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PEACE-MAKING THROUGH SOUND
[RADIOPEACE]
Capacity Building in the Field of Youth

BEST PRACTICES REPORT

**ON USING MUSIC AND DANCE AS NON-FORMAL EDUCATION
TOOL FOR PEACEBUILDING AND INCLUSION**





RADIO PEACE

RADIOPEACE is an Erasmus+ (Key Action 2 Cooperation between organisations and institutions) Capacity building in the field of youth between countries from Italy, Bulgaria, Albania and Kosovo, RADIOPEACE uses music and dance to promote peacebuilding, intercultural dialogue, and European values among young people in Europe and the Western Balkans, focusing on inclusion, digital transformation and environmental sustainability. Funded by the European Union. The views and opinions expressed are however solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the EACEA can be held responsible for these activities.

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Executive Summary

Music and dance have long been celebrated as universal languages capable of transcending borders, uniting diverse communities, and inspiring positive social change. Recognising their unique potential as tools for non-formal education (NFE), intercultural dialogue, and peacebuilding, the RADIOPEACE project's Best Practices Report highlights innovative and effective artistic practices across Europe and the Western Balkans. Funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme under the Youth Capacity Building Call, this initiative aims to provide youth workers, educators, and communities with powerful methods to promote tolerance, inclusion, and active citizenship using music and dance.

The report presents seventeen exemplary practices carefully selected from Albania, Bulgaria, Italy, and Kosovo, each demonstrating the transformative role of music and dance in addressing complex social challenges. From Albania, initiatives such as "The Violin of Peace," "Together for Peace," "Triptych for Peace," and the "SaNiTi Jazz Project" illustrate music's power to cultivate empathy and solidarity among youth. Bulgaria contributes inspiring projects like the "Roma Plovdiv Festival," "Balkan Youth Festival," "Arete Music and Dance Workshops," "Marriage Can Wait - Education Cannot," and "Musical Initiatives '21," showcasing how artistic

expression can effectively combat discrimination and empower marginalised communities. Italy's highlighted practices—"Rhythm 4Youth," "MusicalInGioco", "IWannaDancewithSomebody," and "Aggregation in Music"—reveal music and dance as transformative vehicles for integration, empowerment, and inclusion, particularly for youth facing social or educational barriers. Kosovo's featured initiatives—"Mitrovica Rock School," "MUS-E Kosova's Art at School," "Gipsy Groove," and "Avoko Music Club"—demonstrate clearly how culturally relevant music projects can successfully bridge ethnic divides and foster post-conflict reconciliation.

Central findings confirm that arts-based non-formal education significantly boosts youth engagement, improves social cohesion, and develops key interpersonal skills, including teamwork, empathy, and intercultural understanding. Effective stakeholder engagement and strong community partnerships are critical elements of success, ensuring sustainable impact and adaptability across diverse European contexts. By presenting proven, replicable, and adaptable methods, this report offers practical guidance and inspiration for harnessing the creative potential of music and dance in promoting a more inclusive, tolerant, and peaceful Europe, fully aligned with EU priorities and Erasmus+ objectives.

Introduction

Across the European Union and the Western Balkans, young people are growing up in societies rich in cultural heritage yet marked by histories of division, socio-economic disparity, and evolving inclusion challenges. In this dynamic context, non-formal education (NFE)—mainly when driven by creativity, participation, and empathy—has become a vital bridge between generations, cultures, and communities. This is more evident than in the RADIOPEACE project: a 24-month Erasmus+ Capacity Building initiative launched in 2024 that seeks to use the universal languages of music and dance to spark dialogue, foster understanding, and inspire peace.

RADIOPEACE responds to a critical need for innovative educational approaches that resonate with youth, particularly in the Western Balkans, where unresolved conflicts, marginalisation, and migration have shaped civic life. At its core, the project empowers youth workers, educators, artists, and grassroots organisations to adopt and amplify music and dance as powerful NFE tools. By bringing together partners from EU countries and the Western Balkans—specifically Albania, Bulgaria, Italy, and Kosovo—RADIOPEACE creates a collaborative and intercultural platform where artistic expression becomes a shared instrument for transformation.

Rooted in the Erasmus+ framework, RADIOPEACE is directly aligned with the European Union's strategic priorities on youth, inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and peacebuilding. It promotes the development of competencies among young people and fosters resilience, cooperation, and

respect for cultural diversity. Through practical workshops, public performances, and strategic exchanges, the project equips its beneficiaries—youth leaders, educators, and civil society actors—with skills and methodologies that are both creative and socially responsive.

The practices featured in this report result from a multi-stage research and documentation process co-led by the project partners across all four countries. The methodology combined desk research, interviews, site visits, case study curation, and internal partner collaboration. The selection of best practices prioritised initiatives that demonstrated positive social impact, creativity in methodology, alignment with EU values, and strong potential for adaptation across diverse socio-cultural environments. Local ownership, sustainability, and intergenerational participation were key factors in identifying exemplary models.

The report celebrates the remarkable work already done across Italy and the Western Balkans by documenting and sharing these practices. It provides a valuable roadmap for practitioners, institutions, and policymakers seeking to replicate or adapt these approaches in their contexts. At a time when cultural polarisations and social fragmentation threaten social cohesion, RADIOPEACE offers a hopeful counter-narrative: that youth-driven artistic collaboration can rebuild bridges, restore trust, and lay the groundwork for peaceful, inclusive communities.

1.1 The Transformative Power of Music and Dance in Non-Formal Education

Music and dance are more than artistic expressions in Europe and the Western Balkans—they are living, breathing elements of daily life, storytelling traditions, and cultural memory. They connect generations, carry histories, and have long served as expressions of identity, resistance, celebration, and healing. Within the RadioPeace project, these art forms take on a new function: they become tools for non-formal education to foster intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding, and youth empowerment.

Non-formal education is particularly well-suited to this mission. NFE is voluntary, participatory, and learner-centred—qualities that empower young people to reflect on their realities, connect with others, and imagine alternative futures. It thrives on “learning by doing” and values emotional intelligence, collaboration, and experiential understanding as much as academic knowledge. In post-conflict or socially fragile contexts, NFE becomes a safe space for youth to develop resilience, agency, and empathy.

Music and dance, in turn, embody these same principles. They are participatory, expressive, emotional, and communal. When integrated into NFE, they help young people explore identity, release trauma, challenge stereotypes, and build social bonds across ethnic, linguistic, or

ideological lines. Whether it's Roma youth in Bulgaria reclaiming their cultural pride through dance, young musicians in Kosovo bridging ethnic divides through rock bands, or Italian youth exploring dyslexia through rhythm, each initiative this report captures reflects how music and dance can catalyse growth in both personal and collective levels.

Research supports these insights. Studies in music education and peacebuilding consistently show that music-making strengthens social cohesion, improves emotional well-being, and enhances intercultural competence. Dance, likewise, offers a shared embodied experience that promotes empathy and breaks down verbal and cultural barriers. In NFE settings, these tools allow youth to engage actively and inclusively—especially those who struggle with more traditional educational formats.

In the EU and Western Balkan regions, where youth unemployment, migration, and social tensions often threaten cohesion, music and dance offer an alternative narrative of unity in diversity, resilience in adversity, and creativity in the face of division. RADIOPEACE builds on this potential, weaving together a cross-border initiative network that shows how the arts can educate, empower, and unite.

1.2 Definition & Criteria for “Best Practice”

In the context of the RADIOPEACE project, a “best practice” is not defined solely by scale or budget but by its demonstrated ability to create meaningful, lasting change in youth and community settings through music and dance as NFE tools. These practices are dynamic examples of what happens when artistic creativity meets civic purpose, underpinned by inclusive methodologies and strong local engagement.

The practices featured in this report have been selected because they show a clear track record of effectiveness. This includes observable outcomes such as increased intercultural understanding, improved youth participation, enhanced emotional resilience, or reduced social isolation. Most importantly, they are rooted in the lived experiences of their communities and are validated by the testimonials of those directly involved—whether youth, educators, artists, or local stakeholders.

Equally critical is the potential for replication or adaptation. The initiatives documented here provide flexible, scalable models that can be reimagined in different contexts. Whether through mobile music workshops, inclusive dance performances, or youth-led artistic festivals, these approaches demonstrate strong transferability and resourcefulness, even in low-resource settings.

