

Policy Brief



FROM STRATEGY GAPS
TO SUSTAINABLE PARTICIPATION
OF YOUTH IN MONTENEGRO

NGO Prima
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Policy paper: From Strategy Gaps to Sustainable Participation of Youth in Montenegro

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Summary

Youth participation is one of the most pressing challenges for Montenegro's democratic development, social cohesion, and progress towards EU accession. Although the country has established a comprehensive legal and strategic framework, most recently through the Youth Strategy 2023–2027, the gap between formal commitments and practice remains significant. Young people continue to face barriers in political, economic, and social life, while inequalities between genders, regions, and socio-economic groups persist and limit their opportunities to contribute fully to society.

The Youth Participation Index 2023 demonstrates that political participation remains the weakest dimension. Formal bodies such as youth councils exist, but they are often symbolic rather than functional, with limited influence on decision-making and insufficient capacity to ensure meaningful youth representation. Trust in institutions is fragile, and opportunities for structured dialogue are scarce. Economic participation is somewhat stronger but still vulnerable. Youth unemployment and NEET rates remain high, entrepreneurial opportunities are restricted, and the persistent mismatch between education and labour market demand exacerbates inequality. These problems disproportionately affect young women and rural youth, whose pathways to economic independence remain more constrained. Social participation presents a more complex picture: while access to formal education is relatively solid, non-formal and informal learning are undervalued, volunteering remains underdeveloped, and mental health services are inadequate. The most vulnerable youth groups, including those from low-income backgrounds or marginalised communities, continue to face the greatest risks of exclusion.

Since 2016, NGO Prima has carefully monitored the position of young people as part of the Youth Hub Western Balkan and Turkey Network of Youth Organizations (YHWBT Network). With the financial assistance of the European Union and co-funding from the Government of Montenegro, Prima has contributed to the development of the Youth Participation Index, a structured monitoring tool designed to provide evidence-based insights into youth engagement. Each year, Prima publishes national monitoring reports that assess political, economic, and social participation through specific indicators, thus offering a comprehensive framework for evaluation and advocacy. The Index has become a reference point for understanding the challenges of youth participation in Montenegro, while situating them in the broader regional context of the Western Balkans and Turkey.

This role highlights the importance of civil society in bridging systemic gaps. Prima's work demonstrates that youth participation is not solely a matter of institutional frameworks but also of sustained engagement by organisations that generate evidence, deliver services, and ensure that the voices of young people are translated into policy change.

The analysis presented in this paper indicates that Montenegro faces a choice between maintaining the status quo, pursuing limited incremental reforms, or committing to systemic reform. The evidence suggests that only systemic reform can deliver sustainable progress. This requires a revitalisation of youth councils at both national and local levels, with gender balance and genuine decision-making influence, the adoption of the Youth Guarantee and alignment of education with labour market needs, the institutionalisation of validation mechanisms for non-

formal and informal learning, and the expansion of services for mental health, cultural participation, and social protection. Local governments must be equipped with resources and knowledge to implement youth policies effectively, while gender-sensitive approaches must be embedded in all interventions to ensure that the persistent disparities between young women and men are reduced. Finally, civil society must be recognised as a strategic partner, with stable funding and formalised collaboration, so that organisations such as Prima can continue to innovate and hold institutions accountable.

In conclusion, Montenegrin youth represent an underutilised resource whose participation remains fragmented and fragile. By embracing a holistic and gender-responsive approach that integrates political, economic, and social dimensions, Montenegro has the opportunity to transform youth participation from symbolic gestures into a consistent and meaningful reality. Only through systemic reform, anchored in evidence and supported by both institutions and civil society, can the potential of young people be fully realised in building a more democratic, resilient, and inclusive society.

Policy and Institutional Context for Youth Participation in Montenegro

The legal and strategic framework for youth policy in Montenegro reflects an evolving system that increasingly recognises young people as both beneficiaries and active agents of change. At its core stands the Law on Youth (2019), which provides the foundation for youth services, participation mechanisms, and strategic planning at national and local levels. However, the law leaves important areas underdeveloped, particularly the inclusion of young people who are NEET and the structural disadvantages of vulnerable groups, calling for continuous adjustments in line with European standards and domestic realities.

