



Monitoring the progress of the Western Balkan countries regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights

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Introduction

The progress on the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) has not only been monitored in EU countries, but also in Western Balkan countries. Some progress in social indicators has been recorded in the last few years, but welfare and labour market outcomes remain generally weak in the region. In this policy brief we focus on the six 2020 reports covering EPSR indicators in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, & Serbia. While most countries put some of the necessary legal frameworks in place, their implementation and financing are still lagging behind. Conclusions focus on possible policies and practices to continue social progress in the region, as well as on recommendations for future EPSR updates regarding the Western Balkan countries.

Background

Key words:
European Pillar of Social Rights, progress review, Western Balkan, social convergence

The project was funded by the Regional Cooperation Council, included six country reviews carried out by local experts in 2020, and was coordinated by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (European Centre; see references). Each country report provides an update on issues relevant to the European Pillar of Social Rights. Launched by the European Commission in 2017, the EPSR consists of a set of 20 rights and concrete indicators to be used for monitoring a country's welfare and labour market system (see below). The Western Balkan countries encompass the EU candidate countries (Albania, Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia) and potential candidate countries (Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo).

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Economic and social upward convergence in the Western Balkan Region is important for social cohesion with the EU

Although these countries are not yet EU Member States, their achievements and reform efforts towards social rights as candidate and potential candidate countries should be monitored. This is particularly important given the challenges those countries face, such as an aging population, migration, challenges in the labour market, poverty, etc (cf., Besimi, 2016).

From a policy perspective, it is crucial to monitor the level of progress of the (potential) candidate countries in order to inform policy makers on potential areas of intervention, reform needs and recommendations for further improvements.

From a regional policy perspective, it is essential to update the reviews at the regional level, by both examining the countries individually as well as comparing them against common indicators, and by identifying promising policies, and collaboration possibilities. At the same time, the reviews contribute to the ongoing efforts of the countries towards social cohesion across the borders firstly at the regional, i.e., Western Balkan level and secondly with the EU.

European Pillar of Social Rights

The ultimate goal of the EPSR is to deliver a “positive impact on people’s lives” in line with economic and social progress

The European Parliament, the Council and the Commission jointly proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017, with the ultimate goal “to serve as a guide towards efficient employment and social outcomes” and to deliver a “positive impact on people’s lives” (see EPSR Preamble, 2017). The EPSR promote the upward convergence in both economic and social terms — a central EU aim (Eurofound, 2019). Macroeconomic objectives would need to be aligned with social objectives to provide social resilience against future macroeconomic shocks. To reduce social disparities within and between EU Member States, the European Commission funds initiatives through the European Social Fund and others, and Member States would take action, for example by strengthening institutional structures.

The EPSR can be used to monitor the level of progress and achievements and reform efforts in Europe and the (potential) candidate countries, to identify persistent gaps and challenges to be addressed, and to inform policy makers on potential areas of intervention, reform and upgrade and further improvements. Furthermore, as mentioned above, for the (potential) candidate countries, the EPSR reviews provide an opportunity to facilitate social cohesion across borders at the regional levels, and eventually with the EU.

The European Pillar of Social Rights covers three broad chapters, subdivided in twenty principles. Table 1 provides an overview of all chapters and topics.

Table 1: The 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights

Chapter I: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market	
1.	Education, training and life-long learning
2.	Gender equality
3.	Equal opportunities
4.	Active support to employment
Chapter II: Fair working conditions	
5.	Secure and adaptable employment
6.	Wages
7.	Information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals
8.	Social dialogue and involvement of workers
9.	Work-life balance
10.	Healthy, safe and well-adapted work environment and data protection
Chapter III: Social protection and inclusion	
11.	Childcare and support to children
12.	Social protection
13.	Unemployment benefits
14.	Minimum income
15.	Old age income and pensions
16.	Health care
17.	Inclusion of people with disabilities
18.	Long-term care
19.	Housing and assistance for the homeless
20.	Access to essential services

The Social Scoreboard (European Commission, 2018) contains a subset of indicators from the EPSR (Eurofound, 2019). As not all twenty social rights can be easily quantified, the Social Scoreboard quantitatively tracks, monitors, and assesses trends and performances across EU countries in 12 areas with concrete headline and secondary indicators. The Scoreboard also feeds into the European Semester of economic policy coordination and serves to assess progress towards social change.

