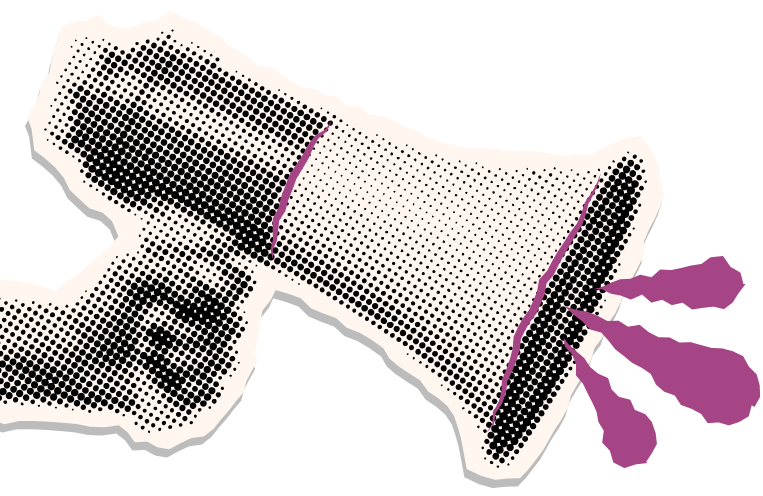




Localizing the UN Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

From Global Commitments to Local Impact



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Localizing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

From Global Commitments to Local Impact

The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda, established through United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018), and 2535 (2020), represents a paradigm shift in understanding the role of young people, not as passive beneficiaries of peace and security policies, but as active agents of change, partners, and leaders in building sustainable peace.

However, despite its strong normative framework and growing global recognition, the implementation of the YPS Agenda remains uneven and often limited to strategies, international commitments, and project-based interventions, with **insufficient translation into the everyday realities of young people at the local level.**

This policy paper responds directly to this gap. It represents a bottom-up contribution to the localization of the YPS Agenda, grounded in the experiences, perceptions, and recommendations of young people collected through the YouthSEC project, as well as the long-standing research and advocacy work of the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS).

Through a series of local consultations, surveys, and dialogues conducted within YouthSEC, young people across Serbia articulated a clear and consistent message: peace and security are experienced locally, shaped by everyday interactions with institutions and social environments. Their concerns primarily relate to:

- **safety in public and digital spaces,**
- **exposure to violence and discrimination,**
- **mental health and wellbeing,**
- **lack of trust in institutions, and**
- **limited opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes.**

These findings strongly align with broader evidence generated by KOMS through its research and monitoring efforts. KOMS Security Compass 2025 study highlights that young people in Serbia face a complex and multidimensional understanding of security, encompassing not only physical safety, but also dignity, freedom of expression, social inclusion, and the ability to participate in public life without fear.

The same research points to several worrying trends:

- **low levels of trust in institutions** responsible for ensuring youth safety,
- **widespread exposure to different forms of violence**, including peer and digital violence,
- increasing **tolerance of violence** among youth, and
- **pressures faced by young activists** when engaging in public and political life.

Importantly, these challenges are not evenly distributed. Young people from marginalized backgrounds, including rural youth, young women, LGBTQ+ youth, and socially engaged youth, face disproportionate risks and structural barriers, highlighting the need for an intersectional approach to YPS implementation.

At the same time, KOMS' analysis of the implementation of the YPS Agenda in Serbia shows that, while elements of the Agenda are present across various public policies, they remain fragmented, insufficiently coordinated, and rarely explicitly framed within the YPS framework. This results in a situation where the **Agenda exists in principle, but lacks systematic implementation**, particularly at the local level.

Evidence from global and regional processes, including contributions by youth networks such as UNOY Peacebuilders, demonstrates that youth participation in peace and security remains largely tokenistic, often limited to consultation without real influence over decision-making, and lacking adequate follow-up, resources, and accountability mechanisms.

This disconnect between policy commitments and lived realities points to a central challenge: the need to localize the YPS Agenda. Localization, in this context, does not merely imply decentralization. It requires a systemic transformation in how peace and security are understood, governed, and implemented:

- **from abstract, top-down frameworks → to context-specific, community-based approaches,**
- **from symbolic youth inclusion → to meaningful and sustained participation,**
- **from fragmented interventions → to integrated, cross-sectoral policies,**
- **and from viewing youth as beneficiaries → to recognizing them as co-creators of solutions.**

For countries in the Western Balkans, including Serbia, this process is particularly relevant. The region continues to navigate political polarization, social fragmentation, and democratic challenges, all of which directly shape the realities and perceptions of young people. In such contexts, the YPS Agenda offers not only a normative framework, but also a practical tool for strengthening social cohesion, democratic resilience, and inclusive governance.

