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**Taming Conflicted Identities: Searching for New Youth Values in the Western Balkans**

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## Introduction

Group membership is built into the identity of the individual (Tajfel 1981, Tajfel and Turner 1986) and social identifications can be more or less relevant for a person's self-concept, depending on differences in personalities and wider contextual factors. The recent history of the Western Balkan societies illustrates the influence of social and political identifications on intergroup relations, as well as the life of every individual, regardless of whether they identify with them or not. However, in today's increasingly complex societies which are sectioned by roles and groups the social dimensions of youth social identities include gender, sexual orientation, age, profession, religion, ethnicity, political views, sports team they support, subculture they belong to, and many other social identities. In each of these groups, a person probably has a member with whom he/she shares at least one common characteristic, but not necessarily the others. However, a young person in the region is often exposed to predominant religious and ethnic identities that are emphasized in these contexts. Because youth are in the process of developing personal and social identity (Marcia 1966, Phiney 2006), developing identities that have a pronounced emphasis on one singular identity (e.g., focusing only on ethnic identity as a form of group identification and differentiation with other groups) can become a cause of conflict (Brewer 2010). Focusing on just one identity reduces this complexity of identification processes to the simplest 'us and them' difference based on a single attribute. Instead of acknowledging the coexistence of multiple identities, a young person perceives one 'true identity' that overpowers the rest. This homogenization around one type of social identity most often occurs in situations when members of a group start to feel threatened by other groups, in other words, when they experience an identity threat (Stephan and Stephan 2000, Riek et al. 2006). Such social identities can maintain or even deepen the divisions between different groups. On the other hand, when youth are aware that their identities do not overlap completely, it allows for a more flexible and broad way of defining own groups. Such a position is reflective of a complex social identity (Roccas and Brewer 2002). Whether a person has simple or complex identity has been shown to have different consequences for his/her perception of the world and particularly for intergroup relations. Most importantly, many studies on youth and other age cohorts show a positive effect of the complexity of social identity on improving intergroup relations, including the reduction of intergroup prejudice and conflict (Brewer 2000, Crisp, Walsh and Hewstone 2006, Crisp and Hewstone 2007, Branković et al. 2016, Maloku et al. 2016).

Youth living in the Western Balkan societies today hold the potential for developing such complex identities. For the most part, they were either very young or born after the end of the conflicts between ethnic groups, so they did not witness its genesis nor did they take part in the violent clashes. Moreover, in some countries (e.g., Kosovo), youth also constitute majority of the population, so they inevitably represent the driving force of the future societies. It is therefore especially important to examine whether and how the youth can step out of the singular identification framework offered to them in the current social and political contexts. With limited opportunities for meaningful social identifications, many of the young feel alienated from the political and social mainstream. Research in the former Yugoslav countries shows that youth populations are largely marginalized socially and politically and that they continue to distance themselves from social and political institutions (Blagojević 2013, Pasha et al. 2012, Tomanović et al. 2012, Topuzovska-Latkovic et al. 2013, Žiga et al. 2015). Distrust in political institutions is often the result of a belief that things cannot change (i.e. political cynicism, Žeželj 2007), therefore prompting the young to emigrate in search of a better life (Pasha et al. 2012, Taleski and Hoppe 2015, Topuzovska-Latkovic et al. 2015, Žiga et al. 2015). On the other hand, if the young embrace the dominant discourse of salient ethnic, national or religious identifications, it results in intergroup distancing and narrowing their social space in multiethnic societies.

One of the most efficient strategies to overcome group divisions and build new, alternative identities, is intergroup contact (Allport 1954). A large-scale meta-analytical study (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008) that examined the 40-year accumulated evidence from 515 independent research studies, showed that intergroup contact indeed helps improve intergroup relations. By comparing different types of contacts, it was established that the largest effect is produced by intergroup friendships (Hamberger and Hewstone 1997). To generalize the positive effects of contact to an entire group, group membership needs to be clearly visible, and both parties should assume that the outgroup member is a typical representative of their group (Van Oudenhoven, Groenewoud and Hewstone 1997). In addition, the positive effects of intergroup contact can generalize to include other groups through a 'secondary transfer effect' (Pettigrew 2009). For example, Irish Protestants who came in contact with Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland later showed more positive attitudes towards other ethnic groups, namely Asian and African immigrants (Tausch et al. 2010). In the Western Balkans, the hardships of the post-conflict era have especially affected youth, who have been growing up in much less diverse communities with less opportunities for interethnic contact now than before the conflicts started (see Maloku et al. 2016 for Kosovo, see Majstorović and Turjačanin 2013 for Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Milošević Đorđević 2016 specifically for the youth in the region). The barriers for contact are not only physical but also psychological – faced with strict societal norms, young people are reluctant to reach out to their peers of other ethnicity and religion.

In the present research we, therefore, examined the potential that the youth hold to overcome these barriers by investigating factors and contexts that foster better intergroup relations as well as alternative forms of social identifications that assist in improving them. Building on the insights from the social psychological literature presented here, our research aimed to explore (a) the interplay between ethnic, religious, national and other types of group identifications such as gender, family, friends, region, and Europe, (b) the relations between different identifications and a set of societal attitudes such as those towards religious/ethnic out-groups, trust in institutions, and embracing of anti-discriminatory policies as indicators of social capital, and (c) the role of contact and social identity complexity and inclusiveness in predicting societal attitudes. The goal was to examine whether young people in the Western Balkans are able to move beyond the prescribed, politicized and institutionalized identities they have been so far socialized to embrace. Particularly, we wanted to investigate the opportunities for youth to develop more inclusive and more complex types of identification that might eventually result in better overall intergroup relations. Additionally, we aimed to address both majority and minority perspectives on the construction of identities.

## **Data and Methods**

Researching social identity poses various theoretical and methodological difficulties because identities are fluid and changing, and thus defining and measuring them presents a challenge (Abdelal et al. 2006). Therefore, to gain a comprehensive understanding of social identities of youth in the Western Balkans, we designed an empirical study that combined qualitative and quantitative research methods. The quantitative survey was meant to provide the basic framework through mapping the importance of various social identities and their relations among the youth, as well as the basic characteristics of the wider context of youth interethnic relations. The focus groups were aimed at a thorough investigation of the personal perceptions of the focal identities, e.g. how they relate to one another, whether they are perceived as changeable or not, what are the contexts in which they become salient, as well as how they affect the perceptions of and relations with other groups.

