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Youth Participation in the EU Integration of Western Balkans: A Token or an Effective Tool for Addressing the Enlargement Fatigue?

ERMA, European Regional Master's Programme
in Democracy and Human Rights in South East Europe

Chiara Maria Murgia

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Foreword

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Biography

Chiara Maria Murgia, an ERMA Program graduate, earned her bachelor's degree in diplomacy from the University of Bologna and majored in International Cooperation and Development at the University of Rome La Sapienza. With experience in various sectors including NGOs, think tanks, and international organizations, her research primarily centres on youth participation in decision-making processes, particularly within the Western Balkans region where she lives and work.

Abstract

Over the past two decades, the prospect of European Union (EU) membership for the Western Balkans has faced numerous obstacles, leading to disillusionment among citizens. The deadlock underpinning the Western Balkans six's EU prospect stems from both internal challenges within the EU and the region itself. This thesis identifies the elite-oriented and top-down nature of the enlargement process as a key contributing factor to the current fatigue. By focusing on citizen participation and bottom-up dynamics, the research explores the role of young people from the Western Balkans in addressing current challenges and in shaping the region's European integration trajectory. It does so by looking into existing participatory mechanisms that inspire regional youth contributions in the context of enlargement, leveraging the process from the bottom-up. The role of youth participation and agency in the European integration of the Western Balkans is therefore examined by employing a qualitative research methodology, through theoretical reflections building from Europeanisation literature, policy analysis and focus groups with Western Balkans youth. The topics engaged in this work are an often overlooked aspect of European integration, yet as this thesis shows, youth contributions have the potential to challenge existing barriers to enlargement, shape the European integration and work towards a more inclusive and democratic European future.

Keywords: *Western Balkans, Enlargement Fatigue, Youth Participation, European Integration, Youth Tokenism*

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out. In particular, I would like to extend a massive thank you to Ms Marija Ivanovic, not only for the great person she is, but first and foremost as a professional. Your competence in guiding me throughout this year and your unique ability to combine outstanding tutoring with genuine empathy are remarkable. In a world where profit and metrics often define standards and evaluations, your empathy stands out as a rare and precious strength. I hope you continue to cherish this quality, navigate and further develop it by prioritising your well-being in all that you do.

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Over the years, my journey has led me to cross paths with countless people from various places, such as academia, youth work, activism, conferences and institutional settings. Through these encounters, I have been inspired by the insights and passion of many peers from the region, who ultimately motivated me to explore this topic also academically. I am grateful to have studied

European integration of the Western Balkans by also talking with peers and listening to what they had to say. Therefore, I wish to dedicate this thesis to the young people who accepted to participate in the focus groups I organised, despite their work obligations and summer vacations. Without you, this thesis could simply not exist in its current shape: thank you for reminding me that, in the end, it was not only about me, but also about 'us'. Last but not least, a big thanks goes to the colleagues from my youth association in Italy, AICEM, and to my friends from the region who are committed to making a difference in their contexts and choose to use their voices. I extend this thought to all the young people who stand up for their right to participate, acknowledging the immense courage and passion required to remain dedicated and actively engaged in a world that is 'bigger than us'. For, I wish we will all continue speaking our truths and posing more questions, especially when our voices are dismissed, underestimated, tokenised or even suppressed.

*To Besnik Avdiaj and our Peace Starts with YOUth
For your brilliance, enthusiasm, patience and friendship.
Thank you for embarking this journey together,
and for the next yet to come...*

Table of Abbreviations

| | |
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| BiH | Bosnia and Herzegovina |
| CEE | Central and Eastern European |
| CoFoE | Conference on the Future of Europe |
| CSOs | Civil society organisations |
| EIM | External Incentives Model |
| EIP | Economic Investment Plan |
| EU | European Union |
| EUBYF | EU-Balkan Youth Forum |
| MFA | Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation |
| RCC | Regional Cooperation Council |
| RYCO | Regional Youth Cooperation Office |
| WBYL | Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs |
| YAP | Youth Action Plan |
| YEA | Young European Ambassadors |

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Introduction

In the current landscape of European integration, a noteworthy phenomenon has emerged – the ‘enlargement fatigue’, signifying the growing exhaustion and scepticism within the European Union (EU) toward including new member states.¹ This phenomenon reflects the growing exhaustion and scepticism within the EU toward including new member states. The Western Balkans six² offer a case on point: the ambitious drive to integrate these countries in the EU – paved 20 years ago in Thessaloniki – has encountered significant hurdles.³ The fact that the EU membership prospect of the region is yet to be a reality brought disillusion among EU member states, candidate countries and citizens. The dynamics of enlargement fatigue extend beyond mere scepticism; they embody a complex interplay of factors, including the EU’s internal dynamics and the crucial aspects of credibility and conditionality. Among these factors, the historically elite-oriented and top-down nature of the enlargement process has been among the leading causes determining the current impasse. The enlargement policy, which emphasises negotiations among political elites, has

¹ The term ‘enlargement fatigue’ has been progressively acquiring contextual specificity as it has gradually been used to refer to the enlargement in the Western Balkans mainly. According to Anna Szolucha’s conceptualisation, enlargement fatigue describes the ‘hesitance or unwillingness to grant EU membership to new states as expressed in the interplay of “wideners” and “deepeners” in the context of an upcoming or just finalised enlargement round’. See Anna Szolucha, ‘The EU and “Enlargement Fatigue”: Why Has the European Union Not Been Able to Counter “Enlargement Fatigue”?’ (2010) 6(1) *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 5.

² The Western Balkans include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

³ The Thessaloniki Declaration resulted from the first EU-Western Balkans Summit in June 2003, where the EU formally reiterated its political commitment to welcome the post-Yugoslav countries, stating that ‘the future of the Balkans is within the European Union’. See European Commission, ‘EU-Western Balkans Summit: Thessaloniki Declaration’ (Press release, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2023) <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163> accessed 14 September 2023.

frequently marginalised the participation of citizens in supporting the European integration process. Similarly, a top-down focus has overshadowed the transformative potential of citizen-driven change from within. This potential bears a pivotal role in fostering the democratic consolidation necessary to align with the EU standards and to establish an overarching Pan-European consensus. Amid this challenging backdrop, one demographic stands as a potential catalyst for change – the youth. Despite its crucial potential in driving European integration of the Western Balkans and in the democratic consolidation of their respective countries, it has remained largely overlooked.

In parallel with the evolution of the European integration landscape, youth participation has taken a central stage in discussions about civic engagement and political involvement. Over the past decades, as citizens have become increasingly detached from the public sphere, questions have arisen regarding young people's engagement, or lack thereof, in civic life and traditional forms of participation.⁴ On one hand, young people are often categorised as apathetic and disengaged, a narrative that clashes with the rise of youth voices on a global scale, with the latter being regarded by many as one of our century's most vibrant and influential political actors. On the other hand, there has been a progressive emphasis on the importance of including young people in shaping the present and the future, with 'youth participation' gaining increased space in various agendas of governments and international institutions. This trend is quite visible in the EU governance, where youth has been increasingly defined as a pivotal agent for shaping the European project. This has mainly applied to the EU's internal dimension, but concerns about young people have become increasingly present in the EU's external dimension and, consequently, its enlargement policy as well.

⁴ In the past decades, civic and political participation has witnessed an increasing disengagement from traditional participation mechanisms, such as voting in elections, joining political parties and other citizen-oriented forms of political engagement. For a literature review on the subject of trends in youth participation, among others, please refer to Anne Crowley and Dan Moxon, 'New and Innovative Forms of Youth Participation in Decision-Making Processes' (Council of Europe October 2017) <<https://edoc.coe.int/en/youth-in-europe/7625-new-and-innovative-forms-of-youth-participation-in-decision-making-processes.html>>.

Focusing on youth is relevant since, while Europeanisation literature in the Western Balkans has primarily focused on political, economic and geopolitical factors, a youth perspective on the topic is often neglected. In light of what has been mentioned so far, the thesis intends to analyse the European integration in the Western Balkans by keeping the main focus on youth as the main subject of the research. By doing so, the two main dynamics considered in the research as shaping the role of youth include the participatory frameworks made available to them in order to *be engaged*, and the enlargement process itself. In addition, the research aims at highlighting how youth perspective and agency, informed by the direct engagement of people in EU-promoted and funded initiatives, can effectively promote the EU integration and mitigate enlargement fatigue.

Therefore, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does youth participation in EU enlargement-related initiatives influence the EU integration of the Western Balkans?

RQ2: What role do the region's young people play in bringing their countries closer to the EU?

The research analysis is shaped around three hypotheses:

H1: Youth participation in EU enlargement initiatives contributes positively to the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans, mitigating the fatigue by promoting democratic values, regional cooperation and European integration.

H2: Participatory frameworks can empower young people to have a more substantial role in the Europeanisation of their countries unless they offer concrete mechanisms supporting youth to participate.

H3: Among different factors preventing young people from meaningful involvement in the EU enlargement, youth tokenism is a major element.

In terms of methodology, this study utilises a multidisciplinary approach situated in the political sciences field and draws upon the contributions brought by Europeanisation literature and youth studies. As outlined in the introduction, this study aims to analyse the interconnection between youth participation in decision-making processes and its potential role in mitigating existing challenges that add to the impasse in the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans. In line with this aim, the study seeks to apply a youth perspective on the topic of enlargement and identify young people as the main subject to retrieve valuable information for the analysis.

Considering how vague and misleading referring to ‘youth’ as a general actor can be, and given the scope of the research, the term ‘youth’ is understood here as young individuals *already* engaged with the EU through active participation. Another layer of the working definition of youth is that the targeted individuals are actively participating in initiatives designed to provide them with a platform designed for them to influence – directly or indirectly – matters related to the EU enlargement. In order to provide a basis to inquiry on the targeted youth perspective on the thesis’ topic, the research employed a mix-method approach, using secondary data sources – such as relevant policy documents where youth is mentioned and acknowledged – as well as primary data, drawing from three focus groups.

Given the study’s limited scope, time constraints and the expansive nature of the topic, the analysis focused on three distinct participatory formats designed for young individuals in the Western Balkans to participate in the subject-matter:

- 01 – the Young European Ambassadors (YEA) programme,
- 02 – the Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs and
- 03 – the EU-Balkan Youth Forum (EUBYF).

These initiatives were selected based on specific criteria. Firstly, all three initiatives formally acknowledge the pivotal role of regional youth in advancing European integration. They are strategically designed to empower young people by providing them with platforms for engagement with decision-makers. It is important to mention that the level at which participants engage with the decision-making process varies across these initiatives. In the case of the EUBYF, participants predominantly interact with

decision-makers at both the national and EU levels, with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Italy's MFA) and the EU Commission serving as key institutional stakeholders addressed by forum participants. In the case of the YEA and Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs (WBYL), dialogue with decision-makers is held at the local and national level, and also with the EU institutions at a lower extent. The third criterion was that all of these initiatives maintain strong connections to the EU, either through EU funding support, as seen in the case of the Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs and the YEA Program, or through direct engagement with the EU institutions, as exemplified by the EUBYF.

During the initial phase of the research, the research question guiding the present work has been broken down into four main sub questions to ease the data gathering and analysis that followed. The identified sub questions read as follows:

- A — How do young participants of these three initiatives perceive the overall topic of youth participation in the region?
- B — Does the ongoing institutional effort to include youth from the Western Balkans in EU policy domains find a place in young people's perceptions and experiences, or is there a mismatch between designed policies and youth's experiences?
- C — What are the main challenges and opportunities faced by young people participating in processes related to the Western Balkans enlargement in the region?
- D — In what ways does youth participation through EU enlargement-related initiatives contribute to mitigate the enlargement in the Western Balkans? How do they define having an impact in the EU accession of their countries?

In August, three online focus groups were conducted to engage with the targeted youth, each comprising of participants from the three initiatives under examination. These focus groups consisted of six to seven individuals aged between 19 and 30, representing the six countries of the Western Balkans. One exception was made for the focus group involving EUBYF delegates, which included a participant that stated availability, from Croatia as an EU country, to enrich the discussion. Each of the focus groups lasted around an hour and a half. All participants provided their consent for the conversations to be recorded and the information

shared to be used exclusively for research purposes. The focus groups discussion aimed to grasp young people's perspectives and insights on the topic of youth participation in the European integration by drawing from their first-hand experiences.

The decision to conduct focus groups was rooted in the desire to gain a deeper understanding of the targeted youth's perspectives. In fact, talking to young people aimed to uncover how these initiatives have influenced their opinions on youth participation, EU accession and related challenges. Additionally, the goal was to assess whether their viewpoints align with the prevailing discourse and agendas concerning youth in general and in the specific policy context of enlargement. The focus group format was chosen to foster interactive discussions among participants who share a common experiential basis, facilitating a sense of collective identification as peers and colleagues. Moreover, it allowed for the recreation of dynamics akin to everyday conversations, creating a context where the evaluation of their participation in the initiatives could be aided by memory associations, such as the people involved and shared details.

The focus group discussions were structured around two main focal points. Initially, the conversations delved into the participants' perspectives on youth participation in decision-making and politics, as well as their feelings about it in light of current developments. This phase also aimed to explore their perceptions of how decision-makers engage with young people. Subsequently, the discussions shifted to the topic of EU enlargement, where participants shared their experiences within the analysed initiatives. This phase sought to clarify the role of these young citizens in bridging their countries with the EU, providing insights into how this role is conceptualised, put into action and perceived. Within this context, participants were asked about their perspectives on the role of youth, youth participation and its potential impact on mitigating enlargement fatigue while expediting their country's path toward EU membership. Additionally, the inquiry aimed to learn whether the EU is viewed as an ally to young people and whether the efforts invested by the EU in supporting youth are deemed sufficient or in need of enhancement.

In terms of structure, this thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter presents the theoretical framework of the research, rooted in Europeanisation literature and youth participation theories and research. The second chapter aims at

contextualising the role of youth in the enlargement process, drawing from existing related documents, agendas and policies that have young people in their focus. Furthermore, an overview of the three initiatives analysed in the work is given. Finally, the findings of the fieldwork conducted with young activists from the region through the focus groups are presented and discussed in the third chapter.

1. EU integration: scope, actors and challenges

This chapter departs from presenting the concept of Europeanisation and the predominant theoretical approaches through which it has been studied in the context underpinning the EU enlargement. In the first section, the thesis highlights the predominant understanding of Europeanisation as a top-down phenomenon whose core agents are the candidate countries' governments and the EU with its member states. After framing Europeanisation, the discussion will delve into its transformative features, looking at how existing theoretical models have explained the domestic change it entails.

1.1 Introducing Europeanisation as a process

Europeanisation, a concept deeply rooted in the discourse of European integration, is not a static phenomenon with a universally accepted definition. Instead, it constitutes a realm of discourses and narratives that seek to explain European integration's complexities and effects on domestic political change.⁵ At its core, Europeanisation research seeks to explain how European integration influences and shapes change in candidate countries. It does so by looking at the dynamics through which countries within and beyond the EU's borders navigate the political, economic and geographical realms in their quest for integration.⁶ Delving into Eu-

⁵ Carlo M Radaelli and Romain Pasquier, 'Conceptual Issues' in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink (eds), *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 35.

