



# **Digital Networks and Collective Memory:**

Youth and Narratives of the Past in the Context of  
Belgrade–Pristina Relations

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# 1. Executive Summary

An unresolved past continues to shape relations between Belgrade and Pristina, while young people inherit opposing narratives about the events of 1998–1999—especially regarding Račak and the 1999 NATO bombing—which are often presented in the digital space through mutually exclusive interpretations (trauma and violation of sovereignty versus the protection of civilians). These differences, present in education and family memory, are today amplified by social networks whose algorithms favor viral, polarizing content.

In this paper, “youth” encompasses three overlapping groups with different needs:

- high-school students (15–18) — highly exposed to viral simplifications;
- university students (18–24) — with targeted support, the most prepared for critical thinking;
- young activists/creators (20–29) — shape norms through content (podcasts, video essays) and can initiate dialogue.

The experience of 2020 showed how quickly disinformation (e.g., 5G/COVID conspiracy theories) can shape attitudes and intensify mistrust, which is why digital literacy and moderator safety are prerequisites for any intervention.

What works and how to scale it:

(A) Integrate digital and media literacy into high schools and universities (modules on algorithms, verification, and narratives about the past);

(B) open an IPA III micro-grant window (€20–50k) for joint podcasts and online Belgrade–Pristina workshops — 2 calls per year, minimum of 10 bilingual episodes per grant, with clearly defined KPIs (reach, engagement, participation from both communities);

(C) strengthen RYCO-type projects and cultural platforms such as the festival Mirëdita, dobar dan! (with a risk mitigation plan: moderator protocols, institutional support, participant safety), bearing in mind that past bans/disruptions were recorded due to nationalist pressures.

This package of measures has a practical effect: reduced polarization among youth, greater resilience to manipulation, and a broader space for inclusive memory and long-term reconciliation.

## 2. Introduction

The relationship between Belgrade and Pristina is still shaped by an unresolved past: the way events from 1998–1999 are remembered and interpreted is crucial for political trust and everyday coexistence. Specific cases such as the events in the village of Račak (January 1999)—described by some as a massacre of civilians and by others as the outcome of an armed clash and political manipulation—remain points of deep disagreement, both in academic research and in public debates.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the 1999 NATO bombing holds a place of trauma and violation of sovereignty in Serbian memory, while in the Albanian narrative it is often seen as a necessary protection of civilians under repression. These opposing interpretations are not confined to textbooks and archives—they spill into everyday speech and influence how young people perceive themselves, “the others,” and the possibility of cooperation.

Digital networks accelerate and amplify this dynamic. Young people in Serbia and in Kosovo and Metohija today predominantly learn about the past through TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, where algorithms encourage the virality of content that elicits a strong emotional response, thereby fueling echo chambers: young people are more likely to see confirmations of their existing beliefs than opposing arguments.<sup>2</sup> The experience of 2020 made this visible during the pandemic: conspiracy theories (from “5G networks spread the virus” to “international actors are using the crisis to subjugate the region”) spread faster than fact-checks, influencing attitudes and trust in institutions.<sup>3</sup> This pattern—the rapid circulation of simplified, emotive, and often inaccurate narratives—maps onto topics from the 1990s as well.

Why is this a policy problem rather than merely a social phenomenon? Because digitally shaped narratives directly influence political behavior and society’s capacity for dialogue. If the online space is left to disinformation and toxic echo chambers, young people become carriers of prolonged divisions: willingness for encounter, joint projects, and trust in institutions decreases. Conversely, if investment is made in the digital space through media and digital literacy, moderated cross-border cooperation, and safety protocols for participants, that same space can become a training ground for learning multi-perspectivity, for co-creating content, and for moving from “parallel truths” to work with facts. This policy paper starts precisely from that premise: how to empower young people—here understood as high-school students (15–18), university students (18–24), and young activists/creators (20–29)—to critically distinguish facts from interpretations, and how to turn digital networks from amplifiers of polarization into infrastructure for dialogue and sustainable reconciliation.

