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VOLTEN BRIEF

New generation, new opportunity for Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Introduction

While Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) can look forward to a future of European Union (EU) integration, it remains haunted by the ghosts of its war past. The country's main challenges remain the lack of integration between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, as well as the heavy state structure, with different levels of governance, that often divides people instead of bringing them together. If Bosnia wants to curtail the outflow of youth to EU countries and move towards European integration, it needs to start investing in its youth and ensure that they are able to meet and share experiences.

Ethnic tensions and bad governance have led to potential instability. Young Bosnians are concerned with their country's security. As today's young generation is less affected by war than their parents, there is hope that incoming politicians, civil servants, and civil society representatives will be more inclined to work together towards a better future for BiH. In fact, it is imperative for Bosnia's stability and security that the incoming generation knows each other and can work together.

Key points:

1. Bosnia's youth grow up in their own communities, with very limited opportunities to mix up with others through education or other activities, given that most youth policies reside at entity and not state level.
2. While Bosnia's youth are concerned over national and international security issues, they can also appear inactive, as they depend on international donors in BiH to organise get-togethers.
3. If BiH's European integration is to succeed, Bosnia's politicians and international partners need to capitalise now on youth's positive inclination towards their fellow countrymen.

Young people need to be provided with incentives to meet with their peers from other ethnicities, as well as begin to take steps toward increased influence and involvement in governance. This is easier said than done in a country where youth policy is not dealt with at a state level but at an entity level. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), the Republika Srpska (RS) and the Brčko District each have their own laws regarding youth and devise their own 4-year strategies. The legal and strategic frameworks include encouraging youth participation in all levels of decision-making. In practice, however, little can be achieved while youth remain separated along entity lines. Education is also primarily dealt with at the entity level. With little being done or decided at the state level and given the limited interaction between people from different regions being promoted at the entity level, BiH largely depends on civil society and international actors for mixed youth initiatives, such as the EU, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and others.

This Volten Brief outlines the obstacles and opportunities for young people from different ethnic backgrounds working on security and governance issues in BiH. It does so by discussing education (Kenan Hodžić), looking at politics and youth (Margareta Blažević), and explaining the challenges of civil servants (Ljubiša Vuković) and the role of youth in civil society and media (Milos Srđić). To conclude, we assess how cooperation and integration can be expanded and intensified in BiH's security governance sector. We advise that BiH state and entity authorities, international partners, and civil society assume the following action points (see last section for full argumentation):

1. Encourage more grassroots youth initiatives that bring people together.
2. Expose students to experience-sharing with peers from other regions and entities.
3. Provide basic security and governance knowledge to young politicians.
4. Invest in civil servant workshops and exchanges.
5. Build and cement nationwide youth networks.
6. Create possibilities for young journalists to learn and meet with peers.
7. International donors should get BiH to address youth matters at the state level.

This paper is part of the Young Professional Trajectory (YPT) of the *Bosnia and Herzegovina Building Inclusive Oversight of Security* (BIHOS) project. BIHOS seeks to strengthen democratic governance and inclusive oversight of the security sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the state, entity, and canton levels through intertwined capacity-building and research components. The nine fellows participating in the YPT work with CESS and BiH partners – the Centre for Security Studies (CSS) and the European Defendology Center (EDC) – for nine months to increase their civil society and security expertise through training and research. This paper is one of the outcomes of the fellowship, in parallel with a CESS Security Matters (Issue No. 31, July 2024) that deals with youth cooperation on security and governance matters at the national, regional, and international levels.

Educating security professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Over the past three decades, Bosnia and Herzegovina has faced a myriad of challenges, compounded by strong involvement of the international community that has created a sort of dependency. Amidst these complexities, the construction of a robust security system in BiH remains an ongoing process. BiH grapples with the absence of a unified and universally accepted education and training system, a challenge exacerbated by the country's complex state structure.

