

District of Reconciliation



Brochure

About the Consortium

Our regional project is implemented by a regional consortium of eminent and experienced organisations active in culture, youth work, public dialogue, and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, which have been active for quite a few years. It is led by the Novi Sad European Capital of Culture Foundation and includes the Local Democracy Agency Subotica, the European Movement in Serbia, the Forum of Citizens Tuzla, Youth Act Albania, the Centre for Intercultural Dialogue North Macedonia, Mladi-info Montenegro, and OPENS from Novi Sad.

The consortium is made up of devoted organisations whose long-term work within post-conflict societies is well known, and which operate across local, national, and regional contexts, combining experience in community-based initiatives, intercultural engagement, cultural production, policy research, and interventions in public space.

About the Project

The project was conceived in a space marked by **unresolved pasts** and a present that has learned to coexist with them without truly confronting them. In the societies of the Western Balkans, reconciliation has long been present as a term of reference, repeated in political language and public discourse, yet rarely embedded in everyday social practice or emotional experience. **Peace, coexistence, and dialogue** are often invoked, while daily life continues along lines of separation that remain largely unacknowledged. Memory is preserved selectively, responsibility is displaced, and silence often replaces actual engagement with the past. In such an environment, reconciliation cannot be reduced to a declaration, a formal process, or an institutional framework.

More than two decades after the conflicts, public narratives sadly remain fragmented and unevenly addressed. Dialogue is often confined to formal statements or symbolic gestures detached from lived experience, producing stability without encounter rather than confrontation or resolution. The project takes this condition and rebels against it. It treats reconciliation not as an announced outcome with bureaucratic language, but as a practice that can exist only through engagement, repetition, proximity, and sustained presence in shared space, particularly at the level of communities where division is most persistently reproduced.

Our project therefore returns engagement to the public sphere by creating situations in which different generations, social groups and **communities encounter one another** without the demand for agreement. Through youth

workshops, regional panels, and cultural gatherings, we establish formats that allow for presence, exchange, and disagreement without coercion. Culture functions for us neither as decoration nor as messaging, but as common ground, enabling difficult subjects to be approached indirectly and without undue ritual or performativeness. **By contextualising reconciliation and dialogue within everyday environments** and lived experience, the project keeps open the possibility of speaking about the past without ceremony or performativeness, and of imagining a shared future without illusion, sustained through continuity, participation, and gradual development of trust.

Project Activities

The activities are organised around the plain fact that reconciliation, if it is to mean anything at all, cannot be reduced to a moment of agreement, nor to the absence of open conflict, because the societies of this region have long been capable of living without open war while still preserving separation in habit, language, and memory, and because division survives not only through slogans and politics, but through the ordinary rhythm of life in which people learn to coexist without truly meeting. For this reason **our project does not treat reconciliation as a declaration** to be repeated, or as a concept to be admired from a distance, **but as a practice** that must be carried into public life through repeated encounters, where disagreement is not denied and where presence is demanded without coercion, so that coexistence may be

tested as a real condition rather than performed as a polite fiction.

The **youth workshops** are placed at the beginning of this sequence because the first task is not persuasion but endurance, namely the slow habituation to plurality, to the existence of narratives that do not mirror one's own, and to the discomfort of sustained conversation about the past without the refuge of inherited formulas. The point is not to produce a uniform position, nor to cleanse participants of prejudice through a single virtuous encounter, but to expose them to the strain of listening and speaking without immediately converting difference into hostility, which is precisely what public discourse in the region so often fails to do. Younger participants are addressed not because youth is imagined as wiser or purer, but because it is often less settled into the rigidities of public life, and because it still

retains, at least to a degree, the ability to revise a view without experiencing that revision as humiliation, defeat, or betrayal.

The **regional panels** extend the same discipline into the wider public sphere, where reconciliation has too often been either monopolised by experts or reduced to empty repetition, and where the language of peace has become so common that it frequently says nothing. These panels are therefore arranged not as ceremonies of unity, but as public moments in which unresolved questions are made visible and in which incompatible interpretations are allowed to remain present without being dissolved into polite language, because the region has been damaged as much by false closure as by open antagonism. The order of the panels is deliberate and follows the geography of the problem rather than any hierarchy of suffering:

Tuzla first, because **coexistence there cannot be spoken of lightly**; Montenegro second, because quiet stability often conceals unresolved questions of identity and responsibility; Novi Sad in 2027 third, because Vojvodina's inherited plurality is not a guarantee but a test, and because even the most accustomed spaces of diversity reveal their limits when pressed by contemporary political pressures.