The quantitative survey was conducted among 767 people aged 20 to 30, from Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) and Kosovo. The sample was specifically designed to include members of both minority and majority groups. We selected two towns in each country: one in which the town's ethnic majority is a majority on the national level, and one in which it is a minority. Belgrade and Novi Pazar in Serbia (Bosniaks are an ethnic minority on the national level, but a majority in Novi Pazar), Priština and North Mitrovica in Kosovo (Serbs are the majority population in

Mitrovica, but a minority in Kosovo on the national level), Skopje and Tetovo in Macedonia (Albanians are a minority on the national level, but a majority in Tetovo), Sarajevo and Banja Luka in B&H (in Sarajevo Bosniaks are the majority, same as on the level of B&H, while in Banja Luka the majority are Serbs). We sampled participants via a passive snowball method (subjects recruit future respondents from among their acquaintances). We aimed to have 100 participants per location, 70 from the local majority and 30 from the local minority. In addition, we used quotas based on the criteria of gender and level of education. For each ethnicity, an outgroup was the group they were in violent conflict with during the 1990s. This means that for Serbs in Serbia, the outgroup was Bosniaks, for Bosniaks in B&H, the outgroup was Serbs, for Macedonians the outgroup was Albanians, for Albanians in Kosovo the outgroup was Serbs and vice versa. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into local languages, using the back-translation procedure (Brislin 1970). The questionnaire encompassed several measures:

- a) The strength of identification: participants were asked to indicate how important is belonging to each of the listed groups for them personally, on 5-point scales anchored at 1 (of no importance) and 5 (highly important). The strength of identification was measured for the main identities that we focused on in this study: ethnicity, religion, and nationality, but also for the personal groups (family, group of friends), other regional identities (city/town of origin, the Balkans, and Europe), as well as gender.
- b) Social identity complexity (SIC) was measured as the perceived overlap between national / ethnic / religious in-groups (SIC, Maloku et al. 2016, Roccas and Brewer 2002, Schmid, Hewstone, Tausch, Cairns, and Hughes 2009). Participants rated on 11-point scales how much overlap they perceived between six pairs of identities, for instance: ‘When you think of people who are Serbs, how many of them are Orthodox?’ or ‘When you think of people who are citizens of Serbia, how many of them are Serbs?’ We calculated SIC as an average rating of overlap between six different combinations of in-groups.
- c) Social identity inclusiveness was measured using a triple categorization task (Van Dommelen et al. 2015), whereby participants were presented with stimuli of person profiles defined by ethnicity, nationality, and religious affiliation, along with a shaded profile of head and shoulders, and a name reflective of the identity combinations. The stimuli had a varying degree of overlap with participant's identities: triple in-groupers, double in-groupers, single in-groupers and triple out-groupers. The gender of fictitious persons was matched with participant's gender. Participants categorized each of the profiles as ‘us’ or ‘them’, and an inclusiveness index was calculated as the total number of stimuli categorized as ‘us’.
- d) The quantity of contact was assessed as the frequency of exposure to ethnic and religious outgroup members across three contexts (at the university/work, in the neighbourhood, during leisure time). The scale ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).
- e) The quality of contact was assessed through a scale measuring four emotional reactions potentially elicited in the contact situation: two positive (pleasant, respected) and two negative (nervous, looked down upon). The scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Those who had no direct contact with the ethnic outgroup could choose the N/A option.
- f) Online intergroup friendship was measured by the reported number of friends from the ethnic outgroup within the social network used most often by the participant.
- g) Social distance was measured by an adapted Bogardus social distance scale (Bogardus 1926). Participants indicated on five-point scales acceptability of each of the four relations (living in the same neighbourhood, going to university/ working, having a close friend, dating or marrying) towards religious and ethnic in- and outgroups.
- h) Attitudes towards social groups were assessed by the feeling thermometer (Wilcox, Sigelman and Cook 1989). Participants were asked to express their feelings towards ethnic and religious in- and outgroups, as well as towards the citizens of their own and outgroup country, by sliding a bar on the scale from 0 to 100 degrees (higher number indicating warmer feelings).
- i) Attitudes towards anti-discrimination policy were assessed by items related to aspects of the position of the marginalized groups (as people with disabilities, Roma, LGBT population etc.) in

the respective societies, e.g. ‘Discrimination of the marginalized groups is no longer issue in Serbia’. Items were rated on 5-point scales.

The qualitative examination tapped into the content and relations between different aspects of social identity in more depth. The central goal of the focus group discussions (Willing 2008) was to explore the relations between the three focal identities (ethnic, religious, and national), and also to find out how they function within the social context (e.g. in which situations they become salient, and how they are expressed in relations with others). In each town, we recruited eight to eleven participants from the ethnic groups that were the majority at the local level. We recruited participants between the ages of 20 and 30, balanced by gender (male/female), and of diverse educational and employment status (both students and high-school graduates, employed and unemployed). Each discussion was led by a moderator and an assistant who were thoroughly prepared for the topic and trained with the guide. Discussions were conducted in the native languages of the participants, and moderators were also native speakers. To facilitate the expression of attitudes and feelings that could be difficult to articulate verbally, we employed techniques such as free associations, unfinished sentences, and collage techniques. As prompts for discussion, we also used recent media materials, e.g. a newspaper article about a person who converted from one religion to another to be able to be the best man at a friend's wedding, or about a theatrical interpretation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* depicting the love between a Serbian girl and an Albanian boy. The discussion guide was structured around several topics: the structure of social identity and the importance of different personal and social identities; perceptions of the malleability of identities; contexts that makes social identities salient; perceived relations between different identities (their overlap or exclusion); factors that foster complex understandings of identity; the role of intergroup contact; and, the permeability of intergroup borders.

## Findings

### *Strength of identification with different groups*

To understand the structure of social identity, we first analysed the strength of identification with a number of social groups. As expected, the groups young people identify with most are personal, relational groups like family ( $M=4.39$ ) and a group of friends ( $M=3.88$ , see Table 1 on the importance of social identifications). However, other broad social categories are also important to youth in our sample, like country ( $M=3.24$ ), town ( $M=3.14$ ), religion ( $M=3.13$ ) and ethnicity ( $M=3.02$ ). Below the midpoint are identifications with the gender group ( $M=2.80$ ), Europe ( $2.77$ ) and Balkans ( $M=2.66$ ).

**Table 1:** Correlations between different group identifications of youth in Western Balkans ( $N=767$ )

	Identification (means)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	2.80	-	.400**	.411**	.424**	.310**	.363**	.308**	.357**	.299**
2. Ethnicity	3.02		-	.420**	.703**	.301**	.276**	.338**	.272**	.287**
3. My town/city	3.14			-	.385**	.398**	.413**	.437**	.414**	.335**
4. Religion	3.13				-	.368**	.301**	.357**	.285**	.244**
5. Family	4.39					-	.574**	.377**	.330**	.284**
6. Group of friends	3.88						-	.348**	.330**	.257**
7. Country I live in	3.24							-	.488**	.333**
8. Balkans	2.66								-	.452**
9. Europe	2.77									-

We further analysed the intercorrelations between social identifications in order to examine underlying structures behind these identifications. Although ethnic and religious identities are most strongly tied together, all group identifications are dependent on one another (see Table 1). For example, identifications with the group of friends and family as primary groups are correlated with identifications with larger social entities, starting from town to country, region, and Europe. It seems

that youth's belonging to very different groups can be traced back to a similar need, and that it cannot be sufficiently explained by political attitudes only. The strong correlation between ethnic and religious identification stands out from the rest, confirming this relation is still very relevant for the youth in the region. This finding is important because it shows how the social constructions of ethnic and religious identifications are similar throughout Western Balkan societies. Similar findings are found in other contexts where ethnic and religious divisions are pronounced: most notably, in Northern Ireland (Mitchell 2005, Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman 2010). The overlap of these two identities or their intersection as we discuss later makes this identitarian structure more salient and less inclusive, resulting in less permeable intergroup borders (Brewer and Pierce 2005, Brewer 2010).

Our qualitative data clearly illustrate that society exerts strong pressure on its young members to identify with their ethnic/religious groups and follow their implicit norms, especially in ethnically mixed communities. Here are examples from the Serbian city Novi Pazar and Priština, Kosovo:

It burdens me. Simply, you have to decide if you are 'this' or 'that'. If you are 'this' then you hate 'that', if you are 'that' you hate 'this'. I do not agree with that, but that is the way things function around here. (male, 20, Novi Pazar, Serbia)

But the way you have been taught means that you are raised to behave and act in terms of being Albanian. (female, 20, Priština, Kosovo)

This perception of a social pressure to identify in exclusive terms is a recurring theme. Unlike some forms of identity, such as personal or professional, the general understanding of ethnic, religious and, to some extent, national identities is such that we cannot arbitrarily choose them, but that they are ascribed to us (Majstorović and Turjačanin, 2013, Phinney and Ong 2007, Worchel 1999). Youth perceive strong pressure to conform to these dominant types of identifications.

#### *Social identification and social attitudes*

In this section, we explore how different types of identifications relate to a set of important attitudes: from social distance towards the outgroups to acceptance of anti-discriminatory policies within the country. Social identification is inseparably tied with other social and political attitudes. The ways in which individuals build group membership into their identity and determine which groups are dominant in their sense of identity is necessarily connected to their relationship with the out-groups, as well as their attitudes towards society as a whole. Table 2 reveals relationship patterns between social identification and social attitudes. Firstly, almost all forms of social identification significantly correlate with ethnic distance meaning that the more youth identify with any of the given groups, the more they are likely to be socially distant from ethnic outgroups. As would be expected, ethnic distance is most strongly correlated with the identification with ethnicity, as well as identification with religion and identification with the country. On the other hand, those who identify with an overarching social category at the level of Europe (perceive themselves as Europeans) feel the least distance toward outgroups.

**Table 2:** Correlations between the significance of social identities and outgroup attitudes

	Social distance towards ethnic outgroup	Social distance towards religious outgroup	Embracing anti- discrimination policies
ID Gender	.144**	-.064	-.084*
ID Ethnicity	.429**	.043	-.152**
ID My town/city	.181**	-.043	-.090**
ID Religion	.369**	.093**	-.135**
ID Family	.119**	-.101**	-.057
ID Group of friends	.039	-.100**	.038
ID Country I live in	.236**	.013	-.129**
ID Balkans	.165**	-.041	-.155**
ID Europe	.072*	-.085*	-.014

If we compare determinants to ethnic and religious outgroup distances, it is visible (Table 2) that religious distance is less embedded with other group identifications. There is a slight tendency for those more identified with family, friends and own religious groups to be more accepting of religious outgroups, but the results are a lot less straightforward than in the case of ethnic distance. When it comes to how different social identifications relate to positive attitudes towards anti-discrimination policies, findings reveal that the strongest negative attitude is observed among those who identify with the Balkans, ethnic identity, religion and the country. This suggests that the youth embracing these identities oppose anti-discrimination measures aimed at improving the situation of marginal groups in their societies.

Taken together, these results make it clear that a stronger ethnic and religious identity is associated with a stronger rejection of other groups. A stronger sense of ingroup belonging associated with a decreased willingness to communicate with others who differ on group membership and a further mutual distancing of groups. As shown, it is most common that ethnic – and sometimes religious and national – identities are coupled with distancing oneself from members of other ethnic and religious groups and the rejection of anti-discriminatory attitudes. In addition, the qualitative examination reveals how strong group identifications limit one's life choices, e.g. in choosing one's partners. It is clear that the rigid forms of social identity are not set forth by young people, but it is also the case that the social pressures to accept them are quite strong. Based on respondents' testimonies, their families and the immediate social surroundings seem to penalize almost any attempt to cross over intergroup boundaries:

I was thinking about this, and I believe that I couldn't be in a relationship with a Muslim, not because of me, but because of the wider social context in which I live in. I believe that my parents couldn't agree with that, it would cause a major problem in the family, my social environment would react to it, and it wouldn't be easy for me to deal with it. (female, 22, Belgrade, Serbia)

To me, personally, for an Albanian to marry a Macedonian, be it a man or a woman, is like mixing fire with oil. It is still dangerous. (male, 27, Tetovo, Macedonia)

I think my parents would say: Ok, this is your choice, but you have created a very big problem for us. So, for them, they wouldn't mind, but living in this society, they would mind explaining it to the rest of the people. (male, 20, Priština, Kosovo)

On the other hand, those who identify more with their group of friends or Europe show more inclusive attitudes and generally less social distance. This suggests that identifying with Europe provides youth