There are opportunities for young people interested in (international) security to study in different places. There has been a significant proliferation of study programmes across various levels of education, both within state and private universities and colleges. BiH's education landscape is diverse, with major universities in cities like Sarajevo, Tuzla, Banja Luka, Mostar, Zenica, Bihać, Bijeljina, Brčko or Travnik, offering various comprehensive programmes on governance, public administration, and political science. Numerous colleges in cities such as Prijedor, Trebinje, Banja Luka, Sokolac, Kiseljak, Doboje, Mostar, Brčko, Konjic or Tuzla also provide specialised education, ensuring broad access to higher education across the country.

At the same time, civil service agencies provide specialised training to enhance the skills and knowledge of civil servants in governance, public policy, and administration. Collaboration with organisations like the EU, OSCE and USAID brings additional training opportunities and workshops focused on democratic governance and public administration.

However, the two entity-level governance structures – FBiH and RS – have differences in terms of curricula and language that reflect cultural and political particularities. Besides that, FBiH is grappling between inter-cantonal cooperation and federal-cantonal relations, whereas RS focuses mostly on centralised governance and administrative efficiency.

Regrettably, BiH serves as an example of segregation and division within the education sector. Consequently, the higher education system in Bosnia is governed by a total of thirteen laws on higher education, each adopted by bodies dispersed across state, entity, and cantonal levels. This fragmented legislative framework has engendered substantial disparities in higher education provision throughout the country.

The prevailing configuration of BiH's security apparatus is heavily influenced by the country's arrangement and the organisational structure of its police agencies. The preparation and cultivation of personnel within the security sector are overseen by a variety of institutions, including police academies and universities. In contrast to the former comprehensive system of police education, reminiscent of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and still prevalent in Serbia and Croatia, BiH has increasingly embraced specialisation. This shift has resulted in the proliferation of three distinct education systems. Basic police training, middle-management staff training, and specialist education are now administered at different levels:

centrally through the BiH Agency for Education and Professional Training for the state-level police and security organisations, and at the entity level through the Police Academy of the Federal Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Directorate for Police Training within the Training Centre of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic Srpska.

Public competitions for positions within the police force lack stringent criteria regarding professional qualifications. Consequently, individuals lacking criminal justice, criminology, security, and legal knowledge may secure employment within law enforcement institutions. This lax approach undermines the integrity of the police profession, perpetuating a cycle of relativisation, marginalisation, pauperisation, and degradation among criminal-legal-security personnel. The prolonged absence of strict educational and qualification norms has impeded the recruitment of educated middle-management personnel within police structures. While the Sarajevo Canton stands as an exception with its stringent regulations of 2018, recognising in the Law on Police Officers the knowledge and skills of specialised personnel to work in police agencies, the lack of harmonisation across other administrative-territorial units exacerbates the challenge.

By standardising recruitment processes and elevating educational requirements, BiH could mitigate the challenges posed by its fragmented education landscape, thereby bolstering the professionalism and efficacy of its law enforcement institutions. In particular, a more integrated education system would be beneficial to youth's inclusion and cooperation with peers on security matters.

Seeking bridge builders: A new generation of politicians

Young people are not only the resource of the present, but also the builders of the preferable future. Through their creative and innovative potential, youth can be facilitators of change and societal progress by detecting security issues of today and tackling them for a better tomorrow. To do so effectively, young politicians from different ethnic backgrounds should discuss how to best address security issues in the community and serve as checks and balances for the state and entities' security bodies.

Most frequently, young people enter politics to influence policies that affect them or their local community. They often want to counter youth unemployment, emigration, or environmental issues. Some young people join political parties to secure better professional opportunities and employment for themselves or their families. To start building a political career, young people generally start by becoming a member of a political party, usually the party's local branch in their respective communities. Within FBiH, they can then proceed to run for and become active in the municipal council, from where they can move up to the cantonal-, federal- and, ultimately, state-level bodies. Within RS, after their engagement within the municipal council, young politicians can proceed to run for office in the city-, entity-, and, eventually, state-level bodies. However, those with family connections in high politics can advance quicker and/or skip some levels. Most young politicians rarely interact or cooperate with their counterparts in the other entity until and if they reach state-level bodies or institutions.

