

More Than a Symbol

Music and Cultural Cooperation in the Normalization of Kosovo–Serbia Relations

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Author:

Erionita Deliu
Young Researcher, New Social Initiative; University of Prishtina, Faculty of Law

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1.
Executive Summary

Formal dialogue can produce agreements, but it cannot produce relationships between people. This paper argues that music and cultural cooperation deserve a practical place in the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, not a symbolic one. The 2023 Agreement on the Path to Normalisation explicitly names culture as an area for cooperation. Research on 4,509 young people across the region shows that the social environment around intergroup contact matters more for reconciliation than individual encounters alone. Mitrovica Rock School, working with divided communities since 2008, shows what sustained creative cooperation can achieve. Yet these initiatives remain fragile: in 2026, the long-running Music Connects Summer School was cancelled because funding could not be secured. The deeper problem is a mismatch: short-term cultural interventions are poorly suited to a peacebuilding process that depends on long-term relationships. This paper recommends longer-term funding, program design built around repeated interaction, a Kosovo–Serbia network of cultural and youth organizations, and follow-up measurement after projects end. The shift is simple: from creating opportunities to meet towards creating opportunities to stay connected.

2.

Introduction

The conversation about the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is often shaped by politics, agreements, negotiations, recognition, institutions and the question of normalization. These are necessary parts of the process, but they do not tell the whole story. A relationship between societies cannot be built only around what governments agree on. It also depends on whether people have opportunities to meet, work together, and gradually become familiar with one another beyond the divisions that politics has created or reinforced.

For young people in Kosovo and Serbia, such opportunities can be especially important. Many have grown up in societies where the other community is often discussed through political narratives, historical memories and unresolved tensions. At the same time, young people are not only shaped by these divisions. They are also capable of creating spaces where those divisions do not have to be the starting point of every interaction. Music is one of those spaces.

Music does not need people to agree on politics before they can create something together. A band has to listen to one another, communicate, compromise, practice, make mistakes and try again. When this happens repeatedly, people begin to know each other not simply as members of another community, but as musicians, friends and collaborators. Its value lies in creating conditions in which meaningful relationships can develop.

This is already visible in initiatives such as Mitrovica Rock School, where young people from North and South Mitrovica have formed mixed bands and worked together over extended periods, as well as in wider cultural initiatives such as Mirëdita, dobar dan!. Yet these experiences raise a larger policy question: if sustained cultural cooperation can contribute to trust and social connection, why is its role in peacebuilding and normalization still relatively limited, often dependent on short-term projects and funding?

The main question is this: how can music and cultural cooperation be used more effectively to strengthen connections among young people and contribute to the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia? The answer is not simply more cultural activities, but longer-term support for programs that create repeated interaction and opportunities for continued connection. Music should not be treated as a symbolic addition to peacebuilding, but as a practical tool for creating repeated, meaningful contact among young people. Greater attention to sustained cultural cooperation, long-term support and follow-up could help turn individual encounters into relationships that continue beyond the project itself.

3.

Background and Context

The relationship between Kosovo and Serbia has been shaped by conflict, political disagreement and a difficult legacy that continues to influence how the two societies interact. More than two decades after the war, normalization remains largely associated with the EU-facilitated dialogue and negotiations between political representatives. The process has produced agreements addressing practical and political issues, but its progress has been repeatedly affected by tensions and limited implementation. The 2023 Agreement on the Path to Normalisation was intended to move the relationship towards normal, good neighbourly relations and to create conditions for broader cooperation. Importantly, the Agreement does not limit this cooperation to political and economic matters. It specifically identifies culture, education, science and technology, sport, health and other areas as fields in which Kosovo and Serbia should deepen cooperation (European External Action Service, 2023).

This creates an important space for thinking about normalization beyond negotiations between governments. Political agreements can establish obligations and frameworks, but they cannot by themselves create familiarity or trust between people who may have grown up with very different understandings of the other community. This is particularly relevant for young people, who make up a generation that did not experience the war directly but continues to live with many of its social and political consequences. Research involving 4,509 young people from Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia found that the broader social context of intergroup contact is a stronger predictor of reconciliation than individual contact alone (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2025). In other words, having one positive encounter matters, but living in an environment where meaningful contact between communities is possible and relatively normal may matter even more.

