

LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
YOUTH, PEACE AND
SECURITY AGENDA
IN SERBIA



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Executive Summary

This policy paper starts from a simple but important premise: in Serbia, the Youth, Peace and Security agenda cannot be successfully implemented only “from above,” through CP-level strategies and international commitments, but above all “from below,” through municipalities, cities, schools, youth offices, civil society and the everyday institutions that young people actually come into contact with. UN Security Council Resolution 2250 established the five pillars of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda – participation, protection, prevention, partnership and reintegration – while Resolutions 2419 and 2535 further emphasized the full and meaningful inclusion of young people in decision-making processes and the importance of contextualized implementation mechanisms. This document focuses on three pillars that are most directly applicable at the local level in Serbia: participation, protection and prevention.

The analysis shows that Serbia already has partial institutional foundations for localizing the YPS approach: the Youth Strategy 2023–2030 sets out a vision of young people as active and equal participants in society, envisages the advancement of a healthy and safe environment, and recognizes youth offices and youth councils as key local mechanisms. At the same time, both official strategic documents and civil society analyses show that local youth infrastructure is uneven, that the quality of these mechanisms’ work varies, and that public security policies still do not place youth safety in explicit focus.

Findings from Raška, Priboj and Leskovac show that young people do not understand “security” narrowly, as a matter of crime or conflict, but as a set of everyday conditions for a dignified life: safe traffic and public space, clean air and environment, access to cultural content, protection from peer and digital violence, a sense that their voice carries weight, and the existence of institutions they can trust. This broad, everyday understanding of security corresponds fully to the contemporary YPS framework, particularly local approaches that link security to social cohesion, civic space, mental health, digital safety and feedback channels between young people and institutions.

The main recommendation of this paper is that local self-governments should not wait for a separate general YPS action plan, but should instead use existing youth policy mechanisms to introduce “YPS localization”: an annual local dialogue on youth security, a local YPS annex to the youth programme/strategy, a small participatory fund for youth initiatives, school protocols for digital and peer violence, a biannual “scorecard” for monitoring, and public presentation of results to young people. This approach is realistic, budget-feasible, and consistent with both Serbia’s strategic framework and international guidance that insists on “nothing for young people without young people,” local regulation, a stable budget line, and participatory monitoring.

Introduction and Context of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

The Youth, Peace and Security agenda emerged as a response to a long-standing perception in international and community level policies: young people have too often been viewed as a “risk group,” and too rarely as political actors, mediators, trust-builders and bearers of social resilience. UN Security Council Resolution 2250, adopted in 2015, was the first security framework to recognize the positive and active role of young people in preventing and resolving conflict and in sustaining peace; Resolution 2419, from 2018, calls for the meaningful and full inclusion of young people in the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements and in decision-making processes; Resolution 2535, from 2020, further emphasizes young people’s contribution to the sustainability and inclusiveness of peace and security efforts and calls for contextualized approaches to implementation.

In Serbia, YPS is not an entirely “external” agenda. The Youth Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023–2030 explicitly links domestic youth policy to international frameworks, including the UN Youth Strategy and its “peace and security” pillar. At the same time, the Strategy itself sets out a vision of young people as active and equal participants in society, envisages specific goals related to active participation, youth spaces, and a healthy and safe environment, and relies on local mechanisms such as youth offices and youth councils. In other words, the normative basis for localizing the YPS agenda in Serbia already exists, even if it is not called by that name.

At the same time, this is precisely where a key gap becomes visible. The analysis by the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS) of the UN YPS agenda in the Serbian context warns that none of the laws or public policy documents related to security give particular attention to youth safety, that no current programmes of state institutions focused exclusively on protecting young people or preventing violence against them have been identified, and that young people are not included in shaping security policy or security sector reform. For this reason, the local level becomes not only a space for implementation, but also a space for “compensating” for the gap between general youth policy and the specific logic of YPS.

In this sense, this policy paper does not attempt to “import” an international model disconnected from the domestic context. On the contrary: its aim is to show how YPS can be translated into the language of local self-government in Serbia – through issues that already matter to young people: the quality of public space, trust in institutions, school safety, digital violence, mental health, cultural content, traffic, environmental safety and a sense of belonging to the community.