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<sup>1</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), “Kosovo/Kosova As Seen, As Told: An analysis of the human rights findings of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission, October 1998–June 1999,” November 5, 1999. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/4/17773.pdf>, (accessed October 1, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao, “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80(S1), 2016. Available at: <https://5harad.com/papers/bubbles.pdf>, (accessed October 1, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), “COVID-19 Mythbusters,” January 19, 2022. Available at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>, (accessed October 1, 2025).

## 3. Research Methodology

This paper applies a qualitative, comparative-narrative approach: we analyze how different narratives about the events of 1998–1999 (e.g., Račak, the 1999 NATO bombing) are shaped and reshaped within the digital networks most used by young people (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube), and how this is reflected in their attitudes toward dialogue and cooperation.

The analysis is based on three types of secondary sources:

- primary documents and monitoring by international organizations on the events of 1998–1999 (OSCE KVM, HRW), which provide a factual basis and the frameworks of opposing interpretations;
- EU/UNESCO studies and policies relevant to algorithmic content mediation, disinformation, and media/digital literacy (e.g., the European Parliament study on social platforms, the UNESCO MIL curriculum);
- regional practices and media testimonies on youth programs and obstacles (RYCO’s mandate and projects; the 2024 ban of the Mirëdita, dobar dan! festival in Belgrade) as indicative cases of practical possibilities and limitations. In addition, documentation on IPA III was consulted as a potential financial channel for targeted micro-grants.

Two “anchor” case studies are embedded: Račak as an example of persistently disputed interpretations (massacre of civilians versus the outcome of an armed clash and political manipulation), drawing on OSCE/HRW documents; and 2020 COVID-19 disinformation (5G, “foreign actors,” “nano-chips”) as an example of a pattern in which emotive and simplified narratives spread faster than fact-checking in the region, which is also relevant to topics from the 1990s. These two points are then traced in publicly available online content (short video formats, posts, public debates), strictly at the level of “frame” analysis (narrative frames, linguistic and visual strategies; without publishing personal data or indicating user identities).

Time frame for documents and reports: the period 1999–2025 (the basic corpus for wartime events and subsequent institutional reflections). For digital practices and platform policies: emphasis on 2018–2025 (the period of the intensive rise of short video formats and new regulatory frameworks in the EU). For civil society practices and cultural formats: 2014–2025 (the consistent work of RYCO and the continuous history of the Mirëdita, dobar dan! festival!).

Thematic analysis was applied (themes: victimhood/legitimacy/identity; protection of civilians/violation of sovereignty; “us”/“them”) alongside frame analysis (how the same event is “framed” in short digital formats). Findings from international reports (OSCE/HRW) serve as the factual control on which the interpretive section rests. Findings from EU/UNESCO studies are used for the normative-policy framework (algorithmic amplification, MIL competencies, implications for democracy). RYCO and Mirëdita serve as proof from practice: what works and with what obstacles. In the digital section, only

public content was analyzed; no collection or archiving of PII, and no targeting of minors. The analysis does not measure prevalence (there is no representative sample or quantitative inference), but rather describes patterns and implications. Algorithmic content selection creates “blind spots” (what remains “under the radar” is not necessarily non-existent).

Therefore, the conclusions have the character of policy-oriented insights rather than statistical claims; hence the recommendations are conceived as S.M.A.R.T. interventions whose effects can be tracked through defined KPIs (reach, engagement, participation from both communities) in the short term (6–12 months) and in the medium term (2–3 years).

## 4. Analysis & Findings

In digital ecosystems of memory, the contested events of 1998–1999 circulate as short, emotionally charged “vignettes” that audiences perceive as self-explanatory evidence. This process is most visible at two nodes: Račak and the 1999 NATO bombing.

