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The Role of Youth in the Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the
Organization Youth Initiative for Human Rights and the Forgotten
Children of War Association

Mentor:

Prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović

Student:

Iva Milutinović

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Content

Introduction	3
1. Literature review	6
1.1 Placing Youth in the Peacebuilding	9
2. Theoretical Framework	14
2.1. Reconciliation: The Building of Relationship – A Conceptual Framework of Peacebuilding by Lederach	14
2.2. Galtung’s “TRANSCEND” Method	17
2.3. The 4RS Framework: Analyzing Education’s Contribution to Sustainable Peacebuilding with Social Justice in Conflict-Affected Contexts	18
3. Methodology	23
4. Analysis	25
4.1 Case Study of The Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR)	25
4.2 Case Study of The Forgotten Children of War Association	37
5. Discussion	51
Conclusion	56
References	58

Introduction

The wars in the Western Balkans which followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991. and lasted for more than 10 years, did irreparable damage to this region, leaving it with political, ethnic and social divisions which have far-reaching consequences even today. The transition from conflict to peace has been marked by numerous challenges, such as addressing war crimes, facilitating the return of refugees, and rebuilding divided societies. In this region, the conflict has persisted in a non-violent manner, characterized by ongoing disputes over accountability and competing narratives. This continues despite significant investments in transitional justice, including the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and extensive international support for local courts to prosecute war crimes. Inter-ethnic tensions and nationalist agendas still heavily influence both private and public spheres, which is reflected in polarized media and public discourse. According to Fairey and Kerr the widespread disillusionment of local communities is becoming more visible and louder. In deeply complex and challenging post-conflict environments, where violence has claimed and destroyed lives and divided societies, there are no straightforward answers to the question of how society should be repaired. Transitional justice, peacebuilding and reconciliation programs, often implemented by international donors, are increasingly viewed with suspicion and cynicism by the locals, who feel these efforts do not address their real needs. Young people especially feel alienated from these projects and have been looking for alternative places where they could be able to transform the future. (Fairey and Kerr, 2020). The post-conflict period for Serbian youth could be characterized as, how Greenberg calls it ‘politics of disappointment’: ‘the dual tensions of being disappointed and disappointing to others’ (Greenberg, 2014).

Even though there is a large amount of literature regarding peacebuilding and reconciliation in the Western Balkans (such as Kostovicova and Biquelet. 2018, Jansen, 2013, Subotic, 2015, Besic and Dzuverovic, 2020, Haider, 2021), the role of youth in this process has been somehow neglected. Accordingly, the goal of this research is to examine and analyze the role

of youth in peacebuilding and contribution to the understanding of the importance of young people for building peace in the region. This will be done through the analysis of their participation in organization Youth Initiative for Human Rights and the Forgotten Children of War Association, by examining their areas of engagement, impact and obstacles they face in promoting reconciliation in their ‘neighborhood.’ McEvoy-Levy argues that discussions about peace processes often ignore the crucial role of children and youth, a gap that is both short-sighted and detrimental. This is especially problematic in the post-accord phase, which focuses on preventing violence and fostering societal reconciliation. Youth play a dual role: they can pose challenges to peace or contribute significantly to peacebuilding efforts. The long-term success of a peace agreement depends on how future generations perceive and engage with it. Their acceptance or rejection of the peace process, their socialization during this period, and their views on the outcomes are pivotal. Since today’s young people will become tomorrow’s leaders and key stakeholders, their involvement in peacebuilding and the development of their political attitudes and skills is essential for achieving lasting peace (McEvoy-Levy, 2001).

Young people are the future of any society, and their active participation in reconciliation and peacebuilding helps instill values of tolerance, dialogue, and understanding in the next generation. This involvement contributes to achieving more sustainable and enduring peace. Therefore, involving young people in peacebuilding efforts in the region is crucial as they possess significant potential and can play a key role in advancing dialogue. Youth participation in peacebuilding brings several benefits, including their creativity, innovation, and energy. They could challenge entrenched narratives, propose innovative solutions, and utilize modern communication and engagement methods that older generations may not have considered. By engaging young people, we foster future generations that are committed to peace and reconciliation, who approach regional communities with openness rather than hostility. The main research question of this paper is: How can young people contribute to building peace in the Western Balkans region? Additionally, what are the ways in which they can help to achieve reconciliation? I hypothesize that young people can play a huge role in

reconciliation and peacebuilding in the region by participating in various activities and implementing new ideas of peace through civic education and promoting coexistence of multiple truths.

In the first section, a review of academic literature will be conducted to become acquainted with existing literature on the role of youth in peacebuilding. Additionally, the literature review will be supplemented with research on peacebuilding and reconciliation both generally and specifically within the Western Balkans region. In the second part, the theoretical foundations of this work will be outlined, focusing primarily on theories of peacebuilding and reconciliation. The methodological framework will consist of two case studies, supported by interviews, as well as secondary data, by document analysis, including annual reports and other publicly available information. Following that, I will present the final insights derived from the research conducted. The final section will present conclusions and propose recommendations for future research in the subject area.

1. Literature Review

In the 1990s, the former Yugoslavia endured brutal wars and severe human rights abuses. Following the collapse of the state, economic hardships and political fragmentation, fueled by ethno-nationalist propaganda, led to the emergence of political factions centered on ethnic identities. This resulted in territorial disputes and competition for political power and recognition. The formation of new ethnopolitical nation-states led to exclusionary policies in multiethnic regions, and the legacies of these conflicts continue to impact the present (Fischer and Petrović-Ziemer, 2013). With over 130,000 victims, the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia stands as the largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II (Jovanovic, Bermudez, 2021). Countries in the Western Balkans have undertaken numerous transitional justice and reconciliation efforts to address the legacy of the 1990s wars and the enduring political and societal divisions (Haider, 2021). From the outset, international actors, supported by local human rights advocates, emphasized the necessity of a legal process to address war crimes and severe human rights violations. Consequently, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was established in The Hague in 1993 (Fischer and Petrović-Ziemer, 2013).

According to Kostovicova, there is no consensus on the causes and nature of the violence that occurred in the former Yugoslavia, nor on the appropriate ways to address past injustices. Each ethnic group tends to view itself primarily as a victim rather than a perpetrator, while war crimes continue to be politicized and exploited for political purposes. Even crimes that have been adjudicated and sanctioned in international criminal trials have not necessarily been recognized by all parties involved in the conflict. The issue of accountability for war crimes has remained a central topic of public debate within and among Western Balkan states. This debate has been particularly driven by civil society groups working towards societal reconciliation. In this context, restorative justice, through symbolic politics and capacity building efforts led by civil society, can play a significant role in peacebuilding. Civil society has the potential to address the gaps left by state-led and trial-based transitional justice

initiatives. Effective state consolidation, which involves strengthening state capacity, requires a crucial step: depoliticization (Kostovicova, 2013).

Nikolic-Ristanovic suggests that fostering intergroup contact and communication is essential for tackling tensions between groups in post-conflict societies such as those in the Western Balkans, as these interactions help to diminish prejudices among different groups. In Serbia, public discourse has been shaped by a partial "truth" about past and present conflicts, a narrow and exclusive view of victimhood, and the hierarchical competition of different forms of victimization. This discourse reflects both new and longstanding political divisions, a history of denial and competing narratives (with each ethnic group passing down its own version of the truth), and the exploitation of victimization to perpetuate violence. For contact to be effective, it must involve balanced power dynamics, shared goals, intergroup cooperation rather than competition, and strong connections among group members through repeated interactions and joint activities (Nikolic Ristanovic, 2015). Bloomfield explains that interpersonal reconciliation, or the cultural approach, operates at the grassroots level by concentrating on individual or small group interactions. This process involves direct personal engagement between those who have held grievances against each other, allowing them to negotiate the terms of their future coexistence (Bloomfield, 2006). Jansen states that for reconciliation to take place, individuals must recognize each other as fully human and deserving of respect. True reconciliation requires direct, personal interactions between those involved (Jansen, 2013).

Besic and Dzuverovic argue that truth is a fundamental element of any reconciliation process. However, in the former Yugoslavia, the concept of truth is complex and multifaceted. This complexity stems from the regional post-conflict environment, where each party involved in the conflict has its own version of the truth. Each side endeavors to present its version of the past as the legitimate one, and this contest over the "true" narrative is an inherent part of post-conflict societies and the reconciliation process. Ultimately, the issue is less about objective truth and more about perceptions of truth, which are shaped by the social and political

positions of different groups involved in state-building (Besic and Dzuverovic, 2020). Besic and Dzuverovic recommend an approach that allows for the coexistence of various interpretations of truth. They believe that accommodating multiple, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations of truth is not only feasible but also the most effective way to advance reconciliation in the former Yugoslavia at this stage. Their approach involves each side respecting its own version of truth while being open to understanding and accepting the perspectives of the other side. Such an approach can lead to a balanced, albeit divergent, perception, fostering a better understanding of each side's views, needs, and interests. Instead of striving for a singular, unified truth, which may be unattainable, acknowledging the shared experiences of pain, suffering, and loss can pave the way for empathy. Regional cultural initiatives that highlight these differing perceptions of the conflict could be beneficial, reflecting the idea that each ethnic community involved has its own interpretation of the truth (Besic and Dzuverovic, 2020).

Bloomfield argues that in what are now referred to as "post-conflict" societies, one of the major barriers to cooperation is that past violence has led to relationships marked by antagonism, distrust, disrespect, and potentially even pain and hatred. It is crucial to address this negative dynamic—not necessarily to make former enemies love each other, but to establish a minimal level of trust that allows for some degree of cooperation and mutual reliance. Achieving this requires examining and confronting their previous relationships and violent history. Reconciliation is the process designed to facilitate this examination and resolution. Reconciliation focuses on addressing relationships, not just between parliamentarians or leaders, but across entire communities. The goal is for whole communities to shift from the adversarial and antagonistic dynamics of war to relationships based on respect and cooperation. Reconciliation is a comprehensive process that encompasses seeking truth, achieving justice, fostering forgiveness, and promoting healing. It involves finding a way to coexist with former adversaries—not necessarily to love, forgive, or forget the past, but to live together and develop the cooperation needed to improve collective lives. Effective reconciliation is the most reliable way to ensure that past violence

does not resurface. In essence, reconciliation is a process through which a society transitions from a divided past to a unified and shared future. While reconciliation involves an important individual aspect, it also requires a community-wide approach. This entails challenging and reexamining the attitudes, prejudices, and negative stereotypes that individuals and groups develop about "the enemy" during periods of violent conflict (Bloomfield, 2003).

