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EDUCATION POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CHALLENGES FOR CANDIDATE AND POTENTIAL CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

OBRAZOVNA POLITIKA EVROPSKE UNIJE I IZAZOVI ZA DRŽAVE KANDIDATE I POTENCIJALNE KANDIDATE

JEL CLASSIFICATION: I21, I28

ABSTRACT:

For any society that strives for growth and development, focus on quality education is of particular importance. With the adoption of the Lisbon strategy in 2000, the European Union (EU) started an upward trajectory towards the most competitive economy in the world. Cooperation in education has become an important instrument for mutual under-

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standing and sharing of European values. This cooperation is supported with numerous relevant policy strategies, action plans, available statistical data, evaluation reports, road maps, thematic working groups and programmes, special network structures and idea exchange platforms within the EU. Key relevant strategies, plans and respective indicators are analyzed in this paper. Special attention is given to progress in candidate and potential candidate countries with regards to recommendations and goals of EU. It is concluded that more effort of the educational authorities is needed in all countries and one of the areas that needs to be further developed is evidence based policy making in education.

KEYWORDS:
EDUCATION, TRAINING, EUROPEAN UNION, POLICY

APSTRAKT:

Za svako društvo koje teži rastu i razvoju, fokus na kvalitetno obrazovanje je od posebne važnosti. Usvajanjem Lisabonske strategije 2000. godine, Evropska unija (EU) je započela uzlaznu putanju ka najkonkurentnijoj ekonomiji svijeta. Saradnja u obrazovanju postala je važan instrument za međusobno razumijevanje i dijeljenje evropskih vrijednosti. Ova saradnja je podržana brojnim relevantnim strategijama, politika, akcionim planovima, dostupnim statističkim podacima, evaluacionim izvještajima, mapama puta, tematskim radnim grupama i programima, posebnim mrežnim strukturama i platformama za razmjenu ideja unutar EU. U ovom radu analiziraju se ključne relevantne strategije, planovi i odgovarajući indikatori. Posebna pažnja posvećena je napretku zemalja kandidata i potencijalnih kandidata u pogledu preporuka i ciljeva EU. Zaključuje se da je potrebno više napora obrazovnih vlasti u svim zemljama, a jedna od oblasti koje treba dalje razvijati je kreiranje politika u obrazovanju temeljeno na dokazima.

KLJUČNE REČI:
OBRAZOVANJE, OSPOSOBLJAVANJE, EVROPSKA UNIJA, POLITIKA

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization leads to changes in all aspects of human activities, both individual and social, which inevitably affects the field of education. The essence of the relationship between globalization and education is to be found in a broader context of education policy regulation. The European Union's (EU) education and training policy has gained momentum since the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, a comprehensive EU programme that focuses on growth and jobs. The strategy recognized that knowledge and innovation are the EU's most valuable resources, especially in light of increasing global competition. Complementary to the Lisbon Strategy, the member states of the EU have adopted a strategic framewok for cooperation in the field of education and training (ET2020).

All countries of the Western Balkans (WB) region have one common goal ie. full integrations into EU and creation of knowledge based economies. Investing and modernizing education is in the center of knowledge based economies and it is also a precondition for sustainable growth and development. Countries of the WB region such as Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo[3] are all in different stages of the accession to EU and that also is the case of education reforms and modenization. Drašković[4] among others emphasizes the need for systematic reforms of higher education and science, with the aim of economic and social development in the interests of Southeastern European countries. Education plays an important role in the overall accession process. Krbec[5] discusses the role of state and how the accession countries should act in terms of education and and the challenges the "Europeanization of education" brings.

This cooperation among the EU member states in the fields of education and training is currently supported with the numerous relevant policy strategies, action plans, available statistical data, evaluation reports, road maps, thematic working groups and programmes, special network structures and idea exchange platforms within the EU. However, regardless of the limited competence of the institutions of the EU in the field, education is an important area since the EU is committed to creating a knowledge-based economy.[6] Considering the importance of education and training for both, EU member states and for those aspiring to become, this paper aims to analyze the current strategic framework in the field, including key programmes and initatives and the progress and recommendations in candidate and potential candidate countries in the field of education. This paper is structured as follows: after the introduction section, the paper present relevant strategic framework including strategies and initiatives in the field of education, such as Europe 2020, ET2020 and Lifelong progam. The third section of the paper includes an overview of key education indicators in EU member states with respective targets. The current progress in the field of education and culture (Chapter 26 in the accession process to EU) of candidate and potential candidate countries is analyzed in the section four of the paper. The conclusion and the list of used literature are given at the end of the paper.

