EUROPEANIZATION IN SEGREGATED SCHOOLS? THIRD PARTIES' EFFORTS TO BUILD A TRANS-ETHNIC EDUCATIONAL SPACE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract. *Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration has been marked by persistent stagnation, particularly in education, where ethnic segregation endures despite decades of reforms and external support. Most analyses approach reconciliation from a top-down perspective, focusing on constitutional reform and EU conditionality, yet this overlooks the everyday realities of divided schooling. This article addresses that gap by examining reconciliation from a bottom-up perspective, by examining third-party efforts to build trans-ethnic educational spaces in post-conflict societies.*

The research adopts a qualitative case study design, triangulating European Commission progress reports (2018–2024), IPA funding allocations, and NGO project documentation. This approach investigates how EU support intersects with local agency and whether participatory practices foster sustainable change in a segregated educational landscape.

Findings show that while national reforms remain blocked, micro-level initiatives yield tangible improvements in interethnic cooperation, with some schools integrating inclusive models into curricula. These outcomes highlight the potential of participatory education projects to complement stalled macro-level reforms and illustrate how bottom-up approaches can plant the seeds of a trans-ethnic social fabric, offering both local benefits and pathways for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession.

Keywords*: participatory approach, peacebuilding, reconciliation, NGO sector.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after the signing of the *Dayton Peace Agreement* (DPA hereafter) that ended one of the bloodiest conflicts in Europe since the Second World War, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH hereafter) still bears the deep scars of its violent past. As the country most severely affected by the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, BiH continues to struggle with the social, political and institutional consequences of genocide, mass displacement and entrenched ethnic division. In recent years, however, BiH's status in relation to the European Union (EU hereafter) has shifted significantly. After a decade of stagnation, the country was granted candidate status in December 2022 and, in March 2024, the European Council formally opened accession negotiations. This renewed engagement to the region must be understood within the broader geopolitical context shaped by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has prompted the EU to reassess the strategic importance of enlargement in the

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Western Balkans (Butnaru-Troncotă, 2025). These milestones have signaled renewed political momentum and raised expectations that BiH could finally move closer to EU membership.

However, BiH's progress is still conditioned by the fulfilment of the 14 key priorities outlined in the European Commission's 2019 Opinion on the country's membership application. These priorities form the political and institutional benchmarks against which reforms are measured, covering areas such as the rule of law, public administration, democratic functioning and fundamental rights. Importantly, they underline that accession cannot proceed without visible progress on issues directly related to equality, non-discrimination and reconciliation.

At the same time, the EU has assumed a dual role in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On one hand, the European Commission acts as the central political actor guiding the enlargement process. On the other hand, it acts as a guarantor of post-conflict stability through its largest civilian mission EUFOR Althea, which operates under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework. This dual engagement distinguishes BiH from other Western Balkan candidates, except for Kosovo[*], and underscores the enduring fragility of its institutions three decades after the war. Within this framework, the EU's conditionality takes on a broader meaning, linking technical reforms with the deeper goal of reconciliation. Among the 14 priorities, several are directly connected to this specific aspect of ethnic reconciliation, calling for eliminating discrimination in access to education, ensuring consistent implementation of human rights rulings and building a functional political system that transcends ethnonationalist divisions. One of the most striking illustrations in regard of this failure is the *Sejdić-Finci* case, in which the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2009 that BiH's Constitution discriminates against citizens who do not belong to the three "constituent peoples" (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs). Despite repeated calls from the EU and the Council of Europe, this ruling has never been implemented. As a result, citizens from minority groups remain excluded from high political office and Bosnia continues to breach its international human rights obligations (Troncotă, 2014).

The roots of these persistent divisions lie in the DPA, which ended the war in 1995 but also entrenched ethnicity as the primary organizing principle of the Bosnian state. The Constitution created under Dayton institutionalized a decentralized and asymmetric political order, granting extensive powers to the two entities and ten cantons, including full control over education (Chandler, 2000; Bose, 2002; Mulalic, 2024; Preljević, 2025). This fragmented and defective governance model has undermined any possibility of a unified educational policy and has allowed local ethno-political elites to sustain control by reinforcing divisions. Scholars have widely argued that the DPA has institutionalized "ethnic territoriality," producing a system where political legitimacy is drawn almost exclusively from ethnic affiliation rather than civic representation (Satterwhite and Campbell, 1999; Bose, 2002; Chandler, 2006; Pehlivanović, 2024; Pepić, 2025; Hasanović and Kapidžić, 2025). Moreover, maintaining the status quo has become a vital interest of ethno-political elites, since the Dayton system remains highly beneficial for their grip on power. Rather than pushing for systemic reform, elites have adapted to the incentives of international actors while avoiding any meaningful transformation, thus preserving Dayton's structural limitations (Troncotă, 2016).

[*] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

As a result, territorial and ethnic homogenization became the norm in post-war BiH, shaping not only political structures but also local communities. The education sector in BiH reflects perhaps the clearest example of how ethnic segregation has been institutionalized since Dayton. Designed originally as a temporary compromise to allow displaced communities to return and to ease post-war tensions, the so-called *"two schools under one roof"* model which was supposed to provide an interim solution for divided communities, in practice, entrenched separation instead of overcoming it. Under this system, students from different ethnic groups often attend the same building but are taught in separate classrooms, follow different curricula and are divided by language, history, religion and national symbols. Rather than fostering coexistence, the model has reproduced mistrust and exclusion from early childhood onwards. Today, more than fifty schools across the Federation of BiH still operate under this arrangement, despite court rulings that labelled it discriminatory (Freedom House, 2024). The system illustrates how the Dayton framework, by decentralising education to entities and cantons, created space for ethnonationalist parties to use schools as instruments of identity politics. Instead of being spaces for reconciliation, schools became a battleground for reinforcing division, effectively passing on the grievances of the war to new generations (Tveit, Cameron and Kovač, 2014).

Despite three decades of international involvement, most analyses of BiH's EU integration and reconciliation efforts have approached the problem from a top-down perspective, focusing on constitutional reforms, political negotiations, or compliance with EU conditionality. While these dimensions are essential, such approaches risk neglecting the everyday realities of segregation and the potential for change at the community level. Thus, one research gap that this article addresses is the need to examine reconciliation from a bottom-up perspective, particularly in the field of education, where the persistence of ethnic separation continues to undermine social cohesion. Is Europeanization possible to achieve in ethnically segregated schools? The main aim of this analysis is to assess whether third-party efforts (for example, those of the NGO sector) to create trans-ethnic educational spaces in the Federation of BiH can play a role in advancing ethnic reconciliation, promoting education for peace and supporting BiH's European integration process. The main hypothesis guiding this research is built around the fact that, despite many setbacks in reducing ethnic segregation in the field of education in BiH, over the past decade, there is still a positive impact of EU funded projects managed by local NGOs that use a participatory approach, which have produced visible results in building a trans-ethnic educational space. From this perspective, the study addresses the following research question: *How have EU-funded post-conflict peacebuilding efforts impacted ethnic reconciliation in BiH's education system between 2018 and 2024?*