According to Hamber and Kelly(2004), peacebuilding involves a series of processes designed to establish peace and prevent violence by addressing both the root causes and consequences of conflict. According to them, reconciliation is a key component of peacebuilding and comprises five interconnected elements:

1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and equitable society.
2. Acknowledging and addressing the hurt, losses, truths, and suffering from the past.
3. Building positive relationships by accepting commonalities and differences and engaging with those who are different from us.
4. Fostering significant cultural and attitudinal changes, replacing a culture of mistrust, suspicion, fear, and violence with one of respect for human differences and rights.
5. Implementing substantial social, economic, and political changes by identifying, reconstructing, and transforming the structures that contributed to conflict and estrangement (Hamber and Kelly, 2004).

1.1. Placing Youth in the Peacebuilding

According to Ebenezer-Abiola, the experiences and perspectives of young people are crucial in both peace and conflict situations. Throughout history, young people have mostly been of interest to researchers and policy makers as victims or perpetrators of the conflict. However, many young people in fragile states or conflict areas work on conflict prevention and transformation in their communities. They foster understanding between ethnic and religious divisions, and aspire to provide alternatives to violence on community, national or regional levels. A definite turn towards emphasizing the contribution of young people to peace

building appeared in the second decade of the 21st century. The UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) on youth, peace, and security emphasize the need for meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding efforts. Given that young people are profoundly impacted by conflict, they should play a central role in exploring alternatives to violence. Youth-centered peacebuilding focuses on placing young people at the heart of peacebuilding efforts rather than on the periphery. This shift is grounded in a worldview that values and recognizes the lived experiences, knowledge, and expertise of young people as integral to peacebuilding. Youth-centered peacebuilding adopts a youth-led approach, where initiatives are spearheaded by young people themselves (Ebenezer-Abiola, 2023).

Ebenezer-Abiola describes youth as the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. The term lacks a precise definition, as it is characterized differently by various countries and communities. While the UN has not established a universal definition of youth, the UN General Assembly defines youth for statistical purposes as individuals aged fifteen to twenty-four years, without affecting definitions used by other member states. Indicators of this transition vary globally, with timing and criteria differing based on social and cultural norms (Ebenezer-Abiola, 2023). However, McEvoy-Levy works with an extended definition of youth, encompassing individuals aged 12 to 30 years (McEvoy-Levy, 2006), while Youth Initiative for Human Rights within this category, includes individuals aged 18 to 30 years.

The existing literature on youth as agents of peacebuilding is limited, though Siobhan McEvoy-Levy's work has begun to address this gap. She argues that the role of youth is often overlooked but is crucial for post-accord reconciliation. McEvoy-Levy defines peacebuilding as efforts to prevent, manage, and resolve both direct and structural violence, while also transforming the systems of ideas and values that justify and perpetuate violence and injustice. Youth are significant for peacebuilding as 'smaller-scale socio-cultural and ideological entrepreneurs bringing knowledge, perspective and hidden politics to the surface' (McEvoy-Levy, 2013, p. 304). For peacebuilding projects to be effective, they must encourage adults to cede power to allow youth to take on leading roles through nonviolent

means (McEvoy-Levy, 2013). Additionally, Berents and McEvoy-Levy have developed a theoretical framework to study youth and everyday peacebuilding. They recognize that young people's involvement in post-conflict and peacebuilding processes is complex and diverse. In times of insecurity, it is often individuals within everyday structures who mobilize to reduce risk, nurture relationships, and build practices and structures of peace (Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

Del Felice and Wisler argue that young people are generally more receptive to change, based on their experiences as youth workers and educators. They have observed that youth are enthusiastic about trying new strategies and are not committed to any set of beliefs. Although young people inherit the past from older generations and may not have experienced conflict firsthand, they are influenced by the stories shared by their parents and schools. Historically, many revolutions have been initiated and led by young students or activists. Students often have the time to think critically, read, meet peers, and develop ideas, as well as engage with various activist groups. They are adept at generating innovative solutions to longstanding problems and tend to focus on the future. Youth are also inclined to seek alternative sources of power and influence (Del Felice and Wisler, 2007). Schell-Faucon argues that educational and youth work are vital across various stages: during conflict latency, in post-conflict situations, and in peacetime. These efforts serve a dual purpose: preventing conflict and fostering a critical reexamination of the past, which aids in healing and reconciliation. It is essential to actively support participatory structures like youth forums, student associations, and self-organized youth groups. Youth councils, in particular, are effective in enabling young people to directly engage with and practice democratic principles (Schell-Faucon, 2001).

Lopes Cardozo highlights that the recognition of young people's unique potential to influence peacebuilding has gained significant traction since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security in December 2015. This resolution urged member states to improve youth representation in decision-making at all levels,

shifting the international view from seeing youth merely as victims or security threats to recognizing them as a crucial force for positive change. Concurrently, there has been growing awareness of the dual role of education in peacebuilding—both as a supportive and potentially obstructive force. The potential for education to act as a constructive and transformative element in peacebuilding processes is increasingly acknowledged (Lopes Cardozo, 2022). Drummond-Mundal and Cave note that contemporary youth peacebuilding programs primarily aim to change attitudes through ‘peace education’ and interpersonal experiences designed to connect opposing groups in conflict. Participants in these programs often report that, after an initial adjustment period, they generally begin to empathize with or form friendships with peers from the other side. For peacebuilding to be effective, it must embrace a comprehensive approach, as outlined by the conflict transformation model, which addresses not just attitudes and behaviors but also underlying contradictions (Drummond-Mundal and Cave, 2007).

In the early 1990s, the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia led to violent ethnic conflicts throughout the region. Nearly 30 years later, southeast European societies continue to bear deep scars despite numerous retributive and restorative justice efforts. Kurze notes that violence affects not only its direct victims but also young people who feel its lingering impact. Many of these young adults are involved in human rights work to address war crimes and human rights abuses, often using performance art alongside traditional transitional justice methods. Kurze's article (2016) explores the growing role of youth activism in post conflict societies across the former Yugoslavia, highlighting why unconventional forms of activism have become preferred strategies among the new generation. It also explores how younger generations, who did not directly experience the 1990s ethnic conflicts, are engaging with this historical period. Youth activism has emerged as a response to unresolved past injustices, exploring new methods. The analysis includes a look at the performance-based strategies used by youth organizations, while also acknowledging that these groups continue to utilize traditional activism tools such as awareness campaigns, workshops, and educational exchange programs. He argues that youth activists, by introducing their installations into the

public sphere, create opportunities for victim groups to access important discussion spaces. These advocates highlight victims' issues at the state level, challenging entrenched barriers and government reluctance to address past atrocities in the former Balkans. Their efforts initiate dialogue between the state and society, aiming to include all victims and counteract marginalization. Through performance-based actions and strategic campaigns, these activists intentionally provoke public responses and disseminate their messages within communities. Kurze argues that performance activism has created new platforms for challenging the culture of impunity and politics of memory in the former Yugoslavia. This form of activism encourages local communities to engage with historical issues. In performance studies, an act is defined by its intended audience. For example, placing empty chairs in front of a wall with names of the missing in Kosovo symbolized the absence of public engagement. When people eventually visited the installation, their presence filled the void, sparking broader public debate. Thus, the installation space became a forum for discussion. The term "strategic confrontation spaces" aptly describes how performance activism facilitates these new dynamics in post-conflict justice practices in the Balkans (Kurze, 2016).

Carter and Guerra argue that the performing arts offer opportunities to convey and embody peace-oriented values, skills, knowledge, and processes. Both artists and peacebuilders value creativity, even if their goals differ. They cite the performance collective La Pocha Nostra as an example, noting that its members use extreme physical acts to challenge the audience and provoke reflection on the violence in the world. When questioned about the violent nature of their performances and the physical harm they inflict on themselves, the collective explained that their aim is to highlight the absurdity of violence. While their performances may not have an explicit focus on peace education, their pedagogical potential is significant. They can effectively prompt critical reflection on violence and its consequences, and even suggest alternatives for fostering peaceful coexistence (Carter and Guerra, 2022).

2.Theoretical Framework

This work will rely on the theories of peacebuilding and reconciliation, examined in the works of Johan Galtung and John Paul Lederach, while being complemented by 4R's Framework developed by Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith. Each framework provides a different lens through which to understand the role of youth in peacebuilding, offering a comprehensive view of how their efforts contribute to reconciliation and sustainable peace in the Western Balkans.

2.1. Reconciliation: The Building of Relationship – A Conceptual Framework of Peacebuilding by Lederach

Lederach emphasizes that when addressing the challenges of modern conflict, a key area where realism and innovation intersect is through the concept of reconciliation. Rather than focusing on novel methods to distance or reduce the affiliations between conflicting groups, reconciliation is achieved through mechanisms that foster direct human engagement between the parties involved. This process relies on bringing the conflicting groups together to interact and relate to each other as individuals. People need the opportunity and space to share with each other their experiences of loss, grief, and the anger that accompanies pain and memories of injustices. Acknowledgment is crucial in the reconciliation process. Simply being aware of these experiences is different from truly acknowledging them. Hearing each other's stories validates those experiences and emotions, serving as a crucial first step toward healing and restoring both individuals and relationships (Lederach, 1997).

For him, relationships are fundamental to both the conflict and its lasting resolution. Therefore, it is essential to provide opportunities for people to look ahead and envision their collective future. The choices made today will impact the next seven generations. Adopting such a long-term perspective fosters a sense of responsibility and provides new clarity regarding their shared future. Reconciliation fundamentally serves as a meeting point where

concerns about the past and future intersect. The concept of reconciliation-as-encounter implies that creating space to acknowledge the past and envision the future is crucial for redefining the present. To achieve this, individuals must discover ways to confront both themselves and their adversaries, as well as their hopes and fears. It is demanded that we step beyond conventional international political traditions, discourse, and methods to discover innovative solutions (Lederach, 1997).

According to Lederach (1997), reconciliation is where the following elements converge:

1. Truth: The desire for acknowledgment of wrongs and validation of painful losses and experiences, encompassing honesty, revelation, clarity, open accountability, and vulnerability.
2. Mercy: The need for acceptance, letting go, and the opportunity for a fresh start, involving compassion, forgiveness, acceptance, and renewal.
3. Justice: The pursuit of individual and collective rights, social restructuring, and restitution, which includes righting wrongs, creating equal opportunities, and making amends.
4. Peace: The emphasis on interdependence, well-being, and security, highlighted by harmony, unity, respect, and a sense of safety.

Lederach proposes that reconciliation involves creating a social space where both truth and forgiveness are acknowledged and integrated, rather than being seen as opposing forces or separate elements. It requires a proactive approach to fostering an encounter where individuals can concentrate on their relationship, openly share their perceptions, feelings, and experiences, and work towards developing new understandings and a collective experience. Firstly, reconciliation fosters an encounter between openly addressing painful pasts and seeking to articulate a long-term, interdependent future. Secondly, it creates a space where truth and mercy intersect, validating and embracing efforts to reveal past events and to let go in favor of renewed relationships. Moreover, reconciliation acknowledges the importance of allocating time and space for both justice and peace, balancing the need to address wrongs

with the vision of a connected future. Overall, reconciliation focuses on building relationships between antagonists, addressing the emotional and psychological dimensions of the conflict, recognizing past grievances, and exploring future interdependence (Lederach, 1997).

Lederach views peacebuilding as focused on redefining relationships and envisioning collaborative, interdependent ways of working together. It fundamentally relies on building relationships and trust, emphasizing the importance of knowing people and being connected. He argues that peacebuilding can be enhanced by utilizing cultural resources and that we should focus on identifying and empowering the existing resources, methods, and mechanisms for peacebuilding within the local context. Lederach advocates for an "insider-partial" approach rather than an "outsider-neutral" one for third-party assistance. His research in Central America revealed that local perspectives on conflict resolution are centered around three key concepts: trust, networking, and timing. Trust is developed through personal relationships and grows over time, fostering honesty, reliability, and support. Networking highlights the importance of personal connections in peacebuilding. Timing involves being attuned to events and recognizing opportunities. Together, these concepts emphasize the need for long-term commitment, relationship-building, and consistency (Lederach, 1997).

Lederach's framework is relevant for this research because it underscores the importance of personal relationships and direct engagement in reconciliation. My case studies will illustrate how youth-led initiatives that involve interpersonal interactions and shared experiences contribute to rebuilding trust and fostering peace. These activities reflect Lederach's idea that reconciliation involves integrating truth and forgiveness, which is evident in the youth-driven efforts later described.

2.2. Galtung's "TRANSCEND" Method

Galtung sees peacebuilding activities as the only possible way to end structural and cultural conflicts (Galtung, 1996). He developed "TRANSCEND" method which is designed to achieve peace through non-violent means. Its central thesis is that preventing violence and harnessing the creative potential of conflict necessitates transformation. This transformation involves moving beyond the original goals of the conflicting parties, establishing new objectives, and detaching the conflict from its initial context. This process is facilitated through dialogue rooted in empathy, non-violence, and collective creativity. The method emphasizes mutual causation, shared responsibility, and the importance of dialogue. The TRANSCEND approach seeks to unite parties in a self-sustaining process (Galtung, 2000).

According to Galtung, transcendence involves redefining a situation to reveal solutions to previously perceived incompatibilities, thereby creating new possibilities. The key to this process is creativity and its application to resolving contradictions. It is crucial to map out the conflict's dynamics and include all parties, goals, and issues, making sure to also involve any overlooked stakeholders. Initial dialogue is conducted with each party separately to identify their legitimate goals and to encourage creative solutions from all sides for overcoming incompatibilities. During these dialogues, acceptable goals for each party should be identified to develop overarching goals that are acceptable to all parties. In this process he includes peace workers who should try to help and do an honest job and serve not as mediators or facilitators but as leaders of this process who are there to help the conflicted parties arrive at insights together. Galtung (2000) provided a list of dos and don'ts which can help them in their work. Some of them are the following:

1. They should recognize the positive aspects within the parties and the conflict itself to foster opportunities for further development and focus on common origins and shared responsibilities, rather than assigning blame and guilt.

2. They should be innovative, propose alternative courses of action and collaboratively develop a concise, memorable outcome phrase, such as "sustainable development," which may simplify the complexities but aid in effective communication.
3. They should avoid manipulation and should not judge but be open and honest with themselves and others about their goals and feelings, keeping in mind that the conflict worker's role is to empower all parties involved.
4. They should avoid insisting on consensus, commitment, or cooperation from parties who are not ready. Similarly, they should not distort the conflict by pushing agendas too far from the parties' immediate concerns (Galtung, 2000).

Applying Galtung's TRANSCEND method to youth involvement in peacebuilding means adapting his principles to empower young people as effective peace workers and facilitators. Youth can play a pivotal role in peacebuilding by leading dialogues, implementing solutions, and taking on roles as peace workers. To maximize their impact, young people should be equipped with essential leadership skills, including conflict resolution, negotiation, and facilitation techniques. They should also be given the authority and support to lead peacebuilding initiatives, manage projects, mediate discussions, and drive the process toward achieving shared goals. Galtung's TRANSCEND method underscores the role of empathetic dialogue and creative solutions, reflected in the innovative strategies used by both organizations. By integrating this method into youth-led peacebuilding efforts, we can harness the energy, creativity, and perspectives of young people to address and transform conflicts in meaningful ways

2.3. The 4RS Framework: Analyzing Education's Contribution to Sustainable Peacebuilding with Social Justice in Conflict-Affected Contexts

Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith (2017) developed a normative framework that outlines the key components of a "socially just" post-conflict society striving for sustainable peace and reconciliation. Their approach to sustainable peacebuilding emphasizes the need for a

heightened focus on social development, including education, to address the root causes of conflict such as political, economic, and sociocultural inequalities and injustices. They argue that political, economic, social, and cultural transformations are essential in conflict-affected societies to promote positive peace and tackle, rather than exacerbate, the injustices and inequalities that often drive conflicts. Central to their argument is the belief that education can play a crucial role in fostering positive peace and social justice, both of which are vital for addressing and transforming the underlying causes of conflict (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith, 2017).

Their theoretical framework (2017). asserts the following:

1. A sustainable approach to peacebuilding focuses on social development and aims to tackle the root causes of conflict, including political, economic, and sociocultural inequalities and injustices.
2. Education is pivotal in sustainable peacebuilding as it enhances security and drives political, economic, social, and cultural transformations in societies affected by conflict
3. Transformation involves how education policies, individual and institutional actions, and development programs advance the 4Rs: redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation.
4. Acknowledging the political and complex factors that influence the interconnectedness of these 4Rs is crucial (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith, 2017).

In post-conflict societies, there is often a need to highlight education's role in addressing inequalities and to prioritize initiatives that promote social cohesion and reconciliation, in addition to economic strategies. This challenge is exacerbated by a disconnect between the potential broad impact of education and the narrowly focused education policies and programs currently in place. As a result, education policies and programs are frequently developed within technical parameters that fail to address critical peace-related issues in post-conflict settings, such as economic, political, social, and cultural inequalities within and between groups. The 4Rs framework aims to encourage a reevaluation of policy,

programmatic responses, and research initiatives by moving beyond a narrow technical perspective on education. Instead, it advocates for a more holistic approach informed by the 4Rs—redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation. This approach involves planning for outcomes that address these interconnected dimensions (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith, 2017).

The 4Rs framework seeks to encourage a re-evaluation of policy, programmatic responses, and research initiatives by shifting from a narrow technical perspective on education to a broader approach informed by 4Rs-inspired conflict analysis. This involves planning future outcomes that address the interconnected aspects of redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation. Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate reconciliation processes that address both historical and current tensions, grievances, and injustices to build a more sustainable and peaceful society. Specifically designed for conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts, the 4Rs model (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith, 2017) provides an analytical framework that asserts:

1. Sustainable peacebuilding depends on societal transformation.
2. Social sectors, including education, are crucial to this transformation.
3. The process of transformation involves not only the three Rs proposed by Fraser but also the four Rs outlined above.

The reconciliation segment requires an analysis of the various legacies left by violent conflict and an exploration of how education governance, content, and pedagogy can strengthen education's role in supporting transitional justice, healing, and trust-building. The first R, redistribution, focuses on addressing social injustices stemming from the unequal distribution of resources, limited economic participation, and inadequate social opportunities (e.g., in education, healthcare, and employment). The second R, recognition, aims to resolve status inequalities that prevent some individuals from fully participating in established cultural hierarchies. This often involves addressing insufficient acceptance or space for various forms of diversity, including cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, gender, and age differences. The

third R, representation, involves examining the absence of transformative politics at global, national, and local levels, which results in unequal participation in decision-making and advocacy processes (Fraser 2005). The fourth R, reconciliation, builds on Fraser's framework by adding a critical process for post-conflict societies to prevent a resurgence of conflict. It includes the role of education in addressing historical grievances, memory, truth, reparations, transitional justice, community-building, forgiveness, healing, and broader social and psychosocial recovery, as well as educating about historical events and their relevance for the present and future (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith, 2017).

The 4Rs approach acts as a heuristic tool that can foster dialogue among key stakeholders. It offers a framework for posing important questions and reflecting on the complexities and contradictions involved in using education to support peacebuilding efforts. While integrating individuals from diverse or opposing social groups—whether through formal schooling or non-formal programs—is important, it is crucial to go beyond a simplistic interpretation of Allport's Contact Hypothesis. True progress requires meaningful, long-term interactions and reflection. Merely engaging in superficial interactions, like shaking hands or sharing a meal, suggests that conflict stems solely from personal animosities rather than also from structural grievances and inequalities (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith, 2017).

This framework is relevant because it emphasizes the transformative power of education in promoting social justice and addressing the underlying causes of conflict. The case studies will illustrate how educational and cultural programs help address structural inequalities and promote reconciliation, reflecting the 4Rs' focus on sustainable societal transformation.

The Contact Hypothesis, proposed by Allport, is one of the most effective strategies for improving relations between conflicting groups. It posits that interpersonal contact can foster positive attitudes, reduce stereotypes, and increase acceptance between individuals from different groups, provided certain conditions are met. People often fear the unfamiliar, including unknown groups. However, as individuals gain more knowledge, understanding, and experience with these groups, their negative and hostile attitudes are likely to diminish.

The hypothesis suggests that exposure to members of different groups through various interactions can lead to more positive attitudes and reduced prejudicial behavior (Allport 1954).

