

REBUILDING TRUST AND DEMOCRACY: ADDRESSING YOUTH NEEDS IN POST-CONFLICT SANDŽAK

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Their openness, engagement, and willingness to contribute to dialogue about the future of their communities made this research both possible and meaningful.



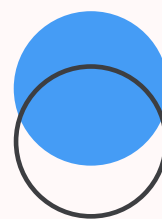
Index:

Introduction.....	2
Background and Problem Statement.....	5
3.1. Historical and Political Context of Sandžak: Contemporary Fragility.....	5
3.2. Structural Challenges Shaping Youth Lives.....	6
a) Economic.....	6
b) Socio-Political.....	7
Research Framework.....	9
4.1. Main objectives.....	9
4.2. Research Questions.....	10
Methodological Framework.....	11
5.1. Method.....	11
6. Theory of Change.....	12
6.1. Civil Society on Post-Conflict Societies.....	12
6.2. Youth participation in peacebuilding: Overcoming Tokenism and Short-Term Involvement.....	14
Survey results and data analysis.....	16
7.1. Survey demographics.....	16
a) Age.....	16
b) Gender.....	16
c) Residential place of the respondents.....	17
d) Settlements.....	17
e) Education.....	18
f) Employment.....	18
g) House income.....	18
h) Ethnicity.....	19
7.2. Section A- Citizenship and political participation.....	19
a) Participation in civic activism.....	19
b) Motivation for involvement.....	20
c) Active participation barriers.....	21
d) Engagement.....	21
e) Voting.....	22
f) Media follow-up.....	23
g) Accordance with statements.....	24
7.3. Section B - Trust.....	25
a) Institutional Trust.....	25
b) Associations on Local Government by youth.....	25
c) Youth perceptions of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).....	26
d) Sources of information.....	27
e) Perceived accuracy and reliability of information sources.....	27
f) Youth consultancy.....	28

g) Community investment priorities.....	29
7.4. Section C - Intercultural relations.....	30
a) Ethnic diversity within social group.....	30
b) Perceptions of interethnic relations.....	30
c) Self-reported experiences of discrimination.....	31
d) Perceptions of key factors for long-term peace and stability.....	32
7.5. Section D - Education and employment.....	34
a) Quality of education.....	34
b) Preferred non-formal education programs for youth development.....	35
c) Perceptions of employment conditions in Sandžak.....	36
d) Major challenges in Sandžak.....	37
e) Perceptions on the region's future prospects.....	38
f) Plans for leaving.....	39
g) Key reasons for considering leaving the Region.....	39
7.6. Section E - EU Mobility.....	40
a) Knowledge on Erasmus+ Opportunities.....	40
b) Willingness on participating on Erasmus+ Opportunities.....	40
c) Obstacles on applying to Erasmus+ Opportunities.....	41
7.7. Additional respondent insights (Open-ended responses).....	41
Final recommendations.....	43
Bibliography:.....	45

Chapter 1

Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak



INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The Sandžak region, situated at the crossroads of cultures, continues to grapple with the legacies of conflict and the challenges of democratic transition. In such contexts, rebuilding trust among communities and strengthening democratic institutions are not abstract goals but urgent necessities. Young people, who often inherit unresolved divisions yet embody the potential for renewal, stand at the center of this process. Their needs, ranging from education and employment to cultural recognition and political participation, must be addressed if democracy is to become a lived reality rather than a distant aspiration.

This local struggle unfolds against the backdrop of a wider global crisis of democracy. Scholars such as Roland Rich (2017) have argued that the optimism of the “Third Wave of Democracy” has given way to widespread disillusionment, with populism, weakened institutions, and declining citizen trust undermining democratic legitimacy. Wangchuk (2023) similarly emphasizes that in developing countries, the erosion of democratic institutions has created fertile ground for instability, weakening accountability and leaving citizens vulnerable to exclusion. These global dynamics resonate strongly in Sandžak, where fragile institutions and contested identities make democracy particularly vulnerable to crisis.

For youth in Sandžak, the crisis of democracy is not merely theoretical. It manifests itself in limited opportunities, skepticism toward political processes, and a sense of exclusion from decision-making structures. Rebuilding trust therefore requires more than institutional reforms; it demands direct investment in youth participation, intercultural dialogue, and socio-economic empowerment. Initiatives such as youth councils, civic education programs, and participatory budgeting can help transform democracy from a distant concept into a tangible practice. At the same time, creating safe spaces for intercultural exchange and addressing structural inequalities are essential to prevent disillusionment and disengagement.

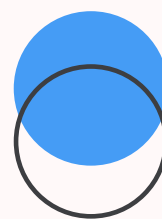
Trust-building in post-conflict societies has been widely studied in transitional justice literature. Fiedler and Mross (2023) argue that, when designed inclusively, transitional justice instruments can foster social trust and reconciliation beyond the prevention of renewed violence. Casas-Casas and Méndez (2020) similarly demonstrate that trust is a key factor in sustainable peace efforts, reducing intergroup hostility and enabling

reconciliation. These insights are particularly relevant for Sandžak, where rebuilding trust among diverse communities is inseparable from the broader project of democratic renewal.

Ultimately, democracy thrives when young people believe in it, trust its institutions, and see themselves as active contributors. In post-conflict Sandžak, addressing youth needs is not only a matter of social policy but a strategic investment in peace, stability, and long-term prosperity. By situating local efforts within the global debate on democracy in crisis, stakeholders can highlight both the urgency of action and the transformative potential of youth to safeguard democratic futures.

Chapter 2

*Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak*

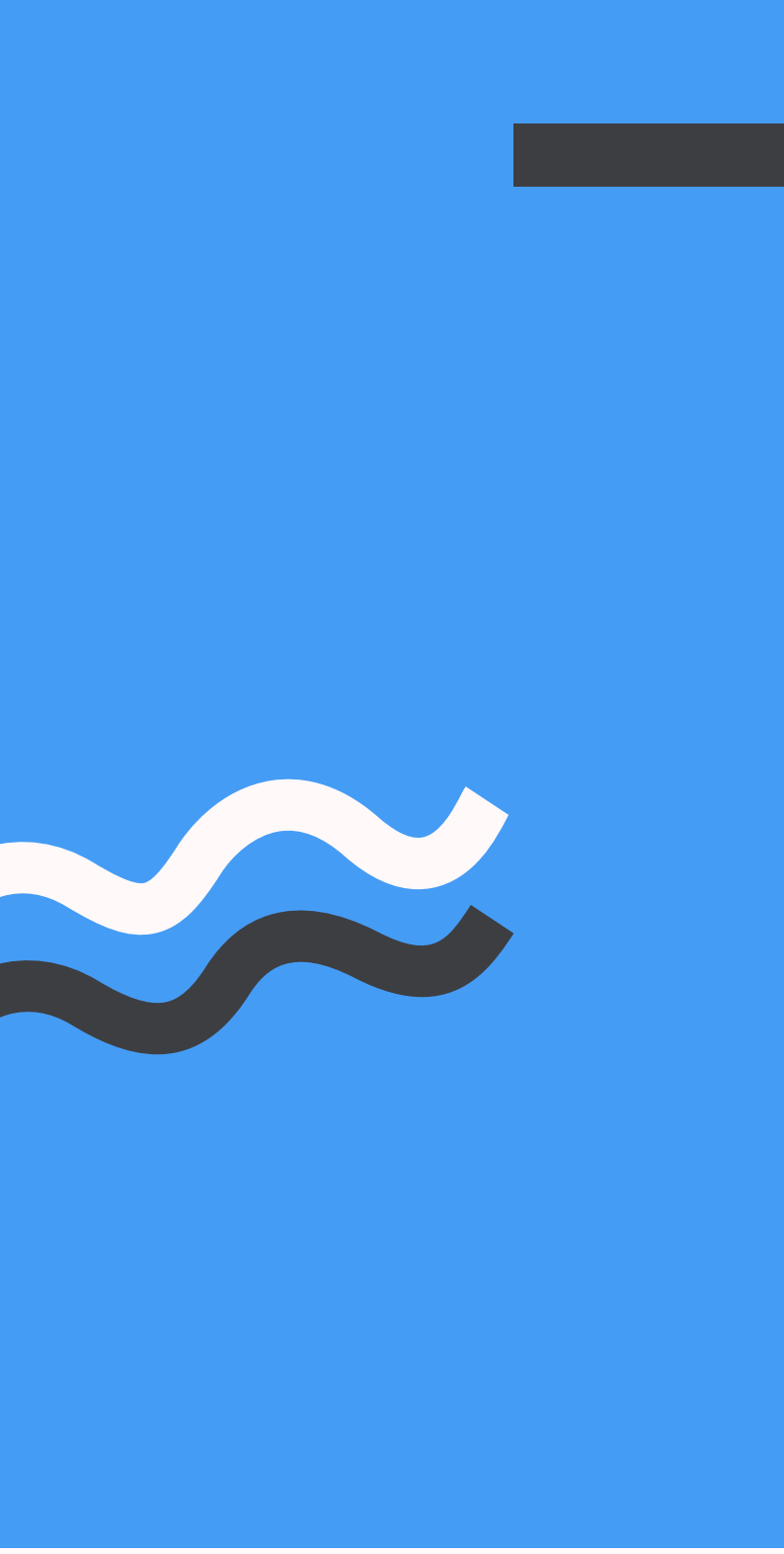


RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Relevance of the Research

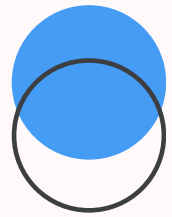
Conducting a needs assessment on youth participation and democratic engagement in Sandžak is highly relevant given the region's demographic, political, and historical context. This region is one of the youngest in Serbia, with a significant proportion of its population under thirty (Novovic, 2014). This demographic profile makes youth not a peripheral group but the majority, whose needs and aspirations directly shape the future of democratic development. Despite this, youth in Sandžak remains underrepresented in political processes, faces high levels of unemployment, and often lacks access to meaningful civic participation. Their exclusion undermines both trust in institutions and the prospects for long-term stability.

The justification for this investigation lies in the absence of systematic research on youth participation in Sandžak. While broader studies on post-conflict societies emphasize the importance of youth in peacebuilding and democratic resilience, there is limited empirical evidence that captures the specific experiences, challenges, and assets of young people in this region. As highlighted in Global Youth, Peace and Security Research, young people worldwide express that they “have lost faith and trust in their Governments, the international community and systems of governance that they feel excluded from,” a sentiment that mirrors the frustrations of many youth in marginalized or post-conflict contexts (Altiok & Grizelj, 2019). This gap in scholarship restricts the ability of policymakers, civil society, and international actors to design interventions that respond to local realities. A needs assessment therefore provides essential data to inform strategies that align with youth priorities and strengthen democratic culture.



Chapter 3

*Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak*



BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Background and Problem Statement

Sandžak's present realities emerge from a complex interplay of history, economy, and politics. To grasp the challenges faced by its youth, it is essential to consider how past fragility, persistent economic disparities, and socio-political dynamics converge in shaping everyday life. This section explores these interconnected dimensions: the historical and political legacies that continue to influence Sandžak, the structural economic barriers confronting young people, and the socio-political conditions that define their opportunities for participation and belonging.

3.1. Historical and Political Context of Sandžak: Contemporary Fragility

Sandžak is a historically layered border region shared today by Serbia and Montenegro, positioned between Kosovo in the south and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the northwest. Its name derives from the former Ottoman Sanjak of Novi Pazar, an administrative unit that once occupied a strategically important corridor linking the western Balkans with the routes toward Istanbul. From the late nineteenth century onward, the region experienced repeated shifts in political authority; moving between Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Serbian, and Montenegrin control; before being divided among the republics of socialist Yugoslavia after the Second World War (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2021).

The Bosniak population of Sandžak has long faced structural marginalization, limited economic opportunities, and periodic waves of emigration. During the interwar period, the region remained one of the least developed parts of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, with scarce educational institutions and persistent public health problems. In the 1950s and 1960s, insecurity and political pressure contributed to large-scale departures to Turkey, a process facilitated by state policies that encouraged the renunciation of Yugoslav citizenship. Although economic conditions began to improve in the 1960s, the administrative division of Sandžak within Serbia was deliberately arranged to prevent the formation of Muslim-majority units (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2021).

The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s brought renewed tension to Sandžak. Although the region did not witness direct armed conflict, it was nonetheless drawn into the broader climate of nationalism and state militarization. Police repression, politically

motivated trials, intimidation, and other violations of human rights created an atmosphere of fear that prompted significant emigration. These pressures left enduring social and psychological consequences for the Bosniak population, reinforcing long-standing feelings of insecurity. The absence of institutional accountability for the abuses committed during this period continues to shape the political and social position of Bosniaks in contemporary Sandžak (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2021).

3.2. Structural Challenges Shaping Youth Lives

a) Economic

Youth in Sandžak face a set of persistent economic constraints shaped by the region's long-term underdevelopment and uneven access to formal employment. Although Novi Pazar has built a strong entrepreneurial base; especially in textiles, footwear, and small manufacturing; these sectors often rely on informal labour arrangements and provide limited long-term stability for young workers. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia notes that Sandžak continues to experience “deep economic disparities compared to central Serbia, reflected in lower investment levels and weaker labour market opportunities” (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2021). These disparities restrict access to vocational training, professional advancement, and stable income, pushing many young people to seek opportunities abroad. UNDP Serbia similarly highlights that youth unemployment remains significantly higher in underdeveloped regions, where structural barriers limit access to skills, capital, and formal job opportunities (UNDP Serbia, 2022).