By focusing on the case of the Nansen Dialogue Centres (NDCs), which combine EU funding with participatory local methodologies, the analysis seeks to uncover how micro-level initiatives can plant the seeds of cooperation even when macro-level reforms stagnate. The article is structured into four main sections: the first section situates BiH's post-Dayton political and institutional landscape, outlining how ethnic governance and EU conditionality intersect in the field of education. The second section analyses the allocation of EU financial assistance under IPA II (2014–2020) and IPA III (2021–2027), tracing the evolution of EU support for educational reform. The third section focuses on the case study of the Nansen Dialogue Centres, examining how their participatory peace education projects have contributed to building trans-ethnic cooperation between 2018 and 2024. Finally, the concluding section reflects on the implications of these findings for the broader debate on reconciliation, participatory development and BiH's European integration path.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Europeanization and the role of the NGO sector

To better understand BiH's path toward reconciliation and EU integration, it is essential to situate the discussion within the broader framework of Europeanization. Over the past decades, the concept has generated a wide spectrum of interpretations within academic and policy debates (for a synthesis of these debates see Ion, 2016). As Bandov and Herceg Kolman (2018) observe, the term has evolved far beyond its original institutional connotation of compliance with EU norms, now encompassing a broader understanding of how ideas, values and practices travel between the European and domestic levels. In their view, Europeanization can be understood simultaneously as a top-down process, through which EU rules and standards are diffused into national systems, as a bottom-up dynamic, where local actors reinterpret and adapt these norms and as a multi-directional exchange, reflecting the complex interplay between institutions, societies, and the EU framework itself (Bandov and Herceg Kolman 2018).

Building on this multidimensional understanding, this article adopts the following working definition of Europeanization: *the process through which EU political, economic and social norms, values and practices are internalized, institutionalized and implemented by non-EU member states, particularly those aspiring to EU membership, as part of their broader reform and integration efforts (Butnaru-Troncotă, 2016; 2024).* This perspective not only captures the transformative dimension of alignment with EU standards, but also acknowledges the normative and participatory aspects of Europeanization. In doing so, it allows the inclusion of non-state actors such as NGOs and local communities as legitimate agents of Europeanization and carriers of European values in everyday governance practices.

Thus, our view connects to what the literature describes as *bottom-up Europeanization*, a process in which European norms are not merely imposed from above but emerge through local reinterpretation and social practice (Džankić, 2019). Studies of EU support to civil society in enlargement countries have shown that NGOs often act as intermediaries between formal EU policies and local realities, translating abstract principles of democracy, participation and equality into contextually meaningful actions (Dereci, 2015). Similarly, analyses of the Western Balkans highlight that civil society organisations have become *change agents* capable of fostering Europeanization from below, creating micro-spaces where dialogue, inclusion and accountability take root despite political stagnation (Wunsch, 2012). This bottom-up approach reveals how education, culture and civic participation can operate as quiet but persistent vectors of Europeanization, producing long-term social transformation and contributing to 'trans-ethnic spaces' even when institutional reforms remain blocked.

2.2. Ethnic segregation of the educational system in BiH

The literature on post-war education in BiH consistently emphasizes how the school system has been used to sustain ethnic division rather than to overcome it, pointing to practices of segregation, the negative legacies of Dayton and the reproduction of exclusionary narratives through curricula (Hadžić, 2022; Kroening, 2024; Kovač, 2025). Hadžić (2022) highlights that the "two schools under one roof" model in FBiH remains an institutionalized practice of ethnopolitics that undermines peacebuilding, reconciliation and democratic development through structural and curricular separation of ethnic groups, where children are exposed to ethnically differentiated narratives in terms of language, history, religion and national symbols. This dysfunctional dynamic is exemplified by Hadzic through the case of the *Common Core Curriculum* project in BiH an initiative that sought to develop a structured

shared curriculum on general world history and geography knowledge while avoiding Bosnia's own national history and identity issues.

A key point raised by Hadžić is that segregation is not an accidental or inevitable outcome of diversity, but rather a practice intentionally orchestrated and sustained by political elites who benefit from the persistence of ethnic grievances and identities, which remain central to their political platforms. He illustrates this by quoting Greta Kune, former Minister of Education of the Central Bosnia Canton, who in 2007 declared that the system of 'two schools under one roof' is sound because "it does not mix pears and apples", thereby shifting the focus of education away from enriching students with knowledge and abilities and into perpetuating an ideological, religious-national depiction of reality (Hadžić, 2022: 37). Building on his critique of the political and structural dimensions of segregation, Hadžić also draws attention to its impact on students themselves, leading to the creation of a "systematic alienation", producing new generations who "do not agree and we do not want to interact" (Hadžić, 2022: 37).

In order to stop passing down the grievances of the past on the younger generations, Hadžić proposes a few important takeaways: firstly, a constitutional reform that would address the root cause of the problem, as the current framework gives the state no sovereignty over education and allows local ethnonationalist parties to maintain segregation given the current distribution of education ministries among different cantons. Secondly, he calls for a fundamental shift in the purpose of education, moving away from a "cognitive segregated ethnopolitical matrix" toward a school organized for "human enlightenment" (Hadžić, 2022 : 39) that values individuality, critical judgment, and multiculturalism over ethnic collectivism. Thirdly, he advocates for the implementation of peace education, which is currently "almost non-existent" in the Balkans, to promote alternative historical narratives, foster inter-ethnic communication and help youth understand the value of non-violent conflict resolution.

While Hadžić's overall perspective suggests that the eradication of educational segregation depends primarily on a top-down approach, with state institutions as the main drivers of change and youth as passive recipients, at the very end of his paper he briefly addresses an argument that should not be overlooked. As part of recommendations for further discussions, he suggests that *"(…) students should be part of debates held by policymakers, civil society personnel and scholars related to the education system and approaches to pedagogy. There should be a focus on local peace agencies, peace infrastructures and non-violent state formation dynamics* (Hadžić, 2022: 40)*".* Prior to this, most of his analysis is devoted to a macro-level structural critique, emphasizing how powerful institutions create and sustain division. Yet, he concludes his arguments with the brief introduction of the bottom-up idea that student participation is necessary, since legal and institutional reforms alone may not be sufficient to heal a divided society. The generation most affected by segregation must be empowered to co-create the new system, as the goal is not only administrative unification but genuine social reconciliation.

Kroening (2024) reinforces most of Hadžić's arguments on educational segregation, from the way the DPA institutionalized ethnic divisions and gave power to ethnically aligned political parties, to how decentralized control allows for the distortion of school curricula where each group teaches its own selective story and blocks genuine reconciliation. Kroening's contribution lies in demonstrating how international actors tried to push reforms but failed, as the very system created by Dayton made real change almost impossible. For example, she presents how "*The Peace Implementation Council (PIC)*" established the mandate for reform in 1997, urging BiH authorities to promote tolerance and a multi-ethnic

system, thereby setting the initial reform trajectory; "*The Office of the High Representative (OHR)"*, tasked with overseeing DPA implementation, led initial efforts, facilitating agreements such as the 1999 mandate to remove "objectionable material" from textbooks and the 2002 agreement accommodating returnee children; and how "*The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)"* assumed a broader role in the early 2000s, especially in addressing human rights and the needs of returnee children. Kroening argues that these reform efforts failed mainly because the DPA handed control of education to the entities and cantons, giving space for ethnonationalist politicians to dominate. In this setup, they had little incentive to compromise, since any change was seen as a threat to their group's identity and to their own political power (Kroening, 2024 : 53). Decentralization allowed the dominant ethnic group in each region, through its aligned political parties, to shape education policies only for its own community and, because politics is organized almost entirely along ethnic lines, politicians do not need to compete for support across the whole population, but only within their own group, making real reform even less likely.

The previous observations lead us to argue that the shortcomings of these reforms cannot be attributed only to their external design, as the failure can also be seen as a consequence of working with the *beneficiaries* of this existing fragmented system, namely, the political elites. Lacking direct engagement with citizens and students, the reforms could not generate grassroots support or challenge ethnonationalist incentives, suggesting that greater involvement of citizens and those directly affected may be a crucial area missing from existing solutions.

Expanding upon the analyses of Hadžić and Kroening, Kovač (2025) turns attention to the content of education itself, providing empirical additions to the educational segregation field, focusing on the discursive tone and specific content strategies used in the school curricula. He systematically analyses 36 history textbooks across the three ethnic programmes to show how segregation is reproduced at the classroom level through "us vs. them" narratives. For instance, although differing in emphasis, the Croatian, Serbian, and Bosniak educational programs all follow a similar pattern of three key areas: (1) celebrating 'us', (2) devaluing 'them' and (3) being victimized by the two other groups. The *celebrating 'us'* component follows the nationalistic pattern of glorifying its own group's greatness and heroism, one example being the dispute over the famous scientific historical figure Nikola Tesla, who is portrayed as a Croat in Croatian textbooks, Serb in Serb books and "simply by his name" in Bosniak books (Kovač, 2025 : 278). *Devaluing 'them'* component implies negative associations on other ethnic groups, portraying them in a negative light as aggressors or enemies through the usage of "politically explosive" formulations (Kovač, 2025 : 278). For example, the Croatian textbooks describing Mostar's Old Bridge, a UNESCO World Heritage site widely known to have been destroyed by Croat forces in 1993, is presented in certain narratives as "the heart of the Croatian resistance." While nationalist bias can also be found in history books elsewhere, in BiH the problem is sharper because positive self-representation is often achieved by devaluing the other two ethnic groups. Last but not least, the victimization among all three ethnic groups establishes the basis for the popular demand that "the truth" needs to be acknowledged as a path to healing, which often deepen antagonism rather than resolve it (Kovač, 2025 : 281). Moreover, the study found that "there are no chapters aimed at increasing reconciliation, peace, and mutual trust among the people in BiH" (Kovač, 2025 : 280).

While Hadžić emphasizes constitutional design and student socialization and Kroening traces the repeated failure of international reforms, Kovač gathers evidence on how the curricula are portraying others as threatening, thereby obstructing reconciliation, calling

this system an "accomplice" in perpetuating the "ethnocracy trap," where ethnicity governs political and organizational decision-making (Kovač, 2025 : 280). Kovač concludes that textbooks are active obstacles to reconciliation because they systematically devalue other groups and he explicitly links this to the need for comprehensive reform and inclusive, multi-perspective teaching, such as: create inclusive textbooks that encourage people to share perspectives, take civic action and support peacebuilding, explain to children why history matters in order to achieve peace, present BiH as shared homeland, present ethnic and religious diversity in a manner that stresses unity, fairly present historical figures from all groups and avoid the usage of inflammatory or romanticized descriptions of the past.

An important observation we draw from Kovač's study is that, instead of fostering collaboration, current educational narratives turn groups against each other. Reconciliation cannot emerge spontaneously under such conditions as it needs to be actively taught, with an emphasis on dialogue, cooperation and the recognition that peace can only be built together.

2.3. Peacebuilding education as a path towards ethnic reconciliation

The previously discussed literature shows how BiH's education system sustains division through constitutional design, failed international reforms and curricula that reinforce "us vs. them" narratives. These arguments make it clear that top-down reforms alone would not be enough, as they would overlook the people most directly affected by segregation and lose sight of the importance of exploring bottom-up perspectives. Thus, the following section shifts from a structural and content analysis of division to examining the perspectives and direct voices of actors in the classroom and how students' and teachers' awareness and participation can shape the prospects for peace education (A. Mulalic, 2023; Kasumagić-Kafedžić and L. Mulalić, 2024).

Mulalić (2023) expands the conversation on ethnonationalist reproduction by focusing on students' lived experiences, the absence of systemic peace education and the missed opportunities for transformation. While indirectly reinforcing Hadžić's claims that schools are not neutral institutions but active contributors to the deepening of ethnic polarization, she moves beyond this diagnosis by focusing on Education for Peace (EFP) as a potential countermeasure, exposing the systemic failure to implement it: *"The EFP is both an educationally and socially directed process that involves knowledge of values and virtues, which will enable young people to develop a culture of peace-related capacities (Mulalic, 2023 : 350)"*. She describes EFP as an educational and social process aimed at building young people's capacity for peace by fostering both values and skills necessary for dialogue, coexistence and conflict resolution. Rooted in principles such as love, trust, justice, respect, and non-violence, it equips students with practical abilities, such as listening, reflection, cooperation and problem-solving, while cultivating attitudes of compassion and understanding. Its final goal is to shape a sustainable culture of peace in the mindset and behavior of young people.

Through a comprehensive survey of 366 first-year university students, she finds that awareness and participation in EFP are extremely low. For example, *"59% of the respondents stated that they were not aware of the presence of the EFP in their primary and secondary schools" (Mulalic, 2023: 355).* She interprets this not as a coincidence, but as a consequence of ethnically segregated curricula, ideologically influenced teachers and a lack of institutional responsibility. Students reported minimal exposure to interethnic dialogue or peace-related content, echoing Hadžić's view of youth being "mentally mutilated" by segregated, ethnocentric instruction. Mulalić's original contribution lies in tracing the institutional abdication of peace education responsibilities. She writes that: *"The peace activities have not*

been institutionalised and are run mostly by international organisations with the support of local non-governmental organisations" (Mulalic, 2023: 363). This is most visible in her discussion of USAID's 2022 Sarajevo peace education conference, which, while commendable, is illustrative of the overreliance on foreign actors: *"The programme in the past two years was implemented in more than 60 schools (...). However, the literature review indicated that there is a very serious lack of initiative by the local stakeholders and institutions"* (Mulalic, 2023: 363). This builds on and complicates Hadžić's argument by showing that even when reform efforts exist, they are often externally driven and unsustainable, with no long-term systemic integration.

Another interesting finding brought by her research is the discovery of readiness among young students in BiH to embrace intercultural learning, empathy training and structural reforms connected to peace education. Despite being products of an ethnically polarized system, there are students who consistently voiced their belief in the transformative potential of Education for Peace to foster reconciliation and social harmony. One example in this regard is the results registered to one of her survey question, "The Education for Peace can help in shaping the future based on cooperation, intercultural awareness and common social interests in BiH", as this statement was strongly agreed upon by 76.5% of students (Mulalic, 2023 : 358). However, the findings suggest that while many students demonstrate openness to intercultural learning and reconciliation, others may hold entrenched views that are harder to shift in late adolescence or early adulthood, as attitudes and identities are already deeply formed by that time.

Mulalić's shift from diagnosis to prescription distinguishes her contribution through the fact that she presents a concrete pedagogical vision for integrating EFP into school curricula through cooperative learning, teacher training and inclusive content. Her emphasis on critical thinking and dialogue as antidotes to xenophobia and nationalism marks a constructive extension of Hadžić's work. For instance, she argues: *"Peace and dialogic culture could transform the interethnic relationships in Bosnian post-conflict society (Mulalic, 2023: 358)".* An additional takeaway suggests that Education for Peace should begin in the early school years, not just in higher education. At a young age, children's values and attitudes are still forming, which makes it easier to encourage openness and inclusion. Starting early gives reconciliation a stronger chance, since it is much harder to alter fixed views later on after years of ethnonationalist schooling exposure.

