



Working Paper Series in Public and Cultural Diplomacy

ISSN: 2784-9589

Working paper no. 7
April 2025

Cultivating Agonistic Dialogue: Exploring Mutual Understanding between the Radical Right Youth and Civil Society Organiza- tions in Serbia on the question of Kosovo

Vana Filipovski and Carlotta Mingardi

Working Paper Series in Public and Cultural Diplomacy

Editor-in-Chief

Francesco Olmastroni

Editorial Board

Saverio Battente
Stefano Campana
Cristina Capineri
Carlo Citter
Andrea Francioni
Giovanni Gozzini

Mattia Guidi
Pierangelo Isernia
Alessandro Lamonica
Federico Lenzerini
Fabio Mugnaini
Daniele Pasquinucci

Giovanna Pizziolo
Lara Semboloni
Gianni Silei
Marco Ventura
Luca Verzichelli

Editorial Assistant

Filippo Simonelli

Scientific Committee

Jo Beall
Silvia Colombo
Spinella Dell'Avanzato
Tommaso Fabbri
Marcin Grabowski
Valdimar Tr. Hafstein
Eleonora Insalaco
Yudhishtir Raj Isar
Andrew Murray
Marcello Scalisi

Layout and graphic design by
Gaea Riondino

A registered publication by
Department of Social Political and Cognitive Sciences
University of Siena
Via Roma 56, 53100 Siena, Italy
e-mail: wspcd@unisi.it

© DISPOC 2025

DISPOC
Interdisciplinary
Department



**UNIVERSITÀ
DI SIENA**
1240

Cultivating Agonistic Dialogue: Exploring Mutual Understanding between the Radical Right Youth and Civil Society Organi- zations in Serbia on the question of Kosovo

Vana Filipovski and Carlotta Mingardi

Abstract

The paper investigates the potential for agonistic dialogue between Serbian civil society organizations (CSOs) and radical right-wing youth regarding the Kosovo question. Despite CSOs' pivotal role in promoting reconciliation, their efforts are hindered by deep societal polarization, mistrust, and nationalist narratives. Based on qualitative interviews with youth affiliated with right-wing parties and student bodies, the research maps key "red lines" that prevent engagement – such as the status of Kosovo and suspicion toward foreign-funded initiatives – as well as "blue lines" that suggest limited but meaningful opportunities for cooperation. These include shared interest in economic and environmental issues, cultural engagement, and depoliticized interpersonal exchange. The paper proposes a three-step framework – recognition of opposing narratives, conflict-sensitive communication, and critical engagement with contested truths, to foster agonistic dialogue. It argues that while consensus may remain elusive, structured interaction across ideological divides can enable mutual understanding and reduce societal polarization in Serbia.

Vana Filipovski (e-mail: vana.filipovski@imtlucca.it) is a PhD student at the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca.

Carlotta Mingardi (e-mail: carlotta.mingardi3@unibo.it) is a postdoctoral researcher and adjunct professor at the University of Bologna, Department of Political and Social Sciences.



Co-funded by the
European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or EACEA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Introduction¹

The stalled relationship between Kosovo and Serbia remains a significant threat to peace in the Western Balkans and Europe, continually at risk of escalating into political and inter-ethnic tensions. Despite efforts by the international community, the EU, and local governments since the early 21st century, the dialogue between the two countries has fluctuated between active obstructionism, passive cooperation, and periodic setbacks, such as the shooting incident in Banjska in September 2023.² Polarization in Serbia is closely linked to past conflicts and the growing radicalization and extremism in recent years. According to Halilovic Pastuovic, Hülzer, and Wylie (2023), tensions among citizens arise primarily due to the absence of an institution-led reconciliation process in Serbia. When such tensions surface, political leaders capitalize on them to mobilize public sentiment rapidly and effectively, often with the support of media. Their research also highlights that this process frequently results in a rise in nationalist, right-wing support (Halilovic Pastuovic, Hülzer, and Wylie, 2023), which is traditionally intolerant of diversity and tends to perceive minority groups as threats to the national community.

The polarization surrounding the Kosovo issue is evident not only in the division between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the radical right but also within the broader Serbian public. Recent research (CDDRI, 2021) indicates that 37.8% of Serbian citizens do not support the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, while 40.6% are unaware of President Aleksandar Vučić's negotiation strategy. When asked whether Serbs have a greater right to live in Kosovo than Albanians, 30.7% agreed, while 35.5% disagreed. Similarly, opinions on Kosovo's significance to Serbia are deeply divided: 29.5% believe that Kosovo is the foundation of Serbian identity, whereas 29.3% disagree.

Conflict resolution studies emphasize that dialogue is a fundamental catalyst for reconciliation and conflict resolution (Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse, 2003; Galtung, 1996; Cohen, 2005). In this context, conflicting parties often engage in what has been termed a "dialogue of struggle" (Dzuverovic and Besic, 2020) or agonistic dialogue (Ramsbotham, 2010). As Oliver Ramsbotham explains in his research on transforming violent conflict, agonistic dialogue refers to "dialogue between enemies – that part of radical disagreement in which adversaries respond directly to each other's utterances, whether or not in the first instance through intermediaries" (Ramsbotham, 2010, p. 93).

Given that high-level meetings frequently fail to address the core issues underpinning long-term cooperation, civil society organizations remain the primary facilitators of people-to-people engagement and agonistic dialogue in the region. This is exemplified by initiatives such as the Kosovo School of the Heartefact Fund, which connects Serbian and Albanian youth through education and cultural exchange, and the "What Did We Inherit?" workshop, a collaboration between the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), Integra NGO, Civic Initiatives, and the Human Rights Education Youth Network (HREYN). These initiatives

¹ The research has been developed within the framework of the Co-creational Jam Session, an initiative of the CREDO Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence at the University of Siena, which provided support for the research and fostered collaboration between the authors.

² In September 2023, Serb militants initiated an attack on Kosovo police as they responded to a situation where trucks lacking license plates were blocking a bridge in Banjska. This incident resulted in the death of Kosovar police officer and three Serbian attackers.

provide young artists and cultural professionals from Kosovo and Serbia with platforms to explore their shared history and its impact on their artistic expression.

The landscape of civil society organizations in Serbia is diverse, ranging from human rights-focused groups (Humanitarian Law Fund, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights) to inter-ethnic dialogue promoters (NGO Aktiv), youth activism organizations (YIHR Serbia), and numerous cultural and artistic exchange programs (CZKD, Heartefact Fund, KROKODIL, Kulturnanova). However, Serbian CSOs currently face significant dilemmas, particularly concerning their target audiences.

At present, CSOs promoting intercultural dialogue primarily attract like-minded individuals – those already committed to justice, reconciliation, and regional cooperation. However, recent polling suggests that this demographic remains small. According to the latest research on Serbian youth attitudes toward the 1990s wars, 43% of respondents believe reconciliation between Serbs and Albanians is impossible (Jovanovic, 2023). The study's author, Rodoljub Jovanović, notes that young Serbs are most familiar with narratives that emphasize threats to the Serbian ethnic group, aligning with the official discourse of the current populist, right-leaning government.

This trend is further illustrated by the fact that over 60% of respondents hold negative views of the Hague Tribunal, while nearly 41% believe its primary purpose is to blame Serbs for war crimes. The high percentage of youth identifying with populist, right-wing views that deny Serbian responsibility for war crimes (50% of respondents, from a sample of 910 individuals aged 18–30) admits to knowing little about these events, and a quarter state they know nothing at all – underscores the difficulty CSOs face in engaging diverse audiences. This social atmosphere limits CSOs' ability to foster broader societal change in normalizing relations between Albanians and Serbs, as they are struggling to include in their activities the so-called “unusual suspects”, often portrayed in Serbia as radical right³.