These local challenges are compounded by the broader economic centralization in Belgrade, which further entrenches regional inequalities. According to the Statistical Office of Serbia, the Belgrade region alone contributes around 40–42% of Serbia's total GDP, while Vojvodina adds another 26–27%. In contrast, the combined share of Šumadija, Western Serbia, Southern, and Eastern Serbia is less than 35%, underscoring the stark imbalance in productive capacity and investment distribution (Uvalić & Bartlett, 2021). This concentration of resources in Belgrade means that capital, infrastructure, and skilled labor are disproportionately clustered in the capital, leaving peripheral regions like Sandžak with weaker institutional support and fewer opportunities for sustainable development.

As a result, youth in Sandžak not only face structural barriers within their local economy but also compete against the gravitational pull of Belgrade's centralized growth model. This dynamic drives both internal migration toward the capital and outward migration abroad, widening the gap between prosperous and underdeveloped regions and making economic insecurity and mobility defining features of youth life in Sandžak.

b) Socio-Political

The socio-political environment in Sandžak plays a decisive role in shaping how young people understand their position within Serbia. For many, social and political dynamics are deeply intertwined: access to education, public services, and cultural spaces is inseparable from broader questions of recognition, representation, and institutional trust.

Although political leaders frequently highlight interethnic harmony, young people often encounter a more complicated reality. In January 2026, President Aleksandar Vučić described relations between Serbs and Bosniaks as “*a key relationship for the future of the Balkans*” (Telegraf, 27 January 2026). He struck a similar tone during the 2025 student protests, stating that “*both Serbs and Bosniaks were equally upset... both want peace, both want stability, both do not want any conflicts*” (RadioSarajevo, 30 July 2025). Yet these messages appear to contrast with the way youth activism is sometimes publicly framed. When students in Novi Pazar organized a protest in 2025, the reaction in official discourse characterized the gathering as limited in scale and impact (Nova.rs, 2025). For many young people, such responses have contributed to a perception that their concerns are acknowledged at a rhetorical level, but not always fully reflected in substantive engagement.

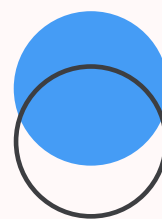
Civil society organizations have long noted this disconnect. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia argues that political discourse often stresses unity while avoiding deeper engagement with the specific challenges faced by minority communities (2021). These issues extend into the social sphere, where young people report limited access to quality education, extracurricular activities, and inclusive public spaces. International monitoring bodies highlight similar patterns. In this way, the OSCE's 2020 election report points out that minority representatives continue to raise issues related to unequal access to institutions and limited responsiveness from state authorities (OSCE, 2020), while the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee observes

that Bosniaks still report insufficient participation in public administration and decision-making processes (Council of Europe, 2021). Together, these assessments help explain why many young people in Sandžak feel that institutions neither reflect their demographic reality nor address their specific needs.

The student protests that unfolded across Serbia in 2025 brought these dynamics into sharper focus. Although the main demonstrations took place in Belgrade, young people from Novi Pazar and other Sandžak municipalities expressed solidarity through local gatherings and online mobilization. Their involvement reflected a broader generational frustration with inequality, limited opportunities, and the lack of meaningful channels for civic participation. As noted by the OSCE, young people across Serbia consistently call for greater transparency, accountability, and genuine avenues for engagement in public life (OSCE, 2022). For Bosniak youth in Sandžak, these national demands intersect with long-standing concerns about education, minority inclusion, making socio-political participation both a regional and generational challenge.

Chapter 4

*Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak*



RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Research Framework

To ensure analytical clarity, the research framework brings together the main objectives and guiding questions into a coherent structure. It translates the broader problem of youth disengagement and fragile institutional trust in Sandžak into specific lines of inquiry, while grounding the analysis in both theoretical and methodological foundations. This section therefore outlines the objectives that shape the study's direction and the research questions that guide its focus, establishing a roadmap for examining how young people experience civic life, engage with civil society, and envision their role in Sandžak's democratic future.

4.1. Main objectives

To guide this research with clarity and focus, the following section outlines the core objectives that structure the research. These objectives translate the broader problem of youth disengagement and institutional mistrust in Sandžak into concrete areas of inquiry, helping to frame how the study will examine youth perceptions, civic needs, and the role of civil society in supporting democratic participation. By defining these objectives, the research establishes a clear roadmap for understanding how young people experience civic life today and how they envision their place in Sandžak's democratic future. In this way, the main objectives are as follows:

- To contextualize the research through a focused background and problem statement that outlines the historical, political, and structural conditions of Sandžak, including the economic, social, and political challenges shaping youth experiences.
- To synthesize key literature on civil society in post-conflict contexts and youth participation in peacebuilding, providing the theoretical foundation necessary to interpret the research findings.
- To examine how young people in Sandžak perceive civil society organizations in comparison to formal institutions, with particular attention to the levels of trust, credibility, and relevance they attribute to each actor.
- To analyze which CSO-led activities youth consider most meaningful and aligning for learning about peace, dialogue, reconciliation, and democratic values, and to assess how these initiatives influence civic awareness and trust-building.

- To identify the structural, social, and personal factors that shape or limit youth participation in civic or CSO-led activities, including access to safe spaces, opportunities for engagement, and democratic skill-building.
- To explore how young people envision their role in Sandžak's democratic future, capturing their sense of agency, belonging, and aspirations for contributing to a more participatory and inclusive society.

4.2. Research Questions

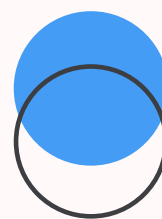
Understanding youth participation in Sandžak requires examining not only the structural challenges young people face but also the ways they interpret and navigate the civic landscape around them. In a region marked by historical marginalization, political polarization, and fragile institutional trust, young people's perceptions and experiences offer essential insight into the prospects for democratic renewal. This research therefore centers youth voices to better understand how they relate to civil society organizations, formal institutions, and the broader processes of peacebuilding and democratic engagement. Guided by this purpose, the study is structured around four core research questions that explore the depth and complexity of youth civic life in Sandžak:

- How do young people in Sandžak perceive civil society organizations compared to formal institutions?
- Which CSO activities do youth identify as relevant for learning about peace, dialogue, and democracy?
- What factors influence or limit youth participation in civic or CSO activities?
- How do young people describe their role in the future democratic development of Sandžak?

Together, these questions provide a framework for assessing youth needs, identifying gaps in civic opportunities, and understanding how civil society can more effectively support democratic participation in a post-conflict context.

Chapter 6

*Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak*



METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Methodological Framework

In this section, the methodological foundations guiding the needs assessment on youth in Sandžak will be presented. It outlines the approach adopted, as well as the methods and criteria used to ensure coherence between the research questions, the use of sources, and the analytical strategy. This section also explains how the combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques makes it possible to capture both the individual experiences and perceptions of young people and the broader patterns that shape their civic participation and their relationship with institutions and civil society organizations.

5.1. Method

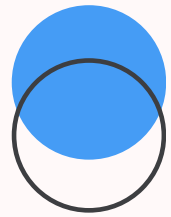
For the purposes of this investigation, a grass rooted and direct approach will be employed, combining both descriptive and quantitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive analysis. This design is particularly appropriate for Sandžak, where youth experiences are shaped by complex historical, political and social dynamics that require both depth and breadth of inquiry.

The survey being delivered to youth examines not only the quantitative data but also provides the perspectives of young people on the topics covered by the research. Quantitative methods will be applied through the design and administration of a survey targeting youth in the region. This instrument will generate measurable information on attitudes toward civic engagement, trust in institutions, and perceptions of civil society organisations. It will also capture the extent to which young people participate in activities organized by CSOs, including those focused on human rights education, peacebuilding, and community dialogue, and the barriers that limit their involvement. The survey results will allow insights for the identification of broader trends and patterns that complement the qualitative findings.

This analytical and descriptive approach strengthens the validity of the findings and provides a holistic understanding of how civil society contributes to post-conflict reconstruction and the development of a democratic culture aligned with the priorities and aspirations of young people from Sandžak. It also ensures that the analysis is grounded in both empirical data and the extensive documentation produced by human rights organizations that have long monitored the region.

Chapter 7

Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak



THEORY OF CHANGE

Theory of Change

To ensure that this research is developed as clearly and coherently as possible, it is essential to outline the key concepts that will guide this needs assessment. Accordingly, the following section is divided into two subsections. The first examines the role of civil society in processes of peacebuilding, democratization, and reconciliation from a bottom-up perspective, with particular emphasis on the function of civil society organizations (CSOs) as substitutes for weak institutions. The second subsection focuses on youth participation in peacebuilding processes, addressing cross-cutting challenges such as tokenistic engagement and short-term involvement.

6.1. Civil Society on Post-Conflict Societies

Armed conflict and state repression not only devastate societies but also fundamentally reshape the conditions under which collective action and civic engagement can occur. As wars fracture social fabrics, displace communities, and erode institutional capacities, opportunities for meaningful civic participation become increasingly constrained. Scholars such as Kaldor (2003) emphasize that violent conflict disrupts the networks of trust and reciprocity that underpin democratic life, while Parver and Wolf (2008) show that these disruptions have long-term consequences for how citizens relate to public institutions and how democratic norms are rebuilt in the aftermath of violence. In many post-conflict contexts, the legacies of fear, fragmentation, and institutional weakness continue to shape the possibilities for civic engagement well beyond the cessation of hostilities.

Within this landscape, civil society emerges as a critical arena for social reconstruction. As formal state institutions struggle to regain legitimacy and operational capacity, Barnes (2006) argues that civil society organizations (CSOs) often become the primary actors capable of mobilizing communities, facilitating dialogue, and rebuilding fractured social relations. Their embeddedness within local communities enables them to identify urgent needs, mediate tensions, and create participatory spaces where citizens can re-engage in collective decision-making. This dynamic resonates with Mac Ginty's (2011) insistence that peacebuilding efforts must align with local understandings of legitimacy and authority if they are to be effective. Similarly, Pouligny (2005) highlights that CSOs often serve as intermediaries between international peacebuilding agendas and community-level expectations, translating external interventions into locally meaningful practices.

At the same time, the influence of CSOs is shaped by the broader political environment, including the degree of institutional openness, the availability of resources, and the extent to which communities perceive civic actors as credible and representative. Ottaway and Carothers (2000) note that civil society's democratizing potential is highly contingent on political opportunity structures, while Richmond (2013) underscores that civic actors can be constrained or co-opted in hybrid or illiberal post-conflict orders. Despite these challenges, civil society frequently operates at the intersection of service provision, social cohesion, and democratization, assuming roles that are both complementary to and compensatory for weakened state structures.

This multidimensional contribution aligns closely with Merkel and Lauth's (1998) functional model of civil society, developed through research on democratic transformation in Eastern Europe and enriched by comparative studies across diverse political settings. Rather than treating civil society as a historically fixed entity, their approach conceptualizes it as an analytical category whose functions can be observed across regions and institutional environments.

Within this framework, civil society fulfills five essential democratic functions. First, it provides protection, offering a sphere in which citizens exercise rights and autonomy beyond direct state control. Second, it performs intermediation, maintaining channels of communication between citizens and state institutions to monitor, influence, and constrain political authority. Third, it fosters participatory socialization, serving as a school of democracy where individuals learn civic skills, develop trust, and cultivate democratic norms, a process also emphasized by Diamond (1994) and Edwards (2009). Fourth, civil society contributes to community-building and integration, bridging social cleavages and nurturing solidarity, provided that self-organization does not reproduce exclusionary ethnic or religious boundaries. Finally, it enables communication, sustaining a free public sphere where deliberation, debate, and collective decision-making can occur independently of state and market pressures, echoing Habermas's (1991) conception of the public sphere¹.

¹ The public sphere is a communicative arena where private individuals assemble to discuss issues of shared relevance, using rational-critical debate to shape public opinion independently of state control (Habermas, 1991, pp. 398–401).

6.2. Youth participation in peacebuilding: Overcoming Tokenism and Short-Term Involvement

Youth participation in peacebuilding is increasingly acknowledged as vital for sustainable conflict transformation, yet structural constraints continue to limit its depth and durability. Despite normative advances such as UNSCR 2250², young people remain peripheral to formal peace processes, where their involvement is often symbolic rather than substantive. The UN Global Policy Paper *We Are Here* (Altiok & Grizelj, 2019) challenges portrayals of youth as threats or victims, emphasizing their active contributions to peace. This view aligns with broader Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) scholarship, which conceptualizes youth as political agents whose roles have long been overlooked. Altiok, Berents, Grizelj and McEvoy-Levy (2020) trace the YPS agenda to sustained youth-led advocacy contesting securitized narratives and demanding recognition of youth as rights-holders and legitimate actors.

