



International
Association of Water
Service Companies
in the Danube Region

Securing the Future of Water in the Western Balkans

A Young Water Professionals Perspective

Why this brochure?

This brochure highlights the voices of Young Water Professionals (YWP) across the region, who have joined forces to propose practical, bold, and inclusive strategies for building a resilient water sector, one that values expertise, equity, and the energy of the next generation.

Our findings

The water sector in the Western Balkans is under pressure. Aging infrastructure, policy fragmentation, and environmental degradation are only part of the story. At the heart of the issue lies a growing workforce crisis: skilled professionals are retiring, while new talent is scarce. Young professionals with the potential to innovate and lead are either discouraged from joining or are leaving the region entirely in search of better prospects.

The workforce crisis in numbers

Aging Experts: Up to 45% of staff in utilities are over 50 years old and are going to retire in the next 10-15 years.

Youth Exodus: Young professionals are migrating abroad. Several countries in the region have lost a significant part of their population to emigration.

Underutilized Talent: In many utilities, young professionals are severely underrepresented. For example, in one North Macedonian utility, only 2 out of 84 employees are under 35, which is just 2.4%.

Gender Imbalance: In Kosovo utilities, only 14% of workers are women, reflecting a widespread sectorial trend across the region.

The brain drain is perhaps the region's most pressing demographic issue. According to national-level data cited in this paper, Albania has lost 37% of its population due to emigration, Bosnia and Herzegovina 24%, North Macedonia 10%, and Serbia 9%. Young people, especially skilled graduates, are increasingly opting for careers abroad. In Kosovo, more than half of the youth surveyed by UNDP in 2020 reported they were either planning or seriously considering emigration. These may be exactly the individuals the water sector desperately needs.

Young Water Professionals: The untapped solution

Young Water Professionals bring:

- Tech-savvy solutions
- Multidisciplinary and transboundary collaboration
- Innovative ideas for good governance and reform
- A bridge between education and employment

Young Water Professionals are individuals under 35 who work across utilities, government bodies, NGOs, academia, and private sector water companies. They are not just filling gaps, they are the future of the water sector. Their strength lies in the ability to blend digital skills, multidisciplinary approaches, and regional collaboration. In Kosovo, YWPs designed the SISHU web application, an innovative tool helping utilities and regulatory authorities to monitor performance. Initially overlooked, it is now being expanded by request from stakeholders, demonstrating both need and value.

YWPs collaborate through student exchanges, cross-border research, and joint forums, initiating international exposure and regional synergies. The Kosovo and North Macedonia chapters, for instance, held a bilateral workshop in 2023 and are active in wider networks like the RCDN-supported Peer-to-Peer Exchange. These experiences build skills, but also solidarity across borders.

What's holding them back?

The barriers are both structural and cultural:

- Low salaries and unstable career prospects
- Nepotism and political appointments
- Weak links between education and the water sector
- Lack of role models and inclusive work environments

Low salaries remain one of the biggest obstacles for YWPs to work in the sector. In many Western Balkan countries, wages in the water sector are well below those in other technical fields. For instance, a young water engineer in Albania may earn around €500/month, far less than what peers in tech or finance make. This makes it difficult to attract or retain talent (in combination with a rather tough educational path).

Nepotism is another challenge. In public utilities, political affiliation often outweighs qualifications. Management positions often change with election cycles, causing instability and leaving skilled professionals sidelined. In such an environment, it is easy to see why many young people feel discouraged.

Gender inequality also persists. Women are still underrepresented in both technical and leadership roles. The data shows that in Kosovo, just 14% of utility staff are women. In North Macedonia, women make up only 17% of the workforce in utilities. Leadership roles are even fewer. This must change, not just for reasons of fairness, but because diverse teams are more effective at problem-solving.

Call to action

The Balkan Water sector needs to invest in young professionals. It needs to attract and then retain their talent.

We call upon **water associations, sector organizations, utilities, regulators, universities, and ministries** to:

1. Empower YWPs

- Offer board observer roles
- Include youth in planning and decision-making

2. Fix Education-to-Employment Gaps

- Expand internships, scholarships, and water-specific training and programs
- Strengthen ties between universities and utilities

3. End Nepotism, Embrace Merit

- Transparent hiring and fair recruitment

4. Invest in Fair Compensation

- Ensure salaries reflect the responsibility, workload, and the essential role of water services in society, while progressively aligning with EU standards. Introduce certifications and professional growth paths

5. Champion Diversity

- Create environments for women to lead and thrive
- Support mentorship and leadership programs

Vision for the future

The future of water is in our hands. Let's support the next generation of professionals who will lead with courage, inclusivity, and innovation. Together, we can create a Western Balkans water sector that is strong, sustainable, and equitable for all.

Contacts

We are a group of 8 Young Water Professionals from the 6 Western Balkans countries, we kept meeting and discussing issues in the water sectors for the past 9 months, and this position paper is the output of our work.

