



EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

## **Revitalising the Western Balkans: What do young people think?**



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The views summarised in this report are those of the young people who expressed their opinions and sentiments freely on issues that they consider important. They do not necessarily represent the views of UNICEF.

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# Introduction

The future of the Western Balkans depends on its youth. To build a resilient region, young people are needed as partners, leaders, and co-creators to design forward-looking solutions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Youth are well-positioned to navigate the digital transition, build democratic and inclusive societies, and sustain productive and green economies. They are key to building bridges across nations, supporting respectful dialogue, reconciliation and durable peace in the region.

Engaging young people begins with listening to their views, needs, and aspirations. As we prepare for the European Year of Youth in 2022, the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office took the opportunity to seek the opinions of young people on issues that matter to them. Using U-Report, a free, real-time social messaging tool, young people throughout the region expressed their views on topics such as participation, employment, education, and the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their lives.

Young people from the Western Balkans were also asked about their opinions and views on EU accession and how it may influence their lives. What emerges from their answers is that young people are optimistic but not naïve. They see that the prospects for development in the Western Balkans region need to go beyond the end-goal of EU membership. Young people's priorities for the future include concrete actions and aspirations for their societies and communities that can already be realised today and where young people can contribute as key actors and partners for change.

*“When we hear from some of our politicians about EU integration, the narrative is like: ‘When we become part of the EU, Skopje will be Paris... and Tirana will be Berlin...’ But we should understand that EU is not a magic wand that will give solutions to every problem we have. We need to know that we young people must be part of the solutions to our problems.” – Blendi, North Macedonia*

This brief summary report demonstrates that young people are critical, honest, and far from being apathetic. It shows that when young people are given a chance to express their views and answer an opinion poll on the U-Report platform, they are engaging as active citizens, showing that they care and are invested in the future of their region. This engagement is a starting point for working with young people as essential partners towards revitalising the present and future of the Western Balkans.

Our sincere thanks go to the thousands of young people who participated in the U-Report polls, sharing their thoughts and opinions. We hope these voices will be heard and inform dialogue and policymaking processes in the European Union and Western Balkans.

*“Before any decision is made by government, at least some young people should always be consulted, it is about us after all” – Nikolina, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

# Methodology

The voices and sentiments of youth form the basis for this report, collected through two U-Report polls conducted by UNICEF. The first poll, *Youth experiences, sentiments and views on COVID-19*, was conducted in July and August 2020 with 15,268 youth aged 15-24 in 23 countries in the Europe and Central Asia region, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo<sup>1</sup>, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

The second poll, *EU-Western Balkans Summit*, was conducted in November 2021 with 2,004 youth and young adults in the Western Balkans sub-region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia). The upper age range of respondents who participated in this poll is higher than in the typical U-Report polls. However, given the high interest in this poll among older young respondents aged 25-34 years, their views were also included. The poll results will also inform discussions in the youth roundtable of the *Friends of Europe EU-Western Balkans Summit*, held online on 7 December 2021. Please note that respondents from Montenegro and Kosovo\* did not have a chance to participate in this U-Report poll. However, informal consultations with youth roundtable participants from these countries suggest that the results are broadly in-line with youth sentiments from those areas.

This report presents the responses to some of the questions asked through the U-report polls. These are real-time quick “snap-shots” providing information on some of the views and sentiments of the young people who responded to the U-Report polls. The graphs below are organised around three main themes:

- Participation and engagement
- Employment and learning in the future after COVID-19
- Western Balkans and the EU

