



# EU-CARES

**EUropean Collective nArratives for Reconciliation and  
trauma hEaling through youth engagement and Storytelling**



ERASMUS-YOUTH-2022-CB  
Project no: 101093735

**Work package 2 “Analysis and best practices”  
T2.1**

**Compilation – NATIONAL REPORTS**

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*Prepared by SMOC*

## Introduction

The Western Balkan countries are still recovering from a legacy of war crimes, human rights violations and ethnic divisions. In this area, as Sisson (2010:172) puts it, a “decade of internecine war [...] had left behind not only a terrible legacy of human losses and material destruction but also an unprecedented level of traumatisation among the population at large”. The new geopolitical reality in which Europe woke up on February 24 this year, inevitably has and will continue to create huge socio-political and economic implications for the entire Europe. Nevertheless, for the Western Balkan region, the situation bears a particularly heavy burden, with its inhabitants reliving past war trauma as Russia continues to invade Ukraine. For those who survived the wars/conflicts in the former Yugoslavia<sup>1</sup>, the war in Ukraine feels too familiar. This collective trauma that a society carries, makes people feel like they are in this together, but it also makes them feel more fearful and particularly vulnerable to the possibility of a new war.<sup>2</sup> The collective and trans-generational trauma faced by the Western Balkan population constitutes an obstacle to societal transformation, but a deeper understanding of it could help to build strong regional connections and strengthen a collective European identity, especially in the wake of what is being reported as the worst security crisis Europe has faced in decades, and the largest refugee crisis of this century.<sup>3</sup>

The current conflicts in Eastern Europe are further aggravating the post-war complex political and socioeconomic transformations which have caused the younger generation of the WB region to be as disillusioned with their past, present and future as the older ones.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, even if young people from the Western Balkans have been able to overcome the disputes of the past, there is still a general distrust among the population in the region, especially between different ethnicities. People in the region do not believe that they share common cultural spaces. In some countries, the skewed lens of the nationalistic narratives that often permeate history classes has made the younger generation even more distrustful than those who lived through the war. This indicates that there is still a lot of work to be done in bringing young people closer together based on their common values and heritage to continue the path of reconciliation.

The idea of the EU-CARES project is to emphasise that there are different ways in which the past can be translated into the present, with the help of memories and storytelling. The process of self-healing from traumatic events is a steep climb. To heal entire communities is even harder since collective trauma leaves intergenerational scars and causes divisions in society. In the reconciliation process, storytelling – with its many techniques – can be an effective tool in providing a social space to bring people together and elaborate on each other’s experiences. Simultaneously, the EU-CARES project aims to address collective trauma, aid the recognition of remembrance and support the reconciliation process among disadvantaged young people in the Western Balkans, and transfer the knowledge about the process to the organisations working with displaced and disadvantaged young people of the Eastern Balkans.

The report presented herewith is a joint work effort of partner organisations that come from Belgium, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The report is a compilation of 7 national reports wherein one-on-one interviews have been conducted in the partner countries. The findings of the research presented herewith provide a solid foundation for the continuation of activities of the EU-CARES project.



Annex I of the report illustrates the guided interview questions used by all partners in their respective countries. The country reports are a summary of the interviews conducted in partner countries, hence reflecting the individual viewpoints of interviewed experts and youth workers.

1 Tabeau, Ewa (15 January 2009). "[Casualties of the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia \(1991–1999\)](#)" (PDF). Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia.

2 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/28/time-for-bosnia-to-get-rid-of-russian-influence-analysts>

3 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60030615>

4 20 Years After 1991: A Tale Of Two Generations, Simonida Kacarska In Cooperation With: Nina Branković, Jelena Džankić, Ervin Mete, Engjellushe Morina, Vladimir Pavićević, Antonija Petričušić, Vladimir Todorčić, Miroslav Živanović

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA - SMOC



Three one-on-one interviews were conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina during March 2023. The interviews took place at the premises of Sarajevo Meeting of Cultures and were held on March 16, March 28 and March 30 respectively. Interviews were conducted with experts and youth workers that come from the following institutions:

*Faculty of Economics, University of Sarajevo (expert)*

*NGO Forgotten children of the war (expert and youth worker)*

*Promente (experts)*

In professional spheres, it is often said that there is no official psychodiagnostic term that corresponds to the concept of collective trauma. This is due to the fact that science deals with individuals and not groups themselves. Collective trauma is a reflection of the violated need for security that is present on an individual and collective level. Collective trauma refers to the emotional and psychological impact of a traumatic event or experience that affects an entire group or community, rather than just individuals. However, war, pandemics, poverty, existential problems, natural disasters, and general uncertainty can have a negative impact on every individual and subsequently communities. Collective trauma can have long-lasting effects on young people, including anxiety, depression, and feelings of hopelessness. It can also lead to a sense of disconnection from others, and from the larger society. Young people may struggle with understanding their role in the traumatic event and may feel a sense of guilt or shame, even if they were not directly involved. In our region, collective trauma has a negative impact on the feelings of young people. Fear of war is omnipresent, and young people are continuously exposed to war rhetoric. Exposure to war rhetoric potentially limits willingness to connect with each other. In addition, the ubiquity of war experiences, repressed emotions and unprocessed mourning by older generations potentially negatively affect the mental health of young people.

*“One of the main challenges in working with youth who have experienced collective trauma is the potential for them to become entrenched in their own cultural or ethnic identities and narratives, which can create barriers to understanding and empathy towards others who have experienced different forms of trauma. This can lead to conflict and a lack of cooperation among young people from different backgrounds. Additionally, there may be a lack of trust and willingness to open up about their experiences due to fear of being judged or misunderstood by others who have not experienced the same trauma. It can also be difficult to address the complex and deeply ingrained social, political, and economic factors that contribute to collective trauma, and to provide effective and sustainable solutions for healing and reconciliation.”* say Mirna Omercausevic and Ajna Jusic.

*„The biggest challenges we face in working with young people is their reluctance to discuss current topics related to ethnicity and national belonging, as well as religious commitment. Young people believe that the political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina supports division and that differences of opinion on these topics can potentially lead to conflict. Also, young people believe that they cannot deal emotionally with topics such as the polarization of society, war, and the consequences of war. Such fears are particularly expressed among young people who live in smaller communities where ethnocentrism is nurtured, and the war*



*rhetoric to which young people are exposed through the media and an educational system where intercultural dialogue is not emphasized results in an increasing division of the population.” say Ivona Celebivic and Lamija Spahic.*

Anesa Vilic commented the following on challenges in her work with youth in her community: *“We cannot change the past, but what we all need is collective healing from trauma. Just as collective trauma arises from each individual, each individual needs the opportunity to heal from past experiences so that they do not take a toll on their future. As one of the greatest trauma experts Bessel van der Kolk says, “the body remembers everything”. Our bodies have recorded countless memories, both those we are willing to look at and those we have deeply suppressed. The healing process, as Thomas Hübl says, would mean discovering the truth about our interconnectedness and mutual dependency. This is precisely where we can work with young people. We need to give them a reason to focus on what connects us and makes us collaborate for prosperity, instead of what makes us different and unique. We need to be able to respect otherness.”*