Beyond youth-specific legislation, broader laws and strategies shape the environment for youth participation. The Law on Local Self-Government regulates mechanisms for civic engagement, including youth councils and public consultations, directly influencing the opportunities young people have to co-create policies at the municipal level. The Law on Non-Governmental Organisations and the Law on Free Access to Information establish the conditions for accountability and transparency, while the Law on Adult Education anchors the principle of lifelong learning. This last dimension is particularly relevant in the Montenegrin context: with technological change and labour market volatility, lifelong learning has become an imperative for personal development, professional adaptability, and competitiveness.

Lifelong learning and validation of non-formal and informal education are crucial for empowering youth participation. Many young people acquire skills and competences through volunteering, community work, informal groups, short training programmes, and digital platforms. Without systematic recognition, these competences often remain undervalued, reducing both employability and self-confidence. Validating such learning increases motivation, eases transitions between education and employment, and allows young people to be recognised as competent contributors to society. European experiences demonstrate that the validation of diverse learning pathways can bridge inequalities and foster inclusion of disadvantaged youth. Montenegro has made initial steps in this field, but the system remains fragmented and requires harmonisation with EU practices.

A milestone in the development of youth policy was the adoption of the Youth Strategy 2023–2027, which came after a two-year strategic vacuum following the expiry of the previous Strategy. The Strategy represents a comprehensive and participatory response to the challenges faced by young people in Montenegro today. It articulates a vision in which young people are recognised as a vital resource and factor of society, whose voices are respected, contributions valued, and initiatives supported. This vision positions youth not merely as recipients of policy but as co-creators of a social environment in which they realise their rights and full potential.

The process of developing the Strategy was participatory and evidence-based. Initiated in 2021 with consultations on short- and long-term priorities, it expanded in 2022 and 2023 through a wide-ranging process involving over 200 participants from more than 100 institutions and organisations, together with extensive input from young people themselves. Surveys, focus groups, public consultations, and analysis of existing research ensured that the Strategy reflects the voices and needs of youth across Montenegro. The guiding principle “for youth, with youth”

guaranteed inclusiveness and ownership, and established the Strategy as both legitimate and relevant.

Substantively, the Strategy defines a strategic goal of building a sustainable cross-sectoral system of support for youth, enabling them to develop their capacities and contribute actively to society. It sets out four operational objectives: 1) Developing a sustainable, quality and inclusive system of services to support young people in their transition to adulthood; 2) Creating conditions for young people to be active citizens, engaged in shaping and implementing public policies; 3) Improving the position of youth through a cross-sectoral approach, including measures on health, well-being, resilience, and quality use of free time; 4) Strengthening mechanisms for effective youth policy planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, including data collection and inter-sectoral cooperation.

These objectives are accompanied by detailed measures, ranging from the establishment of functional youth services to inclusive youth work, improved information systems, and mechanisms for international cooperation. They embody a holistic approach that views youth participation as multi-dimensional: political, economic, and social, while recognising the interdependence of these dimensions. At the local level, municipalities have an equally important role in operationalising youth policy. In line with the Law on Local Self-Government, they are expected to establish regulations and bodies dedicated to youth, including youth councils, secretariats, and service providers. Local Action Plans for Youth (LAPMs) serve as the cornerstone for applying youth policy at the municipal level, ideally reflecting the national Strategy and Action Plan. In theory, LAPMs should be based on research into local youth needs, consultations with stakeholders, and public debates, ensuring that policies are evidence-based and inclusive. In practice, however, implementation varies greatly: some municipalities follow all steps of participatory and evidence-based design, while others adopt minimal documents as a rapid response to national directives, with limited involvement of youth themselves. This uneven practice undermines the coherence of youth policy across the country, and contributes to the fragmented institutional landscape that the Youth Strategy 2023–2027 seeks to address.

The institutional responsibility for youth policy in Montenegro primarily lies with the Ministry of Sports and Youth, which coordinates the development and implementation of the Youth Strategy, oversees the application of the Law on Youth, and supports the establishment of youth services and programmes. At the national level, the Ministry also facilitates cooperation with other line ministries whose mandates affect youth, such as the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Culture and Media, among others.