Youth Camps

The three Regional Youth Intercultural Camps form the first encounter of the project, each lasting five days and each bringing together a mixed group of young participants in a setting that is deliberately intensive, because the work attempted here does not occur through a single discussion or a short public appearance, but through duration, repetition, and the slow weakening of the reflexes by which people avoid one another's narratives. The camps combine thematic sessions, interactive workshops, simulation exercises, group work, and practical creative tasks, not as a decorative variety of formats, but as a way of forcing movement between analysis and speech, between private opinion and public articulation, and between the safety of one's own group and the discomfort of shared space, so that participants do not leave with a conclusion, but

with a capacity to remain present when the subject becomes difficult.

Across the camps the emphasis changes while the method remains the same, moving from media literacy and critical thinking, through questions of gender and social position in post-conflict memory, and into the contemporary problems of hate speech, polarisation, and the attraction of extremism as a substitute for social meaning.

Youth for truth runs through this work as a discipline of public speech rather than a slogan, and the camps therefore prepare participants not for a ceremonial role but for public presence within later activities, particularly the District programmes, where youth voices are treated as part of the programme itself rather than as an ornament, and where the discipline learned in the camps is tested in public space through continued participation, cooperation, and the attempt to sustain dialogue beyond the project's calendar.

Regional Panels

The project includes three regional panels, each structured as a public encounter of experts, witnesses, and the wider audience, and each placed so that the discussion is not confined to a room and then forgotten, but carried forward through a public trace that remains accessible after the event. These panels are not ceremonial gatherings and they are not closed expert conferences, but public debates organised with an internal structure that keeps the subject from collapsing either into slogans or into polite avoidance, making visible the coexistence of incompatible interpretations without pretending that such coexistence is a failure to be corrected. The first panel was held in Tuzla, in a city where the very notion of coexistence cannot be spoken of lightly and where the project enters the public sphere through exposure rather than

instruction, allowing the difficulty to be present without forcing resolution. The second panel is held in Montenegro, in a context where conflict has often appeared muted and political stability has frequently been mistaken for social settlement, while questions of identity, belonging, and responsibility remain unsettled beneath public calm, producing the kind of quiet division that becomes visible only when provoked by crisis. The third panel, planned for Novi Sad in 2027, relocates the discussion to Vojvodina, not as a myth of tolerance, but as a space where plurality exists as a lived fact and therefore as a test, because what is inherited can be defended, eroded, or emptied, and the language of diversity can coexist with the politics that undermine it.

Reflections

Each panel is followed by a public outreach campaign that gives the event continuation rather than merely afterglow. To that end, three yearly issues of the e-newsletter Reconciliation Reflections are prepared and disseminated, each drawing out highlights and thematic threads from the debates and preserving something of the event's tone, its arguments, and its points of friction, so that the panel does not survive only as a memory or a photograph. These thematic scholarly publications, produced by the European Movement in Serbia, collect written contributions by experts and scholars and include columns, analyses and studies related to the discussions, not as a bureaucratic appendix, but as **a public record** that can be returned to, cited, and carried into later stages of the project.

They are combined with a contextualization, as well as reports from the Panels, and the reports from the District festivals, with the atmosphere and goings on being carefully captured and framed within these reflections, connecting policy, culture, and civic engagement. Thus the Reflections keep the panels and contributions within a wider context of public visibility rather than allowing them to remain isolated speeches that vanish once the room empties. At the end of the project a final document sums up all the reflections, reports, columns and texts, and provides a paper that consists of the Recommendations of the project.

District of Reconciliation Festivals

These festivals are the heart of our project and will be its enduring legacy. After the first regional encounters, camps and panels, our project shifts its weight toward districts and local spaces, because political narratives do not become durable in national debates or televised arguments, but in the small and repetitive world of everyday life, where people learn whom to greet, whom to avoid, what to say in public, what to keep for private kitchens, and which silences are safest to preserve. Division is sustained locally, not always through open hostility, but through habit and familiarity, through the quiet reproduction of exclusion that rarely names itself as exclusion, and which therefore survives even when the language of peace is spoken everywhere. If such divisions are to be weakened at all, the work has to happen where they live, and for that reason the

district programmes are not treated as outreach, nor as a peripheral addition to the more practical work of panels and workshops, but as a return to the social fabric in which coexistence is either practiced or refused.

