

MUSIC CONNECTS



Co-funded by
the European Union

Rock Music Powers Inclusion Across Europe

Research Report

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MITROVIC
ROCK
SCHOOL



BALKAN
TRAFIK!



PROJECT OUTLINE:

Music Connects: Rock Music Powers Inclusion Across Europe

[Application form (CREA CULT and CROSS): V1.0 – _15.04.2021 (Page 5)]

Rock music has been the language of European youth for generations. Today, the raw audacity of rock continues to give them a voice. In cities that suffer from ethnic division, rock music expresses anger at political corruptions and social immobility, In 'safer societies, rock music revolts against established meaninglessness. Western Balkan youth look to the future. Dutch youth yearn for a meaningful now. Young Berliners connect past to present in rock. Cultural organizers in Amsterdam and Brussels work to connect these worlds. All share the longing for agency, freedom and connection. This project connects young people from the Western Balkans, Berlin, Belgium, and the Netherlands, exploring common ground across borders of history and politics, through rock music.

In ethnically divided post-war Kosovo, the Mitrovica Rock School (MRS) successfully connects Serb and Albanian youth, together gradually rebuilding the city's proud pre-war rock music history. This project will invite the city's Roma minority to join the school and introduce genre-blending between Roma music and rock to participants of all backgrounds.

In North Macedonia, Roma Rock School (RRS) works to empower disenfranchised Roma youth. Young Romani and ethnically Macedonian musicians create a new genre, combining rock and Roma music. Roma Rock School's multi-ethnic bands create friendships across ethnic and language barriers.

Clash! (Berlin) will connect participants to its Berlin network of artists and youth organizations, who will deliver workshops with a focus on gender equality in the music industry.

In Brussels, 1001 Valises' Balkan Trafik Festival will showcase young musical talent from the Western Balkans and provide access to a European audience, as well as exchanges with artists from the European north and south.

Rockacademie and Academy for Music Education students at Fontys Academy of the Arts (FAA) will engage with the program as a case study of ways in which music can be used to promote social inclusion. They will join MRS and RRS participants at mobilities across Europe, meeting their counterparts in regions where rock music can be life changing.

Musicians Without Borders (MWB) and FAA build local capacity in didactics, sound engineering, production and promotion, strategic development and safeguarding.

The project introduces innovative didactic strategies to promote long-term inter-cultural cooperation, sustain and strengthen the local partners' music education programs and expand them with recording, production, promotion and audience-building tools. Through its networking activities, the project disseminates a successful methodology for promoting inclusion of, and cooperation among, marginalized and/or ethnically or otherwise divided and excluded youth.

The project encompasses a daily extracurricular music education program reaching some of the most divided and marginalized communities in the Western Balkans. Through the intensity of a daily program, the project will impact its participants' lives in a direct and meaningful way, creating a social platform where youth can learn and connect in a safe and inclusive environment.

The project reaches 470 direct participants with 11,600 music activities; includes 24 transnational events and exchanges; three music festivals; and an abundance of video material that will be disseminated both in long and short form to 4 million Europeans.

The project's impact will be evaluated by academic partner SOAS, University of London, in research that will focus on the elements of the project's methodology that can be replicated to promote social inclusion of marginalized youth across Europe.

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'No sight'

*we walk the streets at night,
chasing dreams, out of sight,
no worries in our way,
just living day by day
with people who feel the same,
we play the endless game,
no need to look behind,
cause the world's ours to find*

*we're just living, feeling free,
no plans, just let it be,
life's a ride, and we are holding on,
together, we're never gone*

*the city lights are bright,
guiding us through the night,
laughter fills the air,
no worries, no care
we're chasing down the sun,
the moment is never done,
in this moment, we belong,
singing our simple song*

*we're just living, feeling free,
no plans, just let it be,
life's a ride, we're holding on,
together, we're never gone*

('Spikes', Summer School, Skopje 2024)

*We [MRS and RRS] are like a big family. We know the political tensions between us and what has happened in history. But when we are together and when the right people are taking care, they act as a shield over the students to ensure that they are safe and can make music. We understand that this changes you. We are like one fish in the ocean.
(Nevrus Bajram, Roma Rock School, 26 March 2026)*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Music Connects: Rock Music Powers Inclusion Across Europe is a four-year, multi-sited initiative led by **Musicians Without Borders**. The project builds on longstanding partnerships between the Mitrovica Rock School in Kosovo, the Roma Rock School in North Macedonia and the Fontys Rock-academie, Fontys Academy of the Arts (Netherlands), whose aim is to promote social inclusion and community resilience through collaborative music-making, creative exchange, and shared learning.

Building on their success in bridging some of Europe's most complex social and cultural divides, **Music Connects** has sought to broaden its objectives and regional scope through collaboration with two additional partners in Northern Europe: namely, the Balkan Trafik Festival (Belgium), and the youth exchange organisation, Clash! Exchange & Learning (Germany). By facilitating cross-border collaboration, musical co-creation, and intercultural exchange, the project has sought to create meaningful connections between young people from diverse backgrounds in order to:

- promote social resilience and strengthen inclusion among ethnically divided and marginalised communities in the Western Balkans;
- enhance the capacity of young musicians and music education organisations to develop inclusive and resilience-oriented pedagogical practices;
- facilitate transnational artistic collaboration between musicians from the Western Balkans and Northern Europe; and
- develop and disseminate replicable models of good practice for organisations working with socially marginalised young people.

This report presents findings based on research conducted over the four-year period. Drawing on interviews, observations, and participant reflections, it assesses the project's impacts through three interconnected themes, namely Relationships, Responsiveness, and Resilience.

Findings demonstrate that:

- a) participation in **Music Connects** generated significant personal, social, and community-level benefits. Participants reported increased self-confidence, enhanced musical and transferable skills, expanded educational opportunities, and stronger social networks both within and across national boundaries;
- b) collective music making is a powerful mechanism for fostering trust, empathy, and cooperation among individuals from diverse cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds; and
- c) the project contributed to wider social cohesion by strengthening local organisational capacity, supporting youth agency and self-determination, and creating sustainable networks that continue beyond the life of project activities.

The study concludes that participatory music initiatives can generate meaningful social, cultural, and socio-economic outcomes for individuals and communities. The report therefore recommends greater recognition of participatory arts programmes within public policy frameworks and highlights the importance of sustained investment in cultural initiatives that support inclusion, youth development, and social innovation.



Fig 1. Map of Project Sites



Chapter 1 / Methodology

Resilience and social cohesion are increasingly recognised as central to social development and have become key areas of focus in music-based social change initiatives. However, concepts such as social inclusion and resilience - both fundamental to the **Music Connects** project - have also become widely used terms within policy and development discourse. Their broad application risks promoting generic evaluation frameworks that overlook local realities and fail to capture the nuanced understandings of what matters most to participants in specific social and cultural contexts.

To address this challenge, research towards this report adopted a qualitative, narrative-based approach designed to reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of participants across the project's varied geographic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic settings. The methodology draws inspiration from MacGinty and Firchow's (2016) 'everyday peace indicators approach', which critiques the limitations of top-down assessments based on standardised indicators and prioritises locally grounded narratives and participants' processes of meaning-making. This enables a deeper understanding of the subtle and often intangible changes that emerged throughout the project.

Data collection sought to include students, coaches, teachers, and organisers, while capturing contrasting experiences and forms of self-assessment. Qualitative methods included:

- Observation of workshops, rehearsals, meetings, and festival performances;
- Participant observation, involving active engagement in music training sessions, meetings, curriculum development activities, and pedagogical seminars; and
- In-person and online interviews conducted both individually and in groups.

Throughout the research process, emphasis was placed on fostering an informal and supportive atmosphere. Interviews were conducted at times and in settings that were familiar and convenient for participants, helping to minimise feelings of self-consciousness or anxiety often associated with formal evaluation processes. This was particularly important when working with younger participants, for whom relaxed and conversational interactions often yielded richer and more meaningful insights.

Baseline questionnaires were administered at the outset of the project to establish participants' backgrounds, previous musical experience, and expectations regarding their involvement in **Music Connects**. Delivered orally within group interview settings, the questionnaires were tailored to participants' specific roles within the project.

The baseline phase aimed to:

- Establish deeper understanding of the histories, structures, and activities of the participating Rock Schools;
- Explore existing relationships between the Roma Rock School (RRS), Mitrovica Rock School (MRS), and the Fontys Rockacademie; and
- Identify participants' initial perceptions and expectations of the **Music Connects** project.

Subsequent individual and group interviews adopted a more flexible and conversational format, focusing on the ongoing monitoring of project outcomes and participant's lived experiences. Key areas of exploration included:

- Project strengths, opportunities, and local benefits;
- Skills development and musical learning;
- Experiences of personal growth and perceived changes over time;
- Local identity and transnational representation,
- Perceptions and evidence of social cohesion, and
- Participants' aspirations, and visions for the future.

In addition to scheduled interviews and observations, opportunities for more spontaneous forms of engagement were actively embraced. The researcher frequently spent time with participants outside of project activities, such as walking together to rehearsals and performances and attending social events. These encounters sometimes employed a "vox pop" style approach, capturing immediate reflections and reactions in the moment. These informal methods complemented the more structured elements of the research design, enriching the dataset by capturing the spontaneity and authenticity of participants' voices.