The Youth Council at the national level, envisaged by the Law on Youth, is intended to serve as a representative body of young people in dialogue with state institutions, though in practice its functioning has been inconsistent, particularly during the strategic gap between 2021 and 2023. At the local level, responsibility for youth policy lies with municipal secretariats, which are expected to prepare Local Action Plans for Youth (LAPMs) and establish local youth councils. These bodies should act as the main channels for young people to articulate their needs and participate in decision-making processes.

Civil society organisations, particularly youth organisations and organisations for youth, represent an indispensable pillar of the youth policy system. They not only provide services and

programmes for young people but also act as watchdogs and advocates for more inclusive and evidence-based policymaking. Their role was particularly visible during the design of the Youth Strategy 2023–2027, where CSOs contributed expertise, mobilised young people for consultations, and ensured that diverse perspectives were integrated into the document.

International partners, including the European Union, the Council of Europe and UN agencies, also play a role in providing technical assistance, financial support, and alignment with international standards. Together, these actors form a complex ecosystem of youth policy in Montenegro—an ecosystem that is still in the process of consolidation, and whose effectiveness depends on coordination, continuity, and accountability.

Despite these advances, the Youth Participation Index (2023) places Montenegro only in a moderate position within regional comparisons. The findings highlight underrepresentation of youth in political institutions, persistent NEET rates of around 20%, and significant risk of poverty affecting nearly a quarter of the youth population. Participation in non-formal and informal learning remains low, and its validation underdeveloped, limiting its empowering potential. At the local level, inconsistent establishment and functioning of youth councils and uneven quality of LAPMs further weaken opportunities for youth engagement. These gaps illustrate the tension between the ambitious framework established by the Strategy and the realities of implementation.

In conclusion, Montenegro today possesses an extensive and participatory strategic framework that places youth at the centre of national development. The adoption of the Youth Strategy 2023–2027 has provided a renewed impetus, ensuring inclusiveness, evidence-based design, and cross-sectoral cooperation. Yet, the effectiveness of this framework depends on addressing long-standing challenges: ensuring continuity in implementation, institutionalising local youth councils, embedding validation of non-formal and informal learning, and strengthening data systems to monitor outcomes. Only by translating vision into practice, both nationally and locally, can Montenegro guarantee that youth are empowered as equal partners in shaping a democratic, resilient, and prosperous society.

Key Challenges and Evidence from the Youth Participation Index 2023

Political participation

Political participation of young people in Montenegro remains constrained by structural and cultural barriers. The Youth Participation Index defines this dimension through access to political processes, information about institutions, opportunities to join networks, and eligibility for elected positions. Yet in practice, participation is largely symbolic. Trust in institutions continues to decline, particularly among young people, and surveys show that many express indifference or scepticism towards politics. Activism is strongest during secondary education but sharply decreases afterwards, leaving a gap in sustained engagement.

Institutional mechanisms are weak. Youth councils at the municipal level are either absent or operate only formally, without real decision-making power. The absence of a functional National Youth Council during the period without a valid strategy (2021–2023) further eroded channels for structured dialogue. Youth organisations and informal groups provide some space for activism, but their efforts are rarely institutionalised, inadequately supported, and often disconnected from mainstream policy processes. This results in fragmented engagement and limited policy impact.

The Youth Strategy 2023–2027 explicitly acknowledges these problems, highlighting declining trust in institutions, reduced activism, and unequal opportunities for young women and marginalised groups. It sets out Operational Objective 2: Creating conditions for youth to be active citizens, with measures to strengthen mechanisms for participation, support youth initiatives, expand volunteering, and introduce civic education and digital literacy. These commitments are ambitious, but the Index confirms that without consistent implementation, youth political participation will remain limited to isolated and symbolic practices.

Economic participation

The economic position of youth in Montenegro illustrates a cycle of exclusion. The YPI measures inclusion in the labour market through activity, employment and self-employment. Findings show that young people struggle to enter the labour market, with transitions often delayed by mismatches between education and available jobs. Precarious contracts, seasonal employment and underemployment remain common, while entrepreneurship is still underdeveloped. Access to finance, mentoring and structured institutional support is weak, making self-employment an option for only a minority.