There are already initiatives in Kosovo and Serbia that create such spaces through culture. One of the most established examples is Mitrovica Rock School, founded in 2008 in response to the deep division between North and South Mitrovica. The school works with young musicians from both communities and places them in mixed bands where they write, rehearse, record and perform original music together. To date, more than 1,800 young people have taken part in its programs, and 75 ethnically mixed bands have been formed (Musicians Without Borders, n.d.). Its approach has also evolved with the changing circumstances of the city. Early mixed bands often met in Skopje because crossing between the two sides of Mitrovica was difficult and sometimes unsafe, while later bands began rehearsing and performing in Mitrovica itself, first discreetly and then openly (Mitrovica Rock School, n.d.).

Music is not the only form of cultural cooperation being used. Since 2014, the annual Mirëdita, dobar dan! festival has brought together artists, activists and public figures from Kosovo and Serbia through music, film, theatre, visual arts, public discussions and advocacy. Its stated aim is not simply to present culture from one side to the other, but to create a tradition of cooperation and contribute to peacebuilding and the normalization of relations (Mirëdita, dobar dan!, 2025). The festival has not had an easy path. Its 2024 edition in Belgrade was banned by Serbian police hours before it was due to open (Bami, 2024), and the festival returned the following year, held in Prishtina. Continuity, in other words, is something these initiatives have fought for, not something that was guaranteed.

These initiatives show that cultural cooperation already exists within the wider landscape of Kosovo–Serbia relations. The question is therefore less about whether such spaces can be created and more about whether their potential can be supported consistently. For young people in particular, meaningful cooperation may require more than a single encounter. The challenge is to create spaces where contact can be repeated, relationships can develop, and cooperation can continue after the initial project ends.

4.

Analysis

4.1 Music as a Space for Repeated Interaction

The value of music in peacebuilding does not come from the idea that music can erase political or ethnic differences. It comes from what people actually have to do when they make music together. A band cannot function if its members refuse to listen to one another. They have to communicate, compromise, adjust to different ideas, make mistakes, and try again. When this happens repeatedly, people can begin to relate to each other in ways that a single conversation about tolerance may not achieve.

This matters in societies where contact between communities is often shaped by political tension. Young people do not necessarily need to begin by discussing Kosovo–Serbia relations in order to interact meaningfully. They can begin with a song. They can work on an arrangement, disagree about an idea, laugh about a mistake, stay after rehearsal to finish something, or celebrate after a performance. The political differences do not disappear, but they do not have to define the relationship either.

4.2 What Existing Cultural Initiatives Already Show

Research on Mitrovica Rock School and other Music Connects initiatives supports this understanding. Howell, Bartleet and Davidson studied the program and found that a focus on aesthetic practices and artistic goals can still contribute to social goals. Their research describes this through three connected ideas: rehearsal space, the incubator, and what they call the “expansion of normal”, where interactions that initially feel unusual gradually become ordinary through repeated experience (Howell et al., 2024). In the context of Mitrovica, this is exactly the point. The goal is not simply to place young people from different communities in the same room once. It is to make working, creating and spending time together feel normal over time.

Mitrovica Rock School is a strong example because its model is based on sustained cooperation rather than a single symbolic encounter. Since 2008, the school has brought together young musicians from North and South Mitrovica, allowing them to form mixed bands and develop original music together. What makes this approach particularly valuable is that participants are not meeting only to discuss reconciliation. They meet because they want to make music. The relationship develops through doing something together.

My own experience at the Skopje Music Summer School in 2025 made this difference very clear to me. Working with Serbian young people was not new to me, but spending this much time with them was. For almost a week, we rehearsed for hours every day, wrote an original song, recorded it and performed it together. We also shared accommodation, meals and free time. There was no pressure to have a perfect conversation about reconciliation. We simply had something we wanted to create, and we had to figure out how to create it together.

What stayed with me was not only the performance. It was the time between rehearsals, the jokes, helping each other, sharing the same goals, and becoming comfortable around one another. We stayed in contact after the summer school and continued working together later. I still consider them friends. Looking back, I do not think a one-day workshop would have created the same relationship. We might have met, played music and gone home, but we would not have had the same time to become comfortable with each other or build a friendship. The experience showed me that the value of these programs is not only in bringing people into the same room, but in giving them enough time to actually know one another.

