fiscal incentives for investment in high-skill sectors, an enabling environment for startup activity, and upward revision of wage structures must be treated as retention instruments embedded in economic policy, not as separate concerns from youth strategy.

Beyond wages, participants cited the desire for a more predictable social environment characterized by stronger rule of law and legal certainty. Tackling brain drain therefore requires not only labor market reforms but also broader institutional improvements.

4. Establish inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms with binding authority and introduce outcome-based policy monitoring.

The research identified a gap between policy and delivery, rather than in policy design or policy objectives. Institutional fragmentation, siloed working practices, and absent or weak monitoring systems undermine otherwise coherent frameworks. All three governments should establish senior-level inter-ministerial coordination bodies with defined mandates, individual institutional accountability, and enforceable obligations.

Stronger cooperation between ministries, with other actors, including local governments and universities, is necessary to create coherent and interconnected policies that respond effectively to youth needs while avoiding duplication of efforts. The gap between formal policy commitments and the lived experiences of young people is partly a product of this fragmentation.

Effective policy implementation requires not only continuous dialogue between stakeholders, but also regular monitoring, which should shift from tracking outputs to measuring outcomes — including youth employment rates by qualification level, programme uptake, and longitudinal emigration intent.

5. Rebuild institutional trust through participatory approaches and reframe migration policy toward brain circulation.

Many young people feel disconnected from state institutions and lack confidence in existing support mechanisms, even where those mechanisms formally exist. Governments should adopt more participatory and youth-centered approaches, including local youth councils, peer ambassador initiatives, and genuine youth consultation in programme design. In parallel, diaspora engagement strategies should be operationalized as brain circulation instruments, incorporating professional mapping, structured knowledge-transfer mechanisms, mentorship programmes, short-term placement schemes, and investment facilitation that does not require permanent relocation.

6. Adopt a *whole-of-government* approach to youth retention and provide targeted support for vulnerable groups.

Youth retention cannot be addressed by any single ministry or policy domain. Migration decisions are shaped by wages, governance quality, housing, transport infrastructure, access to public services, and perceptions of social fairness, factors that span the full breadth of government. All three countries should move toward a whole-of-government approach in which youth retention

is treated as a cross-sectoral development objective. Within this broader framework, targeted support for vulnerable groups is essential, as structural barriers compound migration risks for these populations.

Furthermore, local governments should be more actively involved: weak municipal capacity and resource constraints limit the reach of central government policies at the local level. Strengthening delivery at the local level must be seen as a precondition for ensuring that youth retention measures reach the young people most at risk of emigration, particularly those outside urban centers. Policies aimed at improving quality of life, professional mobility, and access to public services should be understood as integral to any whole-of-government youth retention agenda rather than as secondary priorities

5. Conclusion

Youth migration and brain drain represent one of the most structurally consequential challenges facing Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This paper has shown that the problem is not one of insufficient policy ambition: all three countries have developed substantive frameworks addressing youth employment, education reform, diaspora engagement, and active labor market measures. The core challenge lies in the gap between what policies formally commit to and what young people actually experience. Across all three national contexts, the research found that young people are motivated, and conditionally willing to stay (or return), yet consistently encounter institutional environments that fail to reward effort, provide credible career pathways, or deliver on stated commitments. Strengthening the education-to-labor market linkages, improving coordination, adopting a whole-of-government approach across all

government levels, and (re)building trust can contribute to prevent further migration and increase brain circulation.

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