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This paper aims to explore how young people contribute to peacebuilding in the Balkans through the lens of reconciliation theory. It will also incorporate Galtung's TRANSCEND method of non-violent conflict resolution to illustrate how young people can emerge as effective peacebuilders. Additionally, the paper will examine how education and art can serve as tools for young people to foster peace. Lederach's framework highlights the importance of direct human interaction, truth-telling, mercy, justice, and peace in reconciliation. These case studies will demonstrate how young people advance peacebuilding and reconciliation mainly through education, mutual visits, networking, and cultural collaboration, reflecting Lederach's focus on personal engagement and relationship-building. Galtung's framework is relevant because it will later align with the case studies' findings that creative and empathetic engagements are crucial for transforming relationships and building peace. The activities of young people, which involve collaborative and creative approaches, reflect Galtung's emphasis on non-violent and innovative conflict resolution strategies. The 4Rs framework will highlight the role of education in addressing root causes of conflict and promoting sustainable peace. The case studies will show that young people's involvement in education and cultural exchanges also aligns with this approach.

In both case studies, the integration of Lederach's, Galtung's, and the 4Rs Framework's concepts offers a comprehensive understanding of how youth-driven initiatives contribute to peacebuilding. The frameworks highlight the importance of addressing past grievances, fostering dialogue, promoting creativity, ensuring inclusion and representation, and tackling social injustices. Each case study reflects different aspects of these theories and shows how youth engagement, education, and innovative approaches can drive reconciliation and sustainable peace in conflict-affected regions.

3. Methodology

My work relies on a case studies of Organization Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) and the Forgotten Children of War Association (ZDR), which are both dedicated to peace and reconciliation, consist of young people and are located in the Balkans. In this study, I used primary data by conducting semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with two participants from each organization/association who possess substantial insights into the subject matter, aiming to thoroughly understand the role of youth in peacebuilding in the region. The decision to limit the number of interviews was guided by the research design and objectives. Since the research focused on exploring how and to what extent young people contribute to reconciliation through two specific case studies, a smaller, more targeted sample facilitated a detailed examination of nuanced perspectives. The interviews were conducted with individuals who have significant expertise relevant to the case, providing the depth required. Additionally, interviews were complemented by secondary data collected from other sources, which are available on the websites, such as their publications, reports, case studies etc. This document analysis offers a more comprehensive view, which mitigated the need for a larger number of interviews. The main reason for choosing this method is the collection of more detailed information about youth activities towards peace, their progress and the obstacles they face on a daily basis. The concept of data saturation also influenced the decision to conduct only 4 interviews in total. Analysis of the initial interviews revealed rich and comprehensive insights, demonstrating that the sample size was sufficient for addressing the research questions and supporting my analysis and conclusions.

The time frame of the research is from the beginning of 2018 until the end of 2023, since I believe it is important for addressing the research question as it aligns with a period of intensified activity for both Youth Initiative for Human Rights and The Forgotten Children of War Association, which I observed based on the data available on their websites. Analyzing this recent period allows for a more comprehensive understanding of their current operational dynamics and emerging trends. The two of them were not established at the same

time. Moreover, for several years The Forgotten Children of War Association operated as a small artistic organization, focusing on producing plays, exhibitions, and films to introduce and define their identity. From 2018 these activities are complemented by various other legal and educational initiatives. By focusing on the recent years, the study captures the most dynamic phases of their development.

4. Empirical Analysis

In the Western Balkans, ongoing efforts towards peacebuilding and reconciliation are crucial in addressing the region's complex historical and social challenges. Youth engagement has emerged as a vital component of these efforts, providing new perspectives and innovative approaches to fostering social cohesion and resolving conflicts. This empirical analysis focuses on two organizations actively involved in leveraging youth initiatives for peacebuilding in this region. By examining their programs and strategies, the case studies aim to evaluate their impact of young people involved in promoting reconciliation. Utilizing data from organizational reports, program documentation, and interviews with people who have been part of these organizations for many years now, the analysis employs qualitative and comparative methods to assess the outcomes of these initiatives. The following sections will present the case studies and their findings, followed by a discussion where the empirical results in the wider context of the Balkans will be analyzed.

4.1. Case Study of The Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR)

The Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) was established in Serbia in 2003 with the idea of creating connections among young people in the aftermath of the wars that followed the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. It is a regional network of non-governmental organizations, that has programs in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Their core values include truth, justice, responsibility, equality, freedom, democracy and peace. They state that they fight for peace, not only for the absence of war, but for peace as a lasting process that involves confronting the past, and which results in continuous cooperation between countries and people in the region. They provide education for young people from the region about the legacy of the war, leading a dialogue about the perspectives of the democratic development of our societies. They work with youth across Serbia and the wider region to encourage inter-ethnic dialogue and peace, which are essential today. Their activities include implementing various projects, hosting youth summits,

organizing meetings, and running festivals (The Youth Initiative for Human Rights Website, n.d.).

The focus of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights is on societies and citizens, above all young people, who are the least familiar with the events and war crimes committed during the 1990s, where nationalist ideologies that led to wars still prevail and where all sides celebrate their war criminals as "heroes". So far, they organized six Youth Summits held in Belgrade, Pristina, Sarajevo, Zagreb, Skopje and Podgorica. These summits brought together thousands of regional and international young civil and political activists with the aim of exchanging experiences and initiating the process of democratic reforms. The youth summits encouraged and led to the establishment of the Regional Office for Youth Cooperation (RYCO), an intergovernmental office of Serbia, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro (The Youth Initiative for Human Rights Website, n.d.).

YIHR's agenda builds on the efforts of earlier youth movements that sought political change through protests. Operating in a post-conflict and post-authoritarian context, their focus has shifted from regime change to pursuing structural transformation. Their goal is to address past human rights violations through systemic and societal reforms (Kurze, 2016).

I conducted 2 separate interviews with 2 key individuals within the organization who have been involved with the Initiative for many years now and can provide us with firsthand insights into what working with young people in the field is like.

At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked for their opinion on how can young people contribute to building peace in the region, to what extent, and if they can help in achieving reconciliation, based on their perennial experience in YIHR. Later they were asked about their most successful activities, obstacles and challenges they face and more examples of their engagement, in order to get bigger picture of youth participation and interest in their programs.

My first respondent says that young people have a key role in building peace in the region, especially since peacebuilding has the future in its focus and the future belongs to the youth, so it is democratic that they have a key say in building peace according to their own standards. “If we are talking about areas where young people do not have enough knowledge about, regarding what happened in the past and why we have to work on peace at all, and why they have some prejudices possibly about some people from the region, the first step is certainly to acquire knowledge, so that by acquiring knowledge and learning about the past, young people contribute to a different culture and a different kind of remembering, because it is important what we remember in order to prevent some terrible things and know what to do in order to prevent them from happening again” (Interview #1). This respondent also mentions that young people also contribute to peace by meeting other young people and by listening to some other perspectives, because we all come from some kind of environment where we have many narratives which we got at home or through education or from television or through the media or from politicians in the most different possible ways and it is important to understand that there are some other young people in the region who are perhaps exposed to the same narratives, only that they are somehow focused on their ethnic community. It is important for young people to get to know different perspectives and thus enrich their understanding and learn to discuss topics that are not always easy but are important and inevitable if we want to build peace and reconciliation. In that sense, reconciliation is certainly not comfortable, and it represents an exit from some sort of lulled monoethnic comfort zone in which everything is clear, everything has its own explanation, and it introduces some new perspectives and layers into the story of what happened and what it is that we need to overcome in order to contribute to reconciliation (Interview #1).

My second respondent is of a similar opinion and says that the role of youth is multifaceted, it is somehow based or can be based on education in the sense that young people, especially those who had no contact with the war (the majority of young people today have no personal memories of those wars), can have a healthy empty field. They want to find out some basic

information about events from the past, that are talked about in the public space, but it is most often talked about them from a perspective of denial or hatred. "Our special relationship is towards young people who have no contact with war and who, based on that healthy distance, can be some kind of agent of change by first finding out independently and bringing their conclusions about the events of the war and put them in a context related to the modern period"(Interview #2). Therefore, the education of young people for young people, which YIHR applies, is very important. Respondent continues that some new energy is needed and says it is good that there is one big positive legacy from different databases, naming victims, documentation...etc., and what is generally the first thing that should be continued and that the new generations should do, is the demand and advocacy of criminal prosecution of those responsible for war crimes. Also, there is a large gray area - people with vast ignorance, who do not recognize actors or events and who may or may not be suitable for some kind of propaganda and false information (Interview #2).

In this context, I would like to mention a recent research report "Attitudes of young people in Serbia about the wars of the nineties" (YIHR, 2023a) conducted by YIHR in 2023, that aims to examine the knowledge of young people about wars in the former Yugoslavia, their actors and perpetrators of war crimes, as well as the attitude of young people towards the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, NATO bombing, Kosovo and dealing with the past. In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the denial and distortion of facts regarding the crimes committed during these wars. This trend is evident across various social practices, such as media coverage of the wars of the 1990s, commemorations of war crimes, political campaigns, and the political engagement of convicted war criminals. Young people's understanding of the 1990s wars significantly influences their views on these conflicts, particularly given that prior research indicates a general lack of knowledge about these wars and history overall. This research report reveals that, according to their own assessments, young people's knowledge of the 1990s wars is quite limited and biased. They tend to be more informed about events where the victims were Serbs but have scant knowledge of incidents involving victims from other ethnic groups. Consequently, most have

never heard of mass graves in Serbia, and only a small percentage who have heard of them can accurately identify their locations (YIHR, 2023a).

Education

Both my respondents agree that education is crucial for building peace in the region. However, one of them stresses out that no matter how crucial it is, it alone does not necessarily transform a person, since there are people who learn a lot about the past, but that does not change their perspective in any way. Reconciliation requires more than just knowledge; it also demands willingness and personal experience. Engaging with other young people adds a new level of sensitivity to discussions and dialogues, which is vital. This human dimension complements education and factual discussions. They also mention that The Council of Europe has made recommendations on how history textbooks should be designed to promote understanding and avoid presenting facts solely through the lens of national identity. This approach aims to prevent conflicts arising from differing identities by emphasizing that no one's identity should be a source of discord. Experiential learning, although informal, also plays a significant role in personal growth. "It's not just about acquiring theoretical knowledge, but also about developing a deeper human connection, as reconciliation ultimately involves people" (Interview #1).