Collectively, these methodologies contributed to a deeper understanding of how individuals experienced **Music Connects** and the ways in which participation shaped their personal development, relationships, and senses of belonging.

Language

Most participants chose to conduct interviews in English, reflecting generally high levels of English proficiency across the cohort. However, language differences did occasionally present challenges, particularly among younger participants from the Roma Rock School (RRS), some of whom had limited English. To ensure that these participants were fully included in the research process, group interviews were arranged with the support of peers who possessed stronger English proficiency and were able to assist with informal translation and clarification when needed. This approach helped create a more comfortable environment and enabled participants to express themselves more confidently.

Longitudinal Perspective and Analytical Framework

A notable asset of **Music Connects** was its duration over four years. This extended project cycle created opportunities for continuous reflection, learning, and adaptation, allowing activities and organisational practices to be regularly reviewed and refined in response to emerging needs and experiences. The project was able to evolve over time, supporting the development of more responsive approaches and helping to embed good practice across all aspects of its operations.

The longevity of the initiative also enabled sustained engagement of many students, teachers, coaches, and organisers. This continuity provided the opportunity to systematically monitor participants' experiences and development over time. It also facilitated critical reflection by participants themselves, who were often able to recognise their own growth, changing perspectives, and evolving capacities as the project progressed.

For example, several participants who initially demonstrated limited confidence gradually assumed active and responsible roles within project activities. In some cases, participants became informal ambassadors for the programme, recruiting friends and family members, supporting peers, facilitating communication across language barriers, and actively promoting values of inclusion and equitable participation.

This report further benefits from its ability to build upon an earlier evaluation conducted by Howell, Bartleet, Davidson & Pope (2021)¹ of the predecessor initiative, **Music Connects: Culture as a Driver for Social Innovation in Former Yugoslavia** (2018–2021). This evaluation has facilitated deeper analysis of the evolution of the current programme and comparative assessment of the benefits of this project's expanded geographical scope. This continuity strengthens understanding of how approaches to music education, inclusion, and transnational collaboration have matured across successive project phases.

Importantly, the project's duration coincided with a period of significant political and social uncertainty across both the Western Balkans and Europe. These changing circumstances provided a unique opportunity to observe how participants and partner organisations navigated evolving realities, adapted to emerging challenges, and sustained relationships across periods of tension and rising insecurity. The ability to examine responses to real-world pressures added depth to the evaluation, moving beyond hypothetical discussions of social resilience to explore how these capacities were enacted in practice.

¹ Howell, G., Bartleet, B. L., Davidson, J., & Pope, J. (2021). "First of all, be friends": Rock music, social connection, inclusion and mobility in Kosovo and North Macedonia: An evaluation of Music Connects, a project using culture as a driver for social innovation in former Yugoslavia." [*Music Connects: Culture as a Driver for Social Innovation in Former Yugoslavia* project (2018–2021)] <https://musicianswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/First-Of-All-Be-Friends-An-evaluation-of-Music-Connects-Howell-Bartleet-Davidson-and-Pope.pdf>

Summary of Activities

See Appendix A for a full schedule of **Music Connects** activities from 2022-2026.

The following table represents the schedule of interviews conducted over the past four years including project managers, organizers, teachers, coaches and students.

Year	MC Programmes	Interviewees
2022 	Skopje and Mitrovica  7 - 14 October	 Skopje (RRS) Group discussion 5 Students (RRS) Group discussion 3 Teachers (Sonja Dimitrijoska, Emilija Zdravkovska, Ana Nedelkovska) Alvin Salimovski, Dir. RRS  Mitrovica (MRS) Filip Milovanovic (MRS North) Emir Hasani (Prog Dir., MRS North) Nemanja Mistic Milizza Kosova (Dir. of Operations, MRS South) Student (MRS North) Goran Vucetic RA Students (Daan Stultiens, Spijk Hoogendoorn) Edon Ramadani
2023 	Balkan Trafik!  25-30 April	 Brussels Dennis Fraters, Clash! 2 Students (MRS North) Student (MRS South) Group discussion (RRS) RA Students (Esmé Van Der Velden & Eline Wijnands) Nevrus Bajram (Teacher and co-founder RRS)  ONLINE INTERVIEWS Wendy Hassler-Forest (MWB program manager, MC Coordinator)

Year	MC Programmes	Interviewees
2024 	Summer School Skopje  25 August - 1 September	 Skopje (RRS) Student (MRS North) Eric Coenen (Teacher RA) Milan Kabasic (filmmaker) Tringa Sadiku (MRS North graduate) Students (MRS South) Jurre Hogervorst (Teacher RA) Student (MRS South) Emir Hasani (MRS north) Student (MRS North) Group Interview RRS students  ONLINE INTERVIEWS Emir Hasani (MRS North) Milizza Kosova (MRS South) Rockacademie coaches Wendy Hassler-Forest (MWB program manager, MC coordinator)
2025 	Teacher training, Rockacademie  18 - 21 March	 Tilburg Emir Hasani (MRS North) Millizza Kosova (MRS South) Eric Coenen (RA Teacher)  ONLINE INTERVIEWS Eleonora Ungaro (MWB) Wendy Hassler-Forest (MWB program manager, MC coordinator)
2026 	Teacher training, Rockacademie  23-27 March	 Tilburg Nevrus Bajram Student (MRS North)  ONLINE INTERVIEWS Wendy Hassler-Forest (MWB program manager, MC coordinator) Emir Hasani (MRS North) Hans van den Hurk (Head of Education RA) Dennis Fraters (Dir. Clash!)



Chapter 2 / Report Concepts and Structure

The main objective of **Music Connects** was to use state-of-the-art rock music education to promote social inclusion, capacity building and creative innovation. More specifically, it aimed to:

- promote social resilience and enhance inclusion;
- build the capacity of young musicians and music education organizations in the Western Balkans to develop didactic practices that promote inclusion and resilience;
- stimulate creativity and facilitate transnational co-creation between musicians from the Western Balkans and northern Europe, and
- develop, demonstrate and disseminate best practices that can be replicated by artists and organizations working with socially marginalized youth.



Fig 4. Baseline Indicators [ERC proposal / 1.2 Needs Analysis (pg. 8)]

The report assesses evidence of the project's objectives with reference to three key social capacities that emerged as central indicators of project impacts, namely relationships, responsiveness, and resilience. Together, they capture participants' experiences of building and maintaining meaningful social connections, adapting constructively to changing circumstances, and developing individual and collective capacities necessary to navigate adversity.

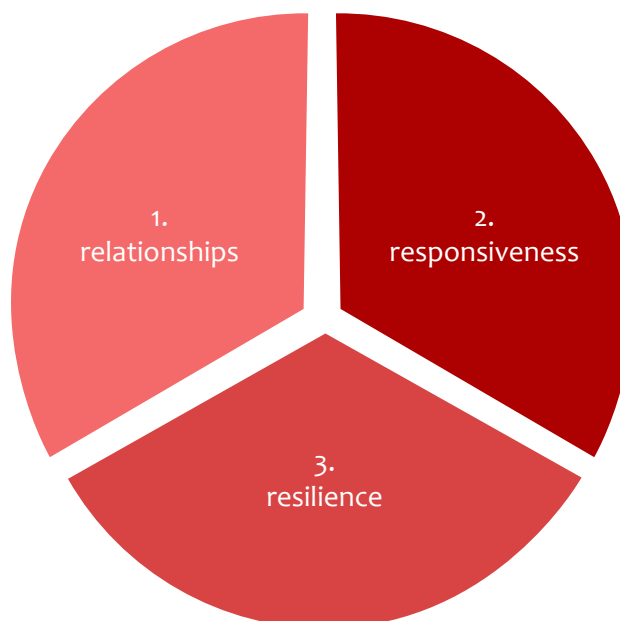


Fig 5. Graphic of interconnected social capacities

1. Relationships

The World Bank defines social inclusion as "the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups—particularly those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity—take part in society."²

Achieving meaningful inclusion depends fundamentally on the development of consequential relationships at individual, group, and organisational levels. It is through relationships that people develop mutual understanding, overcome differences, and build the confidence necessary to participate fully in social life.

Howell, Bartleet, Davidson & Pope (2021)³ identify the centrality of relationships within music-based social inclusion initiatives in their evaluation of the precursor project with the Mitrovica Rock School (MRS) and Roma Rock School (RRS), aptly entitled "First of all, be Friends". Their research found that both students and staff consistently viewed interpersonal connection as foundational to the achievement of all other project objectives. Relationships were not regarded as a by-product of participation but rather as the essential mechanism through which wider educational, social, and developmental outcomes became possible.

The findings of the present study strongly reinforce this conclusion. Relationships emerged as the bedrock of Music Connects and were central to its capacity to promote social inclusion across culturally, ethnically, and geographically diverse contexts. The project's emphasis on collective music-making contributed significantly to building trust, developing mutual respect and fostering meaningful connections that extended beyond the rehearsal room or concert stage.