Yet participation remains marked by tokenism³. The UN paper's model: "in the room, around the room, and outside the room", shows how youth are often confined to consultative roles without real influence over agendas or decisions. Berents and Mollica (2022) describe this as "reciprocal institutional visibility," whereby institutions highlight youth inclusion rhetorically while maintaining hierarchical practices that limit substantive impact. Tokenism persists because peace processes remain elite-driven, representation is narrowed to a few individuals, and institutional cultures privilege age and formal credentials over lived experience and community knowledge.

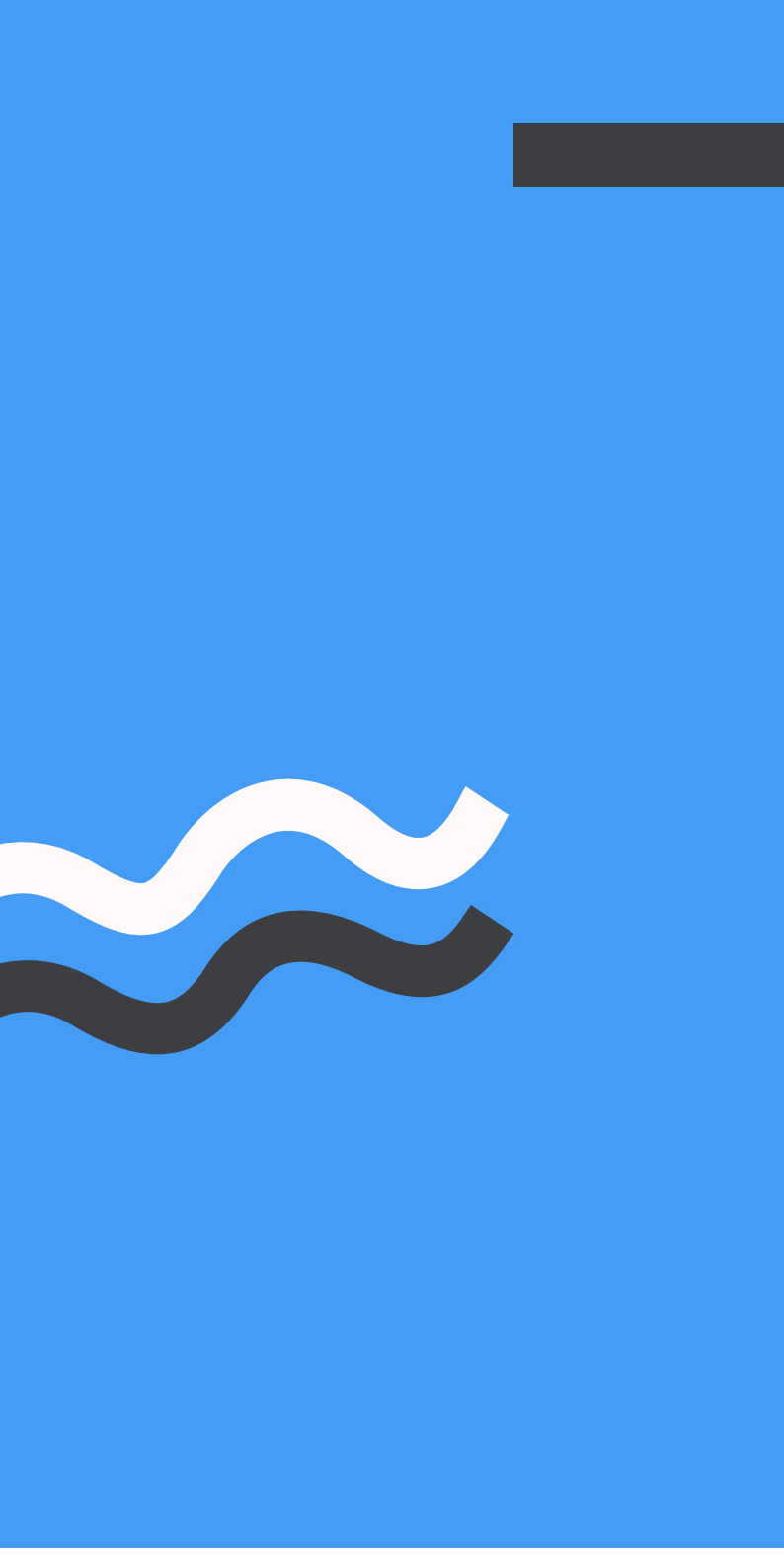
A further challenge is the short-term nature of youth involvement. Peace processes unfold over extended, non-linear cycles, yet youth engagement is typically restricted to brief consultations or project-based activities. The UN paper stresses the need for youth inclusion across all phases, but in practice they are rarely integrated into implementation or monitoring mechanisms. This disconnect produces fragmented engagement and weak institutional memory. Gyamfuaa-Abrefa et al. (2024) identify limited resources, adultism and insecurity as barriers to sustained participation, while Agbiboa (2015)

² United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) recognizes that youth should actively be engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation, while noting that a large youth population represents a demographic dividend that can foster sustainable peace and economic prosperity if inclusive policies are implemented.

³ In this context *tokenism* refers to the practice of including young people in peace processes in a superficial or symbolic way, without granting them real influence over decisions, agendas, or outcomes.

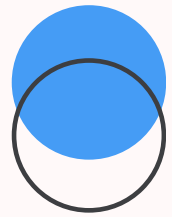
shows that exclusion from formal politics forces youth into precarious, informal peacebuilding despite their central role in everyday security.

Addressing these challenges requires reframing youth participation as a matter of power rather than presence. Meaningful inclusion depends on youth shaping agendas, drafting texts and participating in monitoring. The UN paper calls for institutional mechanisms embedding youth across all phases, while Altioek et al. (2020) argue for institutionalized roles in mediation, advisory councils and transitional justice. Both stress the importance of intersectional approaches that reflect the heterogeneity of youth experiences. Without such measures, youth participation risks reproducing the exclusions it seeks to overcome.



Chapter 8

Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak



SURVEY RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Survey results and data analysis

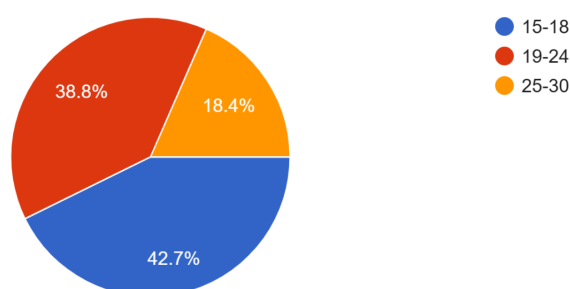
This survey offers a comprehensive overview of youth realities in the Sandžak region, capturing not only demographic characteristics but also the social, economic, and political conditions that shape their everyday lives. The data reveal a predominantly young, female, and urban-oriented sample, reflecting both the opportunities and constraints of growing up in a region marked by structural inequalities and limited institutional trust. Beyond basic statistics, the findings highlight broader patterns: the tension between civic mobilization and disengagement, the fragility of democratic participation, and the uneven distribution of opportunities across municipalities. They also underscore the resilience of young people, whose motivations are rooted in community improvement and solidarity, even as they navigate economic precarity and skepticism toward formal institutions. Taken together, this survey provides a valuable lens into the aspirations, barriers, and priorities of youth in Sandžak, situating their experiences within wider national and regional dynamics of marginalization, activism, and social change.

7.1. Survey demographics

a) Age

In response to the question about the age structure of the respondents, 42.7% of participants belong to the group aged 15 to 18, while 38.8% are young people aged 19 to 24. The oldest category, aged 25 to 30, is represented by 18.4% of respondents. This distribution indicates that the majority of respondents are concentrated in the younger age brackets, with a clear predominance of adolescents and young adults between 15 and 24 years old. It suggests that the sample is heavily youth-oriented, while representation of older participants (25–30 years) is comparatively limited.

103 responses

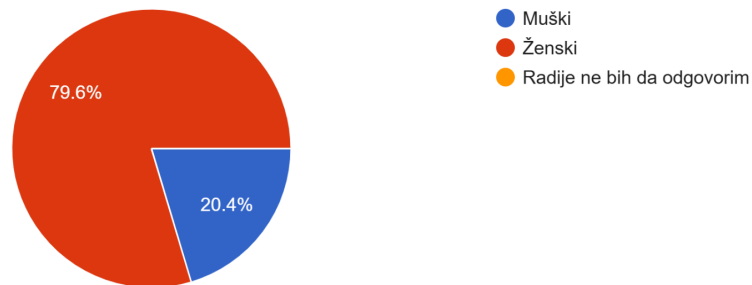


b) Gender

In response to the question about gender, 20.4% of respondents identified as male, while 79.6% were female. An additional 0% of respondents chose not to disclose their gender. The sample structure reveals a clear predominance of female respondents, which highlights that young women are more inclined to participate in initiatives of this kind. This pattern suggests a higher level of motivation and engagement among women in

community-oriented and research activities, shaping the study's findings toward their perspectives and experiences.

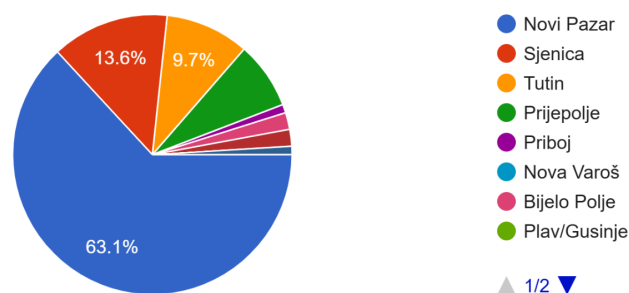
103 responses



c) Residential place of the respondents

When it comes to place of residence, the largest number of respondents come from Novi Pazar (63.1%), followed by Sjenica (13.6%), while other municipalities show lower representation. This geographical distribution indicates a strong spatial concentration of the sample in Novi Pazar, reflecting the demographic weight and centrality of this municipality within the region. The dominance of Novi Pazar suggests that the findings are largely shaped by the socio-cultural and economic context of this urban center, while perspectives from smaller municipalities remain underrepresented. This imbalance also points to unequal access to such activities, as youth from Novi Pazar are more exposed to opportunities for participation, whereas those from peripheral municipalities may face structural barriers.

103 responses



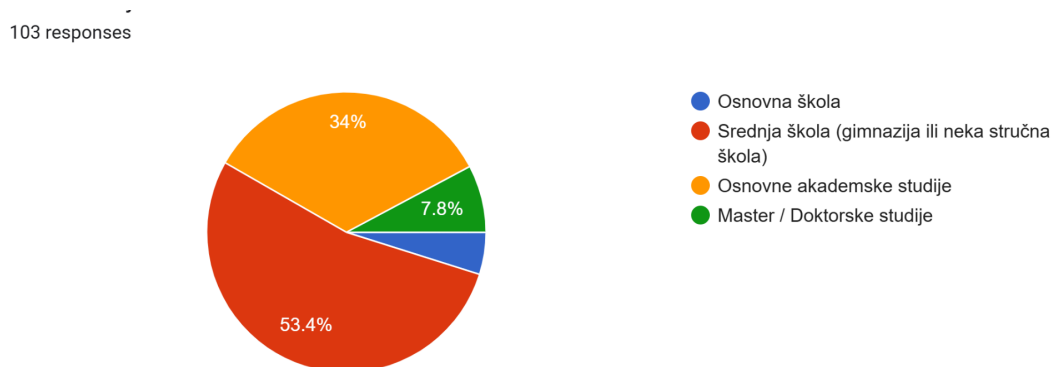
d) Settlements

In response to the question of whether they live in an urban or rural area, 37.9% of young people reported living in the city center, 45.6% in suburban settlements, while 16.5% come from rural areas. These data suggest a predominance of suburban and urban youth within the sample, indicating that the perspectives captured are largely shaped by semi-urban and urban environments. The relatively smaller share of rural respondents points to a limited representation of rural experiences, which may affect the

balance of insights regarding differences in opportunities, accessibility, resources, and social dynamics between urban and rural contexts.

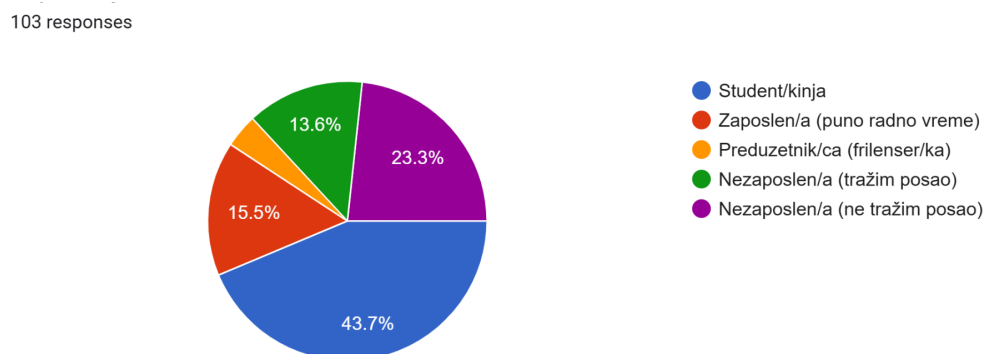
e) Education

When it comes to the highest level of education, 53.4% of respondents have completed secondary school, 34% hold undergraduate academic degrees, while 7.8% possess master's or doctoral qualifications. A smaller portion of the sample (4.9%) has completed only primary school. The educational structure indicates a clear predominance of respondents with mid-level qualifications, reflecting the general educational profile of the youth population.



f) Employment

In response to the question about employment status, 43.7% of respondents are students, 15.5% are employed full-time, while 13.6% are actively seeking work. Additionally, 3.9% of young people are self-employed or working as freelancers. These findings indicate a sample largely shaped by individuals in transition between education and the labor market, with students forming the dominant group. The distribution reflects the typical life stage of youth, where formal education and early career entry prevail, while self-employment and freelancing remain marginal forms of engagement.



g) House income

In terms of financial status, 5.8% of respondents state that their household can cover basic needs, but with difficulties, while 28.2% assess their situation as stable without the possibility of additional expenses such as travel. Alarming, 1% of young people report that they cannot afford even basic needs. These findings point to a worrying level of

economic precarity among youth, where a significant share live under constrained financial conditions that limit their ability to invest in personal development, mobility, or cultural participation. The presence of households unable to meet even basic necessities underscores deep structural inequalities, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support measures to address poverty and ensure more equitable access to opportunities.

