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DEMOCRACY

SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

AUGUST 2023

# The Role of Youth Organizations in Fostering Cooperation Between Kosovo and Serbia

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This Policy Paper is published as part of the project “Strengthening Youth Civic Participation in Political Processes” implemented by New Social Initiative (NSI) funded by National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief explores the role that youth organizations can play in fostering much-needed cooperation between the youth of Kosovo and the youth of Serbia – as critical, albeit underutilized actors, in building bridges towards reconciliation. The two countries share a history of conflict and tension, with inter-ethnic relations being still fragile, despite marked progress. Acknowledging the remarkable potential of youth as the driving force behind transformative change, this brief presents a comprehensive approach to empowering youth organizations to become initiators of peace, understanding, trust-building – and ultimately reconciliation between the formerly warring countries. Through meaningful and constructive engagement, this brief describes how these organizations can create a solid foundation for a more peaceful and prosperous future in the Western Balkans. This policy brief also highlights the need to empower youth organizations in Kosovo and Serbia, recognizing their potential to serve as catalysts for reconciliation and cooperation. Ultimately, this brief advocates to provide youth organizations with tangible support, including financial resources, capacity building programs and technical assistance. By strengthening youth skills in conflict resolution, peace building, intercultural communication and leadership, youth organizations in Kosovo and in Serbia can effectively engage their communities while initiating constructive dialogue and paving the way towards peaceful co-existence.

## INTRODUCTION

The EU-mediated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has been ongoing since [2011](#), with limited progress towards full normalization of relations. In the backdrop of lingering ethnic tensions, facilitating meaningful dialogue between peoples, especially among youth remains a challenge.

Kosovo is often references as having the [youngest population](#) in Europe, with 55% of its population under 30 and over one-third under the age of 18.

In Serbia, young people between the ages of 15 and 31 make up about 20 percent of the population in [Serbia](#).

Youth organizations that specialize in a wide range of areas, depending on the needs of the communities tend to be well positioned to overcome barriers and promote bottom-up dialogue. Specifically, youth organizations can offer a fresh perspective while approaching reconciliation issues with an open mind, energy, and enthusiasm, Further, given that youth organizations tend to be more inclusive, they provide a platform for individuals of diverse backgrounds to engage. Importantly, this also requires a conceptual shift which recognizes [youths as political actors](#), so that their agency and potential trajectories in peacebuilding not to be ignored, wasted and or under-utilized.

Youth organizations can serve as a bridge between the youth of the two countries, helping to build trust and shifting norms and negative attitudes towards reconciliation. They have a unique, forward-looking perspective and great potential for helping to address

existing barriers to open communication which could transform their respective societies. Throughout the Western Balkans, the term “the youth are our future” is widely used, but in reality - how much importance or role is really given to youth? This is a question up for discussion.

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Thus, this policy brief examines the role that youth organizations such as Youth Initiative for Human Rights can play in promoting cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia.

Further, this brief seeks to contribute to constructive dialogue by focusing on the importance of intercultural interaction, youth exchanges, peace education, and conflict resolution, as key steps to shaping a more peaceful future (Ozerdem, 2016). To truly progress towards these aspirations, it is essential that youth organizations take a key role in the peace building process. By equipping them with the authority to actively participate in negotiations and contribute to key decisions, we must include all their voices to leave a mark on the future journey of Kosovo and Serbia. Youth empowerment to participate in negotiations and decision-making, it is possible for their voice to influence the formation of a future with less conflict and more peace between Kosovo and Serbia. Youth involvement in official processes is designed for them, who are the best and who will come in their future. (Iwasaki, 2016) Through this, Kosovo and Serbia can build a better and more harmonious future, facing the challenges of the past and leading the Balkans towards peace, reconciliation, and common prosperity of the countries. Only Young people can create bridges that can connect them together in the future. (Iwasaki, 2016)

## EMPOWERING YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

Strengthening the role of youth organizations on both sides is essential for promoting cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia. As emphasized in the interviews with youth organizations, the empowerment of youth organizations is critical in overcoming divisions and promoting positive changes (Zelic, 2023; Guri, 2023).