From a broader perspective, these peace education efforts can also be understood through the theoretical lens of the bottom-up Europeanization perspective outlined earlier. As previously discussed, bottom-up Europeanization captures how EU norms are locally reinterpreted and embedded through social practice rather than imposed solely through institutional mechanisms. In this sense, the activities of NGOs and educators in BiH mirror this process by translating European principles of inclusion, dialogue and equality into classroom experiences, thus operationalizing Europeanization in everyday educational settings. Peace education, therefore, becomes not only a tool for reconciliation but also a tangible expression of Europeanization from a bottom-up reform approach (Makarychev and Butnaru-Troncotă, 2022).

In addition to student-centered perspectives, Larisa Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Lejla Mulalić (2024) shift the lens toward teacher education and intercultural pedagogy, underscoring how educators and higher education institutions can act as agents of change in overcoming ethnonationalist divisions. Their key insight is that teachers can act as peace agents when they critically reflect on their own biases and positionalities. They are encouraged to see teaching as a space that provides students with both "mirrors" of their own

identity and "windows" into other cultures. This approach frames teachers as drivers of change rather than neutral deliverers of curriculum: *"Teachers are not neutral actors; they are socially and politically positioned in relation to the conflict legacy in their localities (Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Mulalić, 2024 : 18)"*. One interviewed teacher explained: *"As an educator, I want my students to develop their own identity, not the assumed identity of their environment. I want them to critically think of their own culture and challange stereotypes and labels they have been served throughout their lives, labels pertaining to them or the people from other cultures (Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Mulalić, 2024 : 16)"*. This shows how teacher education can encourage future educators to see themselves not as neutral transmitters of knowledge, but as guides who help students question stereotypes, reflect on their own culture and develop independent identities. This research shows that students are not the only actors guiding the process of public participation, as teachers also play a crucial role as drivers of positive change. Even in the absence of strong institutional structures or systemic reforms, teachers emerge as the first agents capable of fostering reconciliation within a still segregated education system.

2.4. A bottom-up approach for combatting ethnic segregation through public participation

A key takeaway we draw from the previous sections is that peace education, as part of the post-conflict Europeanization process, can only be effective when it integrates perspectives from all levels, from institutions to teachers and students. In this regard, the role of local peace activists and practitioners becomes particularly significant, as their work has long been acknowledged as a concrete way in which bottom-up participation takes shape and as a useful tool for addressing the past and fostering reconciliation in the Western Balkans. For example, there are various ways in which local civil society organizations complement formal justice in the Balkans, such as challenging denialist or distorted official narratives, documenting and verifying war-related deaths, supporting families of the missing and publicizing evidence of atrocities (Fischer and Petrović-Ziemer, 2013). Similarly, education for peace and reconciliation starts at the ground level of society, from individuals or small groups whose direct interaction can transform grievances into coexistence. The key challenge, however, is where and how these two spheres meet: whether civil society can act as a "transmission belt" (Bloomfield, 2006: 2) between grassroots interaction and political or institutional reconciliation so that the two tracks converge rather than remain parallel.

Thus, the concept of public participation becomes essential, particularly in the complex case of Bosnia still marked by the scars of genocide denial. In 2025 the Bosnian state court found Vojin Pavlovic, the head of the Eastern Alternative NGO, guilty of breaching legislation banning genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals – the first sentence of its kind in the country (Balkan Insight, 2025). This verdict was issued in the context of the genocide denial legislation that creates numerous tensions in the country as it was imposed in July 2021 by Valentin Inzko, who at the time was BiH's High Representative (OHR), the international official responsible for overseeing the implementation of the peace deal that ended the 1992-1995 war. Thus, in the particular case of Bosnia the concept of public participation provides not only a framework for connecting institutions, civil society, and citizens, but also acts as a means of amplifying the efforts of peace activists by embedding them within broader, more inclusive processes, such as Europeanization and transformation toward a trans-ethnic society. As scholars argue, public participation allows grassroots initiatives to move beyond isolated practices, ensuring that the voices of those most directly affected are integrated into decision-making and reforms (Sen, 1999; Jennings, 2001; Long,

2001; Cowen and Shenton, 2005). It provides citizens with the power to shape decisions that affect their lives and contribute to "the enhancement of freedoms that allow people to lead lives that they have reason to value (Sen, 1999)".

In this context, we look at the tools of public participation and their role in the Europeanization of education in Bosnia as a platform that allows citizens not only to benefit from decisions, but to *co-create* them, offering a pathway for transforming local peace efforts into sustainable post-conflict reconciliation. The literature on this topic consistently highlights public participation as a cornerstone of sustainable governance, particularly in the context of EU's norm transfer process. Participation is broadly defined as the involvement of citizens and stakeholders in shaping decisions that directly affect their lives, rooted in the belief that those most impacted must have a voice in determining outcomes (Jennings, 2001). Far from being a mere consultation tool, participation represents a shift toward bottom-up approaches that counterbalance technocratic or externally imposed reforms, as it enhances legitimacy. As Webler and Tuler (2006) note, effective participation requires a plurality of voices, from individuals, NGOs and communities to institutions, ensuring inclusivity beyond elite-driven decision-making. The International Association for Public Participation (2017) further stresses that citizen input should not only be heard but demonstrably shape outcomes, otherwise participation risks becoming a tokenistic exercise.

More recent agendas, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, embed participation explicitly, as goal 16.7 calls for "inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels." This reflects a global consensus that citizen input is indispensable for responsive governance. Yet, translating these universal frameworks into the Bosnian context remains problematic, since, despite formal commitments, participatory practices are rarely institutionalized. Applied to post-conflict contexts such as BiH, public participation acquires an even deeper relevance in our discussion, addressing it not necessarily as a governance mechanism, but as a peacebuilding tool, where dialogue and cooperation across ethnic lines can gradually erode exclusionary narratives (Escobar, 1995; European Think Tanks Group, 2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

Building on the previous inter-disciplinary literature review, this article turns to the empirical analysis of how EU funding intersects with local agency in BiH's education system in the context of Europeanization. The focus is on understanding whether EU support, when channeled through participatory projects, can create 'trans-ethnic' spaces of reconciliation in a context still marked by segregation and division. More precisely, we are interested in assessing the role of NGOs in building a trans-ethnic space in BiH's educational system through instruments of norm transfer that are part of the EU accession process, namely the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA hereafter) funds between 2018 and 2024.

This specific timeframe was selected because it captures a decisive stage in BiH's EU integration process - from the moment the SAA entered into force until the country granted candidate status in March 2024. While the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) formally entered into force in 2016, it was only after 2018 that the EU intensified its monitoring of reforms and financial support under IPA II, such as the European Commission's 2019 Opinion identifying 14 key priorities for accession, the European Council's decision to grant BiH candidate country status in December 2022 and the formal opening of membership negotiations in March 2024. By aligning with these milestones, the chosen timeframe makes it possible to observe how EU political conditionality, financial

instruments and local participatory projects interacted during a phase when BiH's European perspective gained renewed momentum.