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3   This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

4   Drašković, (2016)

5   Krbec, (2004)

6   Drašković et al., (2013)

2. POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN EDUCATION

The education, youth, sports and culture policies are primarily in the exclusive competence of the member states, however the EU promotes and stimulated the cooperation within the framework of common policies such as increasing the quality of education, educational achievements, employability, cultural dialogue, preservation of cultural wealth, common cultural heritage and strengthening and supporting cooperation activities between member states.[7] This cooperation among the states is realized under the European Education Area[8], Europe 2020, ET 2020, EU Youth Strategy[9], European Agenda for Culture[10] and the EU White Paper on Sports[11] within the framework of Open Method of Coordination (OMC).[12] Cooperation to achieve common objectives is undergoing within the framework of, policy priorities and respective set of indicators. EC is also prioritizing evidence-based decision making in education and stimulates all member states in this practice. Pellegrini and Vivant[13] provides an overview of all EU policies and initiatives that encourage the use of evidence in decision making process in education. The ET 2020 programme is a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training that builds on its predecessor, ET 2010. It provides common strategic objectives for member states, including a set of principles for achieving these objectives, as well as common working methods with priority areas for each periodic work cycle.[14] The realization of the goals is monitored by working groups that are part of the OMC from ET2020 and thus contribute to the realization of the goals from Europe 2020. In February 2021, the European Council adopted a list of goals to be achieved in the future.[15] Compared to the last strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training ("Education and training until 2020"), the digital skills indicator represents the biggest innovation.

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7   Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (Articles 165-167): https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016E%2FTXT [Accessed: 27/07/2022]

8   European Education Area is a strategic framework for cooperation between member states and key stakeholders. It has defined goals and indicators for 2025 and 2030. The center of European Education Area is the Bologna Process. More is available at: https://education.ec.europa.eu/ [Accessed: 27/07/2022]

9   Youth policy and objectives are set within the EU Youth Strategy (2010-2018) and later, Youth on the Move initiative was launched, within the framework of Europe 2020. More is available at: https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en [Accessed: 15/10/2022]

10   After the 2007 Agenda for Culture was adopted and culture and creativity were recognized as main drivers of both heritage and innovation the New Agenda for Culture was adopted by the European Commission in May 2018. More is available at. https://culture.ec.europa.eu/document/a-new-european-agenda-for-culture-swd2018-267-final [Accessed: 27/07/2022]

11   The White Paper on Sports was a first comprehensive policy document on sports at the Union level. More is available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0391&from=CS [Accessed: 27/07/2022]

12   The open method of coordination (OMC) aims at convergence of national policies and attainment of shared objectives through enhanced cooperation in these fields. In order to converge the policies of member states, through OMC, common objectives and common indicators are determined, national action plans are being prepared and reporting, monitoring and evaluation of these plans are being held, common learnings and best practices are shared in the fields of education and culture. More is available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Open_method_of_coordination_(OMC) [Accessed: 27/07/2022]

13   Pellegrini and Vivant, (2021)

14   The progress towards the targets and indicators related to the European Education Area is reported in the Education and Training Monitor reports. These reports are contributing further to the evelution of broader progress within the member states through the European Semester process. Also, the European Education Summit is created as a forum for cooperation and exchnage of ideas and best practices in field of education and training among member states and key stakeholders.

15   https://ec.europa.eu/info/topics/education-and-training_en [Accessed: 26/07/2022]

The Erasmus programme has been a flagship programme of the EU since it was established in 1987. Erasmus became part of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme in 2007, covering new areas such as student internships in companies, training of university staff and teaching of business staff. The main goal of the programme is to improve the quality of education and to increase the mobility of students and teaching staff in Europe. However, Erasmus+ or Erasmus Plus programme as of 2014 is combining all EU's schemes and programmes in fields od education, sport, culture, traning and youth. The new Erasmus Programme[16] will be a key funding instrument in achieving the European Education Area by 2025 through learning mobility opportunities to all generations, facilitating digital transformation, strengthening cross-border cooperation and policy innovation, and supporting educational institutions at all levels.