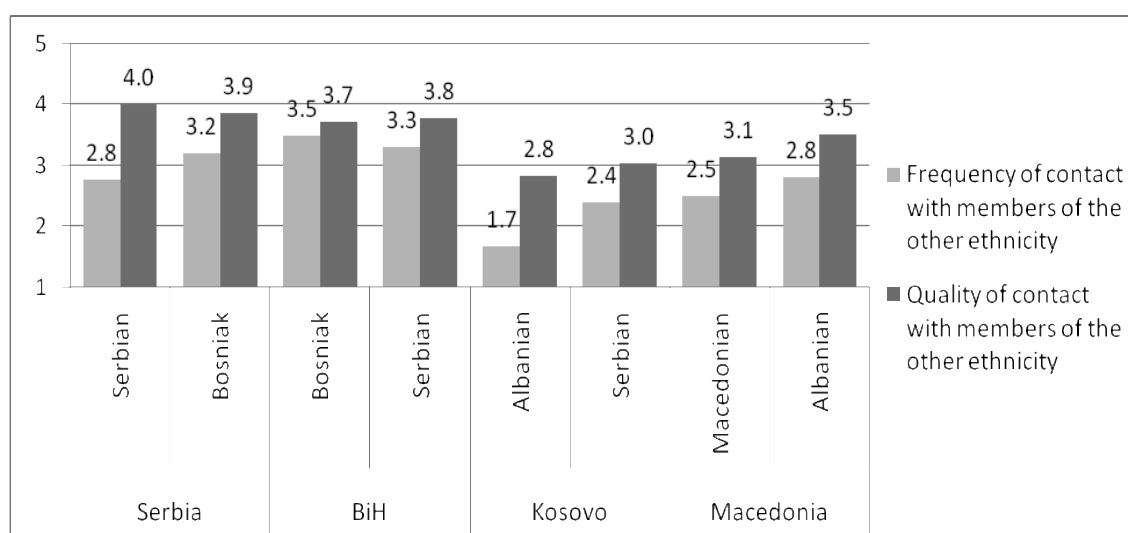
with a broader frame, but also with a set of other political attitudes (usually liberal) that makes them more inclusive towards other groups. On the other hand, an unexpected finding is that family identification correlates mildly with ethnic distancing. This could be a result of the fact that traditional norms and values are still transmitted within a family, and that it is typically the family that penalizes deviations from them.

Thus, there is an overall influence of the social context, which affects the entire spectrum of social categories and beliefs among youth. One way to question these widespread assumptions is through contact between the members of different ethnic and religious groups.

### *Contact between the groups*

In the following section, we explore the level of contact between groups and illustrate its consequences. It has been long known that physical distance and lack of mutual knowledge is the key for intolerance between groups (Williams 1947). Our results go to show that in the Western Balkan region intergroup contact is relatively low on average. In countries where minorities are significantly outnumbered (Serbia, Kosovo) it is higher for the minority group, whilst in the countries with numerous minorities (Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) there is no asymmetry – majorities are exposed to minorities as much as vice versa (Figure 1). The social reality of the majorities allows them to get by with less or no contact with other ethnic groups in a minority position. In contrast, minorities cannot afford that kind of distancing because they are outnumbered and are therefore more exposed to opportunities for contact with majority groups.

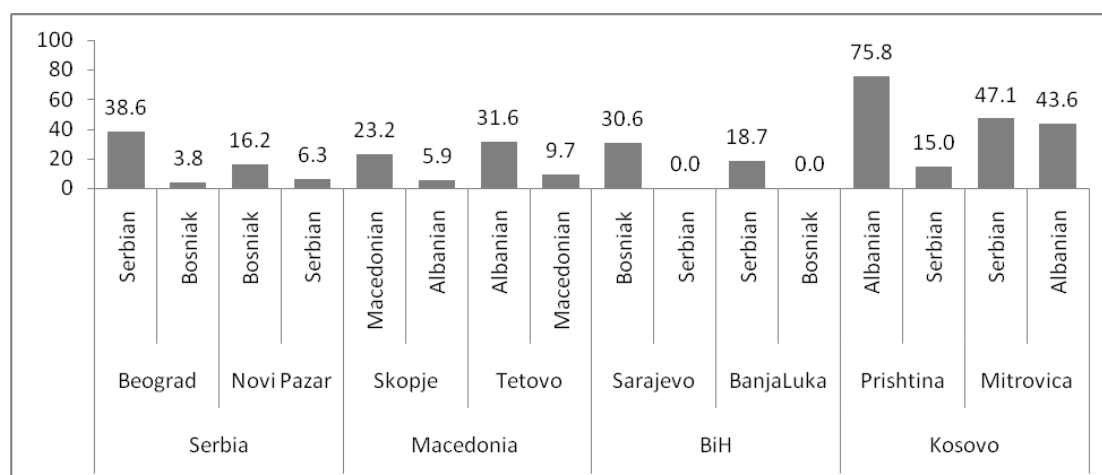
Emotions experienced during the contact (i.e. quality of contact) when it occurs, are relatively positive (the average ranges from three to four on a five-point scale). The experience of contact is less positive for the groups in regions with more unresolved political issues like Kosovo and Macedonia, and with groups with language barriers, e.g., Albanians and Serbs, Albanians and Macedonians.



**Figure 1:** Frequency and quality of contact with ethnic out-groups by country and ethnicity (1= lack of contact/negative experience, 5 = frequent contact/positive experience)

There is a high share of people (especially in Kosovo) who did not report having any contact in any context with members of ethnic outgroups (Figure 2). Lack of contact is evidently larger in ethnically

tensed contexts like North Mitrovica, which is an ethnically divided city and Priština, which is ethnically homogeneous.



**Figure 2:** Share of people that had rare or no contact with the ethnic out-group by country, town and ethnicity

The barriers for contact are perceived as impeding youth's development or that of the respective societies in which they live in.

I think that divisions make us miss a lot. You miss new friendships, communication, and everyday interaction – everything that makes us who we are and that enriches us. (female, 20, Sarajevo, B&H)

It is a huge disappointment to see that the river and the bridge, two important means that were historically used to connect people, in this city they divide people. (male, 24, North Mitrovica, Kosovo)

Both prior examples show that respondents are aware of the physical barriers and the limitations they pose for engaging in contact with their peers from other ethnic groups. However, at the same time, the need to draw and maintain ‘psychological’ borders appears to serve an essentially defensive function. The very idea of loosening these borders between the groups seems to provoke anxiety:

[Moderator: What is the function of these borders?] Belonging. If there are no borders, everything will be erased, we will all blend with each other. (female, 21, Belgrade, Serbia)

In spite of the barriers that evidently limit intergroup relations, there are examples of crossing interethnic borders among youth:

My best friend is a Bosniak. Yes, we were just talking about me marrying someday, and I told her: ‘You will go with me to the civil ceremony [meaning: to act as a witness] and the other best friend will go with me to the church’. (female, 22, Banja Luka, B&H).

