



# ANNUAL REPORT 2025

Belgrade, January 2026, [www.centaronline.org](http://www.centaronline.org)

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## Introduction

The past year was marked by a deepening of political and social polarization in Serbia, as well as by large-scale student and civic protests against corruption, accompanied by demands for greater democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. The reaction of university and secondary school students to the tragic consequences of the collapse of the canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad triggered a wave of dissatisfaction across the country.

Inadequate reactions by the authorities and the judiciary, which created the impression that the investigation was not moving toward an objective determination of responsibility, encouraged citizens across the country to openly and collectively demand that all those responsible be brought to justice. From larger cities, dissatisfaction spread to smaller municipalities and communities. An increase in violence against demonstrators was evident month after month: physical attacks on activists, journalists, and protesters, discrediting of university representatives in the media, and similar incidents.

At the beginning of 2025, dialogue with decision-makers was interrupted at almost all levels where some form of structured dialogue had previously been established. The National Convention on the EU limited dialogue exclusively to the technical level, while a part of the Civil Society Council composed of non-governmental organizations froze its work within the Council.

The Center for Democracy Foundation supported student and civic protests through a number of public statements, condemning violence and supporting the conditional continuation of dialogue with government representatives. In the context of students calling for a general strike, the Foundation discussed the political and legal framework for possible amendments to the Law on Strike through several public debates and expert meetings. We spoke in domestic and international media and published articles in daily and weekly newspapers.

Within the Program Council of the National Convention on the EU and the Alliance for Civil Society, the Foundation supported the position that further dialogue with government representatives should be conditional. In the context of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the need to monitor the Reform Agenda of the Republic of Serbia, an intersectoral working group for monitoring the Reform Agenda was established within the National Convention on the EU. The

Foundation was appointed coordinator for the Human Capital policy area, after which it formed a subgroup for that area. An FCD representative actively participated in the EU–Serbia Joint Consultative Committee (JCC).

At the regional level, FCD coordinated the regional project **Regional Youth Dialogue for Europe (RYDE)**, which entered its final year of implementation. A number of national and regional youth meetings were organized, another regional course of the Politeia School was held, and the final regional conference was organized. Around two thousand young people in the Western Balkans participated in project activities, deepened their knowledge of the EU and reforms important for youth, cooperated regionally through projects we supported, and gained internship experience in our office and in the offices of our partner organizations.

At the national level, the five-year project **“Sustainable Development for All”**, dedicated to the implementation of Agenda 2030 in Serbia, was brought to completion. The multi-year project **“Labour Rights Are Our Rights – Black on White”** continued.

At the local level, in cooperation with UNFPA and UNOPS, a project was implemented to strengthen the capacities of cities and municipalities to develop social services needed by communities and vulnerable groups. We were also directly engaged in improving employability, professional education, and anti-discrimination of vulnerable groups, particularly Roma. In addition, we launched two new projects implemented in municipalities and cities in the Pirot and Rasina districts, as well as in Vranje, Subotica, and Niš.

The first, **“My Idea and My Business,”** is dedicated to the economic empowerment of women and strengthening resilience to climate change. The second, **“Your City – Your Voice,”** builds on the practice developed through the RYDE project and aims to transfer experience gained at the national and regional levels in increasing youth participation in structured dialogue on public policies through establishing the practice of youth policy labs at the local level.

The past year confronted us with several unexpected challenges. The awakening of civic engagement and the demand for more democracy represented, on the one hand, a strong encouragement for the Foundation’s mission. On the other hand, deepened polarization and reactions of the authorities toward the non-governmental non-profit sector called into question the meaning and possibility of public dialogue—without which democratic development cannot occur.

The termination of USAID activities represented another unexpected challenge. A large number of its beneficiaries remained without support for continuing ongoing projects, which on the one hand increased competition in calls of other, increasingly limited donors, and on the other hand made co-financing of European projects more difficult. One of our projects, supported by the Democracy Commission of the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade, was also halted in February 2026.

Furthermore, the termination of USAID projects affected beneficiaries in the public sector—ministries, government agencies and bodies, and local self-government units—thereby significantly reducing the need for these beneficiaries to cooperate with non-governmental organizations, since such cooperation had largely been supported and recommended by USAID.

Serbia's access to the **CERV programme (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values)** opened new financing opportunities, and FCD participated as a partner in several international consortia.

The Foundation continued in 2025 to implement the **Strategic Plan 2023–2025**, while adapting to the current environment through a flexible annual action plan. This annual report refers to the strategic objectives we adopted and presents the results achieved through operational objectives and concrete activities.

## Implementation of the Strategic Plan 2023-2025

In 2025 the CDF continued to implement its Strategic Plan 2023-2025. Its priorities were to diversify its programmatic portfolio and to enhance its operational capacities through innovative practice, diversified funding and development of services for the targeted groups.

