



BIHOS fellows meet at the Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina in The Hague

SECURITY MATTERS

Youth security cooperation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Editorial

Thinking ahead for Bosnia

How are young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) involved with national, regional and European institutions that work on security and democracy? Are organisations like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU) actively involving young people? Are BiH's young professionals interested in working with these international organisations and/or with foundations? These are the questions we discuss in this Security Matters. In an accompanying policy brief (CESS Volten Brief 8), we discuss the obstacles and opportunities for young people from different ethnic backgrounds working on security and governance issues in BiH.

Both publications are part of the BIHOS Young Professional Trajectory, a series of training courses in which nine BiH students, academics, and civil society experts built their writing and outreach skills, while helping CESS with its research on BiH's security sector governance challenges. Our cooperation brought us together in Banja Luka, Sarajevo, and The Hague for several meetings and training courses. When asked about what we would like to write, we all agreed that initiatives like the BIHOS Trajectory focused on young research fellows was an important topic, as young people in BiH remain largely separated across different ethnic lines. Whereas Bosnian youth of different ethnicities have no problem with each other, they also barely know each other, as their education and careers remain mostly segregated: a course that does not bode well for the country's European integration ambitions.

Young people in BiH understand that security and stability are key to the functioning of both society and the state. From family conversations to classrooms, the topic of safety is commonplace, but a deeper understanding of its importance and of what it means for each individual and society is often lacking. Insufficient attention to these matters can lead to a 'wait and see' mentality instead of an active stand in promoting cooperation and understanding. Although there are considerable differences in participation levels, many young people see the need to work together on security issues. Youth security cooperation is not only a matter of common interests, but also of common perspectives that are crucial for a stable and secure future. Young people (aged 18 to 35) have similar worldviews, which leads them to be united and persistent in what they set out to achieve.

Young people in BiH bring new perspectives and ideas to the table, which is essential in approaching today's complex security challenges. Their use of new technologies and communication is important to developing effective strategies. Therefore, BiH authorities should encourage their participation in the security sector to ensure the long-term sustainability and vitality of security institutions. Meanwhile, international organisations have a role in supporting the proactive participation of young people in the security sector. Providing space for young people, encouraging their ideas, and securing the necessary resources are important steps in creating a safer society for all. Young people's participation in security issues in BiH is not only a matter of their personal development and well-being, but also an investment in the future of the country. In a way, taking Bosnia's past and current polarised politics into account, the absence of interaction on security matters among youth from different ethnicities is a security risk in itself.

This Security Matters newsletter discusses the ways in which young people in BiH cooperate on security and democratic reform. First, Ninna Taći discusses the options for cooperation in Bosnia itself, looking at the interaction (or the lack thereof) between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS). Do these entities bring people together or seek to separate them? What role does the Office of the High Representative (OHR) play in bringing youth together? Second, Dejan Umljenović discusses the same issues for the Western Balkan region. What opportunities are there for youth from Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and so on to meet, share experiences, and set up (in)formal cooperation mechanisms? Third, Emina Garaplija takes a step further by looking at BiH's approach to broader European cooperation and youth involvement and assessing NATO and EU initiatives. In line with the last article, we interviewed Asja Kratovic, who works on security and youth issues at the EU Delegation in Sarajevo. We hope you enjoy the read.

Kristina Djukić and Jasmina Sarajkić, BIHOS fellows

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Article

Bosnia's youth are not meeting over security

Ninna Taći, BIHOS fellow, Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, youth incorporation and cooperation within the country's security structure is woefully inadequate. Despite numerous constitutional provisions and international initiatives, there has not been real progress in getting young people involved in security and government. The mismatch between the youth and security domains, exacerbated by systemic problems such as political disillusionment and corruption, highlights the need for increased international cooperation and robust civil society initiatives that encourage significant youth involvement in developing a safe and stable country.

Young people in BiH are largely excluded from discussions and activities related to security and governance. BiH state institutions, responsible for representing the country in international and European organisations, do not prioritise youth participation in security policy. This lack of youth emphasis extends to interactions with the Office of the High Representative, as well as at an entity level in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. The latter two also rarely collaborate on youth affairs, further deepening the divide.