Ever since the end of the 1990s war and particularly in the last couple of years, there have been local and regional initiatives geared towards bringing young politicians together, as well as enhancing cross-party and, by extension, inter-ethnic cooperation around issues such as youth unemployment, youth political engagement, youth emigration, and, albeit less, security issues.

There are several international programmes aimed at young politicians. For example, the International Republican Institute (IRI) established a youth political leadership academy aimed at enhancing youth's representation in decision-making and promoting cross-party cooperation. The Institute for the Development of Youth 'KULT' and the Perpetuum Mobile Institute are also active through events. The EU works on educating young activists from civil society organisations and politicians from different political parties across BiH in leadership and policy-making. Similar educational programmes have also been organised by USAID, the US Embassy in BiH and several educational institutions and foundations, such as the Foundation Boris Divković – with support from USAID and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). At the same time, the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology has its own Diplomatic Academy for professionals in organisations and institutions. For its part, until 2020 the OSCE Mission held a 'Youth and Security School', which was one of the few programmes focused specifically on training youth leaders on security issues.

At the local level, 'Group 9' was established by youth representatives of political parties from both entities working jointly on social change through cross-party cooperation. The group's work has been supported by the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The Political Youth Network established by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights Croatia also gathers several parties from Bosnia and encourages cross-party collaboration on different socio-political and security issues.

These initiatives present commendable efforts towards inter-ethnic cross-party cooperation of young politicians, which can facilitate important political and personal alliances that are essential for effectively approaching different socio-political issues. However, often these and similar programmes and networks within BiH do not touch upon security sector oversight and seem unable to effectively push forward their agenda around security issues and provide the political leadership with solutions. There is also a lack of policy frameworks (both at the entity and state levels) which would allow or facilitate that. Finally, all educational programmes and initiatives have been financed by international organisations or foundations, while support from (local) political leadership is scarce.

Several programmes have been implemented with the aim of equipping young politicians with the skills and knowledge necessary to actively participate in political decision-making. However, considerable issues remain that need to be tackled to achieve progress beyond the groundwork, particularly pertaining to security-sector governance. Three matters stand out.

First, youth cross-party networks and educational programmes do not focus enough on issues such as security-sector oversight or security and governance issues. This should be an essential aspect of youth education and political activity, as youth have the potential to gradually and internally reroute the political activity of their respective parties from inter-ethnic animosity to cooperation.

Second, it is difficult for youth networks to reach or influence high-level decision-makers, as current policies and the political atmosphere do not endorse youth political engagement. *Third*, political leadership's support for networks and initiatives is scarce, which makes it even more challenging for youth political networks to be heard and to proactively engage in political activity and decision-making. Existing legal and policy frameworks are insufficient to facilitate young politicians' involvement in political decision-making, while there is a lack of political will to change that.

Therefore, considerable and systematic reform is still needed to ensure that young politicians can more easily engage in political decision-making and oversight, especially with regards to security issues. Whereas the international community and donors can support, eventually BiH institutions at different levels of governance will need to take up and institutionalise this work so that youth can have a greater impact on security sector policy-making.

Behind the scenes: Young civil servants

Civil servants are the backbone of governance, as well as its institutional memory. Often, attention is devoted to youth in relation to politics or to civil society, while civil servants are taken for granted, including young people who enter service with plans and ideas. These individuals, serving within various governmental institutions, including the defence or interior ministries or parliament, represent a vital demographic whose insights hold the potential to reshape the policies and practices of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, as well as its individual entities.