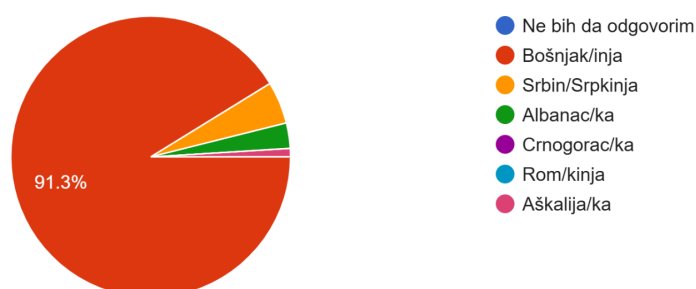
103 responses



h) Ethnicity

According to self-identification, 91.3% of respondents declared themselves as Bosniaks, 4.9% as Serbs, while 2.9% identified as Albanian. The overwhelming predominance of Bosniaks reflects the demographic reality of Novi Pazar and surrounding municipalities, where Bosniaks form the majority population. Nonetheless, the presence of Serbian and Albanian respondents, though smaller in proportion within this sample, is important for capturing the multiethnic character of Sandžak. While Serbians are the majority population at the national level in Serbia, their lower representation here highlights the distinct demographic composition of Sandžak compared to the rest of the country.

103 responses

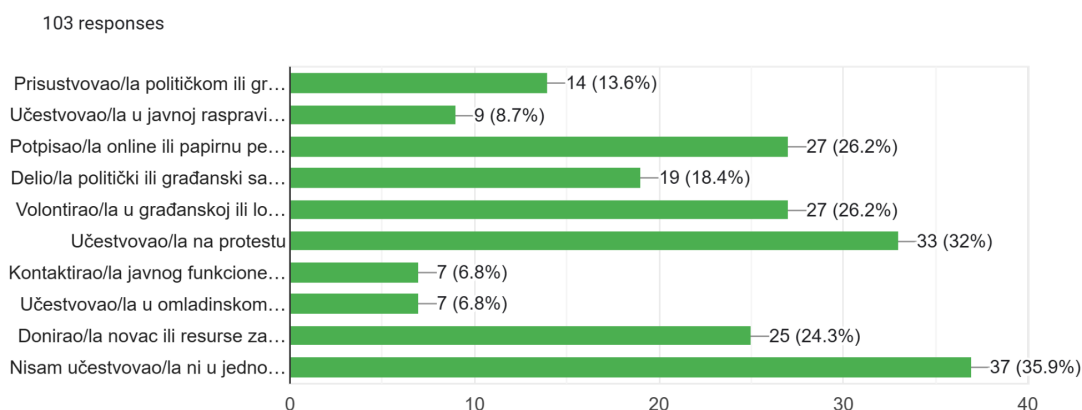


7.2. Section A- Citizenship and political participation

a) Participation in civic activism

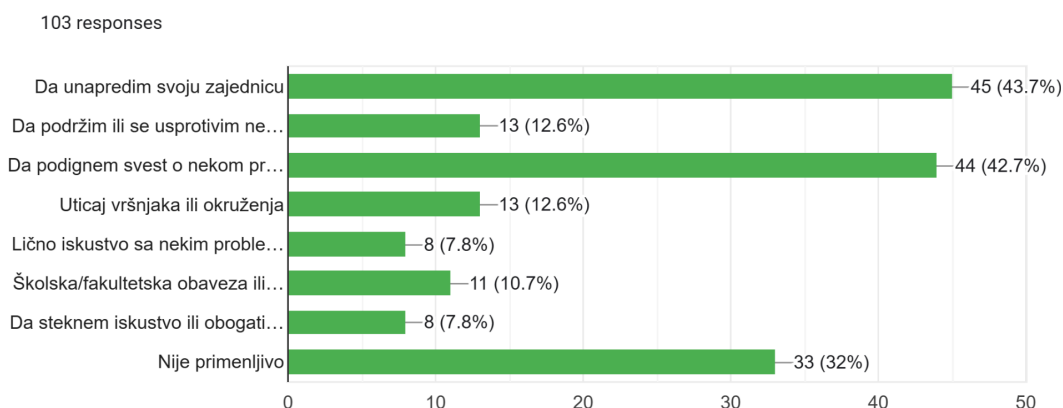
In response to the question about participation in civic and political activities over the past 12 months, 18.4% of young people reported sharing political content on social media, while 26.2% signed a petition. More active forms of participation, such as attending gatherings, were recorded by 32% of respondents. Notably, 35.9% of youth

did not take part in any activity, which indicates a prevailing disengagement from civic and political life. However, these results must be interpreted in light of the massive student protests that took place in Serbia during the past year. The relatively high share of respondents who attended gatherings suggests that such mobilizations had a tangible impact on youth activism, pushing participation beyond digital and low-threshold forms. At the same time, the significant proportion of non-participants highlights the persistence of apathy, distrust in institutions, or fear of repercussions, which continue to limit broader civic engagement. This duality: visible mobilization alongside widespread disengagement; underscores both the potential of collective action to energize youth and the structural barriers that prevent sustained participation and the right to mobilize for the good cause.



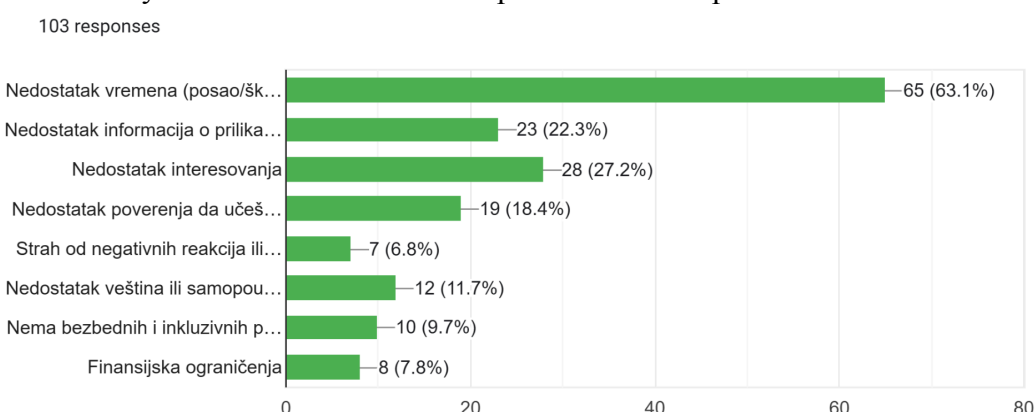
b) Motivation for involvement

When it comes to motivation for civic engagement, the most frequently cited reason is the desire to improve the community (43.7%), followed by raising awareness about a specific issue (42.7%), while 7.8% of respondents mention personal experience as the key motivator. This distribution highlights that youth activism is primarily collective in orientation, rooted in solidarity and the pursuit of community well-being rather than individual gain. In the Sandžak region, where Bosniaks have historically faced marginalization and limited institutional trust, the emphasis on community improvement reflects both resilience and the need to address structural inequalities. The prominence of awareness-raising resonates with the national context of massive student protests in Serbia, which mobilized youth around issues of education, governance, and accountability. At the same time, the relatively small share citing personal experience suggests that activism is not only reactive to individual hardship but is embedded in broader collective struggles. Against the backdrop of government corruption and weak institutional responsiveness, these motivations underscore the potential of youth movements to challenge systemic barriers, while also revealing the fragility of civic culture that depends heavily on collective mobilization rather than sustained institutional trust.



c) Active participation barriers

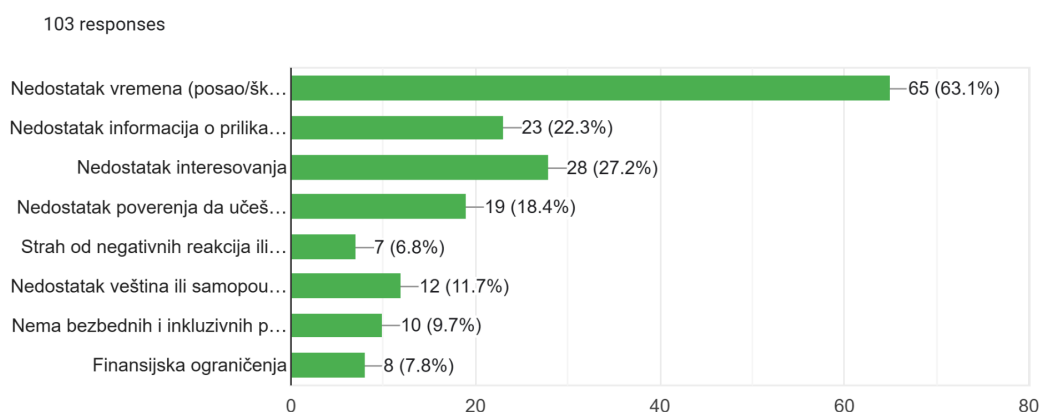
In response to the question of what prevents them from being more active, 63.1% of young people cite lack of time, 22.3% lack of information, while 18.4% highlight distrust that participation can bring change. These findings reveal that barriers to civic engagement are both practical and structural. The predominance of 'lack of time' reflects socio-economic pressures: balancing studies, work, and family responsibilities; that leave little room for activism. The significant share citing 'lack of information' points to weak institutional communication and limited outreach, which restrict awareness of opportunities for involvement. Most critically, the 18.4% who express distrust in the effectiveness of participation highlight a deeper crisis of legitimacy in Serbia, where government corruption, unresponsive institutions, and the marginalization of communities such as Bosniaks in Sandžak have eroded confidence in civic action. Even in a year marked by massive student protests, which demonstrated the potential of collective mobilization, these results underscore that sustained engagement is undermined by structural barriers and skepticism about impact.



d) Engagement

Respondents state that they would be most motivated by seeing concrete results of previous actions (57.3%), as well as the existence of a safe space for expressing opinions (31.1%). Additionally, 14.6% of young people emphasize the need for leadership training. This indicates that youth engagement is shaped by both trust and

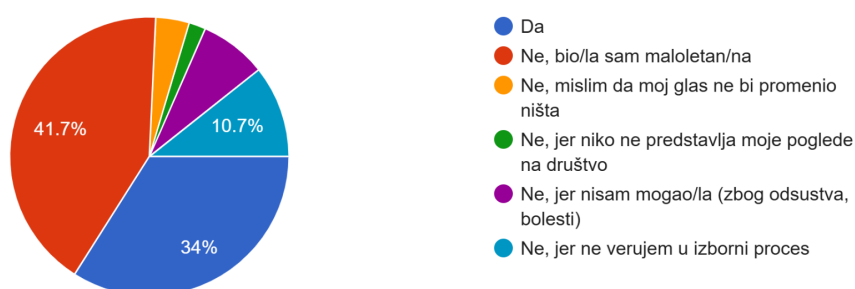
empowerment factors. The demand for visible results reflects frustration with tokenistic practices, where youth are invited to participate symbolically but rarely see tangible outcomes. The emphasis on safe spaces highlights the need to overcome fear of judgment or political backlash, particularly in contexts like Sandžak where Bosniaks have historically faced marginalization. The call for leadership training points to a desire for capacity-building, yet it also reveals that current opportunities often remain short-term and fragmented, failing to sustain long-term involvement. Taken together, these findings suggest that while young people are motivated by collective improvement and empowerment, their engagement risks being reduced to episodic or symbolic participation unless institutions provide transparent follow-up, safe environments, and pathways for continuous involvement.



e) Voting

In response to the question about participation in the last elections, 34% of respondents stated that they voted, while 3.9% believe that their vote cannot make a difference. An additional 10.7% express distrust in the electoral process. These findings indicate that youth political engagement is undermined by both practical disengagement and structural distrust. The relatively low turnout reflects a broader crisis of democracy often described as the 'third wave of democratic recession,' where formal institutions exist but fail to inspire confidence or deliver accountability. The perception that individual votes are meaningless, combined with distrust in the process itself, points to the erosion of democratic legitimacy in Serbia, fueled by corruption, weak institutional transparency, and the marginalization of communities such as Bosniaks in Sandžak. These results underscore the fragility of democratic culture and highlight the urgent need for reforms that rebuild trust, ensure electoral integrity, and create meaningful pathways for youth to see their participation translate into real change.