Through its projects, CDF combines research, provides expertise and creates new knowledge, builds capacities of institutions, organizations and professional bodies, advocates for policy change and reforms in the context of the EU accession process and creates platforms for a democratic and inclusive dialogue on key political, economic and social issues. Values of democracy, human rights, rule of law, good governance and citizens participation are corner stones of all CDF projects.

**Strategic Objective 1.1: Improve the quality of public dialogue on political, economic and social issues**

During 2025, despite limited opportunities and a high level of political and social polarization, and almost in conditions of completely interrupted dialogue with public authorities, the Foundation succeeded in maintaining dialogue-based formats through public debates, round tables, and consultative meetings involving a wide range of social actors.

A total of **16 events** were held with **more than 600 participants** in Belgrade and other cities across Serbia. These events resulted in recommendations, conclusions and presentations, with the participation of decision-makers, independent institutions, representatives of the academic community, international organizations, employers' associations, trade unions, media, and civil society organizations. The events received solid media coverage.

**Strategic Objective 1.2: Advocate European values and promote European integration within the political community and society in Serbia and the Western Balkans**

During 2025, the Foundation continued to promote European values and advocate for the alignment of domestic legislation with the acquis of the European Union. At the same time, it monitored the implementation of reforms and contributed, through communication with citizens and public outreach, to a better understanding of the EU accession process and the importance of EU membership for citizens, society and the state. The Foundation actively supports a pro-European narrative in society.

Through its projects, the Foundation also strengthened regional youth cooperation and expanded young people's knowledge of European values, policies relevant to youth and the importance of participation in dialogue on reforms.

The demands expressed by students and citizens during protests in 2025 were promoted by the Foundation as demands for the rooting of European values in Serbian society, including:

accountable institutions, the rule of law, respect for human rights and effective anti-corruption policies

Through research, monitoring, recommendations, public events and advocacy activities, the Foundation has positioned itself as a credible partner and interlocutor on the topic of European integration at the local, national, regional and European levels. In this role, the Foundation:

- transfers knowledge and experience to other actors
- implements advocacy initiatives to improve public policies in the context of EU accession
- contributes to increased civic participation
- promotes European values and regional cooperation
- strengthens the European narrative in Serbia.

During 2025, European values were promoted through all Foundation projects. Whether working on labour law and advocating alignment with EU legislation and International Labour Organization standards, strengthening institutional capacities for the implementation of public policies based on EU values and practices, or supporting young people to participate more actively in decision-making processes that affect them, the Foundation consistently communicates a clear pro-European message. Through these activities, the Foundation contributes to a better public understanding of how EU integration and eventual membership can improve the lives and opportunities of citizens.

• **Strategic Objective 1.3: Improve public policies for sustainable development with respect for human rights, the LNOB principle (Leave No One Behind), and the principle of solidarity**

In 2025 CDF influenced the improvement of public policies of sustainable development and the strengthening of human and institutional capacities for reforms, while respecting human rights, solidarity and the principle of "leaving no one behind" (LNOB).

CDF contributed to increasing the capacity of local self-government units, members of sensitive social groups and other actors at the local and national level.

In 2025 CDF continued its two decades long commitment to advancing economic, social and cultural rights, with special focus on labour rights. CDF expanded the thematic and organizational cooperation with social partners and civil society organizations at the level of Serbia, the region and Europe. It continued its cooperation with trade unions and employers` associations, chamber of commerces, businesses and regional development agencies in the effort to enhance social and civic dialogue on the improvement of legal framework, public policy documents, and on more efficient mechanisms for protection of rights through inspectorates, judiciary and independent institutions. Increasing knowledge about human right in business was particularly in the focus of 2024+2025. A number of public debates, conferences and training programs was conducted, as well as significant attention was given to the consultations, with social partners, experts and CSOs about the expected modification of the Labour Law and other pieces of legislation related to the world of work.

## Implemented Projects

### Project “Black on White – Labour Rights and Decent Work in Socio-Economic Reforms in Serbia”

Supported by the **Olof Palme International Center**

Through the continuation of long-term advocacy activities aimed at improving the legal framework and protection of labour rights, the Foundation organized several consultative meetings in 2025 with key stakeholders to discuss major problems in labour legislation, primarily the **Labour Law**, which needs to be amended both to align with several EU directives and to revise provisions that have been considered inadequate for more than a decade.

Changes in the labour market, particularly in the context of technological innovation, the expansion of platform work, and the development of artificial intelligence, represent additional influences on the world of work and labour rights.