3. DEVELOPMENTS AT THE EUROPEAN UNION LEVEL

After the European benchmarks identified for the period 2010-2020, the Council has adopted a resolution that outlines the strategic priorities for the period 2021-2030.[17]Also, this seven targets for the EU level and EEA (EU-level targets 2021-2030) are presented in the table below.

**TABLE 1. EU-LEVEL TARGETS 2021-2030**

GOAL	EU-LEVEL TARGET
Low achieving 15-year-olds in basic skills	The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%, by 2030.
Low achieving eight-graders in digital skills	The share of low-achieving eight-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15%, by 2030.
Participation in early childhood education	At least 96% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education, by 2030.
Early leavers from education and training	The share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9%, by 2030.
Tertiary level attainment	The share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45%, by 2030.
Exposure of VET graduates to work based learning	The share of recent graduates from VET benefiting from exposure to work-based learning during their vocational education and training should be at least 60%, by 2025.
Participation of adults in learning	At least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months, by 2025.

Source: https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2021/en/chapters/foreword.html#targets [Accessed: 20/07/2022]

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16   One of the prominent goals is accessible education for all, inclusion in all activities. National agencies play a key role in this, helping to make projects as inclusive and diverse as possible. Based on general principles and mechanisms at the European level, national agencies will draw up plans for inclusion and diversity in order to better approach the needs of participants with fewer opportunities and support organizations working with these target groups in their national context. The European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) has an equally important role for the centrally managed components of the programme. In partner countries, EU delegations and, if they exist, national Erasmus+ offices are also key to bringing the programme closer to the target groups covered by the strategy. More is available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a/priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme [Accessed: 26/07/2022]

17   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021G0226%2801%29&qid=1617706323424 [Accessed: 26/07/2022]

The following three figures present the achievements in EU member states in three areas of PISA testing, ie. reading (Figure 1), mathematics (Figure 2) and science (Figure 3).
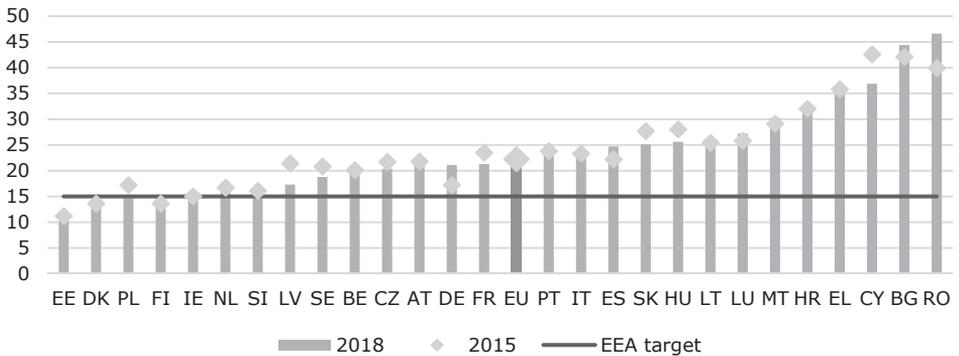
▶▷ **FIGURE 1. UNDERACHIEVEMENT RATE IN READING, 2015 AND 2018 (%)**
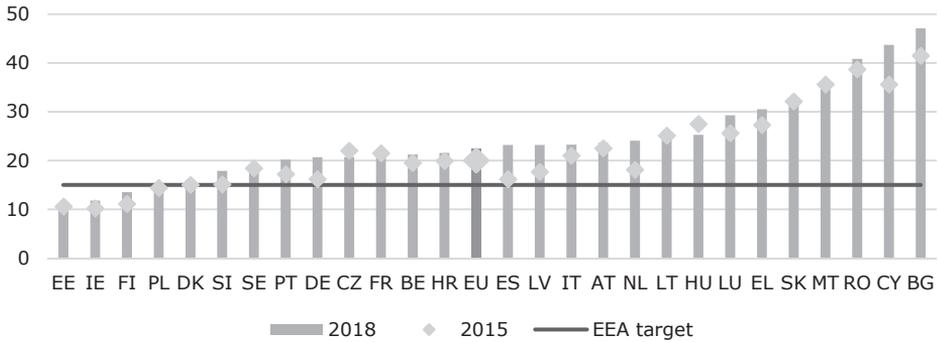
Source: OECD, PISA, 2018.