⁶ Carlo M Radaelli and Romain Pasquier, 'Conceptual Issues' in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink (eds), *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 35.

ropeanisation literature implies encountering diverse interpretations and approaches that shed light on the interactions between the EU and its member states or other countries.⁷ In this framework, Europeanisation embodies the ‘achievement’ of integration and the transformative processes underpinning this outcome. In the context of EU integration, the transformation encompasses a wide range changes, from administrative and normative to political ones. Similarly, it involves multiple actors – primarily political elites – suggesting that it is a diversified phenomenon underscoring interactiveness.⁸ As pointed by Italian scholar Claudio Radaelli:

The EU policy process designates a political space with a distinct EU dimension wherein social interaction among elites (and in some cases, public opinion) takes place. Of course, this does not mean that any political space where there is some interaction produces effects ...⁹

Whether this transformation can be referred to as an outcome – namely, a country that, as a result of engaging in the relation with the EU, gets Europeanised – or as a process – namely, the progression in underscoring domestic shifts that align it with the EU – has been a debated issue within literature.¹⁰ This work draws upon an understanding of Europeanisation as a process, as theorised by Radaelli, who, in the early 2000s, introduced a comprehensive definition of Europeanisation. It reads as follows:

⁷ Carlo M Radaelli and Romain Pasquier, ‘Conceptual Issues’ in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink (eds), *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 35.

⁸ Carlo M Radaelli and Romain Pasquier, ‘Conceptual Issues’ in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink (eds), *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 35.

⁹ Carlo M Radaelli and Romain Pasquier, ‘Conceptual Issues’ in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink (eds), *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 37.

¹⁰ Natasha Wunsch, *EU Enlargement and Civil Society in the Western Balkans: From Mobilisation to Empowerment* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018) 4-7.

Europeanisation (is) a process of construction, diffusion and institutionalization of norms, beliefs, formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles ‘ways of doing things’, that are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics ... in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies.¹¹

The elements acknowledged in Radaelli’s definition originate in the realm of EU policymaking and politics and subsequently find their place within member states’ domestic discourse, identities, political structures, public policies and beyond. This process-oriented interpretation not only states the relevance of exploring the domestic realm as a starting point for understanding change but also recognises the significance of horizontal dynamics in the Europeanisation landscape.¹² Moreover, Radaelli elaborates on his definition by highlighting that the ‘EU policy processes’ go beyond adopting policies or laws.¹³ Even when such processes do not translate into ‘concrete results’ and definitive decisions, according to the author, they can still inform shifts at the domestic level.¹⁴ Hence, understanding Europeanisation as a process emphasises the importance of fostering exchange between the subjects embarking this interaction, which enables them to engage in meaningful exchanges. Notably, the extent to which the latter can be regarded as meaningful is bound to the effectiveness of the interactions it entails. The latter occur when they are translated into domestic political actions, namely when the domain where these interactions are acted – by means of socialisation or through policy-making – informs the domestic level.¹⁵ In this context, it has

¹¹ Claudio M Radaelli, ‘Theorizing Europeanization’ in Kevin Featherstone and Claudio Radaelli (eds), *The Politics of Europeanization* (OUP 2003) 17.

¹² Marteen P Vink and Paolo Graziano, ‘Challenges of a New Research Agenda’ in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink, *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 10. See also Natasha Wunsch, *EU Enlargement and Civil Society in the Western Balkans: From Mobilisation to Empowerment* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018) 5-7.

¹³ Carlo M Radaelli and Romain Pasquier, ‘Conceptual Issues’ in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink, *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 37.

¹⁴ Carlo M Radaelli and Romain Pasquier ‘Conceptual Issues’ in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink, *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 37.

¹⁵ Carlo M Radaelli and Romain Pasquier, ‘Conceptual Issues’ in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink, *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 37.

been recognised that the study's scope of Europeanisation should go beyond identifying uniform impacts – such as harmonisation or convergence – and allow to include wider polity and politics dimensions. Accordingly, while convergence can occur as a result of Europeanisation, the lack thereof does not imply that Europeanisation is not happening, as explained by Radaelli.¹⁶ By acknowledging these premises, the next section delves the focus on the Europeanisation in the context of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and analyse the characterising features of the interactions between the parties involved in this process, namely the EU and the candidate countries.

1.1.1 Europeanisation beyond the member states

Since its inception, the European project has been conceived as inclusive and steadfast in its commitment to fostering integration on the continent, by *deepening* its competencies and powers as a supra-national body and embracing the possibility of *widening*.¹⁷ Looking at its evolution – from an economic cooperation entity involving six states, to the present EU-27 political union – offers a clear glimpse into the fact that Europeanisation is an ongoing process of continually reimagining the European self. Focused on the governance exercised by the Union *within* its borders, the study of domestic change underscoring European integration has been initially limited to the EU member states, overlooking the Europeanisation beyond the internal dimension.¹⁸ This was because the EU governance initial expansion did not imply significant transformation in the prospect members.¹⁹

A shift occurred in the 1990s, when the accession prospect of the former communist bloc was paved – and in the early 2000s, when the EU accorded a membership prospect to South Eastern European countries in Thessaloniki – Europeanisation started

¹⁶ Marteen P Vink and Paolo Graziano, 'Challenges of a New Research Agenda' in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink, *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 10.

¹⁷ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2008] OJ C326/43.

¹⁸ Asya Zhelyazkova and others, 'European Union Conditionality in the Western Balkans: External Incentives and Europeanisation' in Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil and Marko Kmezić, *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham 2018) 15-16.

¹⁹ Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Europeanisation Beyond the Member States' (2010) 8(3) *Journal for Comparative Government and European Policy* 319, 320 <www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Europeanization-beyond-Europe-Schimmelfennig/c2e8c96a66663fa9615396f169fc69b1c88a722e4> accessed 16 May 2023.

expanding its outreach beyond the member states.²⁰ The resulting enhancement of the EU absorption capacity and the magnitude of its domestic transformation laid the premises for Europeanisation scholarship to expand its focus beyond the internal dimension of the EU's capacity to produce domestic impact.²¹ Now it was also linked to the EU's external dimension. In addition, besides encompassing policy harmonisation, the transformation brought by enlargement concerned the very governmental structure of the acceding states. The EU approached this challenge, building on a momentum of expansion and increased political influence, and re-formulating the enlargement policy through which it aimed to include new members.²²

The transformative power of the EU within and beyond its members intrinsically implied rethinking the magnitude and character of the domestic change brought by Europeanisation in the internal realm of the candidate states. This was substantially done by linking the EU widening process with the democratisation

²⁰ The Thessaloniki Declaration was the outcome of the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Thessaloniki in June 2003, where the parties committed themselves to the European perspective of the Western Balkans countries, stating that the future of the Balkans is within the European Union. See European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: The Western Balkans and European Integration' (21 May 2003) COM (2003) 285.

²¹ According to Schimmelfennig, the inclusion of actors external to the EU within Europeanisation literature and scope resulted from three major developments, namely the expansion of the EU's internal market, Eastern Europe's enlargement wave and the introduction of new institutional arrangements aiming at aligning neighborhood with EU policy and rules without implying formal membership. See Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Europeanisation Beyond the Member States' (2010) 8(3) *Journal for Comparative Government and European Policy* 319, 320 <www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Europeanization-beyond-Europe-Schimmelfennig/c2e8c96a6663fa9615396f169fc69b1c88a722e4> accessed 16 May 2023.

²² The gradual expansion of the European Community – accompanied by an increasing economic power resulting from its emergent size – significantly shaped the EU's commitment to expand and the objectives pursued through its borders' expansion. See Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Europeanisation Beyond the Member States' (2010) 8(3) *Journal for Comparative Government and European Policy* 319, 320 <www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Europeanization-beyond-Europe-Schimmelfennig/c2e8c96a6663fa9615396f169fc69b1c88a722e4> accessed 16 May 2023.

agenda of the Union.²³ It is in this context that the enlargement policy emerged as a strategy for the EU to ‘trigger the expansion of the democratic ideal across the European continent’²⁴ in exchange for membership prospects as ultimate reward.²⁵ Establishing accession *conditionality* as the enlargement’s guiding logic and tool to foster domestic change in candidate countries, translated in the candidates being expected to meet the conditions in exchange of EU’s assistance (ie financial, technical, institutional). Since the 1990s, these conditions have become stricter, as accession conditionality has progressively incorporated stricter political and economic requirements to be fulfilled prior to the start of negotiations.²⁶ This culminated in the Copenhagen criteria, adopted by the European Council in 1993. Ultimately, the latter’s establishment implied increased requirements to be met by prospect member states prior the start of negotiations. Accordingly, membership eligibility was linked to the fulfilment and incorporation of the EU general principles, democracy, freedom, the rule of law and human rights – as prescribed by article 49 of the Treaty on European Union²⁷ Subsequently, upon this fulfilment, the accession negotiations focus on issue-specific rules exemplified in the

²³ This link started being explored and established since the Spanish application for membership in 1977 when the Iberic peninsula had just started its democratic transition after Franco’s dictatorship, concerns about the political culture of new candidates started emerging and, with them, a more ambitious idea of the European Community. For literature on the historical evolution of the enlargement policy, please refer to: Anne Applebaum, ‘Does Eastern Europe Still Exist?’ in Luc-André Brunet and Ursula Durand Ochoa (eds.) *The Crisis of EU Enlargement* (LSE Ideas, November 2013); Cristina Blanco Sio-López ‘Reconditioning the ‘Return to Europe’: The Influence of Spanish Accession in Shaping the EU’s Eastern Enlargement Process’ in Luc-André Brunet and Ursula Durand Ochoa (eds.) *The Crisis of EU Enlargement* (LSE Ideas, November 2013),

²⁴ Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragàn, ‘Civil Society and EU Enlargement’ in *The Search for Europe: Contrasting Approaches* (Open Mind - BBVA Book Series 2015) 242.

²⁵ Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragàn, ‘Civil Society and EU Enlargement’ in *The Search for Europe: Contrasting Approaches* (Open Mind - BBVA Book Series 2015) 248.

²⁶ European Commission, ‘Accession Criteria. European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)’ (*European Commission*) <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-criteria_en> accessed 15 September 2023.

²⁷ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2008] OJ C326/43 (TEU).

clusters -- that ultimately aim at the adoption by the candidates of the whole *acquis communautaire*.²⁸ The same was eventually reiterated for South Eastern Europe following the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

Given the enlargement policy's EU formulation through accession's conditionality, the literature has assessed the Europeanisation beyond member states by analysing this policy, its operationalisation, effects and success in determining domestic change.²⁹ The choice of this approach – by the EU to frame enlargement policy and by the literature to tackle it as the main focus in the analysis – has also been motivated by an overwhelming optimism towards a conditionality-led Europeanisation. This was primarily due to the success of a conditionality-based accession: a decade after establishing the Copenhagen criteria, part of the former communist bloc EU membership prospect has become a reality, with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries joining the EU in 2004 and Bulgaria and Romania in 2007.³⁰ On the one hand, the critical increase of the member states from 15 to 28 resulted in the largest single enlargement wave up to the present day.³¹ On the other hand, the radical domestic transformation of the former Soviet block into EU-driven liberal democracies and market economies rendered this wave the most intrusive and transformative in the enlargement history.³² It followed that enlargement policy based on conditionality has emerged as one of the EU's most

²⁸ European Commission, 'Accession Criteria. European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)' (*European Commission*) <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-criteria_en> accessed 15 September 2023.

²⁹ European Commission, 'Accession Criteria. European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)' (*European Commission*) <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-criteria_en> accessed 15 September 2023.

³⁰ European Union, 'EU Enlargement' (*European Union*) <https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en>.

³¹ European Union, 'EU Enlargement' (*European Union*) <https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en>.

³² Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Europeanisation Beyond the Member States' (2010) 8(3) *Journal for Comparative Government and European Policy* 319, 320 <www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Europeanization-beyond-Europe-Schimmelfennig/c2e8c96a6663fa9615396f169fc69b1c88a722e4> accessed 16 May 2023.

successful foreign policy tools.³³ Besides pointing to the EU's transformative power in non-members, it also confirmed the EU's *absorption capacity*, namely, the EU's ability to absorb new members whilst maintaining the momentum of the European integration process.³⁴

In this context, scholars started developing theoretical models explaining Europeanisation in candidate countries and deploying different approaches to reveal the rationale behind their compliance with the EU rules and standards. Most theoretical models that sought to explain Europeanisation in the enlargement context have been grounded in institutionalism and informed by top-down approaches.³⁵ Building from this premise, two main attempts seek a compliance explanation, referring either to realist or sociological approaches. The External Incentives Model (EIM) developed by Schimmelfennig and Sedekneuer and rooted in institutional realism, with insights from the CEE experience, emphasises the pivotal role of the promise of EU membership and its conditionality. Through its sanctions-rewards logic, these elements drive domestic actors' costs-benefits calculations which, according to the model, can translate into compliance at the EU level under specific conditions. The latter encompass the scope and magnitude of the EU's rewards, the credibility of the requirements it places upon governments to receive them and the magnitude of the target government's adoption costs – which should be acceptable.

Other approaches to Europeanisation suggest additional factors driving candidates' rule adoption and compliance. Social learning and lesson drawing models suggest that candidate's adherence to EU requirements is influenced by stakeholder's view of

³³ Luc-André Brunet and Ursula Durand Ochoa (eds.) *The Crisis of EU Enlargement* (LSE Ideas, November 2013), 4; John O'Brennan, "On the Slow Train to Nowhere?" *The European Union*, "Enlargement Fatigue" and the Western Balkans' (2014) 19(2) *European Foreign Affairs Review* 221; Milica Delevic and Jovana Marovic, 'Keeping the Thessaloniki Promise: How to Make Enlargement Work for All 20 Years Later?' (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), 22 June 2023) 4 <<https://biepag.eu/publication/keeping-the-thessaloniki-promise/>> accessed 7 August 2023.

³⁴ Sedelmeier (2011) cited in Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borràgàn, 'Civil Society and EU Enlargement' in *The Search for Europe: Contrasting Approches* (Open Mind - BBVA Book Series 2015) 10.

³⁵ Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, 'Candidate Countries and Conditionality' in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink, *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 90.

EU's legitimacy and sustainability.³⁶ For example, former model posits that the legitimacy of the EU is taken to grow when existing member states are held to the same rules as candidate countries, and the adoption of the regulations results from deliberative processes. While the later postulates that countries are more likely to adopt regulations if they perceived them as practical solutions to local challenges. Finally, according to these models, the EU's regulations must be apt for tackling domestic issues, and the transfer of EU rules should encounter minimal opposition from influential domestic actors. All these approaches share a common institutionalist approach to Europeanisation, viewing political elites and governments as the main actors.

While these models differ in factors driving compliance, they all focus on interactions between the EU and domestic actors. This interaction is characterised by a hierarchical and asymmetrical relation, where the domestic actors are subordinated to – and ultimately depending on – the EU standards, requirements and decisions. Whether the directionality of Europeanisation is seen upward – from the EU, through conditionality, to the candidates – or downward – domestically-driven through socialisation – they both conceive domestic actors as mediators of EU pressures. Similarly, whether the compliance occurs due to a cost-benefit calculation done by rational domestic elites (EIM) or by means of learning and appropriateness, the core agents involved in Europeanisation remain, in both cases, formal institutions. Moreover, these approaches acknowledge the process of Europeanisation as mainly tied to formal compliance – the adoption of EU rules and norms – shaping and facilitating the domestic shift.³⁷

³⁶ Claudio M Radaelli, 'The Europeanization of Public Policy' in Kevin Featherstone and Claudio M Radaelli (eds) *The Politics of Europeanization* (OUP 2003) 43.

³⁷ Asya Zhelyazkova and others, 'European Union Conditionality in the Western Balkans: External Incentives and Europeanisation' in Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil and Marko Kmezić, *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham 2018) 16.