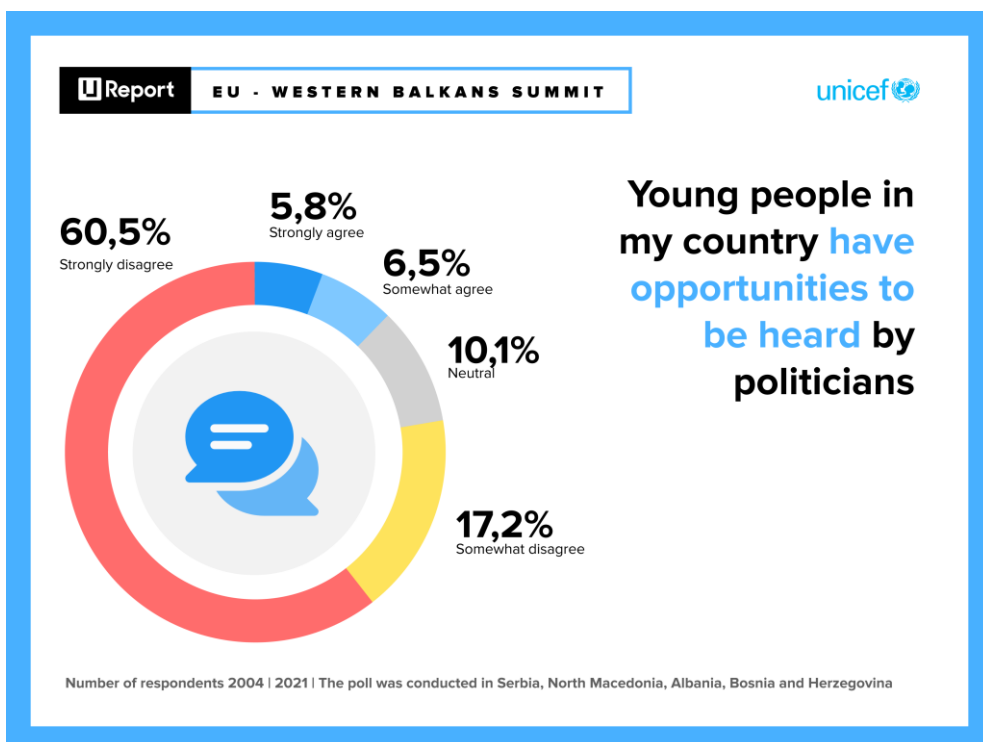
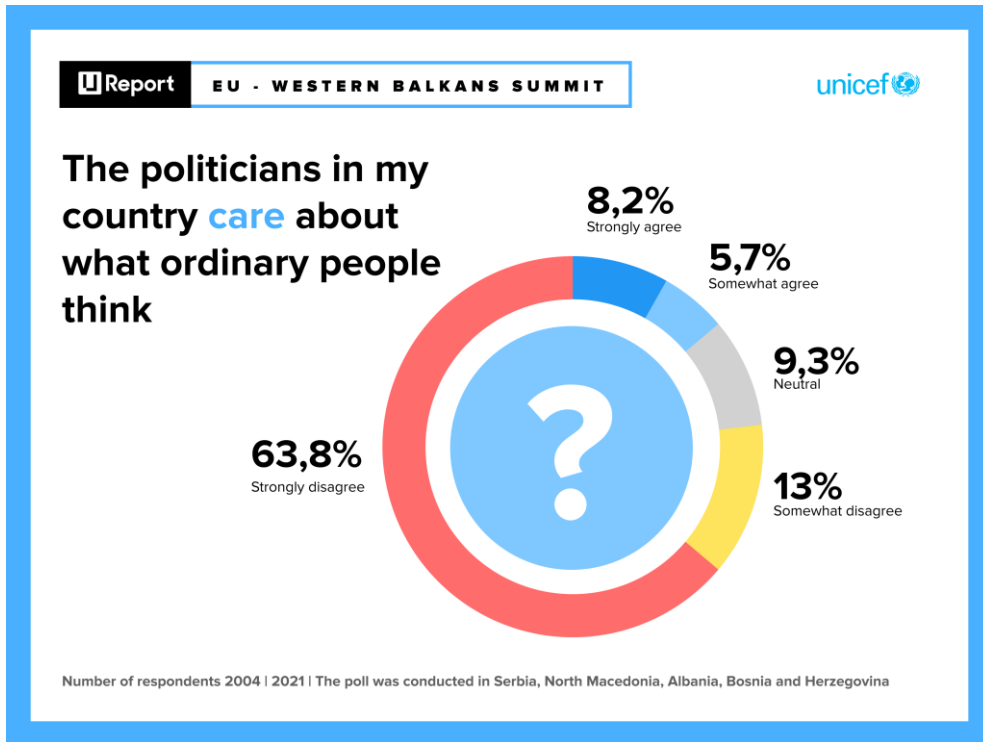
Further in-depth discussions would be needed to unpack and better understand the various aspects of the findings. The findings here represent only the first step in a process of more systematic engagement of young people around the issues that matter to them and their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Under UNSC Resolution 1244