During the interview, the response to the question *“In what ways have you experienced or witnessed the effects of collective trauma in your community or personal life”* the interviewees responded in the following manner: *„The effects of collective trauma are most often manifested through the continuous fear of another war. For most people, the fear of war leads to an increased sense of belonging to one's own group and to discrimination against other ethnic and national groups.“*

Another interviewee stated *„I live in a country that, even thirty years later, people still talk about having come out of a war, as if the war just ended the previous year. Germany, on the other hand, lived in prosperity just ten years after the war. Thirty years later, we still justify and cover up everything bad that happens by saying, “Shut up, as long as it doesn't start shooting again.” So many people have been damaged, unconsciously and undiagnosed with PTSD. The previous pandemic has revealed all of this so clearly. People fell into various psychological states at the first indication of lockdown and isolation. I remember myself as a successful, functional, stable, and agile person, but when the decision was made to lock down, I started to feel such strong panic attacks. These are the places where the brain, thinking, knowledge, and persuasion do not work, because our body remembers what it means to be prevented from moving, and it plays a film of the past, regardless of what reason tells us, that everything is okay, that we have electricity, water, food, internet, and that everything will be okay. Our body has its own separate processes. A strong blow of PTSD, although I was not aware that I had it, I felt it when I entered a store one morning and the shelves were empty. The conscious adult part just turned off, and my body was in a state of “we're going to die of hunger.”*

As Bessel van der Kolk says, trauma is any event or prolonged experience that has a significant impact on the part of the brain that deals with survival, the animal part of our brain. When trauma occurs, our automatic signals of danger are disrupted and we become either hyper-aroused or numbed out. Through this, we regress to our primary instinctual states of fear and aggression (fight or flight) or we are simply immobilized because we are frozen. In this state, we are unable to rationally assess levels of threat and use reason to defend ourselves from future persecution. All people will react to trauma in one of these ways. If we add prolonged duration and the inability to escape from the situation, this will only make things more complex. Each traumatized individual contributes a part of their sense of traumatization to the collective identity, which then spreads among individuals and is built upon, thus becoming somewhat of a shared identity.

Collective memories are most often formed around traumatic events important for the entire community, which represent significant long-term changes in human lives. Through the process of socialization, post-



war generations adopt attitudes, opinions and beliefs about such experiences. Identity creation is a fundamental process in the growth and development of an individual.

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina often struggle with limited access to education and employment opportunities, which can contribute to feelings of hopelessness and a lack of agency in shaping their future. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that involves promoting healing and reconciliation, supporting economic development, and empowering youth to participate in decision-making processes. They are dealing with the consequences of something they haven't experienced themselves and don't have their own traumatic experiences, but their perception is built on the basis of stories that have reached them. In the absence of their own experience (although it may seem like a blessing), they have a whole unexplored space of other people's beliefs from which they build their fantasies. These fantasies are often even scarier than the actual experience. The biggest challenge that young people face is a sense of uncertainty, a sense of helplessness and a lack of perspective. Due to the constant threat of the outbreak of conflict, young people feel an existential crisis, they believe that they cannot contribute to change.

Young people think about the past through the lens of collective trauma that is so strong in our society. They also want change and want to live different lives. They want to break out of the vicious cycle of war that never ended, they want to breathe, and they want a functioning system, stability, and security. They are aware of political games, maybe even more so than some older people. Young people in Bosnia interpret their past in various ways, and their views may depend on their personal experiences and the narratives that they have been exposed to within their families, communities, and educational systems. Some may repeat the official discourse of their ethnic or national group, while others may reject it and seek alternative perspectives. Many young people express a desire for change in Bosnian society, recognizing the need to address issues such as inequality, discrimination, and lack of opportunities. However, they may also face challenges in expressing their views and participating in meaningful dialogue, particularly in contexts where political and ethnic tensions remain high. Additionally, young people in Bosnian society have expressed a strong desire for change in various aspects of their lives. They have been active in promoting social justice, advocating for human rights, and striving for a more equitable and democratic society. Despite the challenges of a society still grappling with the legacy of conflict, young people have shown a willingness to engage with difficult issues, question the official discourse of their group, and work towards a better future. Many young people in Bosnia are looking for opportunities to make their voices heard and participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives and the future of their communities.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the need for dialogue has been emphasized as a key factor in addressing the challenges of collective trauma and promoting reconciliation. A safe and inclusive space for dialogue is essential for young people to share their personal experiences, learn from one another, and develop a deeper understanding of different perspectives. Civil society organizations, schools, and community centres have played a critical role in creating these spaces and facilitating dialogue among young people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The goal is to foster empathy, build trust, and work towards a shared vision of a peaceful and prosperous future.

The most influential channels through which youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina build their perception and the perception of society are media, education, family, and peers. Media plays a significant role in shaping young people's attitudes and beliefs, particularly in terms of political and social issues. Education is also a crucial factor, as schools and teachers have the power to shape young people's values and worldviews. Family and peers are essential in shaping the perception of the world, particularly in terms of cultural and



religious identity. The influence of these channels can either promote positive attitudes towards tolerance and diversity or reinforce negative stereotypes and divisions. Social networks have become important for transmitting ideologies, and young people are exposed to a lot of information that they do not approach critically. Throughout the education system, the importance of critical thinking and taking into account a set of information when making decisions is not sufficiently emphasized.

In recent years, there have been several peer-to-peer education initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina that have been successful in promoting dialogue and understanding among young people. For example, organizations such as the Youth Initiative for Human Rights have implemented peer-to-peer education programs that focus on issues such as transitional justice, the rights of minorities, and interethnic dialogue. These initiatives have helped young people to develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and a better understanding of different perspectives, ultimately contributing to a more peaceful and cohesive society.

Storytelling techniques can play a significant role in addressing collective trauma and promoting reconciliation among young people in Europe. By sharing personal narratives, experiences, and emotions related to past traumatic events, storytelling creates a safe and empathetic space for individuals to process and heal from their trauma. Furthermore, through listening to others' stories, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of different perspectives and experiences, promoting empathy and reconciliation among groups with a history of conflict. Storytelling can also empower individuals to take action and promote positive change, leading to a more resilient and peaceful society. This is one of the most impactful healing ways to heal past traumas. When we speak things out loud and give them meaning, if accompanied by empathetic listeners and supportive reasons for sharing, it has far-reaching consequences for healing. Because in trauma, things can start to fall into place only when we are ready to look at them and tell someone in a safe environment about our experience. Until that happens, we will periodically be overwhelmed by what we have been through, sometimes not even aware of how it has affected us.