The patterns of underachievement[18] in all three areas of PISA are very similar across EU member states in both years represented in figures 1, 2 and 3.

▶▷ **FIGURE 2. UNDERACHIEVEMENT RATE IN MATHEMATICS, 2015 AND 2018, (%)**
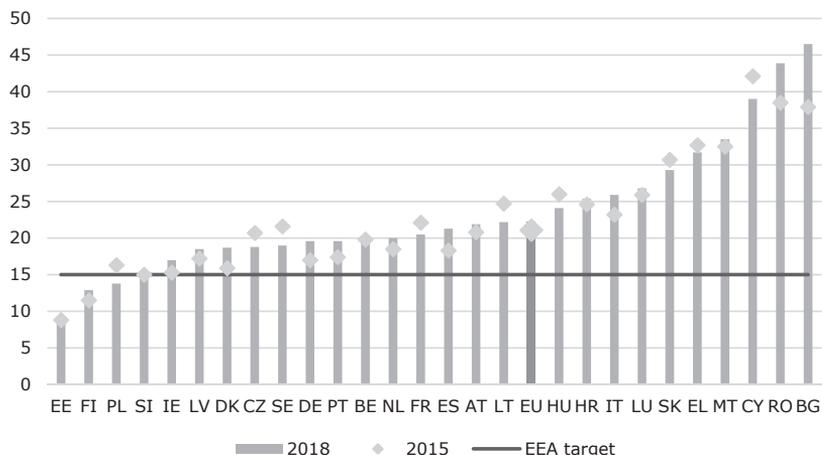

Source: OECD, PISA, 2018.

The pattern shows Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus, Maltra, Greece and Hungary among others, as the low performers in all three PISA areas.

18   As defined in the ET2020 targets presented in Table 1.

FIGURE 3. UNDERACHIEVEMENT RATE IN SCIENCE, 2015 AND 2018 (%)

Source: OECD, PISA, 2018.

The EU-level target is to reduce the share of low-achieving eighth-graders in computer and information literacy to below 15% by 2030. The source of this new target (not covered in previous frameworks) is the indicator used to measure progress towards the digital skills target – the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS).[19]

FIGURE 4. UNDERACHIEVEMENT AMONG EIGHT-GRADERS IN COMPUTER AND INFORMATION LITERACY, 2013 AND 2018
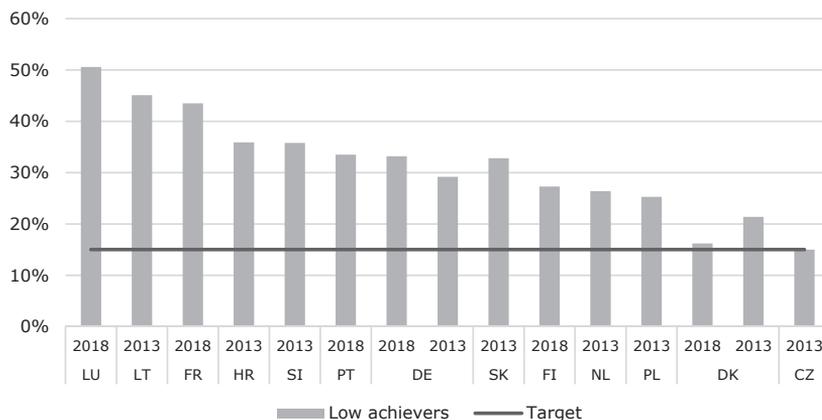

Source: IEA, ICILS 2018 & ICILS 2013.

19 The digital skills indicator is a measure of the share of students in their eighth year of schooling who perform below the level 2 threshold on the ICILS computer and information literacy achievement scale, Low achievement in digital skills means that students are unable to use computers to complete basic and explicit information-gathering and management tasks. Examples of such tasks include locating simple information on a website with multiple pages and entering information in a specified cell in a spreadsheet. The study is conducted every five years by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), and targets students in their eighth year of schooling. ICILS directly measures students' digital skills through computer-based assessments in computer and information literacy and computational thinking. More at: https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/icils [Accessed: 26/07/2022]

Only two EU member states have performed close to the target: Czech Republic in 2013 (15.0%) and Denmark in 2018 (16.2%). As the data show, most countries have had an increase when it comes to ECES (Early childhood education and care)[20] participation of children, with countries such as Cyprus, Ireland, Croatia, Poland and Luxembourg recording the biggest improvements.