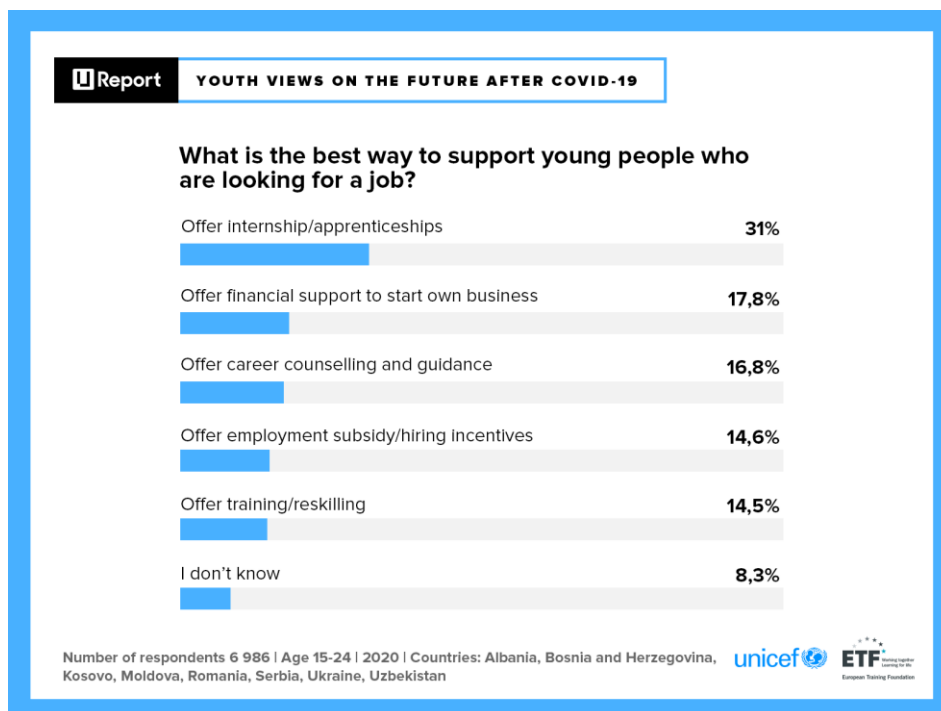
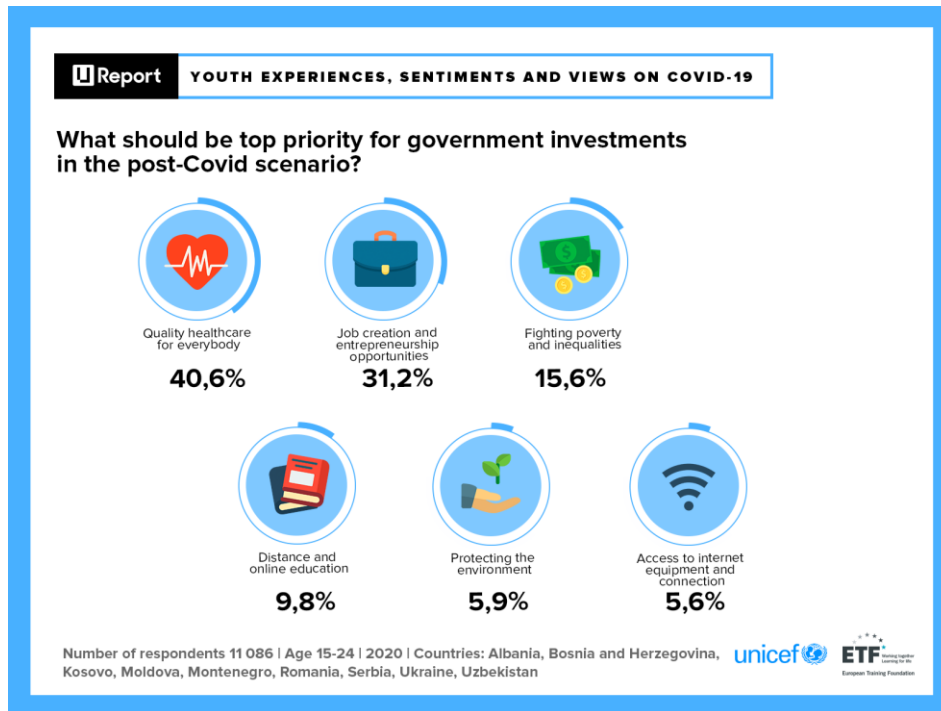
# Participation and engagement