Indicator for Serbia	Finding	Relevance for local YPS
Young people most interested in the topic of security	71,5%	YPS responds to a real, not abstract, interest among young people
Young people concerned about the malfunctioning of democracy	74,4%	Security and trust in institutions are interconnected
Participation in public debates/consultations at the CP or local level	4,6%	Local participation remains extremely low
Young people who experienced mental health difficulties in the past year	More than three-quarters	Mental health is an integral part of YPS protection
Young people who sought professional psychological help	44,7%	The need for support is significant and measurable

Methodology and Project Overview

This document is based on a combination of four data sources. The first consists of project findings and local policy briefs for Raška, Priboj and Leskovac, which summarize local policy dialogues, work with young people, and identified priorities. The second consists of CP-level and local official documents: the Youth Strategy 2023–2030, local youth programmes and strategies, and documentation from youth offices and local youth bodies. The third consists of KOMS research and monitoring documents, in particular the Alternative Report on the Status and Needs of Young People 2025 and the analysis Youth for Peace and Security: An Analysis of the UN Agenda in the Serbian Context. The fourth consists of international guidelines and practices from the UN, UNDP, UNICEF, the OSCE, RYCO and Finland.

The analytical framework is based on three YPS pillars. Participation is understood as the real, not symbolic, influence of young people on local decisions, budgets and priorities. Protection covers the physical, social, environmental and digital safety of young people, as well as mental health and access to services. Prevention is understood broadly: as the prevention of violence, polarization, disinformation, discrimination, loss of trust and local apathy. This approach is consistent with contemporary guidance insisting that local YPS plans encompass social cohesion, digital safety, media literacy, safe public spaces, the local security system and participatory governance.

Why is YPS Important at the Local Level?

Meaningful youth participation most often takes place precisely at the local level, since this is where young people most easily articulate interests, mediate differences and take on their first political and civic roles. Local government is therefore the most natural entry point for YPS implementation. This is echoed by recent guidance on formulating local YPS plans, which defines “meaningful participation” as participation with a voice and a vote in decision-making, throughout the entire public policy cycle – from diagnosis, through design and budgeting, to monitoring and evaluation.

For Serbia, this is especially important because local youth mechanisms already exist, but do not function equally everywhere. The Youth Strategy states that youth offices and youth councils are important mechanisms at the provincial and local level, but also that the main challenges are the absence of these mechanisms in all local self-government units, uneven quality of work, insufficient inclusiveness and functionality of youth councils, and too few systematized staff positions. Youth policy and support mechanisms are not equally developed at the local level. This means that YPS localization in Serbia does not start from zero, but must address issues of quality, trust and functionality, not merely the formal existence of bodies.

Even more importantly, YPS offers a framework that connects issues that local self-governments often treat separately: youth policy, school safety, environmental protection, mental health, local security, media literacy and civic participation. When 71.5% of young people show interest in the topic of security, 74.4% in the functioning of democracy, and only 4.6% participate in public debates and consultations, it becomes clear that the problem is simultaneously political, social and security-related. Local YPS is therefore not an additional “topic,” but an instrument for connecting what is, in practice, kept apart.

It is also important that the recommendations remain budget-realistic. In this regard, the KOMS report shows that in 2025 there was a public call for support to local self-government units in implementing youth policy at the local level in the amount of 72 million dinars, as well as a broader call for the development and implementation of youth policy worth 98 million dinars. The message for local self-governments is clear: part of the YPS measures can be financed through existing youth, education, health, environmental and partnership funding lines, without waiting for a dedicated “YPS fund.”

Local Contexts: Raška, Priboj, Leskovac

The three observed communities show that local YPS must be differentiated. Raška and Priboj more clearly illustrate the logistical and social challenges of smaller communities: fewer organized activities, weaker youth spaces, and greater reliance on individual enthusiasm and everyday municipal conditions. Leskovac shows more developed youth infrastructure, but also more complex urban risks – pollution, peer and digital violence, and a wider gap between the existence of structures and the sense of impact. This difference matters: YPS cannot be the same “package of measures” for all three communities.

Local community	Priorities highlighted by young people	Key participation obstacle	Existing entry point for YPS work
Raška	traffic safety, lack of space and activities for young people, pollution, stray dogs, weaker solidarity and volunteering	young people's ideas remain without support and institutional follow-through	visible work of the Youth Office and potential for mobilization through local campaigns and volunteer actions
Priboj	lack of cultural and artistic content, illegal dumps and waste, parking and traffic, stray dogs	small number of organized channels and activities connecting young people with institutions	Youth Office clearly defined responsibilities and the Programme for Improving the Position of Young People 2024–2027
Leskovac	air pollution, peer and digital violence, illegal dumps, parking and traffic, low sense of influence	formal channels exist but are not always experienced as impactful	local youth strategy, Youth Office, Youth Council, Local Youth Parliament

In Raška, one of the most striking messages is that “many potentially useful proposals and initiatives remain at the level of ideas” due to a lack of support, space and organizational capacity. Young people link security to very concrete things: traffic, parking, public space, ecology and mutual solidarity. This means YPS in Raška must be geared toward visible, shared and tangible actions: safer routes, environmental volunteer actions, youth activities and campaigns that build a sense of community. The municipality’s official website confirms that the Youth Office has the capacity for public mobilization of young people through local activities.