103 responses

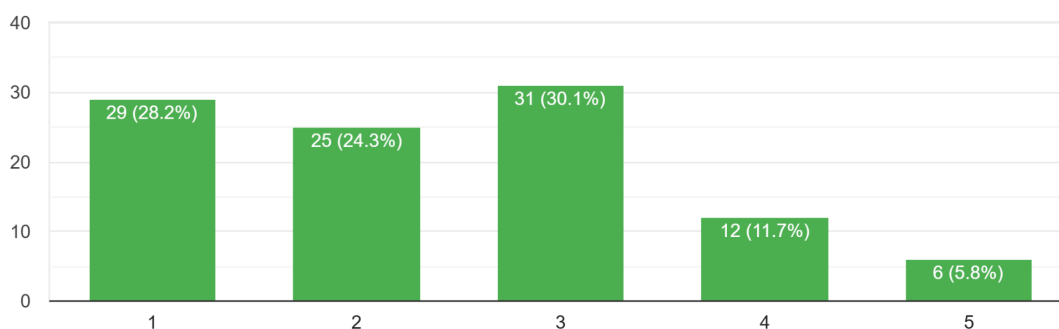


f) Media follow-up

In response to the question of how often they follow the news, 6% of young people report doing so daily, 30.1% occasionally, while 29% rarely or never consume informational content. This distribution indicates that youth information consumption is increasingly fragmented and shaped by the rise of social media as the primary news source. The low percentage of daily news followers suggests that traditional media outlets no longer hold central authority, while occasional or rare consumption reflects a shift toward algorithm-driven, selective exposure. In Serbia, this trend is compounded by the politicization of mainstream media, where state influence and corruption undermine credibility, pushing young people toward alternative platforms. For marginalized groups in Sandžak, this dynamic can reinforce exclusion, as their perspectives are often underrepresented or misrepresented in politicized media landscapes. According to the Report by CRLM on the status of local media, addressing security, financial, and any other relevant aspects for the independence and professionalism of the media (Report on media coverage), “this media landscape in Sandžak reflects a persistent tension between public interest and mechanisms of pressure, which have shifted from overt attacks to more subtle yet equally powerful economic and legal levers of power. The safety of journalists is rated as “medium,” and the statements of those interviewed consistently mention threats, targeting, online harassment, as well as occasional incidents in the field”

At the same time, the report authors state that local newsrooms maintain professional standards through “unwritten rules” of fieldwork, cascading reporting after incidents, and caution in publishing content that may heighten risk.

103 responses



g) Accordance with statements

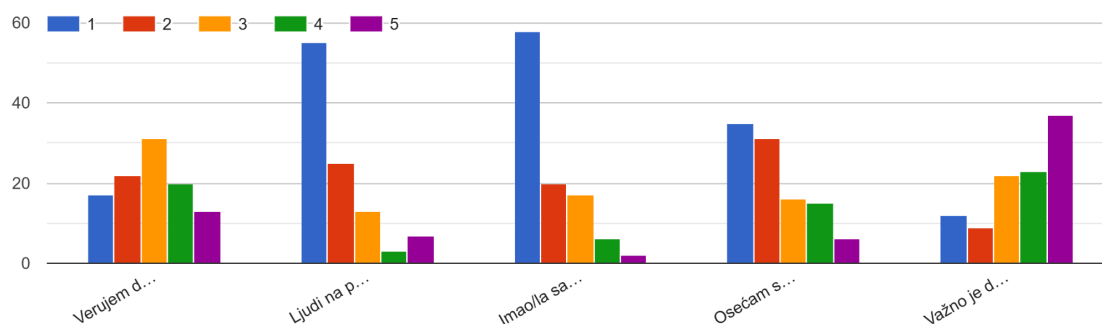
The average score of agreement with the statement *“I believe that voting makes a difference”* is low (clustered around 2–3), which indicates a weak level of political efficacy among young people. This also might show that there is not a trust, but apathy and misconception of voting as change-making cause.

The average score of agreement with the statement *“People in power listen to young people”* is very low (around 2, with most responses clustered at 1–2), which suggests an extremely low level of trust in the responsiveness of institutions.

Regarding the question *“I have had opportunities to meaningfully influence decisions that affect my community”*, more than half of the respondents said they do not agree at all, which implies that young people are not decision-makers nor truthfully accepted as change-makers in the communities. The tokenism for their participation remains one of the major challenges over the course of time.

On a question about *feeling confident to engage in public discussions about policy*, respondents balance between cluster 1 and 2, indicating their confidence remains low and there is very much space for true and factual engagement of young people. Also, this response shows the existence of ageism, and lack of encouragement from decision-makers for active youth involvement, so their participation is not just formal and they commonly fear to step in and express competencies.

Question *“It is important for young people to actively participate in political life, even if they are not members of a political party”* brings interesting findings: 12% of the respondents strongly disagree with the statement which can be understood as their perception of being involved into political parties and their agenda, rather than policy making or international politics comprehension, which comes out as a result of long-year partocracy. On the other hand, 36% of respondents think that being in a political party is not necessary to be active politically and understand this term in a broader way.



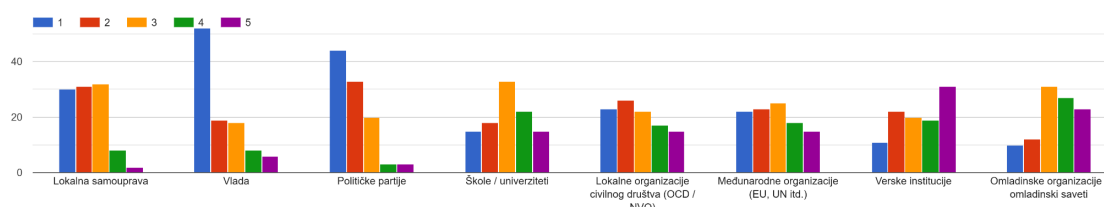
7.3. Section B - Trust

a) Institutional Trust

When it comes to trust, young people express the highest level of trust towards schools/universities and youth organizations/councils (average ratings clustered around 3–4, with notable shares at 5), while the lowest level of trust is recorded for government and political parties (average ratings concentrated at 1). This pattern of trust indicates a structural legitimacy crisis: institutions with formal authority and decision-making power are perceived as unreliable, disconnected, or corrupt, while actors closer to young people's everyday realities (educational institutions, youth-led bodies, and community-based organizations) are seen as more credible.

Critically, this imbalance reveals a paradox of influence. The actors most trusted by youth often lack formal leverage in policymaking, while those with institutional power suffer from a deficit of legitimacy. The findings highlight a fragile ecosystem of trust where credibility is concentrated in actors with limited institutional reach, while formal governance structures fail to establish meaningful relationships with younger generations.

The interesting fact is that 30% of respondents indicated that they trust faith-based institutions and this percentage of trust was higher than any other regarding offered responses. This fact implies a strong presence of religions and faith-based channels in the community, which could be considered as a potential for future programming.



b) Associations on Local Government by youth

A total of 103 respondents were asked to name the first three words or expressions that come to mind when hearing the term “*Local Government / Municipality*.” The responses reveal that perceptions of local government are largely shaped by critical and negative associations. Many respondents linked local government to concepts such as corruption, nepotism, party-based employment, lies, theft, irresponsibility, and political influence, indicating a widespread perception of weak transparency, lack of accountability, and unfair employment practices. Several answers directly referred to political parties, the mayor, the ruling party, elections, protests, and political power, suggesting that local government is primarily perceived as a political structure rather than as a service-oriented public institution. A smaller number of responses reflected the administrative and institutional role of municipalities, with respondents mentioning

administration, citizens, services, budget, documents, municipal offices, and permits, often referring to practical interactions with local government such as obtaining civil registry documents or construction permits. At the same time, some responses expressed strong distrust, frustration, or disengagement, including statements such as “nothing,” “I don’t know,” “sad,” or “something I avoid,” which may indicate low levels of confidence in local authorities and limited perceived responsiveness to citizens’ needs. Only a few respondents associated local government with more positive or normative concepts such as community, solidarity, responsibility, democracy, or autonomy. Overall, the responses suggest that public perceptions of local government among participants are predominantly characterized by distrust, politicization, and perceived corruption, while fewer respondents emphasize its role in providing services and supporting community development.

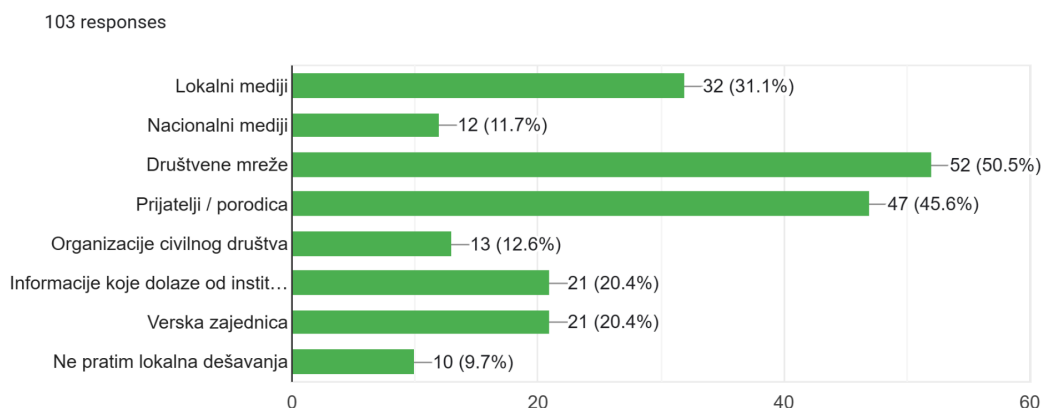
c) Youth perceptions of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

A total of 103 respondents were asked to name the first three words or expressions that come to mind when hearing the term “*Non-governmental organization (NGO/CSO)*.” The responses reveal a mixed perception that combines positive associations with skepticism and limited awareness. A large number of respondents associated NGOs with humanitarian work, volunteering, activism, community support, donations, projects, and helping vulnerable groups, indicating that many participants perceive NGOs as organizations that provide social assistance and contribute to community development. Several responses emphasized values such as solidarity, independence, civic engagement, advocacy, and giving a voice to those who are not heard, reflecting an understanding of NGOs as actors within civil society that promote social change and public participation. Some respondents also connected NGOs with youth engagement, personal development, awareness raising, and informal education, suggesting that NGOs are recognized as spaces where young people can gather, learn, and participate in community initiatives.

At the same time, a noticeable portion of responses expressed skepticism or distrust, with references to money laundering, political influence, hidden interests, corruption, or organizations that exist but do not act effectively. Some respondents associated NGOs with donor funding, projects, and external support, which may reflect a perception that their activities are largely dependent on international funding rather than local initiatives. A number of participants also indicated limited knowledge or uncertainty, responding with phrases such as “I don’t know,” “nothing comes to mind,” or stating that they are not sufficiently informed about NGOs. Overall, the responses suggest that NGOs are widely perceived as actors involved in humanitarian work, activism, and community support, but these positive perceptions coexist with skepticism, misunderstandings about their role, and limited public awareness of how NGOs function and contribute to society.

d) Sources of information

Young people most often get informed through social media (50.5%), followed by friends/family (45.6%), while traditional media account for 42.8%. These findings indicate a profound shift in the information ecosystem, where interpersonal networks and digital platforms dominate youth access to news. However, this reliance on social media also exposes young people to unverified content and algorithm-driven echo chambers, making it alarmingly easy to get trapped in misinformation and fake news. The erosion of trust in traditional media, combined with the absence of robust critical literacy skills, creates structural vulnerabilities: youth are simultaneously more connected and more susceptible to manipulation.



e) Perceived accuracy and reliability of information sources

The responses indicate varying levels of trust in different sources of information regarding their accuracy and reliability, measured on a scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Overall, the results suggest that respondents tend to express moderate rather than strong trust in most sources.

Local media are generally perceived as moderately reliable. The largest share of respondents rated their reliability with 3, while a considerable number selected 2 and 1, indicating a certain level of skepticism. Fewer respondents rated local media as highly reliable (4 or 5), suggesting that while they are used as an information source, trust in them is limited.

A similar pattern appears with national media, where responses are concentrated around 2 and 3, indicating moderate or somewhat low confidence. Although some respondents perceive national media as reliable, the relatively high number of lower scores suggests concerns regarding credibility or bias.

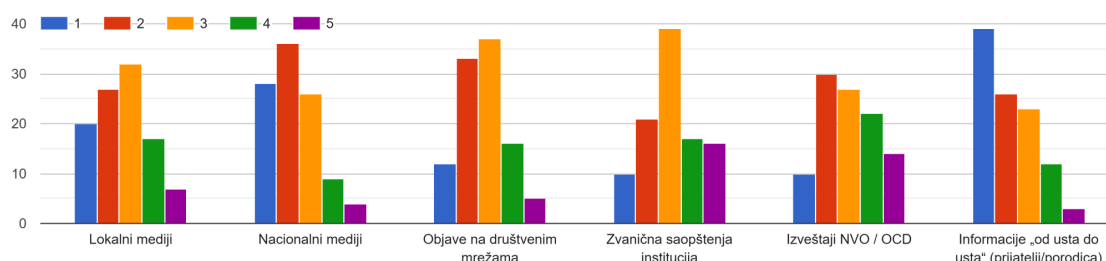
When it comes to information shared on social media, respondents show relatively low levels of trust. Most ratings fall within 2 and 3, while very few respondents selected the highest reliability scores. This indicates that social media is recognized as a common source of information but is not widely perceived as fully trustworthy.