But who are these young civil servants? They are members of the post-war generation, born and raised in a country marked by conflict and its aftermath. Most of them are educated in universities within BiH, while some have pursued studies abroad and returned after obtaining a degree. Civil servants working for FBiH and RS rarely meet and the limited cooperation that does exist can be challenging. Civil servants in RS operate in a centralised system in which they can build their careers. There is more diversity in FBiH as the Federation consists of cantons with their own civil services. People working for state-level institutions often apply directly and do not come from RS or FBiH bureaucracies.

Young civil servants in BiH navigate a complex landscape where ethnic identities intersect with professional responsibilities. While efforts have been made to promote inclusivity and diversity within governmental institutions, persistent suspicions and historical grievances continue to cast a shadow over inter-ethnic relations. In that sense, the European Union's decision to start accession negotiations with Bosnia offers hope for young civil servants, providing motivation for increased cooperation and integration across different ethnicities. This announcement underscores the imperative of nurturing a cohesive and inclusive environment within BiH's security ministries, transcending ethnic divides and embracing the collective vision of a prosperous and united nation.

The legacy of war still influences institutional structures and relationships, meaning that young civil servants must navigate a landscape where ethnic divisions still impact coordination among different institutions. The older generations are often more reserved regarding cooperation with counterparts in other parts of the country and young people. Additionally, the bureaucratic system in BiH is often slow and inefficient, making implementation of new initiatives difficult and causing frustration. Political parties benefit from these divisions among the populace, as this strengthens their grip on power. Young civil servants who try to change this balance encounter significant opposition. Moreover, the added oversight from the European Union, while beneficial for reform, is often viewed by politicians as a threat to their authority.

Ambitious young civil servants end up lacking the necessary resources and support to implement their ideas, often impeded by power structures that see them as a threat to the status quo. Additionally, political parties in power, from all factions, unfortunately benefit from divisions, while added oversight from the EU could be seen as an attack on their absolute authority.

The resilience of young civil servants, coupled with the imperative of EU membership, provides a compelling impetus to surmount these challenges and pave the way for a more secure and prosperous future in BiH. The EU's commitment to supporting BiH's path towards membership provides young civil servants with opportunities to align with EU standards and practices, fostering professional development and integration into European structures. Participation in EU-funded programmes facilitates engagement with European values and promotes a culture of cooperation. Moreover, the increasing role of civil society, NGOs and think tanks offers avenues for young civil servants to interact with diverse stakeholders and contribute to grassroots efforts promoting transparency and good governance within the security sector.

Lastly, the digital transformation of governance processes could potentially enable more efficient collaboration across ethnic and institutional boundaries, as the adoption of digital tools and platforms can facilitate better communication and coordination. By streamlining administrative procedures and making information more accessible, digital governance could reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies and create a more transparent and accountable system.

Analysis of BiH's security and governance through the perspective of young civil servants uncovers a lot of challenges and opportunities, particularly regarding EU membership. Despite obstacles, support from the EU, regional collaboration, civil society engagement, and technological advancements offer pathways to a secure and inclusive future. The commitment of young civil servants to unity and prosperity holds the potential to shape BiH's path toward peace, stability, and EU integration, which will naturally improve the oversight of the security sector as well. Their engagement in seizing opportunities and navigating challenges is pivotal in steering BiH's trajectory.

Young civil society and journalists

Civil society and media in Bosnia and Herzegovina do not play enough of a visible role in the democratic process, citizen participation, and governance of the security sector. There are several reasons for this, ranging from the lack of a tradition of civic activism to a lack of transparency in the work of some NGOs, and from a lack of quality investigative journalism to worldwide online habits of social media and disinformation.

Young people in BiH, whether in FBiH or RS, often find themselves in similar social positions: lack of employment, inadequate educational system, etc. But young people in FBiH have slightly greater opportunities in the field of civil society action, especially in the Sarajevo Canton. There are various NGO projects where young people meet and exchange information. In contrast, in RS, the adoption of a draft 'foreign agents' law in November 2023 indicated that the authorities wanted more control over civil initiative. Fortunately, the law was withdrawn in May 2024. However, there is obviously a lack of genuine desire for change in BiH. Well-designed and implemented projects often do not receive the necessary media coverage or further support beyond completion to ensure sustainability.