This policy paper therefore aims to:

1. **Translate youth experiences into policy-relevant insights,**
2. **Identify gaps and opportunities in how policies relevant to the YPS Agenda are currently implemented, and**
3. **Provide concrete recommendations for localizing the YPS Agenda, with a focus on local communities, while maintaining connections to larger frameworks.**

By grounding global commitments in local realities, this paper seeks to contribute to a **shift from formal recognition of youth toward their substantive inclusion** in shaping peace and security policies.

Why Localization Matters: Insights from Youth

Youth Experience Security Locally: Youth consultations conducted within YouthSEC clearly show that **security is understood through everyday realities**, not abstract geopolitical concepts. Key concerns identified:

- **Mental health** and lack of accessible services
- **Unsafe public spaces** and infrastructure issues (lighting, stray animals, traffic)
- **Peer violence and normalized discrimination** in schools
- Fear of institutions and **lack of trust**
- **Digital insecurity** and online violence

Participation Exists, but Is Often Tokenistic: Young people are often consulted but not empowered, leading to disengagement and frustration. This is strongly reflected in local consultations. Youth lack continuous communication channels with decision-makers. Existing mechanisms (e.g. youth offices, councils) are underutilized or symbolic.

Structural Barriers to Inclusion: Across sources, key barriers include limited funding for youth-led initiatives, lack of safe and accessible spaces, institutional resistance and bureaucratic inertia, stigmatization (e.g. mental health, reporting violence), unequal access for marginalized youth.

From Mechanisms to Systems: What Works in Practice

A central challenge in the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda is the persistence of tokenistic youth participation, where young people are consulted but rarely influence decisions. Evidence from both global practice and the Serbian context shows that meaningful participation requires institutionalized mechanisms embedded in local governance systems, rather than ad hoc or project-based engagement.

A key contribution of our consultations is a **recognition of a need for a human security approach**, which expands the understanding of security beyond physical safety to include:

- mental health and wellbeing,
- social inclusion and equality,
- access to services, and
- protection from discrimination.

Youth insecurity is shaped by structural factors such as unemployment, social exclusion, and limited participation opportunities. This aligns with global YPS practice, which increasingly emphasizes prevention and cross-sectoral responses, linking youth policy with education, health, and social protection systems.

Many of the necessary mechanisms for YPS localization already exist, but remain underutilized, fragmented, or insufficiently inclusive:

Local Youth Governance Structures (LYPDs, Youth Offices, Youth Councils)

Local youth policy documents (LYPDs), local youth offices, and youth councils represent the backbone of youth policy at the municipal level. When effectively implemented, these mechanisms enable structured identification of youth needs, integration of youth priorities into local policies, and continuous dialogue between youth and institutions.

From a YPS perspective, these mechanisms provide a direct entry point for localization, but only if they move beyond formal existence and become functional and inclusive governance tools.

Multi-stakeholder Local Security Governance

Local Safety Councils represent a key mechanism for coordinating responses to security challenges at the community level. These structures should bring together local authorities, police and justice actors, education and social services, and civil society organizations, to enable joint identification of security priorities and coordinated responses, in line with community policing approaches.

However, existing practice shows that youth are rarely included in these structures, despite being directly affected by the issues discussed. Strengthening youth representation within these bodies is therefore critical for aligning local governance with YPS principles.

Participatory Budgeting and Direct Influence Mechanisms

Participatory budgeting is one of the most effective tools for shifting from symbolic participation to direct decision-making power. By allowing young people to propose and allocate public funds, it increases institutional accountability and builds trust between youth and authorities.

Global evidence (OECD, UNDP) shows that such mechanisms are particularly effective when combined with civic education and transparent processes. YouthSEC consultations clearly reflect this need, with young people identifying participatory budgeting as a key mechanism for ensuring that their priorities are not only heard, but implemented.

Co-creation and Participatory Policy Design (Youth Test)

Beyond formal structures, effective localization increasingly relies on co-creation approaches, where youth and institutions jointly design policies and solutions. Within this framework, the Youth Test emerges as a critical institutional mechanism. It operationalizes youth participation by integrating youth perspectives directly into the policy design and decision-making process. The Youth Test functions as a structured tool embedded within the ex-ante policy analysis process, meaning that youth perspectives are considered before decisions are finalized, rather than retrospectively.

Its methodology includes:

- assessing whether a policy affects youth (and which groups),
- conducting consultations with youth and youth organizations,
- analyzing short-, medium-, and long-term impacts, and
- proposing mitigation measures where negative impacts are identified .

