

## From Divisive Memories to Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Priorities for Sustaining Peace in the Western Balkans

Youth-led action research and advocacy to influence public policies and discourse

### Background

Twenty-seven years after the breakout of the conflicts in the 1990s, peaceful coexistence has yet to take hold in the Western Balkans. The legacy of conflict lives on as visible divisions along ethno-religious identity lines and a ‘reconciliation deficit’ characterized by a well-spring of identity-based tension manifested in political rhetoric and the media. Glorification of persons indicted and/or convicted of war crimes, polarized political messages and contested narratives of the past have become increasingly mainstream. Reinforced influence of patriarchy and harmful gender stereotypes undermine movement toward gender equality.<sup>1</sup> A trend towards shrinking democratic space manifests in pressure against civil society and obstacles to freedom of expression and meaningful political participation.



In the same post-conflict period, a whole new generation has risen to adulthood. Either born during the conflict or since, young women and men under 30 continue to experience the legacies of conflict. Compared to their predecessors, this generation has no memory of a time before the wars, and either experienced it as infants or grew up listening to its accounts – while living in post-conflict segregation along ethnic lines. Some scholars have speculated that through the inter-generational transfer of traumas and nationalistic narratives, this generation is more hardened in its identity lines and views of the ‘other’, making any prospect for social cohesion and sustainable peace even harder to attain.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, others have suggested this generation could be more inclined to move beyond identity politics and interact across ethno-religious identity groups freely, online and offline.<sup>3</sup>

While it is generally accepted that the legacies of conflict continue to affect the everyday life of youth in the Western Balkans, the views of young women and men from different walks of life on how they experience and perceive the situation, what action they would like to take, and how they would like to see the region develop in the future, are missing from the debate. Regionally comparable data on youth priorities for sustaining peace does not exist, and a commonly owned UN conflict analysis is also lacking. A series of interventions exist that are explicitly targeted at youth reconciliation,<sup>4</sup> but despite the regional nature of these initiatives, no data exists to compare youth perceptions across the region – either in terms of future potential fault lines (dividers), or opportunities for strengthening social cohesion (connectors).

At the same time, the international community has recognized that young people have an active and integral role to play in peacebuilding, as asserted in UNSCR 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (2015).<sup>5</sup> Without a clear evidence-base of youth perspectives and attitudes towards peace, understanding of youth’s role is often shaped by stereotypes – this skewed representation limits their ability and space to actively play a role in efforts for sustaining peace and work on promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies; as envisaged in the SDG 16 and the wider 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The promotion of youth agency and their priorities for sustaining peace is critical to strengthening the reconciliation efforts, overall stabilization, and preparation for EU accession in the Western Balkans.

<sup>1</sup> Bobić, M. (2012). The application of the concept of social capital in understanding marriage and family in contemporary Serbia. In Predrag Cvetičanin and Ana Birešev (eds.), *Social and Cultural Capital in Western Balkan Societies* (41-58).

<sup>2</sup> Fischer, M. ; Petrovic-Ziemer, L. (2013) [Dealing with the Past in Western Balkans](#). Berghof Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. the [Resonant Voices Initiative](#).

<sup>4</sup> Including two Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) regional interventions (one, referred to in short as Dialogue for the Future, led by the BiH UNCT; and the other, referred to in short as the UN RYCO project, by the Albania UNCT).

<sup>5</sup> [United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250](#) (2015).



## Project outline

Through youth-led processes of action research and advocacy, and through the resulted regionally comparable evidence-base on youth perceptions on peace, security, gender roles and reconciliation, the initiative “From Divisive Memories to Shared Futures”<sup>6</sup> will provide structured opportunities for young women and young men in the region to work together across conflict and societal divides to identify common peace and security priorities and enter in constructive dialogue with decision-makers, build their networks and engage collectively in policy discussions. Implemented in 2019-2020, and led by UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub in collaboration with UNFPA, UNICEF and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, the initiative will consist of:

- 1) **Regional youth perceptions action research** – targeting youth (ages 15-29)<sup>7</sup> from diverse backgrounds (gender, ethnicity, language, religion, geography, socio-economic status, disability, education) in the Western Balkans <sup>6,8</sup> the research will be co-designed, rolled out and analysed with key stakeholders and peacebuilding actors, including local research institutes and diverse groups of young people. It will provide an opportunity to bring strands of peacebuilding research and work together and conceptualize coherent approaches to reconciliation and peacebuilding that engage new cadres of young people from diverse backgrounds.
- 2) **Trainings on leadership, peacebuilding, advocacy and conflict-sensitive research for young activists** – to empower youth to be actors of change in the region, and to provide structured opportunities for networking across conflict divides. This will be achieved by involving youth actors and organizations in jointly developing the research, while being provided with trainings on peacebuilding, leadership, conflict and gender sensitivity. A core team representative of different youth communities will ensure interaction with various socio-economic layers of society and reaching those most vulnerable and marginalized.
- 3) **National and regional youth consultations to formulate common messages for sustaining peace and create offline and online tools, events and products** – for advocacy and policy and programming impact, the results of the research will be utilized as a tool to empower young actors to advocate for peace and engage in policy dialogues, including as part of the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda (UNSCR 2250) and the UN Strategy on Reconciliation in the Western Balkans. To ensure continuation beyond the project, this activity also includes support to local youth actors for cross-border follow-up activities.

In establishing regionally comparable data representing the views of diverse groups of young people, the initiative will inform the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), other and future peacebuilding initiatives in their engagement with youth, including hard-to-reach groups and under-represented young women, for sustaining peace and social cohesion. Throughout the activities, 30% of the budget will be identified as directly contributing to gender equality and/or women’s empowerment, with specific elements in the trainings and advocacy toward that end, and indicators to capture progress.

<sup>6</sup> As part of the joint UN project, led by UNCT Albania, ‘Supporting the Western Balkan’s Collective Leadership on Reconciliation: Building Capacity and Momentum for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office’ (2018-2020), funded by PBF.

<sup>7</sup> The UN, for statistical purposes, defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24. In the Europe and Central Asia region, each country has country-specific definitions, starting from 14 years up to 35.

<sup>8</sup> Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244/1999), North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia.