

## Policy paper

# “Young People and Women as Active Participants in Democracy, Peace and Tolerance in Sandžak”

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## **Young People and Women as Active Participants in Democracy, Peace and Tolerance in Sandžak**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The relationship between democracy, peace, and tolerance in Sandžak becomes most visible when approached through the position of young people and women, because these are the social groups through which a community's formal commitments are tested in practice. The findings presented here indicate that young people and women in Sandžak are not passive, indifferent, or detached from public life, but rather willing to engage, capable of solidarity, and interested in contributing to democratic processes and social change when meaningful opportunities exist. At the same time, their participation remains constrained by a combination of weak institutional responsiveness, insufficient information about rights and available opportunities, distrust toward authorities, corruption, legal uncertainty, economic insecurity, and a broader environment in which public effort too often appears disconnected from visible outcomes. In such a setting, peace is sustained less through fully legitimate and participatory institutions than through informal coexistence, personal ties, habits of tolerance, and everyday social pragmatism. This gives Sandžak a degree of resilience, but it also leaves peace and tolerance vulnerable, because a social order that depends heavily on informal cohesion while formal politics is experienced as distant and unresponsive remains structurally exposed to disappointment, manipulation, and withdrawal from public life. The position of young women is particularly important within this context, as they face the combined effects of limited institutional support, conservative social expectations, and insufficient recognition in public and civic spaces, despite the fact that their participation is essential for any durable democratic and peacebuilding

process. What emerges is therefore not an image of a community defined primarily by open conflict, but of one marked by a persistent gap between declared democratic norms and the lived experience of participation. The central implication is that the inclusion of young people and women in local democratic life, public dialogue, and peacebuilding is not a secondary issue or a symbolic matter of representation, but one of the decisive conditions under which peace, tolerance, and democratic legitimacy in Sandžak can become durable, credible, and resistant to future strain.

## **ABOUT THE PROJECT**

The project SPARK Sandžak, Supporting Peace, Activism, Rights, and Knowledge in Sandžak, was developed in response to the need to strengthen democratic participation, peacebuilding, and inclusive civic engagement in a region marked by political marginalization, socio-economic pressure, and limited institutional trust. Implemented under the title “Advancing Youth and Women’s Civic Leadership in Sandžak through Peacebuilding Workshops, Public Dialogues, and Advocacy for Inclusive Democracy,” the project focused on Sandžak as a space in which minority inclusion, democratic legitimacy, and social cohesion remain closely interconnected. Particular attention was given to the position of young people and women, whose participation in public life continues to be shaped by conservative social norms, weak institutional responsiveness, and limited access to meaningful channels of engagement.

The project addressed the exclusion of youth, especially young women, from democratic participation, public discourse, and peacebuilding processes by creating opportunities for knowledge-building, dialogue, and advocacy across Sandžak. Over

a seven-month period, it brought together participants from Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, and Rožaje through three workshops, public discussions, and a final regional conference in Novi Pazar. Rooted in the Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security agendas, the project aimed to strengthen the knowledge, visibility, and leadership of young people in the region, while also encouraging tolerance, inclusion, and wider community awareness. It concluded with the adoption of a youth-led declaration promoting democracy, peace, and inclusion as long-term priorities for Sandžak.

## **CONTEXT**

The problems of peace, democracy and tolerance in Sandžak appear most clearly when approached through the position of young people and women, as these are the social groups through which a society's declared commitments are forced to become practical. A community can preserve the outward form of stability and still fail the test of peace, if stability rests on resignation, informal pressure, or the permanent expectation that public life is closed to influence. In such a context, peace is not undermined by open conflict, but by the slow weakening of legitimacy, by the quiet erosion of trust, and by the narrowing of the space in which citizens believe that participation produces any consequence. Sandžak can be described through precisely this tension, which has remained persistent over time. Peace can be understood as something lived every day, tied to personal and social harmony, mental freedom, and stability, and not only as an abstract geopolitical condition. It is worth noting that the social environment is shaped by distrust toward institutions, by legal uncertainty, by economic pressure and unequal opportunity, and by an

informational sphere that makes shared reality fragile and therefore makes social cohesion easier to disturb.

