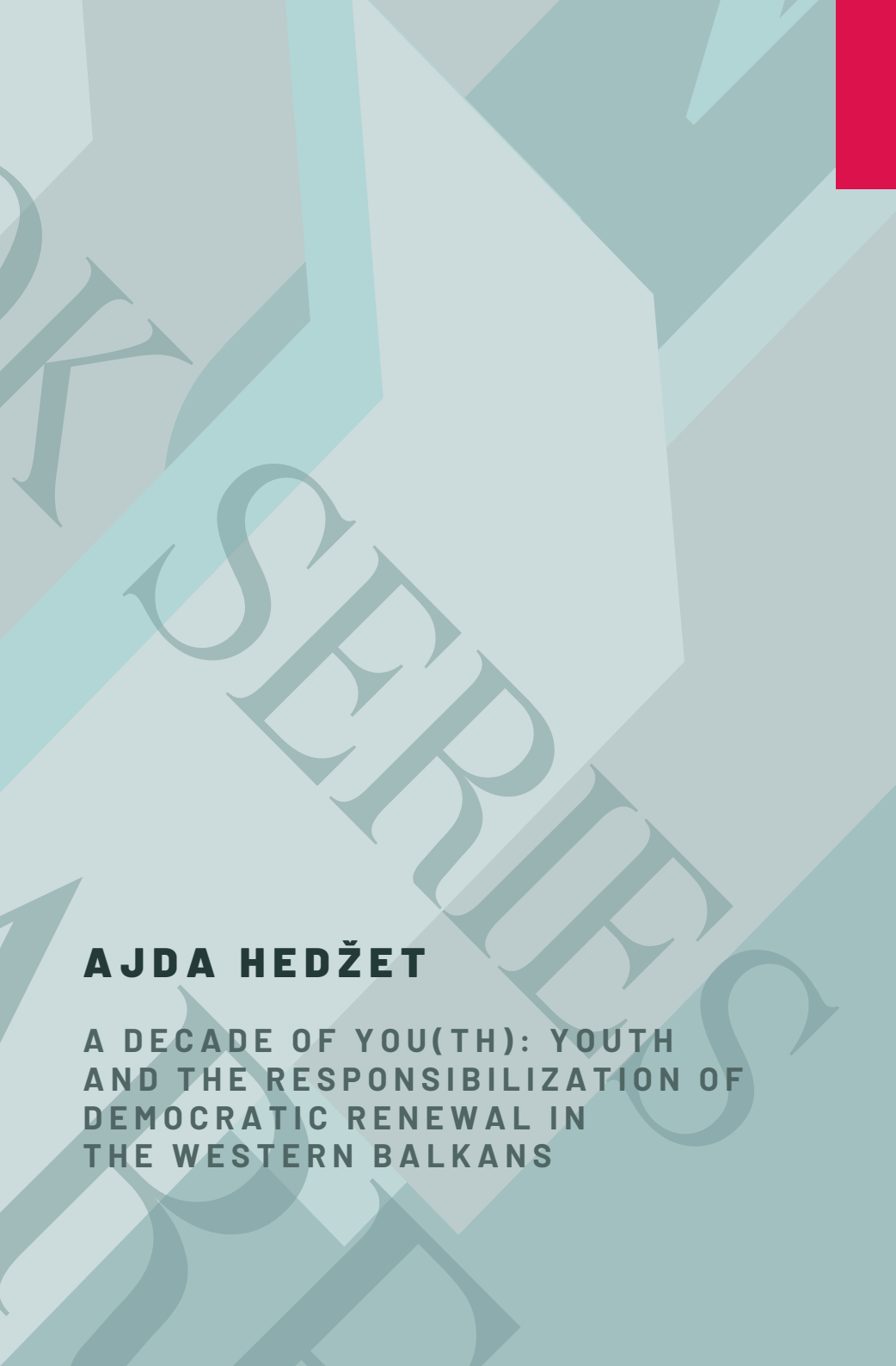




AJDA HEDŽET

**A DECADE OF YOU(TH): YOUTH
AND THE RESPONSIBILIZATION OF
DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL IN
THE WESTERN BALKANS**