This is where the difference between contact and sustained contact becomes important. A short exchange can create an opportunity to meet someone. Repeated cooperation gives people the time to actually know one another. This aligns with the wider finding that positive individual encounters matter most when young people live in environments where these interactions can happen repeatedly and become part of everyday life (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2025).

Music therefore complements many traditional dialogue activities. It does not remove the need for dialogue, but it can create a less politically loaded environment in which relationships can develop before they are asked to carry political weight. Young people can build a relationship before they are asked to represent a community or discuss its political positions. This matters because people are more likely to listen to someone they already know. A friendship does not automatically change someone's political views, but it can make it harder to reduce the other person to a stereotype.

4.3 The Limits of Short-Term Cultural Engagement

At the same time, it would be a mistake to romanticize these experiences. Arts-based peacebuilding research warns against assuming that artistic activity automatically produces reconciliation. Its impact depends on how programs are designed, who participates, how long they last and what happens after they end (Shank & Schirch, 2008). A successful mixed band can exist within a wider environment where political tensions and negative narratives remain. Music can create a positive space, but it cannot control everything outside of that space.

This leads to one of the main weaknesses of existing cultural cooperation: continuity is difficult to guarantee. Many youth and cultural initiatives operate through individual projects and limited funding periods. This is particularly important for programs whose impact depends on relationships developing over time. If a project ends just when participants have started becoming comfortable with one another, the most valuable part of the process may never have the chance to fully develop.

Mitrovica Rock School provides a concrete example of this vulnerability. In 2026, its long-running Music Connects Summer School, which had brought young musicians from Mitrovica Rock School and Roma Rock School together since the program's earliest years, was cancelled because sufficient funding could not be secured (Musicians Without Borders, 2026). The interruption shows a difficult contradiction: programs can demonstrate the value of long-term cooperation while still depending on short-term or uncertain financial support.

Mirëdita, dobar dan! shows another side of the same challenge. Its survival since 2014, including through a banned edition and a forced change of host city, proves that cultural cooperation can become an established part of the relationship between the two societies rather than an isolated event. But its persistence has depended on the determination of the organizations behind it, not on a stable support system around them.

4.4 From Meeting Once to Staying Connected

The policy challenge, therefore, is not simply to create more cultural projects. It is to create the conditions in which successful projects can last, grow and connect with one another. Existing initiatives already provide valuable experience. What is needed is stronger support around them: longer-term funding, opportunities for participants to meet again, cooperation between organizations and evaluation that looks beyond attendance numbers.

If normalization is understood only through agreements between political representatives, much of this social work remains invisible. But normalization also has an everyday dimension. It can be seen in whether young people become comfortable collaborating, creating, travelling and maintaining relationships across community lines. Music cannot negotiate an agreement or resolve a political dispute. What it can do is create spaces in which a different kind of relationship becomes possible, and, when those spaces are repeated often enough, make that relationship feel less unusual.

5.

Conclusions

The relationship between Kosovo and Serbia cannot be normalized through political agreements alone. Formal dialogue is necessary, but normalization also depends on what happens between people outside negotiation rooms. For young people in particular, having spaces where they can meet, work together and build relationships without political divisions being the starting point of every interaction can shape how they see each other in the long term.

Music offers one practical way to create those spaces. Its value is not that it makes differences disappear, but that it gives people a reason to work together before those differences become the center of the relationship. Rehearsing, creating, performing and spending time together can gradually turn unfamiliarity into familiarity. The experience of Mitrovica Rock School, together with wider research on music and social connection, shows that repeated creative cooperation can make cross-community interaction feel more normal.

At the same time, a positive encounter is not enough. A one-day meeting can introduce people to each other, but sustained interaction gives them the time to actually know one another. This makes continuity more than a question of funding or project management. If a program ends just as participants are beginning to build friendships and trust, part of its potential is lost. Kosovo and Serbia already recognize culture as one of the areas where cooperation can develop within the broader normalization process. What is needed is a stronger commitment to supporting the initiatives that are already creating these connections, while making it easier for young people to meet again, continue collaborating and remain connected after a project ends.

Music will not resolve the political disputes between Kosovo and Serbia. It does not need to. Its role is more practical: creating opportunities for people to know each other as individuals, collaborators and friends rather than only through the identities or political positions attached to them. If normalization is meant to last, those everyday relationships deserve a place in the process too. Cultural cooperation should not be treated as decoration around the normalization process. It is one of the ways the social foundations of normalization are actually built.