Recommendation 1: Develop Community-Based Youth Mental Health Services through Youth Spaces

Challenge: Young people consistently identify mental health as a key dimension of their security, yet access to support remains limited, fragmented, and often stigmatized. While Serbia has a formal framework for mental health protection within the healthcare system, services are primarily institutional and insufficiently adapted to youth needs. At the same time, young people lack safe, accessible environments where they can seek support informally and without stigma.

Existing policy and mechanisms:

- Ministry of Health and the public healthcare system (primary care, mental health services)
- National Programme for Mental Health Protection (2019-2026)
- Youth Strategy (2023-2030) – Objective 3 (Youth wellbeing)
- Local youth offices under the Law on Youth
- Civil society initiatives providing psychosocial support (project-based)

Gap: youth security must be understood through a human security lens, including psychological wellbeing, dignity, and trust in systems. However, services are institution-centered rather than community-based, access remains unequal, especially at local level, and services are rarely embedded in environments perceived as safe and trusted by youth.

Policy response: Local governments, in coordination with higher institutions, should establish free, community-based, youth-centered mental health support systems, anchored in youth spaces.

This requires:

- positioning local self-governments (municipal departments for youth and social affairs) as coordination hubs for youth wellbeing at the local level, in cooperation with: local youth offices, civil society organizations and youth workers, licensed psychologists, psychotherapists, academic institutions (faculties of psychology, medicine, social work);
- establishing free and accessible youth counselling services, explicitly targeted at all young people, regardless of socio-economic background, and locating these services within youth-dedicated spaces, rather than exclusively in medical institutions, in order to reduce stigma and increase accessibility;
- ensuring that youth spaces provide integrated programming, combining: mental health support, peer-to-peer activities, youth participation and co-creation of programs;
- embedding these services within local youth policy documents, with dedicated and sustainable funding lines.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen Local Safety through Infrastructure, Service Delivery, and Traffic Safety Measures

Challenge: Young people experience insecurity through everyday environmental conditions, including inadequate lighting, unsafe roads and sidewalks, and the presence of stray animals. Traffic safety is also a major concern (especially for young women), particularly due to insufficient control, lack of awareness, and emerging risks.

Existing mechanisms:

- Municipal communal services and urban planning departments
- Traffic police and road safety frameworks
- Local Safety Councils
- Local budgeting processes

Gap: Youth are not systematically involved in identifying and prioritizing safety issues, while responses remain fragmented and reactive. Everyday safety is not treated as part of youth policy, despite being central to youth perceptions of security.

Policy response: Local governments should adopt a youth-inclusive approach to local safety and service delivery.

This requires:

- integrating youth representatives into Local Safety Councils and urban planning and infrastructure consultations,
- introducing participatory budgeting mechanisms targeting youth-defined safety priorities,
- strengthening traffic safety measures, including: increased monitoring and enforcement, awareness campaigns adapted to youth, youth-led initiatives ("by youth, for youth"),
- establishing clear and accessible reporting systems for infrastructure and safety issues

Recommendation 3: Strengthen Preventive Role of the Education System in Youth Safety and Inclusion

Challenge: Schools represent one of the primary environments where young people experience insecurity, including peer violence, discrimination, and lack of trust in institutional support mechanisms. Although Serbia has a well-developed legal and institutional framework for protection within schools, youth report that these mechanisms are often reactive and insufficiently preventive.

Existing policy and mechanisms:

- Law on the Foundations of the Education System
- School-level protection mechanisms: school psychologists and pedagogues, school protection teams (for violence, discrimination, neglect), protocols for responding to violence
- The Strategy for the Development of Education and Training in Serbia by 2030
- National platform for violence prevention ("Čuvam te")

Gap: Serbia has a developed normative framework, but fragmented implementation and limited preventive impact. Specifically, interventions are primarily reactive (after incidents occur), prevention programs are inconsistent and not systemically implemented, trust in school-based support services is low, discrimination and exclusion are not addressed holistically. Targeted efforts in violence prevention with young men remain particularly low.

Policy response: Reform efforts should focus on transforming how existing school-based mechanisms function in practice, in order to move from reactive responses to systematic prevention, while becoming accessible, trusted, and responsive to the everyday experiences of young people.

This requires:

- Obliging schools, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, to implement continuous, preventive programs addressing: peer violence, discrimination (including gender-based and minority-based), digital safety;
- redefining the role of school psychologists and pedagogues toward: proactive engagement with students, group-based and preventive work, cooperation with external actors;
- formalizing partnerships between schools and: youth organizations, youth workers and other civil society actors working on prevention and inclusion.

