EASE TALKS
The voice of European Sport Employers

18th edition

From Sport Participation to Sport Employment in the Western Balkans

EASE
European Association of Sport Employers

With the participation of our members

This EASE Talk is based on the intervention of Mr. Marko Begovic (University of Montenegro), bringing perspectives to European sport employers on the development of sport employment in the Western Balkans. EASE also thanks all of its members for their feedback and insights during the presentation of this EASE Talk.

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A Region where Sport has yet to fulfil its Employment potential

Western Balkans : Designed as the "WB6", this region brings together :

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo
- Montenegro
- North Macedonia
- Serbia





All six have a European integration perspective, although their accession processes are at different stages. Five are officially recognised as EU candidate countries, while Kosovo remains a potential candidate. Montenegro and Albania are the most advanced in accession negotiations, while Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are progressing at different paces.

Under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Copenhagen criteria (1993), accession candidates must progressively align their legislation, institutions and practices with EU standards (EU acquis). This includes employment and social policies, workers' rights, equal opportunities and institutional governance.

Sport is deeply rooted in Western Balkans societies, yet its potential a source of sustainable and quality employment remains largely untapped.

- Very strong role in social cohesion and community life, as evidenced by excellent results in team sports

BUT

1. Sports organizations rely heavily on fragile nonprofit structures and informal volunteer work.
2. Sports are still not sufficiently recognized as an economic sector capable of creating jobs and career opportunities.



A similar observation was made in neighboring EU member states. Notably in Croatia by the HUP, the Croatian Employers' Confederation: "It is inconceivable that all sports organizations, in all their diversity, would come together to speak on behalf of a single sector" (Jasminka Martinovic, Director of Sectors)

Sport should not only be recognised as a driver of social cohesion, but also as a potential source of decent employment and economic opportunities.

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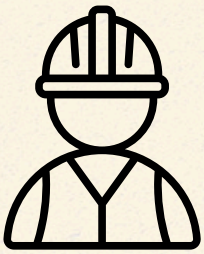
Sport organisations : from informal structures with weak professionalization to responsible employers

The lack of professionalization amongst the sport strctures is the first major issue to develop sport employment in the Western Balkans

A challenging global labour market environment

The Western Balkans continue to face significant labour market challenges. In 2025, youth unemployment reached 25% across the region, compared to 14.7% in the EU. Moreover, 30% of young people in Kosovo were neither in employment, education nor training (NEETs) in 2024. By developing professional pathways and strengthening sport organisations as employers, the sport sector could contribute to youth employability and local economic development

Precarious Employment Conditions and Insufficient Worker Protection



Sport employment in the Western Balkans is often characterised by informal working arrangements, absent or poorly enforced contracts, irregular payments and insufficient social protection. These challenges extend beyond athletes to coaches, medical staff and other sport professionals, highlighting the urgent need for stronger employment frameworks and greater recognition of sport-related occupations.

Example : a physiotherapist employed by a leading handball club in Podgorica without a formal contract or adequate employment protection.



Limited Organisational and HR Capacities



Many sport organisations in the Western Balkans lack the organisational structures and professional skills required to act as responsible employers. Limited recruitment procedures, insufficient human resources expertise, inadequate management training and poorly defined job profiles hinder their ability to recruit, manage and retain qualified staff. Professionalising sport organisations therefore means strengthening their capacity to create, manage and sustain quality jobs.

A Challenge Shared Beyond the Western Balkans

Similar challenges can also be observed in EU countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Hungary, where precarious employment conditions, limited professionalisation and insufficient recognition of sport as an economic sector remain concerns.



Developing sport employment requires more than creating jobs: it requires strengthening the capacity of sport organisations to become responsible, sustainable and professional employers.

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Funding, Governance and the Sustainability of Sport Employment

An overdependance on Public Funding

In the Western Balkans, many sport organisations, including professional clubs, remain heavily dependent on public funding, particularly from municipalities and local authorities. This dependence can undermine clubs' autonomy and expose them to political decisions and financial uncertainty. Without stable and diversified resources, sport organisations struggle to plan for the long term, invest in professional development and guarantee sustainable employment conditions.

The challenge: Moving from politically dependent funding models towards more autonomous, diversified and financially sustainable sport organisations.



Transparency and Good Governance challenges

Financial dependance and weak organisational structures can also create governance challenges. In the absence of clear rules and effective oversight, sport organisations may face increased risks of :

1. Lack of transparency in funding allocation and financial management
2. Conflicts of interest and political interference in decision-making
3. Informal recrutiment practices and insufficient accountability
4. Mismanagement resulting for inadequate internal controls

Three priorities to build more sustainable and trustworthy organisations

1. Diversify Funding Resources
2. Strengthen Management Capacities
3. Promote Transparency and Accountability



Sustainable sport employment cannot emerge without sustainable, autonomous and accountable sport organisations

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Creating Employment Pathways : Opportunities for Young People and Underrepresentend Groups

Bridging the gap between Education and Sport Employment

Sport offers a wide range of professional opportunities, from coaching and club management to event organisation, communication, marketing and health-related services. Yet, in the Western Balkans, access to these careers remains limited by weak connections between education and employment, insufficient practical training opportunities and a lack of clearly defined career pathways.