AJDA HEDŽET

**A decade of YOU(th): Youth and the
responsibilization of democratic renewal in the
Western Balkans**

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A decade of YOU(th): Youth and the responsabilization of democratic renewal in the Western Balkans

Introduction

"A decade of YOU(th) /.../ Because a better region doesn't just start with youth. It lasts with youth!" With this statement, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO, 2026) celebrated a decade of its work as an "independently functioning institutional mechanism" founded by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia to promote the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation among young people in the Western Balkans (WB) through youth exchange programs. At first reading, this statement presents a straightforward and positive link between the role of young people and the future development of the WB. However, when examined more closely and with attention to the expectations it places on young people, a more consequential pattern emerges. The statement represents young people not merely as beneficiaries of regional cooperation, but also as guarantors of a positive, democratic future and de-

velopment in the region, a construction that underpins much of contemporary youth policy discourse in the WB.

This vision of young people as positive agents of reconciliation, democratic renewal, and European integration is already widely embedded in a dense ecosystem of regional initiatives. It has been taken up by a constellation of actors active in the youth sector in the WB, from European Union (EU) institutions and United Nations (UN) agencies to international foundations, development organizations and transnational youth networks. For example, the European Commission's WeBalkans platform describes young people as "the drivers of change," while programs funded by the EU, such as the WB Youth Lab, seek to strengthen youth participation in governance and public policy (WeBalkans, n.d.; Regional Cooperation Council, n.d.). Both initiatives portray youth as partners in reform and contributors to the democratic transformation of the region.

At first glance, this language appears to emphasize that young people now have their voices heard and are recognized as genuine partners within regional political agendas. However, this optimistic narrative coexists with a considerably less encouraging reality. Research shows that across the WB, young people continue to face limited political influence, high levels of emigration, and economic precarity (Eurofound, 2024). They are frustrated with corruption and the (un)responsiveness of political elites (Fiket, Anđelković & Pudar Draško, 2026). This also holds true for members of the most politically promising young generation in the WB, the so-called Gen Z, which researchers show has a pragmatic understanding of the reforms needed in the region, while being willing to engage only very selectively in politics (Pollozhani, 2026).

The identified gap between the agentic and celebratory discourses on youth and the structural conditions shaping young people's lives points to an important tension at the heart of contemporary youth governance in the WB, one that warrants closer examination. After all, the same generation that is expected to strengthen democracy often has limited capacity and material resources to shape the very institutions whose shortcomings it is tasked with remedying. At the same time, youth are not only empowered but also responsibilized by a wide range of actors, as

they are called upon to address social and political problems rooted in broader political and institutional structures largely beyond their control.

In this essay, I explore some of the effects of the agentic construction of youth that portrays young people as symbols of democratic renewal and reconciliation in the WB. My argument is that this construction of youth, while generating important opportunities for youth engagement, also obscures the structural conditions of political marginalization that significantly shape young people's lives. The consequence of the dominance of this discourse is that youth have become objects of political investment and expectation in the WB while remaining excluded from the key institutions and decision-making processes they are expected to reform.

The analysis reconstructs the discourse of youth as agents of change in the WB through two focused snapshots of institutional engagement with youth in BiH and Serbia. BiH represents a post-conflict context structured by institutionalized ethnic divisions (Hromadžić, 2015), in which international actors and donors mobilize youth as symbols of reconciliation and social cohesion (Micinski, 2016; Dragija, 2020). Serbia exemplifies an increasingly captured political system (Petrović, 2024), in which youth are positioned by international actors as agents of reform and Europeanization (e.g., EU Delegation to Serbia, 2026), while the regime itself brands them as terrorists (N1 Belgrade, 2026). These two cases illuminate the governance mechanisms through which youth are imagined and governed across the WB by international actors. The essay proceeds in three parts: the first develops a conceptual framework for understanding youth as a category of governance in the WB; the second examines how key actors have promoted youth as agents of democratic renewal in both cases; and the final section analyses the political consequences of this idealization, focusing in particular on the tension between calls for empowerment and the responsabilization that such empowerment generates.