In terms of research methods, the article employs a qualitative case study design, relying on the triangulation of secondary data. A qualitative case study design was chosen because reconciliation in education is a complex and context-dependent process that cannot be fully captured through quantitative indicators alone. Segregation, dialogue and trust-building are social and relational dynamics, best understood through narratives, institutional reports and project documentation rather than statistical trends (Yin, 2018). The triangulation method is particularly appropriate for this study because it combines evidence from different sources and levels of analysis, allowing for a more balanced and reliable understanding of EU peacebuilding efforts in education. For our analysis, we rely on three main sources:

First, we review IPA II and IPA III funding allocations in the educational sector, using the European Commission's financial programming tables to track annual and multiannual amounts, shifts in priorities and any lines explicitly linked to inclusion or anti-discrimination.

Second, we examine the European Commission Progress Reports from 2018 to 2024. We focus on Chapter 23 (Fundamental Rights and Non-Discrimination) and Chapter 26 (Education and Culture) in order to identify whether any improvements in these areas have been recorded over time. Chapter 23 is central since it addresses discrimination and equality before the law, including the legal and institutional frameworks that condemn practices such as the "two schools under one roof" system and language-based exclusion, while Chapter 26 complements this perspective by assessing the education sector more specifically, covering curriculum development, harmonisation across entities and cantons and the promotion of inclusive, quality education. Together, these two provide both the legal-institutional dimension (protection against discrimination) and the sectoral-pedagogical dimension of the problem (education reform).

Thirdly, we analyze project documentation from the Nansen Dialogue Centres (NDC hereafter) between 2018-2024 as our main third-party actor active in BiH in the field of ethnic reconciliation, focusing mostly on their initiatives funded through IPA instruments that applied participatory approaches in schools, at the local level. The aim here is to have a more detailed illustration of how a trans-ethnic space could be created in BiH's schools, by assessing how these projects were implemented, what outcomes they produced at the local level and whether they contributed to fostering inter-ethnic cooperation and reducing segregation in education. We selected NDC because it is one of the most prominent and long-standing NGOs in post-war Bosnia, and it represents an interesting combination international support and local agency in peace education, being funded by various types of donors, including IPA funds, which makes them directly relevant to assessing the role of EU-financed interventions. At the same time, unlike many externally designed projects, NDC initiatives are rooted in local contexts and carried out in cooperation with Bosnian schools, teachers, parents and municipalities. They have also developed and applied their own methodology of public participation, combining intercultural dialogue, cooperative learning, and community engagement and this specific methodology is of relevance for investigating our hypothesis on bottom-up Europeanization. This dual position, externally supported but locally implemented, makes NDC centers in BiH a particularly valuable case for examining how participatory approaches can translate international funding into tangible reconciliation outcomes within a still segregated educational system.

In our analysis, public participation is used not only as a theoretical concept but also as an analytical framework for evaluating NGO-led initiatives funded under IPA II. Building on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation and the International Association for Public

Participation principles, participation will be assessed in terms of depth (consultation vs. co-decision), inclusivity (the extent to which diverse groups are engaged) and sustainability (whether practices continue beyond the project cycle). Specific indicators include:

1. the presence of structured dialogue forums between citizens and institutions;
2. the extent to which beneficiaries are involved in designing, not only implementing, project activities;
3. the degree to which initiatives foster local ownership rather than reliance on external actors.

As such, in analysing peace education projects managed by the NDC, we paid particular attention to these specific indicators and whether the projects created meaningful opportunities for inter-ethnic dialogue among students and parents, or whether activities remained symbolic, short-term interventions.

4. MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Europeanization through EU funds: IPA II and IPA III in the field of education

Following the methodological outline, the first step in the analysis was to examine the financial support that the EU provided to BiH through the IPA funds. Since 2007, IPA has been the EU's main tool for helping candidate and potential candidate countries prepare for membership. Its objectives have been to strengthen democratic institutions, support socio-economic development and promote reconciliation in post-conflict societies (European Commission, 2014). By examining the funding allocated under IPA II (2014–2020) and IPA III (2021–2027), the analysis aimed to trace how EU support evolved over time and to highlight the scale of resources made available for potential reforms in the education sector.

For IPA II, we discovered that allocations were organised along specific sectors, making it possible to identify funding directed at education, social inclusion and youth, as portrayed in the table below:

Table 1. Bilateral IPA II indicative funding allocations for BiH (2014–2020).

Bosnia and Herzegovina	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total 2014-2017	2018	2019	2020	Total 2018-2020	Total 2014-2020	Of which climate change relevant (%)
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW	9.7	39.7	21.9	44.8	116.1	22.4	39.3	45.4	107.1	223.2	
Democracy and governance	7.9	17.2	18.9	15.3	59.3	47.3				106.6	
Rule of law and fundamental rights	1.8	22.5	3.0	29.5	56.8	59.8				116.6	
COMPETITVENESS AND GROWTH	66	0	25.1	30	121.1	80.1	65.5	62.2	207.8	328.9	
Environment, climate action and energy	51	0	0	0	51.0	63.2				114.2	40%
Transport	0	0	0	20	20.0	21.7				41.7	40%
Competitiveness, innovation, agriculture and rural development	14	0	20	0	34.0	65.4				99.4	
Education, employment and social policies	1	0	5.1	10	16.1	57.7				73.8	
TOTAL	75.7	39.7	47	74.8	237.2	102.5	104.8	107.6	314.9	552.1	

Source: BiH – financial assistance under IPA. Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/bosnia-and-herzegovina-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en?utm

The gathered data illustrate a notable increase in IPA II allocations over the 2014–2020 period, particularly within the sector of *Education, employment and social policies*. Starting from only €1 million allocated in 2014, the funding gradually reached €57.7 million for the 2018–2020 period, with a total of €73.8 million across the entire timeframe. This upward trend is especially significant given the persistent challenge of ethnic segregation in BiH's schools, reflecting the EU's intention to promote reforms in education and social inclusion.

However, when researching IPA III funds, the analysis reveals the introduction of a restructured model, moving away from sector-specific allocations towards a thematic "windows" approach (European Commission, 2022). For BiH, education is no longer reported as a distinct category but is grouped together with employment, social protection and social inclusion. While this may promote integrated reforms across interconnected areas, it has also reduced sectoral transparency and made it more difficult to trace exact education-related spending. Additionally, because the current financial framework is still ongoing, comprehensive data for the 2021–2027 period remains limited, which makes it difficult to clearly identify how much funding is allocated on an annual basis making systematic analysis more difficult. The available information indicated that BiH had access to over €309 million in financial and technical assistance, provided in the form of non-repayable grants (European Commission, 2025). The allocations covered a broad range of priorities, including a €70 million Energy Support Package to protect vulnerable families and SMEs from rising energy costs, €23 million for the EU4People programme targeting employment and social inclusion and €13 million for the EU4 Rule of Law and Equality programme aimed at strengthening justice, gender equality and Roma inclusion. Moreover, in July 2025, the Commission adopted a further €140.5 million under the IPA III 2025–2027 multiannual action (European Commission, 2025).

The evolution of funding allocations under IPA II and IPA III shows that the EU has consistently made resources available to support education and social inclusion in BiH as a critical sector of Europeanization for a post-conflict society. However, while more money was allocated overall, it is no longer possible to precisely track how much of it directly targeted education or, more specifically, ethnic reconciliation in schools, making it difficult to establish a straightforward link between EU funding and progress in reducing segregation in schools.