There are several tools and methods that can be used to work with today's youth and raise awareness about the importance of becoming peace-builders in Europe. One such method is **peer-to-peer** education, which allows young people to learn from and teach each other. **Storytelling** techniques can also be effective in promoting empathy and understanding. Other tools include **workshops, trainings, and mentorship programs** that provide young people with the skills and knowledge needed to become active agents of change. It is also important to **create safe and supportive environments** for youth to engage in dialogue and cooperation, and to **connect** them with existing networks and organizations working towards peace-building. Education is crucial in order to raise the awareness of young people about their importance in building reconciliation. It is possible to hold various workshops or seminars for young people, where young people would be taught about the importance of mutual cooperation, analytical and critical thinking skills, listening skills, and conflict resolution skills. Likewise, providing public guidelines, presenting historical facts, and cross-cultural exchange among young people to get to know and gain a different perspective. Organized visits to war childhood museums, educational stories from genocide and suffering museums, etc. Only when the facts are clear and suffering is accepted and valued, can we start building real peace.

This is a very challenging topic for the area of Bosnia and Herzegovina, considering all the past experiences that we are not yet ready to put on a healthy foundation. We are not ready to stop denying crimes, we are not ready to publicly condemn crimes, and we still have situations where our government officials in the highest positions are either war criminals or have close contacts and collaborations with them. The most significant change method – a participatory monitoring technique based more on stories than on indicators. The most significant change method provides a rich picture of the impact of development work





and provides a basis for dialogue about the key goals and values of development programs. Photovoice method based on photography - participants are asked to identify, document and represent their community using a specific photographic technique. It enables the illustration of the lived experience of the participants, and photographs can be a powerful communication tool that encourages more intense and emotionally engaged thinking about the position of certain groups in society. Accordingly, achieving the primary goals of this method of identifying community issues and needs, promoting critical dialogue, and reaching out to policymakers potentially results in social change. The application of the photovoice method requires the active involvement of the participants. The participants were enabled to tell their stories in a way that was acceptable to them and to present their own perspectives on the problems they were facing.

## Conclusion

Although young people do not have a clear personal experience of trauma, they still feel that they must deal with the consequences. Sometimes, the inability to cope and the lack of understanding of what is happening is clearly evident through the great passion among young people and the increased charge of aggression that they cannot adequately channel. One of the loud responses to collective trauma and this transgenerational transmission is the increase and severity of peer violence, which is becoming increasingly brutal from year to year, as well as the expressed forms and increase in domestic violence.

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina face many challenges that are connected to past or current conflicts in society. Some of the challenges include dealing with collective trauma, addressing ethnic divisions and discrimination, coping with economic hardship, and navigating political instability.

*“We consider it necessary to conduct research on the perception of war experiences by young people in order to reach objective conclusions. On the other hand, we are of the opinion that the attitudes and opinions of young people are divided. While some follow the group's discourse and are subject to the pressures of the BiH political system, some are focused on unity and reconciliation”,* says Ivona Celebivic.

The concept of collective trauma and collective memory needs to be problematized in such a way as to highlight the importance of mutual cooperation, reconciliation and a positive attitude towards members of other cultures, traditional, customary and other differences. The biggest problem in our context is that the space for dialogue is mostly created by non-governmental organizations. Problematizing war trauma in the function of reconciliation, growth and development is the task of the NGO sector as part of project activities. On the other hand, at the systemic level, the political system of BiH supports the polarization of the population.

Storytelling techniques have a very significant role in resolving collective trauma and promoting reconciliation among young people. It is necessary to gain insights into different experiences and different perspectives through storytelling. Through storytelling techniques, dialogue, actualization and problematization of topics relevant to Bosnia and Herzegovina society encourages appreciation of the diversity and uniqueness of experiences. At the same time, it is important to encourage the willingness of young people to develop mutual trust.

Art is and remains crucial as a mediator between marginalized identities and a society that does not adequately face the past and its responsibilities in the consequences of such events. Patriarchy essentially enjoys a strong weapon, which is the state budget, while it hardly tolerates the vast freedoms that art gives to a living being. Institutionally, victims have a hard time reaching justice, but by using art they leave a trace





of their existence, their stories and struggles, which tomorrow should be a lesson for saving and surviving all future generations who will surely partially become victims of transgenerational patriarchal oppression.

## ALBANIA – IRSH



The interviews occurred during the first half of April between the dates 11-15 April. The interviews were conducted at the premises of the IRSH center. The interviewees were two experts and one youth worker.

The questions were posed in a way so as to understand from the interviewees the term "collective trauma" and how it affects young people. The second question was aimed at understanding causes which led to collective trauma and ways the interviewees have experienced or witnessed the effects of collective trauma on his/her community or personal life. Through the interviews, we were trying to understand how something becomes a part of collective trauma (large group identity).

The next group of questions was: what does youth face as a challenge that is connected to the past or current conflict in society and how does youth interpret their past? Do they repeat the official discourse of the group, and do they have a desire for change and possibilities for possible dialogue?

In another group of questions, the aim was to understand the most influential channels through which youth build their perception and the perception of their society and the role of storytelling techniques in addressing collective trauma and promoting reconciliation among young people in Europe. The next question was to understand tools and important methods considered efficient to be used while working with youth in order to raise awareness about the importance of them becoming peace-builders in Europe.

### Conclusion

The interviewees were very cooperative. They participated in the interview being very sincere and telling their personal and independent thought based on their experience and education. In the content of the interviews, they were asking for further clarifications to better understand the context. Albania has gone through difficult periods throughout its history, which have affected some features for which our society needs a moderate approach. Their involvement in the EU-CARES project is an added value which has been very much welcome. An expert at the Centre for Psychological services said: "I am working a lot with young people and storytelling technique is part of my daily work" while a youth worker said: "It is not easy to raise the awareness of the youth about the past but storytelling techniques used in an animated format have very successful results". During the interview with the last expert she stated that: "Discrimination is a mute form of conflict which often people are not aware. If we build confidence using storytelling technique, I am sure many conflicts could be prevented".

In the other activities, the interviewees will be invited to share their inputs. So the next activity, the workshop will be moderated by one of the interviewees.



## POLAND – IDEA LAB



There have been three face-to-face interviews conducted in the framework of the EU CARES project. The first one took place on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2023 in Wrocław, in the IDEA LAB Foundation's office. The other two took place soon after on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2023 in Zagórze Śląskie, during a trip to a popular recreation area about a one-hour drive from the city. The interviewees were respectively:

- A youth activist taking part in volunteering activities and international training courses.
- A trainer and coach working among others with people who have experienced various types of trauma.
- An immigrant from Ukraine working as a project manager in Poland, willing to share the Ukrainian perspective.