Importantly, relationship-building operated across and between all participant groups. Students developed friendships that transcended national, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries; teachers and coaches established professional networks characterised by collaboration and shared learning; and partner organisations strengthened their capacity to work collectively towards common goals. These interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships underpinned all dimensions of the project, underscoring its capacity-building, transnational exchanges, and creative innovation agendas.

The successful coordination of a complex, multi-partner project over a four-year period also depended on the cultivation of strong working relationships and open channels of communication. Effective project delivery required moving beyond hierarchical management structures towards more collaborative forms of leadership and engaged teamwork.

Evidence presented in the next chapter suggests that relationships developed during Music Connects should not be viewed simply as one outcome among many, but as the enabling

² <https://www.worldbank.org/ext/en/topic/social-development/social-inclusion>

³ Howell, G., Bartleet, B. L., Davidson, J., & Pope, J. (2021). "First of all, be friends": Rock music, social connection, inclusion and mobility in Kosovo and North Macedonia: An evaluation of Music Connects, a project using culture as a driver for social innovation in former Yugoslavia." [*Music Connects: Culture as a Driver for Social Innovation in Former Yugoslavia* project (2018–2021)] <https://musicianswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/First-Of-All-Be-Friends-An-evaluation-of-Music-Connects-Howell-Bartleet-Davidson-and-Pope.pdf>

condition upon which broader goals of inclusion, resilience, and social cohesion depend. They were both a means and an outcome of participatory music-making, creating the social foundations necessary for sustained individual and collective development.

2. Responsiveness

While relationships provided the social infrastructure underpinning **Music Connects**, the project's effectiveness also depended upon its capacity for responsiveness.

While receptiveness involves openness to external input, responsiveness refers more specifically to the capacity for actionable reaction. It is defined as the ability to prudently assess situations and respond appropriately rather than react impulsively or defensively. In this sense, responsiveness represents the active process of adapting or changing course based on what has been received. Effective responsiveness involves a degree of risk-taking and judicious decision-making, often requiring creativity in navigating complex or evolving circumstances. Such decision-making, in turn, relies on strong relationships founded on mutual trust and a shared sense of purpose.

Responsiveness exercised by **Music Connects** was rooted in a commitment to listening, recognising local realities, and adjusting practices to ensure that activities remained inclusive, relevant, and meaningful. Operating across diverse cultural contexts and within rapidly changing social and political environments required participants and partner organisations to remain attentive, flexible, and willing to adapt to emerging needs and circumstances. This responsiveness was evident in partnership arrangements and project management practices and was fundamental to capacity building and approaches applied to music education.

The following chapter explores how responsiveness emerged as a critical capacity within **Music Connects** operations, enabling individuals and organisations to negotiate complexity, support participation, and sustain positive collaborative relationships across diverse contexts.

3. Resilience

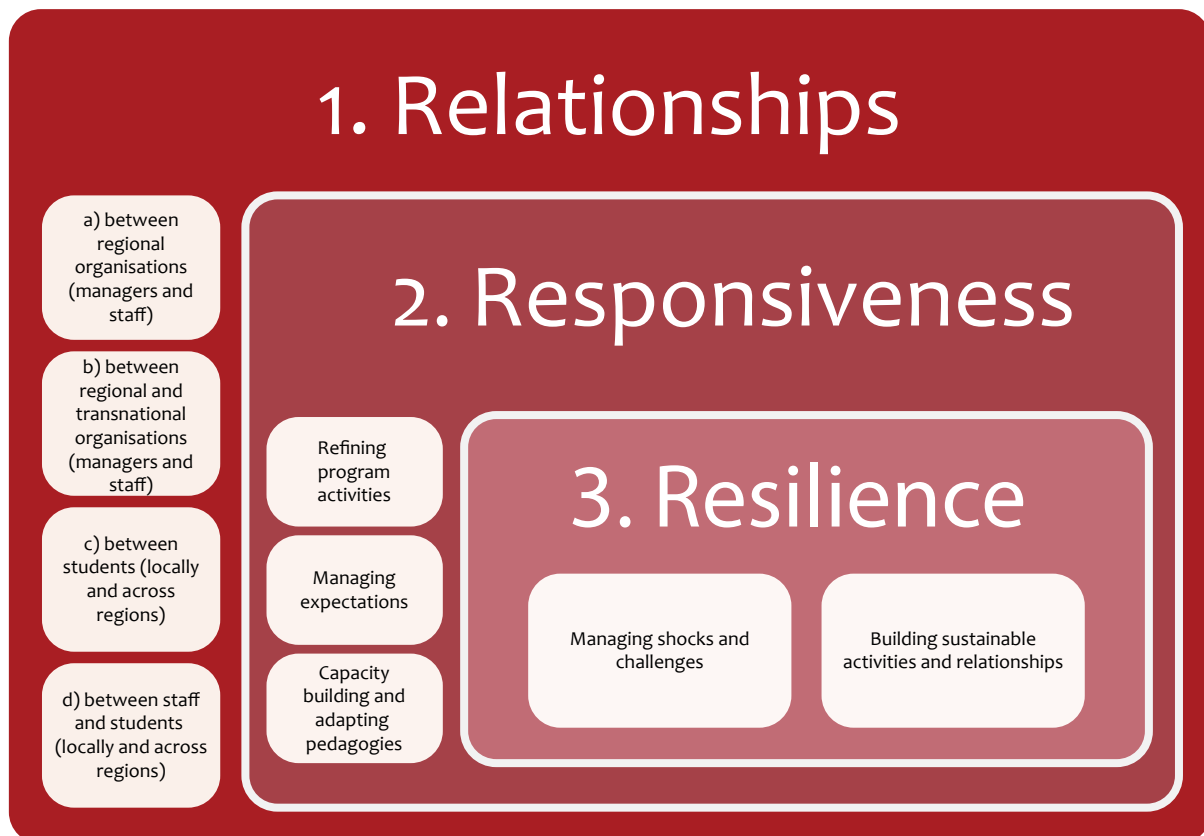
Resilience refers to the capacity to recover or maintain stability in the face of adversity, uncertainty, or unexpected circumstances. It encompasses the ability of individuals, groups, and organisations to persevere through challenges, overcome barriers, and rebound from setbacks. Importantly, resilience extends beyond simply enduring difficulties; it also involves learning from adverse experiences in ways that strengthen future responses and capacities.

Resilience also provides the foundation for adaptability, understood as the willingness and ability to adjust to changing conditions. It enables individuals and organisations to move beyond recovery towards transformation and growth.

The need to develop resilience is recognised as one of the most important qualities for young people today. In a global context characterised by increasing social, economic, and environmental uncertainty, young people are being exposed to adversity on an unprecedented scale.

Evidence in the next chapter demonstrates how **Music Connects** nurtured resilience at both institutional and individual levels, how it facilitated recovery from internal and external challenges, and contributed to social, musical and organisational sustainability.

Chapter 3 / Data Analysis



In this chapter, I draw on interviews and case studies to examine how processes of social inclusion, capacity building, and transnational co-creative innovation were perceived, experienced, and adapted throughout the project.

The analysis is structured through the three core social capacities - Relationships, Responsiveness, and Resilience - which serve as a prism through which these processes were enacted and adjusted in practice.

Relationships, responsiveness and resilience operate in a cycle or feedback loop. Responsiveness allows for adjusting to change, which in turn builds resilience for future challenges, while resilience provides the stability needed for thoughtful actionable response.

1. Relationships

A consistent theme emerging from the data was that respectful relationships and open communication enabled challenges to be identified and addressed before they developed into more significant interpersonal or cultural tensions. Strong interpersonal networks generated goodwill, fostered adaptability, and provided resilient systems of support for participants and organisations alike. This proved particularly valuable during periods of wider political uncertainty, when established relationships functioned as important resources for navigating disruption and maintaining a sense of shared purpose.

Trust between individuals, groups, and organisations emerged as critical to overcoming divisions related to ethnicity, gender, and age; it facilitated meaningful knowledge exchange and enabled collaborative problem-solving across diverse contexts.

Within musical settings, and particularly in the context of band-based practice, differences in musical ability were constructively managed by both students and trainers. This involved recognising the experiences and perspectives of others, avoiding patronising or exclusionary language, and maintaining a positive framing of differences in skill, cultural understanding and experience.

The high level of participant retention in **Music Connects** over the four-year period further validates the strength of these relational dynamics. It indicates the development of an environment in which participants felt heard, valued, supported, and socially connected, thereby reinforcing sustained engagement over time.

a) Relationships between regional organisations (managers and staff)

While the project's emphasis on social inclusion, capacity building, and transnational creativity may appear to be primarily focused on student experience, a significant dimension of the success of the project is attributed to how these processes strengthened relationships between partner organisations through their managers, directors, and music leaders.

Mitrovica Rock School (MRS) and Roma Rock School (RRS)

The relationship between MRS and RRS was already well established at the beginning of **Music Connects**, but it strengthened considerably throughout the project. This partnership was fostered through open and ongoing communication between Wendy Hassler-Forest, **MWB's** Program Manager of **Music Connects**, and regional managers and teachers. Furthermore, decision-making across all levels of project governance was highly democratic, reinforcing local leadership structures while ensuring that regional sensitivities and contextual differences were respected.

When obstacles or differences of opinion arose, these relationships enabled issues to be addressed efficiently and resolutions reached amicably. This relational stability functioned as an essential enabling condition for sustained cross-institutional collaboration.