Alignment with the thematic pillars of the RADIOPEACE project—peacebuilding, inclusion, tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and youth empowerment—is another defining feature. Each best practice uses music and/or dance as a tool not just for education but for social transformation. This alignment with European Union values and Erasmus+ objectives—particularly those related to diversity, social cohesion, and democratic engagement—is key to their recognition within this report.

Sustainability and stakeholder engagement also define best practices. The initiatives highlighted here have invested in local partnerships, community ownership, and intergenerational participation. They are not isolated artistic efforts but are embedded in broader social ecosystems—schools, municipalities, youth networks, and cultural institutions.

Ultimately, these best practices exemplify how non-formal education, when infused with the energy of music and the movement of dance, can spark change from the grassroots. They are stories of young people finding their voice, building bridges, and rewriting the narrative of division with rhythm, harmony, and hope.



2. ALBANIA

Albania, a country where deep historical traditions blend vividly with contemporary artistic innovation, is addressing today's societal complexities with resilience and creativity. As migration reshapes communities and cultural tensions persist across Europe, Albania has increasingly turned to music and art as forms of artistic expression and as transformative instruments for intercultural dialogue, youth empowerment, tolerance, and peacebuilding.

Four remarkable initiatives—The Violin of Peace, Together for Peace, Triptych for Peace, and the SaNiTi Jazz Project—embody this approach, showcasing how the universal language of music can bridge divides, foster solidarity, and strengthen cultural identity. Each project vividly reflects Albania's commitment to the values and objectives of Erasmus+ and the European Union, illustrating robust pathways toward social cohesion and shared growth.

2.1 The Violin of Peace – Uniting Generations through Music in Tirana

Initiated in September 2022 under the passionate leadership of violinist Kledis Rexho, the “Violin of Peace”¹ festival was envisioned to overcome the challenge of limited professional music education opportunities for Albanian youth. The festival aimed explicitly to cultivate intercultural dialogue, foster peace, and enhance professional artistic skills among young musicians.

Funded by the Municipality of Tirana, the Ministry of Culture, and private entities, the festival featured concerts, master classes, and a pedagogical program that catered to musicians aged 10–17. Workshops included collaborations with international institutions, such as the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris and the University of Iowa, blending online and in-person training. Performances took place in prominent venues, including the University of



Arts, the Amphitheater of Tirana, the coastal city of Durrës, and a special outreach concert at a retirement home in Tirana.

A key innovation was the creation of the “Life and Music Concept Orchestra,” uniting professional musicians with Albanian students for collaborative performances. Over forty young musicians participated in intensive workshops,

¹ <https://diasporashqiptare.al/2022/09/29/violina-e-pajes-me-shume-se-nje-seri-koncertesh/>

and twenty-plus international professionals contributed diverse cultural insights. One extraordinary story is that of ten-year-old violinist Vesa Duma, who described the experience as transformative: “Playing with such talented musicians inspired me to work harder and believe in my abilities.” More than 500 attendees across three main concerts experienced this cross-cultural musical exchange.

Though logistical hurdles—such as sustaining funds and coordinating multiple venues—posed challenges, strong community partnerships enabled the festival's success. Ultimately, “Violina e Paqes” advanced EU values by bringing young, underprivileged, and promising musicians into meaningful cultural dialogue.

2.2 Together for Peace – International Musical Solidarity for Ukraine in Tirana

In November 2022, as Europe grappled with the humanitarian crisis resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Albania's capital became a stage for international solidarity through the “Together for Peace”² charity concert. Organised collaboratively by the Albanian Ministry of Defense and the Ukrainian Embassy, this extraordinary event united over 300 musicians from NATO countries, including the Albanian Armed Forces Brass Band, joined military orchestras and brass ensembles from multiple NATO countries (USA, UK, France, Italy, Greece, Ukraine, and other). Their shared goal was unequivocal: raising awareness and funds to support children severely impacted by the ongoing war.

Music was deliberately chosen for its emotional resonance and universal appeal, ensuring wide-reaching empathy and mobilisation of international support. An emotionally charged program included patriotic, classical, and contemporary pieces specifically curated to inspire collective reflection and action. The concert, hosted at Tirana's Palace of Congresses, became a landmark cultural event attended by thousands, further amplified by extensive media coverage.

² <https://www.mod.gov.al/>



Donations raised at the concert were channelled directly to support children displaced or injured in Ukraine. Extensive media coverage, including both national and international outlets, exponentially broadened the concert's outreach. One musician noted, “This concert let me contribute, through music, to a cause bigger than ourselves” reflecting the deep emotional resonance shared by audiences and performers

alike. Other feedback from musicians reflected pride and emotional connection, emphasising the power of collective musical expression.

“Together for Peace” illustrates the alignment with EU values of inclusion, human dignity, and

active global citizenship. Its innovative use of music as a humanitarian instrument offers robust potential for replication as a powerful model for peacebuilding and international solidarity initiatives across Europe.

2.3 Triptych for Peace – Blending Music and Visual Art for European Unity

In May 2019, Albania hosted the pioneering “Triptych for Peace”³ project, artistically expressing Europe’s historical journey towards unity through the compelling blend of classical music, multimedia visuals, and historical storytelling. Funded through the European Union’s IPA 2 Program, the project (which received a notable budget of 808,044 EUR) explicitly sought to strengthen regional cultural integration, foster intercultural dialogue, and promote peace in the historically complex Western Balkans region.

The Triptych project united 65 instrumentalists and 100 singers from Albania, Italy, Greece, Montenegro, and Kosovo. The concerts took place in Tirana and Fier (particularly the Bylis Theater), with performances centered on iconic works such as Verdi’s Requiem and Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9. Scenes of European history were projected on LED walls, weaving music, film, and thematic storytelling into a singular “triptych,” reflecting Europe’s evolution from conflict to integration. Community workshops, overseen by both local educators and visiting artists, further engaged students in discussions around European cultural heritage and solidarity.

Over 1,000 people attended the main performances, with further outreach achieved through local media coverage and social networks. Surveys indicated high audience

³ <https://tournee.italy-albania-montenegro.eu/>



satisfaction and an enriched awareness of cultural cooperation. One participant declared, “Working with artists from different countries broadened my sense of Europe’s shared identity.” Partnerships forged during the event continued among municipalities and cultural institutions, promising ongoing educational exchanges.

Beyond classical music’s universal appeal, “Triptych for Peace” highlighted the unifying spirit at the heart of EU values. It also demonstrated strong transferability potential as a replicable model for future intercultural peacebuilding projects across Europe.



2.4 SaNiTi Jazz Project – Cultivating Intercultural Dialogue through Jazz in Tirana

Between July and September 2018, the SaNiTi (Sarajevo–Niš–Tirana) Jazz Project united youth from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia around the improvisational freedom and inclusive spirit of jazz, with the explicit goal of dismantling cultural divisions in the Western Balkans. Locally overseen by the Blue Eye Association (Syri Blu) in Albania, the project operated on a 14,790 EUR budget funded by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and the EU Commission. Activities spanned intensive masterclasses, workshops, and public jazz performances in Sarajevo, Niš, and Tirana/Apollonia, bringing together 24 young musicians (eight from each country) selected via open call. In Albania, the Archaeological Park of Apollonia served as a picturesque venue for three-day training sessions and a final, “special and magical” concert, supported by partnerships with Fier Municipality, the Artistic Lyceum “Jakov Xoxa,” and local cultural groups.

By focusing on jazz’s improvisational character and requirement for collaborative creativity, SaNiTi fostered genuine intercultural dialogue among youth, bridging linguistic and ethnic barriers. Participants honed musical skills in jam sessions and rehearsals, while roundtables explored jazz as a tool to address ethnic and religious tensions. Public performances in Sarajevo, Niš, and Apollonia showcased a vibrant exchange of Balkan folk traditions and modern jazz, culminating in three joint concerts that featured local folk dance teachers and performing groups. As a lasting testament to the project’s impact, 750 DVD recordings were produced, helping to expand SaNiTi’s message of unity and social inclusion beyond the immediate audiences.



Though the initiative grappled with logistical and resource challenges, it succeeded through dedicated artistic leadership and strong local partnerships. Many participants described developing heightened intercultural awareness and respect for diversity, while enthusiastic audiences discovered firsthand the influential role jazz can play in promoting tolerance and peace. Aligned with EU social inclusion policies, cultural diversity, and youth empowerment, the SaNiTi Jazz Project exemplifies how non-formal education and music can forge mutual understanding in complex post-conflict contexts—revealing a replicable model for future European cooperation and intercultural dialogue.



3. BULGARIA

Bulgaria's cultural tapestry is a rich blend of ancient folklore, vibrant music, and spirited dance traditions, reflecting centuries of diverse cultural influences. While festivals echo with traditional rhythms and dances that bind communities together, contemporary Bulgaria faces challenges of marginalisation, social exclusion, and intercultural tensions, particularly within minority communities. In response, Bulgaria has increasingly embraced music and dance as powerful instruments for social integration,

intercultural dialogue, and youth empowerment, in harmony with European Union values and Erasmus+ objectives. The selected initiatives—Roma Plovdiv Festival, Balkan Youth Festival, Arete Music and Dance Workshops, Marriage Can Wait - Education Cannot, and Musical Initiatives '21—highlight Bulgaria's innovative approach in addressing contemporary societal challenges through artistic engagement and non-formal education.

3.1 Roma Plovdiv Festival – Celebrating Diversity through Roma Culture

Since its inception in 2017, the Roma Plovdiv Festival⁴ has emerged as a vibrant celebration of Roma culture and an influential platform for intercultural dialogue within Bulgaria's historic city of Plovdiv, known as a European Capital of Culture. Conceived as part of a broader strategy to combat deeply-rooted societal prejudices and marginalisation affecting Roma communities, the festival aims to foster genuine appreciation and mutual respect through dynamic artistic expression.

Plovdiv, historically a crossroads of diverse cultures, has long been home to a sizeable Roma population, often subjected to negative stereotypes and exclusion. Recognising the urgent need to bridge this cultural divide, the Roma Foundation "Roma Plovdiv" launched the festival with substantial support from local

cultural institutions, Roma community leaders, and Plovdiv's municipal authorities. Each year, the festival attracts broad participation from artists, educators, civil society activists, and community members, becoming a widely recognized event promoting Roma identity and intercultural exchange.

At the festival's heart is a diverse array of artistic activities illuminating the richness and complexity of Roma's cultural heritage. Audiences actively engage in musical performances featuring traditional Roma rhythms and contemporary interpretations blending jazz, funk, and Balkan fusion. Interactive dance workshops enable participants from various ethnic backgrounds to immerse themselves in Roma traditions, forging new connections built on shared artistic experiences. Theatre performances,

⁴ <https://www.roma-plovdiv.com/>

literary readings, storytelling sessions, and art exhibitions enrich the festival, offering multifaceted representations of Roma identity and history.

In particular, storytelling events and literary discussions have become powerful instruments to humanise and contextualise the experiences of Roma communities, allowing the Roma voice to be authentically represented. The festival actively dismantles prejudices and stereotypes by facilitating open and constructive conversations around complex topics like discrimination, poverty, educational inequality, and cultural misunderstanding.

One significant element of the festival is its strong involvement of young Roma artists and performers. By providing accessible platforms to showcase talent and creativity, Roma youth gain visibility, confidence, and an empowered sense of cultural pride. Additionally, partnerships with local schools and cultural centres ensure active engagement across age groups, promoting intergenerational understanding and community cohesion.

The festival's impact has been demonstrably positive. Evaluations and testimonials from attendees consistently highlight significant shifts in public attitudes toward the Roma community, underscoring increased intercultural awareness and appreciation. Local residents describe feeling more connected to their Roma

neighbours, experiencing reduced prejudice, and embracing a deeper understanding of Roma traditions and contributions to Bulgarian society. Similarly, Roma participants express greater self-confidence, strengthened community pride, and increased civic and cultural engagement motivation.

Despite its success, the Roma Plovdiv Festival has faced challenges, notably limited funding resources and occasional resistance from segments of the broader community. However, persistent community outreach, broad stakeholder engagement, and creative fundraising efforts have effectively mitigated these barriers. Strong institutional backing and active involvement from Plovdiv's cultural authorities have also significantly contributed to the festival's continuity and growth.

Reflecting the European Union's core values—particularly inclusion, cultural diversity, and active citizenship—the Roma Plovdiv Festival aligns seamlessly with Erasmus+ objectives. It provides a highly transferable model demonstrating how artistic celebration, rooted deeply in community participation and authentic cultural representation, can transform public perceptions, foster intercultural understanding, and promote lasting social harmony. Through music, dance, storytelling, and shared experiences, the Roma Plovdiv Festival vividly illustrates that cultural differences can become a powerful catalyst for unity rather than division.

3.2 Balkan Youth Festival – Bridging Youth Across Borders through Music and Dance

Established in 1996 in the picturesque town of Sandanski, Bulgaria, the Balkan Youth Festival⁵ arose from a bold vision: using music, dance, and artistic collaboration to overcome historical divisions and foster lasting peace among Balkan countries. Sandanski, strategically located at a historical crossroads between cultures, was purposefully chosen as the festival's home to symbolize reconciliation and dialogue amid a region long marked by ethnic and political complexities. The festival was initiated in direct response to the turbulent aftermath of the Yugoslav conflicts, recognizing that lasting peace requires mutual understanding and intercultural exchange among younger generations.



The Balkan Youth Festival transforms Sandanski into a vibrant hub of youthful creativity and cultural dialogue each summer. The Municipality of Sandanski and the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture consistently support the event alongside international partners, local cultural institutions, and various youth-oriented organisations. Drawing youth delegations from Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Albania, Greece, Montenegro, Turkey, and other Balkan countries, the festival actively involves young artists in

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/byfestival/>

diverse, immersive activities, turning cultural differences into sources of enrichment rather than division.

At the core of the festival's success is its uniquely inclusive approach. Young participants engage in dynamic collaborative performances that blend traditional Balkan folklore with contemporary styles, creating innovative artistic expressions that celebrate shared heritage while respecting cultural distinctions. Traditional dance ensembles and contemporary choreography workshops are organized side-by-side, encouraging young people to explore new artistic forms and cultural traditions beyond their familiar experiences. The festival also features interactive theatre productions, visual art exhibits, and musical performances that incorporate folklore, jazz, pop, and fusion genres, appealing widely to young and diverse audiences.

A particularly impactful component of the Balkan Youth Festival involves intercultural dialogue sessions and joint artistic workshops. Facilitated by experienced artists, youth workers, and cultural mediators, these sessions allow participants to openly discuss sensitive issues such as prejudice, stereotypes, historical misunderstandings, and common future goals. By sharing their stories, personal experiences, and artistic talents, participants forge bonds rooted in mutual respect and empathy. Over the years, these dialogues have evolved into lasting friendships, partnerships, and joint cultural initiatives, significantly strengthening regional solidarity among Balkan youth.

The festival's results have been consistently

transformative, reflected vividly in evaluations and personal testimonials. Many participants report profound personal growth, an increased appreciation for cultural diversity, and a substantial reduction in previous misconceptions and biases. Young artists have expressed deepened self-confidence, intercultural competence, and enthusiasm to advocate for peace and solidarity within their communities. Feedback from educators, parents, and local residents further highlights the festival's role as a meaningful vehicle for social cohesion and youth empowerment across the region.

Nevertheless, organizing an international festival of such scope is not without challenges. Logistical complexities, such as coordinating cross-border participation, securing adequate resources, and navigating diplomatic sensitivities, have occasionally posed significant hurdles. These issues have been effectively addressed through robust stakeholder collaboration, extensive local and international partnerships, and ongoing community engagement. Strong municipal and governmental support has consistently ensured sustainability and high participation levels, reaffirming the festival's reputation as a key cultural event within Bulgaria and across the Balkans.



Aligned clearly with core European values of solidarity, intercultural dialogue, and active citizenship, the Balkan Youth Festival demonstrates the profound potential of music and dance as universal languages capable of transcending borders and histories of division. Its replicable model provides valuable insights and practical methodologies for utilizing non-formal artistic education in fostering intercultural understanding, youth leadership, and long-term peacebuilding. Ultimately, through artistic collaboration and youth-driven creativity, the Balkan Youth Festival powerfully illustrates that the celebration of diversity can serve as a lasting foundation for regional unity and peace.