1.2. Accession and enlargement fatigue

As presented in the previous section, understanding Europeanisation as a process through the definition proposed by Radaelli means to see Europeanisation not only as a result of policy outcomes. Moreover, while recognising that the main agents fostering Europeanisation are political elites, his approach also looks at other agents. Yet, in the context of EU enlargement policy, it seems that the latter has been operationalised by the EU and explained by leading scholars mainly looking at the adoption – or lack thereof – and implementation of the EU standards. The dynamics of these processes, such as undertaking reforms, negotiating chapters and accepting or not the EU conditions involve institutions and political elites as the main actor, rendering the enlargement technocratic in nature.³⁸ While in the case of CEE countries, this approach worked as demonstrated by the accession of those countries to the EU in a reasonable time, the case of the Western Balkans significantly questions the effectiveness of such an approach. In fact, after the former communist block acceded the EU, a decreased pace to obtain membership and the noticeable change in member states' attitudes towards furtherly enlarged Europe has been registered. The region's accession perspective, paved by the EU 20 years ago with the Thessaloniki Declaration, is yet to be a reality, except for Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013.³⁹

The current deadlock of European integration in the Western Balkans is twofold, being represented by both enlargement and accession fatigue. While the first refers to the hesitancy of the EU member states towards widening, the accession fatigue refers to the candidates' partial or missing compliance with EU rules, standards and requirements. Besides being a question of candidates' unsatisfactory performance in relation to the demands of the EU, the accession fatigue is also triggered by a crumbling membership promise which, in turn, undermines citizens' faith in the accession of their countries. To a crumbling EU membership

³⁸ Nikolaos Tzifakis and others, 'Policy Brief: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Opinion and Integration in the Western Balkans' (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), 1 December 2020) 2 <<https://biepag.eu/publication/policy-brief-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-public-opinion-and-the-eu-integration-in-the-western-balkans/>>.

³⁹ Lilyanova Velina, 'Western Balkans: Enlargement Strategy 2018' (Think Thank European Parliament, 13 March 2018) <[www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA\(2018\)614736](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2018)614736)> accessed 15 September 2023

prospect, it adds the doubts about the democratic shift the accession process should entail. As a matter of fact, conditionality as a meritocratic driver for domestic transformation is not delivering its expected effects, as shown by the illiberal and authoritarian trends registered in the Western Balkans.⁴⁰

The failure attributed to the enlargement progress in the region is the product of different and interconnected factors which include the lack of a credible commitment by the EU and its not resolute application of the tool – the same conditions that enabled the same policy’s effectiveness in the CEE countries.⁴¹ If in the CEE case the conditions instrumental to an effective conditionality (ie a credible membership prospect, the consistent application of conditionality and moderate adaptation costs) were met and translated into compliance, the lack thereof in the Balkans results in a general stagnation.⁴² As noted by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, specific examples highlight instances where the EU’s actions questioned the alignment of rewards with compliance. Notably, in the Western Balkans, there have been cases where the EU extended benefits and rewards despite non-compliance, thus casting shadows on the effectiveness of conditionality. Conversely, the EU’s stance has occasionally led to a suspension of progress even in the face of demonstrated compliance, thereby blurring the clarity of its conditional engagement. All of this resulted in the erosion of the EU enlargement policy credibility in the region, thus significantly contributing to the accession fatigue.⁴³

Besides the ambiguity encompassing the EU’s usage of conditionality, it has also been highlighted how the instrument itself can, at times, facilitate or preserve illiberal regimes by strengthening of informal practices and state capture as constraints to

⁴⁰ Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, ‘Candidate Countries and Conditionality’ in Paolo Graziano and Maarten P Vink, *Europeanisation: New Research Agendas* (Palgrave Macmillan London 2007) 91.

⁴¹ Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, ‘The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: The External Incentives Model Revisited’ (2020) 27(6) *Journal of European Public Policy* 814, 815.

⁴² Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, ‘The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: The External Incentives Model Revisited’ (2020) 27(6) *Journal of European Public Policy* 814, 815.

⁴³ Solveig Richter and Natasha Wunsch, ‘Money, Power, Glory: The Linkages between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans’ (2019) 27(1) *Journal of European Public Policy* 41.

the democratic consolidation of the Western Balkans.⁴⁴ Within the erosion of democratic principles it has been noted that the instrument even favoured leaders to succeed in democratic elections, highlighting how formal democratic structures and institutions can coexist with democratic backsliding.⁴⁵ Despite their formal commitment to EU standards, scholars observe that political elites often hide under a democratic façade, which allows them to preserve a minimum, yet superficial, formal commitment to the EU principles and values as signifying their ultimate integration goal.⁴⁶ The blurring of compliance legitimacy due to internal dynamics and domestic policies in the region finds fertile ground in Brussels' ambiguous attitudes. Kmezić and Bieber introduce the concept of 'stabilitocracy', referring to the EU's willingness to exchange democratic fundamentals with the candidates for regional cooperation on the EU's strategic objectives and priorities.⁴⁷ The latter includes cooperative behaviour by the domestic elites in the region to pursue the Union's strategic targets, such as border

⁴⁴ Solveig Richter and Natasha Wunsch, 'Money, Power, Glory: The Linkages between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans' (2019) 27(1) *Journal of European Public Policy* 41, 46; John O'Brennan, "'On the Slow Train to Nowhere?" The European Union, "Enlargement Fatigue" and the Western Balkans' (2014) 19(2) *European Foreign Affairs Review* 221, 229; See also Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, 'The Transformative Power of Europe Revisited' (2014) 25(1) *Journal of Democracy* 20.

⁴⁵ Branislav Radeljić, 'Tolerating Semi-authoritarianism? Contextualising the EU's Relationship with Serbia and Kosovo' in Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil and Marko Kmezić, *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018) 162.

⁴⁶ Solveig Richter and Natasha Wunsch, 'Money, Power, Glory: The Linkages between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans' (2019) 27(1) *Journal of European Public Policy* 41, 46. Marko Kmezić, 'EU Rule of Law Conditionality: Democracy or "Stabilitocracy" Promotion in the Western Balkans?' in Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil and Marko Kmezić (eds), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham 2018) 105.

⁴⁷ Branislav Radeljić, 'Tolerating Semi-authoritarianism? Contextualising the EU's Relationship with Serbia and Kosovo' in Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil and Marko Kmezić, *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham 2018) 162.

security, regional stability and energy policies.⁴⁸ This dynamic reinforces the standing of authoritarian elites in the region, where the EU's legitimatising role towards them is seen as an opportunity to reinforce power relations and the status quo further.⁴⁹

Moreover, linking Europeanisation to compliance with EU rules and standards would imply that the alignment of concerned countries with the *acquis* shall go beyond the process of accession and remain stable over time. This is in contrast with the trends observed in CEE latecomers, where we witness a progressive detachment from the EU's fundamental principles and a pronounced questioning of the EU sovereignty and governance.⁵⁰ The ways such countries advanced those claims and often misaligned with the EU law, ie constitutionally challenging key fundamental principles such as human rights and the rule of law, also highlighted how 'the EU membership does not necessarily lock in democracy in former communist countries'.⁵¹ As pointed out by different scholars, the EU did not effectively tackle this democratic backsliding by taking prompt action in response to severe and persistent breaches of EU law and principles.⁵² Out of this, a stronger awareness and evidence of the weaker power and control of the EU over these countries to redress this situation after accession, compared to the pre-accession phase, has emerged.⁵³

⁴⁸ Nikolaos Tzifakis and others, 'Policy Brief: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Opinion and Integration in the Western Balkans' (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), 1 December 2020) 6 <<https://biEPAG.eu/publication/policy-brief-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-public-opinion-and-the-eu-integration-in-the-western-balkans/>>.

⁴⁹ Branislav Radeljić, 'Tolerating Semi-authoritarianism? Contextualising the EU's Relationship with Serbia and Kosovo' in Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil and Marko Kmezić, *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham 2018) 163.

⁵⁰ John O'Brennan, "On the Slow Train to Nowhere?" The European Union, "Enlargement Fatigue" and the Western Balkans' (2014) 19(2) *European Foreign Affairs Review* 221, 230. See also Nieves Pérez-Solòrzano Borràgàn, 'Civil Society and EU Enlargement' in *The Search for Europe: Contrasting Approaches* (Open Mind - BBVA Book Series 2015) 247.

⁵¹ Nieves Pérez-Solòrzano Borràgàn, 'Civil Society and EU Enlargement' in *The Search for Europe: Contrasting Approaches* (Open Mind - BBVA Book Series 2015) 250.

⁵² For instance, by using consistently and bravely art 7 TEU. See Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, 'The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: The External Incentives Model Revisited' (2020) 27(6) *Journal of European Public Policy* 814, 820.

⁵³ Heather Grabbe, 'Six Lessons of Enlargement Ten Years On: The EU's Transformative Power in Retrospect and Prospect' (November 2014) 52 *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, 46; Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, 'The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: The External Incentives Model Revisited' (2020) 27(6) *Journal of European Public Policy* 814.

The current impasse characterising the enlargement also resonates in the internal dimension of the EU and its member states.⁵⁴ Several internal and external shocks troubling the Union have gradually eroded enlargement priority within the EU and dampened enthusiasm towards an enlarged Europe.⁵⁵ Most notably are the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, the EU's approach to it,⁵⁶ and, more recently, the refugee crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion to Ukraine.⁵⁷ Concurrently, the internal dimension of the EU has seen an increased politicisation of the enlargement, pitting national interests against objective assessments.⁵⁸ Once characterised by a relatively pluralistic and multilateral approach led by the EU Commission, the accession process has evolved into a more inter-governmental, politicised process with the member states taking a more decisive

⁵⁴ Heather Grabbe, 'Six Lessons of Enlargement Ten Years On: The EU's Transformative Power in Retrospect and Prospect' (November 2014) 52 *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40; John O'Brennan, "'On the Slow Train to Nowhere?'" *The European Union, "Enlargement Fatigue" and the Western Balkans* (2014) 19(2) *European Foreign Affairs Review* 221, 223.

⁵⁵ Milica Delevic and Jovana Marovic, 'Keeping the Thessaloniki Promise: How to Make Enlargement Work for All 20 Years Later?' (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), 22 June 2023) 4 <<https://biepag.eu/publication/keeping-the-thessaloniki-promise/>> accessed 7 August 2023.

⁵⁶ EU austerity policies in response to member states' deficits and public debt led to economic contraction in the Western Balkans, which heavily relied on loans. Additionally, the region's economic interdependence with the EU was adversely affected and the loss of a strong advocate for Western Balkans' accession occurred with Greece's weakened position subsequent to the Euro crisis. The eurozone also heightened the EU's emphasis on governance, which became integrated into the enlargement criteria, as scholars like Heather Grabbe noted. Among others, see John O'Brennan, "'On the Slow Train to Nowhere?'" *The European Union, "Enlargement Fatigue" and the Western Balkans* (2014) 19(2) *European Foreign Affairs Review* 221, 223; Anne Applebaum, Cristina Blanco Sio-López and Luc-André Brunet, 'The Crisis of EU Enlargement' ed. Luc-André Brunet and Ursula Durand-Ochoa (LSE Ideas, November 2013), 9; Marek Dabrowski, 'The Global Financial Crisis: Lessons for European Integration' (March 2010) 34(1) *Economic Systems* 38, 56-57.

⁵⁷ The 2015 refugee crisis exposed the EU's challenges in responding cohesively to a surge in asylum requests, intensifying conflicts between deepening and widening and further dividing old and new member states. Simultaneously, this crisis propelled migration into the spotlight for emerging populist and Eurosceptic parties within the Union, influencing their stance on the Western Balkans' accession process. Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, 'Civil Society and EU Enlargement' in *The Search for Europe: Contrasting Approaches* (Open Mind - BBVA Book Series 2015) 250.

⁵⁸ Namely, a progressive erosion of the Commission's voice in the negotiations and a more decisive role of the Council in determining its progress pace. See John O'Brennan, "'On the Slow Train to Nowhere?'" *The European Union, "Enlargement Fatigue" and the Western Balkans* (2014) 19(2) *European Foreign Affairs Review* 221, 226-28. See also Heather Grabbe, 'Six Lessons of Enlargement Ten Years On: The EU's Transformative Power in Retrospect and Prospect' (November 2014) 52 *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40.

role.⁵⁹ The way EU's decision-making can paralyse the enlargement deliberations has prompted debates and calls for revisiting the enlargement policy,⁶⁰ contextually to a broader debate calling for a more assertive Union.⁶¹

1.2.1 Limits of a technocratic, top-down process

In light of what has been discussed above, it is possible to note how the current impasse in the enlargement witnessed in the Western Balkans can be traced back to fallacies within the interaction between the actors involved. The lack of credibility of the EU in holding its promises by making a consistent use of its 'carrots and sticks' approach leads to a situation where democracy can continue deteriorating. In addition to this, lack of a unitary

⁵⁹ John O'Brennan, "On the Slow Train to Nowhere?" *The European Union, "Enlargement Fatigue" and the Western Balkans'* (2014) 19(2) *European Foreign Affairs Review* 221, 226-28.

⁶⁰ Reference is made to new methodology proposals. Among them, there is France's non-paper endorsing an approach characterised by gradual progression and strengthened incentive-based mechanisms, which unfolds across seven distinct stages based on four pillars: gradual association, stringent conditions, tangible benefits and reversibility. Following the French proposal, nine EU member states articulated a response in a drafted proposal for a more efficient methodology, underscoring the EU fundamentals as critical criteria for assessing the progress. See David M Herszenhorn and Rym Momtaz, 'France Outlines Proposal to Overhaul EU Accession Process' (*POLITICO*, 17 November 2019) <www.politico.eu/article/france-outlines-proposal-to-overhaul-eu-accession-process> accessed 15 September 2023; European Western Balkans, 'Nine EU Members Release a New Proposal for the Reform of Enlargement Process' (*European Western Balkans*, 11 December 2019) <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/11/nine-eu-members-release-a-new-proposal-for-the-reform-of-enlargement-process/#:~:text=Austria%2C%20Czech%20Republic%2C%20Estonia%2C%20Italy%2C%20Latvia%2C%20Lithuania%2C%20Malta%2C,sustained%20and%20accelerated%20integration%20of%20the%20Western%20Balkans%E2%80%9D>> accessed 19 September 2023; Milica Delevic and Tena Prelec, 'Flatter, Faster, Fairer – How to Revive the Political Will Necessary to Make Enlargement a Success for the WB and the EU' (*European Fund for the Balkans*, 1 January 2020) <www.balkanfund.org/european-integration/flatter-faster-fairer-how-to-revive-the-political-will-necessary-to-make-enlargement-a-success-for-the-wb-and-the-eu> accessed 17 August 2023.