I have no problem to have Bosniak and Albanian friends since I met many of them through my work. (male, 29, North Mitrovica, Kosovo).

I have two best friends, one of them is Muslim, the other one is Serb or Orthodox...I congratulate him on the day of his Slava, he congratulates me on Bayram, he comes to me for a cake or something. So, I think there is no difference. (male, 20, Novi Pazar, Serbia).

Even more so, youth also speak about wanting to relate to other peers and do so in ordinary ways that are not burdened with the socio-political pressures:

I could sit in a cafe, and have a warm chat, with everyone, just enjoying the conversation, the good spirit and for having some fun. (female, Tetovo, Macedonia)

I personally am very against the Serbian politics that was played against us. I think that caused wrong ideas about us at the mass level. However, at the core, I don't believe that this pertains to each Serb individually. I have met Serbs who are very dear, who honestly empathize with us and feel sorry for what was done to us, feel a bit guilty too. But in general, they are very good, and so my experience is very positive! (female, 21, Priština, Kosovo)

When lack of contact is combined with the more polarized intergroup attitudes characteristic of post-conflict countries (e.g., B&H and Kosovo), it reads as a recipe for continued hardships between the groups. Young people in our research specifically stated that intergroup communication is one of the preconditions to overcome the divisions:

I believe that contact between people has a strong effect. For example, in Belgium, in Brussels, there are a lot of different ethnic and religious groups, and the long-term (serb. *dugotrajni*) contact between these groups has been slowly erasing these borders. So, there you can see inter-ethnic or inter-religious couples, and that is not perceived as a problem, because of the long-term contact. (female, 22, Belgrade, Serbia)

There is a need for frequent, I think, communication, because if we have a common goal, somehow more contacts among people and not separation, from the beginning to tell us – you will be friends with them, to impose upon us such stories and gossip. (female, 22, Skopje, Macedonia)

However, one has to acknowledge the limits of effectiveness of contact interventions and to take into account the potential for contact to backfire in terms of an effect on outgroup attitudes. For example, history needs to be carefully addressed in organized contact interventions, as our data show that diverging narratives about the conflict can become visible during contact and even lead to more divisions:

I came back from Berlin last night. There was a delegation of 5 persons [of B&H]. I was the only Bosniak. I have to admit that we did not spend a lot of time together.... Because they had, during the first days already, contradictory statements and nationalistic statements that resulted in the lack of contact amongst us. As if we weren't a delegation, but two separate states representing Bosnia and Herzegovina. (female, 19, Sarajevo, B&H)

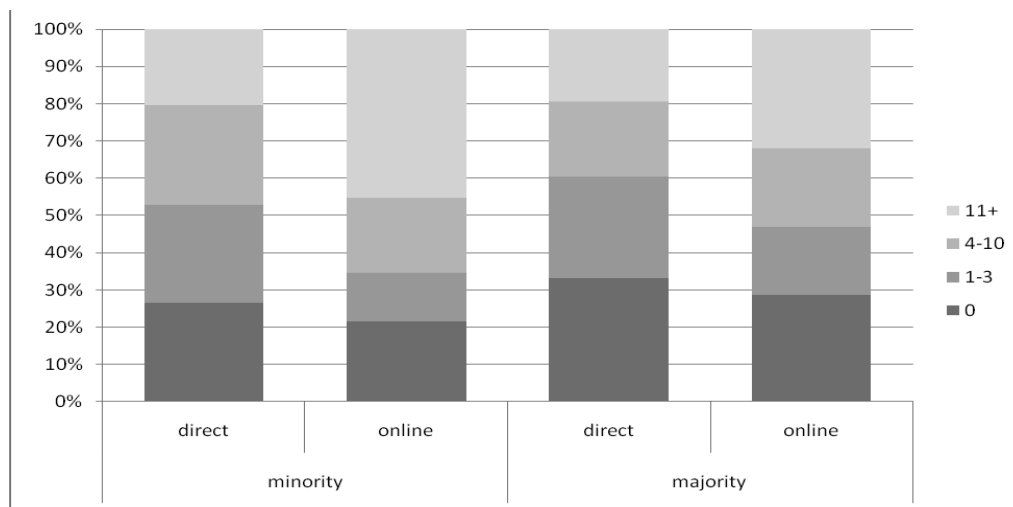
Whenever I have met some Serbs or Croats, we have always talked normally, and the differences weren't visible between us. But when we started talking about history and some divisions, immediately the differences came up. History sets us back the most on this road. (female, 22, Sarajevo, B&H)

Respondents also mentioned different regional programs for fostering communication between the groups, but often stated that they were paradoxically aimed at ethnic groups between countries and not within them:

I have had contacts with Serbs, but only from Serbia, not Serbs from Kosovo. (male, 24, Priština, Kosovo)

Youth is still heavily affected by what they are told and [these] exchange programs would offer the opportunity for youth to see for themselves how things stand...and I'm not talking about exchange outside, in Amsterdam or whatever...I mean exchange with our neighbours here in Kosovo. (female, 28, Priština, Kosovo)

Having this in mind, we argue that alternative forms of informal contact can help overcome the physical or social barriers typical of direct contact. We focused the most on online contact via social networking sites (SNS). We did this for two main reasons: first, there are data showing that SNS penetration is higher in the Western Balkan region than in other regions of Europe and that SNSs are un-proportionally more used by people younger than 35 (Milošević Đorđević and Žeželj 2014a), and second, the positive effects of online contact over and above direct contact have also been documented in the region (Milošević Đorđević and Žeželj 2014b). Our results show that the average number of online outgroup friends is higher than the average number of direct outgroup friends (Figure 3); this trend was replicated both in the majority and minority groups. It seems that young people reach out via SNSs to their outgroup peers. We will discuss the implications of these findings for social identities later in the chapter.



**Figure 3:** Average number of direct and online outgroup friends within ethnic majorities and minorities group in the Western Balkans

Taken together, our results indicate that although youth do not communicate all that much at the moment, they are willing to do so. Even in segregated contexts or contexts with language barriers between groups, there is at least some form of intergroup contact. What is more important, among those who experienced contact, the quality of contact is assessed fairly positive, especially in Serbia and B&H. All of the aforementioned excerpts show that the young are willing to communicate intergenerationally, in forms of contact that is not politically charged. Furthermore, there are good examples, especially from B&H and Serbia, that this type of contact is beneficial. The youth have many advantages in exercising intergroup contact within their generation: their norms and identities are not fully fixed, they have the same social status, and they actively search for friends and romantic partners. It seems the youth can potentially draw on the necessary factors to promote reconciliation.