3.3 Arete Music and Dance Workshops – Empowering Roma Youth through Artistic Expression

Since its establishment in 2015, Arete Youth Foundation's Music and Dance Workshops⁶ have passionately tackled the educational and social disparities confronting Roma youth in Bulgaria. Situated within a broader mission to combat widespread discrimination and systemic

exclusion of Roma communities, these workshops uniquely harness the transformative power of artistic engagement, fostering empowerment, inclusion, and academic aspiration among disadvantaged youth. The initiative emerged as a direct response to persistent educational

⁶ www.areteyouth.org

inequities and limited opportunities facing Roma young people, who frequently experience social isolation, early school dropout rates, and barriers to employment.

Supported through collaboration with local educational institutions, community leaders, and Roma cultural associations, Arete has successfully integrated music and dance workshops within their holistic youth empowerment framework. These interactive sessions blend traditional Roma music and dances with contemporary artistic techniques, enabling young participants to both embrace their cultural heritage and gain exposure to broader artistic practices. Experienced Roma musicians, choreographers, and educators lead intensive artistic sessions in culturally respectful and inspiring environments, often hosted in schools, community centers, and youth hubs across Bulgaria. The inclusion of respected Roma artists as mentors and role models further encourages young participants, enhancing their cultural pride and motivating them toward personal excellence.

Workshop participants regularly engage in diverse artistic activities designed not only to enhance their creative skills but also to boost their self-esteem, academic motivation, and social competence. Activities include traditional Roma dance lessons, instrumental music sessions, vocal training, improvisation exercises, and modern choreography workshops that bridge Roma traditions with popular music genres. This approach actively affirms cultural identity, thereby combating internalized stigma while simultaneously promoting intercultural appreciation and dialogue among broader Bulgarian communities.

A key feature of the program is its emphasis on public performances, which serve as empowering

platforms for Roma youth to creatively showcase their cultural heritage, talents, and aspirations. These performances, held in diverse public spaces, schools, and local festivals, not only celebrate Roma artistic traditions but also explicitly challenge negative stereotypes and societal prejudices. Audiences experience firsthand the depth, beauty, and richness of Roma culture, prompting increased understanding, respect, and dialogue. The visibility generated through such public showcases directly contributes to social cohesion, fostering empathy and reducing entrenched discrimination.

Evaluations of the initiative have consistently underscored remarkable successes in empowering Roma youth, with measurable outcomes indicating significantly increased self-confidence, improved academic engagement, and heightened aspirations among participants. Attendance and retention rates at schools have notably risen among young people involved in the workshops, illustrating the broader educational impact of arts-based empowerment. Teachers, parents, and community leaders regularly provide compelling testimonials describing visible improvements in participants' attitudes, social behaviors, and intercultural relationships. Many Roma youths involved in the program have progressed academically and become active advocates for their communities, indicating lasting personal and community-level transformations fostered through artistic engagement.

Despite early challenges, including initial skepticism from both Roma and non-Roma communities and persistent resource limitations, Arete Youth Foundation has successfully ensured the program's sustainability and expansion. They achieved this through building robust

local partnerships, securing continuous support from educational institutions, and maintaining active community participation. By embedding these workshops into a comprehensive youth empowerment strategy—also encompassing mentorship, academic support, career counseling, and social advocacy—the foundation has significantly strengthened both short-term and long-term impacts for Roma youth.

Arete's music and dance workshops illustrate the profound potential of cultural and artistic

education to empower marginalized youth, foster intercultural dialogue, and strengthen social cohesion. Their highly transferable approach offers valuable insights and practical methodologies that can be replicated across diverse contexts in Europe. Above all, Arete Youth Foundation vividly demonstrates that through celebrating cultural identity and artistic creativity, disadvantaged young people can find powerful pathways toward inclusion, educational success, and social empowerment.

3.4 Marriage Can Wait, Education Cannot – Combating Early Marriage through Music and Dance

Since its inception in 2017, the Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance “Amalipe” has passionately addressed the deeply-rooted issue of early marriages among Roma communities across Bulgaria through its impactful initiative, Marriage Can Wait, Education Cannot⁷. This groundbreaking project, supported financially by the European Union and the Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation, emerged as a response to alarming rates of early school dropouts, gender inequalities, and deeply entrenched traditions that have historically limited educational and social opportunities, particularly for young Roma girls.

Recognizing the transformative potential of music and dance—integral to Roma identity and daily life—the initiative strategically integrates traditional Roma artistic expressions into educational and cultural programming to foster community engagement, raise awareness, and advocate for gender equality and education. Amalipe's innovative use of culturally resonant

⁷ <https://amalipe.bg/>

music, storytelling, and dance allows sensitive issues to be addressed in accessible, non-threatening ways, directly engaging youth, families, and broader community networks.

Activities organized under the initiative are vibrant, interactive, and educational, deeply embedded in the community's cultural context. These include regular non-formal workshops held within schools and local community centers, interactive cultural events, theatrical and dance performances, and open discussions led by respected local Roma figures and educators. Professional artists, musicians, and youth leaders guide young participants through traditional Roma dances and songs, creating safe spaces to explore critical topics such as the rights of women and girls, the long-term benefits of education, and the risks associated with early marriage. Additionally, peer education models empower young Roma role models—especially girls who have overcome personal and cultural barriers—to share their stories and motivate

peers toward educational aspirations.

Public community performances serve as celebratory yet powerful platforms for advocacy. Participants showcase artistic routines rooted deeply in Roma tradition, capturing community attention and opening dialogue around the importance of education and gender equality. These public presentations not only entertain but significantly shift community attitudes, prompting critical reflections on deeply ingrained cultural norms. Local Roma musicians and dance groups actively support performances, further reinforcing the authentic cultural connection and credibility of the initiative's messages.

The results of Marriage Can Wait, Education Cannot have been profound and measurable. Independent evaluations and community feedback consistently indicate increased school attendance and reduced dropout rates among Roma girls within targeted communities. Moreover, reported incidents of early marriage have declined notably where the initiative operates. Families and educators attest to strengthened relationships between Roma communities and schools, coupled with an increased willingness among Roma parents—particularly fathers—to support daughters' continued education. The initiative has successfully amplified community awareness around gender equality, empowering young women and challenging restrictive social norms.

Despite its significant successes, the project has faced considerable challenges, primarily related to sustained funding, maintaining long-term community engagement, and overcoming resistance rooted in deeply held traditional practices. Amalipe has effectively managed these obstacles through extensive local collaboration, targeted educational programs involving community leaders, and culturally sensitive advocacy campaigns. Continuous dialogues involving Roma elders and respected community figures have also been instrumental in securing community buy-in and ensuring sustainable change.

Aligned fully with European Union principles of inclusion, gender equality, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue, Marriage Can Wait, Education Cannot represents a replicable and inspiring model for utilizing culturally embedded artistic expression in non-formal education settings. The initiative clearly demonstrates how traditional music and dance, combined with focused advocacy, can powerfully transform attitudes, empower marginalized youth, and cultivate social cohesion. Above all, Amalipe's work vividly illustrates that through culturally resonant educational interventions, even the most persistent social challenges can be successfully overcome, paving pathways toward greater inclusion, equity, and collective community empowerment.

3.5 Musical Initiatives '21 – Promoting Social Inclusion through Creative Musical Productions

In 2021, Bulgaria's innovative project, *Musical Initiatives '21*⁸, emerged as a powerful artistic response to the persistent challenges of social exclusion and marginalization experienced by minority communities throughout the country. Funded and supported by Bulgaria's National Culture Fund, this initiative was conceived from an acute awareness of societal divides and the pressing need to foster greater empathy, intercultural dialogue, and community integration through the universal language of music.

Rooted in the belief that music has the transformative power to bridge divides, break stereotypes, and amplify silenced voices, *Musical Initiatives '21* strategically brought together professional musicians and artists with members of Bulgaria's minority communities, including Roma, Turkish, and other ethnic

groups often marginalized in the wider society. This collaborative approach provided minority individuals not merely with an opportunity to participate, but to actively co-create artistic productions, directly voicing their experiences, cultural heritage, and social challenges.