This study is looking to understand if the main principle of agonistic dialogue, which recognizes that differences in opinion as inevitable in diverse societies and seeks to harness these differences as a source of intellectual and social growth, are possible in the case of Serbia. The goal of agonistic dialogue is not necessarily to achieve consensus, but to promote understanding, tolerance, and the exchange of perspectives (Ramsbotham, 2010). Therefore, we aim to answer the following questions: How can parties with radically opposed views, like CSOs and right wing in Serbia, engage in dialogue on Kosovo? Along which lines this could happen, without endangering the main objectives of the considered CSOs?

The Puzzle

Within the context outlined above, Serbia's CSOs face three major obstacles in their efforts to engage with right-wing groups. First, CSOs advocating for human rights, minority rights, and social justice are often perceived as threats to nationalist agendas, resulting in reluctance

³ Radical right is defined by Cas Mudde, prominent scholar in the field, as encompassing “ideologies that are nativist, authoritarian, and populist” (Mudde, 2007, p. 155). According to him, nativism is a belief that states should prioritize native inhabitants over immigrants or minorities; authoritarianism is a preference for a strong, centralized authority, often at the expense of civil liberties; and populism is a political approach that pits a “pure” people against a “corrupt” elite (Mudde, 2007).

among the target group to engage with them. Second, the radical right views CSOs as foreign agents due to their reliance on international funding to implement their projects. This perception reinforces the belief that these organizations serve as proxies for Western influence, which, according to nationalist rhetoric, seeks to separate Kosovo from Serbia. Third, CSOs are often portrayed as traitors by government-controlled media and officials. Since many of their initiatives involve cooperation with Albanians from Kosovo – through cultural exchanges, public discussions, and university collaborations – they are accused of collaborating with the “enemy”. Finally, some CSOs have publicly recognized Kosovo’s independence, referring to Kosovo citizens as citizens of the Republic of Kosovo. This stance is widely condemned not only by the radical right but also by the broader Serbian public, as it is perceived as unconstitutional.⁴

All these issues open a set of questions related to the objectives and the right tools to achieve such engagement within an increasingly polarized environment and the re-politization of the ‘Kosovo’ issue in Serbia. This considered, the present working paper provides an exploratory overview of the challenges posed to CSOs willing to enter this path and the nature of the groups they want to engage with. After providing background on the context of analysis, it presents the methodology and the first findings, emphasizing the ‘red lines’ that hinder successful engagement and the blue-lines that provide room for maneuver and a foundation for developing potentially effective practices.

Methodology and Challenges: Reaching the Target Group

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, primarily based on semi-structured online interviews. The research engaged with the youth branches of right-wing political parties in Serbia, including Zavetnici and Dveri. Additionally, student parliaments from the Faculty of Political Sciences, Faculty of Law, and Faculty of Philology (Department of History) at the University of Belgrade were contacted, as on these faculties conflict between Serbia and Kosovo is being studied and discussed.

The primary focus on youth is deliberate, as CSO programs are predominantly designed for young people. Moreover, this demographic represents Serbia’s future policymakers, many of whom are already involved in political parties. Initially, we received four responses from Dveri, along with two responses from the Faculty of Political Sciences and the Faculty of Law. Subsequently, we employed a snowball sampling approach, relying on the initial interviewees to help us identify additional participants.

Before agreeing to participate, many potential respondents inquired about the funding sources of the research and whether the researchers recognized Kosovo’s independence. Interestingly, the majority of the 10 final interviewees expressed approval of the study, primarily because it was conducted in collaboration with Siena University, a foreign institution, and did not involve financial compensation.

Despite this initial success, recruiting additional participants proved difficult, as many potential interviewees were reluctant to discuss the Kosovo issue for fear of jeopardizing their standing within their political parties. Respondents were asked about their perceptions of

⁴ Constitution of Serbia (2006) defines the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija as an integral part of Serbia, with “substantial autonomy”.