Within this project, the Foundation continuously promotes labour rights as part of the broader framework of human rights and, through cooperation with social partners, experts, and other civil society organizations, advocates for accelerated reforms, respect for the law, and greater institutional efficiency in protecting workers’ rights. Equally important is strengthening public awareness of the significance of these rights and of the mechanisms available for their protection through public advocacy.

Within its public advocacy activities, the Foundation organizes public debates, local forums, and prepares annual reports on the state of labour rights.

During 2025, among other activities, the Foundation implemented the following:

#### Debate “Strike Action in the Absence of a New Law on Strike”

13 February 2025, Belgrade

The Law on Strike became a significant public topic in 2025 due to several initiatives and proposals for organizing a **general strike**. The existing law from 1996 does not allow such a possibility, and many of its provisions no longer correspond to today’s circumstances and needs.

The debate discussed the limitations of the existing law, the reasons why a new law has not yet been adopted, and unresolved issues that emerged during the preparation of previous draft versions in recent years. The discussion in Belgrade and Niš brought together representatives of trade unions and employers, legal experts, and civil society activists.

## Debate “Strike Action in the Absence of a New Law on Strike”

19 February 2025, Niš

Due to the strong public interest and the need to involve local stakeholders, the Foundation organized another debate with the same topic in Niš, this time with different speakers, in order to examine the issue from multiple perspectives.

## Round Table “Key Problems of Labour Legislation in Serbia”

13 March 2025, Belgrade

At this round table, the main problems identified in the implementation of the Labour Law were discussed in the context of the expected amendments to the current law.

The basis for discussion was the study “**Key Problems of Labour Legislation in Serbia**”, prepared within the project “*Labour Rights and Decent Work in Socio-Economic Reforms in Serbia – Black on White.*”

Participants emphasized that it is necessary to stop the fragmentation of labour legislation in Serbia and adopt a **new Labour Law** that will adequately regulate all forms of employment. Among the key challenges identified were insufficient labour inspection and supervision of the implementation of regulations, inconsistent and inefficient court practice, weak social dialogue, and new forms of work that are insufficiently protected by labour legislation.

Participants in the discussion included the authors of the study Prof. Bojan Urdarević and Jovana Misailović, as well as Nataša Vučković (Center for Democracy Foundation), Jovana Spaić Erdeljan (International Labour Organization), Slađana Kiković (UGS Nezavisnost), Zoran Stojiljković (Professor Emeritus), Bojana Tamindžija (Center for Emancipation Policies), Svetlana Budimčević (Employers’ Union of Serbia), Bojan Božović (judge), Zoran Radoman (Independent Trade Union of Forestry and Wood Processing), and others.

## Annual Conference “Is Decent Work Possible for Citizens of Serbia? Between Reality and Opportunities”

16 April 2025, Belgrade

The Foundation organized its traditional annual conference under this title in Belgrade.

The conference provided space for critical analysis and constructive dialogue among key stakeholders — trade unions, employers, public institutions, academia, civil society organizations and the media — with the aim of formulating concrete recommendations for improving the position of workers in Serbia.

Three panel sessions addressed:

- the state of labour rights in Serbia
- labour legislation and proposals for future reform steps
- the role of young people in trade unions and what trade unions can do for young people

## Ninth Public Reading of the European Commission’s Report on Serbia

7 November 2025

The Foundation, in cooperation with the **Centre for European Studies** and the **European Western Balkans** portal, organized the ninth public reading of the European Commission’s annual report on Serbia shortly after its publication.

It was emphasized during the event that the European Commission’s assessments clearly show that Brussels insists on the same values that citizens of Serbia have been demanding during months of protests following the tragedy in Novi Sad.

It was noted that **Serbia made no progress in most negotiating chapters**, and for the first time the European Commission recorded **backsliding in the area of freedom of expression**.

## Project Platform “Sustainable Development for All” (SDGs4All)

The project was implemented in cooperation with the Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation (AVDF), Center for Advanced Economic Studies (CEVES), Belgrade Open School (BOŠ), TOC – Association for the Development of Sustainable Communities, BFPE Foundation for a Responsible Society, and SMART Collective, with support from GIZ and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The project was implemented from **March 2020 to May 2025**.

Within this platform, discussions focused on the implementation of **Agenda 2030**, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals monitored by the Foundation within the platform, including:

- poverty eradication
- equal access to education
- equal access to healthcare services
- gender equality
- and other related issues.

### Debate “Single Parents, Standing Alone – Local Policy Support for Parents Raising Children on Their Own”, 1 April 2025, Belgrade

The debate addressed the improvement of local policies aimed at supporting single parents and single-parent families, as well as measures and solutions that could contribute to building more inclusive policies and services at the local level. It was highlighted during the discussion that **almost half of single parents and their children in Serbia (48.9%) are at risk of poverty or social exclusion**, while the rate in families with two parents is **22.1%**. Participants also pointed out that living conditions in single-parent families often lead to the **multiplication of poverty risks**, which ultimately results in child poverty.

### Improving Local Economic Development Planning through Inter-Municipal Cooperation (Užice)

The Foundation co-organized and participated in a program focused on strengthening **inter-municipal cooperation** as a way to overcome limited resources in individual local governments, both financial and human.

Cities and municipalities, however, are still insufficiently encouraged by the current legal framework to develop joint programs with neighboring local governments.

Representatives of local self-governments from the **Zlatibor District** discussed opportunities for improving inter-municipal cooperation. Particular attention was given to cooperation in the areas of: social services in the community, education, healthcare

## Fourth Annual Conference “A Decade of the 2030 Agenda in Serbia: Progress, Achievements and Perspectives”

24 April 2025, Belgrade

This conference marked the **final project conference**.

Participants included representatives of public institutions, civil society organizations, the private sector, the academic community, United Nations agencies, embassies and other key stakeholders.

Participants agreed that aligning policy documents and the legal framework with **Agenda 2030**, as well as establishing institutional coordination mechanisms and mechanisms for monitoring progress and reporting, is a complex but necessary process in order for Serbia to align its development with the commitments it undertook under Agenda 2030.

## Debate “Youth and the 2030 Agenda”

28 May 2025

The debate was organized in cooperation with the **Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation**.

The panel discussion titled “**Youth and Sustainable Development: Dialogue on Opportunities Ahead**” addressed how institutional policies and local initiatives can better respond to the needs of young people through concrete mechanisms, multi-sector cooperation and alignment with Agenda 2030. Participants included:

- Ivana Filipov — Commissioner for Protection of Equality
- Maša Vračar — National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS)
- Nataša Vučković — Center for Democracy Foundation
- Nevena Letić — “Knowledge to Work” initiative
- Marina Savković — Roma Education Fund

- Danica Zdravković — Youth and Pronatalist Policy Commission, Municipality of Medijana (Niš)
- Dobrila Marković — OPENS

## Project Promotion of Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (HREDD) within the Global Solidarity Initiative (IGS)

The project was funded by the **German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)** and implemented by the **German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ)** in cooperation with the Foundation. The project ended in **April 2025**.

The **German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act**, which entered into force in January 2023, as well as the **EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD)**, require companies to ensure respect for human rights and environmental protection within their supply chains.

These regulations have significant implications not only for businesses but also for workers, trade unions, civil society organizations and other stakeholders in Serbia.

Within this project, the Foundation organized a **series of dialogue events** addressing: improving due diligence mechanisms regarding human rights in supply chains; responsible business conduct; complaint mechanisms; the role of trade unions and civil society in monitoring human rights in business operations.

The Foundation also prepared a **study on the role of trade unions and civil society in human rights due diligence in Serbia**.

The protection of human rights in business has been a long-standing topic of work for the Foundation, as evidenced by its membership in the **UN Global Compact**.

### Round Table “Human Rights and Environmental Protection as a Shared Responsibility: Dialogue for Sustainability”

16 January 2025, Valjevo

The round table gathered representatives of the business sector, local government, trade unions, academia and civil society organizations to jointly discuss opportunities for improving the

protection of labour rights, human rights and the environment through responsible business practices and cooperation among all stakeholders.

Participants included:

- Sanela Bahtijarević — German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ)
- Nataša Vučković — Center for Democracy Foundation
- Jovan Protić — International Labour Organization
- Tanja Lindell — Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia
- Miloš Miljković — UGS Nezavisnost
- Miroslav Pimić — City Administration of Valjevo
- Vladimir Radosavljević and Jana Aćimović Planojević — iRevolucija
- Gordana Savić — Užice Center for Human Rights and Democracy
- Jelena Ćirić — Independent Trade Union of the City Administration of Valjevo
- Ognjen Adamović and Rada Tomić — Bizerba
- Sanja Stojilković — Urban-technics d.o.o.
- Slavica Pantić — Local Response Valjevo
- Olivera Erić — Gorenje Valjevo

The discussion was moderated by journalist **Suzana Trninić**.

## Round Table “Due Diligence in Supply Chains: What Does It Mean for Workers in Serbia?”

14 March 2025, Niš

The panel discussion brought together representatives of civil society organizations, trade unions, employers and local government.

Participants included:

- Nataša Vučković — Center for Democracy Foundation
- Vesna Kovačević — Employers’ Union of Serbia
- Slavica Petrović — Association of Disenfranchised Workers and Socially Marginalized Citizens
- Danijel Dašić — PraviLaw

- Miodrag Stanković — City Assembly member, Niš
- Dragoslav Ćirković — Company PAVLE

The goal of the round table was to introduce the main principles of these regulations, better understand their significance for workers in Serbia and encourage open dialogue among relevant stakeholders.