⁶¹ On 9 May 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron explicitly endorsed the formation of 'a Convention to revise our treaties'. In a speech before the European Parliament, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi openly argued for the need not only for 'a pragmatic federalism but also a federalism of the mind'. He stated that if this requires initiating a path leading to the revision of the treaties, it should be embraced with courage and confidence. Commission President von der Leyen also expressed her stance, mentioning the possibility of 'using the full limits of what we can do within the Treaties, or, yes, by changing the Treaties if need be'. The European Parliament has also shown its support for treaty change, with five political groups (European People's Party, European People's Party, Renew Europe, The Greens/European Free Alliance and The Left) agreeing on the major political achievement of CoFoE's outcome. Consequently, during its May Plenary, the European Parliament passed a first resolution demanding a Convention to revise the treaties, which EP President Metsola labelled as the logical next step.

approach towards the enlargement trajectory the EU will take in the region makes the region's prospect of joining the EU significantly blurred.⁶² This leaves the citizens of the Western Balkans unfaithful not only towards the concrete possibility to join the EU, but also in a situation of worsening democratisation, which betrays the democratic promise underpinning the Western Balkans path to the EU. The resulting mistrust and lack of faith towards the EU – summed up with the stabilitocracy problem – significantly reduces the possibility to implement EU-driven reforms due to increased political and economic costs. This, in turn, undermines the possibility for the citizens to benefit from policy interventions that can ameliorate their lives and addressing their needs.⁶³

The situation is further exacerbated by a top-down rather technocratic process. The latter's elite-centred approach, by prioritising negotiations conducted behind closed doors in Brussels, distance the topic of EU integration from the public and, coupled with a lack of EU credibility, can foster distrust among citizens. This not only makes it difficult for citizens to understand but also discourages meaningful debate about the advantages for EU integration. The combination of limited information about the necessity of the integration process and eroded trust poses a serious challenge, challenging citizens' ability to advocate for change from within but also exposing them to propaganda and misinformation about the benefits stemming from the EU accession. These dynamics raise questions about the long-term viability and legitimacy of the integration process in the Western Balkans.

Far from applying solely to the enlargement policy, this technocratic and elite-driven approach, mirrors certain features of the European integration project itself. In the past decade, there have been waved criticisms pointing to EU's distance from the citizens, leading to discussions about the 'EU democratic deficit'. The latter is referred as a 'perceived lack of representation of the ordinary citizens with respect to the EU institutions – a sense of there

⁶² Nikolaos Tzifakis and others, 'Policy Brief: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Opinion and Integration in the Western Balkans' (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), 1 December 2020) <<https://biepag.eu/publication/policy-brief-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-public-opinion-and-the-eu-integration-in-the-western-balkans/>>.

⁶³ Nikolaos Tzifakis and others, 'Policy Brief: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Opinion and Integration in the Western Balkans' (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), 1 December 2020) <<https://biepag.eu/publication/policy-brief-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-public-opinion-and-the-eu-integration-in-the-western-balkans/>>.

being a gap between the powers of those institutions and a perceived inability of citizens to influence those institutions'.⁶⁴ Something that adds to citizens' concerns also in the member states, where people's disillusionment with the democratic and prosperity promise of the European project, has facilitated the rise of Euroscepticism, populism and anti-EU sentiments.⁶⁵ Similarly to the case of accession fatigue, these phenomena, building upon a general frustration of the people, find in the distance between 'the people' and 'Brussels' a fertile ground for reversing the narrative on political fallacies at the national level. Nevertheless, the EU has made efforts to address the 'citizens' question' and embarked on different attempts to rebuild trust by promoting a fairer, more democratic Union. This renewed commitment to revitalising the European project by capitalising on citizens' roles is evident both within the EU's internal and external dimensions, including the enlargement countries.

In the case of enlargement, while integration traditionally followed a top-down and elite-driven approach, the EU has also explored alternative pathways to drive domestic change and address growing fatigue with the process. While supporting the consolidation of civil society has been a longstanding aspect of the EU's enlargement policy, particularly in democratisation and reconciliation efforts, an increased emphasis on strengthening civil society organisations (CSOs) and dialogue with local stakeholders was a response to mounting scepticism towards the EU in the region.⁶⁶ In this context, the EU progressively recognised the need to actively involve citizens by providing spaces for them to have a say in their concerns and expectations from the EU and have a greater role in shaping the future trajectories. A significant step in this direction was the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) in 2021, including both EU member states and candidate

⁶⁴ Eur-Lex Access to European Union Law, 'Democratic Deficit' <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=LEGISSUM:democratic_deficit> accessed 18 July 2023.

⁶⁵ Among others, see: Sofia Vasilopoulou, 'The Party Politics of Euroscepticism in Times of Crisis: The Case of Greece' (21 May 2018) 38(3) *Politics* 311; Sofia Vasilopoulou, 'UK Euroscepticism and the Brexit Referendum' (18 May 2016) 87(2) *The Political Quarterly* 219; Sofia Vasilopoulou, 'Varieties of Euroscepticism: The Case of the European Extreme Right' (April 2009) 5(1) *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 3.

⁶⁶ Hafner T, *The Successes and Failures of EU Pre-Accession Policy in the Balkans: Support to Civil Society* (Balkan Civil Development Network (BCSDN) 10 September 2009) <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/The_successes_and_failures_of_EU_pre-accesion_policy_in_the_Balkans-Support_to_Civil_Society-ENG.pdf>.

countries. The CoFoE primary aim was to relaunch and renew the EU project, with the ultimate goal to change the EU treaties or, in the France's President Emmanuel Macron's words, 'propose all the changes our political project's needs'.⁶⁷ In this context, the CoFoE welcomed European contributions and explore ways to overcome structural limits, many of which also impact the enlargement policy.⁶⁸

1.3 Europe needs the citizens, enlargement needs the youth

The renewed EU commitment to rebuilding trust among Europeans centres around citizen participation. Within the broader discussion about engaging citizens more effectively, a growing significance and priority has been accorded to youth as an agent and their participation in the public sphere. This shift is not only motivated by the fact that young people have the right to have a say in the processes affecting them and because they are considered as a vibrant force for democracy.⁶⁹ It can also be explained by the fact that, for the EU, young people are important allies whose engagement has been instrumental in galvanising a pro-European consensus across the EU in response to the challenges surrounding it and that fuel EU-scepticism.⁷⁰ For instance, engaging and mobilising young people in the 2019 European Elections campaign proved crucial to enhance the 'EU public debate' and increase voter turnout, with the largest participation increase since 1979.⁷¹ Consequently, there has been a growing emphasis within the EU on the

⁶⁷ Le Parisien, '«Pour une Renaissance européenne» : la lettre d'Emmanuel Macron aux Européens' (*Le Parisien*, 4 March 2019) <www.leparisien.fr/politique/pour-une-renaissance-europeenne-la-lettre-d-emmanuel-macron-aux-europeens-04-03-2019-8024766.php> accessed 10 September 2023.

⁶⁸ European Commission, 'Conference on the Future of Europe' <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/conference-future-europe_en> accessed 26 September 2023.

⁶⁹ Geoffrey Pleyers and Nadine Karbach, 'Analytical paper on Youth Participation-Young people political participation in Europe: What do we mean by participation?' (*EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, 2014*) <<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261980/What+is+youth+participation.pdf/223f7d06-c766-41ea-b03c-38565efa971a>> accessed 25 July 2023.

⁷⁰ Reference is made to various youth-led movements that have been created in response to the affirmation of challenges underpinning the European project, such as Brexit, the climate crisis and the increased scepticism towards the EU.

⁷¹ European Parliament, '2019 European Elections: Record Turnout Driven by Young People' (Press Release, 24 September 2019) <www.europarl.europa.eu/pdfs/news/expert/2019/9/press_release/20190923IPR61602/20190923IPR61602_en.pdf> accessed 19 September 2023

need to partner with young people by involving them more extensively in participation efforts. This increased attention on youth has been also reiterated in 2021, when the EU Commission President Ursula Von Der Layen announced 2022 as the European Year of Youth in her State of the Union address.⁷²

To delve deeper into the significance of youth participation, aligning the subject matter's understanding with the EU's perspective and conceptualisation of youth participation is essential. According to the EU, youth participation encompasses active involvement and engagement of young people in various spheres, from policymaking and decision-making processes to community initiatives and democratic activities.⁷³ This definition can be further complemented by deploying the Council of Europe (CoE)'s definition of participation in democratic life. According to the latter:

participation ... is about more than voting or standing for election ... Participation and active citizenship is about having the rights, the means, the space and the opportunity and when necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engaging in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.⁷⁴

This definition reflects the EU's commitment to fostering a more inclusive and participatory European society where young voices are not just heard but actively contribute to shaping the future of our continent.

⁷² Council of Europe, 'Youth Participation' <www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-participation> accessed 10 September 2023.

⁷³ Council of Europe, 'Youth Participation' <www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-participation> accessed 10 September 2023.

⁷⁴ Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, 'Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life' (Council of Europe, March 2015) <<https://rm.coe.int/168071b4d6>> accessed 4 June 2023.

In literature there is overall consensus on the fact that meaningful participation goes beyond mere listening to young people or formally engage them in processes.⁷⁵ According to Roger Hart, participation requires a lot more than having young people invited to the process, urging for the need to test whether available formats of participation are effective in supporting young people's empowerment.⁷⁶ Importantly, Hart's theory also defines what non-participation is – including manipulation, decoration and tokenism as practices inherently conflictual to the idea of authentic participation.⁷⁷ As he notes:

Sometimes children and young people are invited to join the decision making for purposes that serve the adults, not because the opinions of the young are actually considered important. Furthermore, it has also been argued that – for participation to be authentic – there has to be a feeling of participation.⁷⁸

In light of what meaningful participation is, it is important to recognise that having youth on focus at the institutional level does require robust support through effective mechanisms and policies. In this context, there is a growing concern about 'youth tokenism', where young people are symbolically included and asked to participate, without substantial impact. This risk is more pronounced at the decision-making level, where the appearance of

⁷⁵ The concept of participation has been largely debated by scholars, with authors providing different conceptualisations and definitions elaborating what authentic or effective participation entails. For a comprehensive review, see Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, 'Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology' (2012) 22 *Human Affairs* 283; Stuart Fox, 'Is It Time to Update the Definition of Political Participation?' (April 2014) 67(2) *Parliamentary Affairs* 495.

⁷⁶ Tomi Kiilakoski, 'Perspectives on Youth Participation' (European Union and Council of Europe, February 2020) 8 <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/59895423/Kiilakoski_Participation_Analytical_Paper_final%252005-05.pdf/b7b77c27-5bc3-5a90-594b-a18d253b7e67>.

⁷⁷ Roger A Hart, 'Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship' (Innocenti Essay, No 4, International Child Development Centre, 1978) 9-10 <www.unicef-irc.org/publications/100-childrens-participation-from-tokenism-to-citizenship.html>. See also Tomi Kiilakoski, 'Perspectives on Youth Participation' (European Union and Council of Europe, February 2020) 7-9 <www.researchgate.net/publication/24139916-Children's_Participation_From-Tokenism_To-Citizenship>.

⁷⁸ Tomi Kiilakoski, 'Perspectives on Youth Participation' (European Union and Council of Europe, February 2020) 12 <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/59895423/Kiilakoski_Participation_Analytical_Paper_final%252005-05.pdf/b7b77c27-5bc3-5a90-594b-a18d253b7e67>.

inclusivity can mask power imbalances.⁷⁹ Examples of youth tokenism practices include providing young people with a seat at the table where their presence is allowed only after decisions have been made, or where their voices will not be challenged or taken into consideration a priori. Moreover, tokenism leads to adverse consequences in terms of participation, serving as a discouragement for young people, as they may abandon their efforts to engage, believing their voices hold no significance. Following these considerations, it has been noted that interventions aimed at supporting young people's participation and empowerment require robust support via effective mechanisms and policies enabling the former to be effective and meaningful.

To gain insight into how youth participation is addressed at the EU level, and to understand how the aforementioned concerns are managed by the EU, it is crucial to examine the EU youth policy framework. Firstly, it's important to note that this framework is inherently constrained because the EU lacks direct jurisdiction over youth policy, which falls under the primary responsibility of member states.⁸⁰ However, the EU not only promotes collaboration among national governments but has also increasingly incorporated youth policy into the broader policy domain of education, marking significant milestones over the past two decades.⁸¹ A notable milestone in this development, emphasising the growing prominence of youth participation at the EU level, was the publication of the white paper 'A New Impetus for European Youth' in 2001, highlighting the importance of mainstreaming youth in policy.⁸² Subsequently, the 2005 Youth Pact and the adoption of Youth Strategies for 2010-2018 and 2019-2027 underscored the EU's

⁷⁹ Council of Europe, 'Youth Participation' <www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-participation> accessed 10 September 2023.

⁸⁰ At the EU level, youth policy is situated beyond the direct jurisdiction of the Member States, as per arts 6 and 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. See Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [2012] OJ C326/52 and C326/120 (TFEU).

⁸¹ A notable transformation in the EU's engagement with youth occurred with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, wherein youth policy became integrated into the EU's governance and institutional agendas. See Howard Williamson, Max Fras and Zara Lavchyan (Tanya Basarab and Howard Williamson (eds)), 'ABOUT TIME!: A Reference Manual for Youth Policy from a European Perspective' (Council of Europe Publishing, May 2021) <<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261623/Youth+policy+manual+2021+WEB.pdf/32a8859d-ee44-cbb8-016b-0aa3928a4c99?t=1633436172000>> accessed 8 September 2023, 67.

⁸² European Commission, 'A New Impetus for European Youth' (White Paper, 2 November 2001) COM(2001) 681 final <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52001DC0681>>.

commitment to enhancing youth participation within its policy framework. The first EU Youth Strategy identified youth participation as a key priority. Despite some challenges in alignment with national frameworks, it positively impacted young people's involvement in public life. Building upon these foundations, the Second Youth Strategy made youth participation a core priority under its 'engage' pillar.

This strategy aimed to promote active citizenship by incorporating youth voices into policy development and implementation. It also aligned with the Council's work plan, focusing on strengthening multilevel governance to enhance youth participation across local, regional, national and European levels. Various dialogue mechanisms, including the EU Youth Dialogue, emerged as vital channels for youth to engage directly with decision-makers, ensuring inclusivity and comprehensive discussions.⁸³ One tangible outcome of the EU Youth Dialogue – with reference to the 2017-2018 cycle where young people consulted amounted to over 50,000 – is the formulation of the European Youth Goals.⁸⁴ The objectives identified by youth – and included in the EU strategy – touch upon different themes that, according to young people, represent the issues they are most concerned with and the political priorities to be addressed.⁸⁵ In this framework, the first and the ninth goals result relevant for the present work. The former aims at enhancing the sense of youth belonging to the European

⁸³ 'EU Youth Dialogue is governed at EU level through a European Steering Committee (renewed for every 18-month working cycle) comprising youth ministry representatives of the three EU Presidency countries, representatives of national youth councils of the three EU Presidency countries, the Erasmus+ national agencies of the three EU Presidency countries, the European Commission and the European Youth Forum. Furthermore, the EU Youth Dialogue process in each country is organised by national working groups. The groups' composition varies from country to country but they are usually made up of representatives of line ministries for youth, national, local and regional youth councils, youth organisations, youth workers, young people from all backgrounds and youth researchers, among others' Howard Williamson, Max Frasn and Zara Lavchyan (Tanya Basarab and Howard Williamson (eds)), 'ABOUT TIME!: A Reference Manual for Youth Policy from a European Perspective' (Council of Europe Publishing, May 2021) <<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261623/Youth+policy+manual+2021+WEB.pdf/32a8859d-ee44-cbb8-016b-0aa3928a4c99?t=1633436172000>> accessed 8 September 2023, 73-74. For a general overview of the EU youth dialogue see European Youth Portal, 'EU Youth Dialogue: What Is the EU Youth Dialogue?' (*European Union*) <https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/euyouthdialogue_en> accessed 27 September 2023.

⁸⁴ European Youth Goals, <<https://youth-goals.eu/>> accessed 1 October 2023.

⁸⁵ European Youth Goals, <<https://youth-goals.eu/>> accessed 1 October 2023.

project; build a bridge between the EU and young people to regain trust and increase participation, while the latter wants to strengthen the democratic participation of young people by providing dedicated youth spaces.