Another publication produced by YIHR is Analysis "Wars of the Nineties in History Textbooks in Serbia" (YIHR, 2023b). It presents an overview of the contents of 16 Serbian history textbooks, for elementary and high schools, that cover the period of the Yugoslav breakup in the 1990s. This includes the armed conflicts in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and the NATO bombing period. The analysis revealed that the events of the 1990s wars are still depicted in a narrow and biased manner, particularly concerning the presentation of war crimes. The portrayal of these crimes often depends on the perceived perpetrators and victims. Textbooks frequently display selective data, omitting necessary mentions of responsibility for crimes committed by Serbian forces. This selectivity in

reporting and the tendency to portray Serbia and the Serbian people as either the sole or primary victims of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s remain prevalent in most textbooks (YIHR, 2023b).

This raises the question, as for the culture of remembrance, how can young people promote the coexistence of multiple truths in the region and whether they can influence it?

Second respondent mentions that one part of their mission was set with that task, to set as many of our activities as a kind of platform for different truths or different memories or narratives about some events, which are legitimate to express without judgment. Respondent mentioned a couple of examples in their work of how they try to combine it, and it is related to the relations between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Almost since its founding, the Initiative, precisely because of this youth perspective in its work, has been commemorating one of the heinous crimes during the war in Tuzla, the massacre at the Tuzla Gate on May 25, 1995, when 71 young people, whose average age was 22, died. Since 2018 their new approach is to combine the departure of activists from the Youth Initiative from Belgrade since there is a series of sufferings of other people, of other nationalities in the area, also civilians. They decided to integrate the visits and agreed with colleagues from Sarajevo, from the BiH Initiative that they should make it a meeting of young people from BiH and Serbia. On the way to Tuzla, while travelling together to that commemoration, they would stop in the village of Bradina, where Serbian civilians also died on May 25, 1992, who were killed by a unit of the BiH Army and the Green Berets, and most of the village population was later deported to camps. “We try to connect memories of different events in that way. Another example in 2019, we made a study trip with the Initiative in Croatia where we gathered 10 young people from Croatia and 10 young people from Serbia and we also took with us 10 journalists from Serbia, which was also a bit experimental for us then, so that they do not go to an official commemoration organized by, let’s say, the Victims' Association or the state, but to go with us and see what a study trip looks like, what are the questions of young people, what are their reactions after talking to the victims' associations, and seeing the condition of

those places. The agenda was that we first went to Vukovar to visit some of the places of suffering in the city itself of both Serbs and Croats, and then we went to the agricultural estate of Ovcar, where there was the greatest crime after the fall of Vukovar. After that we met in Zagreb and went to a tour of 4 villages in the vicinity of Knin, for example, Armenik where a Croatian family was killed in 1993 by the police of the Republic of Serbian Krajina, and in Bosic where old people of Serbian nationality were killed by the Croatian army that came in September and devastated that village. In the end, we went all together in Jasenovac to the memorial center” (Interview #2). Respondent adds that visiting these places over a few days creates an opportunity to develop a fair and constructive perspective, and a fair and healthy attitude towards the people involved. “The aim that the life of us who participate in it and the life of some other people will be less violent, be peaceful and with some decent life standard, without constantly having our head in the past” (Interview #2).

Other respondent talks about different forms of activities they reached for and used with the aim of contributing to the process of reconciliation and facing the past. and points out that, as educators, they noticed that talking to victims, which can be very traumatic for young people and can be very difficult, and visiting places of suffering, really creates a completely new feeling and attitude towards crimes committed by their ethnic group.” It is something that is very powerful, but at the same time difficult, but somehow we always got the strongest feedback and the biggest impression that the young people had the need to share, that is when they participated and were exposed to that kind of experience” (Interview #1).

Additionally, respondent mentions that traveling around the region, visiting different places, getting to know not only that side of the war, but actually how the consequences of that war shaped the present in which people live today. For young people it is very important to see it personally, to go and travel and see what life looks like in Kosovo today, for example, or in Bosnia or in Srebrenica. “It is important to get to know the people, to see what is really important and what role it plays in today's context. Those trips and exchanges, especially when it comes to mixed groups, that consist of young people from different countries, are

something that really could be very new for them and inspiring and, on the other hand, it can motivate them to look at the peace process in a different way” (Interview #1).

Another segment respondent mentioned that also turned out to be interesting to youth is the participation in peace movements, that is, stories from the war that do not only refer to crimes and mass violations of human rights, but stories that concern people who, even in the most challenging times, chose peace, even if it cost them their own lives - these are stories that young people usually interact with and that inspire them. “Also examples of coexistence, two victims from two different ethnic groups who sit together, talk, empathize, somehow really completely destroys the concept that people who are in suffering and pain must constantly be confronted, and somehow when they see that it is possible then they ask themselves: why wouldn't we create a climate in which, this would be something that would encourage the process of reconciliation and healing, because we constantly ignore the various traumas left behind by the war, we ignore transgenerational traumas, and we ignore a bunch of other issues that are absolutely part of our lives and they have to do with the past” (Interview #1).

Networking

Respondent 2 thinks that young people can contribute to a more supportive environment and sees an opportunity in getting closer to other young people and getting to know them through visiting programs, as these programs can have varying effects on different individuals. For a half year now, there is an internship program available where young people from Serbia and Kosovo, especially at this moment, can do internship at Initiative or some other another civil society organization, based on their interests. “For example, young people from Kosovo, of any nationality, have the chance to live in Belgrade for 3 months and meet various new people and work in one organization for 3 months. There was no such long-term project before. About 15 years ago, there was an internship program so that young people who were selected in the Initiative's competition could do an internship at the Hague Tribunal, spend 6 months there, work in the prosecution, the court, the secretariat, deal with documentation and get to

know the work of that court from the inside. The vast majority of those people work today in some other international courts and international organizations. Those people were some of the conductors to transfer that knowledge back here to some new generations, among whom I was at that moment, and which is now being transferred to others” (Interview #2). Respondent emphasizes that the aspect of getting to know each other and being physically present, which has become increasingly rare, especially after COVID, is crucial. Due to regional tensions, it's becoming more challenging to motivate and reassure young people that their safety is not at serious risk. Improving the situation involves stepping outside of one's comfort zone through personal connections and continuous education driven by genuine interest rather than imposition, which often leads to a counterproductive response. Engagement arises from recognizing and addressing the existing gaps and opportunities for action (Interview #2).

Respondent 1 believes that young people can combat harmful narratives by confronting them rather than ignoring them and argues that if such a harmful phenomenon is ignored, it is actually in some way enabled to grow and develop. This respondent is encouraged by the fact that many young people are actively involved in various ways, contributing to reconciliation, overcoming prejudices, advancing knowledge, addressing the past, and promoting multiperspectivity and multiculturalism. There are numerous avenues through which young people can engage in peacebuilding. These include activism, public advocacy, media work, fact-checking, research, legal efforts for lawyers and jurists, and cultural and artistic collaborations for artists. “I really think that we should place a lot of hope in the generation of young people who are not burdened and do not have the experience of war, did not live through it or were not even born while it was going on. I don't think we should create pressure of expectations for them, but really work with them and somehow equip them with all the possible resources we have so that we can actually support them in that work” (Interview #1).

Challenges

In the work of YIHR there are of course many obstacles and challenges. Respondent 1 identifies the political climate as the primary obstacle, noting that it creates challenges to the extent that they sometimes have to cancel the program when conditions deteriorate. One top-down destabilization can significantly disrupt relationships, posing a major problem. Furthermore, people often retreat or conceal their collaborations, discussing them only within very small circles, because they are aware that their work is not supported by the broader environment. “Reconciliation is a long process, it is never complete, and it is not perfect, but it is important that there is a constant decision to go in that direction and not just a decision, but that this decision is followed by certain actions, say, public speech... We have a lot on the ground wonderful stories, a lot of cooperation, but somehow, we constantly struggle with the fact that a good story is not news. Tensions, problems, extremists, extremist groups, extreme cases are constantly in the news, it doesn't matter which side they came from, and I unfortunately believe that politicians contribute to making it news and behave as if peace is not part of our public interest, and the media contributes to that” (Interview #1).

Other respondent says there are numerous examples illustrating restrictions on their freedom of expression and assembly. They have received three bans on public gatherings within four years unlike other organizations in Serbia which haven't faced such frequent prohibitions. “State institutions are actively working to restrict our activities and intimidate or discourage us. A prime example of this is the recent ban on the Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! festival, which was intended to serve as a platform for diverse narratives” (Interview #2).

Regarding the reaction of young people to actions and events organized by YIHR, both of them agree that the response has been very positive. They have no problem with the number of applications, nor with the response of people, which means that people want to cooperate and want to learn from each other, they want to talk also about things they disagree on, which in fact is where they can learn the most. The most popular seem to be their regional summits, which are held every two years, that consistently receive an excellent response. “We face a

significant challenge as we often receive 400 applications for just 50 or 60 available spots” (Interview #1).

Respondent 2 believes that, in recent years, their street actions have been the most effective in drawing people’s attention, mentioning their action in Beska when they opposed the promotion of a convicted war criminal, it caused the greatest uproar because they encountered violence. Additionally, during their campaign to remove murals and graffiti of Ratko Mladic, which lasted several months, many people came forward to show their solidarity with activists. They planned a meeting where they wanted to gather other young people from the region and then remove the murals together and throw a party out of it, but the meeting was forbidden. They often get attention in both directions, sometimes they get threats and various messages and condemnation, but at the same time people reach out to them in a positive way.. Recently, they sent a letter from the youth to the General Assembly of the United Nations regarding the resolution in Srebrenica. They received a lot of messages of support, even some associations of victims, people who were affected by those crimes contacted and thanked them: “...then that voice spreads and it reaches some young people who have already gathered in some associations and would like to work with us or some other young people come forward because they have seen some of our activities or statements and want to participate in some of our programs or to work with us, be an activist, etc.” (Interview #2).

First respondent views the rise of nationalist policies as a potential obstacle to future cooperation. She notes that there are reports indicating that young people are becoming increasingly radicalized, with their views increasingly shaped by repeated myths rather than by informed knowledge or scientific perspectives. Although the culture of dialogue should be the strongest ally in this situation, it is currently distorted. However, respondent sees this as a challenge and motivation to work harder. It highlights the ongoing need to engage with these individuals, providing them with platforms where they can encounter different viewpoints, have their opinions questioned, and engage in debate, rather than retreating into the circles of like-minded individuals. The Initiative has been working for 20 years according

to the principle where the majority of their teachers and those who work most with young people are precisely the young people who work in the organization. “We strongly believe in peer communication. things that someone of your age can explain and convey to you, he will certainly do it in a language and in a way that is much closer to you. I think it is important for practicing equality and for young people to believe that they can be full of knowledge, responsible and deal with serious matters and that what they think and have to say is actually important, and for that they have to watch other young people who behave like that and believe in it” (Interview #1).