Gender disparities are particularly evident. Young women, especially those in NEET situations, face additional obstacles linked to care responsibilities, cultural expectations, and lack of targeted programmes. These economic vulnerabilities limit not only their financial independence but also their ability to participate actively in political and social life. Economic exclusion, therefore, reinforces wider patterns of marginalisation.

The Youth Strategy 2023–2027 directly responds to these challenges through Operational Objective 3: Improving the position of youth through a cross-sectoral approach. It foresees active employment measures, better alignment of education with labour market needs, and promotion of youth entrepreneurship, particularly green, social and women’s entrepreneurship. The Strategy also incorporates the Youth Guarantee as a mechanism for reducing NEET rates and stresses the importance of practical skills and mobility opportunities. Despite these commitments, the Youth Participation Index highlights the gap between policy design and outcomes, as economic vulnerabilities remain entrenched and continue to limit youth participation across all dimensions.

Social participation

The social dimension of youth participation encompasses integration into community life through education, volunteering, activism and access to youth services, as well as markers of exclusion such as poverty, school dropout and exposure to the justice system. The Youth Participation Index shows that many young people in Montenegro remain vulnerable to social exclusion. Opportunities for volunteering, youth work and non-formal education exist, but they are unevenly distributed and largely concentrated in urban areas. Rural youth and those from disadvantaged backgrounds often have little access to these opportunities.

Another critical challenge is the lack of recognition and validation of competences gained through non-formal and informal learning. Young people acquire important skills through volunteering, community engagement, and informal groups, but these experiences rarely carry weight in the labour market or in education pathways. This undermines motivation and prevents youth from fully capitalising on their civic engagement. Preventive and rehabilitative services are also underdeveloped, leaving young people exposed to risks of poverty, marginalisation and conflict with institutions of social protection or justice.

The Youth Strategy 2023–2027 addresses these issues through Operational Objective 1: Developing a sustainable, quality and inclusive system of youth services, including the establishment of youth centres in all municipalities, mobility programmes, inclusive youth work and improved information systems. It also foresees developing a system for validation of non-formal learning and recognises the importance of mental health, resilience and quality use of free time. In addition, Operational Objective 4 focuses on improving data collection and inter-sectoral cooperation, both of which are essential for addressing exclusion. However, the Index findings confirm that despite these policy ambitions, social participation remains fragmented and many young people are left outside meaningful opportunities for engagement.

Regional comparison: Montenegro and the Western Balkans

The Youth Participation Index 2023 provides an important lens through which Montenegro's progress can be compared with neighbouring countries in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. While the region as a whole faces structural challenges related to youth participation, differences across countries reveal both areas of relative strength and persistent weaknesses for Montenegro. By examining political, economic, and social participation, it becomes clear that the country sits in an intermediate position: ahead of some neighbours, behind others, and consistently below European Union benchmarks.

Political participation

Across the region, political participation is the most fragile dimension of youth engagement. The Index highlights that young people in Western Balkan countries rarely hold parliamentary seats, are infrequently consulted in policy design, and often experience a sense of detachment from formal politics. This pattern is reinforced by low levels of trust in institutions, which discourages active participation and contributes to widespread scepticism about the value of political involvement.

Montenegro's experience reflects this broader trend. The suspension of its National Youth Council during the strategic gap between 2021 and 2023 created a vacuum in institutional dialogue. This weakened formal representation and mirrored challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where young people also lack effective national-level mechanisms. By contrast, Serbia and Kosovo have youth structures that function more regularly, even if their real influence is modest, while Albania has established bodies whose practical impact remains limited. Montenegro therefore aligns more closely with the regional norm of underdeveloped youth councils than with EU member states, where structured dialogue is institutionalised and well-resourced.

At the grassroots level, youth activism in Montenegro resembles that of its regional peers: energetic but fragmented. Informal groups and civil society organisations create alternative spaces for engagement, but they are rarely connected to policymaking. This disconnect results in a form of participation that is visible in protests, petitions, or online campaigns, but with little impact on policy outcomes. The Index underscores that this pattern is systemic across the Western Balkans, and Montenegro is no exception. While the Youth Strategy 2023–2027 foresees stronger mechanisms for participation, including civic education and volunteering programmes, implementation remains the decisive challenge.