The initiative involved creating a series of socially-oriented musical compositions enriched by accompanying music videos that vividly illustrated personal stories, cultural traditions, and social realities faced by minorities. Each composition and visual piece served as a storytelling medium, spotlighting topics like discrimination, integration struggles, cultural pride, and identity preservation. Professional musicians worked closely with minority participants throughout the creative

⁸ <https://programs.ncf.bg/bg/results/MI156>

process, carefully ensuring that each production authentically represented the lived experiences, aspirations, and cultural expressions of the communities involved.

The impact of the initiative quickly resonated beyond its immediate participants. The musical and visual productions reached broad audiences across Bulgaria through strategic public dissemination, including online media platforms, social media campaigns, and community presentations. These creations sparked meaningful public dialogue, significantly increasing societal awareness and understanding of minority challenges. Audience feedback, testimonials, and project evaluations collectively demonstrated tangible shifts in social perceptions, showing enhanced empathy, reduced prejudice, and a deeper appreciation for the cultural diversity existing within Bulgaria's social fabric.

Participants reported remarkable personal transformations, describing increased self-confidence, a renewed sense of community belonging, and an empowered voice to advocate for themselves and their communities. Particularly significant were testimonials from young minority artists who expressed how engaging creatively alongside established musicians had deeply motivated them, inspiring greater educational aspirations and stronger civic engagement. Professional artists involved also spoke about how the initiative enriched their perspectives, highlighting music's unique capacity to dissolve barriers and nurture meaningful intercultural relationships.

Despite notable successes, the initiative faced initial logistical hurdles, primarily due to limited financial and material resources. Yet organizers navigated these constraints effectively by harnessing extensive community and cultural networks, securing in-kind contributions of studio spaces, technical equipment, and volunteer support from local artists, cultural associations, and civil society groups. This extensive community collaboration was key in maintaining momentum and ensuring the successful realization of each production.

Musical Initiatives '21 provides a replicable model with substantial transferability potential.

Its approach—combining grassroots community engagement, professional artistic collaboration, and public dissemination—offers valuable insights for leveraging musical and artistic expression as profound tools for social advocacy, cultural appreciation, and peacebuilding. Ultimately, *Musical Initiatives '21* vividly illustrates the transformative potential inherent in culturally sensitive artistic interventions. By creating platforms where marginalized voices can resonate clearly, the initiative contributes meaningfully to a more inclusive, empathetic, and culturally vibrant Bulgarian society.



4. ITALY

Italy's cultural landscape pulses with life, shaped through centuries of creativity, vibrant artistic traditions, and diverse exchanges. Opera houses echo grand performances, while vibrant folk dances connect generations in public squares. Yet, beyond these timeless expressions, contemporary Italy faces profound challenges: growing diversity from migration, widening economic divides, youth marginalization, and limited support for those with special needs.

In response, a remarkable shift has occurred, one that embraces music and dance not merely as artistic traditions but as powerful instruments for social transformation. Across the country, initiatives have emerged within the realm of

non-formal education, harnessing the universal languages of rhythm, melody, and movement to promote tolerance, intercultural understanding, and peacebuilding.

The four Italian initiatives selected—Rhythm 4Youth, MusicalnGioco, I Wanna Dance with Somebody, and Aggregation in Music—exemplify this new wave of socially-driven artistic engagement. Together, they illustrate vividly how music and dance can inspire young people and their communities to view diversity not as a barrier, but as an opportunity for shared growth, embodying Italy's profound commitment to European values and Erasmus+ objectives.

4.1 Rhythm 4Youth – Empowering Dyslexic Youth through the Joy of Dance in Rome and Vienna

In 2022, Move Art ASD, a dynamic educational organisation in Rome, collaborated with Vienna's BIANNA Zentrum für Bildung und Kunst to confront a challenge often hidden beneath the surface—dyslexia and the social isolation it brings. Dyslexia, though widely recognised, remains misunderstood, frequently leaving affected young people disconnected from their peers and excluded from meaningful participation in educational and social life. Recent research highlighting the connection between dyslexia and rhythmic perception sparked a powerful idea: Could dance, with its inherent rhythmic flow, bridge the subtle yet critical gap

⁹ <https://www.piattaformaprogetti.eu/rhythm-4-youth/>

between auditory and visual stimuli that dyslexic youth experience?

Funded by a €60,000 grant from the European Union, the project “Rhythm 4Youth”⁹ took shape as a series of thoughtfully designed dance workshops in Rome and Vienna, specifically targeting dyslexic adolescents aged 13-19. Activities combined rhythmic drumming circles, interactive mirroring games, improvisational dance, rhythmic locomotor exercises, and engaging “follow-the-conductor” tasks. These were more than mere dance lessons—they were safe spaces, carefully crafted to accommodate

the unique, multi-sensory learning needs of young dyslexic participants, enabling them to express themselves freely without fear of misunderstanding or failure.

The initiative's methodology was distinctly groundbreaking, moving away from traditional approaches toward personalised instruction tailored for inclusivity. Trainers employed structured routines, visual aids, supportive and repetitive materials, and individualized attention, ensuring that each participant felt comfortable and fully engaged. Importantly, the trainers did not work alone; they collaborated closely with partners such as Asociația Tinerilor Cu Inițiativa Civică¹⁰ and Education and Lobbying



Nel Skopje (PEL)¹¹ from North Macedonia. These partnerships not only deepened the project's intercultural dimension but also strengthened the trainers' ability to identify early signs of dyslexia, further amplifying the project's broader impact.

Local schools, families, and institutions provided vital support, offering venues, resources, and expertise to sustain the initiative. Cultural enrichment was woven into every interaction, with folk dance experts introducing traditional rhythms beneficial for addressing the participants' specific rhythmic challenges. These cultural exchanges not only enhanced the educational value but reinforced participants' sense of

belonging to a larger, inclusive community.

The results of "Rhythm 4Youth" far exceeded initial expectations. Quantitative data revealed an impressive increase (at least 60%) in youth workers' and educators' understanding of dyslexia and its connection with dance-based activities. Additionally, more than 30 new practical guidelines were developed to improve communication strategies and enhance the inclusion of dyslexic youth. Yet, beyond these compelling statistics, the initiative's most profound impacts were deeply human and emotional.

Teachers and parents shared testimonials describing noticeable improvements in the children's confidence and participation, highlighting dance as a meaningful tool for their emotional and social integration. As one educator observed, "Seeing these children open up, finally feeling part of something bigger than their condition, was profoundly moving."

However, achieving these remarkable outcomes required overcoming significant hurdles. The project faced challenges adapting dance methodologies specifically for dyslexic youth. These were addressed through specialized training sessions for youth workers, developing clear communication guidelines, and structured methodologies tailored for dyslexic participants.

Fully embodying the European Union's core principles of inclusion, diversity, and human rights, "Rhythm 4Youth" has become an exemplary model within the Erasmus+ framework. Its methods and experiences offer valuable insights and strong potential for replication, demonstrating convincingly how non-formal educational approaches using dance can

¹⁰ <https://aticromania.wordpress.com/about/>

¹¹ <https://www.pel.mk/>

transform the lives of marginalized youth across diverse European contexts. Through rhythm, movement, and empathy, "Rhythm 4Youth" has clearly shown that dance can become not just

an art form but a profound lifeline, empowering young individuals to move confidently beyond their challenges toward a future filled with possibility.

4.2 MusicalInGioco – Transforming Young Lives and Uniting Communities through Music in Puglia

Since its beginnings in 2017, deep in the heart of Southern Italy's Puglia region, "MusicalInGioco"¹² has resonated powerfully as a beacon of hope, inclusion, and transformation. This inspiring initiative emerged to confront an urgent local reality—growing marginalization faced by children and youth experiencing socio-economic hardships, disabilities, and learning difficulties like ADHD, Asperger's syndrome, Down syndrome, and autism. Driven by a powerful vision inspired by the globally acclaimed "El Sistema,"¹³ founded by Venezuelan maestro Antonio José Abreu, MusicalInGioco sought to break down barriers and foster genuine social empowerment through music.