A normative frame that ties peace and security to human rights, equality, and the rule of law is relevant here because it defines peace as a form of institutional life rather than as a moral aspiration. In that understanding, peace is not only the absence of violence, but the presence of inclusive, participatory, rights-respecting institutions across the full cycle of prevention, response, recovery, and transformation. The concept of human security reinforces this, since it treats peace as freedom from fear, want, and indignity, and this immediately makes gender and age decisive categories, because conflict and exclusion produce distinct harms for women and for young people, while meaningful inclusion improves collective outcomes. Within that logic, participation is not treated as a symbolic gesture, but as an element of legitimacy, and legitimacy becomes the decisive condition of prevention. A society that expects its members to accept decisions without influence can be stable for a time, yet it remains structurally exposed, because it teaches citizens that public outcomes are produced elsewhere and that the public sphere exists mainly as spectacle.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda, beginning with Security Council Resolution 1325, is based on the recognition that conflict affects women and girls in differentiated ways and that sustainable peace requires full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in prevention, peacemaking, leadership in peace operations, and recovery planning, alongside protection from conflict-related sexual violence and stronger accountability. The Youth, Peace and Security agenda, launched with Resolution 2250, reframes youth as partners in peace and describes a coherent sequence of pillars that run from participation and protection to prevention,

partnerships, and disengagement with reintegration. Both agendas insist that participation must be meaningful rather than ceremonial and that enabling environments matter, including civic space, safety, and institutional responsiveness. A persistent implementation gap is also entrenched in this framing, since underrepresentation and uneven enforcement continue despite formal commitments, which is relevant because the local environment described in Sandžak is saturated with precisely the kinds of conditions that convert participation into symbolism.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The findings presented in this paper are based on a qualitative research process that combined desk research, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, workshop observation, and discussions held throughout the implementation of the project. The first phase consisted of extensive desk research in order to establish the broader social, political, and normative context within which the issues of youth participation, women's participation, peacebuilding, and democratic inclusion in Sandžak should be approached. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with representatives of local civil society organisations, youth organisations, and faculty staff, with the purpose of identifying key local perceptions, institutional limitations, and existing patterns of participation and exclusion. After that, semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people themselves in order to capture their own experiences, expectations, frustrations, and attitudes toward democracy, public engagement, institutions, and peace in the local environment.

Following the interview phase, a focus group was organized in order to examine youth attitudes in a collective setting and to observe the way in which participants articulated shared concerns, points of disagreement, and common priorities in live

discussion. The research process was then complemented by the implementation of three project workshops, during which additional insight was gathered through direct exchange with participants and through discussions held after the three lectures provided by the project team. New focus groups were later organized in Novi Pazar concurrent with the workshops and brought together young people from different parts of Sandžak, which made it possible to compare recurring themes across local experiences and to identify broader regional patterns. The material collected through interviews, focus groups, workshop interaction, and public discussions was analysed and interpreted by the project team, after which the emerging findings were further discussed with local experts. On the basis of that interpretive process, the policy recommendations presented here were formulated with the intention of reflecting both the lived experience of participants and the structural features of the local environment in which those experiences are shaped.

## **FINDINGS**

The general social atmosphere in which young people in Sandžak find themselves can be characterized by dissatisfaction with the socio-political situation and mistrust toward authorities and institutions. Corruption is perceived as widespread and normalized, and its political effect is to create powerlessness, because in a normalized corruption environment legality ceases to be a shared standard and becomes a selective instrument. Economic pressure, low wages, and unequal opportunities for advancement are identified as central drivers of youth leaving the region, and brain drain is connected to an order in which knowledge and work are not valued while politically connected individuals have priority. The political result of this context is cynicism and the conclusion that effort is not worth it, since merit

appears irrelevant where proximity to power is decisive. Legal uncertainty can be described as the foundation of many problems, institutions do not inspire trust, police inspire fear, and justice is seen as selective, producing the view that what is needed is not a change of office holders but a thorough reorganization of state and social relations. Fear of social instability is coupled with a sense of regional neglect outside of the capital, accompanied by permanent economic uncertainty.

Within Sandžak in general and Novi Pazar in particular, socio-political participation can be described as constrained not only by formal politics but by the everyday structure of information and access. A central problem is insufficient information among young people about existing initiatives, projects, and opportunities for participation, and this deficit produces a distance toward activism and non-formal education. Young people aren't certain which rights they have, what civil society workshops and training concretely deliver, and even what civil society organizations actually do on an everyday basis, which makes civic engagement appear like an abstract activity reserved for those already socialized into it. This is then tied to a local pragmatic culture in which projects are evaluated through immediate benefit rather than long-term social change, particularly in environments where personal security and economic prospects are unstable. The same environment contains a clear desire among young people to be more included in democratic processes and to participate in social change, and young people are described as key actors who can contribute when real opportunities exist and when their engagement is treated as consequential. The problem is in the gap between expression and implementation, since initiatives often fail to materialize or meet what is perceived as a wall of institutional disinterest, producing disappointment and withdrawal.

There is an obvious gap between citizens and their representatives, and it appears to be a structural problem. Political representatives are described by young people as unknown to citizens, communication between the represented and those who formally represent them is weak or almost non-existent, and the result is the belief that the individual cannot change anything. This is a learned conclusion rather than inherited fatalism, because it is reinforced by repeated experiences of non-response. In this environment, civil society is expected to play a stronger and better coordinated role locally, and schools and faculties are treated as institutions that should actively enable youth to organize, network, and engage. The relevant demand is not for sporadic events, but for continuity, cooperation between youth, civil society, education institutions, and local authorities, and for mechanisms through which youth can design and implement projects that are visible to the local population. Visibility matters because effort that is not recognized is treated as wasted, and continuity matters because episodic initiatives do not change expectations.