Through the discussion, participants increased their understanding of due diligence obligations imposed by the German law and the European directive on companies and their suppliers. The debate also addressed the importance of these regulations for workers in Serbia, particularly in the context of human rights protection and the establishment of complaint mechanisms.

The round table promoted responsible business practices and cooperation between the business sector, trade unions, civil society and public institutions.

## Round Table “Due Diligence in Supply Chains: What Does It Mean for Workers in Serbia?”

25 March 2025, Zrenjanin

Following the events in Valjevo and Niš, the same topic was discussed in **Zrenjanin**.

Representatives of trade unions, employers and civil society organizations agreed that the German Due Diligence Act could encourage domestic lawmakers to improve complaint mechanisms in the forthcoming amendments to the Labour Law.

## Project “Dialogue in the Center – Social Forum”

In cooperation with the **Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES)**.

This platform for public dialogue, established in **2007**, continued in 2025 to address important political, social and economic topics.

Through a hybrid format, debates were accessible to participants and audiences across Serbia, with an **average of 50 participants per debate**.

## Debate “Mental Health of Youth in Serbia: Is Society Ready to Recognize and Respond to the Crisis?”

3 June 2025

The aim of this session was to provide young participants with a deeper understanding of the challenges, trends and public policy frameworks related to youth mental health in the Western Balkans.

The discussion focused on the ways in which mental health intersects with education, employment and social inclusion, as well as how public policies can contribute to improving the well-being of young people within the context of the European integration process.

## Debate “Gender Gap in Serbia: Progress on Paper, Stagnation in Practice?”

8 July 2025

Although the law prohibits discrimination based on gender, women in Serbia continue to face inequality on a daily basis — from dismissals related to pregnancy, to workplace demotion and a gender pay gap that often widens as women gain higher levels of education and professional experience.

Participants in the debate included:

- Tijana Milošević — Office of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality
- Prof. Dr. Dragica Vujadinović — Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade
- Marija Srdić — Gender Equality Council of the City of Novi Sad, BRAVO movement
- Dunja Marić — Nova Ekonomija
- Jelena Ružić — Women of the Kolubara District
- Marija Martinić — Trade Union Nezavisnost
- Ana Memeti — Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade
- Jelena Dadić — Gender equality consultant and trainer

## Debate “Artificial Intelligence and Education”

21 October 2025

The debate addressed artificial intelligence (AI) and its impact on the ways we learn, work and live, highlighting education as the sector most directly affected by these changes.

While the Government of Serbia is adopting a new **AI Development Strategy until 2030**, education remains a key area for its implementation.

Participants discussed:

- how well the strategic framework is known and understood by those responsible for implementing it
- whether the education system is prepared for the challenges and opportunities brought by AI
- how artificial intelligence is already being integrated into teaching and learning environments.

The discussion highlighted key questions such as how the education system will adapt to technological change, what types of knowledge will be needed in the future, how educational curricula should be reformed, and how to ensure equal access to quality education.

Although Serbia does not yet have a specific law regulating artificial intelligence, the country has adopted **AI development strategies and ethical guidelines**.

The strategy recognizes education as a key factor in the development of artificial intelligence. It is therefore necessary to prepare legal frameworks and standards for the ethical use of AI in a timely manner in order to prevent misuse and ensure accountability.

It was also emphasized that Serbia should closely follow European regulations in this area, given the country's European integration path and the expected alignment with EU standards.

Speakers included:

- Tanja Jakobi — Center for Public Policy Research
- Prof. Kristina Vušković — University of Leeds
- Ana Dimitrijević — Forum of Belgrade Gymnasiums
- Prof. Dr. Dragan Domazet — Metropolitan University
- Milica Pešterić and Simona Vračar — Drašković, Popović & Partners
- Nikola Marković — Serbian Information Society
- Katarina Anđelković — Petlja Foundation
- Nataša Vučković — Center for Democracy Foundation
- Vladimir Lalošević — Employers' Union of Vojvodina
- Milan Stošić — Veselin Masleša Primary School

## Debate “Energy Security of Serbia in the Context of the Current Crisis – Challenges and Solutions”

2 December 2025, Belgrade

The debate aimed to examine the key challenges Serbia faces in the energy sector, including dependence on Russian energy sources, risks related to sanctions and the consequences of Russian gas transit through EU countries.

Participants analyzed possible scenarios, policies and technical solutions that could contribute to greater resilience and long-term stability of the energy system.

The discussion was structured around three thematic blocks:

- the current situation and systemic vulnerabilities
- risks and consequences for citizens and the economy
- potential strategies, including diversification of energy sources, changes in ownership structures, regional cooperation and legal mechanisms for protection against sanctions.