However, this can only be achieved if the regional contexts in which youth live also promote common social goals, intergroup cooperation, and supportive local norms. Otherwise, contact alone will not reap the fruitful benefits that it should. In this next section, we will examine other ways to overcome the rigid limits of singular identities.

### *Going beyond singular identities*

The following narratives demonstrate the extent to which exclusive identities – such as ethnicity and religion – can feel restrictive for the youth. The respondents note the relational characteristics of group identities – ‘our’ identity exists only in relation to other groups, and most often these relations imply competition or even conflict:

So, the society I think has a tendency to always try to put you in a box, because it is easier for them to deal with others that are different and fall outside of certain societal frames. (female, 28, Priština, Kosovo)

I always had some kind of, I don't know, hm...of resistance towards it [religion]...and when it comes to ethnicity I consider myself a Serb although I don't place too much importance on it, as well...and my family is not the typical, you know, Serb family, which would overemphasize the importance of ethnicity...and I am glad it is the case, because I consider myself a Serb, but I wouldn't like to...nowadays, considering the conditions, don't know, to classify myself only based on my ethnicity even if I don't want to be a part of the group. (male, 23, Banja Luka, B&H)

Here, an ambivalent inner dialogue with the dominant ethnic and religious identities is portrayed. There are two competing needs that the youth face: the need to identify, on the one hand, and the reluctance to accept what is perceived as the implications of these identifications, i.e. taking part in conflicts, on the other. This is also reflective of the political construction of ethnic and religious identities. Since the dominant social discourse is the one of irreconcilable differences and conflict between the ethnic and religious groups, this precludes the young from perceiving possible links and commonalities between different identities.

Today it is hard to be a Serb. You know, when you are genocidal when you are guilty of this or that... I think we need to get together as people and work on that issue in every community, be it schools, family... (female, 24, Banja Luka, B&H)

Our findings also provide insight into a more explicitly articulated critical consideration of the dominant social identities. Youth in the Western Balkans perceive that their identities are politicized – exclusive identities and inter-ethnic divisions are being reinforced and perpetuated by means of political instrumentalization, as well as the media and the educational system. Our participants demonstrated both an awareness of these processes and an opposition towards it:

I think religion is more politics than belief. I see it as a tool that people use to manipulate other people... because the most important thing that you can get from a person is trust. And once you gain that trust, then you can easily manipulate it. (male, 24, Priština, Kosovo)

The youth clearly recognize the social institutions that offer the divisive interpretations of the intergroup relations. In this case, those are educational systems teaching history or politicized religion. Other participants also expressed a need for alternative bases of identity, either in the form of moral virtues rather than pre-imposed social categories or in more global or overarching identifications. It is interesting to note the extent to which the respondents – consciously or automatically – contrast dominant social identities with humane traits. When they say it is more important ‘to be good’ or ‘to be human’ than to identify with ethnic and religious groups, the values

they prioritize are clear. Through this, the youth challenge the dominant narratives that exclusively link the positive attributes with their own group.

The most important thing to me is to be human because I think that is the basic category by which you identify yourself. It becomes the umbrella of your identification. I have been in the past a Muslim, a Kosovar, an Albanian, and many other things, maybe even a patriot, but they have often led me to make flawed decisions. We now know that these categorizations are also means of separating people. For example, when I identified myself as an Albanian, then I unconsciously regarded myself as more important than other people of other nationalities, I thought we were the ones that were righteous and others were wrong. So, I figured that if I see myself as only a human being then all this comparison would disappear. It is more normal and more human....I feel that when I relate to being human I distance myself from all the dogmas and ideologies that I am taught. (male, 21, Priština, Kosovo)

In the last few years, I have started to persistently underline that I am neither one nor the other (Serb/Orthodox), since I am really bothered with taking the positions which imply that we are something else in relation to some other people and that therefore we are something special, often meaning better. That is the way distinctions between people are made. (female, 22, Belgrade, Serbia)

In the context of encouraging openness and reflection on the meaning of identity, the youth challenge the idea of irreconcilable differences between groups and superiority of one's ingroup. They are trying to recategorize their social context, by introducing an overarching identitarian category, such as being 'human'. That way they offer a common group identity for all, which provides grounds for overcoming the present divisions. This process transfers in-group bias in a very specific way: perceiving we all belong to the same group, in the end, makes intergroup boundaries less visible (Brewer 1991, 2000). Positive in-group attitudes now refer to the new, larger group of humans and its members.

So, I figured that if I see myself as only a human being, then all these comparisons would disappear. (female, 26, Banja Luka, B&H)

I think we are human, so at that level, yes. A Serb is part of this group. (female, 21, Priština, Kosovo)

I have created a very big circle which I identify myself with and that is being human. (male, 20, Priština, Kosovo)

I will say something stupid, and I am not sure if that will happen or not. But, let's say that aliens invade the planet and that the existence of the human species is under threat. In that case, I believe that all borders would be erased and all humans would unite in order to survive and continue living. (female, 21, Belgrade, Serbia)

The other mechanism youth use is to try to make categories (or social identities) less salient by referring to a personal characteristic, such as 'normal' or 'good' (Gaertner et al. 2000, Pettigrew 1998):

I am a Serb and it is important for me, but between a bad Serb and a good member of another ethnic group, I would give priority to the goodness. I have already defined myself as a human being and that is the most important feature defining me and the feature I put above everything else. (male, 25, Belgrade, Serbia)

I would define my in-groupers as good persons, no matter of their religion, ethnicity or nationality. (female, 22, Belgrade, Serbia)

It was often the case that young people put forward their subcultural identifications as overarching, and discussed how that differs from the dominant identifications that they are 'pushed into':

Rock subculture, well subculture in general, pushes you to fight the system, to find some faults of the system... That is something typical for all... especially at the beginnings when they [the rockers] started to dress extravagantly and so on... (male, 22, Belgrade, Serbia)

The fact that youth reflect these overarching or alternative categories is substantial in its own right because it reveals the potential that this generation holds for improving intergroup relations. This is especially compelling for countries with a large young population like Kosovo, where over 60% are under the age of 30. Our participants often portrayed their age as an advantage, as a potential societal driving force, but more as giving them opportunities to choose and actively create personal future:

... [commenting on the choice of phrases that define her] And then 'It's important to always set new goals', I think that is very important because we are students now and we have to be open to new opportunities and new experiences. 'Always open doors', that's in line with this, it's about me being open-minded. Then I wrote 'equipped to shape the future', meaning that everything I do at this moment I do for my better future. (female, 22, Sarajevo, B&H)