When young people participate in decision-making, it builds social cohesion, strengthens their sense of trust and self-confidence, and contributes to democratic processes and local and national governance mechanisms. However, based on the findings, young people who responded to the poll feel like they do not have many opportunities to be heard by their politicians, nor do they feel like politicians are in touch with the concerns of ordinary people.

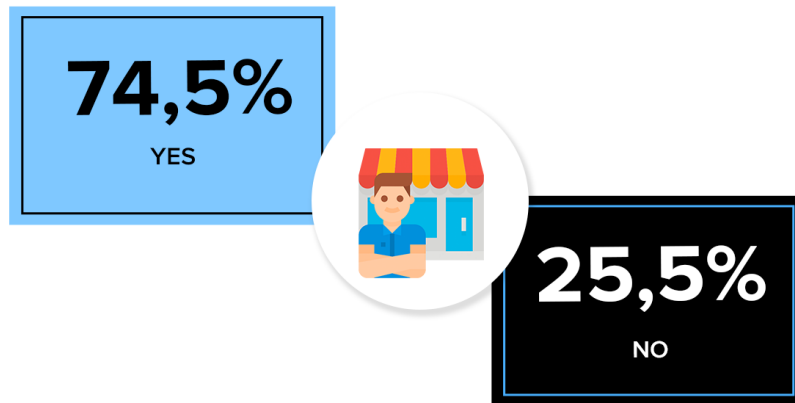


# Employment and learning after COVID-19

Economic recovery and building a more resilient economy in the region post-COVID-19 will require policy shifts to comprehensively support youth transitions from school to work and boost their skills development and acquisition of work experience. The polls show that young people want decent jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities to be top priorities for their governments and that internships and practical on-the-job experience would support them in entering the world of work. Financial support, quality schooling, skilling and networking opportunities would best help young people to become productive members of the community.



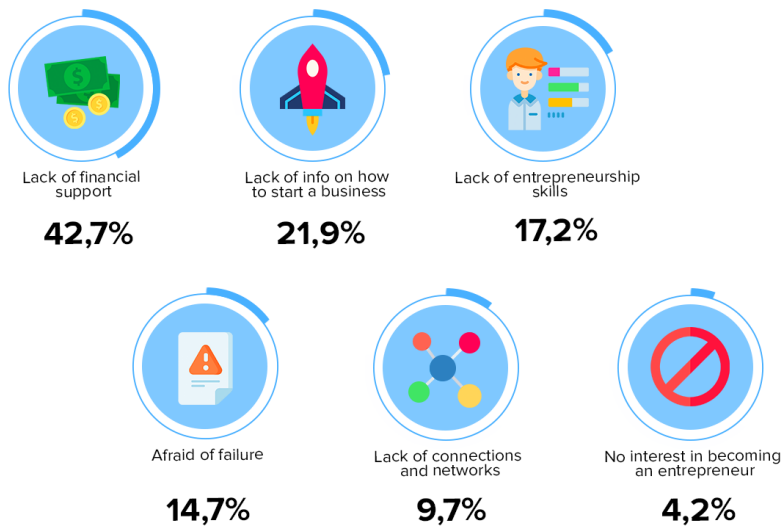
Have you ever thought about starting your own business or becoming an entrepreneur?