CSOs in Serbia, particularly those engaged in programs fostering cooperation with Kosovo.⁵ These programs included people-to-people exchange and study visits, arts and cultural programs, human rights initiatives, youth activism and educational initiatives. For cultural and arts-related initiatives, interviewees were also asked about their personal cultural habits and familiarity with Serbia's arts and cultural scene, with a particular focus on Belgrade as the cultural center.⁶

Distinguishing Red and Blue Lines

To move beyond the commonplace and familiar perspectives associated with right-wing groups in Serbia, the research findings are categorized into red and blue lines. Red lines represent non-negotiable issues – topics that radical youth refuse to engage with when discussing cooperation with Albanians from Kosovo. Most of these perspectives have remained unchanged over time (Tepšić, 2022; Buljubašić, 2022; Bakić, 2013). Blue lines, on the other hand, highlight potential areas of engagement – specific programs, activities, or initiatives where there is room for cooperation. It is important to note that some respondents displayed a lack of interest in discussing the Kosovo issue altogether. Among the ten participants interviewed, three stated that Kosovo was not relevant to their work or daily lives, and they preferred not to comment on the topic.

Red Lines: Unacceptable Points for Radical Youth

1. The Asterisk Issue: Status of Kosovo

All respondents unanimously stated that they would refuse to participate in any program, cultural event, or initiative that refers to “Kosovo” without an asterisk (*). They argued that omitting the asterisk undermines their national pride, the sanctity of the Serbian Constitution, and their identity as Serbs. As one interviewee stated: *“If you don’t respect the Constitution, you don’t respect me as a citizen, nor my national identity”*.

A frequently cited example was the *Miredita, Dobar dan* Festival, a well-known initiative promoting cultural exchange between Albanians and Serbs. Respondents viewed this festival as an example of a program with a political agenda, primarily because it refers to Kosovo without an asterisk and includes films and theater performances perceived as anti-Serbian.

Furthermore, respondents emphasized that they would not engage in programs where the organizing body publicly endorses Kosovo's independence or fails to use neutral terminology. From their perspective, such initiatives automatically exclude them as potential participants.

⁵ The list of CSOs is provided in the Appendix.

⁶ The complete questionnaire is included in the Appendix.

2. *Selective Representation of Victims in Art*

Several respondents referenced films that have gained international recognition, particularly *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, as examples of anti-nationalistic cinema. Regardless of the film's narrative – which focuses on the genocide in Srebrenica and the suffering of Bosnian victims – interviewees criticized what they perceived as one-sided victim representation.

They argued for a more comprehensive portrayal of war victims, one that includes Serbian casualties alongside others. Films that exclusively focus on Albanian or Bosnian victims were dismissed as propaganda tools designed to fuel division and hatred, rather than instruments of reconciliation. Additionally, respondents questioned the effectiveness of films that fail to portray victims in a neutral manner, viewing them as counterproductive in fostering mutual understanding.

Respondents, many of whom identified as enthusiasts of film and literature, evaluated art through a nationalist lens. They expressed the belief that art should serve the nation. Serbian actors and film directors involved in films with an anti-Serbian stance were labeled as foreign mercenaries. Art, in their view, was being manipulated by Albanian filmmakers and their Serbian supporters as a tool of propaganda to advance Kosovo's recognition.

3. *Foreign-Donor-Funded Projects*

The Serbian Constitution does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state, creating legal ambiguities when applying for bilateral cooperation projects. Since Kosovo's institutions are not officially recognized, formal cooperation is nearly impossible within the existing legal framework. As a result, most NGOs rely on foreign funding from organizations such as Creative Europe, the National Endowment for Democracy, and USAID to support their projects. However, respondents strongly opposed participation in initiatives funded by foreign donors, particularly those financed by U.S. organizations, followed by EU institutions.

Throughout the interviews, participants frequently referred to NGOs collaborating with Albanians from Kosovo as "foreign mercenaries". When asked whether they were aware of any national Serbian donors financing cooperation programs with Kosovo, none of the respondents could name one. Interestingly, despite acknowledging that without foreign funding, no Serbian-Albanian cooperation projects would exist, respondents remained distrustful of foreign-funded programs and the CSOs implementing them.