Social networks that constitute civil society are a way for young people to get involved in their communities, realise their interests and potential, and benefit from new knowledge, skills, and experiences that will be positively valued both in the education and professional worlds. To strengthen social responsibility and engagement in the young generation, implies listening to them and involving them in NGOs. To address these challenges, change is needed both in the way that civil society is organised and functions, and in the relationship between the state and the civil sector. On the one hand, civil society needs to be more open to collaborating with the authorities and serving as a bridge in-between the government and the broader public. On the other hand, authorities need to recognise and make use of civil society's input to policy-making. Such a process needs to be led by young people – a challenge considering that politicians and civil servants tend to be senior people, while a large number of NGOs are also run by senior people who may not be as eager to share influence with youth.

Journalists in BiH face challenges in terms of freedom of expression, independence, and professionalism. Political pressures, censorship, self-censorship, ownership control, and financial constraints often hinder free journalism and objective reporting. However, there are independent media outlets and journalists striving to remain unbiased and objective in their reporting, despite facing challenges and threats. Civil society organisations and international institutions often work to strengthen media freedom and promote professional standards in journalism in BiH through training, campaigns, and advocacy for media-sector reforms. The digital sphere is becoming increasingly important for young activists, NGOs, and journalists in Bosnia. Social media, internet platforms, blogs, and other digital tools enable young people to organise, express their views, and function as drivers of social change.

But the digital sphere also presents challenges such as fake news, hate speech, privacy issues, and digital divides, which require attention and responses from relevant actors in society. There are various initiatives and projects addressing training and skills development for young people in areas such as media literacy, civic education, leadership, communication, and other relevant fields.

These are often implemented in collaboration with local and international civil society, universities, schools, media, and other relevant institutions to ensure that young people have access to relevant education and support.

At the end of the third decade of transition in Bosnia, the country still has a long way to go in terms of reform. Tensions persist, requiring international presence to keep stability. The country is stuck in a transitional impasse, as this process (or rather processes) is being conducted uncritically, with each faction pushing for transitional solutions that best suit their own political, economic, or social agenda. In that sense, hope is vested in a new generation to mend the disposition of current powers.

Bridging the divide

Youth from FBiH and RS rarely meet through education, local travel, or youth initiatives. At the same time, they are ready to engage with their fellow countrymen on BiH's future. This lack of interaction has a negative impact on the country's stability and security. As youth are concerned with BiH's internal and external security challenges yet hopeful about European integration, they should have a bigger say on these matters. This means that young politicians, civil servants, civil society representatives and journalists should step up, but also have the opportunity to do so. BiH state authorities, in close cooperation with entity authorities, international partners (foremost the EU and its member states) and local and international civil society should strive to amend this situation. Here are seven actions to take up.

First, encourage more grassroots youth initiatives that bring people together. Leaving youth policy mostly with FBiH and RS entities has resulted in separation and complacency, which can have a negative bearing on the country's security and stability. Meanwhile, the international community – foremost the EU and the US – has taken on the responsibility to provide opportunities for youth to meet on a national and international basis, creating a strange dependency. Ideally, Bosnia would establish a mechanism that can fulfil a coordinating and supportive role in working with the entities and international actors. As this is not in the cards due to Bosnia's political environment, more needs to be done bottom-up. The way forward is attention by all levels of governance in BiH, international donors and especially youth themselves to encourage, develop and support grassroots initiatives that bring youth together around important issues.

Second, expose students to experience-sharing with peers from other regions and entities. Disunity among educational models creates significant disparities in educating Bosnia's politicians, security professionals, civil servants, civil society actors, and journalists. It is imperative to initiate a process of harmonisation among existing training programmes, enriching them with contemporary security knowledge, positive practices, and experiences from other nations, foremost EU member states. To encourage students, initiatives could include creating nationwide academic competitions and collaborative projects that bring together students from different regions and backgrounds.