The reports of the six Western Balkan countries build on initial 2019 reviews and are organised as follows: (1) Country context regarding the status of social policies and social rights, the existing bodies in charge of monitoring the social situation, the relevant efforts of social monitoring including policy initiatives or changes on the country's agenda affecting the principle, and the



**The Social
Scoreboard tracks,
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progress towards
social change**

availability of and access to the needed data; (2) Country performance of the 20 EPSR principles (main part) in terms of law and realisation in practice; and (3) Conclusion addressing strengths, weaknesses and gaps and proposes policy prioritisation in the short-to-medium term. Drawing on the country reports, the Regional Cooperation Council created a regional overview regarding the EPSR (Shani & Vranic, 2020).

Table 2 provides an overview of each country's context as provided by the six reports.

Table 2: Overview of each country's context regarding the EPSR

Albania	Some improvements have been recorded in the last few years, but poverty and income inequality remain high. Every second person in Albania is at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The social protection system is underfunded and does not target all those in need. Labour market access has improved, but the employment rate is still low at 67% with high structural unemployment. Legislative changes in labour law have taken place to ensure fair working conditions, but their implementation lags behind.
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Despite the Reform Agenda and accompanying reform programmes, labour market and welfare outcomes are generally weak and relevant policies are underdeveloped. Gender gaps in the labour market and skills mismatches are large. Due to low wage levels, the in-work poverty (24%) is high by European standards. The social protection system is outdated and leaves many excluded such as persons with disabilities, homeless, Roma and long-term unemployed.
Kosovo	Despite existing legal provisions and measures, equal opportunities and access to the labour market is not attained for many groups including women, persons with special needs, young persons, and Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. Underemployment and temporary employment, and poor working conditions persist. The role of international organisations in the development and monitoring of policies and in the provision of services remains significant. Due to recent political development, legislative reforms in social assistance schemes, social protection, health insurance, child benefits and social housing have been delayed.

Montenegro	Some progress has been achieved in terms of better opportunities and access to education and labour market, with high economic growth and decreasing unemployment rate. Still, despite the new Labour Law, the performance against several EPSR indicators is relatively weak: high youth unemployment, low participation of women, excluded marginalised groups (e.g., Roma & Egyptian) from the labour market, and high long-term unemployment. Poverty and social exclusion levels are falling, but remain high, especially for children, persons with disabilities and Roma & Egyptian.
North Macedonia	Despite progress across many EPSR principles due to reforms in social protection and labour laws, North Macedonia is still lagging behind the EU Member States: persistent poverty (22%), high unemployment and informal employment, inadequate social protection, gender gap in employment, and low quality of social services. Persons from disadvantaged backgrounds including Roma and persons with disabilities do not have equal access and opportunities in society and the labour market.
Serbia	The fields of social protection and social inclusion have not improved as much as compared to Serbia's economy and perform well below EU average. One third of children are at risk of poverty. Children with Roma background and with disabilities are disadvantaged in the education system. Despite the newly adopted Law on Agency Employment, precarious work remains a serious problem. There is a growing shortage of skilled labour, and workers' rights have been reduced due the Labour Law in 2014.

Methodological considerations

Coordination and quality assurance. The European Centre Team coordinated the 2020 updated reviews and worked together with one country expert for each country. The European Centre Team provided guidance and common structural templates and carried out the quality assurance to ensure content quality, consistency, clarity, and plausible evidence basis of the reports.

The **Social Scoreboard** for the six countries were prepared and analysed for 2015 to 2019/2020 depending on data availability. The national experts retrieved data for the EPSR headline and breakdown level in an easily accessible and comprehensive spreadsheet format. The European Centre team then synthesised the tables into one joint table, parts of which are displayed in this policy brief below.