YIHR's focus on educating young people about the Yugoslav wars, advocating for human rights, and promoting inter-ethnic dialogue aligns well with Lederach's framework of reconciliation. Their efforts to integrate multiple historical narratives and foster dialogue among diverse ethnic groups reflect the principles of truth, mercy, justice, and peace. By engaging youth in direct human interactions and experiential learning, YIHR embodies Lederach's emphasis on reconciliation as a means to heal past grievances and build new relationships.

Galtung's TRANSCEND method, which emphasizes transforming conflicts through non-violent means and empathetic dialogue, is evident in YIHR's approach. Their activities, such as youth summits and intercultural exchanges, aim to transform the legacy of conflict into opportunities for understanding and cooperation. YIHR's efforts to involve young people from different ethnic backgrounds in dialogue and learning align with Galtung's principles of recognizing positives, being innovative, and respecting readiness. By facilitating mutual understanding and shared responsibility, YIHR embodies the TRANSCEND method's focus on creative solutions and empathetic engagement

The normative framework proposed by Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith (2017) which emphasizes social development and the role of education in addressing root causes of conflict, is relevant to YIHR's approach. Their educational programs and initiatives aim to

address political, economic, and socio-cultural inequalities by fostering a deeper understanding of historical injustices. The focus on the 4Rs (redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation) aligns with YIHR's efforts to integrate multiple perspectives and promote social justice through education and dialogue.

4.2. The Forgotten Children of War Association

The Forgotten Children of War Association, established in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in the further text BiH) is working on the legal and social recognition of the category "children born of war". In addition, the Forgotten Children of War Association works to support, strengthen capacities and create a safe environment for children born because of war and women who survived wartime sexual violence, regardless of ethnicity in BiH, while using its capacities both in the region and internationally. They support the processes of building peace and coexistence among peoples in BiH through the contribution to the creation of new models and programs for the prevention of violence, sexual exploitation and psychosocial protection. They also contribute through various projects, education, art exhibitions, theatre, etc. Ultimately, and likely their most significant contribution, is their involvement in drafting the law for the protection of civilian victims of war in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

During and immediately after the war, as militarization increased, so-called "Children born of war" were born all around the world-children who are less likely to be born if there was no war in a certain region, and where their fathers were sent on official or military duty. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this category includes children whose fathers were either soldiers from opposing armies or different ethno-national groups compared to the mother's group, or members of stationary or peacekeeping forces or employees of foreign humanitarian missions, while their mothers were local women (The Forgotten Children of War Association Website, n.d.).

Children born from wartime rape, sexual slavery, or sexual exploitation are an especially vulnerable group due to the stigma they face. It is crucial for those involved in protecting child rights in armed conflict and post-conflict settings to recognize, acknowledge and address their unique needs.

Stigmatized as both illegitimate and as children of "enemy", their human rights may be compromised in various ways, including rejection, abuse, or neglect by immediate and extended family members, to stigma by the broader community, limited access to resources, and denial of citizenship. These children represent one of the most vulnerable groups within the broader population of war-affected children. Beyond the general deprivation, violence, and insecurity experienced by all children in conflict and post-conflict situations, these children may also be denied fundamental rights such as the right to survival, protection from stigma and discrimination, and access to nationality, family, and identity. This group remains notably understudied and underserved in the context of war-affected children (Carpenter, 2007).

The Forgotten Children of War Association was established in 2015 by a group of dedicated individuals, including human rights activists and "children born of war" from Bosnia and Herzegovina. These children, who had been overlooked and unrecognized as a vulnerable group in both their mothers' and biological fathers' countries of origin, were often left in the shadows during the war and post-war periods. This Association is unique as it is the first and only organization in the world founded and led by children born of war. It addresses the issue of war-born children from a fresh perspective, focusing on social and legal visibility and uniting members from these specific categories (The Forgotten Children of War Association Website, n.d.).

I conducted two separate interviews with key individuals within the organization to gain direct insights into their experiences with this crucial topic and the challenges they have successfully navigated.

My first respondent believes that young people play a crucial role not only in fostering peace but also in shaping social structures at both national and regional levels and contends that current policies in the area do not allow young people to express their thoughts and ideas. In this respondent's view, the most effective way for young people to contribute to peacebuilding is through their own education. Prevailing narratives in our countries and region focus more on aggression and ignorance rather than human rights, knowledge, or innovative solutions, resulting in a politically unstable environment. Formal and systematic education alone may not fully develop the intellectual capacities of young people, but respondent believes that informal education is also crucial, and today there are numerous resources beyond governmental or non-governmental sectors that can be highly effective. Therefore, it is important to focus on integrating information technology into the education of young people, enabling them to access and utilize information independently" (Interview #3).

Other respondent agrees that young people play a crucial role in peacebuilding in the region. and asserts that it's not a matter of whether they can contribute, but rather that they must do it and believes that involving young people is essential for the healing of society, particularly since they inherit the harsh rhetoric of war from previous generations. Therefore, young people must introduce new, more positive perspectives. In the context of concrete peacebuilding, she sees facing the past as a starting point. In the Association, addressing the past is a central component of nearly every project they undertake. Respondent mentions that many of their programs are closely tied to legal aspects, making the process of confronting the past essential. For instance, they employ the living library methodology in their work. Last year, they hosted a youth camp as a part of a program named "Movement 1325" that used transgenerational encounter as its approach. The camp focused on young women and women in general, bringing together survivors of wartime sexual violence in their later years, young girls up to 25 years old, and regional activists from Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia. It was created to inspire young women in Bosnia and Herzegovina to engage in social and political

activities and contribute to peacebuilding efforts in the region. It is featured in the video of the same title which illustrates the impact of young girls engaging with women who survived wartime sexual violence. This methodology is valuable and potentially productive for regional peacebuilding and reconciliation. “Personally, I believe reconciliation is ultimately a personal choice. While we can present information, discuss facts, and review legal rulings, the process of reconciling with the truth is individual. For young people to come to terms with the truth, it must be grounded in certain qualities developed through their environment, the system, and particularly through education” (Interview #4).

During the first interview, I found out that this program was aimed to equip young women with the necessary knowledge and experience. For instance, if they are unaware that Bosnia and Herzegovina is bound by Resolution 1325, they cannot effectively utilize this resolution or demand its implementation from the state. Respondent stresses out that that changing the context of how society is understood is crucial. Historically, there has been an expectation for society to change in order to accommodate different groups, a mantra that has persisted for the past 30 years, but respondent believes that this approach is misguided. Instead, it is essential to foster dialogue and understanding, recognizing that while we cannot alter others' behaviors, we can strive to influence the values of the social structure we live in. This perspective shapes how they work with young people. (Interview #3).

Regarding other projects focused on the culture of remembrance, one of the significant projects took place at the scene of the children's suffering in East Sarajevo. This project, which was well-received in Belgrade, Banja Luka, and Sarajevo, highlighted that young people, must not lose the information that children really died there: “...a child cannot have any ethnic marking on him, a child is a child, a person is a person, human life is as it is, and somehow it was important to us that let's break the ice of the commemoration of the murdered children in eastern Sarajevo ” (Interview #3).

Education and Networking

Regarding formal education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, second respondent highlights its complexity. The education system is shaped by the country's political structure, which includes two entities, one district, and ten cantons within the Federation, as well as three constitutive nations. This results in a minimum of three distinct educational systems. Additionally, there are 13 ministries of education, each endorsing its own educational policies. This fragmentation leads to the teaching of vastly different historical perspectives within the same country. "If we can find three textbooks representing three different narratives, it's impossible to discuss the qualitative role of education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Young people struggle with conflicting narratives and presentations of facts, leading to personal confusion about identity and historical events, and eroding trust in the system, which ultimately discourages engagement" (Interview #4). In contrast, respondent notes that informal education over the past 20-30 years has been more effective and advocates for the use of real-life stories: "Those who have lived through these experiences are still among us—they go to school with us, buy in the same shops as we do, go to cinema with us, and hold positions in government and municipal assemblies. This is our present. The best understanding comes from engaging with these personal stories" (Interview #4). Respondent gives an example of ongoing court cases being shut down or not pursued due to the death of witnesses. Because of this, valuable testimony about past crimes is being lost. This is a serious issue that complicates path to peace in the region. Respondent believes that now the role of young people is to gather as much information as possible to gain a deeper understanding of why our present is the way it is. By doing so, significant progress toward creating a better future could be made. (Interview #4).

Other respondent agrees that education is crucial, noting that a lack of information and education often leads to prejudice and believes that education can drive meaningful change in specific areas. Young people should be encouraged to embrace mobility and networking, even under current conditions. Respondent points out that times have changed, and today, we must use art, culture, and entertainment to bring together young people from the region. This

approach helps youth to realize that meeting peers from other countries in the region can lead to positive experiences, rather than negative ones. Respondent emphasizes the need to listen to the opinions, needs, and ideas of younger generations. Since with rapid technological and geopolitical changes, the perspectives of those in their 20s differ significantly from those in their 30s, we must adapt to the evolving lifestyle of younger generations and find new values and opportunities for networking within these emerging groups (Interview #3).

This respondent adds that the current models of remembrance in the countries of the region are problematic, as they either glorify war crimes, deny them, or excessively focus on victimization, which is also unhelpful. The culture of remembrance can be better addressed through artistic dialogue. By using various forms of art to portray past events, and by involving young people in this process, they are more likely to remember the emotions and narratives associated with these events. Respondent gives an example that in Sarajevo, blood stains were placed around the city to commemorate the siege, and those stains existed according to the principle of the culture of remembrance so that when a parent walks with a child and the child asks him what it is, the parent can inform the child and give him an adequate answer. However, the education system has not established effective mechanisms for explaining and teaching this culture of remembrance: “Some people may explain it normally, some will say that the Serbs are guilty, some will say something completely different. As a result, different interpretations may arise, leading to a generation with conflicting views on historical facts. I believe it’s too late to establish a culture of memory using traditional methods. Instead, we need to be more innovative, embrace digital approaches, and transform the concept of art to effectively convey and teach important lessons” (Interview #3).