Constructing youth as agents of democratic renewal

Young people have long occupied an important, though often mediated, place in national and international politics. While they were initially understood primarily as passive recipients of protection or development interventions, they have gradually come to be recognized as political actors whose engagement in politics needs to be acknowledged (Holzscheiter, 2020). Over the past decades, these portrayals of youth have become increasingly institutionalized through the emergence of the international youth sector (Ohana, 2009), within which the competing interests of international organizations such as the UN and the EU, governmental and non-governmental aid agencies, international youth organizations and networks, and international foundations frequently clash (Holzscheiter & Hahn, 2013; Benedix, 2022).

Taken together, these actors constitute a key transnational field through which knowledge about youth is produced and translated into policy interventions (Sobe, 2012). Crucially, they do not merely respond to the needs of young people but also actively shape perceptions of youth – who they are and how they should contribute to social and political development. Governance of youth therefore involves not only the provision of resources and opportunities but also the construction of normative expectations regarding young people's responsibilities (Holzscheiter, Josefsson & Sandin, 2019; Kwon, 2019).

McEvoy-Levy (2011, pp. 163–170) identified four discourses that reveal the dominant ways youth are understood in contemporary peace and security governance. The first constructs young people as rights-bearing subjects in need of protection and empowerment. The second portrays youth as development assets whose skills, education, and economic potential should be cultivated for the benefit of society. The third frames youth as potential security threats, particularly through narratives linking unemployment, demographic pressures, and political instability. The fourth discourse presents youth as agents of change capable of driving peacebuilding, reconciliation, democratic reform, and social transformation. The power of these discourses lies in their ability to legitimize particular forms of governance and mobilize support for interventions undertaken by states, international or-

ganizations, and non-governmental actors (Anderson, 2018; Josefsson, 2027). In this context, youth is also best perceived as a politically charged category whose meaning is continuously produced and contested within broader struggles over authority, development, and social order, with each discourse illuminating certain dimensions of young people's experiences while obscuring others.

Importantly, the increasingly influential youth-as-agents-of-change discourse has a problematic tendency to romanticize youth agency, underestimate structural inequalities, and place unrealistic expectations upon young people (McEvoy-Levy, 2011, p. 169). After all, celebrating youth as democratic innovators serves as a technique of governance that obscures the unequal distribution of power that constrains their ability to shape political outcomes. As Kwon (2013, p. 10) shows in relation to neoliberal democratic systems more broadly, youth engagement and participation programs increasingly demand acknowledgment of responsibility for economic growth and self-governance, in addition to active and voluntary involvement in managing one's potential for social risk.

Within such a governance model, what was previously framed as an at-risk youth problem is transformed into an expectation of self-responsibility and empowerment, with young people becoming both objects of knowledge and targets of intervention (Besley, 2010). Here, the concept of responsabilization proves useful again, as it calls for uncovering the process through which responsibility for structurally produced outcomes is transferred onto individual or collective actors who are asked to manage and remedy these outcomes through their own conduct and engagement (Rose, 1996, 2007; Shamir, 2008). Applied to youth governance, the concept of responsabilization helps us better understand the modern mechanism through which young people are celebrated as agents of change while being burdened with expectations to deliver democratic outcomes that depend on structural political transformations well beyond their reach. In the WB context, this governance logic suggests that celebrating youth as democratic agents serves as a mechanism for transferring responsibility for structurally produced problems onto those least institutionally positioned to resolve them.

This critique is important for improving understanding of how contemporary youth governance tools function in the WB. However, it is important to emphasize that its aim is not to disregard the meaningful encounters and capacity-building skills provided by the initiatives examined, but to highlight the gap between what they enable at the individual or group level and what they claim to deliver at the political and institutional levels. The essay's goal is therefore to problematize how the discourse of youth as agents of change, as it operates across the WB, both empowers and transfers collective responsibility for democratic renewal onto a generation that lacks the institutional leverage to deliver it. The following section examines how this dynamic unfolds in practice across the two examined cases.