Data sets used. The reviews combine European-level data sets (Eurostat in particular such as on core labour market and social indicators), international data sets (World Bank, International Labour Organisation, OECD, WHO, etc.) and national data sources. If no data were available from Eurostat and other relevant international or European data sources, the country experts consulted national databases. Furthermore, regional and European platforms were utilized such as the Employment and Social Affairs Platform, the South East Europe (SEE) Development Scoreboard, SEE Jobs Gateway, the Eurofound of the Quality-of-Life Survey, and the Eurofound Working Life Country Profiles. Please note that EU-28 data are being used as comparison for 2020.

Data challenges. When data were compared from different national sources, completeness, quality, reliability, standardisation and comparability was challenging. Some countries (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo in particular) had only limited Eurostat data available.

COVID-19 challenges. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the statistical bureaus and other governmental offices were intermittently closed. Therefore, some country experts could not access the needed data in a timely fashion. Therefore, the review period was extended to accommodate for the delay.

Country comparison

All six Western Balkan countries show some upward social convergence, but still lag much behind the EU Member States

The following tables illustrate selected indicator data for several EPSR principles, which were chosen based on the relative data completeness and covering a wide range of social rights topics. In general, there has been some upward social convergence in all six Western Balkan countries. However, all six countries still lag much behind the EU Member States in terms of social indicators.

The country abbreviations in the tables are as follows: EU-28 (EU Member States including United Kingdom); AL (Albania); BA (Bosnia & Herzegovina); MK (The Republic of North Macedonia); RS (Republic of Serbia); and XK (Kosovo).

Indicator: Gender equality in the labour market—Gender employment gap

A central goal in the EU's progress to gender equality is closing the gender employment gap. The gender employment gap is an indicator that captures gender equality in the labour market. It is defined as the difference between the employment rates of men and women aged 20-64. The employment rate is calculated by dividing the number of persons aged 20 to 64 in employment by the total population of the same age group. This indicator is taken from the

EU Labour Force Survey. In the EU Member States, the gap remained the same from 2015 to 2018 at 11.6%.

Inactivity of women is mainly related to lower levels of education and to family and caring responsibilities as well as traditional division of roles within households

As visible in Table 3 and Table 4, the EU-28 had an unvarying gender employment gap of 11.6% from 2015 to 2018, while the overall employment rate increased by 3.8% during this time. While the gender employment gap of Albania (9.4%) is comparable to the EU-28, all other Western Balkan countries have a much higher gap. The lowest performers are North Macedonia, which has a gender employment gap of 21.4% in 2018. For Kosovo, the number is even higher with 32.3%. Although no gender differences can be observed in the unemployment incidence, females in North Macedonia are much less likely than males to be employed and active in the labour market. The gap is especially large at populations with low education levels (primary education and less). Barriers to employment seem to exist for women with lower levels of education. Inactivity of women is mainly related to family and caring responsibilities as well as traditional division of roles within households. Mothers with children (up to age six) are much less likely to be employed relative to women without children (see also the early childhood care numbers below). Similarly, in Kosovo, the main reasons for low female employment are unequal distribution of family responsibilities, lack of available and affordable childcare responsibilities, low education levels among women, but also discrimination in recruitment. A draft Labour Law of 2019 only envisages mothers' leave and does not address discrimination of women in the labour force.