It is necessary to mention that it was difficult for the interviewees to define what a collective trauma is. They called it “a traumatic event” or a “psychological distress”, but without giving a concrete example. They mention issues like a war or a tsunami, directly explaining that it has to be something out of our reality. One answer was: *It must be something other than an ordinary event, more like a war. In Poland, we live in a safe country and nothing threatens us – there are no attacks, no wars. Trauma occurs when inhuman things happen – attempts, attacks. We don't experience it.* The reason for this might be that modern Polish society has not experienced any event that could be considered a collective trauma since World War II, so during the last 70-80 years, it seems to be a very distant topic. However, all the interviewees mention the context of the war in Ukraine and the Ukrainians who are currently in Poland and try to understand it through that. One viewpoint was: *I don't think collective trauma affects me in any way, we don't have wars, we don't have anything to relate to. There are Ukrainians, but we help them, we don't have such experiences – we are witnesses, not participants.* Another stated that *the conflict in Ukraine has caused an influx of refugees from that country. Psychological and coaching work was extremely needed at every stage of support.* One of the remarks was: *For me, it means something extremely horrible which impacts young people's lives on a daily basis, something that might cause psychological reactions while talking about it or even remembering it. I experience the effects of collective trauma every day while talking with my friends or colleagues from Ukraine.*

An interesting question was the one about how the youth interpret their past. The answers gave it a twist and directly focused not on the past, but on the future: *If we are talking about the current situation in Ukraine, of course, young people are willing to change the future and prevent war.* An interviewee who is a youngster herself was more general: *We see things differently and we want to see them differently. Honestly, we're moving away from history and don't pay as much attention to it. Since I don't go to school, historical topics are not present. Young people want to look more into the future. It is important not to repeat past mistakes. We live in such times that we know that people change. Maybe older people were brought up differently, we can go, see, and experience for ourselves.*

These words lead us directly to the topics of dialogue and storytelling itself. All the interviewees agree that dialogue is one of the most powerful tools and that it is always welcome. Storytelling is seen as a chance to witness the experience of the other person, to see it through their eyes and therefore understand it better: *When something is discussed, the participants of the conversation are more aware of it. The interesting thing is that this is from the perspective of one particular person, it's not fiction. We see that person and*

*their emotions. We see the perspective of the other side. Another aspect pointed out: During storytelling sessions, people have support from other individuals who have similar experiences, and they learn to understand various opinions.*

## Conclusion

Although the concept of being subject to a collective trauma seems very remote to Polish society members, witnessing the trauma of the Ukrainians present in our everyday lives is something very meaningful.

It is clear that to all of the interviewees, personal experience is of crucial importance. This refers on the one hand to finding your own sources of information (being active on social media rather than watching TV), but on the other hand, preferring face-to-face meetings and direct contact between people. One viewpoint was that *each case is different, as each experience is individual. At first, I try not to interpret, just follow and understand.* Another pointed out: *we have many stereotypes that a face-to-face meeting allows us to overcome. We look individually – there are bad and good people, but they are not divided into countries. We can see a person because, in the case of traumas, we are not always aware that there is that other person out there.* All the interviewed persons agree that one of the best tools to promote reconciliation and raise awareness of the important role of young people as peacemakers in today's Europe is the youth exchange program, which needs to be supported by social networks reinforcing the direct bonds between people from different backgrounds. Finally, an interviewee summed up: *I believe in the good connection between online and offline. The young generation lives online, but creating a good possibility to directly meet people from different countries always makes it possible to share experiences and make others aware.*

It is also visible that young people try to cut away the past from today and focus more on the present and the future as they are things that we have a chance to shape and create. Dominika states: *“Young people create their own message, we have a new beginning”.* In this context, storytelling is a technique that seems to be an interesting and attractive alternative that young people look forward to and that addresses the true need for direct involvement and contact.

**SERBIA – CENTRIFUGE**



The first interview was done on March 15<sup>th</sup> via Zoom with an activist, youth worker and project manager who has participated in multiple international projects with the topics of collective trauma, reconciliation and conflict transformation both as a participant and a junior non-formal education trainer.

This interviewee sees trauma as an adverse painful experience that is so intense that it overwhelms the capacities that we need to articulate our feelings. According to her collective trauma is a response to any traumatic event that affects society and is often increased in the moment of some crisis. It can lead to questioning the core values of the society. The experience of collective trauma can be long-lasting and can have significant effects on individuals and communities.

When it comes to the challenges in her work with youth that have their roots in the past when the society was burdened with conflict, in her experience it is sometimes hard even to start a conversation with youth on this topic. Some of the young people are not aware they are affected by some past events,



and most of them are not aware it is something they have to work on since it is a part of their family heritage. More often than not the young are not willing to have a conversation about it and to hear the other side of the story. Hate narrative is quite strong in our society and there is a need for a systematic change. Collective trauma can result from a shared direct or indirect experience of a traumatic event, which can become a part of a group's identity through intergenerational or cultural transmission.

The challenges faced by youth in Serbia are complex and multifaceted and are deeply connected to the country's history of conflict and political change. Addressing these challenges will require sustained efforts to promote reconciliation, build inclusive institutions, and create more opportunities for youth to thrive. Some young people in Serbia may repeat the official discourse of their group or political party, particularly if they have grown up in an environment where such views are dominant. However, many young people are also critical of the narratives presented by the government or media and may seek out alternative sources of information and perspectives. There is a desire for change among many young people in Serbia. Many feel frustrated with the slow pace of reform and the limited opportunities for education and employment and are eager to see meaningful change take place. Civil society organizations, student associations, and some institutions are opening up for discussion and debate, and some young people are actively involved in these initiatives. However, not all young people may feel comfortable engaging in dialogue with those who hold different views.

The interviewee recognises storytelling's potential to create a shared narrative of the past, which can be an important component of reconciliation efforts. By exploring and acknowledging the different perspectives and experiences of different groups, young people can work towards more inclusive narratives, which can help to build bridges and promote dialogue between different communities.

She thinks the first important step is to start a conversation about the traumas we are trying to overcome, to make a safe space for a dialogue with as many sides as possible to better understand the position of everyone. Allowing young people to meet their peers "from the other side" is one of the strongest changemakers from her point of view. Youth workers who are working directly with young people affected by trauma may be more likely to encounter triggering situations that can lead to re-experiencing their own personal or collective trauma. In Serbia we have a situation of young people avoiding certain places in the region, sometimes it is because their parents do not think it is safe for them to travel there, usually, it is based on some narrative promoted in mass media, without much tangible proof.

The degree of acknowledgement of past wrongs and the will to work towards reconciliation vary widely among young people and depend on many factors, such as their personal experiences, cultural background, and socio-economic status. Some young people may be more aware of the past wrongs and injustices that have occurred and may be more willing to work towards reconciliation and building trust. Others may be less aware or may not see the relevance of the past to their current situation. It is important to note that the process of reconciliation and building trust is a long-term and ongoing process that requires sustained efforts from all parties involved. Young people can play a critical role in this process by actively engaging in activities that promote understanding, empathy, and respect for diversity, and by advocating for policies and programs that support reconciliation and social cohesion.

The second interview was conducted on March 13<sup>th</sup> via Zoom with a professor of literature with a PhD from the Faculty of Drama Arts in Belgrade, with the thesis '*Dramatic processes in the rehabilitation of the repressed in penitentiaries in Serbia*'. She teaches Serbian in a high school in Belgrade and has been active in various projects with youngsters, young offenders as well as marginalized groups and individuals.



In the artistic processes she carries out with young people both at school and in her work with offenders, she has encountered the fact that a large number of young people carry some kind of trauma with them. This especially applies to female convicts who struggle with transgenerational traumas, as well as persons who deal with the traumas of social exclusion, stigmatization caused by criminal convictions or people with migrant or displaced backgrounds.

