



PEOPLE'S PEACEMAKING PERSPECTIVES

FEBRUARY 2012

Bosnia and Herzegovina

SINCE THE 1992–95 WAR, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has come a long way in putting violence behind it. Yet, the legacy of war is omnipresent, in particular in the way that ethnicity and ethnic divides shape every aspect of life. The Dayton Peace Agreement put in place an administrative and political system that essentially institutionalises ethnic division. It created a federation of two main entities: the (primarily Bosniak and Bosnian Croat) Federation of BiH (FBiH) and the (primarily Bosnian Serb) Republika Srpska (RS); as well as Brcko District. Current political and economic crises are placing increasing pressure on society and some fear that renewed instability and violence could play out along familiar ethnic fault lines.

Young people (age 16–30), who make up more than 20 percent of the population, have grown up in a deeply divided society recovering from conflict and one where ethnicity is exploited for political ends, stifling meaningful reconciliation. Yet this generation does not carry the same trauma of conflict as its predecessor. Our research shows that many young people are willing to question prejudices and stereotypes prevalent in wider society and eager to break with the past. Yet the obstacles to this are huge, holding back this potential force for positive change. Understanding these obstacles, as well as youth attitudes to ethnicity and their concerns and aspirations is vital to encouraging their role in building BiH's future resilience to conflict.

The findings and recommendations in this Policy Brief draws heavily on the contributions and views of young people in BiH between April and September 2011. Group discussions with youth and interviews with key informants were carried out in ten locations across BiH, involving participants from a range of social and geographical backgrounds. Additional research was carried out by young people drawn from the group discussions.

The European Union's (EU) policy of engagement with BiH largely relies on the incentive of EU accession and its integration process as a means to preserve stability and peace. However, our research shows that this strategy may not be enough to address on-going divisions in society and their effect on BiH's young generation. Targeted and sustained support for youth across all EU policies and programmes in BiH, which encourages and builds their role in the consolidation of peace and reconciliation, should be a central pillar of EU investment in BiH's future.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **Tensions within BiH cannot be addressed by the EU integration process alone** – dedicated support for conflict prevention and reconciliation is needed.
- **Greater interaction between youth across divides needs encouragement and support**, for example across ethnic divides, entities and between rural and urban youth.
- **Youth should be integrated as a cross-cutting issue in EU policies and programmes** reflecting youth's critical importance to future stability.
- **Youth need encouragement and support in order to play an active and constructive role in civic and political life.**

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission's Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

"It is a little bit stupid [for BiH] to go into EU while we are not unified inside of the country."

Young Bosnian Serb man, Banja Luka

Findings and Recommendations

1.

Tensions within BiH cannot be addressed by the EU integration process alone – dedicated support for conflict prevention and reconciliation is needed.

"Everybody feels the war, even today."

Young Bosnian Serb woman, Banja Luka

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are growing up in a society which has undergone huge upheaval over the last two decades and is still struggling with the legacy of war. Issues around ethnicity and ethnic divides still predominate daily life. Even in so called mixed schools, subjects that are considered more sensitive, such as religion, languages and literature, history and geography, are taught in ethnically segregated classes using different curricula, undermining a sense of common citizenship.

The EU's policy of engagement with BiH has relied largely on the incentive of EU accession and its integration process as a means to preserve stability and peace. However, this approach has not bridged the underlying divisions necessary to create a more sustainable peace. Moreover, BiH's progress towards integration has slowed and the EU's 'magnet' effect – pulling BiH together at the same time as it pulls it towards the EU – is becoming less powerful. The vacuum in political attention has been filled by domestic political infighting and grandstanding, most visibly displayed when RS President Milorad Dodik announced a referendum on RS' secession from BiH, a initiative dropped only after an emergency visit in May 2011 by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Peace and stability in BiH still face significant challenges. Young people of all ethnic backgrounds were unanimous in saying that the influence of war has a negative impact on their present and future prospects. While none had taken part in fighting and many had no memories of the war, its impact was still clearly felt. Yet their perceptions of what happened, why and how, rely entirely on second-hand information – what they hear from parents, media and in school – information that is often highly subjective and one-sided.

Almost all felt that this keeps fear alive and entrenches ethnic separation.

"I think we learned enough from the previous war. Nobody will want to have conflict again."