Constructing youth as repositories of political hope in the Western Balkans

The analysis now turns to tracing how governance logic unfolds in practice through two cases: a post-conflict society in which ethnic division is constitutionally entrenched, and youth are primarily mobilized as symbols of reconciliation, and a formally democratic but increasingly captured political system in which young people are positioned as agents of Europeanisation and reform. The comparison between the two cases highlights that responsabilization does not operate as a uniform mechanism in the WB but rather adapts to local political configurations and takes different forms depending on the problems youth are expected to solve. Both cases are reconstructed through close examination of institutional documents, program materials, and official statements produced by different political actors, with particular attention to how these sources construct youth as political subjects and the expectations they place upon them. These materials were selected because they are particularly illustrative of the underlying logics and discursive mechanisms shaping youth programming in each case, capturing the policy rationales and institutional practices through which young people are governed and invited to participate.

The construction of youth as pro-democratic and pro-European agents in a captured political system in Serbia

Serbia presents a particularly revealing context for examining the simultaneous empowerment and responsabilization of youth, because the tension between what international actors, especially the EU, ask of young people and what they are willing to demand of the Serbian government has become impossible to ignore. Over the past decade, the country has experienced significant democratic backsliding under the Serbian Progressive Party, including growing media capture, institutional erosion, and the systematic weakening of opposition (Džunić & Golubović, 2026). It is within this context that the discourse constructing youth as agents of change capable of driving democratic reform to bring Serbia closer to the EU has become the dominant lens through which various actors engage with Serbian youth, producing a construction of youth that is deeply contradictory in its political logic.

The construction of Serbian youth as pro-democratic agents is perhaps most explicitly articulated in EU Delegation programming. At the latest EU Opportunity Week, held in Novi Pazar in April 2026, the Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia emphasized that “young people are a priority and a promise for the European Union,” noting that “this is why an entire support system has been built on the belief that young people deserve the tools, mobility, and confidence to shape their own future” (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2026). At the eighth Youth Rights Talks in 2025 in Belgrade, the same official stressed that “real change comes from initiatives rooted in moments like this – when young people gather to openly discuss the challenges they face, their needs, and their ideas” (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2025). Across EU programming in Serbia more broadly, young people are consistently constructed as the social carriers of European values that the Serbian state has failed to institutionalize – youth are asked to embody, in their civic behavior and political outlook, what accession processes have not succeeded in producing at the level of governance. As such, they are called upon not merely to participate but primarily to actively manage and compensate for the social and political risks that institutions themselves generate.

This construction is not without genuine effect, as programs and projects including Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, RYCO, the Youth Guarantee and the Regional Youth Dialogue for Europe provide young people with important opportunities for mobility and skills development, having created a meaningful regional space for strengthening youth voices that does not exist within formal political institutions. However, the individualized responsabilization that accompanies the empowerment mechanisms embedded in these initiatives becomes particularly visible when young people act on the values these programs claim to cultivate and, in doing so, draw attention to the role of the state and intersecting power structures that produce the conditions of precarity and marginalization they face.

Following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024, which caused sixteen deaths and triggered student-led protests of unprecedented scale against corruption and governmental impunity, the mobilized students enacted precisely the forms of political participation – and articulated the “European” values – that EU programming has long sought to cultivate. However, the EU’s response remained largely cautious. While the European Parliament strongly condemned the actions of the regime (European Parliament, 2025), such expressions of solidarity had little to no effect on the regime’s conduct (Danas, 2025).

This tension becomes further visible in the public communication of EU officials. EU Commissioner Marta Kos (@MartaKosEU, 2025), following a visit to Belgrade and meetings with civil society representatives, wrote on X: “To the students of Novi Sad: I hear you. I want to reiterate that what the EU asks from Serbia closely aligns with the demands of the citizens protesting. Most importantly, I want you, the young generation, to benefit from the many opportunities the EU has to offer.” While this statement appears to affirm alignment between EU conditionality and student demands, it also reframes political transformation in individualized terms, where students are interpellated not as a collective political actor whose claims require institutional enforcement, but as a “young generation” whose primary pathway lies in benefiting from EU opportunities. In turn, this framing effectively displaces the burden of democratic change onto youth themselves,

because structural transformation of the political system is not directly pursued through conditionality or enforcement mechanisms; instead, responsibility is subtly relocated to young people, who are encouraged to seek empowerment, mobility, and opportunity as the primary route to political resolution. In this sense, this discourse constructs a subject who is both acknowledged as politically legitimate and directed away from institutional confrontation towards individualized trajectories of engagement.