There are many options for local authorities to support youth. Here are two examples.

First, link youth organisations with international bodies on security issues. The Youth Council of FBiH unifies youth organisations to advocate for young people's interests. It engages in policy advocacy and youth development programmes, and represents young people in discussions with governmental and international bodies. The Commission for the Coordination of Youth Issues in BiH coordinates youth-related policies and activities across the country, ensuring cooperation among organisations and supporting the implementation of youth programmes. These youth organisations should also play a pivotal role in promoting youth involvement in security matters. At the same time, they need to establish better communication with international representatives (OHR, EU, OSCE) to help young people develop critical thinking skills and influence socio-political and security developments in BiH. For instance, the Youth Council of FBiH could collaborate with the OSCE in organising workshops on security policy, providing a platform for youth from both FBiH and RS to interact and build an informed approach to national security.

Second, increase the role of BiH civil society in youth matters. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play an influential role in fostering youth engagement and participation in BiH. By empowering young people through education and activism, NGOs can bridge the gap between different ethnic groups and entities, promoting a more cohesive and inclusive society. The involvement of youth in civil society activities helps to build a sense of community and shared purpose, which is essential for the long-term stability and development of BiH. At the same time, by involving young people, civil society could renew itself and become more innovative. Ideally, NGOs would receive longer-term support to set up scholarship programmes that include training on leadership, project development, research, and advocacy, and bring young people from different parts of BiH together to work and build networks.

Youth in BiH face significant challenges, including unemployment and corruption, which erode their trust in public institutions. While youth engagement in civic activities is growing, it remains low, and many young people are disinterested in political and social issues. Voting patterns among youth reflect nationalistic tendencies, further complicating efforts to build a cohesive society. To improve the situation, youth organisations must promote young people's active participation in security and civil society. Strengthening the role of civil society and fostering international collaboration through scholarships and exchanges can provide young people with the necessary skills and experiences. These efforts would enable BiH youth to contribute meaningfully to their country's democracy and security.

Article

Balkan youth eager to share and discuss

Dejan Umljenović, BIHOS fellow, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Like any other young democracy that has arisen after internal turmoil, BiH has many challenges ahead to strengthen good governance of the security sector. The strength and efficiency of the security sector depend not only on the will of legislators and politicians, but also on the engagement of young professionals, often through civil society. Because Bosnia's neighbours deal with similar challenges, regional cooperation offers a good opportunity for youth to learn and exchange experiences. So how are youth from BiH engaging around democracy and security with their peers in the Western Balkans?

Security-focused activities between the civil sector and youth are limited in Southeast Europe. There are, however, some initiatives that seek to change this.

First, the Sarajevo branch of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office recently launched a strategic plan to promote a youth, peace, and security agenda across the Western Balkans, as part of the broader 'RYCOgnized' project, supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The overall aim is to empower youth, institutions and NGOs, and enable youth to engage in knowledge-sharing, peacebuilding, and security cooperation. As stated in the plan, 'only a minority of youth in the Western Balkan states is actively involved in civic engagement or civil society activities, while many more young people have expressed interest in being involved'.

Second, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy established a Regional Peacebuilding Academy, which brings together young experts from BiH, Kosovo, and Serbia. It includes activities such as large and small network meetings, collaborative projects, small-scale research initiatives among BiH, Kosovo, and Serbia, as well as high-level conferences and meetings.

Third, the Regional Cooperation Council, with co-funding from the EU, launched the three-year Western Balkans Youth Lab project that covers six Western Balkan countries. It strives to create a longer-term structured regional dialogue between youth organisations and national administrations, focused on jointly developing policies to increase youth participation in decision-making.

Meanwhile, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) Young Faces educational programme gathers young professionals from several European countries, including the Western Balkans, where they have the chance to attend webinars and mentored policy paper writing courses, as well as learn about new security trends like cybersecurity (which was the subject of 2023). Unfortunately, representatives from BiH did not participate in the programme, which could indicate a lack of organisational capacity or interest.