▶ FIGURE 5. PARTICIPATION IN ECE OF CHILDREN BETWEEN 3 AND THE AGE OF STARTING COMPULSORY PRIMARY EDUCATION, 2019 (% OF THE POPULATION OF THE CORRESPONDING AGE, TARGET 96%)
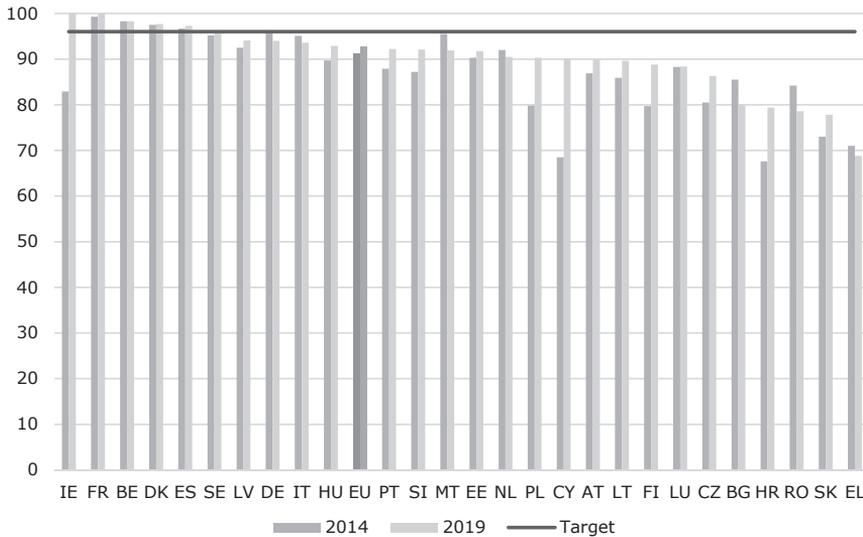
Source: EUROSTAT

Figure 6 below shows the data on the share of early leavers from education and training measured in two years, 2010 and 2020 respectively. The share of early leavers from education and training in 2020 (in EU, on average) was 9.9% , while the target is set to less than 9% by 2030 (as stated in Table 1).

**▶ FIGURE 6. EARLY LEAVERS FROM EDUCATION AND TRAINING, 2010-2020 (%)**
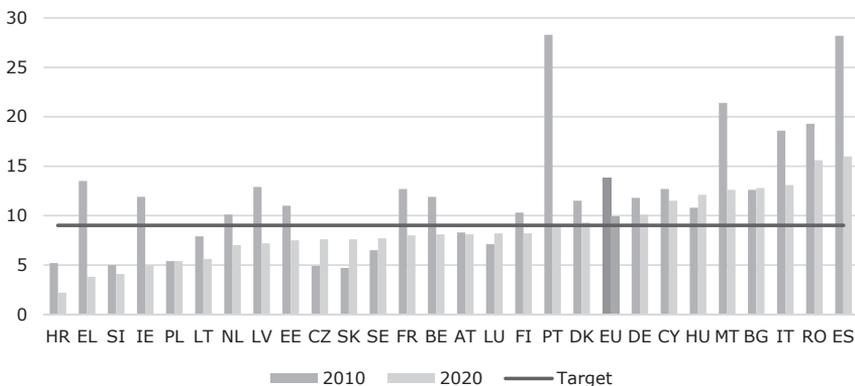
Source: EUROSTAT

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20 Sometimes also refered as ECE (Early Childhood Education).

On average, the share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment was 40.5% in the EU in 2020, however the difference between countries are visible.

