



# Policy Brief

## Health Policy Considerations in the Western Balkans

July 2025



Figure 1: Key pillars of modern health policy in the Western Balkans. © Jevtic, M. (2023)

This Policy Brief provides an overview of key health and public health issues in the Western Balkans (WB), focusing on the challenges and opportunities in the transition towards more effective, equitable and sustainable health policies.

The Western Balkans comprise Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

The rapid pace of demographic, economic and environmental changes in the Western Balkans has created significant public health challenges. These include a rise in Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs), air and water pollution, mental health issues and a growing burden from climate-related health risks.

In response to these challenges, the Western Balkans economies are recognising the need for a more comprehensive public health approach – one that integrates disease prevention, health promotion and systematic improvements of the overall health system.

This Policy Brief draws on extensive research, including individual interviews across all Western Balkans

economies as well as insights retrieved during the 2023 Policy Dialogue Conference in Sarajevo<sup>1</sup> by conducting world-café discussions. It reflects the contribution of regional health experts, aiming to address key challenges of health issues and their connection with sustainability and digitalisation.

The Brief showcases some of the best practices from all six Western Balkans economies, with a particular emphasis on digital and technological innovation in healthcare. It also identifies opportunities for policy improvements and provides targeted recommendations to enhance healthcare access, strengthen public health systems and improve health outcomes for the region's populations.

<sup>1</sup> POLICY ANSWERS Stakeholder Dialogue. Conference website. <https://eu-wb-policy-dialogue-stakeholder.b2match.io/page-4531>. Accessed 4 May 2025

\* 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

## Comparative Analysis of Health Systems in the Western Balkans

Table 1: Selected health indicators for Western Balkans economies<sup>2</sup>

Western Balkans economy	Life expectancy at birth, total (years)			Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)			Current health expenditure (% of GDP)	
	2021	2022	2023	2021	2022	2023	2021	2022
Albania	76.8	78.8	79.6	7.1	7.0	6.9	7.4	6.2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	74.6	76.8	77.9	4.7	4.6	4.5	9.6	8.7
Kosovo	75.0	77.6	78.0	7.5	7.1	6.8	6.4**	~3.6***
Montenegro	73.8	76.2	77.6	1.1	1.0	1.0	10.6	10.9
North Macedonia	73.2	74.4	75.3	2.6	1.9	1.4	8.5	7.6
Serbia	72.8	75.2	76.2	3.3	3.3	3.2	10.0	9.7

\*\*Total health expenses (% of GDP) of Kosovo<sup>3</sup>. \*\*\*Healthcare expenditure (% of GDP) of Kosovo<sup>4</sup>.

## Key Challenges

Despite reform efforts, health systems in the Western Balkans face persistent challenges. Deeply rooted structural issues, limited resources and the legacy of past political and economic systems continue to hamper performance and equity. The region's most pressing challenges are shown in the following graph.

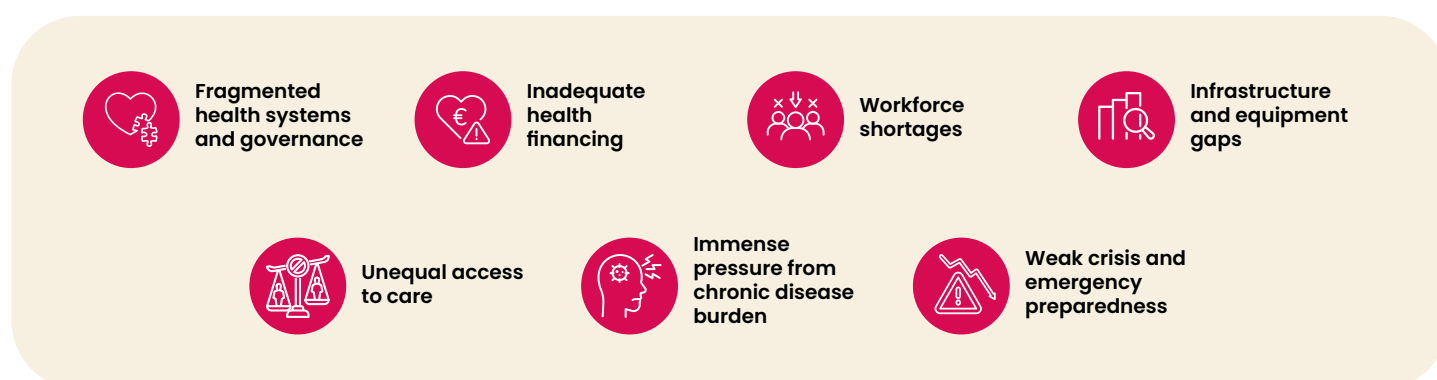


Figure 2: Summary of key regional challenges.

