

MORE THAN 5,400 YOUNG PEOPLE aged 15-29 years from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*,¹ Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia participated in the regional study *Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans*. This report highlights the voices of youth and their perceptions and experiences related to peace and social cohesion in their societies and in the wider Western Balkans region.

The key messages emerging from the study are the following ones:

- **Young people are central actors in the building of sustainably peaceful societies** in the Western Balkans. They share many commonalities and mostly view one another with trust and curiosity, although at times with caution. Their hopes and values across the region are closely aligned. Most are confident that their generation is a positive force in their society and are optimistic about being able to resolve some of the persistent challenges in the region.
- **Trust between government and society** is a critical aspect of peace and social cohesion. Across the region, young people's satisfaction with their governance systems and institutions is relatively low, while satisfaction in civil society and youth organizations is ambivalent although similarly low. Unsurprisingly, the lowest satisfaction of youth is with employment opportunities. When asked if the pandemic had negatively impacted their trust in government and decision-makers, 58 percent of youth felt it had done so. Repairing the broken connections and trust between young people and decision-makers is an essential task.
- **Civic space** is the foundation of any open, cohesive and democratic society. Young people recognize that they have an important role in effectuating change. Yet only an average of 19.5 percent of youth in the region participate in civic activities. Still, a huge potential appears to exist for civic engagement, with over 65 percent across the region reporting interest in being more actively involved. Young people's sense of self-efficacy and agency are associated with open-mindedness towards other groups and more optimism about peace in the region. Paving the way for young people's increased engagement and sense of agency is therefore critical.
- Young people's **democratic and egalitarian values** are importantly related to attitudes of social cohesion and peace. Young people's alignment with democratic values appears to be directly related to a recognition of the similarities between Western Balkan peoples and hope for improved future relations in the Western Balkans. Further, there appears to be a negative correlation between supporting authoritarian values and satisfaction with government in most countries/territories. Hence, it is important to understand what drives young people to support authoritarian views,

1 * For the UN, all references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). For RYCO, this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with Security Council Resolution 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

address the root causes behind them, and reinforce transparent and inclusive government.

- When it comes to **important social causes**, young people indicate helping the poor and marginalized, democracy and human rights and building peace and reconciliation as their top choices – pointing to an important and untapped potential for wider engagement of youth in peacebuilding and strengthening social cohesion. There is also a gap between young people’s areas of interests and what some of them eventually engage in, indicating a need for more diverse, formal and informal platforms for civic participation.
- **Freedom from fear and violence** lie at the very foundation of cohesive and prosperous societies. There were a few unifying safety and security concerns that youth in the Western Balkans expressed. Organized crime and internet safety were among the top concerns among youth in most societies. Young people across the region rated hate crime as a relatively high concern – young women expressed higher concern for hate crime, internet safety and domestic violence in comparison to young men.
- **Hate speech online or offline** was the most reported form of violence or discrimination, with an average of 12 percent of young people reporting it across the region, significantly more than was bullying. Discrimination based on age, political affiliation or ethnicity were also frequently reported. Young women reported gender discrimination and sexual harassment much more often than men did. Out of those who had experienced violence or discrimination, only 17 percent reported this to anyone and just 58 percent felt that reporting had brought any positive results. This indicates a need for better mechanisms for youth to report experiences of discrimination and violence and for institutions and authorities to address these issues.
- Peace and social cohesion are strengthened by **inclusive social policies and the protection of marginalized and disadvantaged groups of people**. Ethnic, political or religious discrimination is a much more common experience for non-majority youth than their majority peers. Youth of non-majority ethnicity are also more likely to report being victims of physical violence or the threat of violence, much less likely to participate in civic activities and express significantly less satisfaction with governing institutions across the whole region.
- Exceptionally high rates of youth **outward migration** represent a problem for both the youth themselves and for the societies they leave behind and are a symptom of other societal ills. An average of 52 percent of youth say that they envisage themselves living outside of the region in 10 years. Yet they also express clear hesitations about migrating: fears of disillusionment and being treated as second-class citizens abroad, as well as a reluctance to leave family, friends and a familiar lifestyle. Outward migration while serious, is not irreversible.
- **Trust, relationships and interactions among people**, across societal divisions such as identity or other social constructs, are important aspects of peace and social cohesion. The region’s divisions and conflicts have not left young people entirely untouched, but for the most part, young people express openness to friendship with members of different groups. When measuring social distance, youth in Albania stand out from their peers by expressing much lower levels of social distance toward