Blue Lines: Potential Points of Cooperation with CSOs

1. *Openness to Meeting Albanian Youth*

Almost all respondents agreed that Serbs and Albanians should have more opportunities to interact. A common theme emerging from the responses was that respondents had limited knowledge of Albanian culture, customs, and history, as well as almost no access to learning the Albanian language in Serbia – except through the Faculty of Philology (Albanistika). However, despite this curiosity, respondents noted a social stigma within their political circles, where learning Albanian or participating in CSO programs that facilitate Serbian-Albanian interactions could label them as pro-Kosovo.

When asked about suitable topics for conversation and collaboration, respondents identified economic cooperation (private sector partnerships), environmental initiatives (due to shared regional ecological concerns), and women's rights as potential areas of mutual interest in both societies.

At the same time, respondents acknowledged that discussions about historical conflicts would likely lead to confrontation and misunderstandings, particularly regarding unresolved political issues such as the status of Serbian municipalities in northern Kosovo. However, 2 out of 10 respondents expressed no interest in learning more about the Albanian community, stating that they believed “they have nothing to offer”. One interviewee further argued that NGOs promoting such interactions are more focused on securing funding than creating real change, and that meeting “the other” has been turned into propaganda. However, when asked how they would differentiate between agenda-driven NGOs and neutral ones, respondents were unable to provide a clear answer, instead suggesting that “it is publicly known who is on whose side”.

2. More Opportunities to Visit Kosovo.

Findings indicate that the majority of respondents had never visited Kosovo. Among those who had, their visits were limited to Serbian-majority areas, with little to no direct interaction with Albanians. These visits were often humanitarian in nature, focusing on delivering aid from Belgrade to Serbian communities. Those who had not visited Kosovo expressed a strong interest in traveling to key Serbian cultural and religious sites, particularly Serbian Orthodox monasteries, Kosovska Mitrovica, Prizren, Peć and Prishtina (though primarily out of curiosity, as it is the largest city in the region). Respondents showed a particular concern for the conditions of Serbian monasteries and churches, as well as historical landmarks, including the site of the Kosovo Battle.

Despite the existence of numerous exchange programs facilitating visits to Kosovo for Serbian youth, respondents claimed that: 1) They were unaware of such programs or had not been informed about them; and 2) NGOs organizing these trips do not use neutral terminology when referring to Kosovo, which, as previously noted, constitutes a red line for their participation.

3. “If the artistic content is qualitative and truthful, I don’t mind it’s Albanian”

Respondents expressed limited interest in cultural events organized by CSOs, largely due to a lack of awareness of them. The only widely recognized initiative among participants was *Miredita, Dobar dan*.

Most of the cultural content they consume is limited to mainstream cinema and media, rather than alternative cultural productions that do not receive broad public approval. However, they were open to engaging with Albanian culture through films and literature, as they did not associate such interest with a specific political agenda.

Despite this, respondents showed little enthusiasm for independent and alternative cultural productions, which are typically the hosts of film screenings and book discussions that challenge dominant narratives. For instance, none of the respondents were aware of the films “Depth 2” or “The Load” by Ognjen Glavonić, which explore mass graves of Albanian victims in Serbia. These films were denied public funding and were never screened in mainstream cinemas, further contributing to the disconnect between the two communities.

Similarly, Albanian literature remains largely untranslated in Serbia, making it even more difficult for Serbian audiences to access and engage with Albanian perspectives. This gap in cultural exchange presents an opportunity for future improvement.

4. Focus on Future Relations Rather than the Past

A shared dissatisfaction with the current political situation among Serbian youth could serve as a unifying factor for engagement across ideological divides. Most respondents expressed frustration with ongoing discussions about Kosovo as a political problem and indicated a preference for conversations that focus on practical solutions rather than ideological debates.