Third, provide basic security and governance knowledge to young politicians. Programmes focused on young politicians' professional development and education should provide insights into governance and security matters. Such programmes should also focus on teaching and supporting young politicians to put forward their agendas and function as oversight actors on all decision-making levels (i.e. municipality, cantonal, entity and state level). Relevant policy frameworks should be introduced and consistently implemented to enable and continuously endorse youth political engagement at all levels, especially with regards to security issues and oversight activity.

Fourth, invest in civil servant workshops and exchanges. Whereas there are some options for politicians and civil society representatives, there are not many opportunities for civil servant exchanges between RS and FBiH. In workshops that deal with technical issues, participants from different regions and ethnicity can build trust and establish informal networks for collaboration. As a prerequisite, this work would need to be free from political influence and focus on technical matters, including digitalisation and cybersecurity.

Fifth, build and cement nationwide youth networks. NGOs are often too comfortable in their bubble (a capital or region) and lean too much on experienced contributors. Of course, changes in civil society are difficult to achieve without external funding, but if that becomes available, it would be good to invest in nationwide networks that are run by youth and for youth, while involving current civil society. This would not only help youth to understand and hopefully appreciate and become active in civil society activities, but it would also help NGOs and think tanks to rejuvenate their activities and organisations.

Sixth, create possibilities for young journalists to learn and meet with peers. With news consumption continuing to change from newspapers, radio and TV to online sources and social media, young journalists often no longer sit in an office with colleagues. They mostly work individually as self-employed and independent journalists that sell their stories to media outlets or run their own online channels. Just as in civil society, it would help if journalists occasionally moved out of their bubble and exchanged experiences with peers. A tutor initiative, whereby senior journalists guide youth in building experience while young journalists introduce senior peers to new media habits, would be beneficial for journalism, especially if experiences are shared between regions. This practice would be especially important in reporting on security issues where social media networks often play an aggravating role, and where balanced (online) journalism can inform instead of incite.

Seventh, international donors should get BiH to address youth matters at the state level. The EU and US have a strong interest in working with a new inclusive and cooperative generation of Bosnians. Both also have strong leverage on BiH that they could apply to ensure that youth affairs receive attention and that people have the chance to meet their peers abroad, but especially in BiH. In particular, the EU, which granted BiH candidate membership status, will be keen to work with a new generation. The ambition of EU integration should be linked to tangible benefits for young people and serve as an incentive. At the same time, it generates leverage for Brussels to push current powers in BiH to give space to new ways of thinking and working. In this way, EU support and leverage circle back to seeking out and supporting grassroots initiatives (see the first recommendation).

Volten Briefs

Peter Volten established CESS in 1993. Peter was a staunch supporter of European unity and strong Transatlantic ties. He sought to contribute to peace and security in Europe by reaching out to people that had lived under authoritarian rule. A mission that remains very relevant today. Peter passed away in December 2022. This series of policy briefs is dedicated to him.



CESS

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BIHOS – Bosnia and Herzegovina Building Inclusive Oversight of Security

BIHOS seeks to strengthen democratic governance and inclusive oversight of the security sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the state, entity, and canton levels. By investing in *capabilities* through providing tools, skills, and techniques to oversight actors; fostering *cooperation* among parliaments, civil society organisations, and other oversight actors; and by promoting a *culture* of oversight that is critical and constructive, BIHOS contributes to better informed, more effective, and inclusive oversight of the security sector in BiH.

BIHOS is implemented through intertwined capacity-building and research components. The former includes tailor-made training courses and trajectories, as well as peer-to-peer consultations, training-of-trainers' courses, and study visits. The latter consists of a needs' assessment exercise, a sequence of expert labs, and a functional analysis, presented in a series of publications. The project is implemented by CESS from The Netherlands, in cooperation with the Centre for Security Studies (CSS) and the European Defendology Center (EDC) from BiH.



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