Relationships between managers and teachers across both rock schools were further reinforced through **Music Connect's** collaborative design which necessitated joint planning, shared responsibility, and coordinated delivery. Ties were further strengthened through ongoing skills exchange, resource sharing, and collective learning, alongside regular teaching exchanges between institutions.

Training sessions at the Rockacademie (RA) in Tilburg played a significant role in consolidating relationships. These week-long sessions enabled extended professional skills training, drawing MRS and RRS staff closer together through the sharing of institutional visions and collective capacity building. The March 2024 training session, which focused exclusively on the training of teachers/trainers (including 10 participants from MRS and 7 from RRS) was especially significant to this process.



Fig 6. Training Session Rockacademie, Tilburg March 2026

The annual week-long Summer School in Skopje played an equally important role in strengthening inter-organisational relationships. This was achieved through coordinated planning and pedagogical collaboration. Importantly, it created space for staff to observe and celebrate one another's creative achievement, as well as time outside of scheduled activities to develop stronger informal social bonds. Together, these activities reinforced both the professional and interpersonal foundations of the partnership.

Finally, travelling to western Europe in mixed groups fostered stronger relationships and encouraged participants to identify less with individual cities or countries and more with the Balkans as a whole. "

"The visits to Berlin fostered a sense of collective identity among participants. Suddenly, they were all only from the Balkans." (Dennis Fraters, Clash! 12 June 2026)



Fig 7. Nevrus Bajram (RRS) and Emir Hasani (MRS), Clash!, Berlin 2023

b) Relationships between Balkans and European partner organisations (managers and staff)

The relationships between MRS, RRS, and the participating European organisations - Rockacademie (RA) in Tilburg, Balkan Trafik in Brussels, and Clash! in Berlin - differed according to the specific roles each organisation assumed and the ways in which they engaged with the project.

Fontys Rockacademie (RA), Tilburg

The Rockacademie (RA) in Tilburg had maintained a longstanding relationship with MRS and RRS prior to **Music Connects** through pedagogical participation at the annual summer schools in Skopje and regional training sessions. Although RA staff consistently demonstrated enthusiasm and commitment, their relationship with the rock schools was largely sustained through the initiative of individual teachers, and formal institutional investment and strategic engagement at the organisational level remained comparatively limited.

One of the most significant achievements of **Music Connects** was the substantial transformation that occurred with these relationships over the four-year period. At the outset of the project, participation by RA teachers and coaches appeared relatively ad hoc. Existing teaching commitments meant that many RA staff members had limited capacity to invest in the Balkans project, demonstrating insufficient institutional buy-in necessary to advance meaningful structural collaboration between organisations.

The student-centred pedagogical approaches employed by RA teachers contrasted with the more hierarchical teaching methods typically adopted within the Balkan rock schools. Efforts to align these divergent educational philosophies in training sessions were valuable but often lacked structure to fully bridge the differences. Furthermore, RA student coaches participating in summer schools and training exchanges in the Balkans were not always adequately prepared regarding the political and historical contexts of the region and the significance of these contexts for the broader social and musical objectives of the rock schools.

Taken together, these factors meant that while individual participants frequently embraced the ethos of learning and collaboration underpinning **Music Connects**, RA's engagement within the Balkans remained institutionally uneven during the early stages of the project.

*“The Balkans training was for me a diversion, recreation, a pet project, but it was not structurally integrated into the vision, priorities or educational programme of the school (RA)”
(Eric Coenen, Teacher RA, Skopje 2024)*

This changed dramatically during Years 2 and 3 of **Music Connects**. Hans van den Hurk, RA Head of Education, attributed this shift to **Music Connects**' longevity and the opportunity it provided for RA teachers—and the institution more broadly—to redefine their relationship with the project through a structured programme of activities, each with clear objectives and outcomes. As this framework took shape, so more RA teachers and students began to engage in training activities and to volunteer to take responsibility for aspects of the project.

This renewed investment in **Music Connects** was also driven by the training sessions that RA hosted for participants from the Balkans in Tilburg. Immersing teachers and students in a highly resourced educational environment, while dedicating time to sustained discussions on curriculum development and instrumental pedagogy, was instructive and deeply inspiring for all participants. The sessions facilitated the exchange of new ideas and competencies, including instruction in sound recording techniques and the application of AI technologies in music production.

RA also introduced a new structure for the preparation of students to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, insights, and skills from one cohort to the next. This was complemented by a preparation manual developed by **Musicians Without Borders**, to be shared with teachers and student trainers prior to their involvement in the project.

During my observation of the training session in Tilburg in March 2026, I noted that Tijs Keverkamp, guitar instructor and band coach at RA who had volunteered to assist with the annual Clash! visits, had already appointed students for the next Berlin session. To support continuity and knowledge transfer, he had ensured that one of the students from the previous year would return to induct the newcomer into the role. He had also scheduled a meeting with both students and **MWB** to discuss logistics prior to the visit.

Significantly, learning was mutuality experienced across organisations: One of the most striking impacts of **Music Connects** was the shift that appeared to occur in the ways RA teachers and students conceptualised music and their role as musicians as a consequence of sustained engagement with the schools in the Balkans. Rather than viewing music primarily through the lens of individual technical virtuosity and according to the commercial imperatives of the music industry, they began to recognise music's social value, particularly as it relates to social justice. For a cohort whose professional identities had been largely shaped by the popular music industry, this represented a significant reorientation. Corroborated by RA Head of Education, Hans van den Hurk,

“The lesson for the RA has been how musically and socially inward-looking the school has been; how we have worked according to a specific understanding of popular music, the market, and the demands for success.” (Tilburg, 12 June 26)

The RA has consequently begun to explore more systematic collaborations with under-resourced music programmes elsewhere in the world, and particularly with educational efforts that address social marginalisation and inequality



Fig 8. Teacher/trainee Training, RA, Tilburg 2025

Balkan Trafik, Brussels

Prior to **Music Connects**, substantial dialogue between partner organisations was required to establish operational synergy between MRS, RRS, and Balkan Trafik.

The aim of the partnership was to enhance students' understanding of professional performance via a major European city festival. Although the leadership of Balkan Trafik was enthusiastic to provide a platform for bands from the rock schools, differing views emerged in the first year as to how the programme should be managed. Balkan Trafik's emphasis on the political contexts of the participating schools in their programming was regarded by **Music Connects** managers as politically untimely and lacked sensitivity to the diverse student cohorts attending the festival. This necessitated open and constructive discussion between organisers to align expectations and ensure that the collaboration remained consistent with the project's educational and developmental objectives.

In the following section (Responsiveness), I examine how these differences were resolved, ultimately strengthening the inter-organisational relationship. Once initial tensions were identified and openly addressed, the organisations developed a productive and mutually beneficial working relationship, that was particularly well-received by the students:

“What was so amazing was that we were performing in Balkan Trafik, a festival that was made for big artists from the Balkans. That we were performing as a multiethnic band and were sharing our cultures with Belgians felt unreal. Also, it was a pleasure to put different cultures from the Balkans in a song because as we know the bands were made from Albanians, Serbs, Roma and Dutch. They (the audience) said they enjoyed our performance a lot. While performing, we saw them dancing and cheering for us.” (Student, MRS South, Balkan Trafik 2023)

“We were able to see a different style of living and meet different musicians. It was good, I really enjoyed it. There were lots of different cultures and no judgments at all. From my perspective there were a lot of people who like rock and metal and that made me happy. It made me feel good while I was there.” (RRS student, Balkan Trafik 2023)

“Brussels showed us that it is important for students to play outside their cities. At home they are in their comfort zone, playing in front of families and friends. In Brussels they began to think of themselves as musicians. It gave them a taste of what it means to be on the professional stage.” (Nevrus Barjam, Teacher RRS, 23 March 2026)

Clash! Exchange & Learning, Berlin

Clash! offered a particularly stimulating experience for students and trainers from the Balkans, focusing on songwriting as a medium through which participants could reflect on the sights, sounds, histories, and cultural diversity of the city.

As an organisation dedicated to designing bespoke educational and socio-cultural projects that broaden participants’ horizons and deepen their understanding of diversity and history, Clash! was uniquely positioned to provide life-changing experiences for participants from the Balkans. Further, as an organisation committed to the practice of cultural listening, Clash! maintained highly communicative relationships with project partners throughout, which ensured consistently strong relations. It also ensured that aspects of the Clash! programme that may have been considered less effective in the early years were openly discussed and addressed in a timely manner.