However, this preference for forward-looking discussions conflicts with the principles upheld by many CSOs, which emphasize that reconciliation requires acknowledging historical war crimes, recognizing victims, and ensuring justice for affected families. While Serbian youth may be open to discussing solutions for the future, their reluctance to confront the historical dimension of reconciliation remains a significant barrier.

Strengths and Limitations of CSOs

The study found little recognition among respondents regarding the role and overall influence of CSOs in fostering the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The majority of respondents believed that reconciliation and normalization efforts should be driven by a top-down approach, led by the government rather than civil society organizations.

Among the suggestions proposed by respondents were the establishment of special teams of intellectuals tasked with developing a new pacification plan, and the introduction of free, publicly funded Albanian language courses to encourage greater linguistic and cultural understanding. However, as these government-led initiatives remain largely absent, CSOs continue to serve as the primary actors in reconciliation efforts between Kosovo and Serbia. Despite this, the sector faces significant limitations, including:

- Lack of Acknowledgment and Political Support

One of the most pressing challenges for CSOs in Serbia is the absence of recognition from political elites and their unwillingness to incorporate the civil society sector into official dialogue processes. This exclusion significantly restricts CSOs' ability to contribute effectively to reconciliation efforts.

- Dependence on Foreign Funding and Donor Policies

CSOs in Serbia rely heavily on foreign funding, which raises concerns regarding the sustainability of their programs and the extent of their influence. Since donor policies often shape program priorities, CSOs may struggle to implement long-term, locally driven initiatives.

One of the largest donors in Serbia – particularly given its status as an EU candidate country – is the European Union. Recognizing the importance of cultural cooperation as a driver of reconciliation, the European Commission launched initiatives to strengthen cultural and artistic collaborations in the Western Balkans. For example, the “Culture and Creativity” project, which was introduced in 2019, allocated €8 million to support cultural and creative

sectors as a means of fostering sustainable development and improving cross-border cooperation.

Additionally, the EU plays a key role as a mediator in international cultural relations actions, particularly through its Delegation in Pristina and the establishment of the EUNIC cluster. These initiatives aim to strengthen cultural diplomacy, build trust, and facilitate dialogue between Serbian and Albanian communities.

- *Limited Public Trust and Perceived Legitimacy*

A lack of trust in CSOs – particularly among radical youth groups – raises questions about their legitimacy and effectiveness in addressing reconciliation challenges. However, recent research suggests that public trust in the civil sector is gradually increasing. According to a 2022 CRTA study, 50% of respondents now believe that CSOs protect the public interest – a significant increase from only one-third of citizens who held this view a decade ago (CRTA, 2022).

- *Fragmentation Within the CSO Sector*

Despite sharing common goals, CSOs in Serbia remain highly fragmented. This divide is often attributed to organizational leadership structures, where individual leaders exert significant influence over their respective organizations (Milivojević, 2006). Many CSOs are perceived as heavily centered around a single leader, typically the president or director, which limits collaboration with other organizations due to personal or ideological differences.

Additionally, leadership teams within these organizations often remain unchanged for extended periods, preventing the introduction of fresh perspectives and innovative approaches. This stagnation is seen as a barrier to progress, both in terms of operational methods and strategic impact.

Enhancing the Agonistic Dialogue: Conclusions and Suggestions for CSOs

When comparing red and blue lines, it is noticeable that the biggest challenge for CSOs to engage with radical right youth is a lack of trust and concrete opposing stands to the reconciliation efforts. Being perceived as foreign mercenaries with an anti-Serbian agenda, which goes in favour of promoting Kosovo's independence, leaves the minimal space for common points of interactions.

In conclusion, this research tries to enhance that minimal space by outlining three step suggestions, based on agonistic dialogue principles and outlined blue points of cooperation, for CSOs who wish to include in their programs right wing groups and support in this way dialogue, much needed in Serbia.

1. Recognition of "The Other"

The first step in engaging with radical youth is acknowledging their perspectives. Agonistic dialogue emphasizes the importance of recognizing "the other" as a legitimate and equal participant in political and social discourse. Instead of perceiving the radical right as opponents or enemies, which would further entrench polarization, CSOs should adopt a non-judgmental approach, creating spaces for critical discussion on contentious issues.