Art

The second respondent also expresses a desire to see an increased use of art as a means of networking in the future, emphasizing the importance of enhancing physical interaction and

sharing stories. Respondent believes that cooperation among young people in the region is improving, as they share similar experiences and increasingly face common issues. This progress is due to a growing willingness to listen to one another, networking, and understand each other better. It is expected for the quality of this collaboration to continue to enhance. For instance, from the Association's perspective, they regularly visit Serbia and recently opened an exhibition at the Endzio HAB, named 'Breaking Free' (Interview #4).

The concept of transforming trauma into an artistic representation through this exhibition followed the principle of dialogue at all levels. The central change was the creation of a safe space in which children created a foundation of trust towards society. This environment allowed children born of war to collectively face a broad audience and encourage society to engage with their stories. The exhibition provides insight into individual responsibilities concerning the impacts of war and sexual violence. It is essential for citizens in peacetime to recognize their own discriminatory practices, as these can further complicate the already challenging fight against injustice in the former Yugoslavia. (The Forgotten Children of War Association Website, n.d.).

Respondents agree that the advocacy program is crucial to them, particularly in raising awareness about the existence of children born of war and promoting peace in the region. “This ongoing engagement in Serbia is helping to create new opportunities for young people and advance narratives that will shape the future” (Interview #4).

Regarding their art program, first respondent believes that art is crucial because, in a patriarchal environment, it represents a realm of freedom that patriarchy cannot dominate. Art serves as a testament to individual existence and a medium where emotions are expressed and validated. It demonstrates to people that it is acceptable to feel, even in the presence of others, and that's one of art's great values. Art has the power to inspire and promote change in ways that patriarchy cannot suppress. “Looking ahead ten years, I hope that the art

produced by this Association will have sparked something unstoppable. I am confident it will, as long as we continue on this path” (Interview #3).

At times, but often as an alternative to formal justice, civil society and artists have pioneered unofficial, grassroots methods to seek truth for victims of mass human rights violations. Artistic exhibitions have emerged as a significant form of communication, aiming to present survivors’ experiences of war and violence to broader audiences and challenge silence and denial. Art can provoke discussions about justice, explore alternative historical narratives, amplify often-overlooked individual experiences, and ensure these stories remain part of the national memory. By engaging the collective sense of community, art invites audiences to contribute to the narrative. Artists use everyday language, rituals, or symbols that resonate with people, conveying truths in ways that the law may not. This approach can express individual truths that impact and connect with the broader community, transcending the personal to reach the collective and universal. The presence of an audience signifies public acknowledgment of crimes, which is crucial for rebuilding trust among communities. Recognizing these crimes disrupts the narrative of denial, often followed by feelings of shame and guilt within the group. Art creates a space for collective acknowledgment of the past, fostering empathy, solidarity, and truth-seeking. By keeping memory alive and challenging denial and silence, artists bring justice closer. They transform public spaces into arenas for political and social engagement, nurturing hope and providing opportunities for communities to engage in collective remembrance and truth-seeking (Simic 2016).

Legal Framework

The Forgotten Children of War Association, in collaboration with partner organizations representing civilian victims of war, initiated and led the campaign for the legal recognition of children born from wartime sexual violence. The Association participated in drafting the Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH).

The draft law on the protection of civilian victims of war in FBiH, which for the first time included children born of the war as a category of civilian victims, was adopted by both the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples of the FBiH Parliament at the end of July 2023. This law, which took five years to develop, was eagerly awaited by civilian victims of the war for 30 years. Before that, in July 2022, the Assembly of Brcko District, a special administrative unit in BiH, granted children born from wartime sexual violence the status of civilian victims of war. This decision was also influenced by the efforts of civil sector activists in BiH and marks the first instance in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the government has officially acknowledged the need to recognize this population. In contrast, children born from wartime sexual violence do not hold the status of civilian victims of war in the Republika Srpska entity (Fazlic, 2023).

Regarding the first law from Brcko District, second respondent says it is poorly regulated, and the administrative structure of the Brcko District operates quite differently from the Federation, Republika Srpska, or the state. Instead of a ministry, Brcko District has various services and departments. The law stipulates that children born from wartime sexual violence can only achieve civilian victim status if their mother also holds that status, which means that the child must prove their mother's status to confirm they were born from an act of war rape. This requirement is highly restrictive, given that many children are not in contact with their mothers, or the mothers may have abandoned them, put them up for adoption, or simply have the discretion to decide whether to claim civilian victim status.

They have been working for the past two years to amend this law, and while it remains a significant challenge, they hope to see positive examples and solutions from the Federation that could be adopted in both the Republika Srpska and Brčko District. Another issue is the lack of recognition for children born from wartime sexual violence in the Republika Srpska. Currently, even if children are recognized in the Federation, they face difficulties accessing their rights if they reside in the Republika Srpska. “Ideally, we would have a law across all

three units that recognizes these children as a distinct legal category, ensuring uniform rights and equal treatment throughout the entire state. However, this remains an ideal goal, and the current reality is far from perfect” (Interview #4).

This respondent also believes that the adoption of the law and the official recognition of children born from wartime sexual violence represents a significant step toward achieving a more comprehensive and lasting peace. By legally acknowledging these children, the truth of their existence is being addressed, the suffering of women victims is being recognized, and the consequences of war crimes are being confronted. This move shifts the focus away from blaming specific ethnic groups or politicians and towards addressing the real issues at hand. Instead of engaging in blame-shifting and discussing abstract notions, they are dealing with concrete realities. Respondent sees this law as a crucial element of transitional justice for all former Yugoslav countries, marking a major advancement for Bosnia and Herzegovina. “True peace encompasses not just harmonious interpersonal relations or adherence to established rules, but also individual feelings of justice and inclusion within the system. The progress made this year involves implementing the law, which requires navigating the complexities of distributing responsibilities across various cantons and ministries, which is a demanding task” (Interview #4). While it's important to understand and evaluate the political landscape, the cooperation between civil society and government is essential for effective implementation and systemic change. Since the law’s adoption last year, it has become clear that meaningful social and institutional reforms rely on strong collaboration between civil society and both executive and legislative bodies. “Despite the challenges and the historically ungrateful atmosphere of the past 30 years, there is a growing recognition of the benefits this cooperative system can offer” (Interview #4).

Narratives and Challenges

Regarding the challenges they face, the second respondent says that primary challenge was addressing a topic from 30 years ago, particularly the taboo of sexual violence during the war

and the subsequent lack of protection for affected populations. Other challenges became apparent as children born from wartime sexual violence faced significant obstacles. For instance, in 2018, an initiative was introduced to address the requirement in many administrative offices, especially in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to provide the father's name as part of identification. This requirement was discriminatory, particularly for those who do not know their father or whose paternity has not been acknowledged. The "Name of one Parent" initiative proposed replacing the request for the father's name with a request for the name of one parent, allowing individuals to choose an alternative identifier. This adjustment was necessary to address the oversight of not considering the needs of those who might feel discriminated against by such requirements.

Amending the law to equally and adequately recognize the role of the mother can significantly reduce the discrimination faced by children born of war. It also enhances the privacy of survivors by addressing the current practice where children are frequently required to disclose sensitive details about their biological fathers in front of strangers. This often forces them to reveal that their mothers are survivors of rape, which directly compromises the survivors' privacy. (The Forgotten Children of War Association Website, n.d.).

"This example illustrates how discovering such issues leads to new challenges and subsequent efforts to make necessary changes. With the introduction of the new law, we are currently assessing its implementation to identify what is effectively regulated and what requires further improvement" (Interview #4).

Manipulative narratives have already widened the communication gap between social groups, directly impacting the youth, who should ideally be the drivers of change and the normalization of relations in the region. Educational systems in both Serbia and BiH reinforce these narratives by incorporating curricula based on a one-sided interpretation of the facts. (The Forgotten Children of War Association Website, n.d.).

Second respondent suggests that young people can address the challenges of a negative political environment by engaging in joint activities and building networks. This respondent believes that this approach can generate many ideas to counteract the factors that undermine coexistence and peace (Interview #4).

They conducted a project named “The digital generation in the fight against dangerous narratives in the Western Balkans” (The Forgotten Children of War Association, 2021) on the territory of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Manipulative narratives have already created a communication gap between social groups, which directly impacts the youth, despite their potential to drive change and foster normalization in the region. Educational systems in both countries legitimize these narratives through curricula based on a one-sided interpretation of historical facts. The primary goal was to educate 20 young people from the Western Balkan region on the history of the war in the former Yugoslavia, media literacy, disinformation, and social media production, with the aim of countering nationalist and harmful narratives among youth in the Balkans. As part of the educational component, participants took part in an online training on the 1990s conflict, media production, and social media, and also engaged in a study visit to Sarajevo (via Srebrenica). This program provided them with the skills and tools needed to drive change within their communities and beyond the scope of the project (The Forgotten Children of War Association Website, 2021).

The first respondent notes that young people essentially form a core part of their audience and observes that during public performances and exhibitions, a significant number of young people attend. “Much of our work with youth is conducted through collaborations with other organizations. Annually, we engage with around 400 to 500 young people via these partnerships, working both regionally and throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. This approach is effective given our current limitations, as we lack the federal capacity to introduce additional programs while managing our existing efforts, especially those related to children born from war, both locally and internationally” (Interview #3).

Other respondent states that the Association has effectively become a safe space for young people seeking to confront their past. When a youth project is announced, the focus and nature of the project are generally well understood, and the response from young people is consistently positive. This positive feedback extends to social media, where they receive favorable comments and shares. Respondent attributes this success to the fact that they are telling a compelling, ongoing story that can be conveyed through various mediums, including television, social networks, youth projects, and exhibitions. These diverse approaches help them achieve their objectives. Respondent believes that it is important to engage younger generations at an earlier age, and it would be beneficial to establish stronger partnerships with educational institutions and the broader system. By working more closely with these entities, they could share the responsibility, as the system alone often lacks the capacity to address all needs effectively. Civil society organizations should take the lead in initiating this collaboration, as it can be challenging to expect young people aged 14-20 to actively engage with such topics without system support. If the system demonstrates the importance of these issues, it can create a safer environment for young people to participate. “Also, on a more informal level, we must stay attuned to young people's interests and current trends. As someone who has aged into the older youth category, I recognize that my understanding of what appeals to younger generations may not be fully current. The digital age and shifting lifestyles mean that traditional formats, like seminars without technology, might not resonate with today's 19-20-year-olds. We need to develop more innovative approaches to engage them, while still maintaining the core values that resonate across generations” (Interview #4).

