

Deliverable 3: Leadership-in-Action Reflection: Six Weeks with the Kosovo Youth Council

When I began my Leadership-in-Action placement with the Kosovo Youth Council (KYC), I expected to contribute to youth programming and learn about peacebuilding, inclusivity and anti-bullying. What I didn't anticipate was how deeply this experience would push me to reflect on adaptability, power, cultural humility, and what leadership really means in a post-conflict context. Over six weeks, I grew from a tentative observer to a more confident contributor, while engaging in projects that stretched me personally and professionally.

Shifting Projects and Embracing Adaptability

My original project plan was to run youth training sessions on peacebuilding and inclusion across schools. Very quickly, it became clear this was unrealistic, schools were reluctant to grant approvals on such short notice. At first, I felt discouraged. But instead of treating this as a failure, KYC modeled adaptability by redirecting the project toward designing an anti-bullying and inclusion mural for the municipality of Lipjan.

Looking back, I see the change as a lesson in realistic leadership. Good leaders recognize when context doesn't support a plan, and they adjust. Too often in leadership narratives, perseverance is glorified, but persistence without adaptation can waste resources and strain relationships. In this case, we preserved the *mission* (empowering youth, fostering inclusion) while shifting the *method*. The mural became a permanent, visible, and participatory way for youth to claim space in their community.

Municipal Differences: Why Engagement Varied

One of the most striking lessons was how differently youth engaged across municipalities. In Lipjan, turnout was high and participants threw themselves into the mural project. In Mitrovica, by contrast, attendance was lower (about 45 youth) and enthusiasm lagged. The 39°C heat played a role, but there was also a cultural element: in Mitrovica, being “too engaged” in art didn’t seem socially rewarding. Some youth clearly had talent but held back, perhaps fearing it wasn’t “cool” to be visibly invested.

This revealed two things. First, youth motivation is not uniform; it is shaped by local norms and peer dynamics. Second, interventions must be tailored. For Mitrovica, the solution may not be to push harder on structured art activities, but to create informal, low-pressure spaces where youth can explore expression without fear of judgment. In other words, leadership in this context means designing opportunities that align with local social realities rather than assuming a “one-size-fits-all” model.

Division, Discrimination, and Contextual Solutions

Kosovo’s post-war divisions remain palpable. In Mitrovica, the north and south are effectively parallel societies where Serb and Albanian communities live side by side but rarely interact. Discrimination against minorities such as Ashkalis, Egyptians, and Romani people is also very open. Moreover, the alarming rates of bullying in schools and on social media remain a cause for concern. These realities cannot be glossed over when working in youth empowerment.

The temptation might be to propose idealistic solutions such as integrated schools, shared community programs etc. but the reality is more gradual. For example, projects like the mural are powerful precisely because they do not demand direct confrontation with entrenched identities but instead create symbolic and inclusive spaces. Over time, such shared projects can chip away

at barriers. Leadership here means thinking incrementally: creating conditions for small but meaningful steps toward dialogue rather than expecting immediate reconciliation.

Power, Privilege, and My Own Biases

The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) conference was another moment of reckoning. I expected youth from across the Balkans to be polished and diplomatic. Instead, their manner was direct, at times confrontational. Initially, I judged this as unprofessional. Later, I realized this reflected my own privilege and cultural bias. Coming from Canada, where youth are often trained to engage in formal, “polite” discourse, I hadn’t considered that many of these participants were leaving their hometowns for the first time and had never spoken in such a setting. Their directness was not a lack of maturity but rather it was authenticity shaped by context.

This realization pushed me to confront my assumptions. Leadership isn’t about expecting others to conform to your norms, but about listening deeply and understanding where perspectives come from. It was a humbling reminder that privilege often blinds us to the structural barriers others face.

Cultural Lessons and the Double-Edged Sword of Relaxation

Another cultural difference that shaped my experience was the Balkan rhythm of work. My boss joked after I arrived early one morning, asking “Why were you early? You’re in the Balkans.” Coffee culture is long, lunches end when conversation ends, and flexibility is the norm.

This relaxed approach was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it created space for genuine connection and prevented work from consuming life. On the other, it sometimes slowed efficiency with deadlines stretched, and tasks taking longer. I came to see that both systems have strengths and weaknesses. Canada’s structured pace fosters productivity but can stifle presence. Kosovo’s

pace fosters connection but can delay outcomes. A strong leader learns to bridge these styles, by embracing relational depth while introducing just enough structure to keep projects moving.

Overcoming Insecurities and Building Confidence

Perhaps my most personal growth came from grappling with language. At the start, I struggled with formal Albanian, bureaucratic terminology, and even regional accents. I often second-guessed whether I understood correctly. By week 5, though, I realized the insecurity was mostly in my head. My colleagues were patient and supportive. Once I allowed myself to ask for clarification and contribute imperfectly, I found my voice.

This shift mattered because it wasn't just about language, it was about confidence. I learned that leadership also means allowing yourself to be vulnerable, trusting others to meet you with empathy, and realizing that asking for help is not weakness but strength.

Final Reflections

Looking back, my six weeks with KYC taught me that leadership is not a fixed trait but a series of choices in context. I learned to read pace as a design variable. Some environments reward speed and clarity. Others reward presence and patience. Lipjan showed me what happens when energy and access align: high turnout, visible curiosity, easier entry points. Mitrovica showed me how peer norms can suppress participation, even when talent is obvious. The fix was not more instructions, instead it was a different invitation, to lower the social risk. Start with small acts that look casual rather than performative. In short, design for psychology, not only for logistics.

I also learned that adaptability matters, as projects succeed when leaders pivot with purpose. Engagement is always contextual, youth motivation varies by setting, and approaches must be tailored accordingly. Moreover, division requires nuance where symbolic and gradual steps can

often be more effective than sweeping plans. Cultural humility is essential, since privilege and bias shape our expectations and must be interrogated if leadership is to remain authentic. I came to learn that balance is also key, and that relational cultures and structured cultures each teach us lessons for sustainable leadership. Finally, confidence grows through vulnerability, as being open about challenges fosters trust and resilience.