Economic participation

Economic participation offers a slightly more positive story in the region, yet vulnerabilities remain stark. The Youth Participation Index shows that young people across the Western Balkans face delayed entry into the labour market, high exposure to precarious jobs, and limited access to entrepreneurship opportunities. The mismatch between education systems and labour market demand is a regional constant, leaving graduates underprepared for practical realities of employment.

Montenegro's position is somewhat stronger than that of countries such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where exclusion from the labour market is more severe and long-term unemployment more entrenched. Compared to Albania, Montenegro has achieved more stability in youth employment, particularly in the recovery period following the pandemic. However, when placed alongside Serbia, Montenegro lags behind: Serbia has made clearer progress in aligning education with employment policies, whereas Montenegro continues to rely on fragmented initiatives that struggle to produce systemic results.

Gender disparities in economic life cut across the entire region, and Montenegro is no exception. Young women encounter barriers linked to care responsibilities, cultural expectations, and insufficiently targeted employment programmes. These structural inequalities are shared with Albania, Kosovo, and Türkiye, underlining that the challenge is not merely national but regional in scope. Furthermore, while entrepreneurship is widely promoted in strategic documents, in practice few young people are able to access the financial support, mentoring, or networks required to sustain their initiatives. Montenegro mirrors this regional weakness: despite policy emphasis on entrepreneurship, opportunities remain limited and unevenly distributed.

Social participation

Social participation presents perhaps the most complex picture. The Youth Participation Index evaluates integration into community life through education, volunteering, and civic engagement, while also monitoring exclusion factors such as poverty, dependency on social protection, or contact with the justice system.

In formal education, Montenegro performs somewhat better than Albania and Türkiye, where systemic dropout remains a significant challenge. Early school leaving is less pronounced, giving Montenegro an advantage in ensuring that young people complete at least a basic level of education. However, when it comes to non-formal and informal learning, Montenegro resembles the regional pattern of neglect. Competences acquired through volunteering, youth work, or informal initiatives are rarely validated, leaving young people without recognition for skills that could improve employability and strengthen civic engagement. Serbia and North Macedonia have begun to experiment with more systematic approaches to validation, but Montenegro is still at an early stage.

The broader challenge of social exclusion is shared across the Western Balkans. The Index stresses that many young people remain vulnerable to poverty, marginalisation, and encounters with the justice system. Montenegro mirrors this trend: while it performs somewhat better in

educational attainment, preventive and rehabilitative services remain underdeveloped. Young people at risk — whether due to socio-economic disadvantage, rural isolation, or other vulnerabilities — lack sufficient support. This places Montenegro squarely within the regional pattern of insufficient investment in social participation.

Another area where Montenegro aligns with regional weaknesses is volunteering. Across the Western Balkans, volunteering is underdeveloped, and legislative frameworks often create more obstacles than incentives. In Montenegro, as in Serbia and Albania, volunteering exists but remains sporadic and undervalued, which limits opportunities for young people to contribute to their communities and develop civic skills.

Taken as a whole, Montenegro's position within the Western Balkans is one of partial strength and persistent vulnerability. It outperforms some neighbours in terms of labour market stability and educational outcomes, but falls behind in aligning education with employment, validating non-formal learning, and institutionalising political participation. In political life, Montenegro closely resembles Bosnia and Herzegovina in the weakness of its national youth structures, while in economic participation it is closer to Serbia but with less progress in policy alignment. In social participation, Montenegro shows strengths in formal education but remains tied to the regional pattern of weak recognition of non-formal learning and insufficient support for vulnerable groups.

Compared to the European Union, the entire region, including Montenegro, remains only moderately prepared to ensure sustainable and evidence-based youth participation. EU member states have well-developed systems for structured dialogue, robust data collection, and mechanisms to validate non-formal competences, while the Western Balkans continue to struggle with fragmented initiatives and limited implementation. For Montenegro, the regional comparison underscores that progress depends not only on strengthening national strategies but also on learning from neighbouring practices, fostering regional cooperation, and moving closer to EU standards of youth inclusion.

The Role of Civil Society and NGO Prima as a Driver of Youth Participation

While institutional frameworks in Montenegro provide a formal basis for youth policy, the practice of youth participation often depends on the initiatives of civil society. Among the organisations active in this field, NVO Prima has emerged as a leading actor that systematically bridges the gap between policy commitments and the lived experiences of young people.

