



Western Balkans Youth Forum "Declaration on Youth Skills for Peace"



United Nations
Association
Albania



MUNA

PREAMBLE

We, the youth of the Western Balkans countries, stand at the forefront of shaping our shared destiny within and across our countries. We want to steer the future in the direction of our common viewpoints despite the conflicts and divisive narratives that have been passed down to us. This statement symbolizes our collective voice, which is united by common goals and motivated by our determination to create a better future.

The Western Balkans region, while steadily developing, has historically been a conflict-stricken zone, which has impacted its growth and development prospects, making peacebuilding and reconciliation imperative in the region. The role of the youth in peacebuilding and reconciliation has been internationally recognized and various efforts have been undertaken to streamline the participation of youth and to support youth grassroots initiatives. This begs for an increased involvement of the youth in the process of building and sustaining peace.

In the context of the European Year of Skills 2023, it is imperative to underscore the critical role of youth skills in peacebuilding efforts. The nexus between youth and peace is undeniable, as the European Union (EU) itself recognizes that nearly 50% of the world's population is under the age of 30, making young people an essential demographic in fostering sustainable peace. One fundamental skillset that young individuals should equip themselves with, is conflict resolution, as a imperative capacity for de-escalating tensions, promoting dialogue, and finding non-violent solutions to disputes. As Europe and the world continue to grapple with various barriers to peace, equipping the youth with these skills is not just an investment in the future but a proactive step towards conflict prevention and sustainable peacebuilding.

In the Western Balkans, conflict resolution skills are particularly vital given the historical and geopolitical complexities of the region. A survey conducted by [RYCO](#) - Regional Youth Cooperation Office revealed that over 60% of young people in the Western Balkans view peace and stability as a top priority, emphasizing the readiness of youth to engage in peacebuilding initiatives, underscoring once again the relevance of skilling, upskilling and reskilling youth on peace skills.

This declaration has been co-designed by young people from Western Balkans countries within the Peace Week 2023. During the discussion the following obstacles have been identified.

Obstacles and Challenges

False and misleading information: Youth's ability to make educated and well-informed judgments is hampered by the spread of false information and limited access to unbiased information.

Media Biases: Finding objective media sources is still difficult, which affects how youth, especially the less privileged, perceive the current state of affairs in their own local contexts.

Youth Representation: Young people's ability to influence decisions that have an impact on our lives is severely hampered by our underrepresentation in politics.

Monopolization of Political Culture: The established political culture largely dominated by politicians belonging to older generations limits the space for innovative ideas and perspectives of the youth. Young people perceive the political processes as difficult to permeate and to change.

Education Restrictions: Traditional teaching methods on history, with less spaces for in-class debates, hinder critical thinking, questioning authority and constructive discussions.

Cultural Barriers: Despite the fact that we face similar regional problems, cultural stereotypes prevent us from working together.

Lack of trust in Public Institutions: Youth involvement is hindered by nepotism and cronyism, as well as inefficiencies and tokenism in the public administration.

Financial Dependency: We face financial dependency, limiting our ability to participate in meaningful activities. Youth sector is highly dependent on international donors and development agencies, while our own governments offer little funds for young people and the sector overall.

Mental health and depression: We, the youth of 2023 face challenges, feel misunderstood or not understood regarding our mental health and its importance.

Youth Migration: One-way migration flows from the Western Balkans towards the European Union countries are diminishing the human capital and contributing to brain drain in the region, thus hampering its long-term development prospects.

The current structural barriers faced by young people are difficult to overcome and are often perpetuated also due to a lack of specific skills of young people in the region. The following were identified as underdeveloped or missing skills crucial for peace:

Cooperation and Peacebuilding Skills: We must actively cultivate, encourage, and improve the following vital skills in order to flourish as effective peacebuilders: effective communication, intercultural dialogue, active listening, open-mindedness, embracing diversity, critical thinking, and digital literacy. Concurrently, we must nurture the individual talents and aspirations of each young person and enhance resilience.

To ensure that all voices, regardless of background, are appreciated and heard, holistic strategies are required to promote diverse participation.