6.
Recommendations

6.1 Create Longer-Term Funding for Intercultural Music and Cultural Programs

Donors, international organizations, cultural institutions and relevant government bodies on both sides should commit to multi-year funding for established intercultural programs, rather than annual project-by-project grants. Programs such as Mitrovica Rock School have shown that the value of cultural cooperation often comes from relationships that develop slowly, not from a single event. Longer-term funding would allow organizations to keep mixed groups active, organize follow-up activities, and build on relationships that already exist instead of starting from zero with every new project. It should also cover travel, equipment and rehearsal spaces, the practical needs that decide whether young people can actually take part. The result is simple: fewer cancellations like the one in 2026, and programs that are judged on whether their connections lasted, not just on whether their activities happened.

6.2 Prioritize Repeated Interaction Instead of One-Time Exchanges

NGOs, youth organizations, music schools and the international organizations that support peacebuilding programs should design their activities around repeated cooperation rather than one-off encounters. Instead of a single workshop, participants could work together over several months through mixed bands, songwriting projects, joint performances, music camps or recurring workshops. The goal is not to maximize the number of young people who briefly meet someone from another community. It is to give them enough time to become comfortable with one another, and at least one structured opportunity to meet again after the main activity ends, so that the relationships built during the program have somewhere to go.

6.3

Build a Network Connecting Existing Cultural Initiatives

Cultural organizations, music schools, festivals and youth organizations in Kosovo and Serbia, with support from relevant public institutions, should create a shared network for youth and cultural cooperation. The organizations doing this work already exist, but they often operate separately. A network would connect them, with a deliberately practical purpose: sharing opportunities, referring participants between programs, coordinating events and creating follow-up moments, not building another institution. One joint activity between network members per year would be enough to start. This makes cultural cooperation less dependent on any single organization or project and gives young people more ways to keep their connections alive between programs.

6.4

Measure What Happens After the Project Ends

Donors and implementing organizations should evaluate programs on longer-term outcomes, not only on outputs such as participation numbers, bands formed or activities held. A short follow-up three to six months after an activity ends, through a survey, an interview or an informal meet-up, can show whether participants stayed in contact, kept collaborating or joined other intercultural activities. That information tells funders which approaches actually lead to lasting relationships, and which programs deserve to grow. Without it, the most important part of what these programs achieve stays invisible, and the same mistakes get repeated with the next funding cycle.

The shift these recommendations point to is simple: from creating opportunities to meet, to creating opportunities to stay connected. The initiatives already exist. What they need is the stability to keep doing what already works.

7.

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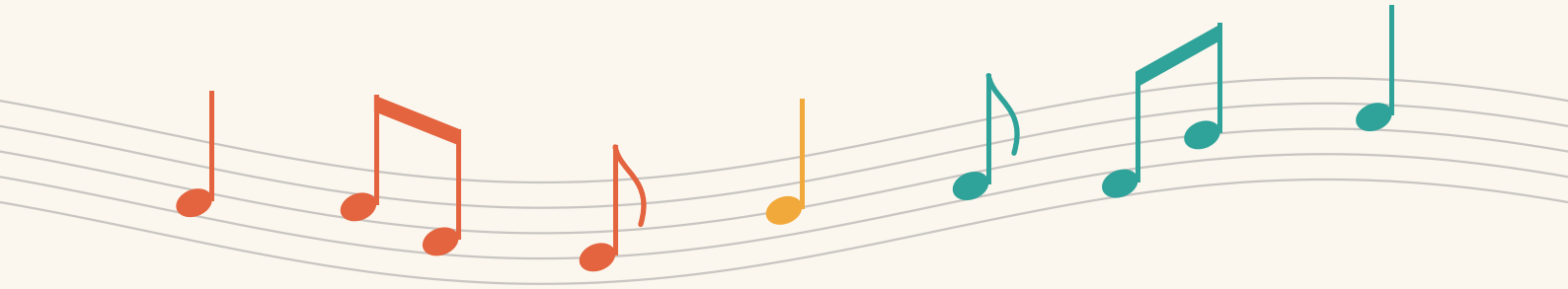
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