NGO Prima contributes to youth participation in three interconnected ways. First, through evidence generation. The organisation has been at the forefront of research on youth participation, most notably by coordinating national inputs into the Youth Participation Index. This contribution is crucial in a context where official data remain limited and fragmented. By producing reliable evidence, Prima supports evidence-based policymaking and helps ensure that the needs and perspectives of young people are recognised in national and regional debates.

Second, through direct work with young people. Prima develops and implements programmes in the fields of education, non-formal learning, employability, and civic engagement. It provides spaces for young people to acquire competences that formal institutions often overlook, including critical thinking, advocacy skills, and community engagement. Importantly, Prima promotes the validation of non-formal and informal learning, empowering young people to see their volunteering and activism as valuable experiences that strengthen their position in the labour market and in society.

Third, through policy advocacy. Prima engages with institutions at both national and local levels, advocating for inclusive youth policies, better support for vulnerable groups, and stronger mechanisms for youth participation. Its role has been particularly visible in highlighting the needs of NEET youth and promoting integrated approaches that connect education, employment, and social inclusion. By linking grassroots perspectives with policy debates, Prima ensures that youth voices influence decisions that affect them directly.

The Youth Participation Index confirms that many of the gaps in political, economic, and social participation are systemic and persistent. In this context, the role of organisations like Prima is not supplementary but essential. Civil society provides the innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness that state institutions often lack. Prima's work demonstrates how targeted interventions, grounded in research and delivered in partnership with young people, can transform participation from a declarative goal into a practical reality.

Looking forward, strengthening the collaboration between civil society and state institutions will be decisive for achieving the objectives of the Youth Strategy 2023–2027. Prima's experience shows that civil society actors are not only service providers but also key partners in designing and implementing youth policy. Their role as drivers of participation should therefore be systematically recognised, supported, and integrated into national and local youth frameworks.

Policy Options: Pathways to Stronger Youth Inclusion

Addressing the challenges identified through the Youth Participation Index 2023 and the new Youth Strategy requires political will, institutional commitment, and sustained collaboration with civil society. Decision-makers in Montenegro face several pathways for action, each carrying different implications for the future of youth participation.

- ⇒ **Option 1: Status quo – maintaining the existing framework without significant change** For several YPI indicators, consolidated national-level data are either missing or not disaggregated by age and gender, which is essential for calculating this index.

This pathway would rely on existing laws, strategies, and local action plans, while implementing them only partially. In practice, this would mean that youth councils would continue to exist mostly on paper, funding for youth organisations would remain inconsistent, and youth services would be fragmented across municipalities. Economic participation would continue to depend on short-term projects, while social participation would remain vulnerable to geographic and socio-economic inequalities. The advantage of this option is low immediate political and financial cost; however, the long-term consequence is the perpetuation of weak youth engagement, declining trust in institutions, and missed opportunities to align with EU standards.

- ⇒ **Option 2: Incremental improvements – targeted but limited interventions**

A second pathway would focus on selective reforms within the existing framework. For instance, strengthening youth councils in a few municipalities, expanding employability programmes for NEET youth, or piloting validation of non-formal learning in specific sectors. This option would demonstrate political responsiveness and provide visible results in certain areas, particularly where civil society initiatives already exist. Yet it risks remaining fragmented and dependent on donor support, without creating systemic change. While it may stabilise some aspects of participation, it would not address the deeper structural causes identified in the Youth Participation Index.

- ⇒ **Option 3: Systemic reform – building an integrated and sustainable model of youth participation**

The most ambitious pathway involves a comprehensive approach, aligning laws, strategies, and institutions into a coherent framework for youth inclusion. This would mean establishing functional national and local youth councils, securing stable funding for youth services, and fully implementing the Youth Strategy 2023–2027. It would also require introducing mechanisms to validate non-formal and informal learning, embedding civic education in schools, and ensuring cross-sectoral cooperation between ministries, municipalities, and civil society. Economically, this pathway would advance youth entrepreneurship, integrate the Youth Guarantee, and provide tailored support to young women and vulnerable groups. Socially, it would prioritise inclusion, mental health,

volunteering, and equal opportunities for rural youth. The cost and effort of systemic reform are significantly higher, but the long-term benefits include sustainable youth participation, stronger alignment with EU accession requirements, and a more resilient and inclusive society.