### Two Nodes of Memory: Račak and the NATO Bombing

Račak (January 1999) remains a “litmus test” for the overall narrative: international reports (OSCE-KVM, HRW) document human rights violations and the massacre of civilians.<sup>4</sup> While part of the Serbian counter-narrative depicts the event as a combat clash and political manipulation.<sup>5</sup> In digital practice, clips of footage, testimonies, and press conferences are cut; musical “sounds,” editing, and subtitles are added that suggest a conclusion before the argument is presented. This produces an effect of complete certainty within two parallel bubbles: each subsequent “remix” reinforces an already existing belief, and the possibility of a shared frame becomes ever smaller. This pattern is not merely an intuitive impression: regulatory and research studies in the EU have shown that algorithmic recommendations and the short-video format favor affective, polarizing content and “echo chambers,” which increases exposure to mono-perspective narratives and reduces the likelihood that a user will see contesting contexts.<sup>6</sup>

The 1999 NATO bombing functions as a “narrative matrix” that is re-created each year around March 24. In Serbian memory, the emphasis is on civilian victims and the violation of sovereignty; in the Albanian narrative—on halting ethnic cleansing and protecting civilians. digital content, the most common “points of proof” are: the total number of civilian casualties, cluster bombs, and the issue of depleted uranium. HRW recorded about 488–527 civilian deaths for the campaign across ninety incidents (with caution due to incomplete data), which platform narratives further reshape into large, rounded figures and moral conclusions. At the same time, Niš (7 May 1999) as a cluster-bomb case becomes a constant visual repertoire—photos of the marketplace, report summaries, clips from TV segments—while it is rarely mentioned that, after that incident, Washington halted U.S. use of cluster munitions, whereas some allies continued to use them.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Human Rights Watch, “Human Rights Watch Investigation Finds: Yugoslav Forces Guilty of War Crimes in Racak, Kosovo,” January 29, 1999. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/1999/01/29/human-rights-watch-investigation-findsyugoslav-forces-guilty-war-crimes-racak-kosovo>, (accessed October 1, 2025).

5 BBC News, “Serbs say terrorists killed at Racak,” January 16, 1999. Available at: <https://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/256392.stm>, (accessed October 1, 2025)

6 European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), “Online Information Manipulation and Information Integrity,” 2024. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762416/EPRS\\_BRI%282024%29762416\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762416/EPRS_BRI%282024%29762416_EN.pdf), (accessed October 1, 2025).

7 Human Rights Watch, “Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign — The Crisis in Kosovo,” 2000 (Niš cluster-munitions incident; note on U.S. prohibition following May 7). Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/nato/Natbm200-01.html>, (accessed October 1, 2025).



In debates about depleted uranium, scientific and activist sources are often combined: UNEP's post-war assessment records a contamination risk requiring decontamination and monitoring, while on the platforms claims about "banned weapons" and "long-term poisoning" range from accurate to inaccurate. In parallel, NATO's own narrative line remains that the operation was launched to "halt a humanitarian catastrophe."<sup>8</sup> These competing "anchor points" — casualties, Niš, DU, legitimacy of the objective— provide ready-made dramaturgical templates for short formats and annual "waves" of content.

## Formatting Memory for the Digital "Feed "

Formatting memory for the "feed" also changes the mode of debate. The "duet"/"stitch" functions and reaction clips produce serial "duels" between opposing video frames, where argument is replaced by genre (sarcasm, a 15-second "debunk"). European studies note that such a format, paired with the recommendation system, rewards short affective messages and enables the rapid recirculation of the same framing in a multitude of variations.<sup>9</sup> When we overlay this with annual commemorative peaks (e.g., 24 March), we get seasonal cycles of virality in which memory functions as a trend: the audience arrives "ready" to confirm its own frame, and crossing linguistic and cultural barriers is rare without intentional bilingual production.

## Three Subgroups of Youth

The three youth subgroups behave differently within the same ecosystem. High-school students (15–18) consume most historical topics as short skits without context; for university students (18–24), it is realistic to offer work with conflicting sources and visual "framing"; young creators (20–29) set norms: when given mentoring and financial support, they are able to design bilingual series that expose the difference between facts and interpretations without stigmatization. Precisely for that reason, MIL (media and information literacy), combined with practice—joint production and controlled exposure to a different audience—is the key lever of change.<sup>10</sup>

## Lessons from Practice

At the practical level, RYCO and related programs are designed—through exchanges, co-productions, and workshops—to encourage the reduction of stereotypes and the strengthening of mutual understanding; available evaluation data from the first cycle of Superschools indicate an increase in self-reported competence for interaction (e.g., 88.23% of participants report greater knowledge of reconciliation/mobility/cooperation;

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "Depleted Uranium in Kosovo: Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment," September 14, 2001. Available at: <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/depleted-uranium-kosovo-post-conflict-environmental-assessment>, (accessed October 1, 2025).