For instance, the [Youth Initiatives for Human Rights](#) is regional organization that operates in Western Balkans which has brought together thousands of regional and international youth civic and political activists to exchange experiences and initiate processes of democratic reforms. They present an



important case study of the impact that youth organizations can have if supported with necessary resources a to bridge divides and drive positive change. Yet, empowering youth organizations depends on multifaceted strategies that include making available funding, capacity building programs and technical assistance. These tools are essential in improving youth skills in conflict resolution, intercultural communication, reconciliation, non-formal education, and leadership ([Iwasaki, 2016](#)).

Recognizing youth ability and potential for change, it becomes imperative to provide comprehensive [support](#) to these organizations. This commitment is underpinned by the understanding that they can serve as vital channels for initiating constructive dialogue and understanding. By bolstering their efforts with the necessary resources, these organizations can better engage with their communities and cultivate environments conducive to collaboration ([Ozerdem, 2016](#)). From the impact on the community, this continues to grow at the local level, from the local level into the central level, and finally into the national level.

The empowerment of youth organizations holds the role of opening a new perspective on reconciliation and cooperation. Youth Exchanges, Study Visits, Peacebuilding and Dealing with the past Workshops equipped with enhanced skills, they can play an active role in mediating conversations, breaking down longstanding barriers, discussing the past, and fostering unity. This strategic investment not only benefits these organizations, but also acts as a catalyst for the transformation of the region, leading it to a future based on values and human rights that is prosperous built on understanding and cooperation.

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Financial support is one of the key steps to enable youth organizations to operate effectively and drive change. Giving resources to youth-led initiatives, as demonstrated by the [Youth Initiative for Human Rights](#), can propel these organizations forward (Zelic, 2023). By allocating resources to support their projects, organize events and implement capacity-building efforts, these organizations can gain the needed momentum to exert their influence on a larger scale. Moreover, organizations should focus on informal education and exchanges foster understanding and cooperation between young individuals (Guri, 2023). One of the examples that should be put into practice in both countries is that of the [Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Kosovo](#), which to receive grants or projects must find a partner organization from the Serbian community, where they work together towards the common interest. These practices should also be put in place by regional governments, international organization, and other actors who by play an influential role in distributing funds for projects. The field of culture is one of the most important, because this resource allocates grants for projects, working on these values and in reconciliation, this should be seen as a strategic effort that influences the formation of opinion for the new generations and the creation of cooperation by promoting good neighbourly relations.



## CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMS

Empowerment goes hand in hand with capacity building. Designing and implementing capacity building programs adapted to the needs of youth organizations is essential such as project management development, inclusivity, and reconciliation. The role of capacity building program sole is critical in empowering youth organizations to be better equipped to address present and future challenges. This requires a carefully planned approach that takes into consideration the unique needs and requirements of youth groups across the region, and in particular youth organizations operating in Kosovo and in Serbia ([Ozcelik et al, 2021](#)).

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Capacity building programs for youth initiatives can include training in conflict resolution, negotiation, project management, and effective communication (Zelic, 2023).

Equipped with these skills, youth organizations can navigate complexity with confidence and professionalism, thereby fostering an environment conducive to collaboration. By equipping these organizations with practical capabilities, we not only empower them, but we also equip them with a powerful toolkit that will help them to navigate the day-to-day challenges in communicating effectively.

These transformations play a very important role, where youth's participation should not be overlooked, so here governmental and international actors should offer opportunities for all youth organizations to have access to capacity building. ([Iwasaki, 2016](#)). Ultimately, these skills are catalyzed as a tool for change.