The second interviewee sees collective trauma as an accumulation of conflict situations or emotional blockages which are not illuminated primarily in the individual to the extent that one can see all its aspects, both related to oneself and other actors of the trauma. The shared and repressed experience of suffering creates a collective trauma. The older generations experienced refugeehood in the nineties, which was a traumatic experience both for the displaced and for the communities that received them. Unfortunately, young people have an extreme perception of the past. Due to the influence of social media and political uncertainty, they are either extreme nationalists or they are totally uninterested in their personal identity stories about their origin and their national history. She has heard many times how young people brag about being great patriots, but don't know essential historical facts, exhibit anger, and often show nationalist characteristics. Many factors play a role in how young people perceive their national history and war events, but also their reality.

She believes that, as individuals, we are all under a certain collective trauma, starting with the wars of the 90s and 2000s, through the popularization of Western media adaptations such as reality programs, together with exposure to today's popular media content, which seems to have funnelled all these traumas, so that people who were not directly involved in war conflicts were nevertheless exposed to media traumatization. She believes that today's political situation and both pro-regime and pro-opposition media have the greatest traumatizing potential. The truth is always somewhere in between, and that truth is not comprehensible to children and young people who are subsequently immersed in collective unconsciousness as they do not have sufficiently developed critical thinking skills. A lack of objectiveness and insufficient motivation to work on the aspect of enlightening people, not only through formal but also non-formal and informal education, contribute to collective traumatization. The social media which abounds in morally disputable content additionally contributes to the feeling of immersion and the lack of questioning of the collective unconscious, and the fact that amoral, immoral and dishonest are presented as dominant values.

Without the process of psychological strengthening or artistic processes through which it is addressed and healed, trauma most often creates new trauma. People who do not process their trauma gradually develop forms of behaviour, both negative and positive ones that help them to overcome traumatic experiences. These forms of behaviour can vary from insults and hate speech, to extreme forms of both violent and philanthropic behaviour. The processes of artistic reintegration with young convicts that she carries out show that the repressed trauma that caused the crime to be committed in the first place always breaks through the work in some way. Although these topics are not raised a priori, the trauma speaks at some point, especially among young offenders. Phrases like "life goes on" or "we have to move on" just don't do any good. Some people do not have the ability to snap out of it, as they either don't have a structured family, or stable finances or lack a stimulating environment that would indicate that they can cope with trauma.

Art opens space for dialogue. It is the game that opens the space for healing and creating new narratives about what we are and what we can be. Today, the virtual world is a place for young people to play in, a space in which people become more and more aggressive in their desire to defend their position, even when they criticize aggression. The storytelling technique is very powerful and actually ubiquitous today,



from news headlines that can vary from decent and assertive to sensationalistic and populist Tweets. Censorship practically does not exist, which is also a huge problem. Children have turned to available channels of entertainment that are a mere semblance of play. We should explore free play as a tool for trauma resolution and work on stimulating the potential of play that motivates. Original games, active participation and telling one's own story can be tools for addressing the problem and one part of its solution.

The last interview was done on April 21st over the telephone with a youth activist. In her several years of youth activism, this Belgrade-based soon-to-be sociologist has had the opportunity to attend educational courses in facilitating, peacebuilding, reconciliation and feminism. She has worked with local and regional NGOs on different projects and educational opportunities for young people related to war crimes, reconciliation and peacebuilding. She has also held workshops for young people and activists on digital violence, violence against women, and peacebuilding.

The first thing that comes to her mind upon the mention of the word collective trauma is a burden. It associates us with something heavy and hard to deal with. It affects people in a way that they feel obliged to carry burdens that they aren't responsible for, they have to fight narratives and prejudices that they didn't ask for and live with the fact that they most of the time have a far worse starting point in life than some of their peers from other regions and parts of the world.

In her work with youth, she sees it as challenging to even encourage people to address these topics. It's similar to personal trauma in the way that an individual is most likely to avoid it, considering the pain and unpleasantness of it. People want to focus on the future not realizing that the future will be hard partly because of the unresolved trauma from the past. In her personal experience with collective trauma, she identifies a lot of confusion and hurt feelings and a lot of people who are just not prepared to deal with a lot of unpleasant feelings and the truth. She has seen parents who want to protect their children from hatred but are doing it by not explaining anything to them, hoping for the best.

The fact that young people today live in societies that are unregulated is, in a way, connected to past conflicts. The high unemployment rate, the lack of opportunities for job advancement, and the generally low standard of living greatly affect youth today. With the violent fall of socialism and its values, and society falling back to conservative values, the waves of patriarchy, intolerance and nationalism, it isn't a surprise that many young people who are part of any minority groups are now facing challenges to live, work, and function normally at all.

As for the ways that youth interpret the past, the last interviewee sees them first and foremost as repeating the official discourses of the group they are a part of. Nevertheless, she believes there is a place for change and dialogue, especially if the young are allowed to express their beliefs and subsequently open a space for dialogue. Young people mostly have opinions that they just repeat having heard them somewhere but they never actually got an explanation for, because societies and socialisation tend to work that way. If we treat youngsters like individuals and not just a topic in a discourse we are more likely to get a positive response. She sees official discourses as the most influential ones because they are also the first ones young people get to learn. After having been exposed to them, it's a lot harder to relearn something that you are convinced you know already than to educate about something completely new.

She believes storytelling techniques can play an important role in addressing collective trauma and promoting reconciliation among young people in Europe because when we talk about the past, especially in the official discourses, we tend to talk in numbers and in today's busy societies people tend to express care in individual and personal stories a lot more. Also, we have to at least give the people





opportunities to hear something from what they perceive to be the other side, we can't expect people to question something when they don't even know it's questionable.

She considers a more thorough and serious approach to learning the history of the region important in working with today's youth to raise awareness about the importance of them becoming peace-builders in Europe. This does not refer only to the one that starts with war activities but the one we shared in this region in the past. She believes young people need to know how people lived then, how it was not only possible but also prosperous for many of their countrymen, and how it also can be prosperous for them today and in the future. Education is just one of the ways.

She also points out that young people who come from mixed marriages are more likely to experience collective trauma on a personal level in a way that they even have to avoid certain family members. Also, those individuals who come from more directly war-affected areas are more likely to have to relive events that are caused by traumatic events from the past which can bring them to tears even when talking about it.

## Conclusion

One of the interviewees will be engaged in the following activities of the project and will participate in the Round Table discussion. *"The questions asked are of pivotal importance for future generations as narratives can play a significant role in the formation and perpetuation of collective trauma. Narratives refer to the stories, myths, and cultural beliefs that a group uses to interpret and make sense of their experiences. Traumatic events can create a new narrative or disrupt an existing one, leading to a collective sense of disorientation and loss. I am grateful for the opportunity to be involved in the project as it essentially carries the message that we have to try to change the narratives in public space. The willingness to work towards reconciliation and building trust is influenced by the broader social and political context in which young people live."*

Another interviewee expressed her interest in being engaged in the following activities of the project, especially the Think Tank group discussions. *"I truly enjoyed our conversation. The questions are inspiring and thought-provoking. I would like to adapt some of the questions a bit and address them to the young people I work with. It would be interesting to hear their perspective on the issues discussed."*

Finally, one interviewee found some of the questions hard-hitting as she herself comes from a family with a refugee background. She expressed great interest in being involved in the following activities of the project, especially the training for youth workers. *"The knowledge barely exists of the past wrongdoings. This is something that we must all work on. On the positive note, younger generations are less likely to be willing to let the past define them, partly because they never experienced it."*





## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA – PERPETUUM MOBILE



**The first interview** occurred on April 12th at the University of Banja Luka with a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Banja Luka, lecturing multiple subjects from the developmental psychology field. Among many years in academia, she has experience in working on trauma healing in refugee camps, when she as a student worked with women and children who fled their homes because of war events in the 1990s.