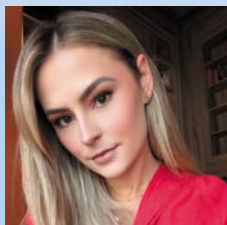


Ylberinë Baliu

YWP Kosovo, Prishtina, Kosovo

ylberine.baliu@gmail.com

Ylberinë Baliu has over seven years of experience in wastewater management and is currently specializing in Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). Her professional work focuses on industrial wastewater, particularly the aerobic treatment of dairy effluents. She serves as Secretary of IWA Young Water Professionals Kosovo and works as a consultant in the field of wastewater management, supporting sustainable practices and innovation in the sector.



Elsa Belba

National Agency of Water Supply and Sewerage (AKUK), Tirana, Albania.

elsa.belba@akuk.gov.al

Elsa Belba is a hydrotechnical engineer with over seven years of professional experience. After working at Tirana Water and Wastewater Utility, she joined the National Agency of Water Supply and Sewerage (AKUK), where she currently serves, also representing the agency on the Supervisory Council of Elbasan Regional Water and Wastewater Company. Elsa is an active member of Albanian Young Water Professionals, advocating for stronger support structures for young experts in the water sector. She holds degrees in Hydrotechnical Engineering from the Polytechnic University of Tirana and in Water Supply Engineering from Epoka University.

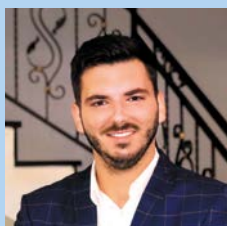


Jelena Hinić Jordanovska

Institute of Biology, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" University, Skopje, North Macedonia

jelenahinikj@gmail.com

Jelena Hinić Jordanovska is a teaching assistant and PhD student at "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" University in Skopje. Her research and professional work focus on freshwater biodiversity and the conservation of aquatic ecosystems, particularly through the study of aquatic insects. Jelena is actively engaged in the Young Water Professionals (YWP) network in North Macedonia and participates in regional peer-to-peer exchange programs supported by IAWD and RCDN, fostering cross-border collaboration in water management.



Leon Bibezić

DOO "Vodovod i kanalizacija" Bar, Montenegro

leon.bibezic@vodovod-bar.me

Leon Bibezić is Head of the Legal and Administrative Affairs Department at the Water Supply and Sewerage Company in Bar, Montenegro. A graduate in law from the University of Montenegro, he is currently working on his master's thesis. His work focuses on ensuring compliance, supporting utility governance, and strengthening institutional frameworks for sustainable water services in his community.



Tanja Krsteva

Public Utility Company "Jkp Komunalec" Sveti Nikole,
North Macedonia
tanjkrsteva7@gmail.com

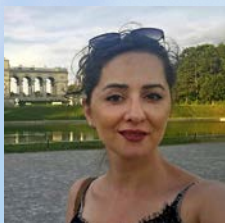
Tanja Krsteva holds a BSc in Biology and Chemistry and is pursuing an MSc in Environmental Engineering. She is Department Manager at the Drinking Water Treatment Plant in Sveti Nikole and actively contributes to national and regional networks, including ADKOM and IAWD's YWP program. Through public speaking, peer-to-peer exchanges, and gender equality initiatives, she has highlighted key challenges facing the sector, including workforce shortages and public awareness gaps. Tanja also works as a Junior Water Consultant supporting utility transformation. Her vision is to strengthen the attractiveness and professionalism of the water sector in North Macedonia.



Veprim Jasharaj

CubyLink GmbH,
Prishtina, Kosovo
veprim.jasharaj@gmail.com

Veprim Jasharaj is a software engineer specializing in digitalization in the water and energy sectors. With a diploma in Software Engineering from Riinvest College, he has worked since 2016 on innovative projects such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, Integrated Water Billing (IWB), and digital monitoring tools for utilities in Kosovo. He has contributed to developing water quality databases and regulatory reporting systems in cooperation with WSRA. Currently employed at the Swiss-based Horizonte Group, Veprim focuses on digital solutions in the energy sector while remaining active in YWP Kosovo initiatives.



Nikolina Majdanac

UC "Vodovod" JVC Gradiška, Association "Vodovodi Republike Srpske" East Sarajevo,
Bosnia and Herzegovina
nikolina.majdanac@vodovodgradiska.com

Nikolina Majdanac is a GIS engineer for modelling and design at KP Vodovod a.d. Gradiška, with a degree in spatial planning and more than four years of professional experience. She began her career at KP Vodovod as an intern before advancing to her current role, where she supports the modernization of water utility operations through digital tools and spatial planning approaches. Nikolina established the Young Water Professionals (YWP) chapter within the Association of Waterworks of Republika Srpska and has initiated ongoing collaboration with the YWP chapter affiliated with UPKP in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Passionate about creating better opportunities for young professionals, she actively promotes gender equality and workforce diversification as key priorities for the future of the water sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina.