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Strengthening Youth Resilience through Sports: Insights from Four Youth Forums in Kumanovo and Lipkovo

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Contents

1. Executive Statement / Summary / Aim.....	3
1.1 Introduction / Problem / Context.....	4
2. About the project	5
3. Study results, conclusions and recommendations	6
Recommendation 1: Build Collaborative Platforms Between Stakeholders.....	6
Recommendation 2: Institutionalise Early-Prevention Pathways	7
Recommendation 3: Integrate Media and Digital Literacy into Sports.....	7
Recommendation 4: Fund Youth-Led Micro-Initiatives.....	8
Recommendation 5: Improve Access and Inclusion for Girls and Rural Youth	9
4. Impact Projections.....	10
5. Conclusion	11
6. Supporting Testimonial	12
7. Acknowledgements	12



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1. Executive Statement / Summary / Aim

Between January and August 2025, four Youth Forums were organised within the PRECYOUS project: two in Kumanovo and two in Lipkovo. These events gathered over 80 young people, CSOs and other stakeholders to discuss youth challenges, the role of sports in building resilience, and policy recommendations for local authorities.

This brief synthesises the discussions, identifies common concerns, and offers concrete recommendations developed by young participants themselves. It demonstrates how youth-led dialogue can shape policies that promote inclusion, prevent polarisation, and harness sports as a driver of social cohesion.

Aim: The aim of this policy brief is to present the main findings and recommendations from four Youth Forums organised within the PRECYOUS project in Kumanovo and Lipkovo. The forums gave young people the opportunity to share their experiences, highlight challenges they face, and propose solutions directly to local authorities and stakeholders. The brief seeks to ensure that youth voices inform municipal strategies and policies, with a focus on using sports as a tool to strengthen resilience, promote inclusion, and prevent polarisation.

Key Issue: Young people in Kumanovo and Lipkovo face multiple challenges that increase their vulnerability to exclusion and polarisation. These include high youth unemployment, limited safe spaces for recreation, unequal opportunities for girls in sports, and growing exposure to online hate speech and misinformation. While both municipalities have active youth and sports traditions, the lack of structured cooperation between schools, clubs, municipalities, and civil society weakens the overall response. Without targeted action, these gaps risk deepening divisions and leaving young people without positive pathways for participation and resilience.

Core Recommendations: Establish municipal sports-for-inclusion platforms linking authorities, schools, clubs, and CSOs to coordinate events and prevention actions. (1) Fund small-scale youth-led projects such as clean-ups, tournaments, and awareness campaigns that give young people ownership and visibility. (2) Integrate media and digital literacy modules into sports activities to help youth recognise hate speech, misinformation, and online risks. (3) Improve access to sports facilities for girls and rural youth through better scheduling, inclusive programming, and transport



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support. (4) Develop referral pathways for at-risk youth so that coaches, teachers, and social workers can respond early and provide appropriate support.

1.1 Introduction / Problem / Context

Young people in Kumanovo and Lipkovo face a mix of social, economic, and digital challenges that directly affect their wellbeing and resilience. Both municipalities are ethnically diverse and have active youth communities, yet limited resources and uneven access to opportunities often leave young people vulnerable to exclusion and negative influences.

The problem

Unemployment among young people remains significantly higher than the national average. According to the State Statistical Office, overall unemployment in North Macedonia was about **12.4% in 2024**, but youth unemployment was close to **30%**. In rural municipalities like Lipkovo, limited job opportunities and weaker infrastructure increase risks of disengagement.

Urgency

At the same time, almost all young people (15–24) in North Macedonia use the internet daily, with more than 80% active on social media. This makes them highly exposed to **online hate speech and misinformation**, which spiked during the **2024 elections**. Both municipalities reported incidents of polarisation online, which were reflected in offline tensions.

Context

Regionally, experiences from the Western Balkans show that inter-ethnic trust can be fragile and requires sustained investment in dialogue, sports, and education. Internationally, organisations like the OSCE and UNICEF highlight that building community resilience is one of the most effective ways to prevent polarisation and violent extremism. Locally, Kumanovo's participation in the Strong Cities Network has shown that **trust in municipal responses is strongly linked to community resilience**.



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Personal perspective

As one young participant from Kumanovo explained during a forum:

“Through sports, I found a place where differences don’t matter. But online it is different—there is too much hate, and it affects us every day.”

This underlines why the issue is both urgent and important: unless municipal strategies address these risks, youth in Kumanovo and Lipkovo may face deeper exclusion and division instead of opportunities to thrive together.

2. About the project

PRECIOUS aims to prevent violent extremism and enhance social cohesion by engaging youth in positive, community-driven activities—particularly through sports—and by strengthening their involvement in policy-making processes. Under Work Package 4 (WP4), the project focuses on identifying and addressing the challenges that limit meaningful youth and CSO engagement in decision-making at local, regional, and national levels.



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3. Study results, conclusions and recommendations

The four Youth Forums held in Kumanovo and Lipkovo showed that young people want to be part of the solution when it comes to preventing polarisation and building inclusive communities. They shared their experiences honestly: the lack of safe spaces, the high unemployment rate, the unequal opportunities for girls, and the daily exposure to online hate speech. At the same time, they also showed that sport is one of the strongest tools for connection. Playing together in mixed teams created friendships and trust, while discussions around these events gave them a chance to suggest practical steps for change.

The conclusions are clear: young people need more structured support, more opportunities to lead, and stronger cooperation between institutions and communities. Based on their voices and the evidence collected, the following recommendations are proposed.

Recommendation 1: Build Collaborative Platforms Between Stakeholders

Evidence:

In both Kumanovo and Lipkovo, young participants expressed frustration that schools, sports clubs, municipalities, and civil society often work separately. This creates gaps, duplication, or sometimes even competition instead of cooperation. Where regular forums existed, young people said they felt “listened to” and trusted institutions more.

Action Steps:

- Municipalities should establish **quarterly forums** where schools, sports clubs, youth councils, NGOs, and religious leaders meet. These meetings should not only be discussions but should end with a **joint action plan** that is visible to the community.
- These forums should be linked to **sports hubs** (e.g. MultiКулти in Kumanovo, youth centres in Lipkovo) so they feel youth-friendly and accessible.



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- The forums can also serve as a space where young people present their own ideas directly to decision-makers. For example, one participant in Kumanovo said: *"It was the first time I could talk directly to the mayor about what young people need."*

Recommendation 2: Institutionalise Early-Prevention Pathways

Evidence:

Teachers and coaches often notice when a young person is struggling – changes in behaviour, withdrawal, or conflicts with peers. But there are no clear steps on what to do next. Young people also admitted they don't always know who to ask for help, especially when the problem is online harassment or family pressure.

Action Steps:

- Map all available support persons in each municipality – **school counsellors, social workers, youth workers, and psychologists.**
- Develop a **short guide (2–3 pages)** for coaches and teachers on how to spot early signs, how to have a supportive conversation, and when and how to refer a young person for extra help.
- Establish **confidential channels** (e.g. a school email, or a phone line in the youth centre) where young people can ask for help without fear of stigma.
- Make sure families are part of the process, so support is not seen as punishment but as care.

Recommendation 3: Integrate Media and Digital Literacy into Sports

Evidence:

Almost every young person in Kumanovo and Lipkovo uses social media daily. During the forums, many described how online hate speech between ethnic groups made them feel unsafe. They also admitted it is not always easy to know what is true and



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what is fake. However, they responded very positively when coaches included short activities on “spotting the trick” or “how to respond safely online” before or after sports practice.

Action Steps:

- Create **micro-modules (15–20 minutes)** that coaches can deliver once or twice a month. Examples include:
Spot the Fake Post – showing how to fact-check in 60 seconds.
Bias and Emotions – why some posts are designed to make us angry.
Fair Play Online – linking teamwork on the pitch to teamwork on social media.
- Partner with local fact-checking organisations and youth media groups so examples are fresh and relevant.
- Encourage clubs to run **online campaigns** led by young athletes themselves, using the same spirit of fair play that they practise on the field.

Recommendation 4: Fund Youth-Led Micro-Initiatives

Evidence:

In Lipkovo, young people highlighted that small financial support made a big difference. With just a few hundred euros they organised football days, intercultural picnics, and clean-up actions that brought villages together. In Kumanovo, youth-led tournaments proved that when young people are given trust and resources, they can organise events that are safe, inclusive, and fun.

Action Steps:

- Municipalities should set aside a **micro-grants fund (€300–€1,000 per project)** for youth-led ideas.
- The application and reporting process must be **simple**: one-page application, short photo and story as report.
- Projects can include sports tournaments, awareness campaigns, art and music linked to sports, or environmental actions.





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- Publicly showcase these initiatives so young people feel recognised and others are inspired.

Recommendation 5: Improve Access and Inclusion for Girls and Rural Youth

Evidence:

Girls in both municipalities raised concerns that they did not feel welcome in some sports spaces, or that times were not suitable. In Lipkovo, rural youth said that transport costs and lack of facilities in villages stopped them from joining activities. These barriers reduce equal participation and risk leaving some young people behind.

Action Steps:

- Ensure that sports halls and clubs offer **female-friendly hours** and actively recruit **female coaches** as role models.
- Municipalities should support **transport vouchers** or rotate events between villages so rural youth can participate more easily.
- Upgrade local facilities to meet minimum inclusion standards – safe lighting, separate changing spaces, and accessible toilets.
- Promote stories of girls and rural youth who succeed in sports, so others see that participation is possible.



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4. Impact Projections

If these recommendations are implemented in Kumanovo and Lipkovo, we can expect clear improvements within the next 12–18 months. By bringing schools, sports clubs, municipalities, and CSOs together, young people will have more safe spaces and structured opportunities to connect. With micro-grants and inclusive tournaments, youth will lead their own initiatives, building confidence and cooperation across ethnic and social groups. Media-literacy sessions will reduce the influence of online hate speech and misinformation, while early-prevention pathways will ensure that vulnerable young people receive support at the right time. Together, these actions will lower risks of exclusion and polarisation and increase trust between young people and local institutions.

Expected Outcomes (12–18 months):

- **+15–20%** increase in participation of mixed-ethnic sports teams in both municipalities.
- **Stronger inclusion of girls and rural youth**, with at least 30% female participation in funded initiatives.
- **10+ youth-led micro-projects** successfully implemented with visible community impact.
- **Greater resilience to online hate speech**, with young people reporting more confidence in recognising and countering misinformation.
- **Improved trust in local authorities**, measured through youth feedback at future forums.



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Outcome Area	Current Situation (2024)	Projected (2026) if Implemented
Mixed-ethnic youth sports participation	Sporadic tournaments with limited reach	Regular events, +15–20% increase in participation
Female & rural youth inclusion	Unequal access; low participation of girls	At least 30% female participation; improved access for rural youth
Youth-led micro-projects	Few initiatives, small scale	10+ projects annually with visible community impact
Digital & media literacy	Limited exposure; few structured activities	60% of active youth trained; Fair Play Online campaigns
Trust in local institutions	Mixed, often low among youth	Noticeable increase in trust (forum feedback & surveys)

5. Conclusion

The four Youth Forums in Kumanovo and Lipkovo have shown clearly that young people are not just beneficiaries of programmes, but active contributors to solutions. They have identified the risks they face—unemployment, lack of safe spaces, online hate speech—and they have also shown how sport, when combined with trust and cooperation, can reduce divisions and bring communities together.

Municipalities, schools, sports clubs, and civil society now have a clear opportunity: to listen, to act, and to invest in youth-led initiatives. By taking forward the recommendations in this brief, local authorities can create safer, more inclusive spaces where young people feel valued and supported. The changes do not require large budgets but do require commitment, coordination, and a willingness to give young people a seat at the table.

The message from the youth is simple: *“We are ready to lead, but we need you to trust us.”* If Kumanovo and Lipkovo embrace this spirit, they will not only strengthen community resilience but also set an example for other municipalities in North Macedonia and beyond.



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6. Supporting Testimonial

The voices of young people in Kumanovo and Lipkovo carry a common message: they want to be part of shaping solutions for their future. Across the four forums, participants repeatedly underlined the same idea – sport is not only a game, but a bridge that helps them connect, understand each other, and stay away from harmful influences.

As one participant summed it up on behalf of many others:

“When we play together, the barriers disappear. We need more chances like this – not just once, but every week, every month. Give us the space and we will show you what youth can achieve.”

7. Acknowledgements

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