In contrast, official announcements from institutions appear to enjoy a somewhat higher level of trust. A significant number of respondents rated them with 3 and 4, and compared to other sources, there are more high reliability scores (4 and 5). This suggests that institutional communication is perceived as more credible, although it is still not universally trusted.

Regarding reports from NGOs/CSOs, responses again cluster around moderate ratings, particularly 3, indicating that respondents perceive them as somewhat reliable but not consistently so. This suggests a level of cautious trust, possibly reflecting limited familiarity with NGO reporting among some respondents.

Finally, information received “by word of mouth” (from friends or family) shows a distinctive pattern. While some respondents rated it as moderately reliable, a large number assigned low reliability scores, and very few considered it highly reliable. This suggests that although such information circulates frequently within social networks, respondents are generally aware that it may not always be accurate.

Overall, the findings indicate that respondents demonstrate moderate and selective trust in information sources, with official institutional communication perceived as relatively more reliable, while social media and informal interpersonal communication are viewed with greater skepticism. The prevalence of middle ratings across most categories also suggests that respondents often adopt a cautious or uncertain stance toward the credibility of information, rather than expressing strong confidence in any single source.



f) Youth consultancy

When asked how youth consultation by local authorities looks, 33% of respondents believe that young people are not consulted at all, while 24.3% describe the process as formal without real influence. No one believes that young people have an equal voice and vote in decision-making. This indicates a systemic marginalization of youth perspectives, where institutional mechanisms for consultation exist largely as symbolic gestures rather than channels of genuine influence. The absence of trust in equal participation underscores entrenched power asymmetries: young people are positioned

as passive recipients of decisions rather than active stakeholders. Such patterns reveal structural barriers to democratic inclusion, suggesting that local governance frameworks prioritize procedural compliance over substantive engagement, thereby perpetuating exclusion and weakening the legitimacy of decision-making processes.

103 responses



g) Community investment priorities

The responses show clear priorities regarding how respondents would allocate a hypothetical budget for improving their community. Out of 103 respondents, the majority indicated that employment programs should be the primary investment priority. A total of 66 respondents (64.1%) selected programs aimed at job creation and employment support, suggesting that economic stability and access to jobs are perceived as the most urgent needs within the community.

The second most frequently selected area is infrastructure development, including roads and water supply systems. 39 respondents (37.9%) identified infrastructure as a key investment priority, highlighting the importance of improving basic public services and physical conditions that directly affect everyday life.

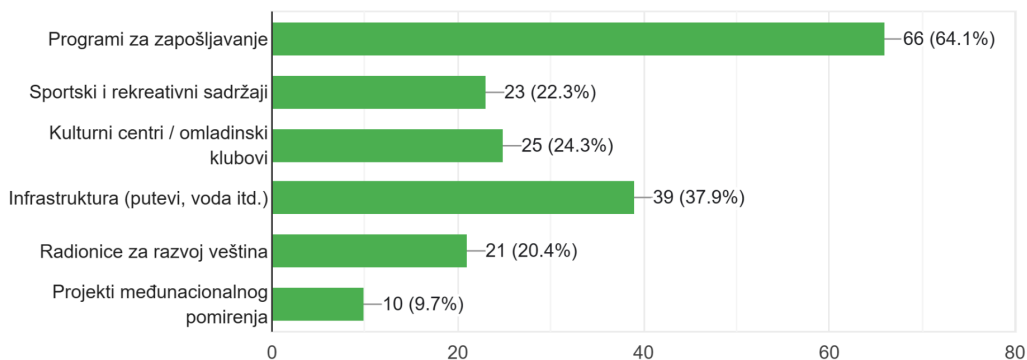
A moderate number of respondents prioritized youth-related and community development initiatives. Cultural centers and youth clubs were selected by 25 respondents (24.3%), while sports and recreational activities were chosen by 23 respondents (22.3%). These responses indicate that a significant share of participants recognize the importance of spaces and activities that support youth engagement, social interaction, and community life.

Similarly, skills development workshops were selected by 21 respondents (20.4%), suggesting that respondents also see value in educational and capacity-building initiatives that can improve individual opportunities and long-term employability.

In contrast, projects focused on interethnic reconciliation received the lowest level of support, with 10 respondents (9.7%) selecting this option. While still recognized as a potential area of investment, it appears to be perceived as a less immediate priority compared to economic development and infrastructure needs.

Overall, the findings indicate that respondents primarily prioritize economic opportunities and basic infrastructure improvements, while youth programs, recreational opportunities, and skills development are seen as secondary but still relevant areas for community investment. Social cohesion initiatives, although present among the responses, appear to be less urgent in comparison to economic and structural community needs.

103 responses

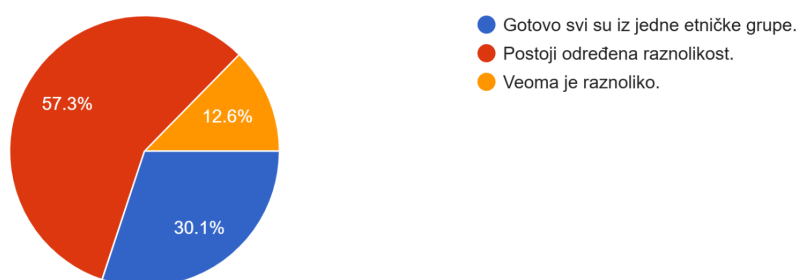


7.4. Section C - Intercultural relations

a) Ethnic diversity within social group

In response to the question about ethnic diversity of their environment, 30.1% of young people report living in a homogeneous community, while 12.6% describe their surroundings as highly diverse. This indicates that, although coexistence between different groups exists, integration remains limited. While tolerance and everyday coexistence have improved, the persistence of religious and spatial boundaries suggests that diversity is present but not fully embraced.

103 responses



b) Perceptions of interethnic relations

The responses show generally positive attitudes toward everyday social interaction with people from other ethnic groups, particularly in informal and community settings. A large majority of respondents reported that they feel comfortable with situations such as living in the same neighborhood, being classmates or colleagues at work, and having someone from another ethnic group as a close friend. In these categories, the highest ratings (4 - pleasant and 5 - very pleasant) clearly dominate, indicating that most

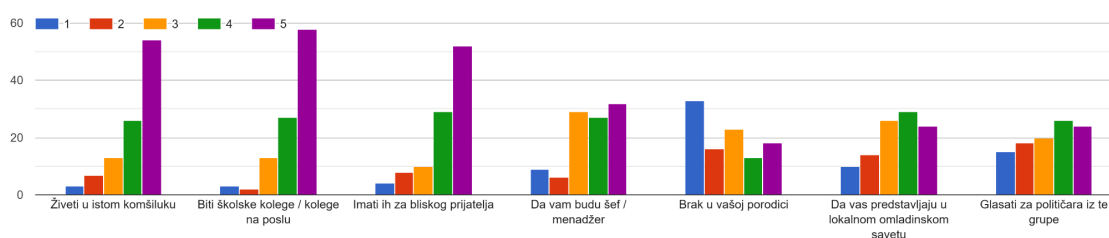
respondents perceive everyday coexistence and social interaction with members of other ethnic groups as normal and acceptable.

Similarly, respondents show relatively positive attitudes toward participation in local youth councils or voting for a politician from another ethnic group, where responses are mostly concentrated around moderate to positive evaluations. These results suggest that, at the level of everyday social contact and community interaction, respondents generally demonstrate openness and willingness to coexist and cooperate across ethnic lines.

However, the findings also reveal important nuances when relationships involve positions of authority or more intimate forms of social integration. While many respondents expressed neutral or positive attitudes toward having a manager or supervisor from another ethnic group, there is a noticeable proportion of respondents who expressed discomfort in such a situation, selecting lower scores. This suggests that although interethnic interaction in everyday contexts is largely accepted, hierarchical relationships, where authority and power are involved, may still trigger reservations among a portion of respondents.

The strongest negative attitudes appear in relation to mixed marriages within the family. In this category, responses shift significantly toward lower ratings, indicating that many respondents would feel uncomfortable with the idea of a close family member marrying someone from another ethnic group. Compared to other scenarios, mixed marriage is clearly the least accepted form of interethnic relationship among respondents.

Overall, the results suggest that interethnic coexistence in everyday life, such as friendship, neighborhood relations, or working together, is broadly accepted, reflecting a relatively high level of social tolerance. At the same time, boundaries appear when relationships involve authority or deeper personal and family integration, particularly in the case of mixed marriages. This pattern indicates that while interethnic contact is normalized in public and social spaces, more intimate or power-related relationships still reveal underlying social distance and cultural reservations between ethnic groups.



c) Self-reported experiences of discrimination

The responses indicate that the majority of participants reported not experiencing discrimination in the past 12 months across all listed categories, including age, gender, political affiliation, and ethnic background. In each category, the number of respondents

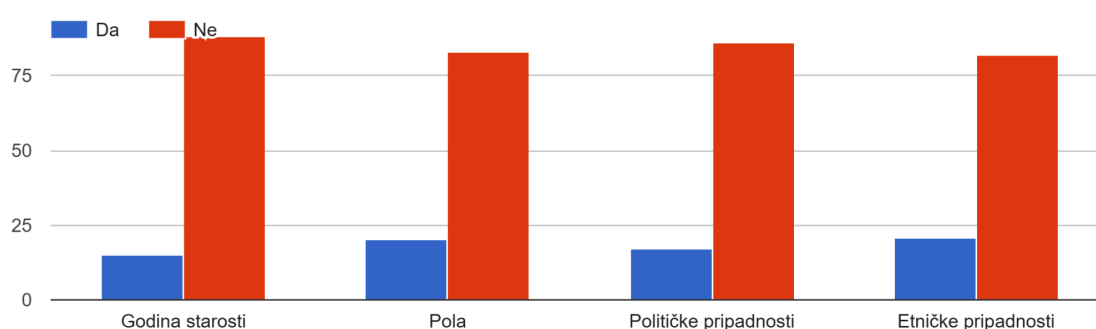
who selected “No” significantly exceeds those who reported experiencing discrimination. This pattern suggests that most respondents do not explicitly perceive themselves as victims of discriminatory treatment in their daily lives.

However, these results should be interpreted with caution. The relatively low number of reported discrimination experiences may not necessarily indicate the absence of discriminatory practices, but rather a limited awareness or recognition of what constitutes discrimination. When questions are framed in a general way, respondents may not immediately identify certain behaviors, institutional practices, or everyday interactions as discriminatory unless specific examples are provided.

Research on discrimination perception frequently shows that individuals are less likely to recognize subtle, indirect, or normalized forms of discrimination, particularly in environments where such practices may be socially embedded or perceived as routine. Without concrete scenarios, such as unequal treatment in employment, access to services, public institutions, or social interactions; respondents may underestimate or overlook experiences that objectively fall within discriminatory patterns.

Therefore, the results likely reflect a combination of genuine perceptions and limited conceptual understanding of discrimination. This suggests that further research or survey instruments that include more detailed, scenario-based questions or practical examples of discriminatory situations could provide a more accurate picture of the prevalence and forms of discrimination experienced by respondents.

In this context, the findings highlight not only perceptions of discrimination but also the importance of raising awareness about different forms of discriminatory behavior, including subtle or systemic forms that may not always be immediately recognized by individuals.



d) Perceptions of key factors for long-term peace and stability

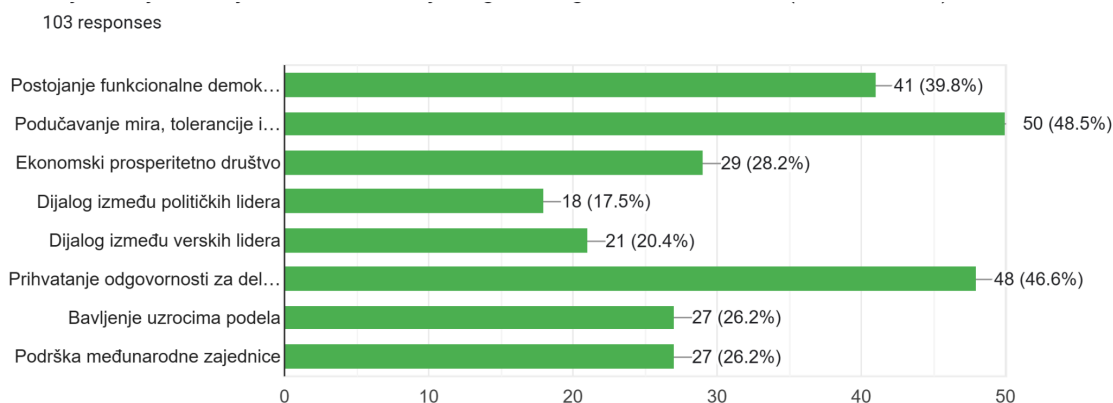
The responses indicate that respondents most strongly associate long-term peace and stability with education about peace, tolerance, and coexistence, selected by 50 respondents (48.5%), and acceptance of responsibility for past actions, chosen by 48 respondents (46.6%). These findings suggest that participants perceive peace primarily through the lenses of awareness-building and acknowledgment of past violence, rather

than through broader structural or socio-economic conditions. In particular, the high percentage of responses emphasizing the importance of admitting responsibility for past actions may reflect the continued presence of regional political narratives surrounding the legacy of the Bosnian war and unresolved questions related to war crimes and genocide. In contexts where official recognition and accountability have often been contested or politicized, public discourse around responsibility and historical truth continues to shape how peace and reconciliation are understood.