Special attention was given to the role of the state, companies and civil society in shaping energy policy and protecting the public interest.

Key speakers included:

- Aleksandar Kovačević — energy expert
- Goran Radosavljević — FEFA Faculty
- Ilija Batas Bjelić — Institute of Technical Sciences, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
- Miodrag Kapor — energy expert
- Damir Dizdarević — BFPE Foundation for a Responsible Society
- Milena Maglovski — Energy Portal
- Zoran Obradović — UGS Nezavisnost
- Nataša Vučković — Center for Democracy Foundation

## Project Regional Youth Dialogue for Europe – RYDE

Supported by the **European Union**

The project runs until **31 January 2026**.

This three-year regional project (2023–2026) contributed to strengthening the capacity of young people in the Western Balkans to participate in decision-making processes, improving mutual understanding among young people and strengthening regional youth cooperation.

The project also contributed to better awareness among young people and the wider community regarding: the EU accession process. European values and the importance of EU membership.

The main activities implemented during **2025** included the following.

### POLITEIA Regional School for Youth Participation 2025

Belgrade, 21–27 September 2025

The POLITEIA Regional School brought together *26 students from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia\**.

Politeia is more than just a school — it represents a space for learning, exchange of ideas, building connections and strengthening European values. This was the shared conclusion of young participants from the Western Balkans after seven days of discussions and joint activities.

Key topics discussed during the program included:

- regional cooperation
- European integration
- reform processes
- challenges to democracy
- rule of law
- the fight against corruption
- youth participation in decision-making
- shared values and social cohesion

- civic activism
- the benefits of EU integration
- artificial intelligence and the labour market
- gender equality

The program was organized under the motto **“Talk! Act! Activate!”**

## Politeia Thematic Sessions

Two thematic sessions were organized as part of the project:

- **“The Role of Youth Mental Health in Building a Resilient Society”**
- **“Public Policies for Youth Housing Independence in the Western Balkans”**

Research conducted within the RYDE project on the attitudes of civil society organizations and young people regarding youth participation in public policymaking in the Western Balkans showed that **housing conditions are among the five most significant challenges faced by young people across the region.**

The thematic session was organized to strengthen the capacities of young people, civil society organizations and decision-makers to better understand and analyze public policies related to youth housing independence.

Participants exchanged knowledge about:

- the structure of housing policies
- defining policy objectives and measures
- legal frameworks
- methods for assessing the social impact of policies, particularly on young people and other vulnerable groups.

Special attention was given to alignment with **EU standards** and to the exchange of policy experiences from other Western Balkan economies and EU member states.

The session contributed to strengthening regional cooperation and developing a shared understanding of key challenges related to improving access to housing for young people.

The two-day Politeia thematic session brought together representatives of youth organizations, young activists and youth representatives of political parties from:

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo\*
- Montenegro
- North Macedonia
- Serbia.

The session “**The Role of Youth Mental Health in Building a Resilient Society**” was organized by the project partner organization **AIEN from Albania**.

## Youth Policy Labs (National and Regional)

Youth Policy Labs were organized as platforms for dialogue between young people and decision-makers on public policies relevant to youth, including education, employment, health, environmental protection, human rights and technological development.

These policy labs were first organized at the **national level**, followed by **regional sessions**.

A total of 30 meetings were held across five thematic areas, selected based on previously conducted research. Each RYDE project partner was responsible for one thematic area:

- Youth participation — partner organization in Albania
- Sexual and reproductive health of youth — partner organization in Pristina
- Youth Guarantee and youth employment — partner organization in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Cultural policy and youth — Center for Democracy Foundation (Serbia)
- Media literacy and the digital environment — partner organization in Kosovo

For each of these thematic areas, sets of policy recommendations were formulated and later presented to public authorities through advocacy activities.

Representatives of the Foundation participated in all policy labs and coordinated the thematic area “Cultural Policy and Youth.”

After three national sessions, three regional policy labs were organized.

The final regional youth dialogue session on youth, culture and cultural heritage in the Western Balkans was held on 3 December 2025 at the ASK Center (Association for the Affirmation of Culture) in Belgrade.

The session was organized by the Regional Academy for Democratic Development in cooperation with the Center for Democracy Foundation, within the three-year project “Regional Youth Dialogue for Europe – RYDE”, supported by the European Union.

This session represented a continuation of the dialogue previously conducted at the national level in Serbia and aimed to strengthen dialogue between youth representatives and institutions from across the Western Balkans in order to jointly discuss recommendations for improving youth policies in the field of culture and cultural heritage.

Participants from public institutions, civil society organizations and youth communities across the Western Balkans worked together to define regional priorities that would:

- strengthen youth participation in shaping cultural policies
- ensure inclusiveness
- improve access to cultural opportunities.