The EU youth policy framework has progressively extended its reach and influence beyond the EU's margins as part of its enlargement policy and external action. This extension involves various forms of support to the youth in the region, including direct government assistance and substantial technical and financial backing for CSOs. Such support underscores the EU's acknowledgement of the vital role that a vibrant and active civil society plays in fostering practical democratic life, both within the EU and among its partners in the world. Within this framework, the Youth Action Plan (YAP) in the EU External Action 2022-2027 represents a significant milestone, strongly emphasising promoting youth participation and empowerment worldwide. Recognising the youth as potent agents of change, the YAP positions young people as capable allies to address pressing global challenges.⁸⁶ Moreover, it acknowledges existing barriers hindering youth empowerment and participation in public life, underscoring the need to amplify young voices in decision-making processes.⁸⁷ The latter has been increasingly placed on the EU agenda for the enlargement countries, where young people are seen as important partners for the EU to facilitate their countries' European integration. In the following chapter, the author will zoom-in on the policy developments concerning youth and enlargement in the Western Balkans.

⁸⁶ European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for International Partnerships (EC), 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU External Action 2022 – 2027: Promoting Meaningful Youth Participation and Empowerment in EU External Action for Sustainable Development, Equality and Peace' (Communication) JOIN(2022) 53 final <<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/43436aee-44be-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-pdf>>.

⁸⁷ European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for International Partnerships (EC), 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU External Action 2022 – 2027: Promoting Meaningful Youth Participation and Empowerment in EU External Action for Sustainable Development, Equality and Peace' (Communication) JOIN(2022) 53 final <<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/43436aee-44be-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-pdf>>.

2. Youth participation in the EU Enlargement process: mapping current initiatives in the Western Balkans

This chapter sets the EU policy framework that encompasses youth participation within the context of the enlargement process. Besides from setting the scene for the field research, it provides crucial context for the thesis's overarching topic. The first section is an overview of recent endeavours aimed at integrating youth participation into the enlargement process. It analyses documents that encompass regional development agendas and declarations emanating from EU-Balkan summits, which have increasingly recognised youth as a pivotal catalyst for change, necessitating the acknowledgment and redressal of their specific needs. This augmented focus on youth aligns seamlessly with broader trends in which the region has found itself progressively included, such as the European Year of Youth in 2021 and the CoFoE. These events, besides bridging the EU with people, have the potential to generate a momentum also for placing youth into a prominent sphere within the realm of enlargement governance attention. The second section provides an overview of the three initiatives that constitute focal points of this analysis: the EUBYF, the WBYL and the YEA initiative.

2.1 EU enlargement: what place for youth in the Western Balkans?

The EU's formal commitment to involving young people in shaping their own futures has also been extended to the Western Balkans, where youth has progressively become a target group for the EU policy in the region. Since the EU prospect for the region has been paved, youth have been recognised as pivotal actors in the democratic transition and consolidation of their countries,

promoting reconciliation and shaping the region's future. Yet, it is only in recent years, within the last decade, that we have witnessed a more substantial inclusion of youth and youth-related issues within the institutional outputs, key documents and cooperation frameworks between the EU and the Western Balkans. Several developments testify to this growing emphasis on youth involvement, exemplified by the integration of youth-related needs into the accession dialogue and the emergence of EU-funded regional initiatives concerning youth policy. Additionally, the Western Balkans' alignment with EU programmes, such as the Erasmus+ and other plans and agenda, mirrors the EU's commitment to integrating the region's citizens, especially its youth, into the EU's programmes and opportunities.⁸⁸

With the EU paving the way for Western Balkan membership prospects, youth has emerged as a pivotal force for European integration and regional cooperation. This shift began with a focus on expanding youth exchanges within the Berlin Process, marking a significant step forward.⁸⁹ The Brdo Summit introduced the youth dimension to the Berlin Process, leading to the launch of the 'Positive Agenda for Youth in the Western Balkans'.⁹⁰ In 2016, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) was established as a result of the Paris Meeting held in July that year. RYCO drew inspiration from the Franco-German Youth Office, focusing on promoting reconciliation and European integration in the Western Balkans through youth mobility and cooperation.⁹¹ During this period, the EU significantly increased its support for fostering youth

⁸⁸ Among others, reference is made to initiatives such as the Skills Agenda for Europe, the Digital Education Action Plan, the Creative Europe Program and the Action on Cultural Heritage. See European Commission, 'Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)' (*European Education Area*) <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>> accessed 18 September 2023; European Commission, 'Creative Europe' (*Culture and Creativity*) <<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe>> accessed 17 September 2023; European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission), *European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage* (European Commission Publications Office 2019) <<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/949707>>.

⁸⁹ German Agency for International Cooperation, 'The Berlin Process' (*GLZ*, 2024) <www.berlinprocess.de/> accessed 19 September 2023.

⁹⁰ SALTO, 'Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting: Connecting Youth Work and Youth Policy: Action Plan for Youth Work and Youth Policy' (*SALTO*, 2016) <www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3438/Action%20plan%20EWBYM.pdf> accessed 13 June 2023.

⁹¹ European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (European Commission), 'Final Declaration by the Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit' (Background Document) (4 July 2016) 2 <Final Declaration by the Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit - European Commission (europa.eu)> accessed 1 September 2023.

connectivity within the region and with the EU. Expanding existing mobility programmes, such as extending the Erasmus+ programme through the Youth in Action Window to the Western Balkans, underscored the EU's commitment to spreading European values and enhancing citizens' understanding of the EU in the region.⁹² While these developments showcased the growing recognition of youth as agents of change in the Western Balkans, the emphasis primarily revolved around reconciliation within the realms of mobility and education.

The aforementioned developments mark significant progress in integrating youth into the broader context of EU-Western Balkans relations. However, in the last five years, it was possible to observe a more concerted effort to enable youth participation within their respective nations within the EU-Western Balkans cooperation and dialogue. Despite not being a watershed moment in the accession process itself, the year 2018 marked a significant turning point in mainstreaming youth-related issues within the enlargement framework. In 2018, the European Commission adopted the Strategy for the Western Balkans, providing enhanced cooperation in the youth field, expanding the RYCO's scope and reach.⁹³ The same year, the Sofia Declaration following the Western Balkans-EU Summit in 2018 explicitly called for youth inclusion and active participation in policy-making processes.⁹⁴ In line with this, it paved the need to provide youth from the Western Balkans with innovative spaces for policy-making, calling for the establishment of Youth Policy Labs.⁹⁵ This commitment to youth empowerment and engagement has consistently resurfaced in subsequent summits and declarations, persisting to the present

⁹² SALTO, 'Cooperation with the Western Balkans in Erasmus+: Youth' <www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/see/yia/> accessed 21 September 2023.

⁹³ European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (European Commission), 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of the Regions: Enhancing the Accession Process - A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans' (Communication) COM(2020) 57 final 5.

⁹⁴ European Council, 'Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit' (17 May 2018) 5 <www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf> accessed 2 September 2024.

⁹⁵ European Council, 'Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit' (17 May 2018) 5 <www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf> accessed 2 September 2024.

day.⁹⁶ Observing these documents' successions, it appears that the recognised role of young people has broadened across multiple policy domains. These encompass existing areas like reconciliation and emphasise youth as dynamic contributors to economic integration, socio-economic development, regional connectivity, cooperation, human capital and innovation.⁹⁷

Furthermore, in their declarations, the EU and Western Balkans leaders have progressively increased mentions of youth needs and the crucial importance of addressing them. Accordingly, addressing challenges such as limited economic opportunities, youth unemployment, brain drain and the quality of education gained more space in the agenda, under the overarching, general goal of 'providing youth with more opportunities'. In parallel with the increased formal recognition of youth-needs and young people's significance within the summit declarations of the past five years, regional development agendas have also started addressing these multifaceted issues. As a result, youth has come into sharper focus, at least in a formal sense, across various policy domains, including human capital development, inclusive growth, connectivity, digital and green transition, and the Covid-19 recovery.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Reference is made to the EC Communication on a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans as well as to the declarations resulting from the Western Balkans Summits, including the ones held in Sofia in 2018, in Poznan in 2019 and in Zagreb in 2020. See Inva Nela and Gresa Smolica, 'Sustainable Development in the Western Balkans: Is Youth on Board?' (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik ÖgFE Policy Brief, March 2023) <www.wb2eu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PB-032023.pdf>.

⁹⁷ European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (European Commission), 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of the Regions: Enhancing the Accession Process - A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans' (Communication) COM(2020) 57 final 12-15. European Council, 'Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit' (17 May 2018) 2 <www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf> accessed 2 September 2024; European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (European Commission), 'Western Balkans Summit in Poznań: Strengthening Links within the Region and with the EU' (Press release, 5 July 2019) <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/western-balkans-summit-poznan-strengthening-links-within-region-and-eu-2019-07-05_en#:~:text=At%20the%20Pozna%C5%84%20Summit%20on%20the%20Western%20Balkans%2C,energy%2C%20digital%2C%20economy%2C%20security%20and%20good%20neighbourly%20relations> accessed 23 September 2023; Tomi Kiilakoski, 'Perspectives on Youth Participation' (European Union and Council of Europe, February 2020) <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/59895423/Kiilakoski_Participation_Analytical_Paper_final%252005-05.pdf/b7b77c27-5bc3-5a90-594b-a18d253b7e67>.

⁹⁸ Inva Nela and Gresa Smolica, 'Sustainable Development in the Western Balkans: Is Youth on Board?' (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik ÖgFE Policy Brief, March 2023) <www.wb2eu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PB-032023.pdf>.

This shift towards mainstreaming youth concerns is particularly reflected in the formulation of key regional agendas launched within the same timeframe, which includes initiatives such as the Green and Innovation Agendas for the Western Balkans,⁹⁹ the Economic Investment Plan (EIP)¹⁰⁰ and its Common Regional Market Action Plan.

2.1.3 A new momentum for youth policy in the Western Balkans?

These recent agendas, launched within the past five years, consistently mirror a general EU trend to place youth mainstreaming within policymaking. They reflect a progressive shift towards acknowledging young people's pivotal role in shaping the Western Balkans' future. While some of these agendas explicitly call for active youth involvement in their implementation, signalling a genuine commitment to engaging young individuals in the decision-making processes, others concentrate on addressing the specific needs of youth. While the ways to address specific solutions are rarely elaborated, in some cases – ie Youth Guarantee¹⁰¹ – tailored policy schemes and solutions are proposed to overcome the barriers and challenges they face. At the heart of how the agendas frame youth, there is a general goal to empower young people, unleashing their potential and actively involving them in the region's transformation. This multifaceted approach signifies a more inclusive, youth-focused dimension in the EU's enlargement strategy and underscores an increased commitment towards the region's young population. In this framework, young people are finally recognised – both directly and implicitly – as having a pivotal role in expediting their countries' accession to the EU. It is also in light of this newly formulated role that young people are started being regarded as an *agent* of European integration and, as such, to be provided with the possibility to participate in policy design and policymaking processes.

⁹⁹ Regional Cooperation Council, 'Green Agenda for the Western Balkans' (RCC) <www.rcc.int/greenagenda> accessed 25 August 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Western Balkans Investment Framework, 'Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans 2021-2027' (WBIF) <<https://wbif.eu/eip>> accessed 21 September 2023.

¹⁰¹ Regional Cooperation Council, 'Leaflet on Youth Guarantee in Western Balkans' (RCC, 2021) <www.rcc.int/docs/575/leaflet-youth-guarantee-in-western-balkans>

Yet, while these documents and agendas acknowledge the significance of youth, it is essential to recognise that they do not always provide ample avenues for direct youth involvement in the decision-making processes related to the enlargement. Despite recognising the potential for meaningful youth inclusion in decision-making processes, the current reality falls short of these aspirations. For instance, while a significant initiative, the EIP does not pay sufficient attention to the inclusion of youth in the projects it envisions. Among its flagship projects, only the Youth Guarantee directly targets young people, while other references to youth merely highlight the ‘need’ to include them. This discrepancy between the EU’s portrayal of youth as agents of change and their role in these regional development agendas often positions youth as passive beneficiaries rather than active participants. Furthermore, operational challenges and a lack of legal regulations and frameworks sometimes hinder meaningful youth involvement, as evidenced in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). In some cases, youth structures and bodies are not adequately developed to establish a legal framework that guarantees youth inclusion and engagement. These challenges are also mirrored in the involvement of civil society, with questions arising about establishing monitoring mechanisms and including youth agencies and umbrella organisations. This highlights critical gaps and limitations in the current approach to youth inclusion in regional development agendas, calling for more substantial efforts to translate rhetoric into meaningful engagement.

2.2 Overview of three initiatives

This section offers an overview of three initiatives through which the topic of youth participation in the EU integration of the Western Balkans is further deepened, and the qualitative research integrated. These include the Young European Ambassador Platform, the WBYL and the EUBYF in its 2021 edition. All of them explicitly recognise the essential role of young people in advancing European integration within the Western Balkans, and aim at empowering young individuals by offering them valuable opportunities to engage with decision-makers. They do so in different ways. In the case of the EUBYF, participants engage with decision-makers both at the national and EU levels, while the YEA and

the WBYL primarily facilitate dialogues with decision-makers at the local and national levels. They also organise ad-hoc events to connect these levels with events involving EU institutions. A common trait uniting these initiatives is the fact that they are closely embedded with the EU integration framework, whether through financial support, as seen in the Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs and the YEA programme, or through direct collaboration with the EU, exemplified by the EUBYF, which was held back to back with the CoFoE. These initiatives serve as valuable case studies that shed light on the role of youth participation in the European integration process in the Western Balkans, as well as how it is acted and organised.

2.2.1 Young European Ambassadors for the Western Balkans

The YEA network is a non-political, activist initiative established in 2020 under the framework of the EU Regional Communication Programme for the Western Balkans, referred to as ‘WeBalkans’.¹⁰² This Communication Programme, financed through the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), serves the dual purpose of raising awareness of the EU’s relations with the Western Balkans and fostering understanding of the enlargement policy.¹⁰³ Integral to the programme, the YEA platform aims to promote the EU within the region by disseminating information about EU opportunities, policies and programmes. It does so by targeting young people from the region, referred to as *young ambassadors*, in a network where they cooperate to bridge the Western Balkans countries and the EU with the region. Indeed, this programme sees youth as a vital agent to advocate for the European perspective of their country and shape the image of the EU in the region. Through the YEA platform, young people promote awareness and knowledge of the EU values and principles and sponsor EU-funded programmes. They do so through social media and event organisation as main channels.

¹⁰² European Union, ‘WeBalkans | Your Story, Our Future | EU Projects in the Western Balkans’ (EU, 2022) <<https://webalkans.eu/en/>> accessed 20 August 2023.

¹⁰³ European Union, ‘Funding Programmes Western Balkans and Other EU Projects | WeBalkans’ (WeBalkans 2022) <<https://webalkans.eu/en/about/>> accessed 23 October 2023.

The YEA initiative aligns with the EU's commitment to fostering youth participation and empowerment by providing spaces and opportunities for young people to be heard and supported by the EU Commission. Among them, YEAs engage in policy dialogues on topics relevant to the region's development and path to European integration, with the expectation to amplify the role of youth in shaping regional policies and decision-making. The initiative also supports and finances creative projects designed by young people, thus enabling them to shape their ideas into concrete actions. Investment in youth's skill development is also crucial, encompassing leadership, communication, project management and advocacy skills.