The existence of functional democratic institutions was also identified as an important factor, selected by 41 respondents (39.8%), indicating that participants recognize the role of governance structures, rule of law, and institutional stability in maintaining social order. However, economic prosperity and social well-being, selected by 29 respondents (28.2%), received comparatively lower levels of support. This suggests that respondents may not fully perceive socio-economic stability, economic development, and material security as central prerequisites for sustainable peace, even though these elements are widely recognized in peacebuilding literature as critical components of long-term stability.

Other factors such as addressing the root causes of divisions and support from the international community each received 27 responses (26.2%), indicating moderate recognition of the need for broader structural and societal engagement in peacebuilding processes. Meanwhile, dialogue between religious leaders (21 respondents, 20.4%) and particularly dialogue between political leaders (18 respondents, 17.5%) were selected less frequently, which may reflect a degree of skepticism among respondents regarding the effectiveness of elite-level dialogue as a mechanism for creating lasting peace.

Overall, the findings suggest that respondents tend to conceptualize peace primarily as the absence of direct conflict and violence, supported through education and symbolic acknowledgment of past injustices, rather than as a multidimensional process that also requires strong socio-economic foundations, structural reforms, and sustained institutional development. This perspective may be influenced by dominant regional narratives and political discourses that continue to frame peace largely through historical responsibility and reconciliation debates, while placing comparatively less emphasis on the socio-economic conditions necessary for building resilient and sustainable peace.



7.5. Section D - Education and employment

a) Quality of education

The responses indicate that respondents generally perceive several aspects of formal education in their municipality as insufficiently developed, particularly in areas that relate to practical skills, civic engagement, and the transition from education to employment. Across multiple indicators, ratings tend to cluster around lower and middle scores (1–3), while relatively few respondents evaluate these aspects as very good or excellent, suggesting that the education system is not fully meeting expectations in preparing students for contemporary social and economic realities.

One of the most notable weaknesses appears in the connection between schools and local employers, where a large proportion of respondents rated this aspect as very poor or poor. This indicates a perceived lack of cooperation between educational institutions and the local labor market, which may limit opportunities for students to gain practical experience, internships, or clear pathways into employment. Similarly, career guidance and professional counseling services received predominantly low to moderate ratings, suggesting that students may not have sufficient access to structured support when making decisions about their educational and professional futures.

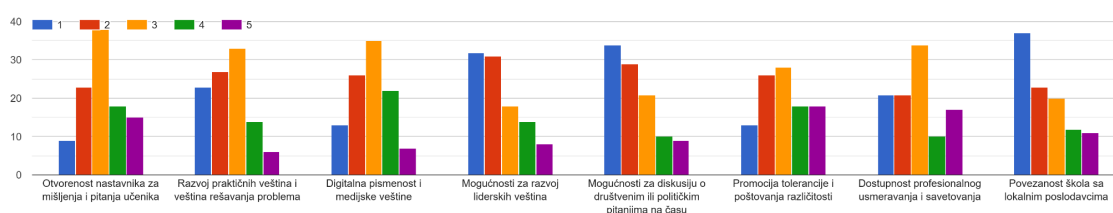
Respondents also expressed concerns about the development of practical and problem-solving skills, with many ratings concentrated in the lower and middle categories. This suggests that formal education is still perceived as being more focused on theoretical knowledge than on the practical competencies required in modern labor markets.

Another area receiving relatively low evaluations is the opportunity to discuss social and political issues in the classroom, indicating that schools may not sufficiently encourage open dialogue, critical thinking, or civic engagement among students. In a similar vein, opportunities to develop leadership skills were also rated relatively low, pointing to limited institutional support for activities that build confidence, initiative, and participation in community life.

While digital literacy and media skills received somewhat more moderate ratings, the results still indicate that many respondents do not perceive these competencies as being strongly developed within the education system. Considering the increasing importance of digital literacy in both employment and civic participation, this may represent a significant gap.

The promotion of tolerance and respect for diversity shows slightly more balanced results, yet ratings still remain largely in the middle range, suggesting that while such values may be present in the educational environment, respondents do not perceive them as being systematically or strongly promoted.

Overall, the findings suggest that respondents view formal education in their municipality as insufficiently oriented toward practical skills, career preparation, and active civic participation. The relatively low ratings for cooperation with employers, career guidance, leadership development, and opportunities for open discussion indicate that the education system may struggle to equip young people with the practical, social, and participatory competencies needed for both the labor market and democratic engagement.



b) Preferred non-formal education programs for youth development

The responses indicate that respondents place the greatest value on community-oriented and practical engagement activities when considering extracurricular or non-formal education programs for youth development. The most frequently selected option is organized volunteer days, humanitarian aid drives, and public space rehabilitation initiatives, chosen by 63 respondents (61.2%), suggesting that participants strongly associate youth development with active civic engagement, solidarity, and direct contribution to the community.

The second most valued activity is active student parliaments, debate clubs, or Model UN programs, selected by 50 respondents (48.5%). This indicates that respondents recognize the importance of youth participation, public speaking, democratic engagement, and critical thinking as key components of youth empowerment and leadership development.

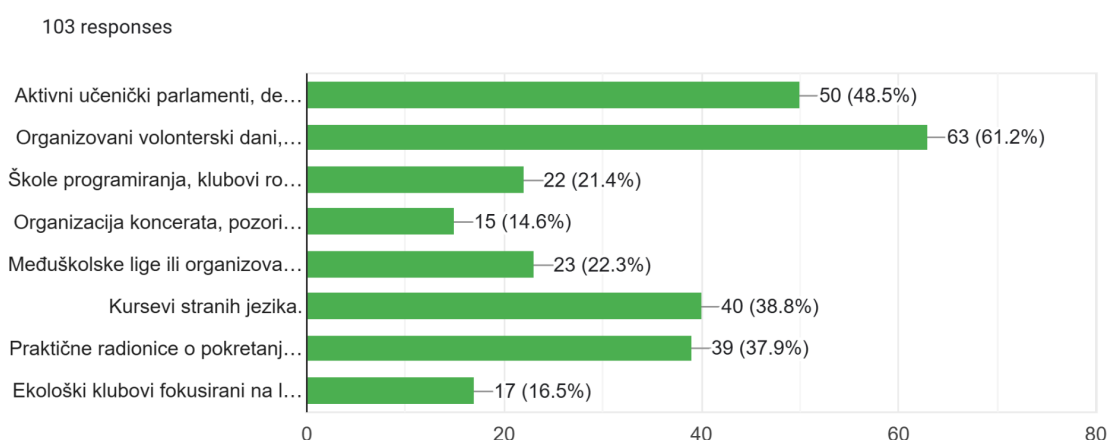
Practical skills that can improve future opportunities are also highly valued. Foreign language courses were selected by 40 respondents (38.8%), while practical workshops on starting a business and financial literacy were chosen by 39 respondents (37.9%).

These responses suggest that respondents see non-formal education as an important space for acquiring skills that enhance employability, entrepreneurship, and global mobility.

Programs related to sports and inter-school competitions received moderate support, with 23 respondents (22.3%) selecting inter-school leagues or community tournaments. Similarly, coding academies, robotics clubs, and graphic design workshops were chosen by 22 respondents (21.4%), indicating a moderate level of interest in digital and technological skill development.

Less emphasis was placed on ecology clubs focused on conservation and field activities, selected by 17 respondents (16.5%), and student-led organization of concerts, theater performances, or art exhibitions, selected by 15 respondents (14.6%). While still recognized as beneficial, these activities appear to be perceived as less central to youth development compared to civic engagement and practical skill-building initiatives.

Overall, the results suggest that respondents prioritize community engagement, civic participation, and practical life skills when considering the most valuable non-formal education opportunities for youth. Activities that combine social responsibility, leadership development, and employability skills appear to be perceived as particularly important for supporting the development of young people within the local community.



c) Perceptions of employment conditions in Sandžak

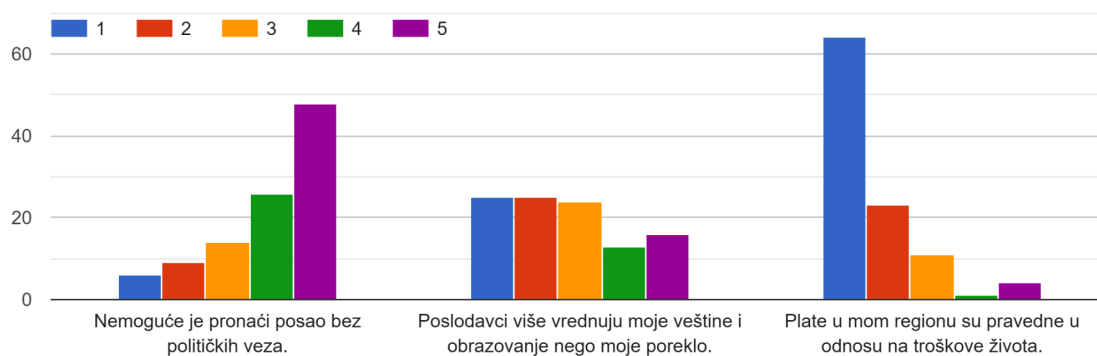
The responses reveal a strong perception among respondents that employment opportunities in Sandžak are significantly influenced by political connections. A large proportion of respondents expressed agreement with the statement that it is difficult to find a job without political ties, with the majority selecting higher agreement scores. This indicates a widespread belief that political affiliation and informal networks play a decisive role in access to employment, suggesting concerns about fairness, transparency, and merit-based recruitment in the local labor market.

At the same time, responses to the statement that employers value skills and education more than personal background are more evenly distributed across the scale. While

some respondents expressed agreement with this claim, a considerable number remained neutral or disagreed, indicating mixed perceptions regarding the extent to which merit-based criteria actually determine hiring decisions. This distribution suggests uncertainty among respondents about whether professional qualifications are consistently prioritized over social or political factors.

Another striking finding concerns perceptions of wages and economic conditions. A clear majority of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that salaries in the region follow the cost of living, indicating that participants widely perceive local wages as insufficient to meet basic living expenses. This points to a broader sense of economic dissatisfaction and highlights concerns about the overall quality of employment and financial stability in the region.

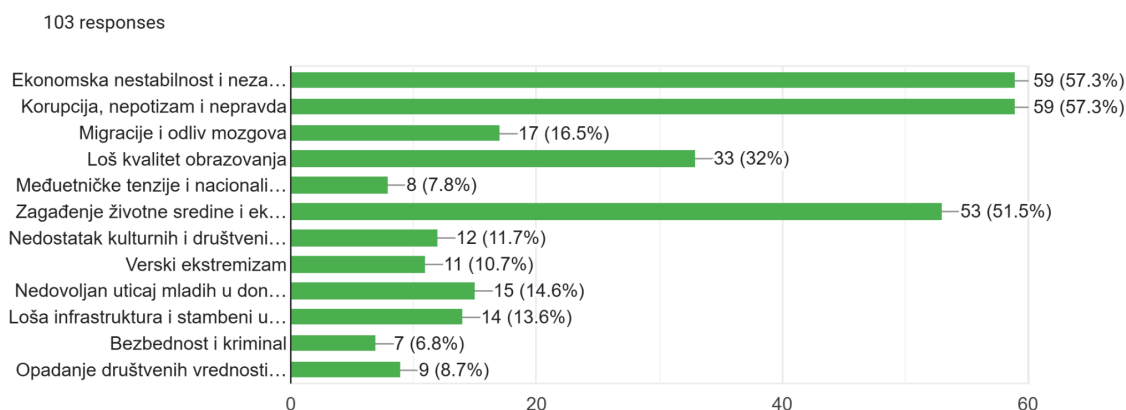
Taken together, the results suggest that respondents perceive the local labor market as characterized by structural challenges, including political influence in hiring processes, uncertainty about merit-based employment practices, and insufficient wage levels relative to living costs. These perceptions reflect broader concerns about economic opportunities and social mobility within the region.



d) Major challenges in Sandžak

Young people identify economic instability and uncertainty (57.3%) as the most urgent challenge, followed by corruption, nepotism, and injustice (57.3%), while the third place is occupied by environmental pollution and ecological issues (51.5%). These priorities indicate a structural crisis in Sandžak, where economic fragility, governance failures, and ecological degradation converge to shape youth perceptions of their future. The equal weight given to economic instability and corruption reveals that young people do not see these issues as separate but as interdependent problems: economic hardship is understood as a direct consequence of systemic injustice, nepotism, and political patronage. This perception undermines trust in institutions and reinforces the belief that opportunities are distributed unfairly, eroding both social mobility and democratic legitimacy. The prominence of environmental concerns in third place signals a generational awareness of sustainability, where ecological degradation is recognized not only as a health and quality-of-life issue but also as a barrier to long-term

development. For youth, environmental neglect compounds economic and governance failures, creating a multidimensional sense of insecurity.



e) Perceptions on the region's future prospects

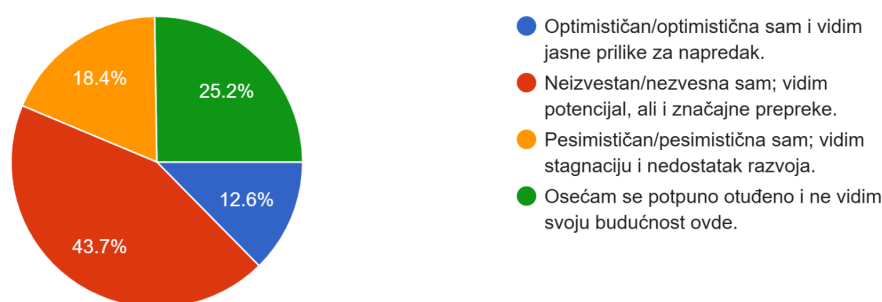
The responses reveal a generally uncertain and pessimistic outlook regarding the future of the region. The largest share of respondents, 43.7%, reported feeling uncertain, stating that they see potential for development but also recognize significant obstacles that may hinder progress. This indicates that while respondents acknowledge possible opportunities for improvement, there is a strong perception that structural challenges and barriers continue to limit the region's prospects.