Participants included representatives of institutions, civil society organizations and young people from across the region. Among them were:

- Marija Ivković — Youth Sector, Ministry of Tourism and Youth of the Republic of Serbia
- Tijana Bugarski — Gallery of Matica Srpska
- Marija Dragišić — Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the Republic of Serbia
- Maša Vukanović — Institute for the Study of Cultural Development
- Ivana Branković — Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia
- Dunja Trifunović — UN Youth Advisory Group in Serbia
- Ivana Bogičević Leko — expert on youth and culture
- Jovana Jovanović — student, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad
- Nataša Sandić — student, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad
- Ivan Šuković — Center for Public Policy Research
- Aleksandra Nikolić — cultural heritage specialist
- Ana Đurić — student, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad
- Evisald Arapi — youth activist from Albania
- Kirila Cvetkovska — Center for Audiovisual Arts, North Macedonia
- Ivona Jankova — Center for Contemporary Arts and Culture Bitola, North Macedonia
- Dejan Vasilevski — cultural manager, Go Green organization, North Macedonia

- Bardha Sadria — Organization for Promotion, Equality and Advocacy, Kosovo\*
- Alma Pelo Zagorčić — Civic Initiative Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Key Recommendations Adopted within the Youth Policy Labs (Cultural Policy and Youth)

Several recommendations were adopted during the meetings dedicated to youth, culture and cultural heritage in the Western Balkans:

- Increase and institutionalize youth participation in the development of cultural policies through amendments to the Law on Culture, the Law on Cultural Heritage and the Law on Youth, as well as through the establishment of permanent dialogue mechanisms (a strengthened Government Youth Council and local youth cultural councils).
- Launch public consultations and develop a new National Strategy for Cultural Development in cooperation with young people, civil society and the expert community, in order to include clear objectives, measurable indicators and a youth dimension.
- Align national, youth and local development strategies in order to connect cultural, educational and youth policies across all levels of governance.
- Ensure sustainable and fair financing of culture and youth initiatives by increasing budget allocations and establishing stable financial mechanisms and funds for youth cultural organizations.

## RYDE Youth Fund

Young people also strengthened their knowledge and cooperation capacities through the Youth Fund, within which financial support was awarded to nine civil society projects from the Western Balkans with a total value of EUR 250,000. The supported organizations were:

- ✓ Leaders for Education, Activism and Development, project “LEAP - Local engagement, activism and participation”, North Macedonia
- ✓ Union of Secondary School Students of Serbia, project “School Student Lab - enhancing youth activism on local and national level”, from Serbia
- ✓ Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society, project “Empowering Youth to Advocate for Green Future”, from Serbia
- ✓ New Social Initiative, project “Future Bridges: Empowering Youth for

- ✓ Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue”, from Kosovo\*
- ✓ Beyond Barriers Association, project “Voice & Impact: Empowering Youth Councils for Community Change”, Albania
- ✓ Women's Association of Kolubara Region, project “Increasing political participation of young women”, from Serbia
- ✓ Association “Progressive Reinforcement of Organizations and Individuals” PROI, project “Youth Action for EU Integration: Advocating the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan”, from Bosnia and Herzegovina
- ✓ Albanian Institute for International Studies, project” European Academy: fostering peace and integration through youth engagement”, Albania
- ✓ I would like to be in the EU NGO, project “Youth- Media Network for reforms”, from Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Youth Achievement Fund

Through this fund 10 grass root youth initiatives were supported across the WB region. The aim of this activity was to strengthen creative groups in the Western Balkans, particularly informal ones, by providing financial support for initiatives aiming to:

1. Increase youth activism in their communities and participation in structured dialogue with decision makers on public policies relevant to youth
2. Advocate for the adoption of European values and strengthening of democratic and responsible institutions
3. Promote regional cooperation and political, economic and social benefits of the EU integration for the Western Balkans countries;

## Regional Conference “Youth of the Western Balkans and the European Union: Shaping Our Common Future”

18–19 November 2025

Toward the end of the three-year RYDE project, a two-day regional conference was organized simultaneously in five conference centers: Belgrade, Sarajevo Tirana Skopje and Pristina.

More than **30 speakers and 515 participants**, both in person and online, took part in the event.

The conference addressed key regional topics through five thematic panel discussions:

- A Bridge to Europe – Youth of the Western Balkans in Reform Processes
- Youth Employment in the Era of Artificial Intelligence: Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans – Challenges and Opportunities
- Youth Well-Being in Focus: Health, Housing and Culture
- Youth in the Digital Landscape: Security, Trust and Resilience
- Youth and Nature: Partnership for a Sustainable Green Future

## Project “PRO – Local Governance for People and Nature”

### Cooperation with UNFPA

During 2025, the Foundation contributed to strengthening the capacities of 12 local self-government units to identify community needs and establish social services for vulnerable groups, including Roma communities, particularly informal waste collectors and their families.