In light of the above, it is possible to highlight how the initiative conceptualises the role of the targeted youth in the European integration process and conceives the idea of youth empowerment. They are first and foremost perceived as active citizens: active, informed individuals with a role in shaping their countries and the region's future. This is exemplified by their concrete engagement in decision-making processes related to their local, national and regional contexts. Moreover, they are framed as *ambassadors*, namely, promoters of EU values. In other words, they are allies of and chosen by the EU to advocate for its positive image within the region. The youth is also a two-fold bridge-builder: they are expected to bridge between their countries in the scope of regional cooperation and reconciliation, and between the Western Balkans and the EU. In conclusion, they play a role as *multipliers*, agents who can mobilise other young people, inspiring transformative change within their communities.

As for what concerns the empowerment aspect, the YEA platform is operationalised through three main dimensions: skills development, networking – or socialisation – and empowerment, understood as the ability to make a change. Regarding the skill development, the YEA initiative emphasises equipping young individuals with the competencies required to translate their ideas into tangible and impactful outcomes. This facet encompasses leadership, effective communication, project management and the ability to advocate effectively. These skills enable youth to actively participate in the EU integration process and enable them to contribute meaningfully to their communities and society at large. The second dimension of empowerment revolves around networking. This dimension recognises that the latter

can significantly derive from interactions and collaborations with diverse stakeholders and cannot neglect regional cooperation. Young individuals can engage with peers from across the Western Balkans and the EU, CSOs, governmental bodies and EU representatives through the YEA platform. These interactions should foster a sense of connectivity, knowledge sharing and exchange of ideas. The third dimension embodies empowerment as unlocking one's full potential and driving meaningful change. It emphasises that each young individual in the YEA network possesses the potential and the capacity to initiate positive transformations within their communities and the wider Western Balkans region. This dimension signifies agency, recognising the significance of their voices and actions in shaping the region's future in light of European prospects.

2.2.2 EU-Balkan Youth Forum (2021)

The EUBYF, launched and funded by the Italian MFA in 2021, emerged as a new initiative targeting young people from both the EU and the Western Balkans.¹⁰⁴ The inaugural edition, held from 22 to 26 November in Rome, gathered 78 young citizens, each representing their states in the EU and the Balkans, grouped into five working groups. These working groups were devoted to tackling various facets of the overarching question guiding the conference's work: 'What is Europe?'. This question was articulated through five different macro-areas – each tackled by a group – including 'governmental cooperation and democracy from below', 'reconciliation', 'environmental protection', 'economic integration' and the 'digital revolution's implications for democracy'.

A dual mission drove the EUBYF. Firstly, it aimed to launch a transnational network of young *Europeans* from the EU and the region. This network was envisioned as a space for the youth to unite, forging new partnerships and design initiatives to advance the EU and Western Balkans' integration. Secondly, the forum created an agora to deliver a twofold outcome: the possibility for youth to discuss common issues and for echoing their voices publicly. Regarding the former aspect, the forum enabled young delegates to discuss topics related to European integration through a peer-to-peer approach within their working groups and with

¹⁰⁴ European Balkan Youth Forum, 'About the Forum' <www.eubalkanforum.org/about-forum/> accessed 16 July 2023.

decision-makers through the panel discussions. As for the second aspect, according to the initiative, young delegates presented their perspectives to EU and national decision-makers in the form of several policy recommendations.

These recommendations, discussed in a plenary session and presented to Vice President of the European Commission Dubravka Suica and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Luigi Di Maio, cover a wide range of issues. One common thread that unites these recommendations is a vision for a more responsible and impactful Europe. They called for greater engagement of governments in addressing pressing challenges such as climate change, the promotion of effective reconciliation processes and the creation of a cohesive labour market. These recommendations envision a Europe that is not only visible but also actively present in the daily lives of its citizens, especially in local communities across the continent, including the Western Balkans, fostering a sense of shared future. They advocate for a more participatory and democratic Europe, emphasising secure and people-oriented spaces for dialogue as essential for safeguarding democratic values. Finally, the recommendations highlight the crucial role of young people from both the EU and the Western Balkans as active protagonists in shaping the future. To achieve the collective vision outlined in these outputs, delegates maintained that young people must play integral roles in decision-making processes, acting as bridges between institutions and communities, entrepreneurs, promoters of reconciliation and proponents of new identity narratives.

These recommendations were challenged to policymakers in two ways: first, through the plenary session held on the conference's last day, where youth representatives presented their views to the Vice-President of the EU Commission. Secondly, the recommendations were channelled among Italy's contributions to the CoFoE. The CoFoE has a twofold meaning for youth and the enlargement process. Firstly, including citizens from the Western Balkans unequivocally underscores that Europe's future transcends its existing boundaries. Secondly, it underscores that the future of Europe, encompassing the Western Balkans' enlargement, is a matter for citizens and thus necessitates their active involvement. This recognition of the indispensable role of citizen participation in democracy appears to challenge the elitist

perception often associated with the operationalisation of enlargement. In this light, the CoFoE bridges the aspirations of young people in the Western Balkans with their role in shaping the region's future within the EU.

2.2.3 RCC's Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs

The WBYL is a three-year project funded by the EU and implemented by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in the Western Balkans six, aimed at fostering youth participation at the decision-making level. Its inception can be traced back to the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Sofia in 2018, during which a commitment to providing youth in the region with more opportunities to participate in their societies was first expressed. Two years later, in line with the goal of enhancing youth engagement, the RCC launched the WBYL. This initiative aimed to establish a sustained regional dialogue between youth organisations and public administration, with a focus on collaboratively designing policies to boost youth participation in decision-making and enhance the socio-economic conditions for young people across the region. The project is guided by four interlinked components: youth policy mapping, the Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs, strengthening the youth councils and the participation of youth from the region in regional and international events.¹⁰⁵

The Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs methodology, within this broader context, is grounded in several principles that guide its programming. Drawing from best practices at the EU level, these principles aim to ensure the meaningful engagement of young people in policy-making processes through a participatory and youth-centred approach. This include designing new policies, building the skills of decision-makers and young leaders in policy-making, and contributing to the policy landscape through research and analysis. Two key principles guide the Youth Policy Labs: co-management and co-production. The co-creation process involves the participation of young people in creating new public policies and services concerning them. It begins with

¹⁰⁵ Tamara Gojkovic, Lindita Rexhepi and Marija Pantelic, 'Youth Policy Lab Methodology' (Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs, Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo, May 2021) <www.rcc.int/pages/158/western-balkans-youth-policy-labs#:~:text=Youth%20Policy%20Lab%20brings%20a%20participatory%20and%20youth,based%20on%20the%20principles%20of%20co-management%20and%20co-production> accessed 4 June 2023.

consultations led by different working groups in each of the six Western Balkan countries, aiming to map the main challenges and obstacles faced by young people and identify key areas for dialogue. After these consultations, inputs are presented for further discussion and analysis. Co-management comes into play once the demands and goals are established. The working groups shape these into action plans, setting up a roadmap on how the policy recommendations can turn into specific policies aimed at enhancing youth policies, mechanisms and the overall situation of young people in the region.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Tamara Gojkovic, Lindita Rexhepi and Marija Pantelic, 'Youth Policy Lab Methodology' (Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs, Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo, May 2021) <www.rcc.int/pages/158/western-balkans-youth-policy-labs#:~:text=Youth%20Policy%20Lab%20brings%20a%20participatory%20and%20youth,based%20on%20the%20principles%20of%20co-management%20and%20co-production> accessed 4 June 2023.

3. Where does youth stand? Research findings and data analysis

In this chapter, the research findings will be presented, drawing from the data analysis conducted during the field research. The findings will be organised and interpreted across three distinct sections: ‘Youth perceptions of participation’, ‘Assessment of the initiatives by participants’ and ‘Youth participation and the EU enlargement in the region’. Subsequently, a discussion will be initiated with the aim of establishing a connection between the answers to the two primary research questions and the insights derived from the sub-questions. Within this framework, the overall discussion of these findings will be contextualised within the theoretical foundations and background information provided in the preceding chapters.

3.1 Research findings

This section presents the research findings, addressing the sub-questions outlined in the methodology chapter and interpreting the insights shared by participants during the focus group discussions. To provide a better understanding of the findings, it is essential to consider the context in which these perspectives were expressed. The focus group discussions were marked by a tangible sense of engagement and relevance among the participants, who exhibited a profound connection to the topic of youth participation and, at times, expressed frustration when addressing issues such as youth tokenism, civic detachment or the challenges surrounding the enlargement process. This high level of engagement was perhaps to be expected, given that all the interviewees shared similar experiences and, above all, the fieldwork target was comprised of active individuals in the civic space through civil society

and international institutions. In fact, they have engaged in various initiatives and events where they had the opportunity to collaborate with fellow young activists and interact with policymakers. Secondly, each focus group comprised participants from distinct initiatives. This specificity meant that participants' takes to the posed questions was shaped in line with the groups in light of their experiences. Thirdly, the specificity of the targeted participants meant that they could establish a shared experiential foundation, which facilitated their self-identification as peers and companions. This was consistently evident throughout the dialogues. Participants often alluded to their shared experiences, highlighting common memories and challenges linked to their collective involvements.

3.1.1 'Youth participation is a name shouted by many but being carried by few'

Regarding the research question first sub-question, this author sought to understand whether and how the growing emphasis on youth participation in the decision-making process is actually perceived by young activists. Investigating the participants' general perception on youth participation sought to have more glimpses of the overall picture, extending beyond the target 'active' youth. When asked 'How do you feel about youth participation?', participants' contributions made evident that they strongly believe in the importance of youth engagement in decision-making processes. They emphasised that in recent year, there has been a growing emphasis on involving young people in shaping processes and influencing decisions, something they wholeheartedly welcome. The motivations brought by participants were twofold and can be outlined in the answers provided by two participants, that read as follow:

Youth should be more engaged and part of all policy and decision-making processes because, at the end of the day, if we want to have sustainable and life-long democracies, young people should be informed, educated, engaged and part of all the democratic processes. (Franceska, Albania, WBYL)

It is important because youth organisations can influence decision-making processes by serving as watchdogs, being them very vocal and constructively critical about policies contents. (An-ja, Serbia, WBYL)

What can be noticed from these answers is that participants see a connection between democracy and youth participation, with the latter being directly implied in democracy.

Françeska's perspective aligns with the idea that youth hold a critical role in democratic consolidation. It emphasises that active youth engagement is essential for the long-term sustainability and vibrancy of democratic governance. This, as highlighted by Anja, is also connected to the crucial role played by the youth sector as vigilant observer of institutions and as scrutinisers to ensure their content aligns with the interests of young people and need of the citizens. According to the discussion, is also motivated by the fact that youth is seen as a competent agent having the potential to monitor, shape and constructively influence decisions relevant to the development of the countries.

Inquiring about participants' perception of young people's participation in the political and civic space, the majority of focus group participants emphasised the disengagement of young individuals from civic life within their communities. They linked this trend to various factors, highlighting the following aspects:

People in our region feel hopeless and don't believe in this corruption system ... I would like to bring the issue of limited participation of youth in politics and decision making process ... these young people lacks a lot not only participating in the decision making process, but they lack the basic rights to education and economic stability. (Xhuliana from Albania, YEA)

Young people feel that their voices are not heard and that's why they don't even try to speak up and they feel like that participation has no meaning, that their voices will not be heard and say so that's why they don't even try to be involved. (Eva from North Macedonia, previous EUBYF youth delegate)

We cannot ignore that there is a lot of talk but not a lot of action from the side of youth. And this is like a cycle that some of the colleagues have mentioned that where we see youth. (Urma from Montenegro, previous EUBYF delegate)

In the past 20 years, our countries, our respective countries forgot that young people are part of population and that they need to be included. No one was thinking about us for almost 20 years, and now we talk about youth participation. (Nikola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, WBYL)

Indeed, corruption and a lack of perceived representation in political agenda are among factors used by focus group participants leading to the youth's exclusion from civic life. Another point is the positive correlation between the belief that one's voice matters and reduced political engagement, as expressed by Eva. In addition, the disconnection between rhetoric and action in youth participation domain is perceived as contributing to youth disillusionment, something Una later defined as a 'vicious circle'. A sentiment that, according to Nikola, has historical roots – with a long-lasting neglect of youth by governments. These quotes present interesting correlations between youth disengagement and the object youth is disengaged from, namely politics. Not by chance, in all the three focus groups a large part of the discussion revolved on how youth perceive attitudes of decision-makers towards young people.

Expanding upon the preceding discussions, youth tokenism emerged as a significant concern that resonated passionately with participants throughout all the sessions. Youth tokenism, characterised by the superficial involvement of young people in decision-making processes without actual influence, drew considerable attention and evoked impassioned responses:

The more I take part in youth participation programmes, the less I believe in youth participation because, to be honest, it all seems staged for politicians to take photos with us, for them to take credit. (Zrinka, Croatia, EUBYF 2021)

Politicians do often tokenise youth; they bring us to events, and they let us talk, as long as their power is not damaged, it is okay for them have us. (Nikola, North Macedonia EUBYF 2021)

Often youth participation sounds like a way for politicians to use young people to show off. (Eva, North Macedonia, EUBYF 2021)

In political parties' programmes, youth is generally not mentioned. Even when we are mentioned, it just stays in the paper. (The politicians) do not bother with youth and their interest, so even if we are mentioned is just for *being there* but not because they actually want to do *something* with youth. (Xhuljana, Albania, YEA)

Interestingly, many focus group participants used the example of 'taking pictures' or similar to symbolise how youth is often reduced to a mere target for media outputs, like articles and news. This is an attitude that, according to many, transcends the national level, with references made to international organisations and European institutions. In fact, another issue raised is how these organisations are seen to struggle discerning between engaging with structured youth organisations recognised for their competencies and representational role and conducting superficial encounters with random youth for media coverage.

3.1.2 'Everything looks perfect on paper': intentions and implementation mismatch

As highlighted in the previous section, while recognising the significance of youth participation, most participants expressed concerns regarding the extent to which this importance is acknowledged and put in place. Similar concerns reflected a widespread sentiment that youth participation is often championed in rhetoric or policy and legal frameworks – words that focus group participants often used interchangeably – but falls short in implementation. As Eris, YEA from Kosovo stated, 'When it comes to different normative documents, everything looks perfect on paper, but implementation is severely lacking'. This statement aligned with a general frustration stemming from the existence of well-defined policies that often falter when it comes to institutional

execution. Different participants monitoring their countries' youth laws implementation express profound disappointment. Filip from North Macedonia highlighted issues such as unclear budget provisions, delays meeting the agreed timelines and a lack of mechanisms to hold institutions accountable.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, participants revealed that existing mechanisms for youth involvement, such as advisory councils, youth clubs and offices, if not absent, are often underutilised, or remain unfulfilled. These mechanisms, enshrined in youth laws, strategies and action plans, remain far from achieving their intended scope. As put by another participant from Serbia, 'For (these) mechanisms and policies to be sustainable, we need funding'. Hence, according to a few, scarcity of financial resources is essential to bolstering the effectiveness of the youth policy framework and to translate it into tangible improvements for young people.

As per the insights voiced by numerous participants, the effectiveness of youth participation mechanisms and policies hinges significantly on young people's meaningful involvement in developing and designing policies that directly affect them. A case in point is presented by Filip, who draws from an illustrative example in North Macedonia, where the initial design of the youth law in 2008 entirely overlooked the engagement of youth organisations.¹⁰⁸ This omission resulted in what he describes as a paradox – a youth law ostensibly designed to focus on youth participation but completely neglecting the involvement of its target beneficiary. Even when youth are formally included in processes, this does not necessarily mean they are meaningfully engaged. In the words of Françeska from Albania, 'Many of them (politicians) do not realise that engaging with young people is not the same as engaging young people', underlying that 'there should be a concrete and explicit say on how young people are part of those processes'.¹⁰⁹ A prevailing sentiment of shared disappointment and disillusionment – often filled with ironic jokes – pervaded the

¹⁰⁷ Focus group discussion with the participants of the Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs (WBYL) (unpublished raw data, 4 August 2023).