The local institutional environment can be also described as insufficiently responsible toward youth needs, especially those of young women, with youth voices insufficiently listened to and youth activism insufficiently valued. A general pattern appears in which reactivity dominates over proactivity, with limited long-term planning, and this matters because peace and reconciliation require routine, predictable inclusion and conflict management rather than improvisation. Mobilization appears in response to crisis and then dissipates when crisis loses visibility, leaving the underlying structure unchanged. This dynamic is captured in the experience of recent protests, which are described by local youth as moments when they felt more included, visible, and heard at the national level, and as moments that produced solidarity and even a sense of harmony and peace across religious and ethnic communities in Novi Pazar, since people recognized shared interests and

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shared rights. This indicates that coexistence is not absent and that civic mobilization can temporarily widen public space and reduce identity barriers. The dominant after-effect is disappointment, because durable change did not follow, and the absence of concrete results produced loss of focus and reduced visibility, including reduced visibility on social media.

The meaning of human rights in this environment is therefore not a legal abstraction. Rights are experienced as something that is declared yet not sufficiently respected. The claim that constitutional rights are not adequately respected is tied to the perception that authorities are not oriented toward citizens and that there is insufficient political will to take youth voices seriously. Peace itself is described in the local environment as both personal and social. Peace is not only a lack of conflict but mental freedom, stability, and everyday harmony, and it is built continuously, daily. Divisions and occasional conflicts exist, yet they tend to be resolved quickly without long-lasting hostility, because people know each other, often through family and community ties, and there is a strong tendency toward good neighborly relations, tolerance, and openness. This indicates that informal social cohesion exists and has practical force. Informal cohesion, though, can be undermined if institutions lose legitimacy or if public narratives become more polarized and manipulative, since informal cohesion does not automatically immunize a community from external pressure, economic strain, or systematic disinformation.

Young people and women in Sandžak can be described as willing to engage and capable of solidarity, including solidarity that crosses religious and ethnic lines, while peace is understood primarily as a daily lived condition tied to stability, coexistence, and everyday social harmony. At the same time, participation remains constrained by insufficient information about rights, initiatives, and available opportunities, by

weak communication and accountability between citizens and their representatives, by institutional distrust tied to corruption, legal uncertainty, and selective justice, and by economic pressure and unequal opportunity that encourage cynicism and exit from the region. The findings also indicate that moments of civic mobilization can temporarily widen public space, strengthen solidarity, and reduce social divisions, but that the absence of visible and durable institutional change produces disappointment and withdrawal. Young women remain especially affected by limited recognition and insufficient support in public life, while schools, faculties, civil society organisations, and local authorities are seen as actors that should play a stronger and more continuous role in enabling participation. What emerges from this is not a picture of open social conflict, but of a structural exposure in which peace depends heavily on informal cohesion while formal politics remains distrusted, and in which reconciliation depends on daily tolerance that can be weakened by public narratives, institutional neglect, and the absence of credible participation channels. In such a context, the participation of young people and women in democracy and in the creation of an active peace is not a secondary or symbolic theme, but the decisive measure of whether peace and tolerance in Sandžak can become durable, predictable, and resistant to manipulation.

## **POLICY PROPOSALS**

### **FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

-Local self-governments in Sandžak should establish fixed quarterly consultation meetings with young people and women through existing municipal structures. These meetings should include youth groups, women's groups, student

representatives, youth offices, and local civil society organisations. In a context marked by weak communication between citizens and representatives, low trust, and limited institutional responsiveness, such a measure would create a regular and visible channel through which local concerns, proposals, and requests can be raised and formally acknowledged.

-Local self-governments should introduce a simple and public local information system on opportunities relevant to young people and women. On a monthly basis, municipalities should publish and circulate one overview of open calls, consultations, trainings, internships, support programmes, scholarship opportunities, and contact points for citizen requests and complaints. Distribution should rely on municipal websites, social media, youth offices, schools, faculties, and local media. This would address the current lack of accessible and centralised information, which contributes directly to low participation and to the perception that opportunities are available only through informal networks.

-Local self-governments should provide small-scale financial support for youth-led and women-led local initiatives and improve procedural transparency in all local opportunities affecting these groups. Municipalities should introduce modest annual support schemes for community-based actions such as public discussions, peer education, neighbourhood initiatives, local campaigns, and intercommunity activities. In the present context, where arbitrariness, non-response, and lack of visible outcomes reinforce distrust, such measures would make participation more credible and practically meaningful.

