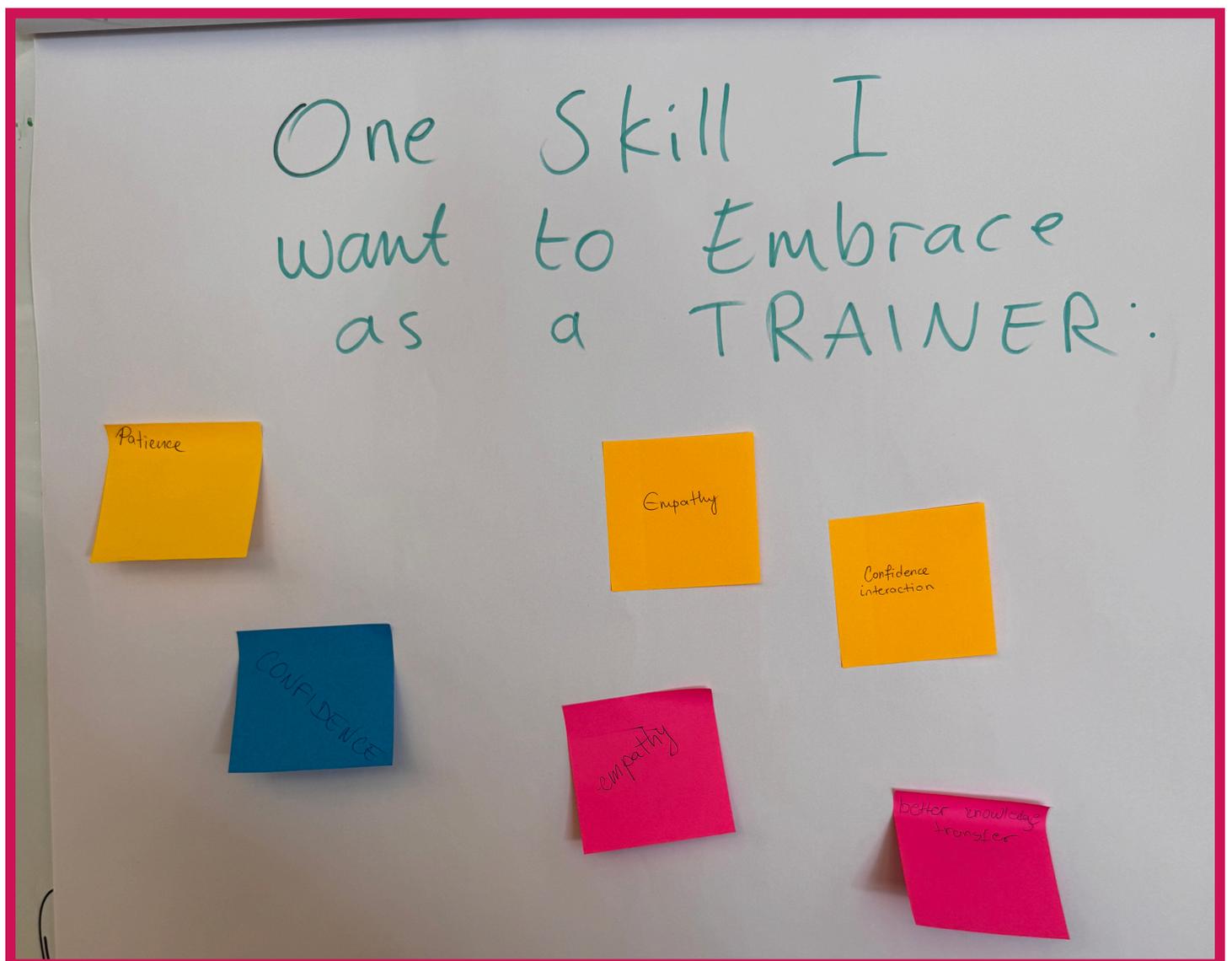


Navigating youth between internal polarization and geopolitical flux - The Montengro perspective under SCORE project



Regional Sport Initiative – Playing Together (REGSPO), active as an initiative since 2017, and officially registered as an NGO in 2021, is a non-governmental organisation dedicated to fostering social development through sports in Montenegro. Since its inception, REGSPO has put efforts to bridge key stakeholders in sports policy, youth organisations, and civil society to promote systemic solutions for community challenges. By using sports as a catalyst for sustainable development, equality, and collaboration among diverse communities, REGSPO aims to create lasting social impact.

In a country with youth facing institutional challenges reflected in limited civic engagement opportunities and rising exposure to polarising narratives (including prevalent hate speech and demagogy), the SCORE project represents a framework to test new, community-rooted approaches to lower and prevent radicalisation among youth.