Young Bosniak woman, Novi Travnik

Current political and economic pressures – such as high youth unemployment, with more than 50% of those between 15–24 years without a job and many of those in employment working in the informal sector without job security, social security or pension provision – are placing added strains on society, increasing fears of instability and social unrest in some quarters. Many of those consulted think that conflict on the scale of the last war is unlikely. Such views are based both on the degree of public and political aversion to war and on the international community's commitment to maintaining peace.

"As long as EU and others are present here, there will be no war, but we do not know what will happen when they leave."

Young Bosniak man, Sarajevo

However, a considerable number of participants felt that the tense environment resulting from years of political crisis has in turn made society vulnerable to conflict triggers such as political provocation, the influence of a radical minority, as well as protests resulting from economic crisis. Fear of instability and social unrest was also voiced by civil society representatives, administration employees and police representatives and is shared by some international and national actors who call for stricter conditionality and a continued international political, military and police presence. There is a broad public perception of a rise in aggressive behaviour by young people and in the likelihood they will be drawn into criminal activity, fuelling the idea that society is degrading.

Most young people agreed that economic hardship affected all ethnic groups alike

and that, for now, tensions were not based on ethnicity. However, they expressed concern that if general social frustration escalated into unrest, then this could easily play out along inter-ethnic lines:

"The social, economic and political context here is unemployment and poverty (...). These are ideal predispositions for expressions of frustration and violence for young people who are dissatisfied with society and the general conditions."

Police representative, Mostar

"Inter-ethnic tensions are not the motive for conflicts and violence, but they are used during the escalation of conflict."

Young Bosnian Serb woman, Dobo

Against this backdrop of persistent grievances, resentment between ethnic groups, tensions fuelled by political actors and economic crises, more explicit measures are required to further reconcile society and build peace and stability, in tandem with the EU integration process. Undoing the institutionalisation of ethnic divides in BiH is a difficult and long-term task, but a necessary one.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Press the Government of BiH to address the issues sustaining internal divisions and undermining long-term peace and stability. Start a process to reform the administrative system and institutional segregation which entrenches the ethnic divide, and begin a reconciliation process between the ethnic groups.
- To support this, enlargement instruments, such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA), should include a more explicit focus on reconciliation, security issues and building consensus on disputed or controversial areas of policy.
- Expand long-term financial support under EU instruments, in order to underpin country-wide initiatives engaging young people from an early age and across divides.

2.

Greater interaction between youth across divides needs encouragement and support, for example across ethnic divides, entities and between rural and urban youth.

Young people display conflicting and ambivalent feelings regarding their own ethnic identity. Many express resentment at being obliged to identify themselves first and foremost by ethnicity and religion, for example when joining school or university. Yet youth were also quick to defend their ethnicity, particularly if it was perceived to be under threat. In one workshop the issue of language gave rise to heated debate between Bosniak, Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb speaking participants. While young Bosniaks from Sarajevo were in favour of abolishing teaching in different languages at schools and argued for a unified curriculum, some ethnic Bosnian Croat participants argued strongly for maintaining cultural diversity:

"There is no respect for diversity. I'm not happy. I believe that you can't impose one language and unify the three that we have."

Young Bosnian Croat man, Mostar

Others suggested more flexible alternatives: "I was at the youth camp [...]. Students from the RS had identity cards in Cyrillic, and Bosniaks in Latin. Some people did not understand each other's names. Why don't we learn both letters?" (Bosnian Serb workshop participant). Others also expressed a willingness to compromise:

"I will speak even Serbian language, if Bosnia and Herzegovina is unified and we live in peace."

Young Bosniak, Sarajevo

In places associated with war crimes and atrocities, such as Srebrenica, youth feel burdened by the 'legacy' of their ethnicity and fear stigmatisation. In so-called 'divided cities' such as Mostar, Novi Travnik and to a certain degree also Sarajevo, fear of 'the other' remains tangible:

"I feel unsafe because in our city there are invisible boundaries between the lower (Bosnian Croat) and upper (Bosniak) part of the city."

Young Bosnian Croat woman, Novi Travnik

"Since Mostar is a divided city, I feel safe on the side where we belong."

Young Bosniak man, Mostar

Lack of contact between youth of different ethnic backgrounds breeds fear of how they will be received when they do interact. Many young people said they or family members and friends had experienced resentment when travelling to a location where the majority population is of another ethnic group. However, fears often appeared to be based on hearsay or media reporting. Despite these anxieties, even in 'divided cities', most people involved in the research expressed a strong desire to meet people from other ethnic groups and other locations within BiH more frequently in a positive environment.