Addressing these challenges calls for sustained political will, increased investment in healthcare infrastructure and stronger regional cooperation.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank. World Development Indicators. <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>. Accessed 4 May 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Kosovar health sector strategy 2025–2030. (2024). <https://msh.rks-gov.net/Documents/DownloadDocument?fileName=Healt49443676.2903.pdf>. Accessed 4 May 2025.

<sup>4</sup> International Monetary Fund. European Dept. (2023). Request for stand-by arrangement and an arrangement under the resilience and sustainability facility—press release. *IMF Staff Country Reports, 2023* (200). 103. <https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400244940.002>

## Best practices in Health Policies across the Western Balkans

Despite structural challenges, the Western Balkans economies have made some progress in healthcare reform and innovation. Advancements are evident in areas such as primary healthcare, digital health and Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). Each economy brings forward some best practices and innovative solutions in health system delivery and policy that can serve as model for the region.

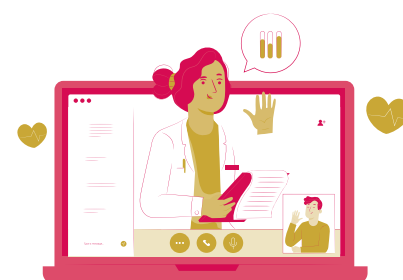
### Albania

Albania has been at the forefront of digital reforms, implementing e-prescriptions and electronic health records nationally. Plans for telemedicine are also underway.

Moreover, it has made significant strides in advancing Universal Health Coverage (UHC) with the introduction of free preventive services for all citizens.

The country offers financial incentives and scholarships to retain healthcare professionals in underserved areas.

Albania's use of PPPs is a prominent case: by contracting private firms to provide dialysis, laboratory diagnostics and imaging services, the country managed to increase the availability of these services relatively quickly.



### Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina has made notable progress in strengthening Primary Health Care (PHC), particularly through the broad adoption of the family medicine model. Today, over 70 % of the population is registered with family medicine teams, improving access to basic services and enabling better management of chronic conditions at the primary level.

In parallel, the implementation of hospital and primary care centre accreditation based on international standards is helping to drive quality improvements across the health system.

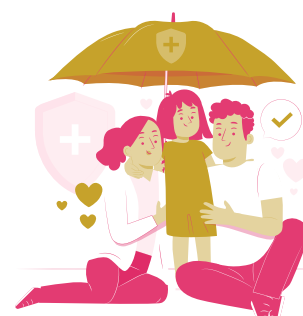


### Kosovo

Kosovo has taken important steps in advancing healthcare reform through the introduction of a mandatory health insurance system aimed at achieving UHC. It has also prioritised improvements in maternal and child healthcare services.

Participation in the Horizon Europe Programme has strengthened Kosovo's medical research capacity and public health initiatives, fostering collaboration and innovation through European Union (EU)-funded projects.

To address workforce shortages, Kosovo offers financial incentives and scholarships to retain healthcare professionals in underserved areas. A notable milestone was the opening of its first Radiotherapy Centre, made possible through a blended finance approach.



## Montenegro

Montenegro has been at the forefront of integrating digital health solutions in the region, establishing the Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) and adopting a national digital health strategy. Telemedicine initiatives are also in development, aiming to improve access for remote communities.

The country has improved hospital infrastructure and implemented a comprehensive health financing model, providing social health insurance coverage to over 95 % of the population.



## North Macedonia

North Macedonia has led the region with its digital health transformation. Its "Moj Termin" e-health system, which streamlines appointment scheduling and patient care coordination, is frequently cited as an innovative model.

Telemedicine and an Electronic Health Record (EHR) system have been implemented to improve healthcare access, particularly in rural areas.

The country has integrated EU best practices by establishing Health Technology Assessment (HTA).

The Recent inclusion of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine into the national immunisation programme is expected to significantly reduce cervical cancer rates.

North Macedonia has also enforced indoor smoking bans in healthcare and educational facilities.



## Serbia

Serbia has made significant strides in digitalising its healthcare system through the development of the Integrated Health Information System (IHIS). Building on its Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) achievements and strong life sciences sector, Serbia is positioning itself as an emerging bio-economy hub in Europe.

Pharmaceutical sector reforms include an electronic procurement system and a positive list of drugs that is updated with cost-effectiveness criteria, improving transparency.

Serbia's participation in Horizon Europe not only enhances its healthcare infrastructure but also facilitates its integration into the broader European research and innovation community.

The country has implemented organised breast and cervical cancer screening programmes and enforced indoor smoking bans in healthcare and educational facilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia led the region with a high vaccination rate, securing vaccine supplies through multiple channels and donating vaccines and medical supplies to neighbours in 2021, demonstrating regional solidarity.