<sup>9</sup> European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), "Online Information Manipulation and Information Integrity," September 30, 2024. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762416/EPRS\\_BRI%282024%29762416\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762416/EPRS_BRI%282024%29762416_EN.pdf), (accessed October 1, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO, "Media and Information Literacy Curriculum – E-version," n.d. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/mil4teachers/en/curriculum>, (accessed October 4, 2025).

91.5% report greater confidence in interacting with peers from other communities).<sup>11</sup> At the same time, these programs remain vulnerable to offline pressures that originate online. The 2024 ban of the Mirëdita, dobar dan! festival in Belgrade (with the Ministry of Interior's explanation citing security risks) shows how digital mobilization can spill over into administrative bans and risks for participants; therefore, moderation and protection protocols (anti-doxing, escalation plan, contact points) are mandatory elements of any serious digital initiative.

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission, "Annex 8 to the Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the multi-country annual action plan in favour of the Western Balkans and Türkiye for 2024 – Action Document for 'EU4Youth: Supporting Regional Youth Cooperation'," 2024. Available at: [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9573921e-824c-442f-81df-53332ec4826f\\_en?file-name=AD+08+EU4+Youth+WB+and+TR-FINAL.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9573921e-824c-442f-81df-53332ec4826f_en?file-name=AD+08+EU4+Youth+WB+and+TR-FINAL.pdf), (accessed October 1, 2025).

# 5. Consequences

## Erosion of the shared “epistemic minimum” and growth of social distance

When short, affective formats become the dominant pathway to knowledge about the past, the set of minimally shared facts through which conversation is even possible is lost; in practice, the same photograph or video clip “proves” opposing theses in two bubbles. The OECD Global Competence framework shows that the ability to consider multiple perspectives and work with contradictory sources correlates with a lower propensity for moral polarization; in the region, youth studies show that quality contact (close intergroup friendships, exchange experiences) reduces social distance, while its absence entrenches differences. This is also visible in surveys: a portion of young people express trust toward “others,” but a significant share remains skeptical; it is precisely here that targeted, bilingual digital co-productions have the greatest marginal effect.

## Political behavior and susceptibility to external manipulation

An environment dominated by a mocking, “us/them” genre is conducive to coordinated informational influences: the European Parliament and the OECD note that platforms—due to the architecture of recommendations and attention-based business models—increase the risk of political polarization, erosion of trust in institutions, and the faster spread of disinformation.<sup>12</sup> The 2020 crisis provided empirical evidence that susceptibility to conspiracy theories in the Western Balkans is higher than in most EU countries; that mental model then “sticks” to narratives about 1998–1999. The mechanism in practice is simple: the more emotive (and often inaccurate) the simplification, the faster the engagement and the greater the recommendation—precisely to an audience with similar views.

## Risks to the safety and well-being of young participants and creators

Younger participants in bilingual formats more frequently experience waves of targeted online harassment; this leads to a “chilling effect” on participation, privatization of profiles, and withdrawal from public debates. At the same time, European findings indicate very high daily exposure to networks (e.g., 96% of fifteen-year-olds active on social media on school days; a significant share over three hours per day), with links to anxiety and problematic use. In the context of polarized topics from the 1990s, this means

<sup>12</sup> European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), *Online Information Manipulation and Information Integrity*, 30 September 2024. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762416/EPRS\\_BRI\(2024\)762416\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762416/EPRS_BRI(2024)762416_EN.pdf), (accessed: 4 October 2025).

greater anxiety when speaking publicly, quicker withdrawal in conflict, and an increased risk of digital violence without adequate protection protocols.