These activities were implemented as part of the joint UN programme “PRO – Local Governance for People and Nature.”

The program aims to improve the quality of life of citizens by strengthening local governance, social inclusion and environmental protection in 110 cities and municipalities across Serbia.

The PRO programme also provides support to informal waste collectors affected by the modernization of waste management systems in municipalities included in the Solid Waste Programme, co-financed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the French Development Agency (AFD).

The programme outcome focuses on strengthening the capacity of local governments to provide systemic responses to the rights and needs of waste collectors, support their economic empowerment and ensure sustainable income opportunities.

It also aims to improve the overall social position of waste collectors and their families through better access to: social protection education and healthcare services.

The Foundation organized a number of workshops with representatives of municipalities and cities, civil society activists and representatives of educational and health institutions in order to identify effective approaches to empowering vulnerable groups within local communities.

Through direct work with beneficiaries — particularly families of informal waste collectors — awareness was raised regarding **professional training opportunities, job-seeking processes and the importance of education for young people.**

Two publications were produced within the project:

- Handbook for Strengthening the Capacity of Local Self-Governments to Improve the Employability of Waste Collectors
- Illustrated handbook for waste collectors’ families “Path to Employment: Know Your Rights and Opportunities.”

## Project “Politeia – Knowledge Hub for Active Youth”

The project aimed to reduce social distance between young people belonging to majority and minority communities.

Planned as a program within the **Politeia School**, the project was intended to bring together young people from **Subotica and Bujanovac** for a three-day workshop focused on dialogue, cooperation and mutual understanding.

Unfortunately, the project was suspended due to the decision to freeze funding within the USAID programme, which resulted in the termination of several activities supported by that programme.

## Project “My Idea – My Business”

This project focuses on empowering women in southern Serbia through entrepreneurship and climate resilience, specifically in the Rasina District (Kruševac) and Pirot District (Pirot).

The project supports women in developing and managing their own businesses and social enterprises, while also strengthening the resilience of women engaged in agriculture to the impacts of climate change.

Local civil society organizations **Peščanik (Kruševac)** and **Ternipe (Pirot)** serve as key local partners and community contact points.

Through training and mentoring support, the project empowers **30 women aged 20–40** to improve their knowledge of business development, business planning and entrepreneurship.

Special attention is given to **women from vulnerable groups**, including:

- single mothers
- persons with disabilities
- Roma women.

In the Rasina District, the project also supports 12 women involved in agribusiness, helping them strengthen their knowledge and skills related to climate resilience in agricultural production.

The project also contributes to raising awareness among local stakeholders — including decision-makers, public officials, companies, business associations and civil society organizations — about the importance of improving the environment for the development of women’s entrepreneurship.

## Project “Your City – Your Voice”

Through this project, the Foundation encourages **youth participation in planning and decision-making processes related to community development**.

Young people in Serbia often feel that they have little or no influence on public policies and therefore rarely participate in decision-making processes within their communities.

In order to make youth priorities more visible in local communities, the Center for Democracy Foundation launched the project **“Your City – Your Voice” (2025–2026)**.

The main objective of the project is to increase the participation of **young people aged 18–30 and local civil society organizations** in local development planning and in shaping public policies relevant to youth.

The project aims to achieve these goals by:

- increasing understanding of policy-making and planning processes
- identifying youth priorities in key reform areas
- strengthening institutional mechanisms for youth participation
- adapting the **Youth Policy Labs model** to the local level.

## Participation in Public Events and Working Groups

During 2025, the Foundation actively participated in numerous events dedicated to the **European integration of the Western Balkans**, both at the national and international levels.

Key activities included:

- organization of the Ninth Public Reading of the European Commission Report on Serbia (2025) in cooperation with the Centre for Contemporary Politics and the European Western Balkans portal
- participation in the Programme Council of the National Convention on the European Union (NCEU)
- contribution to the preparation of the NCEU Book of Recommendations for 2025
- participation in the Intersectoral Working Group for Monitoring the Reform Agenda within the framework of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, where the Foundation coordinates the Human Capital policy area
- participation in the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) EU–Serbia, where the Foundation has been represented since 2024.

The Foundation also participated in the Monitoring Committee for the Operational Programme on Employment, Skills and Social Inclusion 2024–2027.

Additionally, representatives of the Foundation participated in:

- the Civil Society Week 2025, organized by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in Brussels
- the Civic Engagement Conference 2025 in Chişinău
- the Annual Conference of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) in Brussels.

In 2025, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted the recommendation of the Committee on NGOs granting the Center for Democracy Foundation special consultative status.



to be continued in 2026