By directly addressing the concerns of far-right youth – which are also shared by broader right-wing sympathizers – such as skepticism toward foreign donors and fears of a hidden agenda promoting Kosovo’s independence – CSOs can mitigate hostility and challenge enemy narratives. Agonistic dialogue allows for the possibility of changing perspectives through engagement.

It is important to recognize that society is not strictly divided into radicals and non-radicals. Individuals transition between different cognitive and behavioral traits over time, shaped by personal experiences, external influences, and social contexts (Pilkington and Hussain, 2022). Therefore, engagement through dialogue can contribute to shifting attitudes over time.

2. Conflict Sensitive Communication

In addition to recognizing radical right-wing perspectives, CSOs must carefully consider the language they use when attempting to engage these groups. A conflict-sensitive approach involves striking a balance between respecting the red lines of radical youth and maintaining the core principles of CSOs, particularly regarding the neutral terminology used for Kosovo. For example, instead of using politically charged terminology, CSOs could refer to specific locations – such as “Belgrade-Prishtina” or other city names – to avoid signaling a particular political stance. However, this approach carries risks, as it may undermine trust and cooperation with partner organizations in Kosovo, potentially weakening cross-border collaboration.

When discussing projects or activities, the focus should remain on the nature of the event itself, rather than its political implications. For example, when organizing festivals, theater performances, or art exhibitions involving participants from Serbia and Kosovo, the emphasis should be placed on the artistic and cultural content, rather than the national identities of the participants. This organic representation of collaboration can facilitate dialogue without triggering political resistance.

3. Acknowledging Different Perceptions of Truth

Agonistic dialogue promotes critical engagement with opposing viewpoints, rather than their dismissal or exclusion. Instead of presenting a single “truth”, it encourages the analysis, questioning, and debate of competing narratives to broaden understanding. In the context of Serbian-Albanian relations, this means recognizing that while there may not be multiple truths, there are different perceptions of truth (Dzuverovic and Besic, 2020). Encouraging discussion about divergent historical narratives can help both sides better understand conflicting discourses surrounding past events, allowing them to refocus on finding shared solutions through dialogue.

A particularly effective platform for engaging opposing sides is the arts. Film screenings, theater productions, and literature discussions that explore conflict from diverse perspectives can create neutral spaces for debate. However, for such discussions to be productive, it is crucial that all participants are treated as equals.

CSOs should avoid a didactic approach that could be perceived as preaching or moralizing. Instead, they should focus on listening and fostering genuine exchanges. As Ramsbotham (2010, p. 80) emphasizes, “people become radical when they are not listened to”. By

ensuring that all perspectives are heard and engaged with critically, CSOs can contribute to depolarizing discourse and fostering constructive dialogue.