other groups, followed by young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina expressing the lowest social distance out of the remaining five. Young people with close friends from other groups and those who live in multiethnic and fully integrated communities show lower social distance towards other groups than their peers. Some 47 percent of respondents in the region reported trusting other groups despite past conflicts, while 24 percent of youth said they did not trust other groups in the region – these attitudes vary among the Western Balkan societies and different socio-demographic groups.

- **More young people are optimistic than not about peace and improved relations** in the region. There is relatively little variation between societies, while young women tend to be more optimistic. Even in the most pessimistic case, 42 percent of respondents expected relations to improve. Just 8 percent expected regional relations to deteriorate, while the rest expected no change. When evaluating possibilities for peace, a forward-looking frame of reference resonated better with youth, something to consider when approaching the topic of dealing with the past.
- Asked to name up to three most effective factors for peace and stability, up to 47 percent of youth think the EU accession process is the most important **factor in creating long-term peace and stability** in the Western Balkans, although responses vary highly by ethnicity. A well-functioning democracy, teaching peace and tolerance, dialogue between leaders and economic prosperity were also seen as important factors for peace and stability by more than 25 percent of young people in the region.
- Intergroup contact has often been used as a tool for improving intergroup trust and relations. *Shared Futures* found that when it comes to intergroup social relations, the **quality of intergroup relationships** not only trumps quantity; the two may possibly have different consequences. Having mere acquaintances from other communities, particularly in specific social environments characterized by segregation or other forms of discrimination, can be counter-productive in that it could in some cases facilitate more negative attitudes towards others. Opportunities for young people to meet and build friendships across ethnic, religious and geographic lines should be fostered, because they are associated with a wide range of positive outcomes.
- Youth who express a **focus on the past** and feel that they and their societies have been negatively impacted by the past conflicts report lower intergroup trust and less positive perceptions of other ethnic groups in the Western Balkans. A considerable proportion of young people in the region, ranging from 15 to 63 percent, say they are unwilling to forgive others for past deeds. There is a need to engage young people in constructive dialogue about the past and its effects on their current realities.
- **Divisive narratives** represent an important obstacle to the achievement of social cohesion within the region as a whole. Some 42 percent of youth say it is common to see content offending their society on social media. Between 49 and 75 percent of young women and men are concerned about fake news and conspiracy theories. While most young people did not endorse freedom of expression extending to the right of hate speech, important proportions in each society thought this was acceptable, and many had personally experienced it.
- The most important sources of information for youth to **learn about the other peoples in the re-**

gion are parents and family members, friends and social media. Schools, books and traditional media are also important sources of information while cultural activities, regional projects and youth exchanges are much less so. Yet between 61 and 91 percent of young people agree that youth exchanges can have a positive impact on regional relations, pointing to a potential opportunity to advance interaction between youth.

- **Travel experiences** of youth are associated with their sense of agency, interest in civic engagement and lower social distance to other groups, all which were also found to be associated with pro-social behaviour and more optimistic views about peace. Overall, about 36 percent of Western Balkan youth have been outside of the region in the past two years, while an average of 50 percent of young women and men have travelled within the Western Balkans. Lack of finances, the consequences of past conflicts, preference for travelling elsewhere and prejudices against other peoples of the Western Balkans are seen as obstacles for regional travel.

Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans was compiled by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). It was developed through a uniquely participatory research process which involved a youth advisory group, representing youth across the Western Balkans region, in the design of the study framework and the analysis of its findings. The study is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected through a regional survey and several focus group discussions between December 2020 and April 2021.

KEY MESSAGES

#SHARED FUTURE