The absence of EU flags at the protests further reflects this dynamic, signaling accumulated frustration among young Serbians with what they perceive as the EU's prioritization of strategic stability and partnership with incumbent elites over meaningful democratic conditionality (van Zanten, 2025). Responsibilization operates here not only through explicit policy frameworks but also through a broader affective and symbolic misalignment, in which youth are recognized as agents of change, while the institutional mechanisms that could translate this recognition into political leverage remain limited or cautiously deployed.

In this sense, the case exposes a central contradiction in how responsabilization operates in Serbia: young people are celebrated as carriers of European values in the controlled settings of EU-funded programs and workshops, yet when they enact those values in ways that challenge the governing regime, EU responses largely remain at the level of symbolic support and diplomatic restraint. As a result, the burden of democratic transformation is displaced onto youth, while the structural conditions that constrain such transformation, including the EU's reluctance to exert meaningful accession pressure, remain largely unaddressed.

Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a symbol of cross-ethnic reconciliation in a post-conflict society

Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a distinct yet equally insightful case, in which the post-conflict dimensions of youth construction are more explicit and the consequences of ethnic division more structurally entrenched. The country's constitutional architecture, established by the Dayton Agreement, has produced a political system in which ethnic power-sharing arrangements prevent open armed conflict while reproducing the very divisions that international actors ask young people to transcend. With-

in this context, the youth-as-agents-of-change discourse constructs young people as carriers of cross-ethnic reconciliation, who will resolve ethnic divisions through interpersonal encounters rather than through institutional reform.

The construction of young people as agents of cross-ethnic reconciliation is very visibly institutionalized through RYCO's programming. School exchange programs such as Superschools, co-financed by the EU and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, bring together students from ethnically divided communities in structured exchanges designed to build mutual understanding and regional solidarity (RYCO, 2022a). Already at the introductory meeting of the Superschools project, speakers representing RYCO and key donors emphasized most strongly that young people should create a culture of mobility, intercultural exchange and reconciliation, and be active contributors to democratic development and European integration. After all, "Young people are the priority of this region and the future of BiH. That is why projects that lead to exchanges and activities tackling cooperation and reconciliation are our goal," emphasized a representative of the Delegation of the EU to BiH (RYCO, 2022b). Participant testimonies shared by RYCO similarly described these encounters as transformative, emphasizing the development of new cross-ethnic friendships and a sense of regional belonging.

The positive effects of such school exchange programs in a society where institutional structures actively discourage cross-ethnic contact must surely be recognized. However, unlike social differences that exist primarily at the level of culture or attitude, ethnic division in BiH is institutionalized. Moreover, it is deeply embedded in the constitutional order created and supported in collaboration with international actors, reproduced through parallel educational systems and maintained by political elites whose authority depends on the perpetuation of ethnic boundaries. Therefore, when various political actors emphasize youth as peacebuilders and agents of cross-ethnic reconciliation, they ask young people to perform a form of political work through their personal encounters that the political system is organized to prevent. The young person who forms a friendship across ethnic lines while attending an exchange program thus returns to

a school that, in most cases, continues to separate students by ethnicity, to a labor market divided by ethnic networks, and to a political system in which ethnic belonging influences who gets institutional access. The management of what constitutes a structural political risk is therefore displaced, with the help of such activities, onto the voluntary engagement and personal development of young people themselves.

Another dimension of this can be observed in the UN Development Program's (UNDP) programming and its engagement with intergenerational memory. UNDP workshops, supported by the EU Support to Confidence Building initiative, bring together survivors of the 1990s conflicts and young people, with survivors sharing their experiences while students are asked to commit to carrying these truths forward (UNDP BiH, 2025b): after all, “/t/he culture of remembrance of genocide and other past atrocities is not only for survivors – it is the foundation upon which a responsible society is built. When young people recognize the importance of these memories, they not only honor the victims but also actively contribute to building a fairer and more resilient society.”