## **FOR LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY**

-Civil society organisations in Sandžak should establish more regular and structured outreach to young people and women who are not already included in civic initiatives. Organisations should move beyond project-based invitations and develop simple outreach practices through schools, faculties, local communities, and social media, with clear explanations of available activities, practical relevance, and ways to join. This would reduce the distance between organised civic actors and those who currently experience civic engagement as abstract, selective, or inaccessible.

-Civil society organisations should develop continuous cooperation with local self-governments, schools, faculties, and community actors around a limited number of recurring activities during the year. Rather than relying primarily on isolated workshops or short-term events, organisations should work toward regular local cooperation formats focused on youth participation, women's participation, non-formal education, public dialogue, and community-level trust building. In the Sandžak context, where mobilisation is often episodic and weakly coordinated, this would strengthen continuity, reduce duplication, and create a more stable local participation environment.

-Civil society organisations should expand practical civic and media literacy activities targeted at young people and women, with a clear link to everyday local experience. Such activities should focus on rights, participation mechanisms, communication with institutions, identification of disinformation, safe and responsible use of digital platforms, and basic skills needed for civic engagement in practice. The emphasis should remain on short and applied formats rather than abstract normative training. In an environment shaped by distrust, weak access to reliable information, and

manipulation in the informational sphere, this would strengthen both participation capacity and local resilience.

## **FOR LOCAL FACULTIES**

Faculties in Sandžak should assume a more active role in informing young people about rights, opportunities, and available participation mechanisms. Educational institutions should regularly share information on local consultations, trainings, civic initiatives, internships, scholarship opportunities, and programmes relevant to youth and women. This information should be circulated through social media and direct communication with students. Given the identified lack of information and weak awareness of available opportunities, and the time spent by young people on social media, they represent the most realistic points through which participation can become more accessible.

-Faculties in Sandžak should establish regular cooperation with local self-governments, youth offices, and civil society organisations working in the fields of youth participation, women's participation, non-formal education, and community dialogue. Such cooperation should not be limited to one-off project events, but should take the form of recurring annual activities, including public discussions, thematic workshops, information sessions, and participation-related programmes. In the current context, where youth often express willingness to engage but lack sustained institutional pathways, educational organisations can serve as a stable bridge between young people and the wider public sphere.

-Faculties in Sandžak should introduce practical civic and media literacy activities adapted to local conditions and linked to the daily experience of young people. These activities should cover basic knowledge of rights, local participation channels, public communication, recognition of manipulative and false content, and responsible use of digital media. Where possible, they should also include practical exercises related to submitting requests, communicating with institutions, and participating in local initiatives. In the present environment, where distrust, disinformation, and weak institutional contact contribute to withdrawal from public life, educational organisations have a direct role in strengthening civic competence and long-term participation

## **CONCLUSIONS**

What the findings suggest is not that Sandžak lacks peace, nor that young people and women lack willingness to engage, but that the social existence of peace and tolerance is not yet matched by an equally credible institutional structure of participation. Coexistence, openness, and solidarity clearly exist, including solidarity that crosses religious and ethnic lines, and this gives the region a real capacity for resilience. At the same time, that resilience rests too heavily on informal cohesion, everyday familiarity, and habits of accommodation, while formal politics remains marked by distrust, weak accountability, limited responsiveness, and the repeated experience that participation does not reliably produce consequence. The central problem is therefore not the absence of civic potential, but the persistence of a gap between that potential and the structures through which it could become durable democratic influence. Where such a gap persists, disappointment is not incidental

but structural, because citizens are asked to recognize the language of rights, participation, and inclusion in conditions where those promises remain unevenly realized in practice.

This is what gives the Sandžak case a significance that exceeds the region itself. What appears here in a particularly visible form reflects wider questions that matter for Serbia more generally, including the relationship between formal democratic commitments and lived participation, between institutional legitimacy and social trust, and between the existence of rights and their practical accessibility. The position of young people and women is especially important because it reveals whether democracy functions as a real social process or remains largely formal, episodic, and selective. If their participation continues to be weakly supported, insufficiently visible, and only partially consequential, then peace and tolerance remain vulnerable, because they depend more on informal social habits than on durable democratic structures. If, by contrast, participation becomes continuous, credible, and institutionally meaningful, then Sandžak also shows that a more inclusive and resilient democratic order is possible. In that sense, the region should be understood not as an exception, but as a clear test of whether Serbia is capable of making democracy, peace, and tolerance practical in the everyday life of communities that have long experienced marginalization, distrust, and limited influence over public outcome

## **Publication Authors:**

**Uroš Popadić**

**Staša Ivković**

## **Project Experts:**

**Jelena Tokmačić**

**Katarina Bogičević**

## **Publication editor:**

**Dragana Đurica**

**WOMEN.**

**Canada**



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