These three options illustrate the spectrum of choices available. The status quo risks stagnation and growing youth disengagement; incremental improvements provide limited gains but fall short of systemic impact; systemic reform offers the most comprehensive solution but requires political determination and long-term investment. For Montenegro, the lessons from regional comparison suggest that half-measures are unlikely to deliver sustainable change. To move closer to EU standards, the systemic reform pathway emerges as the only option capable of transforming youth participation into a consistent and meaningful reality.

Policy Recommendations

The analysis confirms that fragmented measures are insufficient to address the structural barriers faced by young people in Montenegro. To achieve meaningful and sustainable youth participation, policy responses must be holistic, integrating political, economic, and social dimensions, while also addressing persistent gender inequalities. The following recommendations outline priority actions:

1. Revitalise youth political participation and representation

Montenegro should institutionalise mechanisms that allow young people, both young women and young men, to contribute meaningfully to decision-making at national and local levels. The National Youth Council must become a functional, representative body that ensures gender balance, while youth councils in municipalities should be established and resourced to avoid tokenism. Civic education and media literacy must challenge gender stereotypes and encourage equal participation of girls and boys in democratic processes.

2. Advance youth economic empowerment and address inequality

Economic participation requires integrated measures that explicitly tackle gender disparities. The Youth Guarantee should be adopted and tailored to Montenegro's labour market, ensuring equal access for young women and men to education, training, or employment. Curricula must integrate digital skills, entrepreneurship, and green competences, while also addressing occupational segregation by encouraging young women to enter underrepresented fields such as ICT, STEM, and green jobs. Specific programmes are needed for NEET youth, rural youth, and minority communities, with a particular focus on young women who face multiple barriers. Youth entrepreneurship should be fostered through gender-sensitive financial support, mentorship, and incubators, while public-private partnerships must include gender equality targets in training and recruitment.

3. Enhance social participation, inclusion, and well-being

Social participation must account for gendered differences in access to opportunities. Montenegro should institutionalise the validation of competences gained through volunteering and youth work, with recognition of young women's unpaid contributions in community and care roles. Cultural and creative programmes, such as art workshops, music, and digital creation labs, should aim for gender balance and address stereotypes about "male" and "female" activities. Mental health services must be expanded with an awareness of gendered stressors, including pressures on young women related to care responsibilities and discrimination. Social protection systems should provide targeted measures for young mothers, single parents, and other vulnerable groups.

4. Strengthen lifelong learning and digital inclusion

A culture of lifelong learning must be inclusive and gender-sensitive. Access to adult learning programmes and online platforms should be designed to accommodate young women who often balance education with care work or precarious employment. Digital literacy programmes must prioritise girls and young women, bridging the gender digital divide and enabling their full participation in the digital economy.

5. Empower municipalities and foster cross-sectoral cooperation

Local governments need resources and training to develop Local Action Plans that genuinely reflect the needs of both young women and men. Gender analysis should be embedded in local youth policy processes, ensuring that municipal measures respond to specific barriers such as lack of childcare, limited mobility, or discriminatory practices. Cross-sectoral cooperation must systematically include gender equality actors and women's organisations to guarantee that youth policies are aligned with broader equality commitments.

6. Recognise and support the role of civil society

Civil society, including organisations such as NVO Prima, has a crucial role in bridging gender gaps in youth participation. Their initiatives often provide safe spaces for young women, amplify their voices in policy debates, and promote gender-sensitive non-formal education. Stable funding mechanisms and formal partnerships should ensure that civil society organisations can continue advancing gender equality alongside broader youth participation goals.

Montenegro's youth policy must move from fragmented initiatives towards systemic reform.

By combining measures that revitalise political participation, empower youth economically, strengthen social inclusion, and reduce gendered inequalities, decision-makers can create an enabling environment where all young people, regardless of gender, socio-economic background, or place of residence, have equitable opportunities to realise their potential and contribute to society. Only through such a holistic and gender-responsive approach, aligned with the Youth Strategy 2023–2027 and EU standards, can youth participation evolve into a consistent and meaningful reality.

For more details on the project, visit:



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