These encounters are often meaningful for both survivors and young people, because they create a rare opportunity for dialogue in a context where formal educational institutions in BiH frequently avoid sustained engagement with the recent past. However, framing young people as those who will “carry the truth forward” and “build the future they want” (UNDB BiH, 2025a) also produces a distinct responsabilization dynamic – it shifts responsibility for post-conflict reckoning onto a generation that was not party to the conflicts and must now operate within political and institutional structures that have systematically failed to deliver comprehensive transitional justice. In this sense, memory work is not only about recognition or dialogue, but also about the allocation of moral and political responsibility across generations.

What emerges is a form of distributed governance of memory, in which the burden of historical reckoning is relocated from institutions to individuals, and in which youth are interpellated as ethical carriers of collective memory, expected to preserve and transmit truth as part of their civic role. However, this expectation is not matched by institutional mechanisms capable of addressing the political and legal dimensions of accountabil-

ity. Instead, transitional justice remains fragmented or externally driven, while the task of ensuring continuity with the past is individualized and moralized. Responsibilization therefore operates through a double movement that elevates young people as essential agents in sustaining historical consciousness, while displacing responsibility for incomplete transitional justice onto their personal conduct and intergenerational solidarity. In doing so, it risks transforming structural and institutional failure into an ethical demand placed on youth to do the reconciliation work within conditions that remain politically unresolved.

Empowered but responsabilized: The limits of youth-led democratic renewal in the Western Balkans

The two cases examined in this contribution reveal important similarities and differences in how youth governance functions across the WB. In Serbia, young people are cast as carriers of democratic reform and European values within a captured political system. In BiH, they are framed as agents of reconciliation expected to overcome ethnic divisions that continue to structure public life at every institutional level. Despite these differences, both cases clearly show how effective the youth-as-agents-of-change discourse can be, particularly in raising expectations that young people will engage politically, repair the shortcomings of existing institutional arrangements, embody political and social values that institutions have failed to produce, and sustain aspirations for democratic transformation that formal political processes have struggled to achieve.

This does not mean that the activities examined in this contribution have no positive effect. Exchange programs, youth conferences, and civic education initiatives frequently generate experiences that participants regard as highly important; they develop new skills, form friendships, build networks, and gain access to political spaces from which they have historically been excluded. Across the WB, RYCO's Superschools program has helped create numerous cross-ethnic friendships; this holds true in BiH as well, where the political architecture is almost organized to

prevent such encounters. In Serbia, the Youth Rights Talk equally provides a meaningful space for youth to discuss issues they face and cannot address within formal political institutions.

However, what needs to be acknowledged is that, through such activities, contemporary democratic governance tools increasingly call upon young people not merely to participate, but to actively manage and compensate for the social and political risks that political institutions and elites generate. Democratic backsliding and political capture in Serbia are not a consequence of insufficient youth civic engagement, but of entrenched institutional kidnapping, media control, and weakened political accountability of political elites. Ethnic division in BiH is similarly sustained not because young people fail to interact across communal boundaries, but because constitutional arrangements and educational structures have continued to reproduce those divisions for more than 30 years. In both cases, the obstacles to transformation are institutional, yet the agents identified as responsible for overcoming them are increasingly young people.

What we observe at play is a responsabilization mechanism that operates through celebration: young people are praised as future truth-carriers and democratic champions; invited to summits and workshops; asked to draft declarations; and described by senior officials as the future of their countries. This discourse confers genuine recognition and resources; however, it also places a disproportionate burden of expectation on young people relative to the institutional leverage they actually possess. When young people are celebrated as builders of just societies, democratic innovators and peacebuilders, the responsibility for renewal is quietly shifted away from those with the authority and responsibility to enact structural change.

International actors in particular rely on youth as repositories of political hope in moments of crisis, precisely when their own capacity to produce political transformation appears most constrained. As EU accession in the WB seems to be losing momentum and post-conflict settlements reach political impasses, investments in youth agency increasingly serve a symbolic purpose – they allow international actors to continue narrating prog-



ress even when structural reforms remain intangible. This reflection, therefore, calls for a more honest assessment of what youth governance focused primarily on participation can and cannot achieve. The current dominant approach seems to treat participation as a substitute for systemic reform rather than its complement. A more sustainable model would require political actors to pair investment in young people with stronger commitments to democratic conditionality and structural accountability, ensuring that youth programming forms part of a broader political strategy rather than standing in for one.

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