▶ FIGURE 7. TERTIARY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 25—34-YEAR-OLDS BY COUNTRY, 2010 AND 2020 (%)
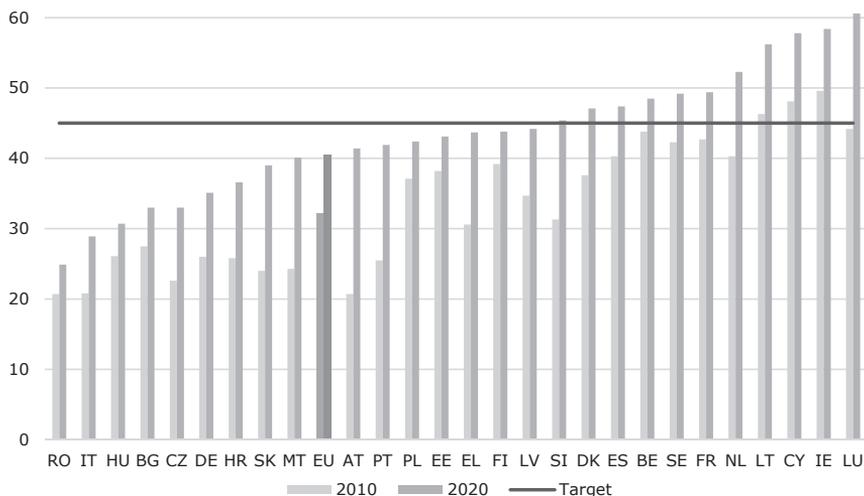
Source: EUROSTAT, EU Labor Force Survey

Exposure of VET graduates to work based learning is a VET target included in the New strategic framework and the data for this target is still waiting to be defined and set.[21] To show the performance in the area of adult learning, EU member states use EU Adult Education Survey (AES), however as of 2022 The EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) will collect adult learning data. At this point, AES show a an increase in the EU adult learning figure from 2007 (32.8%) to 2011 (40.2%) and more modest progress in 2016 (43.7%).

▶ FIGURE 8. ADULTS (AGED 25-64) PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING, 12-MONTH REFERENCE PERIOD, 2007, 2011, 2016
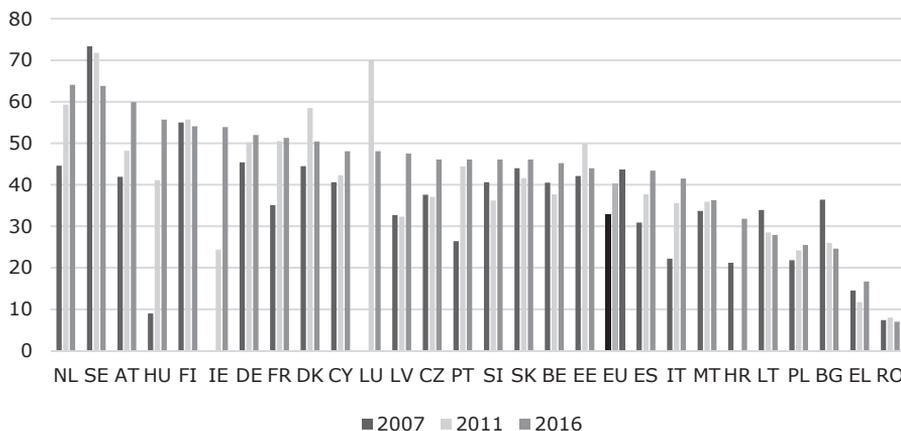
Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey 2007, 2011, 2016.

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21   Data for the EU Labour Force Survey will be used at it will cover the age group 20 to 34 who graduated from a medium-level (ISCED 3-4) programme with a vocational orientation between 1 and 3 years before the year of the survey. More at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2020:275:FIN [Accessed: 15/10/2022]

4. CHAPTER 26: EDUCATION AND CULTURE

The acquis related to the Chapter 26 consist of recommendations, EU Council conclusions, action plans, policy programmes and strategy papers and a Directive on education of the children of migrant workers. Additionally, Member States are expected to have the necessary implementing capacity in place to participate effectively in the EU Programmes (such as Erasmus+) related to this Chapter.[22] The level of preparation (in field Education and Culture) in Albania[23] and North Macedonia during was marked as „moderately prepared" while in Serbia and Montenegro with „good level of preparation" in the last EU country progress reports.[24] Montenegro has a good level of preparation in this area. Some progress was made on the 2020 recommendations on continuing education reform, in particular on Vocational Education and Training.[25] Serbia has remained at a good level of preparation in terms of education and culture.[26] Potential candidate countries, BiH[27] and Kosovo[28] are both at an early stage of preparation in the area of education and culture. When it comes to recommendations by the EU to the above mentioned countries, they are listed in the table below:

▶ **TABLE 2. COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCACTION AND CULTURE BASED ON THE PROGRESS REPORTS FROM 2021**

COUNTRY	COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION
Albania	→ adopt the new strategy on education, covering all levels and ensuring the adequate financial protection as well as targeted public spending for the people affected by the earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic; → finalise the implementing legislation of the VET Law and implement the Optimization Plan by 2022 to develop services and competences in line with the needs of the private sector at local level; → adopt the National Youth Strategy for the period 2021-2026.
North Macedonia	→ implement the strategic framework for education and particularly the targets for preschool education and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) reform; → improve support for teachers' training and professional development and ensure that an effective assessment process is in place; → improve access to quality education for all, in particular children with disabilities and children from Roma communities, and increase pre-school enrolment.