Number of respondents 6 971 | Age 15-24 | 2020 | Countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan



In your opinion, what are the biggest obstacles for a young person to become an entrepreneur?



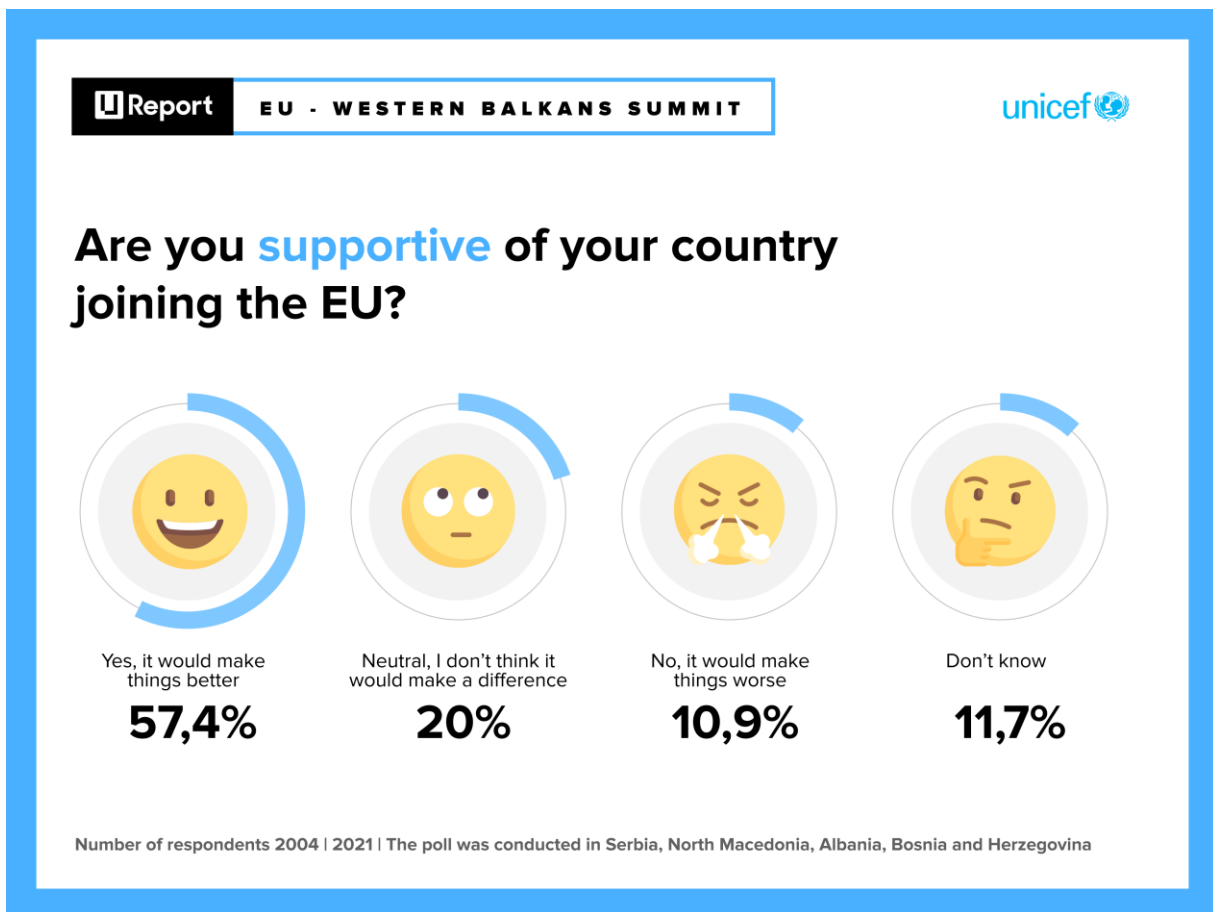
Number of respondents 6 712 | Age 15-24 | 2020 | Countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan



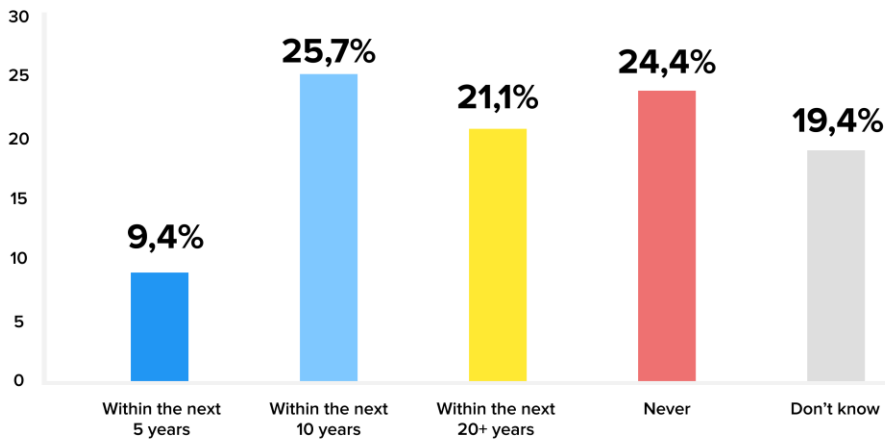


# Western Balkans and the EU

For this generation of young people in the Western Balkans, accession to the European Union has dominated the public conversation for their entire lives. Based on the polls, young people generally support their countries joining the EU but are unsure when that might happen. Jobs and high standards of living are among the most attractive features of the EU. However, young people also felt that if living standards were improved in their home countries, it would be more attractive to stay rather than move abroad.