In keeping up with the goals of the European Year of Skills 2023, we pledge to unlock our collective potential, work towards change, and overcome the difficulties distinct to our region. United by the principles of unity, knowledge, and resilience, we shall jointly forge a brighter and more harmonious future. This is why we, the youth of the Western Balkans, have identified the following skills as crucial to peacebuilding efforts, for our common future.

Skills for Peace

Training the youth on skills related to peace, and peace education, more broadly, has been recognized as a vehicle for enabling youth to identify conflict, resolve it, build and promote peace. The Youth of the Western Balkans Youth Forum, through careful deliberation, have engaged in identifying a number of skills crucial to peacebuilding efforts.

The skills identified range from personal to interpersonal ones. Self-awareness and empathy have been recognized as preconditions for conflict sensitivity. Particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of developing skills that can help youth break down internalized narratives relating to a given conflict. Other important skills highlighted are those that contribute to the deconstruction of predominant discourses, particularly media literacy. Furthermore, it has been noted that open, intercultural and intergenerational dialogue and understanding are major contributors to creating conditions for peaceful communities.

All skills identified and discussed have been considered in relation to the conflict cycle. Namely, they have been conceived as skills needed to respond to, cope with and resolve conflict; skills needed to build peace; and skills needed to sustain peace and prevent conflict.

Below is a comprehensive list of skills for peace identified and discussed:

- **Conflict Analysis**
- **Problem-Solving**
- **Leadership**
- **Cooperation & Teamwork**
- **Dialogue**
- **Facilitation**
- **Mediation**
- **Negotiation**
- **Advocacy**
- **Campaigning**
- **Fund-Raising**
- **Communication**
- **Language Awareness**
- **Consensus Building**
- **Active Listening**
- **Critical Thinking**
- **Political Literacy**
- **Media Literacy**
- **Digital Literacy**
- **Research**
- **Recognizing Bias**
- **Empathy**

These skills are strongly believed to positively contribute to the transformation of attitudes towards peace, and to encourage open-mindedness and tolerance, trust, accountability, and respect for others.

To this end, this Declaration on Youth Skills for Peace hopes to serve as an encouragement to bridge formal and non-formal educational settings to provide spaces for continued learning opportunities that promote skills for peace and peaceful behaviors for the youth in the Western Balkans. Upon the deliberation and recognition of skills for peace, the Youth of the Western Balkans Youth Forum generated a number of concrete actions, pushing forward reconciliation and peaceful cohabitation in the region.

GENERATED CONCRETE ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Establish Political Literacy and Youth Representation

Description: Implement quotas for young people in politics, fostering youth representation in government decision-making processes, and promoting political literacy. Public and state institutions, Ministries of Youth, UN agencies with YPS agendas (e.g., UNDP, UNICEF), EU grants, European student unions, CoE, RYCO, Open Society foundations, and Youth Initiative for Human Rights provide support for youth representation in Ministerial meetings on youth, peace, and security, as well as educational programs enhancing political literacy.

2. Enhance Professional Skills and Mediation Training

Description: Provide project management and mediation skills training, simulations of negotiation and mediation for conflict resolution, along with professional mentoring opportunities for youth to develop their professional skills. UN agencies, banks, ministries of youth, organizations, educational institutions promoting conflict resolution and mediation, and EU grants are instrumental in providing capacity-building programs, mentorship, and training opportunities in project management, mediation and negotiation capacity-building in conflict resolution.

3. Advocate for Public Discussions and regional-level Campaigns

Description: Create spaces for public discussions and launch campaigns that span across the Western Balkans to engage and empower youth. International organizations (e.g., OSCE), EU programs, RYCO, RCC, SALTO, and ministries of youth need to collaborate to fund public discussions, cross-Balkan campaigns, and campaigns to promote peace and reconciliation.

4. Promote Media Literacy and Fact-Checking

Description: Develop media literacy programs and fact-checking portals to educate youth in deconstructing narratives and countering misinformation. UN agencies, EU grants, and media literacy organizations shall play a vital role in establishing fact-checking portals, media literacy programs, and educational campaigns to promote critical media consumption.