Table 3: Gender employment gap

Gender equality in the labour market					
Countries	Gender employment gap of men and women aged 20 to 64				
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
EU28	11.6	11.6	11.6	11.6	11.4
AL*	12.6	10.8	11.2	9.4	n/a
BA*	17.7	20.1	18.3	19.1	n/a
MK	19.4	21.2	21.9	21.4	21.3
ME	10.3	11.7	13.8	13.8	13.3
RS	15.3	14.4	14	14.7	13.9
XK*	n/a	35.3	39.4	32.3	n/a

Source: Labour Force survey, *national data

Indicator: Youth—Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training

The percentage of Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) is a key indicator for equal opportunities and access to the labour market. It measures the share of population aged 18 to 24 with lower secondary education (at the most), who were not involved in any education or training for four weeks preceding a survey. Education and training and successful transition from school to work are at the core of the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010) and are key drivers for growth and jobs. Reducing the rate of NEETs to 10% is one of Europe 2020 targets, which was almost accomplished by 2018. Leaving school early has a large impact on not just individuals' lives, but also on the society as a whole. Difficulties in the labour market and a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion could be a result of a high percentage of NEETs.

Table 4: Youth Not in Employment, Education and Training in the 6 Western Balkan States

NEET				
Countries	NEETs as % of total population aged 15-24			
	2015	2016	2017	2018
EU28	12.0	11.6	10.9	10.5
AL	29.6	27.0	25.9	26.5
BA	28.1	27.0	24.5	22.1
MK	24.7	24.3	24.9	24.1
ME	19.1	18.4	16.7	16.2
RS	20.1	17.7	17.2	16.5
XK	31.4	30.1	27.4	30.1

Data Source: Labour Force Survey

Data Provider: <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/>, Eurostat

World Bank/Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (2020) offers slightly different data.

Despite improvement, the NEET rate was still twice as high as the EU average

Though the NEET rate has fallen in all Western Balkan countries from 2015 to 2018, but with four countries still above 20%, it was still about twice as high compared to the EU average of 10.5% in 2018. Variations existed within the Western Balkan Region: As Table 4 indicates, Bosnia & Herzegovina showed the largest drop from 28.1% to 22.1%, which could be a result of positive labour market trends. In Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, the reduction was about 3% from 2015 to 2018. In North Macedonia and Kosovo, the reduction was around or even less than 1%. In 2018, the Kosovar Government approved an action plan to tackle youth unemployment, but there is no monitoring of implementing this plan. There is still a lack of employment opportunities, insufficient and inefficient activation measures and active support to employment through employability-enhancing as well as accessible and affordable, non-formal training options that

would improve the young persons' skills and help integrating them into the labour market.

Indicator: Labour Force Structure — Employment rate

The employment rate is taken from the Labour Force Survey. The employment rate of the total population is calculated by dividing the number of persons aged 20 to 24 in employment by the total population of the same age group. The employment rate of men is calculated by dividing the number of men aged 20 to 64 in employment by the total male population of the same age group. The employment rate of women is calculated by dividing the number of women aged 20 to 64 in employment by the total female population of the same age group.

In the Western Balkan countries, the employment rate was between 55% and 70% in 2019, except for Bosnia & Herzegovina (49.7%) Kosovo (30.1%) due to structural reasons

The EU employment rate was 73.9% in 2019, while the policy target rate is at least 75%. The Southern European countries tend to have a rate lower than 75%. In the Western Balkan countries, the employment rate was between 55% and 70% in 2019, except for Bosnia & Herzegovina (49.7%) and Kosovo (30.1%) due to structural reasons. While Bosnia & Herzegovina saw an increase of about 6% from 2015 to 2019, Kosovo stagnated around 30%. In Kosovo, the low employment rate is also due to the extremely low female employment rate of 13.9% (see Table 5). Also, the employment rate of Roma and Ashkali people are well below the national average, where informal work arrangements prevail. As a result of the low employment rate, the tax base in Kosovo is low.

Table 5: Labour force structure, indicator employment rate (% population aged 20-64)

Labour force structure					
Countries	Employment rate (% population aged 20-64)				
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
EU28	70.1	71.1	72.2	73.2	73.9
AL*	59.3	62.1	63.9	65.6	n/a
BA*	43.2	44.2	46.6	47.7	49.7
MK	51.9	53.3	54.8	56.1	59.2
ME	56.7	57.1	58.2	59.8	60.8
RS	56.0	59.1	61.4	63.1	65.2
XK*	29.1	32.3	34.4	28.8	30.1

Source: Labour Force Survey, *national data

The employment rate disaggregated by men and women are shown in Table 6. For the EU-28 countries, the female employment rate is 68.2% in 2019, while in the Western Balkan countries, female employment rate is persistently below 60%, which Kosovo being the lowest at 13.9% as mentioned above.