A specific mechanism was also mentioned by one of the participants - personal growth:

Education, books and being open helped me become who I am today... It is important for human beings to evolve.... To try to find answers to their questions... To not be rigid and strict... (male, 24, North Mitrovica, Kosovo)

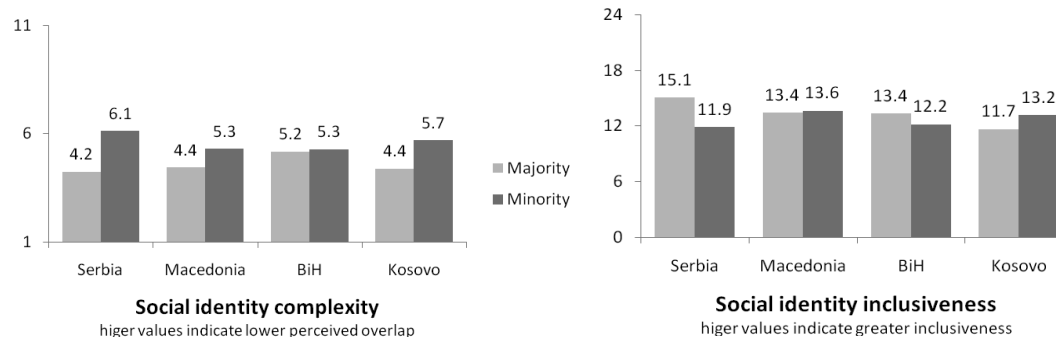
The previous example in which the respondent says it's important 'to not be rigid and strict' to become more open to others, points to the fact that a person needs to overcome some rigid views of the social world to accept others.

#### *Social identity complexity and inclusiveness*

Further, we examined a similar mechanism: allowing different social identities to coexist, not perceiving them as mutually exclusive and, subsequently, creating more flexible 'ingroup' boundaries for the young people in this region (Roccas and Brewer 2002, Brewer and Pierce 2005). To see if the worldview of young people is rigid or more nuanced in this sense, we explored how they perceive the interplay between dominant identities. As coined by Roccas and Brewer (2002), social identity complexity (SIC) is the perceived overlap between the multiple groups a person belongs to. In addition, social identity inclusiveness (SII, Van Dommelen et al. 2015) refers to how inclusively or exclusively one defines the ingroup from a combination of multiple cross-cutting categories. A person who has low inclusiveness of their identity might consider only people of the same religion, nationality, and ethnicity as their ingroup. While SIC is the perceived overlap between the groups and therefore more cognitive in nature, SII is more suggestive of the willingness to include members of other groups who share some (but not all) identities with one's own group.

Our findings show that in most of the countries surveyed, youth who are in a minority position demonstrate more complex social identities (Figure 4). This might at least partially stem from their minority position, which implies lower objective overlap of the identities – more precisely, the low overlap of their national with other identities (e.g. ethnic, religious). Being cognitive in nature, this measure of complexity demonstrates how young people perceive the diversities around them. It makes sense that minority members, as those who are very often treated as outgroups from the majority

perspective, are more likely to be aware of these diversities. Similarly, the youth of majority groups, surrounded mostly by people similar to themselves, are less likely to become aware of these diversities. It is important to note that although minorities demonstrated more complex identities, the level of complexity is only moderate and there is room for increasing the complexity of social identities for both minority and majority members.



**Figure 4:** Social identity complexity and inclusiveness by country and majority/minority status

Youth from ethnic minorities in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina show less inclusive identities than respective majority members. In other words, although they are more aware of social diversities, they are less willing to include members of other groups with some shared identities in their own group. This might come as a result of the recent history of conflicts between Bosniaks and Serbs and the minorities perceiving assimilation threat (Majstorović and Turjačanin 2013). The minorities might, therefore, be more likely to embrace a narrower definition of their identity by excluding others who do not share their ethnicity and religion. However, in Kosovo, the majority demonstrates a less inclusive identity than the minority. This might be due to the efforts of the Albanian majority in the Kosovo to build a new national identity (see Maloku et al. 2016, for a similar argument). Considering that Kosovo's population is on average very young, this poses a problem for its particularities of intergroup relations on the one hand, but could also represent a vast potential for improvement, on the other. Serbs from Kosovo seem to perceive both Serbia and Kosovo as their in-countries, which results in measuring more inclusiveness among them. In Macedonia, where the proportion of majority and minority members is more balanced, we did not register differences with regards to inclusiveness.

Further, we examined how complexity and inclusiveness among youth relate to intergroup relations, i.e. to the extent to which people are psychologically distant from others, how they feel about them and how much contact they have with them.

**Table 3:** Correlations between number of friends, social identity complexity/inclusiveness and outgroup attitudes (distance and feeling thermometer)

	Social distance – Ethnic outgroup	Social distance – Religious outgroup	Thermometer – Ethnic outgroup	Thermometer – Religious outgroup
Number of online friends	-.104**	-.068	.168**	.172**
Number of face-to- face friends	-.001	.007	.069	.103**
Social identity complexity	-.054	-.018	.061	.035
Social identity inclusiveness	-.305**	-.139**	.285**	.266**



As we have previously seen less strong singular identifications - especially with ethnic and religious groups – relate to less social distance and more acceptance of anti-discriminatory policies. However, here we argue that not only the strength, but also the structure of social identity is important: it is important how a young person defines an ingroup, and whether he or she is prepared to broaden the definition of their own social identity so that it includes members of groups that are not typically considered members of the ingroup. The obtained results show that social inclusiveness consistently correlates with the willingness to establish social relationships and a more positive affective relationship with outgroup members: negatively with social distance and positively with the ‘feeling thermometer’, both for the religious and the ethnic outgroup. Social identity complexity, on the other hand, as a more cognitive construct, was less strongly connected with attitudes towards outgroups.

One possible source of building more complexity and inclusiveness of multiple identities could be interethnic contact, and in particular, interethnic friendships. When we compare the effects of online and direct friendships on outgroup attitudes in our sample (see Table 3), we indeed find that this measure is a better predictor of acceptance of outgroups than the number of face-to-face friends. Thinking about the nature and process of online contact – less status differences, less salient ethnic and religious identities, less anxiety in comparison to face to face communication (Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna 2006, Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons 2002), we argue that it could facilitate social identity inclusiveness, i.e. widening the borders of the perceived ingroup more easily than direct contact.