In Priboj, it is clear how much cultural and creative content belongs within the YPS agenda. When young people describe spending most of their free time in informal spaces, without enough organized activities, this is not merely a “quality of life” issue, but also a matter of preventing isolation, passivity and disconnection from the community. Priboj’s Youth Office states on its official website that its mandate is to encourage activism, ensure youth participation in decision-making, conduct needs research and network stakeholders, while the Programme for Improving the Position of Young People 2024–2027 is explicitly based on participatory planning and aligned with the CP-level strategy. This is a solid institutional foundation for a local YPS approach.

Leskovac presents a different picture: stronger institutional infrastructure, but also a more pronounced lack of trust in youth influence. The Local Youth Strategy 2021–2025 was developed through a public call, with the participation of 57 people, 39% of them women, and the Youth Office, with support from UNICEF and partners, surveyed 395 young people via the U-Report platform. In addition, the city has a Local Youth Parliament bringing together representatives of all secondary schools and an active Youth Council. Still, young people in Leskovac report that they feel their “voice has no impact,” particularly regarding air pollution, peer and digital violence, and municipal problems. This means that Leskovac lacks not only channels, but also a visible feedback effect from those channels.

Participation, Protection, Prevention

Participation

Meaningful youth participation does not mean mere presence at consultations, but the right to influence priorities, the course of discussion, the budget and the monitoring of results. At the local level, it is easiest to enable meaningful youth participation, and this participation must encompass the design, implementation and oversight of policies and budgets. New guidance for local YPS plans recommends formal mechanisms with “voice and vote” rules, publicly available minutes, a decision trail, and participatory monitoring. KOMS findings for Serbia show why this matters: 87.1% of young people believe the political system does not allow citizens sufficient influence over decisions, and participation in public debates and consultations remains extremely low.

In all three towns and municipalities, youth participation is closely tied to trust. In Raška, the problem is framed as a lack of institutional support for young people’s ideas; in Priboj, as a lack of structured activities connecting young people with the local community; in Leskovac, as a gap between existing bodies and actual influence. For this reason, the participation pillar at the local level must shift from a “consultative” to a “co-decision-making” model: young people should not only be asked, but should receive visible responses, small budgets, a mandate on working bodies, and insight into what has been adopted, what has not, and why.

Protection

At the local level, protection most often means protection from what young people see and feel every day: polluted air, neglected public space, traffic risks, peer and digital violence, lack of psychological support, and weak referral protocols. The Youth Strategy 2023–2030 recognizes “a healthy and safe environment and the social wellbeing of young people” as a specific goal, and the KOMS report shows that more than three-quarters of young people experienced mental health difficulties in the past year, while 44.7% sought professional psychological help.

For the digital space, the OSCE in Serbia offers particularly relevant lessons: open platforms for dialogue on media for young people increase the quality and quantity of youth-oriented content, and media and information literacy in schools has a direct preventive and protective effect; according to the OSCE, more than 400 teachers in primary and secondary schools across Serbia have already introduced media and digital literacy into their teaching practice. For Leskovac, where digital violence has been directly identified as a local priority, this is a highly applicable model. For Raška and Priboj, where challenges related to public space and local connectedness are more pronounced, protection must include safe youth spaces, environmental and traffic safety, and clear protocols for cooperation between schools, youth offices, health centres and social welfare centres.

Prevention

In the local YPS context, prevention does not mean only preventing “extreme” forms of violence. It also means reducing everyday causes of insecurity: social exclusion, boredom, distrust, disinformation, intolerance, municipal disorder, and the sense that nothing can be changed. UNDP’s local guide explicitly recommends that local YPS plans include civic engagement and digital safety, media literacy, prevention of harassment and disinformation, safe urban spaces for young people, mental health support, and strengthening of the local security and justice system from a youth perspective. OSCE practice in Serbia further shows that prevention works when it is rooted in schools and local communities – through peer educators, work with teachers, intercultural workshops, and campaigns against hate speech and violence.

This is precisely why the local priorities identified in Raška, Priboj and Leskovac should not be treated as “secondary” to YPS. On the contrary: annual environmental actions, youth cultural programmes, school workshops against violence, safer traffic routes, safe digital practices and public dialogue with institutions all constitute local prevention. KOMS data showing that 71.5% of young people currently follow the topic of security, and 74.4% the topic of the functioning of democracy, further demonstrate that prevention in Serbia today is inseparably linked to rebuilding trust and a sense of meaning in local public life.