Although some domestic and regional NGOs do have initiatives aimed at integrating youth into security issues, the work seems ad hoc instead of structural. The lack of youth engagement in security can be traced back to the habit of post-communist societies limiting security issues to the elites and quickly stamping topics as confidential or no-go-areas. Individuals and NGOs that seek to work on security issues can be easily seen with suspicion by the authorities. Often, the blockades of working on security are more severe than the hurdles that youth of different countries and backgrounds need to take to meet and cooperate.

Of the existing regional forms of youth cooperation in the field of security, it is disappointing that young people from Bosnia partake in only a handful of initiatives, while there are little to no initiatives in BiH aiming to connect youth to security issues. BiH should be the first in connecting young people around security to avoid repeating the mistakes from the past. Moreover, it would be beneficial if the few activities that connect youth and security liaised and pulled resources to create impact and attract attention from a broader public. One of the potential formats could be a gathering of youth, primarily those dealing with social sciences, who would learn about contemporary security challenges from domestic and international experts and gradually expand their activities to other countries of the Western Balkans.

Article

Linking Bosnia's youth to the European mainstream

Emina Garaplija, BIHOS fellow, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Youth engagement is crucial to shape a democratic and secure future for Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, little is happening in terms of initiatives and policies. Instead, young people are leaving Bosnia.

BiH's youth, from different ethnic backgrounds, generally express scepticism towards security, given past conflicts and current problems. Furthermore, disappointment with the political system also lowers their confidence in democracy as a force of positive change. Youth engagement initiatives exist, but they often lack inclusivity and fail to address deep-seated issues such as unemployment, education, the environment or human rights. In Bosnia, three ethnically-divided interpretations of the 1990s war dominate official narratives, hindering reconciliation efforts. This lack of common ground, exacerbated by occasional flare-ups of ethnic tensions and political discord, gives youth a sense of insecurity. The present fear of potential conflict and unresolved past atrocities fosters mistrust and anxiety among young people.

A 2021 survey conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) found that a significant majority of BiH youth were dissatisfied with the political system, due to corruption, nepotism, and a lack of transparency. An outdated education system also fails to provide youth with the skills needed to access available jobs, leading to high youth unemployment and economic instability. These issues are prompting a desire among young people to leave BiH to seek a better future, driving emigration.

The EU prioritises reforms and youth engagement through financial aid and projects (see interview with Asja Kratovic below). The EU is a frontrunner in terms of youth initiatives through support of civil society and cooperation with universities. People associate the EU with education and employment. BiH's recent EU candidate status is helping to gather some new momentum among youth. Support for EU integration is strong among BiH's youth. Whereas youth from FBiH are mostly in favour of EU membership, the support is somewhat lower among RS youth. However, the EU should not take support for granted, and keep investing in empowering youth through participation and capacity-building, as well as ensuring ethnic inclusivity.

NATO and Bosnia and Herzegovina collaborate closely, supporting democratic, security sector, and defence reforms through programmes like Partnership for Peace. While these initiatives offer educational opportunities, they primarily target government officials and military personnel, and youth involvement is modest. In BiH, youth perspectives vary between the entities, influenced by historical narratives and political affiliations. Young people in FBiH often view NATO as a guarantor of security and stability, particularly considering continued ethnic tensions and unresolved political divisions. Others, however, have reservations about NATO's role in the region, particularly in relation to concerns about sovereignty and military intervention. In RS, youth attitudes towards NATO cooperation are also shaped by historical narratives emphasising resistance to external interference and sovereignty concerns. To engage youth effectively, NATO must carefully navigate these differences. NATO should offer more educational and training opportunities for youth, establish advisory boards, and create exchange programmes to enhance engagement and collaboration of youth from both BiH entities.