“The students came back from Berlin with their minds shifted. They could see that there is a world out there, outside of our city. It opened their eyes and they began to see how many more opportunities are available to us. One of my bandmates was invited last year and she was so excited when she came back: seeing a city, and making music was energizing.... It made her think about her life and creativity in new ways. She told me that her purse broke while walking in the city, so she wrote a song about that. The purse was a metaphor of a break or a breakthrough in her life.” (MRS student, North Mitrovica, 26 March 2026)

“It’s not always about the music. The underlying structure [of the programme] may have been music, but the barriers broken here were about life. For instance, some of the students were really scared in Berlin. After a few days, they began to embrace the energy of the city and wanted more. Some of them were very young – less than 12 years old - and several could not speak English. They have really grown up now. I am so happy about all these results.” (Nevrus Barjam, RRS teacher and co-founder, 26 March 2026)

“First of all, the experience was crazy, the place itself was so good, also it was my first time in Berlin. The places, the buildings, everything was just like I imagined it would be. The most impressive places were the monuments that we had to visit. About people, I’m going to be honest, I didn’t like them that much; maybe it was just me because they were so different to the people I was used to seeing in my own country. Some of them were pretty nice and the whole experience was very special.” (MRS student, South Mitrovica, 2023)

Balkan trainers appeared to be particularly invigorated by Berlin's cosmopolitan, experimental, and musically rich environment, which instilled in their own professional practice and creative output new energy and sense of excellence:

“We are proud of our DIY lifestyle in the Balkans, but occasionally we need to experience the wider world, to be fed by the excitement and creative excellence that one experiences in cities such as Berlin.” (Sonja Dimitrijoska, Teacher RRS, 2025)

A notable indicator of the project's impacts is evidenced in the synergy that developed between Clash! and the rock schools, which has prompted them to begin discussing ideas for ongoing collaboration through Erasmus funding to support ongoing visits to Berlin by students from the Balkans. The initiative envisages the use of music as a reflective lens through which Balkan students, in collaboration with German students, will explore the city, while engaging critically with wider social issues (interview with Dennis Fraters, 12 June 2026).

d) Friendships between students

A principal aim of **Music Connects** was to use collaborative music-making to foster friendships between students across ethnic, gender, regional, and national boundaries.

In the first instance, friendships made during the daily music education and band coaching programmes at the respective rock schools were instrumental in fermenting firm bonds between participants, which often extended beyond musical interactions.

The growth in student recruitment to the rock schools was increasingly driven by the enthusiasm of existing participants, who promoted both the musical and social benefits of the programme to their peers. As a result, friendship networks expanded and became more inclusive, increasingly crossing gender and ethnic divides. This development was particularly evident at the RRS, where growing enrolment over the course of the project included an increasing number of Macedonian students.

The year-long mixed-band training programme, which brought together students from MRS and RRS, similarly facilitated the development of strong friendships between participants from the two schools. These relationships were further strengthened through the annual summer school in Skopje and the international musical exchanges that took place across Europe.

“Kids become friends and they stay friends. Most of the kids from RRS stay friends with kids from MRS. They stay friends over FB and Instagram.” (Alvin Salimovski, Dir. RRS, 2022)

Students maintained that friendships were created when they were called to write songs together in mixed bands, which necessarily drew them into meaningful conversations about their interests, styles, struggles and dreams. While some may have been initially weary of their differences, these experiences quickly helped them establish that they had the same social aspirations, which was cemented in a mutual interest in rock music:

“I had no expectations of the people, but I was surprised by how similar we are, even though we live in different countries. We all love each other’s music.” (Student, Summer School, 2023)

*“I had no specific expectations even though I was a bit scared, as there were people from different regions, countries, different languages and cultures. I didn’t know that I would be able to communicate with people and make friends in such a short period of time.”
(Student, Summer School, 2023)*

*“What I will never forget from summer school is that music does connect people. It doesn’t matter if you are Roma, Albanian or Serbian, as long as you love music.”
(Student, Summer School, 2023)*

As explored in the following section (Responsiveness), observations of a mixed-band rehearsal at the summer school reveal a strong ethos of collective engagement and mutual support that transcends the immediate context of music-making.

*“What I loved the most were the new friendships (I made) and new people (I met) from other countries. It made me feel good. It made me feel like I was at home.”
(Student, Summer School, 2023)*



International travel and performance opportunities played an important role in reducing perceptions of difference among participants. In these settings, young people were less likely to be defined by ethnic, national, or regional identities and were instead united through their shared identities as musicians and young people from the Balkans. The experience of performing together before audiences and being recognised as a collective generated a strong sense of shared accomplishment and pride, further consolidating social bonds across group boundaries.

“Even though we’re not there [summer school] anymore, we’re still in contact, every single one of us. It doesn’t matter what nation we’re from. We became very close friends because music truly connects.” (Student, Summer School, 2023)

While differences between students from the Balkans and RA student coaches were evident in terms of musical training, technical proficiency, and professional experience—often shaped by educational and cultural contexts that emphasise individual achievement and commercial success—it became apparent that the primacy placed on social connection by Balkan students was equally valued by the RA coaches.

The following extract from an interview conducted with RA coaches Daan Stultiens and Spijk Hoogendoorn in Mitrovica in 2022 illustrates this shared perspective. While both acknowledge the demands and aspirations associated with popular music and conservatoire training, they emphasise that respect, mutual support, and reciprocal learning are fundamental dimensions of the musical experience.

S: I didn't come here (Mitrovica) with the sense of not being equal. I always see that we are on the same path. Perhaps I am a few years ahead, but I don't want to see them as not equal. It's more so that you can say come on ahead, I can show you the way.

D: I see it more as a reflection of where I was a few years ago. It all makes sense. Perhaps that also has to do with my personality; I always look for opportunities. If you can play 3-chords, that's awesome. If you play those chords, I will play a 4th.

S: It's the same when I do a gig with someone who has a little less experience. I will always find a way to work around them; you work through it. You want the end-result to be good and the process to be fun.

D: That's the kind of vibe I really like about the RA. I have never felt that I am inferior to more senior students. There is an ethos that everyone is talented and has expertise. You want to pick things up from others and help each other. ... I have a strong feeling that when selecting participants [for the Music Connects project], they will want to see someone who is motivated, inspired to learn.

S: If you are arrogant and look down on others - and if you are racist - you are gone! You are so gone! That doesn't mean that everyone is open-minded, but there is that norm.



Fig 10. Guitar workshop led by RA coach, MRS 2022

Many students described the friendships developed through **Music Connects** as constituting their principal social networks. These relationships frequently proved durable, extending well beyond participants' formal involvement in the programme. The strength of these bonds is reflected in the continued engagement of graduates of **Music Connects**, many of whom return regularly to participate as performers, mentors, or coaches.

Fieldnotes Summer School, 2024

Having run for so many years, the summer school acts as something of a reunion for many of the students. There is little sense of division between them other than by age and (perhaps naturally) by gender. Overall, there is a real sense of 'being back in place': students are comfortable, happy, and they appear more than ready to get to work. This is also reflected in the daily activities, which students take on with a real sense of responsibility. Not once during the summer school was a single student late for the bus; once in the rehearsal space, their focus changed completely from fun and games to absolute concentration on the musical task at hand.

The final performance is a huge celebration. By that time, everyone knows everyone else and there is a strong sense of a unified identity. "**Music Connects**" is most certainly appropriate branding!

The students scream and dance and goad each other on. Some claim to be happier than they have ever been. They threaten to organise a petition to have the summer school extended to two weeks. Others shout, "all year round please!" What a celebration! It's as if nothing can stop them now.

e) Friendships between staff and students (locally and across regions)

Music Connects applied a human-centred leadership and pedagogical approach that nurtured relationships between staff and students through an ethos of openness, democracy, and reciprocal learning. Consistency, a clear vision, repeated activities, and continuous feedback were fundamental to the program. These elements helped maintain open lines of communication and provided a stability that fostered trust, collaboration, and a shared sense of purpose among participants.

The pedagogical approach applied by RA was instrumental in transforming relationships between students and teachers in the Balkans. Nevrus Bajram described **Music Connects** as having a profound musical and social impact on fellow RRS teachers and students, many of whom had never travelled outside the Balkans. Few students had ever flown on an airplane. As a young teacher, Bajram recalled being reticent and lacking confidence, working within a pedagogical tradition common in the Balkans, where teaching was largely based on following prescribed exercises and established standards. Participation in **Music Connects** exposed fellow teachers to alternative pedagogical practices that emphasised dialogue with their students through co-creation and mutual respect, thereby challenging traditional hierarchical models of instruction and reshaping teacher–student relationships within their educational contexts:

“The relationship between RA and the Balkans schools has been particularly good for the teachers. When we first started, I was a little too strict with my students. This was the Balkan way of raising kids. We had very good results with that kind of teaching. After meeting the RA team, we began to realize that we were too strict; we had to let them (students) create their own music. We tried to control them. Now I see that it was wrong. We have to trust them to be themselves. They are happier with what they do. Improving skills does rely on the person, but by allowing them more freedom doesn’t mean that they won’t develop. Ironically, the connection between teachers and students is stronger. Now it’s like we are more like friends, but they still respect us as teachers. It was a big process for us. It was not easy to change the game. We had to progress little by little. We had to change our mindset. We discussed these things all the time with the RRS teachers. It has brought us all together.” (Nevrus Bajram, 26 March 2026)

2. Responsiveness

The effectiveness of **Music Connects** was attributed largely to the openness, adaptability, and responsiveness demonstrated by all participants throughout the project. The schedule of activities planned for the four years was particularly intense and program managers were extremely careful to distribute workshop and travel opportunities across demographics and skill levels for both teachers and students. Where systems did not work as planned in the early years, the organizers were quick to communicate concerns and seek solutions. There were very few instances when mistakes were repeated: By year 4, systems were well-oiled.