Key Findings and Good Practices

The first key finding is that young people in all three local communities define security as everyday security. This includes clean air, traffic, public space, digital protection, mental health, and the ability to influence decisions. The second finding is that the trust deficit is almost as important as the service deficit: formal mechanisms without feedback do not produce a sense of participation. The third finding is that, in smaller communities, participation and protection often intertwine: cultural activities, volunteering, public events and joint actions simultaneously reduce risks and strengthen cohesion. The fourth finding is that local institutions in Serbia already have sufficient levers to begin YPS localization, but lack a way of linking these levers into one coherent framework.

Good practices from the wider region and international environment help identify what is locally applicable. Finland, in its new plan for 2025–2028, defined five priorities, including participation, prevention and protection, and specifically insists that youth participation be accessible, safe, inclusive and free of barriers, supported by a cross-sectoral and civil society monitoring group. RYCO in the Western Balkans is building an institutional framework for cooperation, reconciliation and intercultural learning through exchanges and joint youth programmes.

Local community	Existing institutional resource	Initiative or direction from the dialogue	YPS value
Raška	Youth Office with experience in public mobilization of young people	campaigns for traffic safety, volunteer environmental actions, strengthening solidarity and youth spaces	connects participation with prevention
Priboj	Youth Office with a clear mandate and the 2024–2027 Programme	annual Youth Day, improvement of public spaces, environmental and municipal actions, cultural content	connects participation with protection and social cohesion
Leskovac	Youth Office, Youth Council, Local Youth Parliament, local strategy	school workshops against peer and digital violence, youth environmental monitoring and anti-pollution actions	connects institution-building with protection and prevention

Recommendations and Conclusion

The most realistic path for the local implementation of the YPS agenda in Serbia is not to build a parallel system, but to reorganize existing local youth policy mechanisms through YPS logic. This means: one annual local dialogue on youth security, one small participatory fund for youth initiatives, one clear school-institutional protocol for digital and peer violence, one public progress table, and one obligation to give young people a response to every important recommendation. This approach is fully aligned with guidance on local YPS plans, which recommends local ownership, stable budget allocation, a six-month participatory scorecard, and annual public hearings with young people.

Actor	Priority measure	Time horizon	Resource requirement
Local self-government	adopt a YPS annex to the local youth programme/strategy or a separate municipal/city decision; establish a cross-sectoral YPS working group	short-term	low
Local self-government	open a small participatory fund for youth micro-initiatives with mandatory public justification of decisions	short- to medium-term	low to medium
Schools	introduce regular workshops on peer and digital violence, media literacy and non-violent communication; develop peer support and referral	short-term	low
Youth Office	conduct quarterly field consultations with young people, including rural settlements and vulnerable groups; keep records of proposals and responses	short-term	low
Social welfare centre, health centre, school, Youth Office	establish a local protocol for mental health, crisis referral and protection of young people from violence	medium-term	medium
CSOs	facilitate dialogues, training, mini-grants and monitoring; act as intermediaries with marginalized groups of young people	ongoing	low to medium
Informal youth groups	launch small local actions: environmental actions, road safety campaigns, peer digital workshops, mapping of risk points	ongoing	low
Local self-government units and partners	larger infrastructure interventions, such as sensors, filters, space improvements and major safety solutions, to be sought through external funding	medium- to long-term	high, with external co-financing

This model is adapted from UNDP guidance for local YPS plans and the findings of the three local dialogues.

For Raška, this practically means: focusing on safe public space, traffic safety campaigns, environmental volunteer actions and revitalizing youth activities. For Priboj: investing in cultural and creative programmes, municipal ecology, and regular public events that build connections between young people and institutions. For Leskovac: strengthening existing structures through visible youth influence on solutions to air pollution, school violence and digital safety. In all three cases, the most important principle remains the same: nothing for young people without young people — but also nothing merely symbolic with young people. Local YPS succeeds only when young people see that their priorities are translated into decisions, budgets and changes in the space where they live.

In conclusion, the local implementation of the YPS agenda in Serbia is not a matter of introducing new bureaucracy, but a new lens. It requires that youth policy, security, education, health, the digital space and local democracy finally be viewed together. In a country where young people strongly feel a deficit of influence, while at the same time showing growing interest in security and the quality of democracy, local YPS can become one of the most practical paths to rebuilding trust. Raška, Priboj and Leskovac show that young people's priorities are already clear. The next step is for local institutions to show they are ready to genuinely listen, translate these priorities into public policy together with young people, and then make those policies measurable and visible.

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