## Health Policy Opportunities and Recommendations in the Western Balkans

Significant opportunities for improvement lie in key areas such as regional cooperation, workforce retention, health financing, preventive care, sustainability and digital transformation, amongst others. By strategically addressing these areas, the Western Balkans can build a more resilient, equitable and sustainable healthcare system. Opportunities identified are summarised and further described in Figure 3.

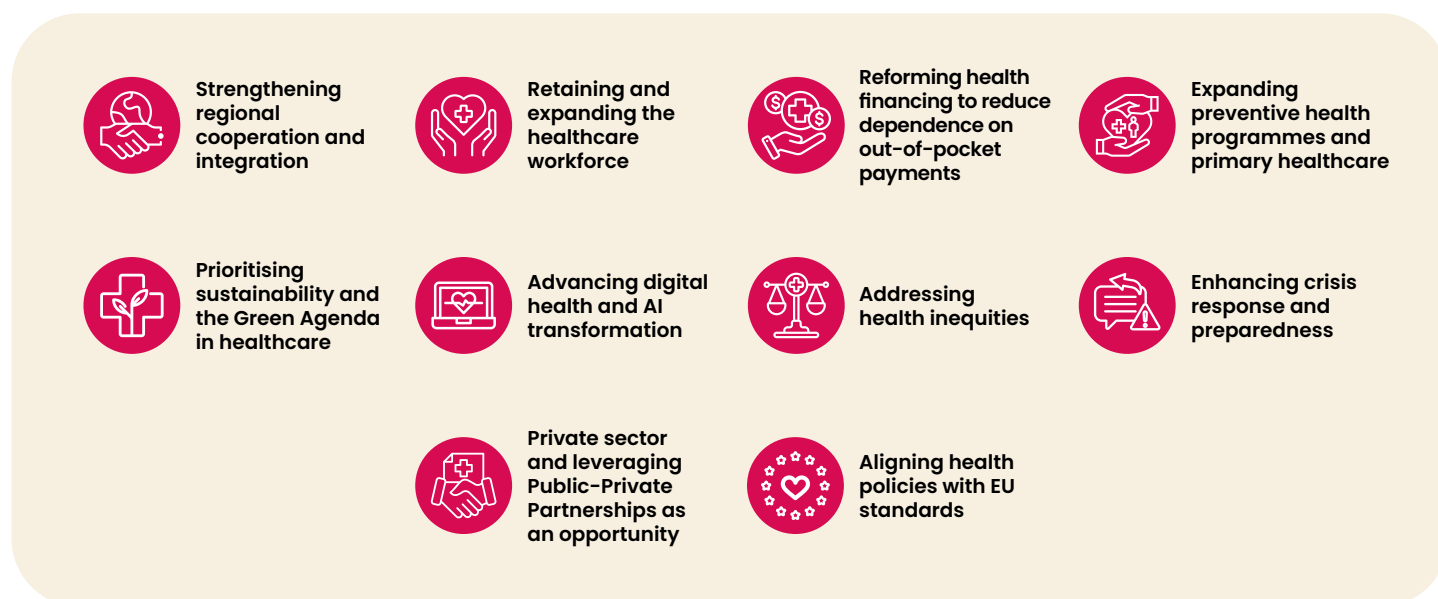


Figure 3: Overview of identified opportunities for the region.

### Strengthening regional cooperation and integration



Strengthening regional cooperation through platforms such as the South-Eastern Europe Health Network (SEEHN) can improve resource sharing, data exchange, cross-border collaboration, policy harmonisation and management of transnational challenges like air pollution and pandemics. This increased cooperation will boost healthcare system resilience and efficiency in tackling shared health threats across the region.

### Retaining and expanding the healthcare workforce



Retaining healthcare professionals in the Western Balkans, especially in rural areas facing critical staff shortages, is a major challenge across the region. Strategies like better pay, improved working conditions and training opportunities can reduce the migration of healthcare professionals. Additionally, regional cooperation in medical education and workforce development can improve service quality, reduce burnout and build more resilient healthcare systems.

### Reforming health financing to reduce dependence on out-of-pocket payments



A high reliance on out-of-pocket healthcare payments limits access for vulnerable groups. Reforming health financing through expanded public funding and improved social insurance systems could reduce these financial barriers. Reducing out-of-pocket payments would enhance access, reduce inequalities and offer better financial protection and health outcomes for all citizens in the region.

**Expanding preventive health programmes and primary healthcare**

Strengthening primary healthcare is key to improving early diagnosis, managing chronic diseases and reducing hospital strain. Investments in family medicine, preventive programmes and public health education can enhance health outcomes and cut costs. Upgrading infrastructure and promoting patient-centred care will further boost service quality and healthcare system resilience.