Collective trauma implies a certain traumatic experience experienced by a group of people which, if they are not aware of it, is passed on to the next generations. New generations who have not experienced that particular traumatic experience are "infected" with trauma from their parents who unconsciously pass it on to them because every collective trauma is also a family trauma.

Today we have a generation of adults who lived through direct traumatic war experiences as children and passed them on to their children. Young generations don't want to talk and think about past events, that's why the biggest challenge in working with them is to get to the moment to open up the story. A particular problem is that this collective trauma is used in political discourse in the pre-election period, so it is difficult to get to the moment when it is unpacked to the extent of seeing how to help people damaged by collective trauma.

Collective trauma occurs through various processes, which can even change the neurological structure of a person if a person grows up in constant stress and tension. Such people do not know how to live peacefully and comfortably, and it is difficult for them to relax in everyday life. Such a feeling is passed on to new generations and thus a collective trauma arises. It should be noted that the body and mind are connected, and when our body suffers, so does the mind and vice versa. The body is the first indicator that something is happening with the mind.

Dealing with the past is one conscious level where young people have to decide what they want to do and engage in that process. In most cases, young people deny and avoid unpacking these events and narratives. They are packed in "boxes" that adults have packed them in and it takes a lot of courage to get out of it because it is the only reality they know. That is why today we have a huge number of young people from Sarajevo who have never been to Banja Luka and vice versa, and a whole generation of young people in Mostar who have never crossed the street in their city. Young people are naturally more willing to take risks and step out of their comfort zone, but they are not well - research shows that they are more anxious, depressed and lonely than adults. Dialogue is possible, but if it is left only to the bravest, we will have a few sporadic positive stories. In order to have a greater impact, we need systemic solutions through school plans and programs, special places, music, movies, etc.

When it comes to building the perception of young people, they get their primary awareness of the world in their family and through schools. The problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that each entity and each canton has a different educational system and they shape the youth according to their needs. When young people leave the educational system, they start looking for things that fit into their thinking schemes, and it is very difficult to come to reconsider them.



Storytelling techniques are useful because people like personal stories and it is easier to connect and empathize with the other side. However, in order for the personal story to be useful to others, they must fit together well, otherwise, people will not be able to relate to them. Sometimes a psychotherapist is needed to help people who have experienced trauma to overcome it and put it in good order. Although they have a lot of advantages, the disadvantage of storytelling techniques is their smaller reach, since they are usually adapted for smaller groups. An idea to overcome this problem would be to record those personal stories and distribute them in the form of documentaries.

**The second interview** occurred on April 13th via Zoom with a Project Coordinator of the NGO Helsinki Citizens Assembly Banja Luka, who is implementing workshops on "Human Library" - where we have human "books" that are "lent" to readers, so they talk about their own experiences to challenge readers' prejudice about them and the group that "book" belongs to. This methodology was first used in Denmark to overcome peer violence.

With daily reminders of the war through the media and education, this society is retraumatized again. This includes warring with history, from which everyone extracts the parts that suit them. Historians, who should be objective scientists, mostly write history in an emotional way.

At our "Human Library" workshops, we have a sincere transmission of oral history about the personal events of the "book" in an honest and open way, which especially young "readers" feel. Young people react best because they are not to a large extent occupied by the dominant narratives in society. At those workshops, the "book" and the "reader" are on the same level, where the "reader" has the opportunity to make comments and ask questions. This way of working suits young people, because they do not feel equal to their professors in the process of formal education.

However, institutions make young people suitable individuals who will not question the dominant narrative. It starts with formal education, where everything is based on repetition, which kills critical thinking among young people. The NGO sector deals with the development of critical thinking, but in recent years the scope of their activities in schools has been narrowing. Between the formal authority and the emotional charge among young people, we get that young people really become convinced that the dominant narrative is correct and begin to fit into that system where we have us against them. Those narratives remain locked up like a ghost in a bottle, just waiting for an opportunity to break free and start causing problems, even to the point of extremism. However, we had a "Human Library" workshop in Goražde, where the "book" was the sister of a fallen VRS soldier, and the "reader" was a girl of Bosniak nationality. After the workshop, the "reader" said that she could not believe earlier that Serbs could be victims of war. In just 20 minutes, one young person changed his mind and left the dominant narrative, that's why the institutions do not allow informal education to interfere with formal education.

The written word is boring to young people, and through the "Human Library" workshops, they learn history through the individual, thus reducing prejudices about him and the group he comes from. The best way of working is when formal and informal education work together, where lessons are learned in schools and knowledge is improved through personal stories that develop critical thinking.

Any methodology with young people that develops dialogue and critical thinking is welcome in overcoming collective traumas. Debate clubs do a good thing where young people reflect and debate on topics from their everyday lives. Also, dialogues with war veterans and POWs that "Pravipožar" and "Caritas" are doing



are positive, because they give space to war victims and young people to build a better society. This helps young people to develop critical thinking and not think of extremist steps, especially in this critical time.

**The final interview** occurred on April 11th via Zoom with a president of the NGO “Pravipožar” - an organization for support of war veterans, families and victims of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through their work, they implemented numerous workshops using a KUVI methodology - Constructive use of veteran experience, where the war veterans from all three sides in BiH use storytelling techniques to work with youth from all parts of the country, educating them on their personal experience why is important to protect peace in the region.

Many people participated in the war events of the 1990s. War veterans experienced a certain traumatic experience on the battlefield. After the end of the war, the veterans returned to their families and took their trauma with them, passing it on to their families, and through families to the entire society.

Young people already received certain knowledge about the war in their community. Given that they have already formed narratives, the challenge in our work is how to supplement them with experiences from other ethnic communities and other parts of BiH, and in this way produce thinking about already formed stereotypes.

At one workshop, a high school student wanted the veterans to explain to him why his family gets upset when he wants to cross the border of a neighbouring country, which is 20 kilometres away from his house, to buy himself sneakers. Young people believe that such workshops should be held with their parents because they have experienced trauma and thus traumatize young people who have not had a personal experience of war. In one workshop in Sarajevo, about 25 highly educated people attended, 10 of whom cried at the story of a VRS veteran and all his pains and sufferings. Dialogue is needed, especially with those who do not want to hear the other side.

The main challenge for overcoming conflicts is that BiH is divided and only the bravest dare to, for example, study in all parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are fears when crossing inter-entity lines, which is why gatherings and competitions are most often organized at entity levels.