Youth often bring fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to conflict resolution. They can challenge entrenched narratives, propose new solutions, and adopt modern methods of communication and engagement that might not have been considered by older generations. Young people are adept at using social media and other platforms to raise awareness about reconciliation and peacebuilding. Their advocacy can mobilize broader segments of society, including their peers, to support and participate in these efforts.

The Association's work in legally recognizing and supporting children born of wartime sexual violence also ties into Lederach's framework. Their efforts to address the stigma faced by these children and to integrate them into society through advocacy, education, and art are indicative of a commitment to truth and justice. By fostering an environment where these children can confront and heal from their past traumas, the Association supports Lederach's vision of reconciliation that involves acknowledging past wrongs and working towards a collective future. Their work to address the needs of children born of wartime sexual violence and to foster societal acceptance reflects Galtung's emphasis on transforming conflicts through new objectives and empathetic dialogue. Their innovative use of art and education to promote remembrance and dialogue is consistent with Galtung's call for creative approaches to conflict resolution. By focusing on collective healing and social integration, the Association aligns with Galtung's principles of addressing structural and cultural conflicts through non-violent means. The Association's work directly engages with the issues of recognition and representation, as outlined in the normative framework. By advocating for the legal recognition of children born from wartime sexual violence and addressing their unique needs, the Association addresses issues of status inequality and seeks to foster social development and justice. Their use of education and art as tools for dialogue and remembrance reflects the framework's emphasis on transformative education and social justice.

5. Discussion

The engagement of young people in reconciliation processes is promising for the region's future. By addressing historical grievances and working towards a common vision of peace, the younger generation holds the key to a more integrated and harmonious Western Balkans. The involvement of young people in reconciliation and peacebuilding helps ensure that the values of tolerance, dialogue, and understanding are embedded in the next generation which can lead to more sustainable and lasting peace.

According to my interlocutors, a key role of youth in peacebuilding is their involvement in networking to repair, reaffirm, and rebuild relationships within the region, which coincides with Galtung's TRANSCEND method and Lederach's writings on reconciliation. Lederach developed a working matrix for establishing a peacebuilding infrastructure as a journey from our reality through transformation until the achievement of the desired future. He outlined a timeline for different intervention options and approaches, distinguishing between immediate action/crisis intervention (2-6 months), short-range planning/ preparation and training (1-2 years), decade thinking/ design of social change (5-10 years) and generational vision/ desired future (20+years). The last area is where I believe youth should have a significant impact (Lederach, 1997).

Moreover, some of my interlocutors mentioned art as a way of youth engagement in peacebuilding. According to Galtung the arts cultivate creativity, which is essential for designing new processes through imagination and ingenuity. Teaching performance can stimulate these creative capacities and showcase their practical applications. Creativity is a fundamental strategy for developing solutions to problems. The ability to think and act creatively in response to challenges is a vital skill for working in peacebuilding and other areas of development (Galtung 2004). Routledge also mentions cultural activism, as a way of influencing grassroots political practices, merges art, performance, activism, and politics to challenge dominant perspectives and present alternative viewpoints. This type of activism

frequently addresses the social, psychological, and emotional impacts of issues such as war, injustice, environmental crises, and capitalist exploitation. A prevalent method within cultural activism is "culture jamming," which involves disrupting consumer culture and mass media imagery through various actions and practices (Routledge, 2012).

Similar to many transitional justice actors, youth activists are driven by a desire to combat impunity and prevent historical amnesia (Kurze, 2016). The multidimensionality of youth interaction with society offers enormous potential for more widely utilizing their roles in generating new knowledge and in informally educating not only their peers but also the wider society (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). A peacebuilding initiative, whether youth focused or not, should incorporate a youth lens and engage young people, whose ideas about and solutions to some of the toughest challenges are essential to achieving durable, sustained peace around the world (Ebenezer-Abiola, 2023).

All of my interlocutors agree that young people have a huge role in the peacebuilding efforts in the region. They all see education as a first step towards reconciliation. They emphasize the significance of informal education especially since the textbooks lack comprehensive and accurate information. Engaged and informed youth are less likely to be influenced by extremist ideologies or nationalist rhetoric. By promoting education and dialogue, youth can contribute to creating a more stable and peaceful society, reducing the risk of future conflicts.

Jovanovic and Bermúdez point out that research in psychology, sociology, and education shows that young people in Serbia have a limited grasp of recent violent history and often harbor misconceptions about it. Their findings indicate that these youths' understanding of historical events is commonly shaped by everyday experiences rather than by accurate historical information. Attitudes, beliefs, and memories of conflict are passed down to new generations long after a conflict has ended, making it crucial to study the perspectives of those born after the conflict. Research shows that following the breakup of Yugoslavia, the successor states began updating history textbooks to reflect the new realities, often

emphasizing victimization and portraying others negatively. It is also important to investigate how these revised views affect political attitudes and the presence of nationalism in the narratives of young people. By focusing on youths who did not directly experience the violence, this approach provides valuable insights into how they perceive recent conflicts, the impact of historical revisionism, and the connections between violence and nationalism (Jovanovic and Bermúdez, 2021).

According to Lopes Cardozo, in post conflict periods, education can play a crucial role in supporting young people's psychosocial recovery, offering a sense of normalcy and hope. Today's youth, who are grappling with issues of inequality, violence, social transformation, and peacebuilding, were once children impacted by armed conflict. They will eventually become adult citizens responsible for shaping the future of their communities (Lopes Cardozo, 2022).

Many authors emphasize the critical role of education in promoting peace and resolving conflict through both formal and informal approaches, focusing on behavioral change and the rebuilding of relationships to sustain long-term peace. Carter suggests that education happens in both formal and informal settings, with formal learning being the result of structured teaching, while informal learning occurs through everyday experiences. For example, informal learning takes place when individuals observe and engage in conflict situations, particularly through restorative practices. These practices offer valuable opportunities to learn about fostering peace by addressing harm and its impact on relationships and identities. Restorative practices aim to mend connections through communication, empathy, and collaboration. Globally, voluntary reconciliation efforts demonstrate a widespread commitment to community healing and creative problem-solving. Humanism supports these restorative approaches by highlighting humans' ability to address and repair the harm they cause, thereby reinforcing and rebuilding relationships (Carter, 2013).

Samura highlights that education spans both formal settings, like schools, and nonformal ones, such as community activities, aiming to develop individuals' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, which ultimately leads to changes in behavior. Its goal is to foster harmonious relationships and cultivate a culture of nonviolence and peace among students and society as a whole. In the postwar context, effective peacebuilding requires "reconstructing" people's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. This process involves not only addressing the root causes of conflict but also establishing the foundations necessary for enduring peace to prevent future disputes. Education plays a crucial role throughout all phases of conflict, contributing to both conflict prevention and the promotion of lasting peace (Samura, 2013).

Del Felice and Wisler propose that one of the most impactful ways youth can contribute is through peer group non-formal education (Del Felice and Wisler, 2007). The key characteristic of peer group education is that the 'educators' are typically of a similar age, and often share similar backgrounds and gender with the target group (Schell-Faucon, 2001). This aligns with the educational approaches implemented by YIHR and ZDR. According to Del Felice and Wisler, teenagers, in particular, spend substantial time with their friends and often heed their peers more than adults. Their greater flexibility and openness to new ideas enable them to forge connections and relationships that help break down existing barriers. Success hinges on giving youth the space, time, and trust to take initiative. Young people should be acknowledged and studied as proactive agents of positive change (Del Felice and Wisler, 2007).

All three theoretical frames—Lederach's reconciliation framework, Galtung's TRANSCEND method, and Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith's normative framework, are relevant to the case studies as they provide complementary perspectives on how youth contribute to peacebuilding. Lederach's framework highlights the importance of direct human engagement and relationship-building, which is evident in both YIHR's and the Association's approaches. Galtung's TRANSCEND method emphasizes the importance of

empathetic dialogue and creative solutions, principles that are evident in the innovative strategies employed by both organizations. Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith's framework emphasizes the need for addressing root causes of conflict through education and social development, aligning with the educational and advocacy efforts of both YIHR and the Association. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of how youth involvement in education, art, and mutual engagement can contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation in the Balkans.

Conclusion

Youth engagement in reconciliation and peacebuilding is crucial for several reasons, especially in regions like the Western Balkans where historical conflicts have left deep divides. This research showed that youth can and actively do contribute to the peacebuilding efforts in the region. Currently, they mostly contribute through education, art, and cultural exchange that happens by meeting other people, hearing their stories and thoughts. Based on the interviews, I conclude that this moment of personal presence and being there with other people is very important. Educational and cultural exchanges enable young people from diverse communities to interact and share their experiences. These initiatives can help challenge stereotypes and foster mutual understanding.

Young people often face unique challenges such as high unemployment, limited opportunities, and a lack of political influence. Peacebuilding initiatives can address these issues by creating opportunities for economic and social development, thus integrating youth more effectively into the societal fabric. Nationalist rhetoric, political instability, and economic hardship can hinder reconciliation processes. Additionally, there is often a lack of support from political leaders and institutions for youth-driven initiatives. These negative narratives spread by the media and political leaders need to be addressed, or social reconciliation will remain unattainable.

Youth-led initiatives often emphasize inclusivity and diversity. By actively engaging in reconciliation, young people help to promote these values, contributing to the creation of more inclusive and equitable societies. In summary, youth engagement in reconciliation and peacebuilding is essential for fostering sustainable peace, addressing generational divides, and creating a more inclusive and dynamic society. Their involvement not only addresses the immediate aftermath of conflict but also shapes the future trajectory of their communities and nations.

This research demonstrated how young activists are harnessing their transformative potential and creativity to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation in the region through a variety of actions. I believe that future scholarly attention should expand to explore the role of youth in global peacebuilding efforts.

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Annex:

Interview #1, YIHR, interviewed by author. Tape recording. Belgrade, 24th July 2024.

Interview #2, YIHR, interviewed by author. Tape recording. Belgrade, 30th July 2024.

Interview #3, The Forgotten Children of War Association, interviewed by author. Tape recording. Zoom Meeting, 2nd August 2024.

Interview #4, The Forgotten Children of War Association, interviewed by author. Tape recording. Zoom Meeting, 1st August 2024.