The following section presents 3 examples of how considered listening and swift action helped to turn potential challenges into mutually beneficial outcomes.

CASE STUDY 1: Refining programme activities / Balkan Trafik festival, 2023

The placement of the rock school bands within the Balkan Trafik festival required a degree of organisational adjustment, which necessitated careful, candid negotiation between organisers.

MRS-RRS-RA bands originally met for a training week in Skopje in December 2022, where they had their first rehearsals and selected songs from the large catalogue of original MRS and RRS songs (written by mixed bands from previous years). When they met again at Balkan Trafik in Brussels, they used the first days rehearsing the songs in preparation for the festival performance at the end of the week. However, this approach proved overly ambitious. Many students did not yet possess the level of musical proficiency required to achieve these goals within such a limited time-frame, while simultaneously navigating the overwhelming experience of a new city and country—often for the first time.

Furthermore, this was the first occasion that RA students participated with the mixed Balkans bands as performers rather than leading musical sessions as band coaches. The discrepancy in their respective musical abilities created a particularly uneasy dynamic. RA students had been insufficiently prepared for the experience, both in terms of understanding the project's real objectives and the demands of collaborative music-making. Consequently, they remained fairly distant from the Balkan students, both musically and socially. It was only during the festival performance that their professionalism really came to the fore. Drawing on their considerable musical expertise, they carried the bands with impressive energy and skill.

The success of the public performance, and the enthusiasm it generated among audiences and performers alike, proved to be pivotal, prompting organisers to rethink the programme's original structure.

MWB program manager, Wendy Hassler-Forest, immediately entered discussion with MRS, RRS and RA teachers to identify ways to improve the creative experience for the participants. The solution agreed to for the following year was that students would perform in distinct MRS, RRS, and RA bands that had been rehearsing together throughout the year who would perform songs from their own repertoire. Rehearsal time in Brussels was used to refine performances, resulting in a considerably more relaxed and successful experience for all involved.

A further dimension requiring reframing with Balkan Trafik related to how the rock schools were represented in festival publicity. Given that the festival showcased exclusively Balkan music to audiences heavily composed of diasporic communities from a region still marked by complex political divisions, seemingly minor political associations attached to the rock schools could carry significant symbolic weight. To mitigate the risk of misunderstanding or controversy, **MWB** negotiated with Balkan Trafik organisers to remove flags and other political symbols and to emphasise the cultural aims of the project instead.

CASE STUDY 2: Managing expectations / Balkan Trafik and the Music Connects promotional video

One of the planned outputs by Balkan Trafik was a documentary video of the **Music Connects** project. The following describes how careful negotiation between stakeholders transformed disagreement about its proposed content into a highly successful collaborative music video.

Upon consultation with the Belgian filmmaker proposed by Balkan Trafik, **MWB**, MRS, and RRS organizers were concerned that his vision for the documentary might not fully capture the depth of cultural understanding the project required and that the filming methodology he proposed was not realistic to the project's context. After extensive, very carefully considered discussions, a compromise was reached: instead of a single-author documentary, a Mitrovica filmmaker would direct the documentary, while the Belgian filmmaker would provide footage of the residency and performance in Brussels, a task he was best positioned to execute. This footage was additionally used for a music video featuring one of the MRS bands performing at the Balkan Trafik festival and interacting with the city of Brussels.

This division of roles resulted in a highly successful collaboration. The Mitrovica filmmaker brought cultural insight into the musicians and regional context, while the Belgian filmmaker contributed an authentic visual portrayal of Brussels. Together, this produced an evocative music video that balanced perspectives from both sides and reflected the strengths of each contributor.



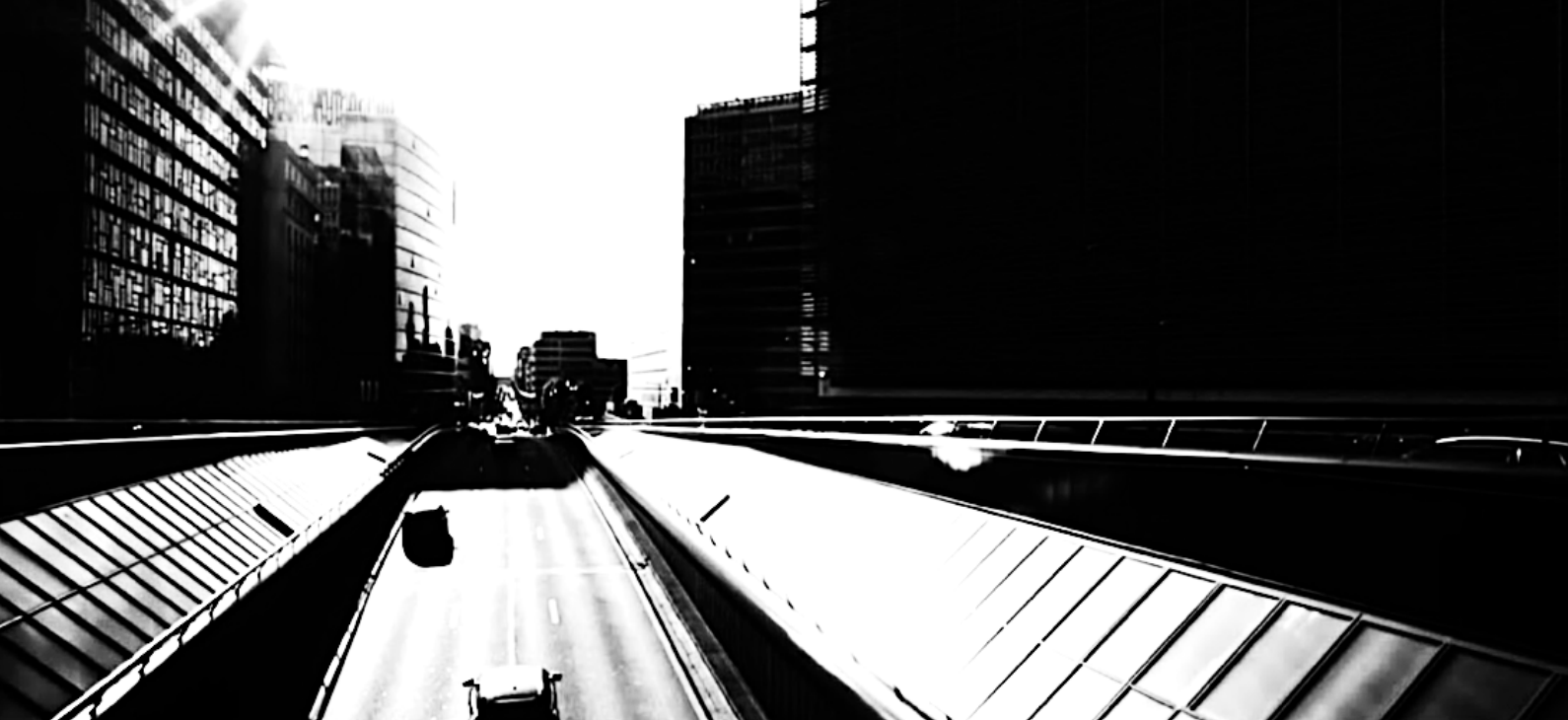


Fig 11. Still frames from “Affinity” (Balkan Trafik) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QJQoksS2ps>

CASE STUDY 3: Capacity building & adapting pedagogies / Band rehearsal, Skopje Summer School

Excerpt from fieldnotes, 27 August 2024

Day One

I am in the rehearsal of a student group that briefly met in Mitrovica some weeks ago to form a band and compose two songs. Now at summer school, they will have two days to rehearse their songs before going into the studio to record them. After that, they will need to organise themselves for a band photoshoot – i.e. agree on style, clothes, attitude - and then perform the songs at the final concert.

The bass player is clearly new to his instrument and is struggling to understand how his riff fits into the arrangement. The pressure is mounting and he is holding up the process. He stumbles over his phrase, stops and stumbles again.

Savica, the young woman on the keyboards, has informally assumed the role of music leader. She is confident and forthright but surprisingly patient and supportive of her struggling bandmate. She writes the bassline on the whiteboard and talks him through his part.

"Don't worry," she assures him, "Just watch the drummer and remember to move to C at the bridge."

The room is full of observers – students from other bands, a trainer from RRS, and several RA teachers and coaches. It is hot, and everyone is a little on edge.

The band plays the phrase over and over again. The bass player could so easily become overwhelmed or intimidated by the experience, but the group protects him by subtly folding him into the musical collective, all equally determined to get the music right.

The RA coaches leave the band members to work out a strategy for themselves. At the RA, they receive advanced training in band coaching and arrangement. They are highly skilled musicians and could easily have stepped in to take control of the proceedings. Instead, they adopt the pedagogical approach that has become a defining feature of RA training in the Balkans, which allows students to discover their own creativity and develop their own solutions.

When the coaches do finally offer a few words of advice, they do so gently, and the band members listen attentively, showing no resistance.

Day Two

By the second rehearsal, the band is beginning to find its way. The bass guitarist has practised his riff, and while he still occasionally falters, he is finally able to carry the music.

At the final performance, the band delivers their set with gusto. The audience – comprising mainly fellow bands, parents, and friends – cheers them on, singing and whooping loudly.