¹⁰⁸ Focus group discussion with the participants of the Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs (WBYL) (unpublished raw data, 4 August 2023).

¹⁰⁹ Focus group discussion with the participants of the Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs (WBYL) (unpublished raw data, 4 August 2023).

participants' interactions throughout these discussions. This sentiment significantly echoed in all three focus groups, where young people acknowledged the risks of having a participation façade while failing to deliver factual empowerment and partnership.

3.2. EU enlargement and youth participation: opportunities and challenges according to participants' experiences

After exploring the general topic of youth participation in the decision-making process guided by the participants' experiences and reflections, the second part of the focus groups focused on the initiatives they participated in and the role of young people in the enlargement process. Building on these experiences, the three groups of interviewed young people were asked to elaborate opinions on how their involvement in the initiatives has contributed – or, if not, could contribute – to the European integration of the Western Balkans. Participants have mainly discussed the role of young people in the enlargement process by drawing from the programmes analysed in the present work. Yet, many insights came as observations about the state of the 'youth' with which participants interact as part or apart from their network. The latter often transcend the target of 'young, EU-enthusiast, engaged people'. Within this framework, participants were asked to elaborate on how, if this was the case, the programmes they participated in contributed to fostering young people's role in the European integration of their countries and region. Due to the differences among the three initiatives, the characteristics of the groups slightly influenced the flow of the conversations. Additionally, these features influenced the directions embraced by participants in highlighting topics, with implicit 'collective' agreements on what was important to discuss.

3.2.1 Young European Ambassadors

'This is the way we are coming together': a peer-to-peer integration

When asked about the positive aspects of the YEA programme regarding opportunities for participation and fostering EU integration, participants highlighted the platform's significance. They identified the most tangible benefits of being part of the YEA platform as the opportunity to connect with young people from the region and acquire knowledge about the EU to promote its values:

Connecting with people from our network was very important for me. I used to be in a medical high school and did not know much about politics, especially about the EU. This experience was important because everything I know about the EU, European integration and enlargement comes from this project ... I think it is very important because we, YEAs, can share this knowledge with our peers and friends. (Shipte, Kosovo, YEA)

Without having the opportunity to meet other people from the region, I would not have the chance to learn more about their countries, communities, cultures. This is the way we are coming together and learning about each other to better promote our common values within our countries and also in the EU. (Xhuljana, Albania, YEA)

Before the YEA was created, the topic of EU integration in the Balkans was monopolised by only high visits of high political figures from Brussels. No one talked about the youth before, and this is where I find the importance of YEA's role. (Milos, Serbia, YEA)

When it comes to connecting with other people from the region, all the participants point to its significance for them, both in relation to their and other young people's lives and in relation to the European integration process. Proving to be able to work together and representing others, and engage in informed discussions with young people and other stakeholders, is seen as having positive repercussions in bridging their countries with the EU. They indeed present young people's cooperation at the regional level as increasing the credibility of their countries' commitments

towards the EU membership. The focus group participants also highlighted their involvement in disseminating EU values and principles within the region as a positive aspect of their work. This role is deemed critical for different reasons. According to them, it helps reach out to young people and make 'EU topics' accessible and not circumscribed to high-level institutions. Moreover, it helps deconstruct disinformation about the EU to promote its values and the associated benefits and opportunities stemming from the EU membership. Yet, there was substantial consensus within the group on the fact that these objectives are not without challenges.

'Promoting the EU is not an easy task'

As the focus group's participants continually referred to their responsibilities in promoting EU values by meeting other people, I delved deeper into their challenges in carrying out their activities as YEAs. The discussion has then shifted to the primary obstacles they encounter when conveying EU values to their peers. Eris from Kosovo initiated the conversation, remarking: 'It is difficult for us to promote EU values', a sentiment that resonated with the group as they nodded in agreement. The explanations given by participants, supported by examples, encompass different elements related to the EU popularity and the overall support of youth to the accession:

I was part of a panel with like young people and we were discussing the role of youth in terms of Kosovo's (aspiration of) being part of the EU and Europe. Among the questions that I had for the audience, which was like 90% of young people, I asked to raise their hand if they feel part of Europe, if they feel European. And only a few people raised their hand. (Eris, Kosovo, YEA)

When I talk to my classmates and my team, who are not pro-EU, about integration, their answers are not based on economics or governance, neither about anything that impacts their lives concretely. In the Northern part of Montenegro, as well as coastal areas, the Orthodox Church, some of the right-wing politicians, they would utilise the questions of identity to kind of portray Europe as, you know, antagonising the Balkans and somehow jeopardising the traditional way of life and the ideas that have been here for centuries ... as if they can isolate yourself from Europe – without giving any concrete evidence about the benefits of such approach. (Dmitry, Montenegro, YEA)

I have to say that in the case of Serbia, there is an interesting situation because according to latest polls, only 35 or 36% of young people in Serbia support accession to the EU. And there is a lot of negative opinions regarding to the EU, and this is primarily, I would say, coming from a lot of propaganda here and a lot of anti-European centres. (Milos, Serbia, YEA)

Listening to the young ambassadors statements, it becomes clear that the challenges they face primarily concern the barriers they encounter when promoting the EU. They explain these challenges according to their experiences with peers. Accordingly, major constraints include the lack of identification in the EU values (something portrayed as the lack of European identity), lack of information about the EU, the benefits and disadvantages of membership and negative perception of the EU due to propaganda. Moreover, the focus group participants noted that the enlargement process often seems distant from young people. They lamented the lack of information regarding the benefits of EU membership and highlighted the limited accessibility of EU-related topics to youth. When these topics do reach young people, they are often filtered through propaganda and populist narratives that exploit identity politics to portray the EU negatively. In this context, young people, with their ability to access and influence various channels, were seen as potential agents of change. They can work within the social fabric of their communities to promote EU values and bridge the information gap.

Furthermore, the participants emphasised that young people represent the future leaders of the enlargement process. They recognised that in a few years, young individuals will occupy decision-making positions, work in various organisations and assume leadership roles, making their influence crucial to the integration process. They stressed the importance of ensuring that young people are already familiar with the EU and its membership requirements. This familiarity would empower them to engage effectively in shaping the future of their countries. In this context, several participants highlighted the YEA as a programme that equips youth with the skills to influence processes, mobilise communities and create a well-versed generation involved in the EU affairs. They emphasised the role of young people as change-makers and innovators capable of addressing the challenges inherent in the enlargement process. They believed that the youth inherently possess qualities such as creativity and innovation, essential for tackling these challenges.

In conclusion, the participants often referred to themselves as being the next generation of leaders who would eventually drive the enlargement process forward. They acknowledged their challenges and emphasised the importance of ensuring that young people are actively involved in decision-making. The discussions concluded with Dmitry's insightful remarks, which read as follows:

If I should find a word (to describe the role of) youth in relation to the EU integration, it should probably be (something) about building bridges between the countries and building bridges with Europe ... So I think that's our role should be about, defining our societies as European societies, societies that are open and embrace tolerance and inclusivity and not on any national scrutiny.

3.2.2 EU-Balkan Youth Forum

The EU and the Balkans side by side: Shooting a common message

Similar to the focus group discussion with YEA participants, interviewing the delegates of the EUBYF 2021 offered insights into the initiative itself, its perceived utility by participants and the challenges associated with it, particularly in the context of EU integration. When discussing the positive aspects, the initial question touched upon the participants' expectations towards the

forum, aiming to grasp their perceptions regarding the initiative itself. A key point highlighted by the participants concerning the EUBYF was its unique focus on bringing together youth from both the EU and the Western Balkans to contribute to EU integration. This aspect served as a motivating factor for their participation in the initiative, and it continued to resonate with them when reflecting on the conference experience:

I had become aware of the importance that such events have in shaping the personalities of young people, including myself. Therefore, I applied to be part of the forum, so I could network with other young people from the Western Balkans and Europe, share ideas, exchange experience and knowledge and get to know each other better. This resonates especially when you consider that Western Balkans are prospecting to be part of the EU, so we have to kind of become closer to each other in different dimensions. I was inspired to have such an opportunity and create even a modest impact on the issues the Western Balkans face regarding the integration into the EU. (Besnik, Kosovo, EUBYF 2021)

What really made me apply was the idea of connecting EU and Balkan young people, which I found the most important. (Ajla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, EUBYF 2021)

It was a great opportunity to connect. Since we are not part of the EU, we have less opportunity to connect with other people from the EU, as similar events are happening mostly at the regional or local level. (Elio, Albania, EUBYF 2021)

It was very interesting to be part of something like that, being it a huge event and coming from two completely different parts – the EU and the Western Balkan countries, which was an interesting thing to see how ideas clashed and, although we would like to believe that we are coming from very different places, maybe it is not like that. (Una, Montenegro, EUBYF 2021)

Focus group's participants' responses revolved around two key aspects: contributing to European integration and doing so within a space that fosters equal communication between young individuals from the EU and the Western Balkans. The latter aspect stood out as particularly significant and noteworthy. Its importance lies in the perceived necessity to challenge assumed differences between the two sides and to invest in the desire to establish and strengthen connections, which is viewed as a unique opportunity, especially given the shared European future prospects. In terms of meeting participants' expectations, the forum was described as a platform where young people could engage in meaningful discussions, express their viewpoints and exchange ideas while conveying a unified message. According to them, this message was clear and unanimous: young people from both the Western Balkans and the EU support enlargement, as elucidated by the participants:

When it comes to the enlargement policy I think we send a very clear message and I think this is one of the key things that came out of the forum: the youth is for enlargement, at least the ones that were present there and that showed with their participation that it is a very important topic on our minds now. I think it was important because the media decision makers promoted it through their channels. That was, I think, a very clear message and it was one of the highlights for me as well, where we showed some sort of unity representing youth across the European continent. So I think this was very positive and there is some effect there, although not immediate but realistically, it was the most that you can do. (Una, Montenegro, EUBYF 2021)

The forum showed the clear intention of Western Balkans to be part of the EU. And most of all, it was shown that we, as young people, being European or from the Western Balkans, are the same and are fighting similar challenges. Being part of the EU is still, and more than ever, a prevalent desire for youth and the majority of my country. (Elio, Albania, EUBYF 2021)

I think the greatest outcome of the forum would be that, if we will come in a position of power or be decision-makers, the delegates will remember when in 2021 their stand both on the Western Balkans and the EU sides. End when (that moment) comes, maybe, when it comes time for the enlargement and other EU reforms (to happen), I hope these recommendations will stick to our mind: that would be the greatest result of the forum. (Nikola, North Macedonia)

For participants, the ability to come together, collaborate, reach consensus on policy recommendations and craft a unified message held significant importance, particularly in light of the current complexities surrounding EU integration and its impasse. The salient features of this message that made it relevant included its unity, clarity and the shared commitment from both the EU and Western Balkans participants. Emphasising this unity not only to policy makers but also to the broader public, through the visibility of the event, was seen as crucial in making a resounding statement: youth is prepared and eager to bring the EU integration forward. Furthermore, an essential takeaway from the participants' experiences was their desire to better understand themselves and bridge perceived differences. Prior to the forum, they had carried assumptions about their dissimilarities. However, their interactions during the event led to a realisation that they shared more in common than they had initially thought. The forum's exploration of the concept of Europe, as encapsulated in the question 'What is Europe?', encouraged them to reflect on common challenges and shared needs of the European citizens. This process was perceived as giving a more concrete and less abstract sense to the idea of 'being Europeans' united by common goals and aspirations.

The forum was just a piece of the puzzle

For others, such as Nikola from North Macedonia, the main attraction to the forum was that 'somebody is bringing you together to make concrete policy papers in this regard'. Discussing expectations led participants to elaborate on the extent to which these expectations aligned with their experiences in Rome and to discuss the outcomes of the conference. When it comes to that, a general sentiment of bewilderment animated the interactions concerning the policy recommendations. While recognising the

forum as an ideal space for young people to have a say, they raised doubts about how and in which ways this would be used after the Forum was over – something that no one knew about by the time the focus group was held. What was known for sure was that their policy recommendations were channelled into the Conference of the Future of Europe, and that was it. ‘We do not know if anything happened with that in the end. Again, this was part of the Future of Europe Conference, so maybe it was discussed on that level. But also whether that initiative brought any results is debatable’, said Una from Montenegro, building on other comments about the poor impact of this output. Yet, as Dejan from BiH stressed, ‘When you have policy recommendations, in whatever format you do, you can only promise that you will try to present them to the relevant stakeholders. You cannot expect something to change’. Dejan’s thought was complemented by Una’s, who commented, ‘This forum was just one piece of the puzzle’.

At this juncture, an interesting passage occurred in the discussion. Dejan took it upon himself to address the general frustration surrounding the lack of updates on the policy recommendations outcomes. He suggested writing to the forum’s organiser, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under the belief that ‘there will be reasonable explanations from their side ... It is not that they did not do anything; we also did not ask for updates from our side. If that is okay with you, I can write a message in the group’. The group unanimously agreed with the proposed initiative. Different voices were raised to highlight that, despite the abovementioned issues, the forum did support youth in advancing their proposals and ideas. As Nikola from North Macedonia put it, ‘The space was wonderful because it was for young people and by young people. There was not necessarily outside forces’. Following Nikola’s perspective, Una adds that ‘we really did have the needed support and also the participants were really, really, young people, so it was very interesting’. Considering the aforementioned outcomes they reported, the focus group participants were asked to share their perspectives on whether and how the forum contributed to empowering young people in influencing decision-making related to the EU accession of the Western Balkans.

3.2.3 Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs

Given the programme's focus on policy-making, respondents approached the transitioning question by elaborating on 'everything they achieved together' through the project. They elaborated more on the dialogue with the decision-makers carried throughout the Policy Labs, sharing lessons learned and the challenges encountered. This allowed them also to elaborate on the role of the EU's support to the project in enabling participants throughout this dialogue with decision makers and link this to general reflections on the European integration itself. In particular, they tackled European integration from the youth policy angle and the integration of this policy framework within the Western Balkans.

'Everything that we achieved together'

There was unanimity among participants in defining the Youth Policy Labs as a very positive and constructive experience. They linked the usefulness of this programme to four main elements. First, the fact that embracing the co-management principle provided them with the chance and support to establish direct contact with decision-makers. This aspect has been significantly prioritised within the first part of the conversation, with participants highlighting how this dialogue brought concrete results. Thanks to the Labs, participants were enabled to bring youth issues, questions and needs in the political agenda of different ministries. 'Thanks to the Youth Policy Labs, I was able to push for young people and civil society to be included in the body', said Anja from Serbia, emphasising how otherwise these youth issues, like mental health, remain neglected: 'They could not even grasp the utility and need to have youth and CSOs to be included in the board that has to deal with mental health of young people', she said.

Another notable positive aspect was that the programme equipped them with the resources and support needed to engage in this dialogue and interact with decision-makers on an equal footing. As pointed out by Filip from North Macedonia:

(The project) offered a lot of flexibility, at least on our end from the youth sector, because this is not something that we have been used to working on prior. Basically, all the activities that we were usually working on, end up having concrete goals, activities, everything as it was predefined with very little room for manoeuvring ... So basically, even if someone is appointed within the working group and does not have the same level of experience in working on projects or something similar, we can still have the capacity to prepare the applications for the instruments. I think this was very important because the aim of the Western Balkan neutral was actually to even the playing field between the youth representatives and the government representatives so they work on equal basis on addressing the different issues of concern. (Filip, North Macedonia, WBYL)

What emerged as positive take away is that this experience equipped them with valuable skills useful in the policymaking, as well as a deeper understanding of policy dialogues. This, according to Frančeska, was very significant: 'I think that this project was a very good exercise for us as individuals, youth organisations and youth stakeholders to understand more how policies function behind the scene'. According to Nikola from BiH, this was beneficial beyond the scope of youth policy: 'I believe that WBYL was very important for young people who are part of youth umbrella bodies because they understand the process easier, and it helped them to learn how to advocate issues, not necessarily only related to youth, but in general how to advocate within our State'.