This is both innovative and to a certain degree a brave step forward as sport in Montenegro is still dominated often by politically exposed groups or individuals focusing on non-sportive objectives and safeguarding particular interests (Begović, 2023; Begović, 2025).

Challenges toward building inclusive society – the gap between *de uire* inclusive and *de facto* reality

Montenegro faces a combination of demographic, social and political challenges that exposed youth people to radicalisation. Along with economic uncertainties, migration pressures and political polarisation with decreasing trust in institutions, the youth population is largely disconnected from public life. Besides youth, women and minorities are particularly exposed to the internal polarization and geopolitical flux, however, sport, as a tool used deliberately throughout the SCORE project, confirms its potential to stimulate constructive and inclusive framework for engagement.

The Law on Youth adopted in April 2019 in Montenegro focuses on improving services and structures for young people, including through non-formal education programmes. Montenegro identified the need to bring active participation of young people in public life and decision-making processes at national and local level. Just recently, CSOs are becoming engaged in education through sport activities and projects as part of the wider policies in the region.

As highlighted in several EC reports for Montenegro, gender-based violence (GBV) is persistent and different systems of male and patriarchal domination persist. Similarly in Montenegro, the Gender Equality Index reveals deep-rooted inequalities between men and women, placing the country below the EU average with a score of 55 (the EU average being 67.4). Montenegro has committed to advocate more effectively for gender equality and women's rights, not only by aligning national legislation with the EU *acquis communautaire*, but also by introducing institutional measures, such as the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2025, which introduces suggestions from specialised NGOs for better gender mainstreaming in public policies.

Montenegro also adopted the Strategy for Inclusive Education (2019-2025) in 2018 as well as the Strategy 2021-2025 for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians. In Montenegro, according to the European Commission (EC) 2022 report, the legal framework and institutional mechanisms to promote and protect the rights of persons belonging to minorities need to be significantly improved, fully implemented and enforced. In addition, a major problem in education remains the difficult inclusion of minorities in school, with high drop-out rates. For example, in Montenegro, in the 2021/2022 school year, 1,856 Roma pupils were enrolled in primary school, 207 in secondary school and only 12 at university level. Only 77 per cent of

Roma and Egyptian children of primary school age are enrolled in school and only 7 per cent of children of secondary school age. Long-term unemployment affects two-thirds of young women in Montenegro. These poor employment opportunities lead many young people to question the possibility of migration. Montenegro is planning strategies for the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation, placing the integration of communities as a prerequisite for their implementation.

Network-based and systemic governance approach

REGSPO's unique structure as network-based CSO, enabled an engaging environment with the capacity of flexible adjustment to specific local needs aimed at developing social and emotional skills as part of critical preconditions to tackle radicalisation. REGSPO structured its work focusing on:

- Empathy and respect
- Critical thinking
- Teamwork and conflict management
- Building a sense of belonging through inclusion and bypassing difference

Moreover, the SCORE project enabled technical and material support to strengthen local CSO's capacities to use sport to tackle radicalisation. Combining training and mentorship, REGSPO leads capacity building activities of these organizations, their administrative staff, coaches, youth workers and volunteers through broadening their skills and competences by using organized physical activity, especially its transformative nature from recreation and health activity to mindful educational process. This represents a long-term impact of the project as it sets up foundations for a sustainable approach in developing youth resilience, enabling community engagement and developing social cohesion. These CSOs are now capable to:

- Design inclusive sport-based activities
- Facilitate discussion and navigate sensitive topics
- Recognize vulnerability and create inclusive, safe and engaging environment

The system governance applied within this project empowered local CSOs to take appropriate responsibility and to improve accountability to its communities by building cooperative and engaging spaces not only for its members, but equally to schools, sport and youth clubs, other CSOs and local public institutions. This confirms the potential of sport to bridge gaps, bond actors despite their diverse roles and responsibilities, turning prevention into a collective, horizontal and community-based effort.

Literature

Begović, M. (2023). Corruption in sports: Lessons from Montenegro. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 58(1), 126-145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902221094186>

Begović, M. (2025). Sport and Social Cohesion: the case of the Western Balkans . *Current Issues in Sport Science (CISS)*, 10(1), 007. <https://doi.org/10.36950/2025.10ciss007>



Co-funded by
the European Union



“THIS PROJECT IS CO-FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION AND AFD-FRENCH DEVELOPMENT AGENCY. VIEWS AND OPINIONS EXPRESSED ARE HOWEVER THOSE OF THE AUTHOR(S) ONLY AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THOSE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION OR AFD-FRENCH DEVELOPMENT AGENCY. NEITHER THE EUROPEAN UNION NOR THE GRANTING AUTHORITY CAN BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THEM.”