A particularly concerning finding is that 25.2% of respondents stated that they feel completely alienated and do not see their future in the region. This suggests a significant level of disengagement and dissatisfaction, particularly among young people who may consider leaving the region in search of better opportunities elsewhere. Such perceptions may reflect broader concerns related to employment opportunities, economic stability, and social mobility.

Meanwhile, 18.4% of respondents expressed a pessimistic view, stating that they see stagnation and a lack of development in the region. This further reinforces the sense that many participants perceive the local environment as struggling to provide sufficient conditions for long-term growth and prosperity.

Only 12.6% of respondents reported feeling optimistic, indicating that they see clear opportunities for advancement in the region. The relatively small proportion of optimistic responses suggests that confidence in the region's future development remains limited.

Overall, the findings point to a dominant sense of uncertainty and dissatisfaction with the region's future prospects, accompanied by a notable proportion of respondents who feel disconnected from the region and do not envision their long-term future there. This pattern may signal broader concerns about economic opportunities, governance, and the overall quality of life in the region.



f) Plans for leaving

In response to the question about considering leaving Sandžak, 66% of young people state that they plan to go abroad, while 34% plan to stay. This finding indicates a serious risk of brain drain, where the majority of the region's educated and ambitious youth envision their future outside of their home community. Such a trend reflects not only dissatisfaction with local opportunities but also a structural lack of confidence in institutions, the labor market, and governance. The implications are profound. First, the loss of human capital threatens the region's long-term development, as the departure of skilled and motivated youth weakens innovation, productivity, and civic engagement. Second, migration perpetuates a cycle of underdevelopment: as talent leaves, local institutions and employers struggle to modernize, reinforcing the very conditions that drive young people away. Third, the erosion of the social fabric becomes inevitable, with demographic decline, reduced intergenerational continuity, and weakened community resilience. This dynamic is not simply about individual choices but about structural exclusion. When young people perceive that merit, education, and effort are insufficient to secure fair opportunities, migration becomes a rational response to systemic injustice.

g) Key reasons for considering leaving the Region

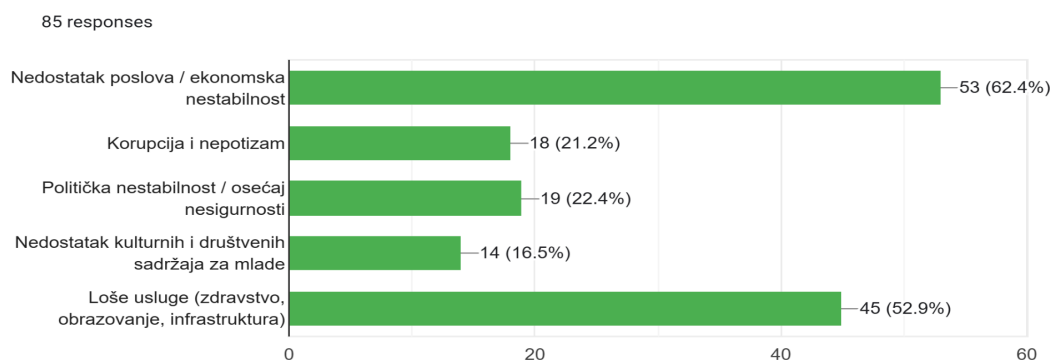
The responses indicate that economic factors and the quality of public services are the dominant reasons why respondents consider leaving the region. Among the 85 respondents who indicated that they might leave, the most frequently selected reason is lack of jobs and economic instability, chosen by 53 respondents (62.4%). This suggests that limited employment opportunities and economic uncertainty are perceived as the primary drivers of migration intentions.

Closely following this is dissatisfaction with the quality of public services, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure, selected by 45 respondents (52.9%). The high percentage indicates that many respondents perceive deficiencies in essential public systems as a significant factor influencing their decision to seek opportunities elsewhere.

A smaller but still notable proportion of respondents identified political instability and a sense of insecurity, selected by 19 respondents (22.4%), as well as corruption and nepotism, selected by 18 respondents (21.2%), as reasons for considering leaving the region. These responses reflect broader concerns about governance, transparency, and the perceived fairness of social and economic opportunities.

Finally, the lack of cultural and social opportunities for young people was selected by 14 respondents (16.5%), indicating that while this factor is less prominent compared to economic concerns, it still contributes to feelings that the region offers limited opportunities for personal and social development.

Overall, the findings suggest that economic insecurity and dissatisfaction with institutional services are the primary push factors influencing migration intentions, while governance-related concerns and limited social opportunities further reinforce the perception that better prospects may exist outside the region.



7.6. Section E - EU Mobility

a) Knowledge on Erasmus+ Opportunities

In response to the question about familiarity with the Erasmus+ program, 66 young participants state that they are familiar with the program, while 37 participants are not. This indicates persistent gaps in the EU's outreach and visibility among youth in Sandžak. Despite Erasmus+ being a flagship initiative for mobility and intercultural exchange, its communication channels and promotional strategies appear insufficiently adapted to local realities. Limited dissemination in minority languages, weak presence in rural and peripheral areas, and a reliance on centralized information networks all contribute to uneven awareness.

b) Willingness on participating on Erasmus+ Opportunities

The survey results reveal a clear preference among respondents for shorter international programs when financial barriers are removed. Youth exchanges under Erasmus+ lasting 5–10 days attract the strongest interest, with most participants rating them as extremely appealing. This suggests that the combination of cultural immersion and

limited time commitment makes them highly accessible and desirable. Short-term ESC team volunteering projects of two weeks to two months generate moderate enthusiasm, with many respondents expressing interest but not at the same level as youth exchanges. The appeal here seems to lie in the collaborative aspect and the chance to contribute meaningfully, though the longer duration introduces some hesitation. In contrast, long-term ESC volunteering opportunities of two to twelve months receive the lowest ratings, with a significant portion of respondents indicating little or no interest. This points to the challenges of committing to extended periods abroad, even when costs are covered, likely due to personal, academic, or professional constraints.

c) Obstacles on applying to Erasmus+ Opportunities

The greatest obstacle to applying is *I cannot take time off school/work* (32 participants), followed by *My English language skills are not good enough* and *My parents/family would not support me going abroad* (28 participants each). These findings suggest that structural and personal barriers, such as rigid school and work schedules, limited access to quality language education, and prevailing family attitudes, significantly constrain youth participation. Without flexible program arrangements, stronger language support, and targeted family engagement strategies, Erasmus+ risks remaining inaccessible to large segments of young people, particularly those from minority and rural backgrounds.

7.7. Additional respondent insights (Open-ended responses)

The open-ended responses provide additional insights into respondents' perceptions and concerns, although the majority of participants indicated that they had nothing further to add or expressed general satisfaction with the questionnaire. Several responses simply confirmed that the survey covered the relevant topics or thanked the organizers, suggesting that respondents largely felt their views had already been addressed through previous questions.

Among the more substantive comments, several key themes emerge. Education quality and limited academic opportunities were highlighted as important concerns, particularly regarding the quality and diversity of university study programs, which some respondents perceive as weaker compared to other parts of the country. This perception contributes to migration intentions among young people seeking better educational opportunities elsewhere.

Some respondents also pointed to social and cultural challenges, including concerns about discrimination toward certain groups, such as Roma communities and LGBT individuals, as well as the presence of growing religious or ideological polarization. These issues were mentioned as factors that can contribute to social divisions and influence perceptions of inclusiveness within the region.

Another recurring theme relates to trust in institutions and youth participation in decision-making. One respondent emphasized that rebuilding young people's trust in institutions requires transparent communication, genuine inclusion of youth in decision-making processes, and concrete measures rather than symbolic commitments. This perspective highlights the importance respondents place on meaningful civic engagement and institutional accountability.

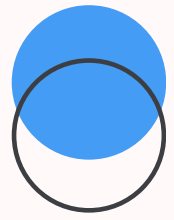
Economic concerns also appeared in several comments, including calls for higher student scholarships and better financial support for young people, as well as the desire for greater work-life balance and opportunities for personal development, such as the ability to travel and plan one's future more freely.

Finally, some respondents expressed hope that the survey results will lead to concrete improvements, indicating that participants value being consulted but also expect that their input will translate into tangible outcomes.

Overall, the open responses reinforce several themes already identified throughout the survey, including concerns about education quality, employment opportunities, institutional trust, and social inclusiveness, while also highlighting the importance respondents place on practical measures that can improve opportunities and quality of life for young people in the region.

Chapter 9

*Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak*



FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Final recommendations

The findings of this research confirm that young people in Sandžak do not lack motivation, values, or willingness to contribute to their communities. What they lack are fair opportunities, trustworthy institutions, meaningful channels for participation, and visible evidence that their voices can shape real decisions. Rebuilding trust and democracy in post-conflict Sandžak therefore requires a shift from symbolic youth inclusion toward structural, long-term, and locally grounded investment in youth agency.

First, **local and national institutions must move beyond formal consultation and establish mechanisms for meaningful youth participation.** Youth councils, public consultations, school parliaments, and municipal youth bodies should not exist as procedural tools only, but as spaces where young people can influence priorities, budgets, local policies, and community development plans. Participation must be continuous, transparent, and linked to visible follow-up.

Second, **trust in institutions must be rebuilt through accountability, fairness, and responsiveness.** The findings clearly show deep distrust toward government and political parties, alongside strong perceptions of corruption, nepotism, and exclusion. Local authorities should therefore strengthen transparent communication, publish clear information on youth-related decisions and budgets, and create feedback mechanisms through which young people can see how their input is used. Without visible institutional integrity, democratic participation will remain fragile.

Third, **employment and economic security must be treated as central democratic issues,** not only development issues. The high intention to leave Sandžak reflects not merely economic hardship, but also a collapse of confidence that merit, education, and effort can lead to a dignified future. Targeted youth employment schemes, practical training, internships, entrepreneurship support, and stronger cooperation between schools, employers, and municipalities are urgently needed. If young people continue to see migration as the only rational option, the region risks long-term social and economic erosion.

Fourth, **education systems must better prepare youth for both employment and citizenship.** Schools and universities should strengthen practical skills, career guidance, leadership development, media literacy, and spaces for open discussion of social and political issues. Civic education must be lived through practice, not only taught as theory. At the same time, non-formal education should be expanded, especially in areas that youth themselves identified as valuable: volunteering, debate, humanitarian action, entrepreneurship, foreign languages, and community engagement.

Fifth, **civil society organizations should be recognized and supported as trusted actors in democratic renewal.** The research shows that youth often place more trust in schools, youth organizations, and community-based initiatives than in formal political structures. CSOs should therefore continue to serve as facilitators of participation, intercultural dialogue, peace education, and democratic learning, while also ensuring

that their work reaches rural youth, those with fewer opportunities, and those who are not already active.

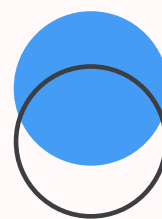
Sixth, **intercultural trust-building must remain an integral part of youth programming**, even when young people rank economic issues as more urgent. Everyday coexistence in Sandžak appears relatively functional, but deeper forms of inclusion, especially where authority, family, or historical narratives are involved, remain sensitive. Sustainable peace requires more than the absence of violence; it requires safe spaces for dialogue, education on tolerance and coexistence, and initiatives that connect young people across ethnic, political, and social divides.

Finally, **international and European opportunities must be made more accessible to youth in Sandžak**. Interest in Erasmus+ and mobility programs exists, but access is limited by language barriers, family constraints, and lack of time or information. More localized outreach, preparatory support, mentoring, and inclusive recruitment strategies are needed so that European mobility does not remain available only to the already informed and privileged.

In conclusion, the democratic future of Sandžak depends on whether young people are treated as passive beneficiaries or as equal partners in shaping the region's future. Addressing youth needs in a serious and systematic way is not a secondary policy concern, but a precondition for rebuilding trust, strengthening democracy, and securing long-term peace and stability in the region.

Chapter 10

Addressing Youth Needs in Post-Conflict
Sandžak



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