4.2. European Commission Progress Reports (2018 - 2024) - Review of Chapters 23 and 26

Building on the previous premise, financial data alone are not enough to understand whether it was translated into meaningful reforms, which implied the need to examine another category of evidence: the European Commission's annual Progress Reports, since these are official EU documents that evaluate BiH's performance on accession criteria and provide detailed assessments of areas such as justice, fundamental rights and education, which constitute the focus of this analysis. To capture the evolution of reforms in this field over time, we reviewed the Commission's annual reports from 2018 to 2024, focusing specifically on Chapter 23 and Chapter 26. The main findings were coded and synthesised year by year into a comparative table (**Table 2**), which highlights the recurring problems noted by the Commission and allows us to track whether any substantive progress was recorded:

Table 2. European Commission's Communications on EU Enlargement Policy (2019–2024): Observations from Chapter 23 and Chapter 26

	Year of report						
Chapter:	**2018[1]**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**
23. Justice and protection of rights	-	- *Two schools under one roof* are recognised as discriminatory since 2014, but 56 schools still operate this way. - Implementation of rulings lacking.	- No registered progress in eliminating *two schools under one roof,* breaching the 2014 ruling of the Federation entity Supreme Court.	- No registered progress in eliminating *two schools under one roof.*	- No registered progress in eliminating *two schools under one roof.*	- Disputes over education continue. - Systemic solutions for inclusive and non-discriminatory education are still absent.	-- No registered progress in eliminating *two schools under one roof.* - Language discrimination continues in Republika Srpska.
26. Education, culture	-	- Common core curriculum based on learning outcomes is not completed nor applied throughout the country.	- Common core curriculum is not completed or applied.	- Need to align legislation with framework laws and ensure application of the common core curriculum. - The social inclusion at all levels of education is required.	- No progress in education reform; - Inclusive access at all stages of education is not ensured.	- Continued stagnation. - Harmonisation, inclusion and curriculum reform remain blocked.	- BiH must shift from content-oriented to competency-based education; - Harmonisation and curriculum transformation are needed.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on European Commission, *BiH Progress Reports* (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024).

As illustrated in the table, the analysis of the European Commission's six reports between 2018 and 2024 reveal a consistent pattern of limited to no progress addressing educational segregation in Bosnia. Under Chapter 23, the practice of "two schools under one roof" remained in place year after year despite repeated court rulings declaring it discriminatory. Similarly, Chapter 26 shows that the common core curriculum was never meaningfully implemented and efforts toward inclusive access to education largely stalled. While some reform efforts were noted, the overall picture reflects persistent stagnation, in other words, an absence of Europeanization. These observations are further supported by independent monitoring bodies, as presented below:

[1] The lack of 2018 data is due to the fact that, until 2019, reports were not yet aligned with the structured chapter-by-chapter format of the EU acquis. The 2018 report generally discusses education and fundamental rights under thematic sections, such as democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights, socio-economic development, with findings not so different from the following years reports.

Table 3. The Integration Process of BiH to the EU: 14 Priorities from the Opinion of the European Commission 4 Years Later

	CHAPTERS	MN	SRB	N.MK	TUR	ALB	UKR	GEORG	KOS*	MLD	BIH
1	Free movement of goods	2	2	2	3	1,5	2	1	1	1	0
2	Free movement of workers	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
3	Establishment and provision of services	2	2	2	0	2	1	2	2	1	0
4	Free movement of capital	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	2
5	Public procurement	2,5	2	2	2	2	1	1	1,5	0	1
6	Commercial law	3	3	3	4	2	1	1	1	0	1
7	Intellectual property	3	3	2	3	1,5	0	1	1	1	2
8	Competition policy	2	2	2	1	1,5	1	0	1	1	1
9	Financial services	2	2	2	3	2	1	1	2	0	1,5
10	Digital media	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	0
11	Agriculture, research and development	2	1	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
12	Food safety	2	2	3	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
13	Fishing	1	2	2	2	1,5	0	1	0	0	0
14	Transport policy	2,5	3	2	2	1	1	1	0	1	1
15	Energetics	3	2	2	2	2	3	1	1	1	0
16	Tax policy	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	0	1
17	Economic and monetary system	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	0
18	Statistics	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	0
19	Social protection, employment	1	2	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	1
20	Entrepreneurship and industrial policy	2,5	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	0
21	Trans-European networks	2,5	2	3	4	1	1	1	1	1	1
22	Regional policy	2	2	2	2	2	1	0	0	0	0
23	Justice and protection of rights	2	1	1,5	0	1,5	n/a	n/a	0,5	n/a	1
24	Public order and peace	2	1	2	2	1,5	1	1	0,5	1	1
25	Science and research	3	3	3	4	1	2	2	0	2	1
26	Education, culture	3	3	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	0
27	Environment, climate	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	5
28	Consumer protection	2	2	2	3	0	1	1	0	1	0
29	Customs Union	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	1	1
30	International relations	3	2	2	2	3	3	2	0	2	1
31	External, security and defense politics	3	2	3	1	3	3	2	n/a	2	1
32	Financial control	2	2	2	3	2	0	1	1	0	1
33	Finance and budget	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	n/a	0	0
	Total*	70,0	67,0	66,5	63,0	54,0	37,0	35,0	26,5	23,0	22,0
	Average (0-4)	2,1	2,0	2,0	1,9	1,6	1,2	1,1	0,9	0,7	0,7

** Kosovo was rated for 31 chapters, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine for 32 chapters.*

***Grade: early stage (0), certain level of preparedness (1), moderately prepared (2), good level of preparedness (3), well advanced (4).*

Source: Transparency International (2023), available at: https://ti-bih.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ispunjavanje-prioriteta-2023-prelom-WQ-ENG.pdf

Table 4. Enlargement scorecard reports for 2019-2024 for BiH

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Rule of Law fundamentals	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Functioning of judiciary	1.0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Fight against corruption	1.0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Fight against organised crime	1.0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Freedom of expression	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Total Rule of Law fundamentals	**4.0**	**2.5**	**2.5**	**2.5**	**2.5**	**2.5**	**2.5**
Average (out of 4.0)	**1.0**	**0.6**	**0.6**	**0.6**	**0.6**	**0.6**	**0.6**

	Chapters	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
1	Free movement of goods	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	Freedom of movement for workers	1	1	1	1	1	1
3	Establishment and service provision	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	Free movement of capital	2	2	2	2	2	2
5	Public procurement	1	1	1	1	1	1
6	Company law	1	1	1	1	1	1
7	Intellectual property law	2	2	2	2	2	2
8	Competition policy	1	1	1	1	1	1
9	Financial services	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
10	Digital transformation and media	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	Agriculture and rural development	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	Food safety, veterinary, phytosanitary	1	1	1	1	1	1
13	Fisheries	0	0	0	0	0	0
14	Transport policy	1	1	1	1	1	1
15	Energy	0	0	0	0	0	0
16	Taxation	1	1	1	1	1	1
17	Economic and monetary policy	0	0	0	0	0	0
18	Statistics	0	0	0	0	0	0
19	Social Policy and employment	1	1	1	1	1	1
20	Enterprise and industrial policy	0	0	0	0	0	0
21	Trans-European networks	1	1	1	1	1	1
22	Regional policy, structural instruments	0	0	0	0	0	0
23	Judiciary and fundamental rights	1	1	1	1	1	1
24	Justice, freedom and security	1	1	1	1	1	1
25	Science and research	1	1	1	1	1	1
26	Education and culture	0	0	0	0	0	0
27	Environment and climate change	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
28	Consumer and health protection	0	0	0	0	0	0
29	Customs union	1	1	1	1	1	1
30	External relations	1	1	1	1	1	1
31	Foreign, security and defence policy	1	1	1	1	1	1
32	Financial control	0	0	0	1	1	1
33	Financial and budgetary provisions	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total chapters (out of 132)	**21.0**	**21.0**	**21.0**	**22.0**	**22.0**	**22.0**
	Average chapter rating (out of 4.0)	**0.6**	**0.6**	**0.6**	**0.7**	**0.7**	**0.7**

Source: European Commission country reports 2015, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Rating: early stage (0), some level of preparation (1), moderately prepared (2), good level of preparation (3), well advanced (4).