Entirely sustained by public generosity—through financial contributions and donated musical instruments—the initiative quickly blossomed into a vibrant movement embedded within local communities. Strong and sustained partnerships with municipalities, notably Gioia del Colle and Adelfia, allowed MusicalInGioco to create inclusive youth orchestras, choirs, and interdisciplinary workshops blending theatre, dance, and scenography. Young participants aged 10 to 17 were offered structured yet creatively flexible musical education at no cost, enabling even the most disadvantaged to gain access to the transformative power of music.

Central to MusicalInGioco's success has been its distinctive



blending of formal and non-formal educational methods. Regular rehearsals, public concerts, and collaborative community events provided participants with an inclusive environment promoting teamwork, emotional and social skills, and artistic expression. Over the years, more than 15,000 children and youth—including juveniles in detention centers—have directly benefited from this initiative.

The establishment of two uniquely symbolic choirs powerfully reflects MusicalInGioco's inclusive ethos: one featuring more than 50 adult singers, many elderly, and another specifically designed to include young adults with Down syndrome. Together, these choirs embodied a rare harmony across generations and abilities, offering a poignant representation of the project's inclusive spirit. Families and local audiences frequently witnessed performances that exemplified unity, resilience, and community solidarity, turning concerts into powerful symbols of social integration.

Quantitative evaluations consistently underscored the initiative's impressive impact, documenting substantial improvements in

¹² <https://www.musicaingioco.net/>

¹³ https://www.sistemaeuropa.org/What_is_El_Sistema/

emotional regulation, reduced hyperactivity, and enhanced social behavior among participants compared to peers not involved in the program. But numbers alone scarcely capture the profound human transformations that took place. A mother's heartfelt testimony vividly illustrates MusicalnGioco's real-life impact: "He was shy and withdrawn; music gave him friends, it gave him a voice." Many families described significant improvements in social interactions and confidence among children who previously struggled socially and emotionally.

Yet, sustaining this remarkable social transformation was not without challenges. Continuous need for funding, logistical coordination, and consistent stakeholder engagement presented ongoing hurdles, which MusicalnGioco navigated skillfully through dedicated community partnerships, consistent fundraising, and strong institutional support. The initiative's exceptional outcomes have been widely recognised—officially endorsed by Italy's Ministry of Education (MIUR)¹⁴ and prominently featured by Urbact¹⁵, the influential European network promoting urban innovation.

By successfully combining structured and music education with creative freedom and adaptability, MusicalnGioco has provided invaluable insights into the power of artistic non-formal education. This model offers tremendous potential for replication across diverse European contexts. It demonstrates that music can be far more than entertainment—it can unify communities, promote cultural engagement, and drive lasting social change. Reflecting EU values of diversity, inclusion, human rights, and fully embodying Erasmus+ objectives, MusicalnGioco stands

14 <https://fundit.fr/en/institutions/ministry-education-university-and-research-italy-miur#:~:text=The%20Ministry%20of%20Education%2C%20Universities,the%20Italian%20universities%20and%20research.>

15 <https://urbact.eu/>

16 <http://www.artmovingasd.it/>

out as a powerful testament to music's unique capacity to build bridges, foster empathy, and transform societies for the better.

4.3 I Wanna Dance with Somebody – Bridging Differences through Dance in Rome / Across Europe

Between January 2019 and June 2020, Rome's Move Art ASD¹⁶ took center stage once again, this time using dance as



a powerful instrument for social transformation through its vibrant initiative, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." Recognizing the growing tensions in increasingly diverse communities, the project sought to address issues of exclusion, racism, and cultural misunderstandings by explicitly targeting young migrants and youth from challenging socio-economic backgrounds.

Supported by Erasmus+ and the European Commission, with funding totaling €48,070, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" brought together young participants and their families from Italy, France, and Hungary in four dynamic transnational exchanges and multiple local community events. Rather than merely performing dance routines, participants used dance as an expressive vehicle for identity exploration, intercultural dialogue, and genuine connection. Events were structured around innovative European methodologies—including Open Space Technology, European Structured Dialogue, and Focused Conversation—

providing dynamic spaces where young people engaged in intercultural dialogue, explored identity, and addressed racism and exclusion through creative expression.

Throughout these exchanges, participants explored their identities and cultural backgrounds through dance, contributing to increased intercultural understanding and reduced social barriers. Dance became not just an art form, but a powerful language capable of communicating emotions and experiences that transcended traditional cultural and linguistic barriers. Participants described feeling a newfound pride in their cultural identities, discovering the richness in diversity rather than division. A young dancer captured the spirit of the project beautifully, reflecting, "When we dance together, our differences don't separate us; they make our dance more beautiful."

Beyond individual transformations, the project significantly impacted broader community networks. Schools, families, local institutions,

and even sports associations engaged actively, witnessing firsthand how dance could foster empathy, intercultural friendships, and democratic participation. Despite initial challenges—such as cultural barriers and logistical complexities—meticulous planning, open community dialogue, and strong collaborative partnerships allowed the project to thrive.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" was the creation of a European network committed to advocating dance as a primary tool for migrant integration and social inclusion. By building lasting connections across borders, the initiative provided valuable insights into how non-formal, arts-based methods could effectively promote active citizenship and intercultural cohesion. Aligned with Erasmus+ priorities and EU values of unity through diversity, the project underscored dance's extraordinary potential to cultivate understanding, social integration, and a deeper sense of shared humanity across diverse European communities.

4.4 Aggregation in Music – Uniting Youth through Rhythm and Friendship in Sardinia

On the sun-drenched island of Sardinia, in the picturesque town of Sestu, music and dance set the stage for a powerful encounter between cultures. From January 2017 to January 2018, an initiative called "Aggregation in Music" brought together 40 young Italians and Latvians in a vibrant celebration of diversity, creativity, and community. Coordinated passionately by Associazione Turistica Pro Loco Sestu¹⁷ in partnership with Latvia's TDA Lielupe¹⁸, this Erasmus+ funded project (in the amount of 17 <https://festivaldelleproloco.wixsite.com/prolocosestu> 18 <https://kultura.jelgava.lv/en/tautas-deju-ansamblis-lielupe/>

€19,668) emerged as a timely response to the increasing social fragmentation and intercultural tensions faced by youth in Europe.

Right from the start, participants dove into immersive experiences designed to spark friendships and break down barriers. Guided by skilled facilitators using engaging, non-formal educational methods, the young people explored diverse artistic activities including lively dance parties, interactive icebreaker games, cultural

visits, collaborative workshops, and community performances. The heart of the project lay in its intentionally informal yet deeply educational approach—every activity encouraged participants to freely express their unique cultural identities, engage openly in meaningful dialogue about citizenship and social inclusion, and develop valuable interpersonal and intercultural skills.

The days spent together quickly translated into profound intercultural understanding. Participants discovered shared values and built lasting bonds as they learned traditional dances, practiced songs, and created performances seamlessly blending Italian and Latvian artistic traditions. These dynamic interactions, rich with experiential learning, significantly enhanced the youths' confidence, empathy, and cross-cultural communication skills. Each joint performance transformed into a compelling expression of unity and shared European identity, contributing positively to local community awareness about intercultural cooperation and solidarity.

Evaluations captured snapshots of these transformations, highlighting increased tolerance and empathy among participants and their strengthened awareness of European values and democratic engagement. Reflecting on their experiences, young participants spoke passionately of lasting friendships formed across national borders. Many described their journey as “life-changing,” sharing personal stories of how cultural stereotypes dissolved, replaced by



genuine appreciation and respect for diversity.

Despite the project's ambitious goals, logistical challenges arose early, such as coordinating international travel, accommodation, and event spaces. Yet the organizers successfully navigated these complexities through meticulous planning, securing local venues equipped with comfortable boarding facilities, and providing ongoing dedicated support from experienced group leaders.

The tangible success of “Aggregation in Music” is a testament to the replicability and value of arts-based youth exchanges across Europe. Fully aligned with Erasmus+ objectives and embodying EU values of diversity, human rights, inclusion, and active citizenship, this vibrant initiative offered lasting insights into how music and dance can foster profound intercultural dialogue, social cohesion, and peace. By creatively using rhythm and movement, young participants in Sestu demonstrated that harmony across cultures is not only possible—it can thrive, beautifully reshaping communities and transforming lives.