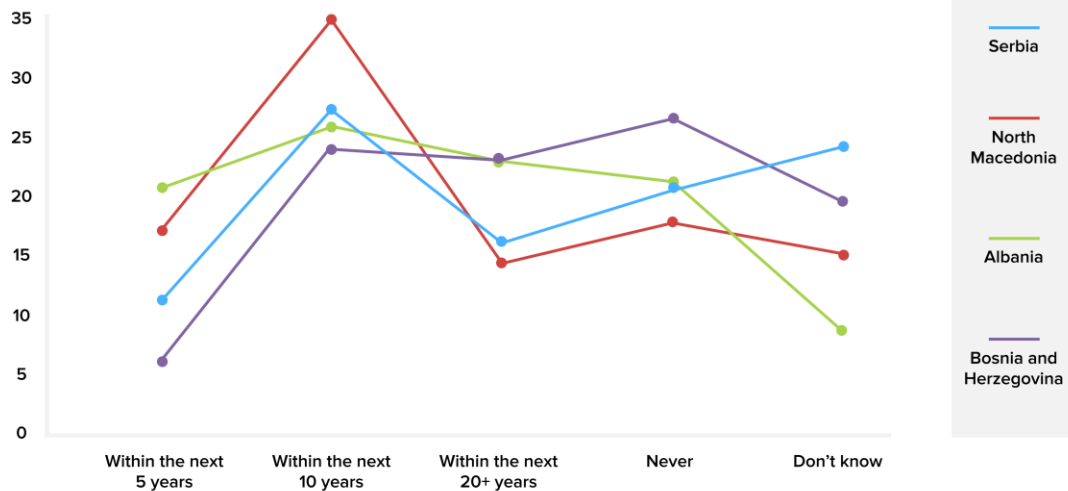


## When do you think your country will join the EU?



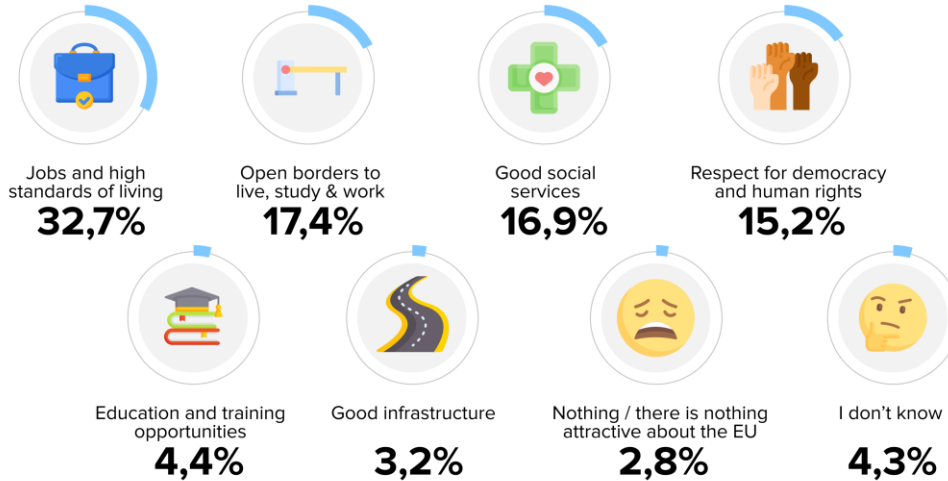
Number of respondents 2004 | 2021 | The poll was conducted in Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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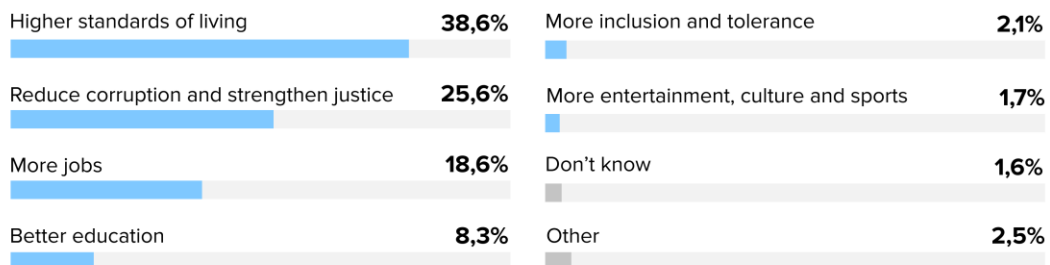
Number of respondents 2004 | 2021 | The poll was conducted in Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## In your opinion, what is the best thing about the EU?



Number of respondents 2004 | 2021 | The poll was conducted in Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Many young people in the region wish to move abroad. What should your country do so that it is more attractive for young people to stay?



Number of respondents 2004 | 2021 | The poll was conducted in Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Looking ahead to the European Year of Youth

The European Year of Youth in 2022 must mark the beginning of a longer-term process of increased youth engagement and activation. Now more than ever, in the context of the COVID-19-related recovery, we need to accelerate the participation of young people in all aspects of policies and programming that affect their lives.

Ensuring that young people have the space to share their views, to an audience with the power to affect decisions, and where their voice can have influence, is a good start. This requires establishing sustainable online and offline mechanisms for more systematic participation with all young people from all backgrounds and working together with them as partners and leaders.

UNICEF is committed to working with young people, national governments, civil society and international partners to support youth engagement as active citizens. When young people participate, they can help develop and revitalise the Western Balkans into a region of opportunity, prosperity, and peace; a region that is respectful of the planet, human rights and dignity of all.

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