The district festivals, beginning in the autumn of 2026, are born of this logic, and they are constructed not as celebrations of reconciliation achieved, nor as spectacles meant to produce a momentary emotional unity, but as interruptions of routine in which cultural presence makes shared space possible without pretending that shared space abolishes difference. Art, film, music, and performance are not used as slogans with rhythm, nor as a substitute for argument, but as forms of participation in which people can stand next to one another, watch the same thing, respond differently, and still remain present, which in this region is often the first condition of any longer

change. In that sense the festivals do not solve tension, because tension is not a technical problem to be solved, but they make it bearable, and they make the encounter ordinary rather than exceptional, so that coexistence becomes something done, not something proclaimed.

Each District is organised as a three-day public programme in which cultural work and public discussion are placed side by side in a curated sequence, so that participation is a matter of entering a shared space rather than joining a closed circle, and so that the encounter is sustained through multiple forms rather than reduced to one staged conversation. Participative theatre is presented in a format that demands response and is often followed by talk back sessions, documentary screenings are paired with moderated public debates held in ordinary language, and installations and public space actions interrupt

routine to create visible points of encounter. Interactive and photo exhibitions provide slower forms of participation, guided walks and thematic workshops carry the work of the youth camps and panels into the District setting, and advocacy forums and public debates bring civil society and public authorities into the same space without the performance of agreement. Concerts and music programmes follow the same logic of shared presence rather than spectacle, and the Districts also function as the regional stage for the sub grant programme, integrating sub granted films, performances, installations, exhibitions, and public actions into the District schedule so that the programme carries not only the voice of the organisers but the wider anthology of works enabled by the project.

The Districts are therefore conceived as temporary public spaces in which coexistence

is practiced rather than announced, repeated rather than advertised, and carried from one local context to another so that recognition is built over time and not left to a single event that disappears without trace. They do not aim to settle historical disputes, nor to force consensus where none exists, but to create conditions in which individuals and groups can remain in shared space without the pressure of alignment, and in which cultural expression can mediate where direct political language has long reached its limit. The project keeps a resistance to finality here as well, because closure has been promised too often and too cheaply in the post-conflict history of the region, and because what is fragile can be reversed, meaning that the only ambition that can be taken seriously is the sustaining of presence, of dialogue without illusion, and of coexistence without denial.

Sub-Grants for Socially Engaged Art

The project includes a regional programme of financial support for socially engaged art, with at least twelve projects to be supported, because reconciliation cannot remain the property of a small circle of organisers, and because ownership, if it is to exist at all, has to be multiplied. Applicants are therefore required to propose collaboration with at least one organisation from another partner country, so that the programme produces not only cultural works but cross-border cooperation as a practice, carried through concrete production rather than declared as an intention. The supported formats cover engaged participative theatre involving intergenerational communities, medium length documentary films, installations in public space including mobile reconciliation monuments, public

actions and performances, photo stories, and interactive exhibitions, with a particular emphasis on applied and participative theatre, not by accident, but because in a region where public space is politically saturated and direct argument often collapses into hostility, theatre can force presence without coercion and allow disagreement to exist without immediate rupture.

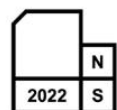
Each grantee is obliged to present the work first within its own community and then within the Districts of Reconciliation, so that the production does not remain private, local, or isolated, and so that the District programmes become a curated regional anthology rather than an accumulation of unrelated items. The sub grant scheme is accompanied by mentoring and monitoring, with a team of mentors providing coaching and capacity support, and with additional expert

input, including an artistic director, engaged to secure methodological and pedagogical consistency across different contexts. The scale is not symbolic. Over two hundred participants are engaged in planning, research, creation, production, and performance, including young people, older persons, and marginalised populations, and the thematic range is defined so that flexibility does not dissolve into arbitrariness: reconciliation in public space, legislation and reconciliation, peace agreements, reconciliation in media space and media literacy, the role of educational institutions, hate speech, anti fascism, the role of women in reconciliation, cultural heritage preservation, and the culture of remembrance.



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