5. KOSOVO

Kosovo, marked by rich multicultural traditions and a complex post-conflict history, has turned to music and dance as powerful instruments to rebuild fractured communities and foster peace. Amid persistent ethnic tensions and social isolation, innovative local initiatives have harnessed artistic creativity within the framework of non-formal education to promote intercultural dialogue, youth empowerment, and social inclusion. Four notable practices—Mitrovica

Rock School, MUS-E Kosova's Art at School, Gipsy Groove, and Avoko Music Club—stand out for their creativity, resilience, and profound commitment to European values and Erasmus+ goals. Collectively, these initiatives vividly illustrate Kosovo's dedication to transforming diversity from a potential barrier into a strength, inspiring hope and cohesion through artistic expression.

5.1 Mitrovica Rock School – Uniting Youth through the Universal Language of Rock

Mitrovica, historically known as “Rock City,” has long been renowned for its vibrant music scene, particularly rock music, dating back to the 1960s. Bands like “FAN,” formed in 1967, and the notable bi-ethnic ensemble “MAK,” established in the 1970s, exemplified a spirit of unity, transcending ethnic boundaries through their music. This rich musical legacy, however, was profoundly disrupted by the conflict and subsequent deep ethnic divisions within the city.

In response, the Mitrovica Rock School¹⁹ emerged in 2008 as a creative initiative to bridge the entrenched separation between Serbian and Albanian youth by reigniting their shared musical passion. Supported by prominent international organizations, including Musicians Without

Borders, Community Building Mitrovica²⁰, the European Union, and the Netherlands' Matra program, the school created unique neutral spaces for youth interaction through music education. Initially, it operated through separate branches on either side of the Ibar River, gradually fostering opportunities for ethnically mixed collaborations.

The school's curriculum creatively blends instrumental lessons, band coaching, songwriting workshops, and dynamic public performances. Young musicians engage actively in genres such as rock, punk, indie, and rap, forming ethnically mixed bands that collaborate creatively, write original music, and perform both locally and internationally. Over its 16-year journey, the

¹⁹ <https://www.mitrovicarockschool.org/>

²⁰ <https://www.cbmitrovica.org/>



Mitrovica Rock School has successfully engaged more than 1,700 youth, resulting in the formation of over 70 diverse bands whose music embodies themes of unity, friendship, and cultural harmony.

Performances and exchanges beyond Kosovo's borders have provided participants with valuable experiences, bolstering their confidence, broadening their cultural horizons, and demonstrating the transformative potential of music in overcoming division. Testimonials and evaluations consistently highlight significant improvements in mutual understanding, reduced prejudice, and increased openness among students who previously experienced isolation from one another.

Operating within a highly politicized and complex environment, the school has encountered logistical and practical challenges. Yet these

hurdles have been effectively managed through dedicated local staff, persistent community dialogue, and steadfast cross-community cooperation. The neutral, student-focused approach empowers youth to connect meaningfully and authentically, creating lasting personal and communal relationships.

Fully aligned with the core European values of diversity, inclusion, human rights, and active citizenship, the Mitrovica Rock School provides a replicable model demonstrating how youth-driven non-formal education through music can heal even the deepest divisions. By reviving Mitrovica's celebrated rock heritage in a contemporary context, the school stands as a powerful testament to the enduring capacity of music to foster peace, intercultural dialogue, and positive societal transformation.

5.2 Art at School (MUS-E Kosova) – Fostering Intercultural Understanding in the Classroom

Since 1999, MUS-E Kosova's²¹ innovative initiative "Art at School – Music and Dance for Intercultural Dialogue" has deeply embedded creative expression into Kosovo's educational fabric, fostering intercultural understanding and promoting social cohesion among primary school children. Inspired by the international MUS-E (Musique-Europe) framework initiated in 1993 by renowned violinist Yehudi Menuhin, this program draws from the educational philosophies of Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály, who emphasised the importance of integrating accessible artistic experiences into everyday education. While Menuhin's broader vision encompasses multiple art forms—such as music, dance, drama, and visual arts—the Kosovo program adapts this rich artistic tradition to address the region's unique post-war needs.

Mus-e Kosova is a part of Mus-e Networks, which operates under the International Yehudi Menuhin Foundation²² and is based in Brussels.

Responding to Kosovo's historical divisions and the lingering impact of ethnic separation, MUS-E Kosova actively engages children from diverse communities, including Albanian, Bosniak, Gorani, Roma, and Serbian backgrounds. Supported by the International Yehudi Menuhin Foundation, Kosovo's Ministry of Culture and Education, and various local partners, the program uniquely integrates professional artists into classrooms alongside regular teachers. Through an interactive co-teaching methodology, students participate in vibrant sessions that merge music, dance, and creative movement, helping them explore and appreciate the region's multicultural heritage. These sessions are not merely artistic activities; they become pathways for building empathy, mutual respect, and meaningful intercultural dialogue.

The outcomes from MUS-E Kosova have been profound. A comprehensive evaluation conducted at Mihal Grameno School in 2024 revealed



21 <https://mus-ekosova.org/>

22 <https://www.menuhin-foundation.com/>

impressive results, with 75% of participating students reporting high satisfaction, 78% indicating improved creativity, and over 60% noting a substantial reduction in bullying and discrimination. Beyond numbers, testimonials from teachers and parents consistently highlight positive behavioral transformations, increased intercultural cooperation, and enhanced emotional intelligence among the children, reflecting the initiative's profound social impact.

Despite these remarkable successes, the program has faced challenges, particularly regarding sustained funding and effective coordination across diverse schools. MUS-E

Kosova successfully addressed these through proactive local partnerships, robust community involvement, and ongoing artist-teacher collaboration, demonstrating resilience and adaptability.

MUS-E Kosova exemplifies how arts-based non-formal education embedded in formal schooling can be a powerful catalyst for positive social change. By adapting an internationally recognised model to local needs, the initiative continues to build a more inclusive, harmonious, and resilient society in Kosovo, providing valuable insights and a replicable framework for similar contexts throughout Europe.

5.3 Gipsy Groove – Fusing Music with Social Advocacy

Founded in 2010, Gipsy Groove²³ is a vibrant and innovative musical ensemble from Kosovo, renowned for blending traditional Balkan Romani melodies with contemporary genres such as jazz, reggae, funk, ska, and drum and bass. The band's diverse lineup, featuring musicians from Albanian, Turkish, and Roma communities, reflects Kosovo's rich cultural mosaic and underscores its mission to promote unity, equality, and intercultural dialogue through music.

From its inception, Gipsy Groove embraced a profound commitment to addressing social issues, including inequality, racism, freedom of movement, women's rights, and human rights broadly. Their music encapsulates the complex interplay of struggle and joy characteristic of life in Kosovo and the Balkans, serving both as a reflection of societal realities and a powerful catalyst for social change.



Their energetic performances are distinguished by lively interaction with audiences, improvisational creativity, and a joyful atmosphere that invites

²³ <https://gipsygroovemusic.com/>

active participation. By infusing Roma folk traditions with modern musical influences, Gipsy Groove effectively challenges stereotypes, creating a powerful platform for dialogue, understanding, and social advocacy. Audience testimonials frequently highlight how their concerts spark meaningful conversations about diversity, acceptance, and equality.

The band has successfully brought its vibrant message to diverse local and international audiences, participating prominently in festivals such as Kosovo's acclaimed DokuFest, the International Romani Art Festival (IRAF) in Romania, the Great Anatolian Meeting of the World Cultures in Turkey, and NGOM Festival in Kosovo. Through these festivals, Gipsy Groove amplifies their vision, reaching wide-ranging communities and inspiring cross-cultural appreciation and understanding.

Their musical journey is marked by important creative milestones: in 2013, the band released their debut album featuring fresh interpretations of traditional Romani songs. This was followed by their groundbreaking 2014 album, "BalkanMania," which comprised original songs explicitly addressing social issues such as freedom of

movement, women's empowerment, love, and resilience. These releases not only demonstrated their artistic versatility but also reinforced their unwavering dedication to advocacy and social justice through art.