## **Discussion**

In this chapter, we have presented several findings that elucidate the role of traditional social identities for the youth of Western Balkans. We have shown that youth are subject to intense social pressures to sustain the traditional identities and that the traditional identities still serve important psychological functions among them. However, youth are at the same time aware of the extent to which these identities are politicized and recognize their political implications. So, what are the prospects of overcoming these traditional identities in the direction of building more complex social identities and more openness towards others?

First, our findings suggest that various social identifications we investigated (e.g. ethnic, national, regional, identification with family etc.) are closely intertwined among the youth and demonstrate similar patterns of relations with more general social and political attitudes. From this perspective, it appears that we cannot trace some clearly articulated alternative sources of identification that would cut across the more traditional divides. Even the superordinate regional and European identities are not clearly profiled and distinct from the more traditional identities among youth in our sample. This finding is consistent with some more general findings, demonstrating substantial discrepancies within the value and norm systems in the societies undergoing transition (Golubović 2003, Golubović, Spasić and Pavićević 2003, Lazić and Cvejić 2007).

Our results clearly show that fostering more complex and inclusive forms of multiple identities among youth could be a promising venue to overcome the traditional bonds. In line with previous research (Brewer 2000, Crisp et al. 2006, Crisp and Hewstone 2007, Branković et al. 2016, Maloku et al. 2016), our study supports the link between more inclusive identities on the one hand and more tolerant out-group attitudes on the other. Since traditional identities, in particular, ethnic and religious identity, do seem to serve important psychological motives, attempts aimed at decreasing the attachment to these groups could in fact backfire in the current setting (i.e., if threatened, it might increase, rather than decrease identification with these identities). On the other hand, heightening awareness of alternative identifications and the existing overlap between various identities could prove a more viable alternative for youth in the region. Exposing them to the exemplars of people with complex identities, representative of both ingroup and outgroup can be a way to illustrate the

flexibility of intergroup borders. Another way would be to promote the ideas of solidarity as well as shared overarching values, as they seem to have an appeal among the youth. These ideas spontaneously emerged as alternatives to traditional dominant identities in the focus-group discussions.

Second, an additional insight from the present study is that the social lives and experiences of young people who come from minority and majority ethnic and religious groups differ (Brewer, Gonsalkorale and van Dommelen 2013). This affects the construction of multiple social identities in both groups, suggesting that, e.g. identities for minority groups more accurately reflect the complexities of social surroundings, whereas they also show more sensitivity to identity threats. Identities of youth from majority groups, conversely, appear to be more open to including others, but often lack the motivation to actually do so. Both majority and minority youth groups thus face particular identity issues and care should be taken to address these in attempts to overcome the traditional identity bonds. These issues can, for instance, affect the perceptions of overarching national identities, which make an important consideration particularly for the emerging national identities, as that of Kosovo (Maloku et al. 2016). Insights from the qualitative study highlight possible venues of overcoming traditional identities, although these are more likely to be seen as potential than actual opportunities at the present time. For instance, youth in our sample appear to be sensitive to the predominantly exclusive and binding nature of ethnic and religious identities, as well as their political construction and instrumentalization. On the other hand, our study validates previous findings (Blagojević 2013, Pasha et al. 2012, Tomanović et al. 2012, Topuzovska-Latkovic et al. 2013, Žiga et al. 2015) reflecting a very sombre perception of social and democratic institutions among the youth, evidenced, for instance, by a high level of political cynicism and reluctance to take an active part in the political process. Although the young are clearly not satisfied with the current socio-political climate and the bonds of the exclusive identities, their political attitudes do not seem to be sufficiently articulated. Clearly, further democratic consolidation of the societies in the region should therefore include fostering critical thinking among the youth and providing support for more active political participation.

Third, consistent with previous research, our findings imply that public discourse and the manner in which inter-ethnic relations are typically portrayed can affect the youth who are in the process of developing their social identity (Bar-Tal 2000, Paez and Liu 2011). For instance, previous research has demonstrated increased willingness for reconciliation in cases of protracted conflict when the conflict is cast in terms of common humanity (Hirschberger and Ein-Dor 2006). In contrast, when inter-ethnic relations are presented as immediately threatening for the ingroup, people tended to embrace more prejudiced courses of action (Stephan and Stephan 2000). The currently predominant political discourses in most of the region do not support the overcoming of ethnoreligious divides. An important first step would therefore be to reconsider some of the constitutional preambles that constrain the definition of national identity as primarily based on the ethnic majority in the respective countries (Vasiljević 2011). In countries where this is already reflected in legal terms (e.g., Kosovo's constitution), work needs to be done to increase the representation of national identity as inclusive of all ethnic groups.

Finally, to provide opportunities for the recognition of overlapping shared identities, as well as challenging negative perceptions of and feelings towards others, youth should be encouraged to have more contacts across ethnic and religious divides. Our study supports the contention that contact has several beneficial impacts on inter-group relations (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). Future intervention programs bringing together the youth should maximize the possibilities of generalization of the positive experiences. Providing a more long-term basis of interaction by, for example, planning the public space to encourage inter-ethnic contact or engagement in common activities appears as a promising venue. Youth organizations across country borders are a much-needed framework for organizing and supporting contact. Our research also mapped the potential drawbacks and difficulties of such initiatives that should be taken into account. Furthermore, as we demonstrate strong effects of

online contact on intergroup acceptance, we suggest that researchers should also register and longitudinally trace the online friendships and their outcomes. These are spontaneous, informal ways for young people to communicate, and they seem to make more and more use of it.

Youth in the region know very little about the members of other communities because of the physical and political barriers between them, but even more so because they are taught that ethnic, religious and national identities primarily draw content from imagined 'irreconcilable differences'. To address this issue, the educational system should serve as a buffer against the prejudiced and discriminative treatment of others, and not as its perpetrator. More importantly, some of our respondents made clear they would embrace this change and would, in fact, push for it. Similarly, the youth show evident resistance to the political pressure to be instrumentalized in the construction of divisive forms of social identities. By distancing from the political and social institutions the young show their reluctance to conform to the dominant norms and accept the dominant identities. Obviously, they do not feel comfortable in the society created by the previous generations. Internet could be a valuable tool to initiate and promote much-needed changes, and especially so because it overwhelmingly populated by young.

Bridging social divides in the Western Balkans seems like a goal dependent upon politically empowering the youth, offering them more opportunities to communicate and encouraging them to define themselves more broadly instead of limiting themselves to singular identities. Ultimately, that could lead to a liberating way of perceiving oneself and the world.

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