They made it!

Walking back to the hotel after the show, the bass player suddenly appears alongside me. He is exhilarated by the experience and full of talk. He tells me that he has only been playing bass since October and this was his first-ever public performance. He works with a local NGO and has attended countless workshops on cultural diversity and social inclusion. None, he says, has resonated with him in the way this project has.

"The music and the musical relationships move you deeply. The effect of the other projects is that they last only as long as the project does. They are just words. This is a million million times better! We don't talk about inclusion; we live it. This will stay with me always!"

He skips off into the night to join his new friends at the afterparty, holding his bass guitar proudly under his arm.

Later, Savica recounts her experience of the rehearsal in an interview:

"I've been in a lot of bands and if you're rude, it doesn't help. We have all the time it takes. I saw the bass player getting nervous and you were all there. And it was hot! We were working on a song, and it wasn't going well. So I thought we should keep it easy; take our time, find a practical way to remember the changes. If we don't work together, it won't work. It's all about collaboration. I don't want to push someone because I don't want to be pushed. Sometimes I need time to think, to be alone; to percolate like coffee! For us, it's all about understanding each other; it doesn't matter how good we are as musicians."



Fig 12. Summer School, Skopje 2025

3. Resilience

Relationships and judicious responsiveness operated across **Music Connects** activities in a continuous feedback loop, providing the scaffolding necessary for building resilience at individual, group, and organisational levels. The cultivation of resilience as a project capacity was particularly evident in the ways participants mobilised in response to rising political tensions in the Western Balkans and the consequent resurgence of longstanding divisions and fears. Similarly, the project offered a safe space amid growing social anxieties across Europe, which were becoming increasingly visible in rising levels of racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and geopolitical tensions associated with the war in Ukraine.

This section briefly reviews two themes to demonstrate the development of resilience as a key capacity of **Music Connects**.

a. Managing shocks and challenges

Organisational resilience was demonstrated by **Music Connects**' stable management approach and infrastructure, which are founded on **Musicians Without Borders**' ethos of trust and mutual respect, and which enabled the project to endure differences and difficulties, both internally experienced and externally imposed.

When differences emerged, tensions were given time to ease before being discussed openly. These episodes were almost invariably resolved through a reaffirmation of the project's commitment to social inclusion.

Further, the longevity of the project and the predictability of its programmes, alongside positive reinforcement aimed at building confidence and supporting competence, were fundamental to participants' ability to endure external pressures. During the years of the project, political tensions in the Balkans intensified considerably, inflaming longstanding ethnic divisions. This escalation reignited fears of ethnic violence among parents and the wider community, necessitating at times careful replanning of project operations to ensure students' safety. The resurgence of political tensions triggered difficult memories amongst some participants. Mitrovica resident and filmmaker, Milan Kabasic, remembered when he was first invited to film the MRS project, which necessitated his crossing the bridge from North to South Mitrovica for the very first time:

"People did not cross the bridge to have lunch or buy perfumes. My experience was mixed with fear. You are so close. I was beaten up at the bridge as a kid, and this has stayed with me. I was just sitting there; there was no provocation. Many people have had some experience, if not themselves then in their families. The memories sit as shadows in all families. It's understandable that parents are sometimes reluctant for their kids to venture out. But they are relaxed with this project because they trust the managers. It's about music, not something else. It's about pure love!" (Milan Kabasic, Skopje, 2024)

The project's longstanding experience of local political vicissitudes proved instrumental in managing renewed tensions, and most parents remained confident in the wise decision-making of project managers, allowing their children to continue to participate in project activities. The MRS is especially well equipped at navigating shifting political circumstances:

"As the years have gone by, we have tended to look the other way. People get tired of 'the social project'. But that said, the conflict is still very, very present. If you had been here two months ago, there was a day of 6-hours of silence with people with guns in the streets. It is constantly there. The school is a particularly important meeting point at these times." (Emir Hasani, 11 Oct 2022)

The following incident illustrates how resilience-building efforts by **Musicians Without Borders** translated into real-world behaviour during a period of renewed tension.

The day before the final concert at the 2024 Summer School in Skopje, police closed the bridge in Mitrovica following an outbreak of violence. This created uncertainty as to whether parents from Mitrovica would be able to attend. In the past, the concert may well have been cancelled during such moments and the children recalled home. However, this year, the parents found a way to catch the **Music Connects** bus to Skopje, determined that the concert, with its programme of ethnically mixed bands, would proceed. At the concert, students from Mitrovica appeared largely unfazed by the renewed tensions at home, and their parents loudly celebrated their children's creative accomplishments.

- The incident demonstrated
- Adaptability in the face of crisis,
- Commitment to positive goals,
- Emotional resilience among students,
- Support for social cohesion, and
- Evidence of changed attitudes.

As explained by Nevrus Barjam, RRS teacher and co-founder:

“We (MRS and RRS) are like a big family. We know the political tensions between us and what has happened in history. But when we are together and when the right people are taking care, they act as a shield over the students to ensure that they are safe and can make music. We understand that this changes you. We are like one fish in the ocean.” (26 March 2026)

b. Building sustainable activities and relationships

Individual resilience was nurtured pragmatically through collaborative music-making, which provided a creative framework through which participants learned to navigate uncertainty, manage differences, and work collectively towards shared goals. Through these experiences, essential qualities associated with resilience—teamwork, empathy, persistence, and determination—were actively cultivated, strengthening social and emotional capacities necessary to cope with challenges more broadly.

“The Balkans is quite conservative and hierarchical, originating from a music education system based in classical music. We focus on band coaching and producing, which encourages participatory decision-making. I like the word GROW, which stands for G - goal; R- reality at this moment; O- options and W – work. Give students options and then let them work. Go and get a coffee and let them work things out. And then you come back to consolidate. Most of the time, you start with an idea and by then they will have worked out their own solutions. This way you help them build confidence in themselves. I will ask musicians: your part is great, but do you think it is the best part for this song? Keep asking “what do you think?” (Eric Coenen, Teacher RA, 2023)

“Be the best you can be” appeared to function as the guiding mantra among **Music Connects** teachers and trainers, reflecting a shared vision of socially grounded musical capacity-building. According to MRS drum teacher, Filip Milovanović, harnessing the power of music for personal growth represents the project’s primary objective. Like other MRS and RRS teachers, Milovanović recognises that a professional musical career is an unlikely path for most students from the Balkans. Consequently, he emphasises the importance of fostering musical sociality, creativity, and mutual respect as the core objectives of music education.

This ethos was reflected in countless interviews conducted with **Music Connects** students:

“Maybe it’s that agreement and conversation are the most important, and that everyone has the right and freedom to say what they think and feel. And when something doesn’t look or sound that good at first, it can end up being better than you ever imagined.” (Student, Summer School, Skopje, 2023)

“Something I’ll never forget is that everything is better when you work together. Even though it might be a cliché, I have to say that there is no “I” in Team. And when it comes to music, when two or more minds combine, you can make great things.” (Student, Summer School, Skopje 2023)



CONCLUSION

The objective of **Music Connects** was to use collaborative rock music education to promote social inclusion and resilience, strengthen the capacity of young musicians and music education organisations in the Western Balkans, and facilitate transnational co-creation between musicians from the Western Balkans and Northern Europe. Further, it aimed to demonstrate best practice for artists and organisations working with socially marginalised young people. The report drew evidence from a wide range of interviews conducted over the four-year project period, and analysed its findings through the lens of three key social capacities: relationships, responsiveness, and resilience.

Relationships

Relationships formed the bedrock of **Music Connects** and contributed to all aspects of the project. Strong leadership and institutional connections supported the development of trust and mutual respect among project directors, managers, teachers, coaches, and students. These relationships often extended beyond project activities and continued long after students had graduated from the programme.

Friendships were nurtured across ethnic, age, and gender differences. These were facilitated by regular creative collaboration in mixed bands at the respective rock schools and the numerous exchanges between them, and fortified by extended social and musical interactions made

possible at the annual summer school. Bonds were further reinforced by opportunities provided for both staff and students to jointly participate in activities with partner organisations in Europe.

Relationships among teachers from MRS, RRS, and RA were significantly strengthened through systematic training programmes conducted both in the Balkans and the Netherlands. These initiatives helped build pedagogical skills and align educational values.

Learning was reciprocal and resulted in fundamental shifts in attitudes toward musical meaning and value. This led to the institutional expansion of the outreach programme at the RA, and to the formalisation of a music and social justice agenda. In the Balkans, it encouraged the adoption of a more democratic, student-led approach to music education. Together, these developments substantially enhanced student creativity and improved teacher–student relationships.

Responsiveness

Project managers applied swift, judicious responses to both internal and external challenges. This facilitated effective adaptation of programme activities and efficient alignment of objectives, while ensuring the preservation of productive collaborations. Grounded in an ethos of open listening and mutual trust, these processes enabled partners to respond constructively, contributing to the programme’s long-term sustainability.

Resilience

Resilience was attributed principally to the experienced, locally grounded, and judicious leadership of **Musicians Without Borders. Music Connects** managers and music leaders exhibited deep understanding of, and sensitivity to the history and evolving political dynamics in the Balkans, and remained consistently attentive to the perspectives, experiences, and expectations of its European partners. This strengthened the programme’s capacity to withstand organizational and geopolitical challenges, while maintaining project objectives and generating lasting social impacts.