Despite confronting significant challenges, including limited resources and persistent societal prejudices, Gipsy Groove has consistently overcome barriers through proactive public engagement, creative partnerships, and strategic media outreach. Their approach effectively promotes core European values of equality, cultural diversity, active citizenship, and youth empowerment, aligning seamlessly with Erasmus+ objectives aimed at intercultural dialogue and grassroots peacebuilding.

Gipsy Groove's journey exemplifies the transformative power of music as an instrument for bridging cultural divides, fostering inclusive communities, and inspiring lasting social change. Through their passionate performances and meaningful advocacy, they continue to inspire audiences and fellow artists alike, reinforcing music's universal ability to cultivate unity, respect, and solidarity across diverse societies.



5.4 Avoko Music Club – Harmonizing Diversity through Musical Collaboration in Dragash

Established in 2009 by local youth, the Avoko Dragash Youth Center²⁴ is a non-governmental organization committed to empowering young people in the ethnically diverse municipality of Dragash, Kosovo. Recognizing the municipality's unique composition, including Albanian, Gorani,

By facilitating regular creative interactions, the initiative significantly improved mutual understanding, empathy, and cooperation among youth from diverse backgrounds. Community testimonials highlighted clear positive shifts in youth attitudes, notably increased openness,



and Bosniak communities, Avoko has actively promoted youth capacity-building, advocacy, and social inclusion initiatives.

In 2023, Avoko introduced the innovative Avoko Music Club, specifically designed to bridge cultural divides and foster deeper connections among previously separated ethnic groups. Supported by UNDP's REALOD program and the Dragash municipality, the club created a structured, after-school space where young people could explore an engaging blend of traditional Balkan music alongside contemporary pop and rock genres. Under the guidance of experienced local musicians, participants collaboratively composed, rehearsed, and performed music celebrating their shared regional heritage.

dialogue, and intercultural friendships. Despite facing initial logistical challenges related to coordination and resources, Avoko successfully overcame these barriers by leveraging strong local partnerships, dedicated artistic facilitation, and active community involvement.

Avoko Music Club exemplifies how purposeful artistic collaboration can effectively harmonize diversity and cultivate social cohesion. Its accessible approach clearly aligns with Erasmus+ values of youth empowerment, intercultural dialogue, and inclusive community development. Harnessing music as a universal language, Avoko Music Club provides a powerful and replicable model for peacebuilding initiatives across Kosovo and beyond.

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/p/AVOKO-Qendra-Rinore-Dragash-100077952738415/>

6. Cross-Country Reflections: Shared Harmonies and Local Rhythms

While each country featured in the RadioPeace project brings its own cultural depth, historical background, and artistic legacy, what emerges most clearly from this collection of best practices is a powerful common thread: the belief that music and dance are not only cultural expressions but transformative tools for connection, healing, and change. Across Albania, Bulgaria, Italy, and Kosovo, these practices offer unique responses to local challenges—but they also sing in harmony around a shared vision of intercultural dialogue and youth empowerment.

In Albania, music served as a bridge between generations, nations, and even global crises—uniting local musicians with international performers or rallying public solidarity for Ukraine. In Bulgaria, the emphasis turned toward inclusion and identity, particularly among marginalized Roma communities, where artistic expression became both a shield against discrimination and a celebration of cultural pride. Italy's practices offered groundbreaking examples of therapeutic inclusion, showcasing how rhythm and movement could empower neurodivergent youth, bridge divides across Europe, and stimulate civic participation. Meanwhile, Kosovo's initiatives tackled post-conflict division head-on, using rock music, multicultural collaboration, and school-based creativity to transform deeply rooted separation into shared artistry.

Despite differences in scale and setting—from national festivals to intimate after-school clubs—

the approaches converged in key ways. First, local leadership and grassroots involvement were critical: nearly every successful initiative was born from the vision of a community leader, artist, or educator deeply embedded in their local context. Second, participatory and inclusive pedagogy ran through all projects. Whether through improvisation in jazz, co-creation of original songs, or peer-led dance sessions, these practices actively engaged young people not just as learners but as cultural agents.

Common challenges also emerged—most notably, resource constraints, cultural resistance, and sustainability gaps. Yet, the recurring success factor was resilience, often fueled by partnerships with municipalities, civil society organizations, and international networks. Where traditional systems had fallen short, these initiatives offered youth a space to belong, create, and lead.

What's especially striking is that each project succeeded not despite its local context, but because of it. Cultural specificity was not a barrier but a foundation. Folk rhythms, historical memory, and linguistic diversity were harnessed rather than erased—demonstrating that peacebuilding need not be culturally neutral. On the contrary, it thrives when rooted in the authenticity of place, people, and story.

7. Recommendations: Pathways Forward for Practice and Policy

Drawing from the diverse and inspiring examples featured in this report, several key recommendations emerge—both for practitioners eager to replicate or adapt these models and

for policymakers committed to supporting peacebuilding and inclusion through non-formal education.

7.1 For Practitioners and Community Leaders

1. **Start Local, Dream Global:** Ground your project in the realities of your community—its needs, cultural resources, and existing networks—but seek inspiration and partnerships across borders. Peer exchange and international collaboration significantly enhance both impact and visibility.

2. **Design for Participation:** Use co-creation as a guiding principle. When young people help design and deliver music and dance activities, they become more than participants—they become leaders. Inclusivity must be intentional, with accommodations for diverse needs and backgrounds.

3. **Build Strong Partnerships:** Collaborate with schools, municipalities, artists, and NGOs to share resources and broaden reach. Multi-stakeholder approaches strengthen implementation and contribute to sustainability beyond project lifespans.

4. **Document, Reflect, Share:** Evaluate your work using qualitative and quantitative tools. Stories, testimonies, and feedback loops are powerful for advocacy and for improving future iterations. Don't underestimate the value of visual documentation and digital storytelling in building momentum and legitimacy.

7.2 For Policymakers and Institutional Stakeholders

- 1. Integrate NFE into Youth and Education Policies:** Recognize the unique value of non-formal, arts-based education in reaching disengaged youth, fostering inclusion, and building peace. Provide institutional recognition and funding mechanisms to support this work.
- 2. Invest in Artistic Capacity-Building:** Offer training for youth workers, teachers, and artists in using music and dance as pedagogical tools. Support mobility opportunities and cross-border collaborations to encourage knowledge transfer.
- 3. Ensure Long-Term Support:** Move beyond one-off funding schemes by supporting long-term models that embed NFE practices within schools, cultural centres, and youth services. Sustainability is not just financial—it depends on continuity, mentorship, and systems of care.
- 4. Promote Cultural Inclusion as Peacebuilding:** Frame cultural policy not only as heritage preservation but as a peacebuilding strategy. Support initiatives that bridge ethnic, generational, and socio-economic divides through participatory arts.

To sustain the impact of these practices, the RADIOPEACE project calls for establishing a regional and EU-wide network of practitioners in arts-based NFE. This network could facilitate ongoing exchange, offer mentorship, and serve as a repository of tools, case studies, and evaluation frameworks. Investing in digital platforms, open-access toolkits, and multilingual resources will help practices travel beyond their origin while staying true to their core.

The next step is not just replication but amplification—ensuring that these inspiring stories echo in policy circles, youth platforms, and community dialogues. By supporting infrastructure for creativity, learning, and youth leadership, Europe and the Western Balkans can continue to foster inclusive, peaceful futures.

8. Conclusion: A Collective Rhythm for Peace

From Tirana to Plovdiv, from Rome to Dragash, this report has charted a journey through voices, melodies, and movements that do more than entertain—they educate, empower, and transform. These best practices show us that music and dance are not luxuries, but lifelines—especially for young people navigating division, isolation, or marginalization.

Non-formal education grounded in artistic practice is not a supplement to formal learning; it is a vibrant, necessary complement. It invites young people to bring their whole selves into the learning space—body, heart, and mind—and it opens pathways for empathy, creativity, and collaboration. It also reminds us that culture is not static. It evolves, adapts, and, in the hands of young people, becomes a force for unity.

The RADIOPEACE project embodies a belief that peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of dialogue, dignity, and shared creation. This report is both a testament to that belief and a call to action—for policymakers to recognize and support this work, for educators and artists to continue building new bridges, and for young people across Europe and the Western Balkans to keep dancing, playing, and dreaming a more inclusive future into being.

Let us keep the rhythm going.



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