The best channel for building perception is education, that's why we advise young people to educate themselves from all sources, listen to experiences and use what is needed for their lives. Storytelling techniques are very useful and we personally used them through the KUVI methodology, which we took over from the War Trauma Center in Novi Sad. I had a guy who participated in the workshops 4 times. I asked him why he participated so many times because the workshops are always structured in the same way and I was afraid that he would get bored, but he said that through those workshops he heard 12 different stories that helped him understand and to help his family who went through a certain traumatic experience. In addition to all available techniques and technologies, it is still necessary to sit down and talk. The goal is to hear the story of the little man through the war experiences of veterans, who are war veterans and took part in war events but are now peace activists. The goal is to educate young people about what happened here in the 1990s, not to traumatize them, but to teach them to recognize if someone in the future tries to take them to a war from which they will never return as the same person. As one veteran often likes to conclude the workshop: it is better to negotiate for 1001 days than to be in war for 1 minute, because there is no return from it.

## Conclusion

One interviewee is interested in continuing to cooperate with us through the EU-CARES project. He is willing to share with us even more information and experiences from the „Human Library“ workshops, to help us to achieve the project goals. He accepted our invitation for our next event – the round-table discussion.

Another interviewee stated that he is interested in continuing cooperation with us through the EU-CARES project. He said that he was not an expert in trauma healing, but through his work in “Pravipožar” using the KUVI methodology, he has valuable experience to share with us and to help us to gain the project goals. He accepted our invitation for our next event - the round-table discussion.

Finally, one interviewee, who is also interested in continuing cooperation with us through the EU-CARES project, said that she is willing to share her expertise with us to reach our project goals. She was invited to our next event - the round-table discussion.

**MONTENEGRO – NVO PRIMA**



Three one-on-one interviews were conducted in Montenegro during April and May 2023. Interviews were conducted with:

- A psychologist, feminist and anti-militarist activist, retired, from Kotor;
- A teacher, High school Danilo Kis, from Budva and
- A Youth initiative for human rights, war crimes expert and youth worker

Collective trauma, as defined by the psychologist refers to the **psychological effects of events that exceed ordinary human experience**, such as a war, an earthquake, or unusual actions by governments. According to her, in a Montenegrin political context, it refers to the wars fought in this area and the violence committed in this area over a long period of time. The violence committed is often associated with heroism and honour through mechanisms of unsurpassed trauma. Furthermore, the consequences of unsurpassed war trauma (fear, despair, humiliation) are transmitted unconsciously to the third and fourth generations. As a result, society (political elites) have never taken the necessary steps to prevent trauma from repeating itself, i.e. bringing transitional justice to an end, as well as dealing with the past.

The teacher defines collective trauma as a negative condition caused by **adverse events that affect the majority of society**. She said that *In the beginning, young people appear indifferent, sometimes not participating in social events and it would seem that your own non-participation would make it easier for you to cope with the consequences of collective trauma. As a matter of fact, there are direct and indirect effects, visible and hidden, depending on their involvement.* Mehđina Kašić Šutković believes collective trauma has a significant impact on young people because society is unaware of the consequences left behind after the war. In her words: *Collective trauma is a disease of society that has failed to confront collective guilt.*

All interview participants have either experienced or witnessed the impact of collective trauma: Through work in her NGO, the youth worker learned historical facts but also witnessed personal stories of people directly affected by armed conflicts. She is very much interested in transgenerational trauma, which is an area important for interventions targeting the young population, in order to prevent future uncertainties.



One of the interviewees notes that collective trauma has been misused in politics, through misinterpretation of the joint past, national feelings of citizens, religion and symbols. According to her, the bombing of Montenegro in 1990 remains fresh in the minds of our people, which explains why many Balkanians are opposed to NATO. Furthermore, the country is now facing an emigrant crisis as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian war. It depicts images from the time when many people fled the region (Kosovo, Bosnia, Croatia.) as a result of war.

Young people generally do not occupy themselves with the topic of collective trauma, which they find to be difficult and distant. It is considered as a topic reserved for adults. In the event that they or their families have experienced some trauma, they would be empathetic, but would rather not talk about it publicly. According to her the major challenge in presenting young people with the truth is to enable them to have a clear position on the past event, which is difficult since there is no common position at the societal level. Another interviewee agrees with her: “The perception of the past for young people is shaped by what their families are saying and what they are learning in school. This has to stop”. In light of the fact that there were no adequate punishments for the perpetrators, crimes and violations of human rights are being approved and convicted war criminals provide role models to the next generation. A lot of work needs to be done with young people, especially when it comes to teaching them how to distinguish between facts and subjective judgments, especially when it comes to war crimes.

The research we conducted at the Faculty of Political Sciences showed us that there is a very small percentage of law students who know what happened in the past or have heard of some war crime committed on our territory. Unfortunately, our education system does not make an effort to inform them about these things, and it is these young people who will be the judges tomorrow and who will try to make our country a safe and peaceful place to live. Education is the key to everything – said the interviewee.

The psychologist recognizes dissatisfaction, depression, violence, and crime among the younger generation, which, in her opinion are the products of the lack of transitional justice. Based on her work with young people who had experienced the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, she believes that these traumatic experiences dramatically alter their perception of the world (of the youth). To cope with these experiences, the state and the social community need to provide a long-term response. A transitional justice system is essential to accomplish this, including fair nonselective trials (direct and command responsibility), as well as highlighting all those from institutions contributing to the war, such as the media, religious communities, government leaders, and prominent individuals from educational and health institutions. It has been demonstrated that individual counselling is limited in its effectiveness for people who seek help following traumatic events because a supportive environment at the community level is missing.

Healing collective traumas requires both political and individual will to deal with the past. Different interventions could help, such as dialogue, education and development in order to develop a shared understanding of the trauma and its effects. It is important to address the adverse aspects of patriarchal culture, such as preventing mythologizing and glorification of trauma faced by particular groups. This can be done by creating a common sense of safety, respect, and trust. It was noted that *“The dialogue process has been manipulated by those opposed to dialogue, and as a result, it must be returned to its original meaning - a conversation between people who have varying attitudes and convictions, but are firmly committed to finding common ground and creating a more just and safe society for all”*.

## Conclusion

Each of the three interview participants confirmed that the topic addressed by EU-CARES is relevant. They would be willing to participate in future project activities, such as a round table and think-tank. The organizations represented by two interviewees have important resources for promoting dialogue on collective trauma in Montenegro and the region (knowledge, evidence, regional networks with peace activists). As part of this, an information documentation centre is run by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in collaboration with the Parliament of Montenegro, which collects evidence of past events and promotes reconciliation and cooperation.

## ITALY – CESIE



During the first two weeks of April 2023, three face-to-face interviews were conducted in the framework of the EU CARES project. The interviews took place either online or at the premises of the interviewees' organizations. Among the three interviewees, two of them are youth workers operating in Palermo with young people from both migrant and local communities, and the third one is an expert on the issues of extremism and divisive narratives:

- **The first youth worker** has founded Exodus, a youth association that supports students with a migratory background and organizes awareness-raising events and debates on issues that are relevant to young generations in Palermo.
- **The second youth worker** is one of the founders of the Palermo Youth Center (PYC), an association that counts around 3000 members, mostly young people, who are both the targets and the initiators of several types of initiatives such as screenings, debates, public advocacy actions, etc.
- **The third interviewee** has managed several projects on extremism, radicalization and communication for the Centre for Creative Development "Danilo Dolci", a non-profit organization working on education and born from the educational and working experience of the great pacifist Danilo Dolci.