## “Parallel Classrooms” and Negative Transfer into Reality

Formal education rarely explicitly teaches how to analyze visual rhetoric, editing, and the creator economy. The result is “parallel classrooms”: in school there are concepts; online, there are narrative heuristics of short forms that drown them out. The PISA Global Competence framework is operational here: competencies for intercultural understanding and multi-perspectivity can be directly embedded in curricula, and micro-credentials (MIL) can bridge the gap until changes enter the system. Without this, young people return to the online “normal” where genre defeats fact.

## Developmental consequences: youth outmigration, decline of social capital, and missed opportunities

Prolonged exposure to conflictual narratives without outlets for encounter fosters aspirations to leave and weakens local engagement. The Regional Barometer records high percentages of young people considering work and life abroad (especially in the EU), while research on perceptions of peace indicates that exchanges and close intergroup ties reduce distance and increase personal agency.<sup>13</sup> In such an environment, programs that increase contact and joint production have a disproportionately positive effect on social capital; the absence of such programs amplifies “silent separation” and the loss of human potential.

<sup>13</sup> Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), *Balkan Barometer 2023 – Key Findings (Public Opinion): Depopulation worries on the rise*, 2023. Available at: [https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key\\_findings/2/](https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/) (accessed October 1, 2025).



# 6. Recommendations

## Option A: Systemic Introduction of Media and Digital Literacy (MIL) into Formal Education

The first recommendation concerns a long-term, systemic solution aimed at fundamentally increasing young people's resilience to manipulation. This entails introducing mandatory modules on media and digital literacy into curricula for high schools and relevant university faculties. The modules would cover understanding algorithms, fact-checking techniques, and critical analysis of narratives.

**Advantages:** The main advantage is sustainability and systemic impact. Instead of reactive measures, this approach proactively builds the capacities of entire generations, creating a more resilient and better-informed society over the long term.

**Risks:** The biggest challenges are bureaucratic inertia and political resistance to changes in the education system, which is often slow and susceptible to politicization. There is also a risk of insufficient teacher training and difficulties in keeping the curriculum up to date with rapid technological change.

**Feasibility:** Assessed as medium. Although there is a growing global consensus on the importance of MIL, implementation requires strong political will and inter-institutional coordination, which may take time.

## Option B: Establishing a Targeted IPA III Micro-Grant Mechanism for Joint Digital Projects

The second recommendation focuses on directly stimulating the creation of alternative, positive content. This entails opening a special "window" within existing EU IPA III funds to finance joint online projects by youth from Serbia and from Kosovo\* (bilingual podcasts, video essays, workshops), with grants ranging from €20,000 to €50,000.

**Advantages:** The key advantages are speed, flexibility, and direct impact. This mechanism bypasses state administration and places resources directly in the hands of motivated young creators, enabling the rapid production of relevant content that can immediately enter the digital space.

**Risks:** The main risk is the sustainability of projects after the grant is spent. There is also the challenge of ensuring that the produced content reaches a broader audience beyond the already interested "bubble," as well as the administrative challenge of efficiently managing a large number of small grants.

**Feasibility:** Assessed as high. This option uses an existing and well-developed financial

instrument (IPA III) and does not require the creation of new institutions. It aligns with EU priorities regarding support for civil society, reconciliation, and youth, which makes it politically acceptable and realistic to implement.

## Option C: Strengthening Institutional Support and Safety Protocols for Existing Initiatives

The third recommendation aims to secure and strengthen what is already producing results. It concerns increasing financial—and, crucially, institutional—support for proven platforms of dialogue (such as RYCO and the Mirëdita, dobar dan! festival), together with the mandatory development of safety protocols to protect participants from online and offline attacks.

**Advantages:** The advantage lies in efficiency and building on existing success. Instead of creating something new, resources are invested in proven models. Insistence on safety protocols directly addresses the key vulnerability of these initiatives, making them more resilient and sustainable in the long term.

**Risks:** The primary risk is political obstruction. As practice has shown, such initiatives are often targeted by nationalist groups and can be constrained by authorities that view them as controversial. Securing consistent public and institutional protection may be difficult.

**Feasibility:** Assessed as medium to high. The financial component of support is highly feasible, as donors are willing to back successful organizations. However, the feasibility of obtaining strong institutional and safety guarantees from domestic authorities is medium, as it depends on the current political climate.