Youth engagement is crucial for stability, democracy, and security in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. By addressing their concerns, promoting their innovative and creative ideas, and fostering inclusivity, meaningful progress can be achieved towards a brighter future for the country. Both the EU and NATO play a crucial role in supporting youth engagement, albeit it could be enhanced. By prioritising youth empowerment, they could more effectively contribute to peace and stability, and to strengthening security and democracy in the region. Young people in BiH working on issues such as human rights, unemployment, and democracy should be supported more to drive positive societal change.

Interview

EU working with Bosnia and Herzegovina's youth

Asja Kratovic, Programme Outreach Officer, European Union in Bosnia and Herzegovina

How does BiH's youth regard the country's EU membership ambition? Do they engage with the EU?

According to our last youth polling from 2023, overall, 84 per cent of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina support the country's EU membership. When it comes to the benefits which young people identify with EU accession, 70 per cent said greater employment opportunities, 54 per cent higher standards of living, while 39 per cent mentioned easier travel opportunities.

The EU Delegation/Office of the EU Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EU Office) puts a big focus on youth, including through our outreach programmes. In 2023, the EU Office in BiH launched 'Generation Change' – our flagship youth programme aimed at providing students from all public universities with a platform to raise their voice on issues that they consider important for them, as well as for the country's EU path. This year, the programme included over 550 students from the following universities: Banja Luka, Bihac, Mostar, 'Dzermal Bijedic' Mostar, Sarajevo, East Sarajevo (through its branch in Bijeljina), Zenica, and Tuzla. Since the 'Generation Change' programme worked very well, this year we decided to expand the initiative to include young politicians and civil society activists.

Another big youth programme, Young European Ambassadors (YEA), managed by the European Commission in Brussels, is open to young people from all of the EU's Western Balkan partners. The programme is focused on cooperation, networking, and capacity-building, and young people are encouraged to work together and promote EU values. This autumn, there will be an open call for a third generation of YEA.

What do you see as the main challenge for the current post-war generation in BiH?

Constant political turmoil is an obstacle for everyone in BiH, including young people. Due to this, unfortunately, many educated young people are leaving the country without the prospect of returning, which puts the country at the top of the list when it comes to brain drain. In 2022, according to our poll, while 41 per cent of those surveyed said that they did not want to leave the country, the others either said that they wanted to leave or were being held back by certain constraints (financial means, still trying to build a life in BiH, etc.). Our poll also showed that unemployment and a poor economic situation, followed by crime and corruption, are the most significant problems for young people. For the Generation Z, having a good education and finding a suitable well-paid job are important. It is thus very important to create such an environment and provide support for young people to find a job or develop a business, motivating them to wish to stay here.

Does the EU Delegation promote cooperation among young people from different ethnic and cultural groups?

Unfortunately, it is the international community, rather than domestic authorities, that leads in offering youth opportunities to meet, interact, and work together. On top of this, building relationships and friendships with peers from around the country has additional and long-term value. When you give young people a chance and opportunity to meet, many other things come naturally for them.

Last year, we launched a two-week 'State of Peace' summer school for young people aged 18 to 30 from BiH, Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro, which focused on reconciliation and peacebuilding. Participants had the chance to travel around BiH and speak with people involved in the peacebuilding process, as well as with war veterans, religious leaders, politicians, and international actors. A big part of the programme was memorialisation and jointly paying respect to all civil victims. We hope to be able to continue with this programme, as it can have a great impact on young people.

Indeed, it's often international actors, most noticeably the EU, but also of course the OSCE and others, that bring young people together in a room, as you say, and enable them to build networks, build friendships for life. Are there also efforts to help governments and local authorities to do the same?

Yes; the EU in BiH is currently implementing, together with our partners OSCE, Council of Europe and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), a reconciliation programme called 'Možemo bolje' (We can do better). Among other things, it focuses on local communities, especially neighbouring communities that have ethnically-diverse populations. The programme seeks to empower people to implement different initiatives among communities, also involving youth. But, indeed, most actions seeking to bring communities together are still being facilitated by the international community.

Interview by Kristina Djukić and Jasmina Sarajkić

About 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 *capacities* 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. BIHOS is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands.



CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance security, development, democracy and human rights by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges. CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.



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