Source: European Stability Initiative. (2024). Scorecard 2024. https://www.esiweb.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/Scorecard%202024%20-%20Enlargement%20reports%2031%20October%202024.pdf

Both Transparency International's 2023 review of BiH's progress on the 14 key priorities and the European Stability Initiative's 2024 Scorecard present almost identical findings, as they rely on the European Commission's readiness scale (0–4). BiH records an average score of 0.7, the lowest level of preparedness in the Western Balkans, with chapters 23 and 26 continuing to register scores at the 0–1 level, suggesting that reforms remain at an early stage, with institutions and laws either incomplete or only partially implemented.

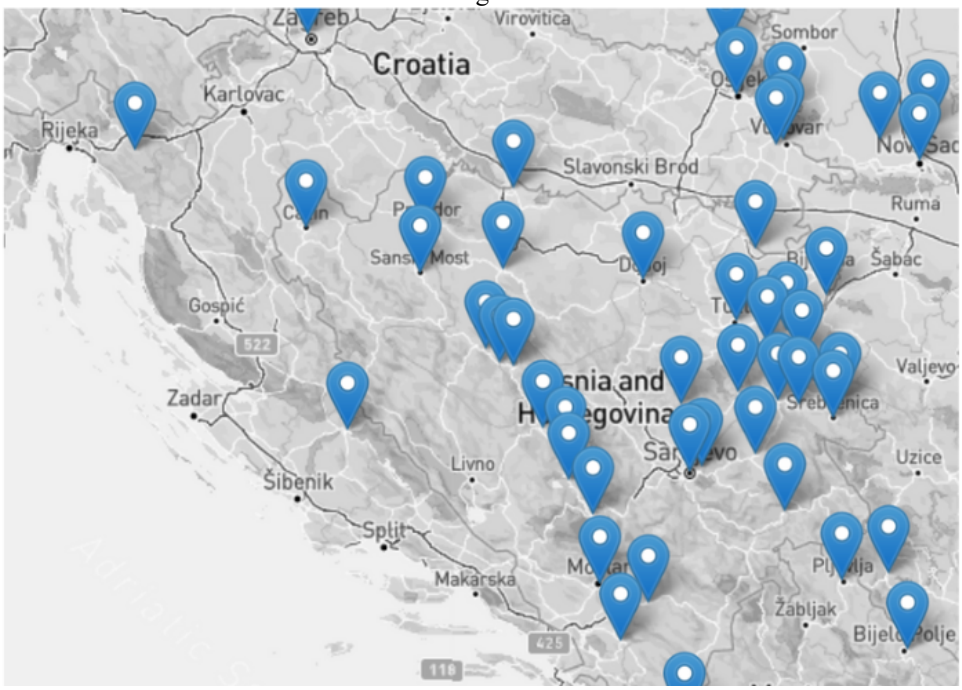
From a top-down, macro-level analysis, these negative evaluations indicate a persistent pattern of slow or stalled progress, with the same challenges highlighted repeatedly across successive reports regarding the addressing of educational segregation or broader reforms in BiH. Yet such a conclusion risks overlooking smaller, micro-level changes that remain invisible in aggregated assessments, such as NGO efforts that, although they might not shift national indicators or court rulings, they can still generate tangible improvements for their communities, with the possibility of a later national expansion. Although they may not alter national indicators or court rulings, their initiatives can still bring tangible improvements in communities, with the potential to scale up over time. By examining the work of NDCs as one of the most important civil society actors in the field of ethnic reocnciliation in Bosnia, the folowing section illustrates how EU resources, when combined with a locally grounded participatory approach, can generate concrete improvements in interethnic cooperation, even within a broader context of political stagnation. As a result, the analysis of IPA funds support for education requires a bottom-up approach to Europeanization, reinforcing the importance of case studies, such as the NDC, which make it possible to trace the link between EU funds, NGO-led participatory initiatives, and micro-level improvements in reconciliation and inclusive education.

4.3. The Nansen Dialogue Centres' approach to combating ethnic segregation in BiH (2018-2024)

Established in the early 2000s in Sarajevo, Mostar and Prijedor, the Nansen Dialogue Centres emerged as part of the wider Nansen Dialogue Network, originally founded with support from the Nansen Academy in Lillehammer, Norway. Their mission has consistently been to promote interethnic dialogue, inclusive education and peacebuilding in post-conflict societies such as BiH. Positioned between international support and local ownership, NDCs combine external funding from Norway, the EU (through IPA instruments), OSCE, and UNDP with the participatory implementation led by local staff, teachers, parents and municipalities (Šavija and Šahić, 2020). While NDC functions as a non-EU actor, the organization operates as a supporter for BiH's path towards European integration.

As illustrated in the map below, the Nansen Dialogue Centres have gradually expanded across BiH, establishing local branches and partnerships in more than twenty municipalities, including Sarajevo, Mostar, Srebrenica, Bratunac, Jajce and Prijedor, reflecting both the geographical spread and the localised strategy.

Figure 1: Map of Nansen Dialogue Centres and partner communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source: Nansen Dialogue Network (no date), *The Nansen Dialogue Impact*, available at: https://nansen-dialogue.net/

Over time, the centers have developed their own public participation methodology, the Nansen Dialogue Approach (NDA), directly addresses the dual challenge of reconciliation and democratic transition in BiH (Šavija and Šahić, 2020). This approach is built on several defining characteristics: first, it begins with trust-building through dialogue seminars, creating safe spaces for interethnic encounters. Second, it promotes joint decision-making structures, such as interethnic school boards, parent councils and youth groups, ensuring that different community voices are included in shaping outcomes. Third, the NDA is gradual and long-term, moving from interpersonal dialogue to institutional cooperation, thereby avoiding short-term, externally imposed fixes. Fourth, it emphasizes local ownership and co-creation of activities and, finally, it links dialogue to practical community projects, ensuring that reconciliation is not only discursive but also visible in shared initiatives. Through the lenses of these principles, we first analysed the 2018-2024 timeframe and discovered a series of projects which, while not large enough to be registered by the EU progress indicators, planted meaningful seeds of reconciliation at the community level and we would like to underline their relevance for the local context in Bosnia.

The year 2018 marked a stage of both expansion and institutional strengthening for NDCs, by expanding NDC's activities in the newly targeted schools in Jajce and Mrkonjić Grad, and by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Herzegovina-Neretva Cantonal Ministry of Education. According to the PeaceNexus 2018 Annual Report, this agreement paved the way for NDC to roll out integrated education and social cohesion projects in new communities, while preparing to engage in policy dialogue on inclusive education with school authorities and municipal officials (PeaceNexus, 2018: 14). This marked early evidence of NDC's combinations of participatory grassroots work

with efforts to enter institutional policymaking. In the context of a system resistant to reform, such a MoU reflects an intentional blurring of boundaries between civic dialogue and formal policymaking, thereby embedding participation into the architecture of education governance itself (NDC Mostar, 2018).

