



Report on Stakeholder Seminar

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Background and Objectives

The final conference of the Erasmus+ Sport project “*Sport Zajedno – Promoting Social Inclusion and Reconciliation through Grassroots Youth Sport*” took place in Pristina on 23 January 2026. The event marked the conclusion of a two-year regional initiative (2024–2026) implemented across the Western Balkans, aiming to strengthen the role of grassroots youth sport as a tool for social inclusion, dialogue, and post-conflict reconciliation.

The conference brought together representatives of EU institutions, diplomatic missions, national and local authorities, academia, civil society organisations, sports federations, practitioners, and—centrally—young people and athletes from across the region. Its objectives were to reflect on project results and lessons learned, connect research, policy, and practice, and explore opportunities for sustained cooperation, funding, and advocacy beyond the project’s lifetime.

Opening Remarks and Policy Perspectives

The conference was opened by representatives of the lead organisation, the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC), and the host organisation KfV Prishtina. Opening contributions emphasised sport’s growing role as a space within civil society where progress can be



made towards multi-ethnic integration, overcoming nationalist divisions, and fostering local ownership—particularly in challenging political and social contexts.

Policy-level speakers highlighted the responsibility of institutions to create safe and inclusive environments for children and young people. Strong emphasis was placed on ensuring that younger generations are not burdened with unresolved conflicts of the past and on the importance of investing in inclusive sport infrastructure, mobility, and exchange. The Erasmus+ programme was underlined as a key framework for enabling such cross-border cooperation, with clear reassurances of continued EU support for initiatives promoting inclusion and reconciliation through sport.



Academic Insights: From “Negative” to “Positive” Peace

A central keynote contribution was delivered by Professor Richard Giulianotti (Loughborough University), who framed sport-based peacebuilding through the distinction between *negative peace* (the absence of direct violence) and *positive peace* (sustainable, institutionalised forms of justice, inclusion, and trust). Sport was presented as a potentially powerful—but not automatic—tool for contributing to positive peace, particularly when linked to broader institutional and social processes.

The keynote and subsequent discussion stressed the importance of moving beyond short-term “ice-breaking” activities towards longer-term pathways that connect micro-level encounters to macro-level change. Participants were encouraged to adopt pragmatic and realistic expectations, avoiding overly idealistic assumptions about what sport alone can achieve. The need to learn from other sectors and peacebuilding approaches beyond sport was also highlighted.

Research and Practice: Institutional and Grassroots Perspectives

The Expert Panel on *Research & Practitioners’ Perspectives* brought together representatives from development cooperation, academia, national football associations, and UN institutions. A recurring theme was the narrow and often exclusionary understanding of sport in the region, which prioritises competitiveness and elite performance over participation, inclusiveness, and social impact. Panellists argued for a broader, grassroots-oriented conception of sport as a means—not an end—for achieving social inclusion, equality, and reconciliation.

Research insights underscored the importance of direct communication and contact between young people from different communities. Evaluations of previous initiatives demonstrated that well-designed sport programmes can reduce prejudice, challenge stereotypes, and foster meaningful relationships, particularly when sustained over time. At the same time, panellists cautioned that



sport’s impact is limited when broader structural factors—such as segregated education systems or politicised narratives of the past—remain unaddressed.

Institutional representatives highlighted ongoing efforts to promote inclusion within football structures, including work with girls, minority communities, and persons with disabilities, often in cooperation with initiatives such as Special Olympics. The discussion repeatedly returned to the need for long-term, continuous interventions rather than one-off events, acknowledging that meaningful social change may take many years to materialise.

Funding, Capacity, and Cooperation Challenges

A key cross-cutting theme throughout the conference was sustainability. Participants from both institutions and civil society stressed that capacity constraints—within sports federations, NGOs, and public authorities—remain a major obstacle. Social inclusion and sustainability roles are often under-resourced and undervalued compared to technical or competitive priorities within sports organisations.



Funding challenges were discussed openly, including competition between NGOs, short-term project cycles, and the difficulty of communicating the social impact of sport to policymakers and donors. Several speakers emphasised the need to improve strategic communication and storytelling, ensuring that decision-makers experience and understand the transformative potential of inclusive sport first-hand. At the same time, donor and development actors highlighted their potential role as conveners, facilitating dialogue between civil society, sports institutions, and governments at national and regional levels.

Activists, Youth Voices, and Regional Learning

The Activists Panel and informal exchanges showcased concrete project activities and local experiences from across the Western Balkans, including work in divided cities, rural areas, and marginalised communities. Youth voices and practitioners shared examples of outreach in contexts where young people have limited contact across ethnic or social divides, illustrating how mobile sport initiatives, festivals, and community-based events can create rare spaces for interaction and trust-building.

Participants also reflected on mistakes made during implementation, framing them as valuable learning opportunities for future initiatives. Regional exchange emerged as a strong added value of the project, enabling partners to share methodologies, adapt approaches, and collectively address common challenges.



Safeguarding, Sustainability, and Lessons Learned

Discussions throughout the conference highlighted that safeguarding and sustainability must be treated as core components of sport-for-peace initiatives rather than as add-ons. Participants emphasised that inclusive, safe, and gender-sensitive sport environments require clear safeguarding frameworks, trained staff and volunteers, and institutional commitment at both policy and practice levels. A key lesson learned from the *Sport Zajedno* project was that safeguarding is closely linked to trust-building: young people, parents, and communities are more likely to engage when sport spaces are perceived as safe, respectful, and supportive.

Sustainability emerged as a central challenge, with repeated calls for longer-term funding horizons, continuous capacity building, and stronger integration of social inclusion objectives into mainstream sport policies and education systems. Participants stressed that meaningful impact depends on sustained engagement over time, cross-sector cooperation, and the ability to learn openly from challenges and mistakes. Embedding safeguarding principles, strengthening local ownership, and investing in durable partnerships were identified as essential conditions for ensuring that the social and peacebuilding impacts of grassroots sport initiatives endure beyond individual projects and funding cycles.

Networking, Conclusions, and Next Steps

The conference concluded with a facilitated networking and collaboration forum, which enabled participants to identify opportunities for cross-border cooperation, future funding avenues, and joint advocacy priorities. Discussions reinforced the importance of collaboration over competition within the sport-for-development-and-peace sector and the need to prioritise meaningful, high-impact actions over easily measurable but superficial successes.



Overall, the conference reaffirmed grassroots youth sport as a relevant and promising entry point for promoting social inclusion, reconciliation, and cooperation in the Western Balkans—provided it is embedded in long-term strategies, supported by institutions and donors, and informed by research and lived experience. The *Sport Zajedno* project was widely recognised as a strong foundation on which future regional initiatives can build.

Finally, we invite you to have a look at the overall [conference programme](#) as well as [pictures](#) and a [video](#) from the event.