5. Facilitate Critical Thinking Seminars and Workshops

Description: Organize seminars and workshops, hosted in the Western Balkans, on critical thinking. Academic institutions, universities, and organizations focusing on education can contribute resources and funding for convening such seminars.

6. Foster Dialogue and Exchange Programs

Description: Support youth exchange programs and study visits in the Western Balkans to encourage intergenerational and intercultural dialogue among youth. EU programs and funds, universities, region's governments, and organizations promoting youth mobility may facilitate study visits, youth exchange programs, and funding for dialogue initiatives to foster intergenerational and intercultural communication.

7. Promote Trust and Intercultural Dialogue

Description: Fund initiatives that promote trust and understanding through youth mobilities in the region, historical books development, and unbiased history research. EU programs, local governments, and organizations promoting research are encouraged to allocate funds for youth mobilities in the region, historical book production, and unbiased historical research (e.g., "Laboratory of Conflicts").

8. Support Academic and Knowledge Exchange

Description: Partner with the EU and universities, utilize EU grants, European student unions, and other organizations for funding academic programs and initiatives. EU and universities, European student unions, and organizations providing grants shall extend their financial support for research, partnerships with universities, and transparent information dissemination to academic institutions.

9. Conduct Digital Literacy Workshops

Description: Organize digital literacy workshops for younger generations, empowering them with essential digital skills. Academic institutions, organizations promoting digital literacy, and EU programs must coordinate digital literacy workshops, educational programs, and initiatives for younger generations.

10. Promote Youth Participation

Description: Organize mock elections, certify and train youth, and remove barriers to youth participation in political processes. Youth councils funded by embassies, universities, and educational institutions should work towards organizing mock elections, youth certification and training programs, and initiatives to eliminate barriers to youth participation.

11. Funding of Consensus Conferences and Town Meetings

Description: Fund consensus conferences and town meetings in high schools, regional councils and city youth councils, with research experts, that aim to exchange opinions, and raise awareness on various societal tensions, and underlying conflicts. EU programs, ministries of youth, regional councils, and city youth councils can be explored as potential donors and partners who fund and market the actions.

12. Promote Peace Education and Accessibility

Description: Fund programs that allow students to get involved, support quality assurance programs, and introduce peace and security studies in universities. Additionally, make educational institutions accessible for diverse needs. Incorporate more non-formal education tools in high school and university curricula that facilitate peace education. Work towards strengthening partnerships between CSOs and educational institutions.

13. Develop Instructional Manuals and Campaigning

Description: Develop instructional manuals focusing on the benefits of a more inclusive society, empathy-building, and conflict resolution. Additionally, provide guidance on how to approach conflicts, how to campaign and advocate. Academic institutions, organizations supporting conflict resolution, and educational organizations shall work together to develop instructional manuals, campaigns promoting inclusivity, empathy-building, and conflict resolution.

14. Promote Understanding of Conflict and Peace Building

Description: Foster understanding about different aspects of conflict, transitional justice, breaking taboos, and promote the role of mediators, especially women, in peace building. Organizations focusing on peace and security, universities, and international donors need to intensify collaborations on initiatives targeting the understanding of intersectionalities between conflict, transitional justice, social norms, and promoting the role of mediators, especially women, in peace building.

List of identified donors, partners and stakeholders

1. Public and state institutions
2. Ministries of Youth
3. UN agencies with YPS agendas (e.g., UNDP, UNICEF), and the Resident Coordinator Offices
4. Western Balkans Fund
5. EU programs and grants
6. Young European Ambassadors Network
7. European student unions
8. Council of Europe (CoE)
9. RYCO (Regional Youth Cooperation Office)
10. Open Society Foundations
11. Youth Initiative for Human Rights
12. Banks with development funds
13. International organizations (e.g., OSCE)
14. Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)
15. SALTO Youth
16. Academic institutions (e.g., Universities and High Schools)
17. NGOs focusing on education and youth
18. Local governments
19. Organizations promoting historical research
20. Organizations promoting conflict resolution and mediation

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