"There are situations where people in our country believe that members of the other ethnic communities are different [from them] in the physical sense, for example, [that they] have three ears... It is sad that people from different places just a few kilometres apart have no communication, they live in mono-ethnic communities."

Young Bosnian Croat woman, Sarajevo

Young people from different ethnic and religious groups and geographic locations need to be given opportunities to meet and interact in a constructive way that goes beyond co-existence and encourages peaceful and positive relationships. This should include the reduction of institutional barriers, such as divided schools, but also proactive and sustained efforts to bring young people together for experience sharing and joint activities. Participants in all group discussions had attended at least one such initiative and the experience had been positive. They called for these activities to take place more frequently, over a longer-time period and to involve more people from diverse backgrounds.



"I think it is very important to organise workshops where we can be together and speak freely and, hang out. It is important not to sweep things under the carpet and forget the war and the violent events of war, we need to talk and tell each other openly what hurts us. It is the only way to move forward."

Young Bosniak woman, Sanski Most

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage the initiation of public debate on the consequences of a segregated education system for BiH's future in order to raise awareness and challenge assumptions around the issue.
- Provide more support to programmes which have an explicit focus on enhancing inter-ethnic relationships amongst youth and their positive role in peace dynamics, including through co-implemented projects by organisations across BiH, using instruments such as EIDHR, the Civil Society Facility and within the IPA framework. Explore lessons from similar EU initiatives in other contexts, such as Northern Ireland.
- Support sustainable programmes and initiatives that help to overcome stereotypes and the legacy of the past and which promote interaction among and between entities and regions, for example exchange programmes between regions or dialogue initiatives and media projects. This should also address attitudes in the 'parent' generation.
- Promote and support greater interaction and exchange between youth from Bosnia and the rest of Europe, particularly from the EU, in order to foster connections and to help de-mystify the EU for youth in BiH.

The photo shows youth from all over Bosnia who participated in this research, congregating by the war memorial in Sarajevo. © NINO VADAKARIA/SAFERWORLD

3.

Youth should be integrated as a cross-cutting issue in EU policies and programmes reflecting youth's critical importance to future stability.

While their resilience to external pressure, prejudice and violence is uncertain, the degree of common ground and relative openness among youth to question ethnic prejudice and narratives about the war offer hope. With the right support youth can potentially play a positive role in longer-term reconciliation and stability in BiH. To achieve this, more targeted attention to youth issues across a range of sectors is required from national and international actors.

"We remember the war, but we have our own opinions about these events."

Young Bosnian Croat woman, Novi Travnik

While the research was unable to take in the views of those youth advocating for or involved in violence and captures perhaps some of the more progressive views within society, it spanned a range of ethnic groups and geographic locations and the degree of consensus on common issues affecting young people was striking. Many shared similar aspirations regardless of background. There was a common desire to live lives free of economic hardship and politicisation, in a peaceful and secure environment and in a society that provides them with fairer and better economic and social opportunities.

"Today it is only possible to get a job through connections, nepotism."

Young Bosnian Croat woman, Drvar

Similarly they shared many of the same frustrations, expressing for example, disillusionment in democracy, frustration with a nepotistic economy and little trust in politics and politicians, who are seen as motivated by personal gain and guilty of perpetuating ethno-nationalistic rhetoric, including through the media.

"In order to distract attention from the crucial problems, politicians are deepening the gap between different ethnic groups."

Young Bosniak woman, Sarajevo

There was also unanimous concern at what is seen as a divisive role played by religious institutions and the unhealthy relationship between religion and politics.

"I think that religion is very much politics here. [...] To me personally, religion is very important, but there is no room for religion in institutions in the secular state which BiH should be."

Young Bosniak, Mostar

Yet youth are still vulnerable to societal pressure.

"At this point it is [a] very unstable and tense political situation here. Politicians provoke hatred by manipulating the passive population. It is necessary to work with young people in order to protect them from various nationalistic manipulations."