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22 Suwinski (2018) provides an overview of Polish experience after the accession to EU in area of education.

23 Albania – EC Progress report (2021) https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2021_en, pp. 81 [Accessed: 14/10/2022]

24 North Macedonia – EC Progress report (2021) https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021_en, pp. 86 [Accessed: 20/07/2022]

25 Montenegro– EC Progress report (2021) https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/montenegro-report-2021_en, pp. 93 [Accessed: 20/07/2022]

26 Serbia – EC Progress report (2021) https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/serbia-report-2021_en, pp.105 [Accessed: 20/07/2022]

27 Bosnia and Herzegovina – EC Progress report (2021) https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2021_en pp. 79 [Accessed: 14/10/2022]

28 Kosovo – EC Progress report (2021) https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/kosovo-report-2021_en, pp. 86 [Accessed: 20/07/2022]

COUNTRY	COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION
Montenegro	→ intensify reform efforts to improve inclusive education and access to quality education at all education levels; → adopt and start to implement the new strategy on early and preschool education 2021- 2025, to help improve preschool enrolment and inclusivity for all children; → establish an adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanism of practical learning, at both higher and VET level education.
Serbia	→ increase participation in early childhood education and care, in particular of children from disadvantaged backgrounds; → consolidate the NQF system, with additional focus on the quality and scope of non-formal education; → ensure full compliance of the policy and institutional framework for quality assurance in higher education with the recommendations of the ENQA
Bosnia and Herzegovina	→ ensure a fully functional system of (re-)accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes across the country; → ensure continued participation in international assessment studies (International Student Assessment – PISA, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study – TIMSS and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study – PIRLS); → establish an inter-sectorial commission for the national qualification framework.
Kosovo	→ systematically apply quality assurance mechanisms at all education levels, improve access to quality education at pre-school level and for disadvantaged groups, improve quality assurance in higher education by meeting the recommendations of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and revising the relevant legislation (such as the Law on higher education and the Law on Kosovo Accreditation Agency); → finalise the implementation of the new curricular framework for basic education with quality textbooks and by providing sustainable training to teachers; → increase the provision of quality vocational education and training for professions in demand; → Take steps to establish and implement Youth Guarantee by developing a Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan in line with the EU model and guidance.

5. CONCLUSION

By adopting the Europe 2020 strategy, the EU launched a ten-year plan for growth and employment. Five main goals have been agreed for the EU until the end of 2020, which include employment, research and development, climate change / energy, education, social inclusion and poverty reduction. Each member state has accepted its own national goals within the mentioned areas. The Europe 2020 strategy gave new impetus to the construction of a competitive Europe of sustainable development and employment. What can be a problem when it comes to the implementation of such a unique, comprehensive education plan is the development of the institutional level of the member countries and the limited competence in the field of education and training, as well as continuous adaptation to the needs of national education systems. It should also be emphasized that despite possible problems in the implementation of education policy, the EU continuously invests in education and actively works to harmonize the legal framework in each of the member countries.This was seen in the ET2020 benchmarks as well as in the EU-level targets within the New strategic framework.

Cooperation in education has become an important instrument for mutual understanding and sharing of European values. Externally promoting European education and the EU's transnational approach to cooperation help shape relations with other countries and regions, encourage peer learning and attract the best talent to enable Europe to remain economically competitive. International cooperation in education and training with third countries and regions around the world is important essential for solving contemporary global challenges. Sharing knowledge, policy and practices also helps to achieve economic and social the priorities of the EU. One of the strategic goals of all countries of the Western Balkans is the full integration into the EU. EC Progress reports on all Western Balkans assess the progress and provide a comprehensive country-specific recommendations for education authorities in all WB countries in the area of Chapter 26: Education and Culture. In general, common recommendations for these countries include development of statistical capacities in education and very importantly, promoting evidence-based policy making in the field of education.

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