**Prioritising sustainability and the Green Agenda<sup>5</sup> in healthcare**

Aligning healthcare systems with sustainable practices can reduce environmental impacts and improve public health amid climate change challenges. Policies that promote energy-efficient facilities, renewable energy use and sustainable waste management boost resilience of health systems. Integrating climate resilience into health strategies will reduce pollution, lower costs and improve emergency preparedness – creating healthier, more sustainable communities.

**Advancing digital health and artificial intelligence transformation**

Expanding digital health technologies, such as electronic health records, telemedicine and Artificial Intelligence (AI) diagnostics, can improve healthcare access and efficiency. The use of AI tools can boost earlier disease detection and more accurate treatment, particularly in underserved areas, ultimately improving health outcomes and reducing healthcare burdens.

**Addressing health inequities**

Vulnerable groups – like Roma, refugees and migrants – face major barriers to healthcare access in the Western Balkans. Tailored outreach programmes can improve health literacy, overcome cultural obstacles and provide essential preventive care. Expanding such services will reduce disparities, enhance social inclusion and improve health outcomes for marginalised populations.

**Enhancing crisis response and preparedness**

Strengthening health system resilience is vital for managing future emergencies such as pandemics and natural disasters. This requires investing in infrastructures, maintaining stockpiles, developing robust emergency plans and establishing national operation centres. Improved crisis preparedness will help ensure continuous healthcare services and reduce the impact of health emergencies on both populations and healthcare systems.

**Private sector and leveraging Public-Private Partnerships as an opportunity**

The growing reliance on private healthcare can exacerbate inequalities, often favouring wealthier groups. Strengthening regulations and reforming insurance systems can ensure that the private sector complements public services without undermining them. Expanding Public-Private Partnerships offers a promising solution to improve infrastructure and care quality, especially in underserved areas, without fully privatising essential healthcare services.

**Aligning health policies with EU standards**

Aligning Western Balkans health policies with EU standards is crucial for improving care quality and regulatory compliance. The EU provides political and financial support to promote good governance and to foster regional integration. Full integration into EU health policies will improve healthcare quality, ensure better patient safety and reduce the risk of medical errors.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission. (2020). Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. EUR-Lex 52020SC0223. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020SC0223>. Accessed 4 May 2025.



## Concluding remarks

The Western Balkans offer significant potential for cooperation in healthcare, particularly through trans-boundary healthcare agreements, shared health data systems and joint health workforce training programmes. Collaborative programmes in digital health, e-health innovations and public health surveillance can drive efficiency, equity and improve overall health outcomes.

Aligning the World Health Organization<sup>6</sup> (WHO) Roadmap with Framework Programme 10 (FP10) offers a strategic opportunity to advance Research and Innovation (R&I) in the Western Balkans. By focusing on shared priorities, health system resilience, digital transformation and Green Health, FP10 can turn the Roadmap's vision into action. Tailored investments and inclusive R&I calls will help close health gaps and build more resilient, future-ready systems.

To build a sustainable and inclusive health policy framework, the following priorities should be emphasised:

- **More health policy implementation, less politics** – with actions at both strategic and individual levels (e.g. promoting healthy lifestyles).
- **Apply the “Health in All Policies” principle** – by integrating health considerations across all sectors and policy areas.
- **Prioritise the Green Agenda and digitalisation in health**

By advancing integration, stakeholder engagement and cross-sectoral collaboration, the region can accelerate progress toward healthier populations and more resilient health systems.

### For the future: Key Actions

- Foster a healthier organisational culture
- Promote healthier leadership
- Create a healthier environment for workforce in healthcare
- Enrich the educational process and curricula by integrating digital and AI issues
- Ensure sustainable healthcare by respecting and implementing energy efficiency and environmental issues
- Leverage FP10 to operationalise the WHO Western Balkans Roadmap via targeted R&I investments, advancing resilience, digital innovation and sustainability, thereby enhancing the importance of health and wellbeing issues in the region

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). (2021). Roadmap for Health and Well-being in the Western Balkans (2021–2025). <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/WHO-EURO-2021-3435-43194-60508>. Accessed 4 May 2025.

This Policy Brief is an executive summary of the Policy Report available here:



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## Strengthening Research and Innovation in the Western Balkans: The POLICY ANSWERS project

POLICY ANSWERS is a strategic initiative funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project “R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS”. The project focuses on enhancing research and innovation (R&I) policymaking and governance systems in the Western Balkans, while also addressing aspects of education, culture, youth, and sports. By providing essential support to the region’s development, POLICY ANSWERS plays a crucial role in strengthening the Western Balkans’ potential for successful participation in regional and multilateral research and innovation activities.

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