The first interviewee reflected on the general situation and environment within the group of volunteers of one of the associations: "There is more prejudice towards middle-class and catholic volunteers than towards migrants. True integration is far more complicated between Westerners, it's difficult to create a sense of community". In his view, the problem of integration is no longer about skin colour. In this sense, the interviewee referred to individualism as the main cause of social ruptures within our society, especially among younger generations: "Young Westerners are extremely individualistic and it is very difficult to bring people together, even if building communities is the goal of our association". In addition, the interviewee mentioned that according to what he witnesses within civil society organizations in Palermo, social or voluntary work seems to have become more of a "self-serving act". He argued that the lack of a sense of community creates a political ground where politicians can take advantage of societal fractures and accentuate them: "There is the need to find a common ground. Because of individualism there is nothing that really unites us right now."

Speaking about the relationship between representatives of migrant communities and those of the "local community", he referred to a process of assimilation more than real integration, as he believes that, although Palermo is an extremely welcoming city and there is much awareness of the issue of migration, still he feels there is no equal exchange among different cultures. Reflecting on the city of Palermo, however, he recognized that, "racism is still widespread, but people from Palermo still remember their past as migrants. There is a long-lasting tradition of welcoming other people, there is a lot of empathy towards people in a difficult situation, poor people help each other."

If the first interviewee focused on the issue of individualism, the second one paid particular attention to generational issues and intergenerational fractures. While answering the questions on the "us vs. them" narrative, he stated that he sees in young people a feeling of togetherness that is not shared among adults: there is a fight that is more about generations than migrants vs. non-migrants. Adults are perceived as those who have everything, and *boomers* who now have much influence in politics yet are not aware and do not pay attention to younger generations' struggles and needs.





While listing what are, in his opinion, the most influential social media platforms that promote divisive discourses (He indicated Instagram, TikTok Tok and Facebook), he then spoke about potential factors which he thinks make people vulnerable to polarizing and divisive narratives. “When people have less emotional intelligence tools they lack the ability to doubt, that’s why some things get bigger and bigger and take away the credibility of scientists or the legitimacy of a state.” At the same time, he also mentioned that people tend to perceive their opinions and points of view as the only possible and right ones; in this sense, any debate on any issue becomes a zero-sum game, where either you are right or you are wrong and there is no room for dialogue, no space to compromise or find common ground. “By perceiving yourself as central, the reality becomes distorted,” he stated. “If a group feels self-sufficient, it will not be capable of accepting others’ positions.”

The third interviewee gave an account of her professional experience as project manager of COMMIT, a project on hate speech and radicalization. She worked with university and high school students to raise their awareness of social media, their conscious use, as well as critical thinking and the capacity to recognize propaganda or hate speech. She particularly focused on the role that COVID-19 played in shaping divisive narratives, saying that the general tone of debates on inclusion was really exacerbated by the pandemic, a phenomenon that had people with disabilities, migrants, and women as main targets. The interviewee also affirmed that there is a polarization of discourses on social media that changes based on what is trending: “hate speech takes the form of the main issue in that moment.”

She witnessed a widespread fear of the unknown, of everything that feels different, but this seems to be especially true among older generations. She stressed that “From young people comes the strength to fight stereotypes like the widespread narrative that ‘migrants are here to steal our jobs’”. According to the interviewee, in generating propaganda and divisiveness there is a link between social media and traditional media. She affirmed that, while traditional media and politics define the divisive themes, these are then reproduced, shared and amplified in the social media landscape. She also witnessed a tendency among digital natives to assume that everything they see on social media is true. However, it’s important to notice that “there is less control on the messages conveyed and a lot of news get inflated and become bigger than they actually are. Negative feelings are shared a lot more on social media because they create more engagement.”

Concerning the main vulnerabilities of young people vis-à-vis polarizing narratives, she believes that, “Young people are not necessarily more vulnerable or less critical. It’s important for us adults to never take for granted that we always know what is right.” She also argued that vulnerability may come from the necessity to hold onto a secure identity. In the last two or three years there has been an increasing sense of insecurity in the social sphere. “When a positive identification is missing, you look for an identity in a group, a sense of belonging.”

## Conclusion

From what has emerged in the interviews, it is clear that the theme of conflict is very prevalent in Italian society. What has been interesting to notice is that, while the us vs. them narrative created towards people with a migrant background is still prevalent, every interviewee focused on internal fractures. Themes like clashes between adults and youngsters, and between middle class and working class seem to be recurrent. The message seems to be clear: there is a need to “look outside of ourselves”. The concept of Western individualism runs through the interviews and it is fundamentally seen as flawed, even dangerous. As the first interviewee states, “It is necessary to rebuild common paths, structures, and visions together. There is the necessity to think of a brand-new world. It is not possible to change the world only by thinking about yourself: it’s as if we are not able to come together any longer, we no longer understand the world.”

The perceived description of individualism is that of a ‘blinding force’ that creates continuous fractures and divisiveness. To create a dialogue, according to the second interviewee, it is important to develop the tools that allow us to see reality for what it is and to acquire a sense of “awareness of the uniqueness of human beings.”

Despite the general disillusionment towards the lack of unity in Italian society, there is a general trust towards younger generations. New generations are seen as very active and willing to move in defence of rights, and also in the use of social media as a medium of information. This concept was wrapped by the





third interviewee, who stated, “There is no need to motivate young people, it would just be necessary to listen to what is important to them”.

## Annex 1

### Questions asked

*What does the term "collective trauma" mean to you, and how do you believe it affects young people?*

*We cannot change the past, but we can change the feeling of past occurrences (distant or near past) at a personal level. What are the challenges in your work with youth that have their roots in the past when the society was burdened with conflict, crises, or any type of suffering which led to collective trauma?*

*In what ways have you experienced or witnessed the effects of collective trauma in your community or personal life?*

*How does something become a part of collective trauma (large group identity)?*

*What does youth face as a challenge that is connected to past or current conflict in society?*

*How do youth interpret their past? Do they repeat the official discourse of the group, and do they have a desire for change?*

*Is there space for dialogue?*

*What are the most influential channels through which youth build their perception and the perception of their society?*

*Healing individual, ancestral and collective trauma is of imperative importance for every society. The most pressing issues of our times include war and conflict, the refugee crisis, climate change, racism, intergenerational trauma and so forth. What role do you think storytelling techniques can play in addressing collective trauma and promoting reconciliation among young people in Europe?*

*What tools and methods do you consider important and efficient to use while working with today's youth to raise awareness about the importance of them becoming peace-builders in Europe?*

*Are there any additional comments or information you think is important that you would like to share?*

*Are there any best practices that use storytelling techniques you know of that you could recommend for this project?*



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EU-CARES European Collective nArratives for Reconciliation trauma hEaling through youth engagement and Storytelling has been co-funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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