The following year placed youth agency at the centre of attention, as NDC Sarajevo published the results of its work documenting the 2016 student-led protest in Jajce, where young people stood up against a government decision to divide their school along ethnic lines. Marching under the slogan "We want to stay together" and tying Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian flags together as a symbol of unity in a divided society, the students sent a powerful message: "We want quality education, not division," as one student declared, while another insisted, "We don't want to fall back 20 years into the past (Spaic, 2017)". Although the protest was entirely student-led, NDC Sarajevo played an important role in what followed. By documenting the Jajce case and publishing the results in 2019, it helped amplify the students' voices through research, publications and advocacy, thereby providing greater visibility to their struggle. As a follow-up of the successful protest, NDC engaged the students in dialogue workshops and intercultural activities, establishing the Nansen Forum of Young Peacebuilders, where over 120 students were trained in interethnic dialogue, with 60 of them continuing to design and lead local projects (Nansen Dialogue Centre, Sarajevo, 2019). Thus, Jajce became a symbol of unity in Bosnia, as one young participant reflected: "They wanted to separate us, but we showed that we can be stronger if we stand together". This story demonstrates how grassroots resistance, when supported rather than co-opted by NGOs, can become the foundation for structured, participatory peacebuilding. It also underscores the central argument of this article: that while macro-level reforms often stagnate, micro-level initiatives like Jajce reveal the possibility of change when youth agency and civil society come together.

Moving forward, 2020 provided a moment of reflection and consolidation, as NDC Sarajevo published the comprehensive study on *Building Trans-Ethnic Space: Interethnic Dialogue, Social and Political Action in Local Communities of BiH*, which documented more than a decade of their work in places such as Srebrenica, Bratunac, Jajce, and Zvornik. Far from being a simple retrospective, the publication distilled lessons learned from years of community engagement, presenting dialogue not as a series of isolated initiatives but as a long-term strategy for transforming relations across ethnic divides. What made the study particularly valuable was its ability to portray the lived impact of interethnic dialogue at the grassroots level: "Instead of waiting for systemic reforms that often remain on paper, dialogue groups proved that change can start at the micro level, through everyday cooperation between teachers, parents, and students (Šavija and Šahić, 2020 : 68)". In doing so, NDC Sarajevo positioned itself not only as a practitioner but also as a knowledge-producer, offering both local communities and international partners a concrete portrayal of how peacebuilding and democratic participation could intersect in BiH:"What we see in these communities is not just temporary cooperation, but the seeds of a sustainable social fabric that can resist political manipulation and ethnic polarization" (Šavija and Šahić, 2020: 92).

Building on these lessons, in 2021 NDC Mostar advanced its efforts to embed peace education into the formal school system of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. Together with the Cantonal Ministry of Education, the Centre conducted several Peace Education training cycles for 21 high-school teachers, equipping them with tools to serve as multipliers of interethnic dialogue and non-violent communication. These teachers went on to deliver more than 40 intercultural classes, directly reaching over 600 students across

the canton (Mostarski.info, 2021). While the program participation varies from year to year, NDC Mostar estimated that in 2025, their program has managed to reach and engage about 1,000 students and 70 teachers (SMART Balkans, 2025). This initiative illustrates how NDC's work can also operate at the intersection of participatory grassroots engagement and institutional cooperation, since it was carried out in formal partnership with the Ministry.

Ambition grew even further in 2023, when NDC Mostar launched the *Advocacy of New Educational Practices* program, a bold step toward moving peace education beyond classrooms and integrating it into legislation and policy. The project's stated objectives include crafting proposals for inclusive curricula, engaging in public advocacy and building partnerships with education authorities. It specifically aimed at "promoting the necessity of educational reforms and mobilizing local communities" while embedding peace and intercultural components into partner schools (SMART Balkans, 2023). The project envisaged working with 15 schools across Herzegovina and Central Bosnia to reach thousands of students and train 300 teachers and staff through capacity-building and curriculum development activities. In doing so, NDC Mostar is actively attempting to close the gap between grassroots peacebuilding and systemic structural change-bridging micro-level dialogue with macro-level policy aspirations.

Finally, 2024 brought an impactful institutional recognition for the public participation methodology, as NDC Mostar consolidated its role as a key partner in peace education by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Education of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. The agreement laid the groundwork for active collaboration in strengthening school capacities, training teachers and supporting the work of student and parent councils. Moreover, several of the schools involved had already integrated the Nansen Model of Education into their annual curriculum, making it the first such program to move from extracurricular activities into official teaching practice. As the Ministry emphasized at the signing, the partnership was built on the recognition that "quality education must rest on respect for human rights, regardless of religious, political, national, or gender affiliation". This MoU not only formalized cooperation at the cantonal level but also extended to other ministries and municipal authorities across BiH, signaling growing institutional and local buy-in for NDC's participatory approach (SMART Balkans, 2024).

These elements stand in sharp contrast with the European Commission's progress reports, which have consistently criticized BiH for failing to implement the common core curriculum and for blocking inclusive reforms at the national level. By demonstrating that integrated approaches can work in practice and gain formal acceptance, NDC's initiatives position the organisation as a potential contributor to future debates on a unified, competency-based curriculum, an EU priority that remains stalled. In a system where top-down reforms are paralyzed, such bottom-up agreements illustrate how local initiatives can create institutional footholds for inclusive education, planting the seeds of a future common curriculum and, with it, a more reconciled educational landscape. Ultimately, these findings reveal the ambivalent nature of bottom-up Europeanization in BiH. While structural ethnic segregation persists and EU-level reforms remain blocked, grassroots initiatives like those of the NDC demonstrate that tangible progress toward a trans-ethnic educational space is possible when European values are locally reinterpreted and enacted from below.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Over the past decade, BiH's EU accession process has been marked by persistent stagnation. The European Commission's progress reports consistently highlight the lack

of meaningful reforms, particularly in the field of education. Despite repeated calls for action, ethnic segregation in schools remains one of the most visible and unresolved challenges, with practices such as "two schools under one roof" continuing to undermine the principles of inclusion and equality. In this context, reconciliation in education must be understood as more than a policy aspiration, and instead as a requirement for visible improvements in interethnic cooperation and the gradual dismantling of segregated structures that keep BiH's pupils in isolation from one another. This raises the question of whether Europeanization can become palpable in the field of education. In this article, we argue that the answer is ambivalent. The creation of a trans-ethnic educational space, including the implementation of a common curriculum in all schools, therefore remains central both to social cohesion and to BiH's EU path.

While macro-level reforms remain blocked, this article has shown that micro-level initiatives, such as those implemented by NGOs like the NDC, demonstrate the potential of participatory approaches to generate meaningful change. By engaging various actors in dialogue and cooperative practices, NDC projects provide tangible examples of how reconciliation can be built from the bottom up. Their work illustrates that participation is not merely symbolic, but a practical tool for creating spaces where interethnic trust and cooperation take root.

These experiences suggest that even in the face of structural stagnation, participatory peace education can open pathways toward Europeanization. By embedding inclusive practices in schools and gradually institutionalizing them through local partnerships, BiH can move closer to fulfilling EU values of democracy equality, and social cohesion. Our analysis opens new avenues for research into how EU assistance should prioritize scaling participatory models, ensuring that grassroots reconciliation efforts are connected to broader EU accession reforms, so that local seeds of change can grow into systemic transformation.

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