## **TECNICAL ASSISTANCE**

Technical assistance serves as a practical way to empower youth organizations and support their role in peacebuilding. Collaboration with experts in fields such as conflict resolution and peacebuilding can provide valuable insights. For instance, youth exchanges held by Youth Initiatives for Human Rights have a great impact on creating a new mindset for young people and see it practically. Mentoring and guidance from experienced professionals helps youth organization refine strategies (Zelic, 2023). Providing mentorship and guidance from experienced professionals can help youth organizations not only to refine their strategies but also to amplify their influence and navigate complex diplomatic landscapes. Empowering youth organizations is not just a means to an end, it is an investment for sustainable peace and a shared future. By providing tangible support and fostering skills development, these organizations become initiators of positive change ([Ozcelik et al., 2021](#)). Their energy, innovation and commitment can overcome historical divisions, fostering an atmosphere of cooperation that paves the way for a brighter future in the Western Balkans. Through these comprehensive efforts, the potential for transformative cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia becomes an achievable reality.

## YOUTH EXCHANGES

The promotion of youth exchanges appears as a major tool with the potential to significantly overcome the problems between Kosovo and Serbia. These exchanges provide a unique opportunity where young people from both countries can engage in meaningful interactions, share personal stories, and create true friendships. Facilitating joint initiatives, cultural exhibitions and collaborative projects, these exchanges have the power to see up close what the reality is, what the situation is and help to see the role of politics in this. These initiatives provide a unique chance to challenge stereotypes and long-held prejudices to help bridge the divide. (Ozcelik et al, 2021). These exchanges serve as a channel for overcoming past histories, allowing participants to create new friendships and histories to discover common aspirations. As these exchanges progress, participants usually develop friendships that last. (Guri, 2023) Youth exchanges have a transformative impact on young people (Žilić, 2023). These exchanges serve as boxes to challenge prejudices and misconceptions. Youth exchanges are a key strategy in overcoming the divide between Kosovo and Serbia. These exchanges not only challenge stereotypes and prejudices, but also cultivate a shared spirit of cooperation and a sense of collective identity.

"How do I see you?" organized by Doku Fest



"The Regional Youth Exchange" organized by YHIR KS

"Creative youth sport work events for reconciliation acceptance of diversity" organized by NGO Building the Balkans

## CONCLUSION

In this the complex history and ongoing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, the involvement of youth organizations appears as a light at the end of the tunnel. This policy brief has explored how these organizations can be key players in fostering cooperation and understanding between the two countries. By strengthening the capacities of youth organizations, we provide them with the tools to bridge divides and drive positive change. Financial support, educational programs and expert guidance empower these organizations to become active participants in shaping a harmonious future. Youth exchanges stand out as a powerful mechanism for transformation. Through these exchanges, young people from both sides can interact, share experiences, and create connections that challenge prejudices and preconceived notions. This first-hand interaction has the power to reshape perceptions and foster a renewed sense of unity.

The potential of youth organizations lies in their ability to rewrite the narrative of discord into a tale of cooperation. By investing in their growth, we invest in a more peaceful and prosperous Western Balkans. We must start this path for all of us as well as for the future generations so that look towards peace and prosperity rather than animosity and conflict that only keeps the region in the dark.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the complexity associated with promoting cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia through youth organizations, and to facilitate the effective implementation of this initiative, this brief puts forward the following recommendations:

- The Republic of Kosovo should give paramount importance to providing substantial financial support and establishing sustainable resource channels to empower local youth organizations operating within its borders.
- The Republic of Kosovo should collaborate actively with these empowered youth organizations to foster meaningful youth exchanges. These collaborations will transcend ethnic boundaries, allowing young individuals to participate in joint projects and shared experiences that contribute to unity.
- The Republic of Serbia should prioritize the allocation of financial resources and establish sustainable support mechanisms to bolster local youth organizations within its territory.
- The Republic of Serbia should integrate inclusive peace education comprehensively into formal education systems. This measure will ensure that the upcoming generation in Serbia possesses adept conflict resolution skills and a foundation of empathy.
- The European Union should elevate its commitment to supporting cross-border youth initiatives. Dedicated funds should be allocated to encourage collaborative projects and foster exchanges that bridge the gap between Serbian and Kosovar youth.
- The European Union should advocate for the inclusion of youth voices in peace negotiations and the decision-making processes. This advocacy should ensure that the perspectives of the youth play an integral role in shaping the future trajectory of the region.

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