According to what emerged from the participants' exchanges on this topic, the programme's inclusivity, co-management approach and the support provided by the organisation (RCC) significantly influenced the project's outcomes. Discussions revealed that the programme enabled the meaningfulness of their participation, which was linked to their ability to express themselves as something that requires resources. This underscores a common challenge for youth participation in decision-making: youth may desire to participate but lack the essential tools, skills and time needed to engage as equals. Participants in the WBYL project found cooperation with policy-makers to be a positive experience, despite its challenges. They valued the opportunity to create some meaningful partnerships with certain institutional figures

and regarded them as allies rather than adversaries, emphasising the unique perspective gained from collaborating with diverse institutions. Nikola's perspective highlighted the potential of institutions to be supportive allies when direct engagement and meaningful conversations were initiated. As he noted:

When we sat down with them and initiated meaningful conversations, we realised numerous processes were in motion. While the system may appear inactive and not align with our preferred pace, it became evident that significant efforts were continuously being invested. (Nikola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, WBYL)

Anja from Serbia reinforced this importance, sharing an example of a Ministry of Youth and Sport representative who actively advocated for youth issues across ministries. This commitment for youth inclusion proved to be instrumental, as explained by Anja: 'She pushed because she was believing in everything we were doing, and this was very useful for us'. Filip emphasised the significance of government representatives who understood the value of engaging with young people in the youth sector. Interestingly, this added a new layer that enabled this author's understanding of what participants referred to when praising 'everything they achieve together', not only as motivated, committed young professionals, but also as competent stakeholders able to recognise the necessity and significance of building meaningful partnerships with 'adults'.

'We truly need to be integrated'

When discussing the WBYL programme, across the board, the participants expressed a shared belief that initiatives like the Youth Policy Labs are closely linked to EU accession and can positively contribute to this overarching goal. They highlighted several key reasons for this perspective. First, participants underscored the role of the Youth Policy Labs in facilitating small but crucial steps toward alignment with EU standards, practices and required reforms. They recognised that these incremental changes are essential for their countries to meet EU expectations and qualifications. In the words of Frančeska:

If we speak for EU accession, but at the end of the day, sometimes, the accession could be a utopic term, but there are those key small steps that make the big summary of the EU accession. So I think that all these projects contribute to the bigger picture ... For the first time it was presented in the region with new concepts that also contribute in all of these key reforms. (Françeska, Albania, WBYL)

Participants enlivened the discussion by emphasising how the WBYL underscores youth policy as a domain facilitating integration. They highlighted its role in introducing and offering first-hand experience with mechanisms and practices implemented at the EU level in youth policy, among other aspects. According to Anja, this aspect is pivotal in moving closer to EU membership, emphasising the need to continue implementing the practices that exist at the EU level in the realm of youth policy:

If we are seriously working towards integration, then we truly need to be integrated. We truly need implement all the practices that exist on the EU level in the region as well ... even the youth policy, I know it's a different competency compared to some others, but still, there needs to be some harmonising. (Anja, Serbia, WBYL)

Anja's viewpoint resonated with other participants, who also stressed the importance of harmonising existing EU practices in the region. Participants cited specific examples, pointing to various policy schemes and participation mechanisms available to young people in the EU, such as the Youth Guarantee and the EU Youth Dialogue.

However, participants expressed the need for a more systematic and sustained approach, moving beyond project-specific initiatives. As pointed out by Nikola from BiH, 'It is not a solution building participation from programme to programme from project to project. In our countries this is the main way to include young people and to have good participation: it needs to be a systematic approach'. They also highlighted a desire for greater recognition and inclusion of the progress made in the Western Balkans within broader EU policies and initiatives in the youth sector. At this point, they exhibit frustration, lamenting that the progress

made in the region within the youth sector is not sufficiently incorporated into broader EU initiatives, which is seen as preventing substantial mutual learning and lasting partnerships. According to Anja:

We (the Western Balkans) have our bubble, and then we have everything that happens in the EU, and I have been many times frustrated, even just realising how young people and youth sectors in the EU level function and how exclusive it is, even though they preach inclusivity. (Anja, Serbia, WBYL)

Anja's concern about the insufficient inclusivity from the EU side was further explored during the discussion. She highlighted the example of EU Youth Dialogue and similar practices successfully implemented in the region. According to her, they often struggle to find a platform within the EU to share their positive practices and contribute to the overall processes on an equal footing with their EU counterparts. Anja mentioned a recent opportunity when youth councils from the Western Balkans were invited to a youth conference in Brussels. When she raised the issue with youth coordinators and individuals from the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture, their response was dismissive, suggesting that they felt the Western Balkans youth councils were not considered suitable for involvement in such matters. Filip from North Macedonia elaborated further on this. He emphasised that their good practices are typically presented at the regional conferences attended primarily by individuals from the region. 'Therefore', – he continues – 'young people engage in the process (eg Youth Dialogue) were unable to really engage with their counterparts from the EU and exchange even additional lessons that they can learn from, so they can apply them to their own national context'.

3.3 Discussion of findings and concluding remarks

The focus groups findings highlighted how participation plays a pivotal role in positively influencing the EU integration of the Western Balkans countries. First of all, it showed how young people's engagement empowers them to actively contribute to their countries' democratic development, acting as watchdogs for

their governments and consequently supporting the democratic consolidation of institutions. This primary element relates to the importance of participation, as embedded in democracy and the EU integration. Therefore, the findings very the first hypothesis (H1) which posits a positive relationship between young people's involvement and EU integration. Regarding the latter, youth participation initiatives lead to incremental changes that align with EU standards and practices, gradually establishing the necessary foundation for EU membership.

The participants, describing their activities and connecting them with the broader picture of integration, emphasise how their involvement underscores small but essential steps in this direction. In the case of YEAs, these steps mainly underscore regional cooperation and the promotion of the EU values and principles in the region. In the case of the WBYF, the involvement of youth from the region and the EU in discussing the future of the enlargement enabled to convey a common unified message by the youth for the EU policymakers. Thirdly, initiatives like WBYL enable the integration of EU practices within the region with participants emphasising how harmonising existing EU practices targeting young people extends beyond youth policy and aligns with broader EU integration objectives. Based on this, another crucial aspect is that the extent to which youth participation can influence the EU integration process depends heavily on whether young people are empowered to take such actions. By looking at the initiatives analysed in this study, it is possible to observe how participants were enabled by to bring further the change they want to make.

In the case of the YEA platform, the possibility they have to implement projects in local communities, create partnerships within the region and spread EU values through peer-to-peer interactions in events designed by them, is made possible thanks to the platform. In the case of the Forum, the ability of participants to discuss, collaborate and exchange perspectives on enlargement-related topics was closely linked to the existence of a framework where youth from both the EU and the Western Balkans were invited to engage on an equal footing. Furthermore, the support provided by the organising body, in this instance, the MFA, in channelling their ideas and consolidating them into policy recommendations, made it possible for their message to be conveyed to the EU Commission, as well as other institutions and decision-makers. In this context, the WBYL serves as a

notable example of how youth participation can yield tangible results when the participation framework ensures that young people not only engage in meaningful dialogues with decision-makers on equal terms but are also equipped with the necessary tools and resources to do so. In light of this, it can be argued that the capacity of youth participation to exert influence on the process is intrinsically linked to the nature of the participatory frameworks made available to young individuals, including the space they offer and the support provided to facilitate their engagement.

Nonetheless, another major element shown in the analysis regards the challenges faced by participants throughout the participation in the initiatives. Interestingly, such challenges can be observed as closely linked to the broader context of EU integration, allowing to uncover strong connections EU integration and the way youth experiences it. This provided a specific youth-centred perspective within the broader picture. For instance, in conversations with the YEAs, the main challenge identified by them is the barriers they face while promoting the EU on the ground among their peers. As presented in the first chapter, the lack of engagement, interest and enthusiasm towards the EU is intertwined with internal and external factors, such as propaganda, misinformation and the scarcity of reliable information about the EU. A major challenge in the WBYL case is the limited integration of successful Western Balkans' policies into the broader EU framework, as participants noted. They lamented that WBYL's success in youth participation often stays regional and lacks integration with EU peers and institutions. This 'hierarchical exclusion' of the Western Balkans youth from the EU youth process, and the latter's perceived lack of inclusivity, can be seen in connection with the hierarchical approach of enlargement policy – with candidates being marginalised in the EU governance framework. This further exacerbates the distance between the young people from the region in relation to their peers from the EU and as well as the EU itself.

This is also noticeable in the way participants of the EUBYF emphasised the bewilderment noticed stemming from the fact that the conference implied that young people from the EU and the Western Balkans could sit in the same table and have an equal say in the future of the enlargement. Yet, the frustration they expressed when pointing to the fact that their policy recommendations did not impact the trajectory of the enlargement, points to

the weight of young people in the process. In this context, a reflection on processes through which the EU tries to involve the citizens, such as the CoFoE – where the forum’s delegates challenged their recommendations – arises. Despite the relevance of these processes to address the marginalisation of citizens in the EU governance, the voices they try to raise are remaining quite unheard.

Conclusions

The main goal of this thesis was to examine the role played by young people in advancing the European integration process in the Western Balkans and explore how youth participation can serve as a means to address the challenges underpinning the enlargement fatigue. As young people's role in this process is largely unresearched, this thesis sought to contribute to Europeanisation research by applying a youth perspective to studying the EU enlargement. Accordingly, this thesis centred around two closely linked research questions: To what extent does youth participation in EU enlargement-related initiatives influence the EU integration of the Western Balkans from the perspective of young people? And what role do young people in the region play in advancing their countries' closer ties with the EU? These research inquiries were underpinned by three core hypotheses: the presence of a positive correlation between youth participation and European integration (H1); the participatory frameworks, examined within this study, have the potential to alleviate enlargement fatigue (H2); and the identification of youth tokenism as a significant barrier to youth effective participation (H3). These questions were approached using an interdisciplinary approach that delved into the analysis's focus on the following elements: enlargement fatigue, young people as agents and youth participation in decision-making processes. Firstly, the 'problem' (enlargement fatigue) has been analysed through a theoretical review of existing Europeanisation literature and youth participation. This has been narrowed further by looking at the position of the subject youth within the enlargement and youth policy of the EU, to be further examined by looking at three initiatives. Acknowledging the role of young people in EU integration, these initiatives aim to foster their participation in the process.

The first chapter of the thesis underlined the main challenges underpinning the current state of EU integration of the Western Balkans. Looking at how the integration has been operationalised by the EU and studied in theoretical models, it has been pointed to its technocratic, elite-oriented and top-down nature. Contextualised in the current dynamics of accession and enlargement fatigue, it has been noted how this approach contributes to the current deadlock, leaving the citizens of the Western Balkans out of the picture and not capitalising on their role in driving domestic change. Departing from this, the second part of the chapter overviewed how the EU has addressed this issue by looking at recent developments. Subsequently, the role of young people has been discussed in relation to youth participation theory and its policy framework at the EU level. Furthermore, it has been presented how a partial understanding of participation, translated into a superficial involvement of young people in processes affecting them, can significantly limit their agency. Finally, the concluding part of the chapter briefly discussed the relevance of including young people in the EU integration process, introducing how an increased focus on youth at the EU level communicates with the enlargement process. Building from this, the abovementioned considerations were contextualised in relation to the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. After briefly presenting how the role of young people in the EU integration has been framed throughout this process, it has been analysed how the growing focus on youth participation at the EU level has been incorporated into the Enlargement framework in the past five years. While acknowledging new efforts to align EU youth policy in the region, the analysis of relevant documents shed light on the importance (and lack thereof) concrete mechanisms and instruments to ensure effective implementation.

These limitations were further explored through the fieldwork, throughout which data on the perception of young people on youth participation within the enlargement, were collected using focus groups discussions. A prevailing theme that emerged across the discussion is the disengagement of youth in the region, where youth participation often sounds like an empty word, disconnected from the context where it is framed. Interestingly, participants framed the theme of youth disengagement within young people's perception that 'nothing will change' stemming from the perception that involving youth is not a priority for political elites

and, when it is, seems to be a façade. Therefore, youth tokenism has been described by them as one considerable factor contributing to youth political apathy and a strategic manoeuvre politicians employ to increment their credibility and power. In light of this, the third hypothesis, namely that youth tokenism is a major element preventing participation, has been verified.

In addition, focus group discussions highlighted a mismatch between institutional efforts to include youth and reality. One aspect pointed out by many is about the gap between formal policies and their actual implementation. This suggests that, despite participatory frameworks, there may be shortcomings in translating them into meaningful youth engagement. Observing the tension between the formal acknowledgement of youth participation and the practical mechanisms that enable it verified the second hypothesis. This can also be motivated by the overall lack of specific mechanisms and schemes that clarify how to address young people's concerns. In this perspective, it seems the challenges and limitations identified in current approaches to youth inclusion in regional development agendas, as discussed in the second section of this thesis, directly resonate with the findings of the fieldwork. Yet, interacting with the subject target of this thesis, namely young people actively engaged in participation under the umbrella of EU integration, proved essential to unveil that, despite the challenges discussed above, there is a potential that can be unleashed.

At the end of a focus group, I asked people to find a word to define young people's role in the EU integration process. One focus group participant from Montenegro said that young people are 'bridge-builders'. Facing the same question, another used the term 'change-makers'. Initially, these words seemed somewhat idealistic and rhetorical, as much as talking of 'youth participation' may sound nowadays. Yet, after concluding this research, their meanings resonate more. Bridges, by nature, shorten distances; throughout this study, the concept of distance remained central. Distance of the EU from the citizens, the one felt by youth in relation to politics and politicians and the one felt by youth from the region towards the EU membership. The fieldwork unveiled how young people are acutely aware of this gap and how they, or at least those who participated in this work, are trying to

bridge it: regionally, fostering cooperation and mutual recognition among themselves; on the European level, connecting with their peers from the EU, addressing shared challenges through common mechanisms, and at grassroots and institutional levels.

The same reflection goes to the term ‘change-makers’, which, contextualised through the research, carries deeper significance than at first. Reflecting on the enlargement process, the word ‘change’ resonates particularly. First, because since Thessaloniki, not much has changed in terms of progress. Secondly, because change is intrinsically embedded in the scope of Europeanisation. Listening to young people throughout this research unveiled a precious insight: a layer of integration – perhaps unnoticed, less researched or not necessarily mediated by institutions – is happening in the Western Balkans. This integration is made of people willing to meet each other, work together, identify solutions to address common problems using their competencies and explore differences and similarities in an interaction, under the hypothesis that being part of a common project is auspicious and desirable. In this context, Raedelli’s definition of Europeanisation resonates well: a process occurring through meaningful interactions that can inform shifts at the domestic level. If these shifts lead to successfully amending a law that neglects youth, cooperating with peers on local projects, or sending a common message as united Europeans, they all encompass the *will* to make sense of what is possible to do together, something that in the European project, and in the EU enlargement as well, is crucial, relevant and necessary.

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