Table 6: Employment rate male and female

Countries	Employment rate (% population aged 20-64) – male and female									
	2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f
EU28	75.9	64.3	76.9	65.3	78.0	66.4	79.0	67.4	79.6	68.2
AL*	68.1	50.7	69.4	55.0	72.1	55.6	73.9	57.4	n/a	n/a
BA*	53.9	32.4	56.4	32	58.1	35.1	59.5	35.8	n/a	n/a
MK	61.5	42.1	63.7	42.5	65.6	43.7	66.6	45.2	69.7	48.4
ME	61.9	51.6	63.0	51.3	65.2	51.4	66.7	52.9	67.5	54.2
RS	63.7	48.4	66.3	51.9	68.5	54.5	70.5	55.8	72.1	58.2
XK*	n/a	n/a	49.9	14.6	54.0	14.6	45.3	12.3	46.2	13.9

Source: Labour Force survey, *national data

Indicator: Early childhood care — Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare

Formal childcare still remains a challenge in the region, especially for vulnerable groups. For many families, a main limiting factor is the unavailability of care services in their vicinity, especially in rural areas

The European Commission adopted a Council Recommendation in 2019 to improve the quality of and access to early childhood care systems to provide a fair start to children, especially to those from vulnerable backgrounds (Eurofound 2019). Among EU Member States, the share of children under three in formal care increased from 28.4% in 2014 to 35.1% in 2018. Not all Western Balkan countries report the share of children under the age of three receiving formal care — a fact that can be regarded as a policy problem by itself, because policy planning and programming may not be possible based on limited or even missing data. Although access to early childhood care (children less than 3 years) and preschool education (children between 3 and 6 years) has improved in Bosnia & Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Kosovo, formal childcare still remains a challenge in the region, especially for vulnerable populations. The low coverage is especially true for Kosovo. For many families, a main limiting factor is the unavailability of the care services in their vicinity, especially in rural areas. Where available, main obstacles are costs and limited number of places as not all providers offer free enrolment. The access to early childcare also has an effect on the gender employment gap, because mothers are often not able to pursue paid employment due to child rearing duties. Even enrolment in preschool education is often not mandatory. Public expenditure often remains far below the EU level (see table 7).

Table 7: Early Childhood Care

Early childhood care					
Countries	Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare (in %)				
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
EU28	28.4	30.3	32.9	34.2	35.1
AL	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
BA*	n/a	4.2	4.7	5.2	6.3
MK	5.9	6.1	9.1	10.3	8.8
ME	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
RS	11.1	14.0	18.1	14.5	13.3
XK*, **	n/a	n/a	n/a	2.3	4.9

Source: Labour Force Survey, *National data

**The Ministry of Education in Kosovo does not present data for 0–3 year olds. Instead, it presents data for gross enrolment rate of children 0–5 years (5 and up not included).

More information on each country's performance indicators of the 20 EPSR can be found in the six reports listed in the references.

Challenges ahead and policy pointers

All Western Balkan countries face several challenges with respect to improving the social situation of their people, ranging from implementation challenges to external shocks.

The COVID-19 pandemic might bear additional risks of setback to the progress made in living standards, poverty reduction and social inclusion

Implementation challenges. While existing and several planned legislative changes are expected to bring positive changes in several countries, the real impact on the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights depends on effective implementation, which is often slowed down by limited resources as well as by a lack of planning and monitoring.

Funding challenges. Even when legal frameworks are in place, not sufficient resources may have been allocated to implement those. Unfunded mandates and/or overreliance on external funders limit the progress on access and social protection. A prime example is the case of Kosovo.

Political instabilities and changes. North Macedonia and Kosovo have experienced recent political changes, which may endanger progress that has been prepared by legal and regulatory frameworks. Only strong institutionalisation and anchoring of these principles in funded laws will improve the situation.