References

- Bakić, J. (2013). "Right Wing Extremism in Serbia". *International Policy Analysis*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Bloomfield, D., Barnes, T. and Huyse, L. (2003). *Reconciliation after violent conflict: A handbook*. 1st ed. Stockholm: International IDEA.
- Buljubašić, M. (2022). "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE". *EU Commission - Radicalisation Awareness Network*. Accessed April 17, 2025. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_en.pdf
- Centar za društveni dijalog i regionalne inicijative (CDDRI) (2021). *Stavovi građana Srbije o Kosovu*. Sprint Insight doo. Accessed April 17, 2025.
- Cohen, C. (2005). *Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts: Strengthening Peace-building Capacity through the Brandeis International Fellowship Program*. Boston, MA: Brandeis University.
- CRTA (2022). *Istraživanje: Stavovi građana Srbije o učešću u demokratskim procesima*. Accessed April 1, 2025. <https://crt.rs/istrazivanje-stavovi-gradjana-srbije-o-ucescu-u-demokratskim-procesima-2022/>
- Dzuverovic and Besic (2020). "How many truths are there? Reconciliation and agonistic dialogue in the former Yugoslavia". *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20 (3): 455–472.
- Galtung, J. (1996). *Peace by Peaceful Means*. Oslo, Norway: International Peace Research Institute.
- Halilovic Pastuovic, M. Hülzer, J. and Wylie, G. (2023). *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans and MENA Region: Key findings and implications for research. Theoretical Synthesis Paper*. PAVE Project Publications.
- Milivojević, Z. (2006). *Civil society in Serbia: Suppressed during the 1990S – gaining legitimacy and recognition after 2000*. Belgrade: Research & Analytical Center ARGUMENT.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pilkington, H. and Hussain A. (2022). "Why wouldn't you consult us? Reflections on preventing radicalisation among actors in radical(ising) milieus". *Journal for deradicalisation* 1 (30): 1–44.
- Ramsbotham, O. (2010). *Transforming Violent Conflict. Radical disagreement, dialogue and survival*. Routledge, Oxon.
- Tepšić, G. (2022). "Conflicting Peace in Post-War Serbia. Radicalisation and Extremism as Security Threats". In Džuverović, N. and Stojarová, V. (eds.), *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans*. 1st ed. Abingdon: Routledge.

Appendix

Annex 1: List of CSOs working on cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia, in Serbia

Center for Regionalism
CZDK
Forum ZfD
Heartefact Fund
Helsinki Committee of Human Rights
Humanitarian Law Center Serbia
Krokodil
Kuluranova
NGO Aktiv
YIHR Srbija

Annex 2: Questionnaire for semi-structured interviews – CREDO program

Socio-demographics

1. Where are you from?
2. Age?
3. What work do you do? Students? Employed/unemployed?
4. How long have you been active in political party/movement?

Understanding cultural habits

1. How often do you go to theatre/cinema/concerts?
2. Which kind of cultural activities you prefer?
3. Would you describe yourself as culturally active?
4. What do you think about Serbian arts and cultural scene?
5. Can you name few artists important for you?

Shifting to Kosovo-Serbia thematic

6. Do you like historical movies/theatre plays? Can you name one that you have appreciated or that you would advise friends to watch?
7. Which films/theatre plays/shows you watched/follow? What is your favourite one?
8. How do you find cultural content which has in focus Kosovo-Serbia relations?
9. Did you watch Depth 2? Aida Qua Vadis? Series Besa?
10. What do you think about Miredita, Dobar dan festival?
11. Would you watch a film which portrays Serbian people as perpetrators? Or vice versa? Why yes/why no?
12. Do you see movies/theatre plays, photo exhibitions as education tools?
13. Do you think arts and culture have power to change perceptions on relations between Albanians and Serbs? If yes, how? If no, why?

Work of CAOs in Kosovo-Serbia relations

1. Have you ever been to Kosovo?
2. Which sources you learned from about Kosovo conflict?
3. What is your opinion on Albanians living in Kosovo? Why?
4. What do you think is the idea or the image of Albania that comes out of your sources and do you share it?
5. Would you be a part of the program which offers Albanian perspective of the conflict? Why yes/no?
6. Would you be a part of program which states Kosovo as independent country?
7. Would you be a part of program which connects youth from Prishtina and Belgrade?
8. Would you be a part of the program which includes Albanians? Why yes/no?
9. Do you know of any CSO involved in enhancing relations between Kosovo and Serbia? Which one? What do you think about their activities?
10. What would make your views challenged? Do you think you can change your views and why?

Coexistence and entry points

1. How do you imagine coexistence between Serbians and Albanians?
2. What would be acceptable form of interaction with Albanians?
3. Which cultural activities would you do be engaged with Albanians?
4. Which cultural events would be acceptable from your point of view? Mutual ones organized by Albanians and Serbs?

Working Paper Series in Public and Cultural Diplomacy



A registered publication by
Department of Social Political and Cognitive Sciences
University of Siena
Via Roma 56, 53100 Siena, Italy
e-mail: wpspcd@unisi.it