Recruitment often relies on informal networks, while internships, apprenticeships and structured professional development remain underdeveloped. Bridging this gap requires stronger cooperation between sport organisations, educational institutions and employers, ensuring that young people acquire the skills and experience needed to enter the sport labour market

Grassroots sport organisations should not only be considered as providers of sport activites, but also as potential employers and learning environments

Turning Grassroots Sport into an Employment Opportunity

Although many local clubs rely heavily on volunteetring, they could play a greater role in supporting young people's professional developement, through :

- Interships and firest professional experiences
- Work-based learning
- Dual career opportunities for the athletes



In Albania, 21% of young people were neither in employment, education nor training (NEETs) in 2024 *(World Bank / ILOSTAT 2024)*

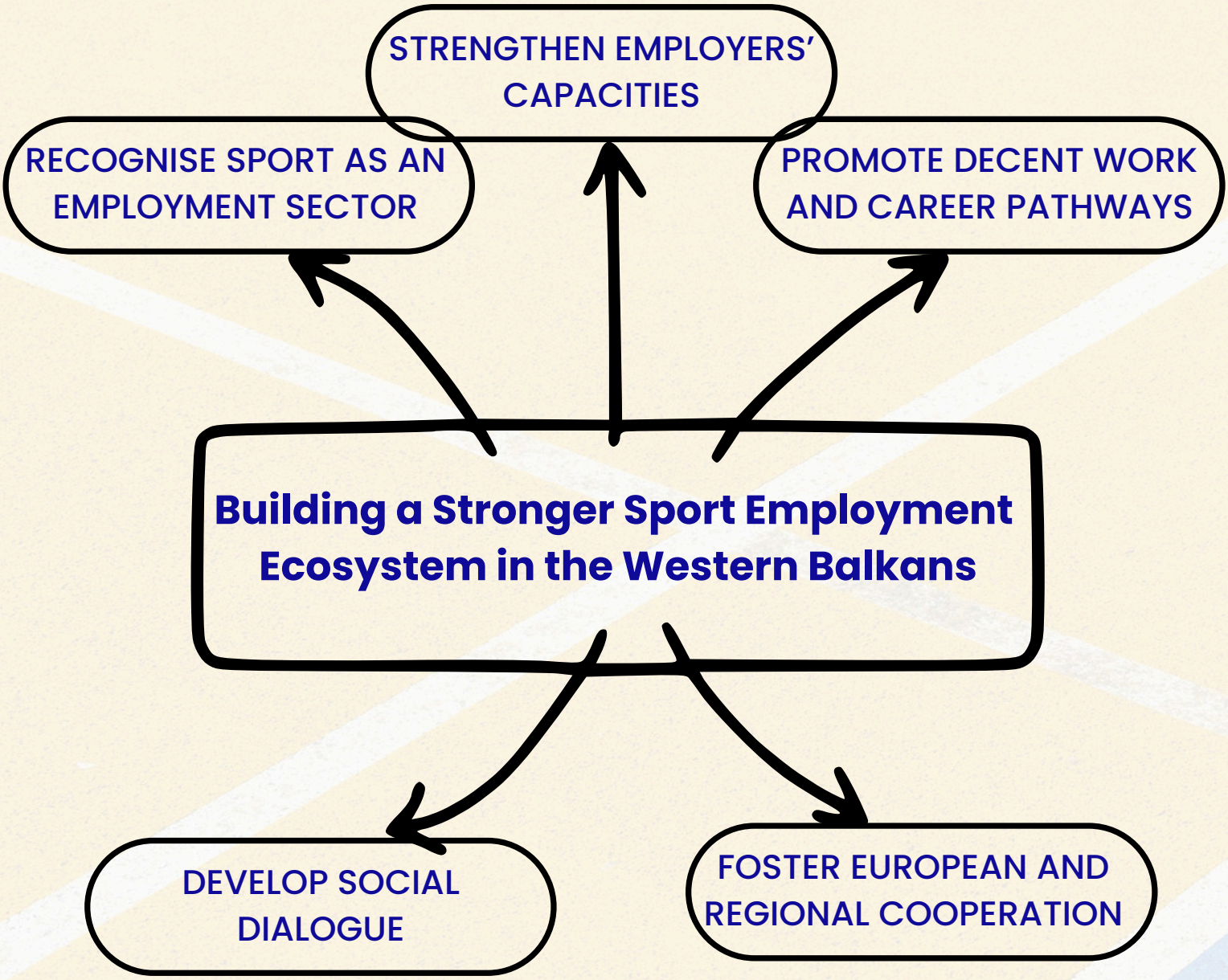


In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30,7% of young people aged 15-24 in the labour force were unemployed in 2025 *(World Bank / ILOSTAT 2025)*

Unlocking the employment potential of grassroots sport means creating accessible pathways from participation and volunteering to skills development, professional experience and decent work.

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The Voice of European Sport Employers : Building a Strong Sport Employment Ecosystem



EASE believes that closer cooperation between European and Western Balkan stakeholders can play a decisive role in this transformation. By sharing expertise, strengthening local capacities and developing solutions adapted to regional realities, sport employers can contribute to building a more professional, inclusive and sustainable sport sector.

Find more information on our website.