Recommendation 4: Institutionalize Dialogue Mechanisms and Youth-Accessible Information Systems

Challenge: Young people lack structured, continuous opportunities to engage with decision-makers, as well as clear information on how to access institutions, report issues, or exercise their rights. Existing mechanisms for participation and dialogue are often formal, inactive, or not visible to youth.

Existing policy and mechanisms:

- Law on Youth
- Youth Strategy (2023-2030) - Objective 1 (Active participation of youth)
- National and local Advisory Councils on Youth
- Local youth offices (KZMs)
- Public consultations (Law on Planning System)
- Youth organizations and representative bodies

Gap: youth participation mechanisms exist but are fragmented, inconsistently implemented, and weakly connected to decision-making processes. Additionally, youth lack clarity on where to turn in situations of risk, communication is not adapted to youth realities (digital, informal, continuous), and feedback mechanisms are largely absent.

Policy response: Authorities should establish mandatory, structured dialogue mechanisms and unified youth information systems, ensuring that young people have continuous access to decision-making processes and clear, accessible pathways to institutions, services, and reporting mechanisms.

This requires:

- mandating the regular functioning of Advisory Councils on Youth at local level, including: defined meeting frequency, formal links to decision-making processes, involvement in policy planning and budgeting, mandatory feedback mechanisms;
- institutionalizing regular consultation cycles aligned with key local policy and budget processes;
- establishing centralized youth information systems (online and offline), where young people can: access information on rights and services, identify responsible institutions, report issues through clear procedures;
- developing and maintaining official digital engagement channels (including social media) as tools for two-way communication.;

Recommendation 5: Institutionalize the Youth Test as a Cross-Sectoral Policy Tool

Challenge: Youth perspectives are not systematically integrated into policymaking processes, resulting in (local) policies that do not fully reflect youth needs and realities.

Existing policy and mechanisms:

- General policy development procedures under the Law on the Planning System of the Republic of Serbia (including ex-ante impact assessments)
- Sectoral strategies and action plans
- Youth Strategy (2023-2030) – emphasizes evidence-based policymaking and inclusion of youth perspectives

Gap: There is no standardized mechanism for assessing the impact of policies on youth, and participation remains dependent on political will rather than institutional obligation.

Policy response: The Youth Test should be institutionalized as a mandatory tool within policymaking.

This requires:

- integrating the Youth Test into existing ex-ante policy assessment frameworks at both all government levels, including municipal decision-making procedures;
- requiring its application across all relevant sectors, with a particular focus on policies affecting youth safety and security, such as: community safety, education and school environments, public space and infrastructure, digital safety and prevention of violence;
- ensuring that the Youth Test includes structured consultations with diverse groups of young people at local level led by CSO representatives, assessment of short-, medium-, and long-term impacts on youth especially focusing safety, trust in institutions, and access to protection mechanisms, identification of mitigation measures for risks related to violence, exclusion, and insecurity;
- integrating findings from the Youth Test into monitoring and evaluation processes, including public reporting at local level, building capacities of local self-governments, local youth offices, and relevant service providers to implement the Youth Test effectively in practice.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen Protection Systems through Legal Frameworks, Independent Institutions, and Gender-Sensitive Approaches

Challenge: Young people report low levels of trust in institutions, particularly in relation to reporting violence, discrimination, and rights violations. This is especially pronounced among girls and marginalized youth, who face additional barriers due to stigma, fear of consequences, and lack of confidence in institutional responses.

Existing policy and mechanisms:

- Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, Law on Gender Equality, Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Law on Youth, Criminal Code
- Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (2022-2030)
- National Gender Equality Strategy (2021-2030)
- Youth Strategy (2023-2030) - includes measures on inclusion, equality, and safety of youth

Gap: the main issue is not the absence of mechanisms, but the gap between normative guarantees and lived experience, driven by low awareness among youth, weak accessibility of protection mechanisms, lack of trust and insufficient coordination between institutions.

Policy response: Authorities should strengthen and operationalize youth protection systems by making them accessible, trusted, and responsive at the local level, with a specific focus on youth safety, prevention of violence, and inclusive security.

This requires:

- enhancing youth-targeted activities of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, including awareness campaigns and accessible complaint procedures;
- introducing and strengthening youth-friendly and accessible protection mechanisms across systems (schools, local governments, police), including: anonymous and safe reporting channels, clearly communicated and easy-to-navigate procedures, support mechanisms that ensure protection from retaliation and secondary victimization;
- integrating gender-sensitive and anti-discrimination approaches into all local protection systems, by developing targeted support mechanisms for girls and young women, marginalized youth groups (including ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities);
- strengthening local-level coordination for youth safety and protection, by linking relevant actors through Local Safety Councils;

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