Young Bosnian Serb woman, Trebinje

This suggests that the EU can do more to address youth issues across the full range of its policies and programmes. There is recognition within the European Partnership and Multi-annual Indicative Planning Documents (MIPD) of the need to enhance understanding of youth issues at the political level, support social and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups (including children) and improve education and employment prospects. Yet these references and EU action to date have been linked to the enlargement agenda, in particular education and cultural contacts. Given the centrality of youth issues to stability and conflict prevention, explicit and targeted measures addressing these issues need to be mainstreamed across EU engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure youth issues are prioritised as a cross-cutting issue within the MIPD and measures implemented. Youth should be considered in the same light as 'vulnerable groups', for whom there is a commitment to reflect their interests in activities programmed under the IPA.
- In line with the partnership principle, ensure youth representatives are included as a key stakeholder, as well as a beneficiary, and consulted in the shaping of relevant programmes and strategies for EU external assistance.
- Ensure that a shift to sectoral support, including for implementation of the National Youth Policy, does not preclude support to smaller, local initiatives implemented by local non-governmental and civil society organisations, which can address challenging and sensitive local issues, such as community engagement and inter-ethnic relationships of relevance to the youth population.
- EU grant application guidelines should, where relevant, include a requirement for proposals to state how the particular needs of young people will be addressed with projects and programmes.
- Continue to encourage and support the BiH Government and other stakeholders to make progress in the development of policies and programmes relevant to youth issues, in particular the National Youth Policy, the education system and youth unemployment.
- Develop the potential of European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and other financial instruments to fund projects which focus on youth and peacebuilding, seek to bridge societal divides and promote reconciliation.



The photo shows a group of young men performing on a busy street in Sarajevo to help raise money for their group to enter a regional dancing contest.

© NINO VADAKARIA/SAFERWORLD

4.

Youth need encouragement and support in order to play an active and constructive role in civic and political life.



"We have to erase the thinking that 'we, youth, can't do anything'."

Young Bosniak woman, Sarajevo

The vast majority of youth in BiH play no active role in shaping society. Youth themselves, most commonly referred to apathy when describing young people's response to their situation, to the apparent frustration of some of the older generation:

"Young people are very passive, they are difficult to mobilise, even to fight for their own rights."

NGO representative, Sarajevo

Yet the social and political environment is not conducive to more active engagement. Several of those interviewed highlighted the fact that many young people have never been taught to think critically, analyse information and explore solutions.

"The education system does not encourage students to develop analytical minds, to be critical, to ask themselves questions."

Professor/political analyst, Sarajevo

Youth are also disillusioned and disappointed in the behaviour of politicians, and politically disenfranchised. They have limited opportunities to voice their views and to be heard. Few show interest and trust in politics and do not want to get involved for fear of 'getting their hands dirty'. Many said they would not vote if there were elections.

Yet criticism does not translate into action and youth do not tend to initiate change. For many this stems from scepticism that their actions would be successful, blamed in part on the lingering 'socialist culture' in which bottom-up initiatives are not rewarded. As a result young people see logistical and bureaucratic hurdles as insurmountable obstacles.

The photo shows youth from different backgrounds participating in a workshop in Ilidza, Sarajevo to discuss issues facing Bosnia and ideas for addressing them.

© NINO VADAKARIA/SAFERWORLD

Young people are also discouraged by the fear of personal consequences should they step out of line, to the extent also that some feared that open protest for social or political change could have implications for individuals and family members.

"Adults are afraid to say what they really think, because if they do not support the ruling party they will lose their jobs."

Female Bosniak woman, Sanski Most

Yet the research also found that many young people do take part in youth activities or are volunteers in apolitical activities, such as social work, sports or environmental activities, or were interested in such activities if organised by others. Civil society organisations cited positive results of longer-term engagement with youth.

"If you give youth the chance to express themselves, this is sufficiently motivating. (...) One 17-year-old volunteer was elected President of the Youth Council of BiH."

NGO representative, Dobo

A recent project supported by the EU Special Representative (EUSR) called 'Generation BiH for Europe' brought together 100 young people from across the country and from various backgrounds to develop a common vision for BiH. This was then shared with decision makers at national, EU and international levels. Such initiatives, which give youth necessary skills, knowledge about their civic rights and also the space to engage constructively in society, are essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support to administrative and governance reform should encourage the establishment of and foster existing mechanisms for youth consultation and involvement in decision-making. This might include youth parliaments and consultation with youth organisations on draft policies and laws.