COVID-19 challenges. Low resilience to natural hazards and the COVID-19 pandemic might bear additional risks of setback to the progress made in living standards, poverty reduction and social inclusion. The lockdown of economic



activity, institutions, businesses and schools due to the spread of the coronavirus starting in March 2020 is expected to negatively affect the gains in poverty reduction, education and human capital development, especially for already vulnerable populations.

An overall trend of upward economic and social convergence can be observed in the Western Balkan region to some degree, but change has been slow. The following policy suggestions summarise the conclusions made in the six reports:

Reforming the social protection systems towards needs-based systems to reach the most vulnerable should be prioritised

- **Ensuring access** to social protection, education, labour market, health care and housing facilities for poor people and people from vulnerable groups is one of the reform needs across the region. A special focus could be put on persons living in rural areas as the social infrastructure and employment opportunities are lacking.
- **Reforming the social protection systems** should be prioritised towards needs-based systems to reach the most vulnerable, and adapting the systems to the needs of different groups including young children, NEETs, marginalised persons, and older persons. While social protection systems in several countries are undergoing a process of transformation and legislative changes are expected to bring positive changes, the real impact on the twenty EPSR principles depends on the effective implementation of the legal framework. Earmarking adequate funding for the social protection system would be important.
- **Considering demographic and economic changes** including demographic ageing, changing nature of labour market (e.g., more part-time and short-term jobs) should inform and guide future reform efforts, for example by targeting an increase of the employment rates.
- **Better integrating social services and labour market services** is necessary to respond better to persons' needs and to activate persons from disadvantaged backgrounds and who are traditionally more distant from the labour market. Integration of women into the labour market could also become a major focus.
- **Reforming the education systems** would benefit several countries including keeping children and youth longer in the educational system, aligning secondary and tertiary education with labour market needs, and introducing affordable and accessible formal and non-formal training (e.g., for NEETs) to ensure employability.
- **Providing childcare services** could be strengthened and expanded to increase the opportunities of young children and allow parents to participate in the labour market. Ensuring access and coverage of childcare services would be needed especially in rural areas.
- **Promoting social dialogue and workers' rights** in a permanent and active

way should be a cornerstone of sound economic development. At the same time, informal employment should be discouraged for companies.

- **Strengthening institutional capacities and monitoring practices** both at the national and local levels would allow for better evidence-based and results-focussed planning and budgeting and for a more efficient mixing of finance sources.

The following suggestions focus on the future updating of the EPSR reviews and were prepared by the European Centre in its role of coordinating the 2020 updated reviews:

- **Prepare a dissemination plan** so that reports can be widely disseminated. The primary dissemination is for the Annual meeting of Ministers of Employment and Social Affairs in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, webinars and presentations for relevant stakeholders could be considered. The reports should be uploaded at an official website to ensure transparency.
- **Embrace an easy navigable online dissemination format** so that readers and visitors could click on each principle and then on one of the six countries to show the information. Vice versa, visitors could click on a country and then on each principle for in-depth analysis.
- **Data visualisation via infographics.** A one-page summary that visualises the report in an infographic format would ensure to disseminate the reports to a broader stakeholder audience.
- **Regular updates of reviews** would allow the reports to become a to-go-to source for the Western Balkan Region with respect to social rights.
- **A comparative report across the six Western Balkan countries** should be part of the review process in order to enable readers to grasp the most important issues per principle.

Conclusions

Monitoring the progress of the Western Balkan countries regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights revealed some progress in social indicators, but welfare and labour market outcomes remain generally weak in the region. The implementation and financing of already existing and planned labour market and social legislation are still lagging behind the EU countries. Implementation and financing challenges need to be addressed to ensure access including for persons from vulnerable backgrounds. Women's integration into the labour market could be strengthened by providing them with childcare services and tailored labour market services. In order to continuously monitor the progress of Western Balkan countries, further reviews should be updated on a regular basis.

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