- Encourage the BiH Government to promote and foster volunteering as a way of increasing young people's social and civic engagement, by developing legislation on volunteering (in FBiH), ensuring its implementation and accrediting volunteer activism as part of educational and professional experience.
- Promote youth activism and support initiatives that give youth the opportunities to get involved in civic processes. Such initiatives should involve children from an early age so they grow up seeing active participation as something that is important, desirable and appreciated.
- Support projects and initiatives to improve young people's ability to think critically, providing opportunities to voice, discuss and analyse their views and concerns and to develop solutions, for example through debate clubs and competitions, and carried out at local, entity and national level. Support to schools and universities should be tied to educational approaches which encourage critical thinking.
- Ensure that the right to freedom of expression and right to protest are fully respected in BiH. Assess and, if necessary, take action to address concerns that activism and public protest could lead to negative consequences for individuals and family members, for example on employment prospects.
- Work with GoBiH to ensure that the appropriate infrastructure is put in place to care for and address the problems facing young people at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence and radicalisation. This should include, child-orientated support services for families vulnerable to domestic violence, substance abuse, or mental illness – particularly traumatised ex-combatants from the war. Support should be provided to initiatives that promote non-violent approaches to conflict, and provide safe places for victims and perpetrators to seek professional help and reintegrate with their peers.

Case study: Generation peace?

The findings of the research appear to contradict the assumption expressed by older generations in previous research – parents, teachers, local authorities and civil society representatives – that young people who grew up after the war are ethno-nationalistic and prone to violence and conflict.

Many young people argue that their generation is more open-minded and less influenced by negative perceptions about other ethnic groups stemming from the war than their parents. Others are more openly critical of the older generation for encouraging them to hate 'others', rather than encouraging the same inter-ethnic communication that they experienced under life in Yugoslavia.

"I disagree with my dad in many things when we talk about the war. He had terrible problems during the war. Now my father is poisoned by hatred, does not like anyone from other ethnic groups, and does not even want to have any contact with 'them'. (...) I understand why people do not enter into inter-ethnic marriages, but it is necessary to socialise and co-operate between different ethnic groups."

Young Bosniak woman, Sanski Most

Some actively choose to reject ethnic prejudice by socialising with people of other ethnic backgrounds.

"I have two friends, Bosniaks, from Kotorsko (about 10 km from

Doboj) and we socialise. Their parents receive me well, as well as mine them. Youth should make more efforts to get rid of ethnic prejudices. There are many more prejudices among older people than [among] youth. For us, the most important [thing] is to socialise. Whether we are of this or another religion is not important to us."

Young Bosnian Serb woman, Doboj

This generation therefore offers the potential to move beyond the traditional drivers of conflict in Bosnia and become a driving force for peace and a more integrated society. Yet the obstacles to this are huge, and young people are looking to others to help them.

Methodology

The perspectives and ideas in this Policy Brief are drawn from research carried out by Saferworld in co-operation with Nansen Dialogue Center Sarajevo and builds on the findings of report published by Saferworld in August 2010, *The missing peace. The need for a long term strategy in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. The research, which involved group discussions and interviews in over 10 locations across BiH, gave young people the opportunity both to voice their opinions, as well as take an active part in carrying out some of the research, thus encouraging them to analyse their own attitudes and behaviour and demonstrating what they can achieve on their own. A final validation and advocacy training workshop for the young researchers and NGO representatives took place in Sarajevo. The findings are explored in greater depth in the report *Leaving the past behind: The perceptions of youth in BiH*.



This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Saferworld and Conciliation Resources take no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid.

REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The findings of this policy brief were drawn from a wider report entitled *Leaving the past behind: The perceptions of youth in BiH* conducted by Saferworld under the People's Peacemaking Perspectives project. For full details of the project and the report please visit:

www.saferworld.org.uk/PPP

For further information please contact: Luitgard Hammerer, Head of Europe and Central Asia, Saferworld, lhammerer@saferworld.org.uk



This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this are the sole responsibility of Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

Saferworld
The Grayston Centre, 28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT, UK
Phone: +44 (0)20 7324 4646
Fax: +44 (0)20 7324 4647
Email: general@saferworld.org.uk
Web: www.saferworld.org.uk
Registered charity no. 1043843
A company limited by guarantee no. 3015948

Conciliation Resources
173 Upper Street, London N1 1RG, UK
Phone: +44 (0)20 7359 7728
Fax: +44 (0)20 7359 4081
Email: cr@c-r.org
Web: www.c-r.org
UK charity no. 1055436

The cover picture shows a group of young people who participated in the research talking together on a tram in Sarajevo.

© NINO VADAKARIA/SAFERWORLD