The solid and consistent foundation provided by project leadership had a demonstrable impact on the resilience of teachers and students, as well as their wider familial and social networks. This was evidenced through:

- Adaptability in responding to challenges and crises;
- Sustained commitment to positive and shared goals;
- Consistent commitment to social cohesion within and across communities and partnerships;
- Clear evidence of positive shifts in attitudes, perceptions, and relationships.

FINDINGS

The study concludes that participatory music initiatives generate meaningful social, cultural, and socio-economic outcomes for individuals and communities. More specifically, it finds that

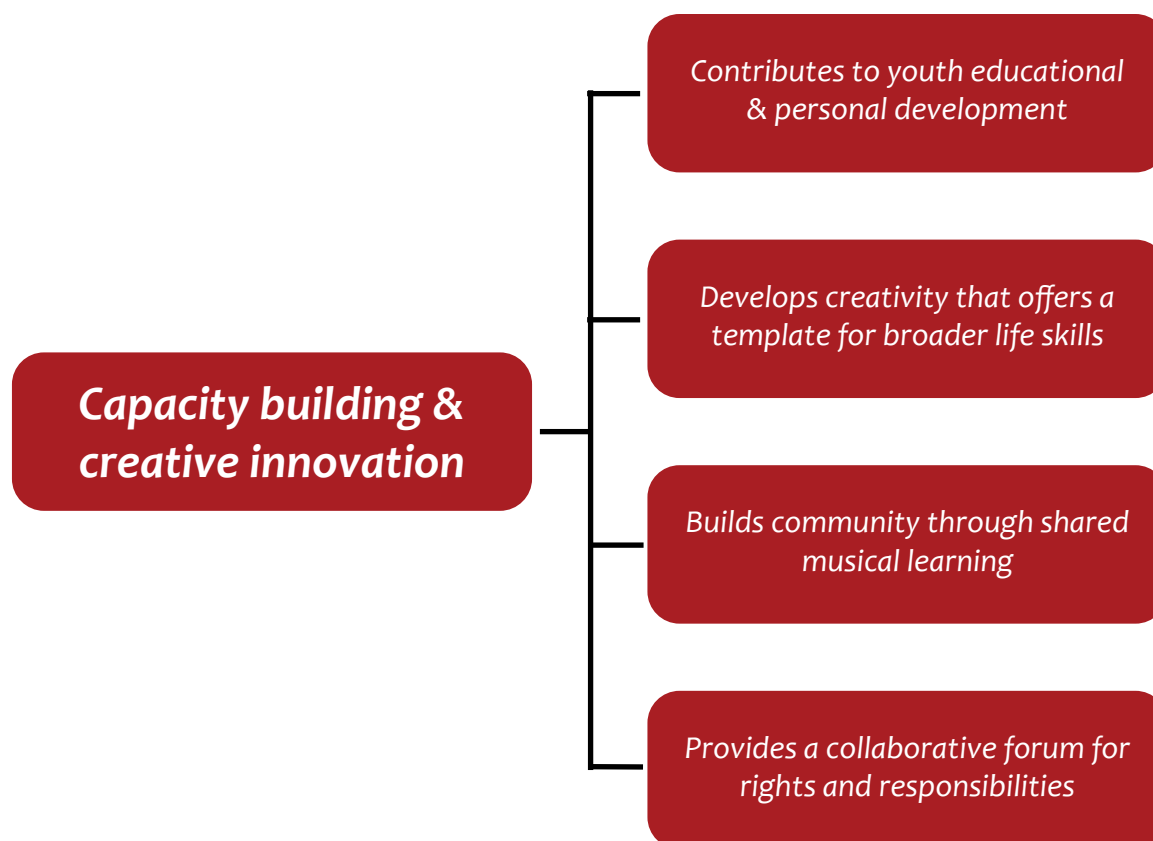
a) participation in collaborative music making generates significant personal, social, and community-level benefits, increasing self-confidence, enhancing musical and transferable social skills, expanding educational opportunities, and building social networks both within and across national boundaries;

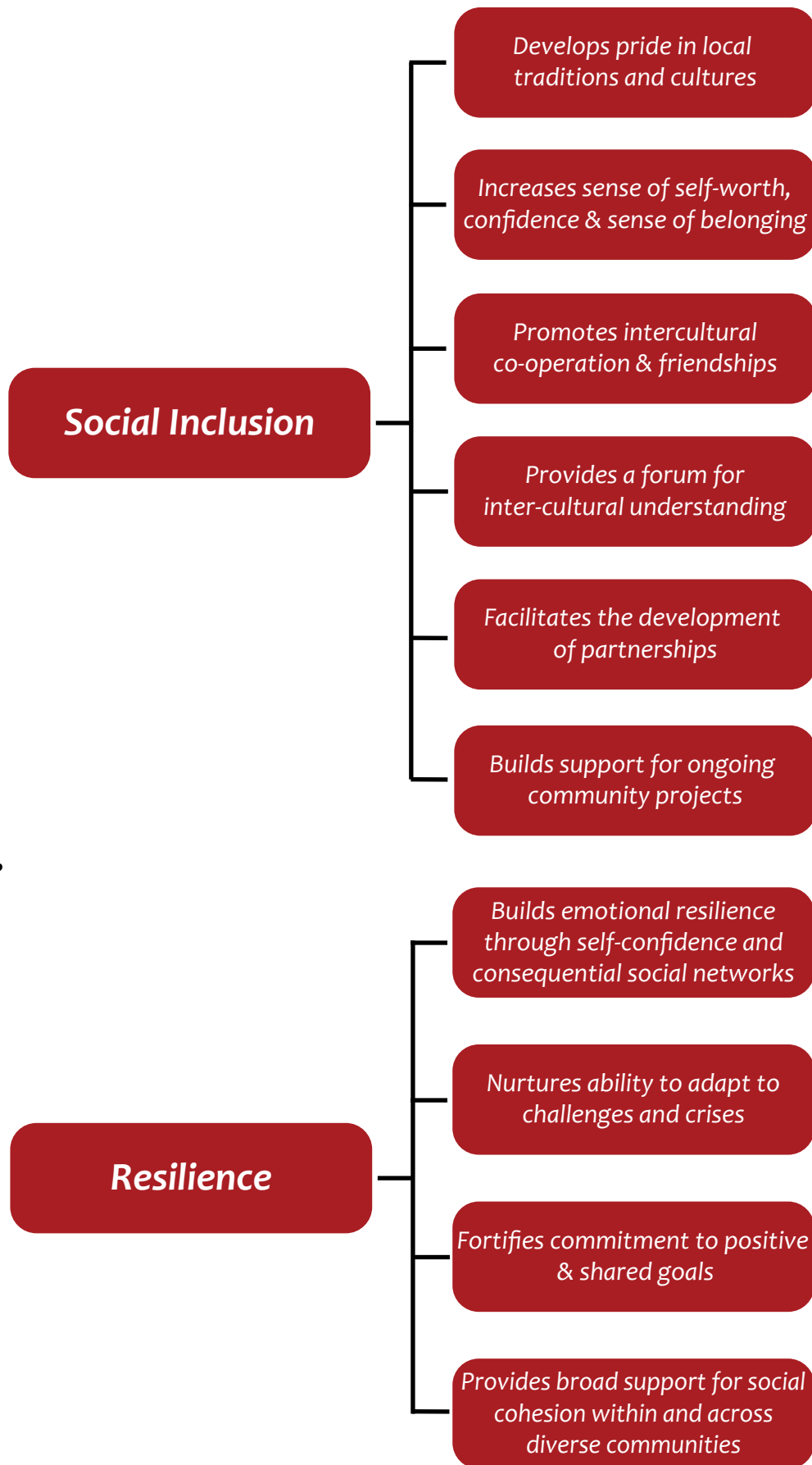
b) collective music making is a powerful mechanism for social inclusion, fostering trust, empathy, and cooperation between individuals from diverse cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds, and

c) arts-based collaboration contributes to wider social cohesion by strengthening organisational capacity, supporting youth agency and self-determination, and creating sustainable partnerships that continue beyond the life of the project.

The report recommends greater recognition of participatory arts programmes within public policy frameworks and highlights the importance of sustained investment in cultural initiatives that support inclusion, youth development, and social innovation.

The following graphics summarise **Music Connect** impacts, which serve also as the foundation for a replicable model of good practice for organisations working with socially marginalised young people:





APPENDIX A

SCHEDULE OF MUSIC CONNECTS ACTIVITIES

Activity	Location	Start date	End date	No. of participants	Notes
2.1 - Training Week in NL					
2023 Teacher Training Week	Tilburg	8/5/2023	12/5/2023	28	
2024 Teacher Training Week	Tilburg	4/3/2024	9/3/2024	36	
2025 Teacher Training Week	Tilburg	17/3/2025	21/3/2025	36	
2026 Teacher Training Week	Tilburg	23/3/2026	27/3/2026	30	
2.2 - Training Week Western Balkans					
2022 Mitrovica Training Week	Mitrovica	9/10/2022	15/10/2022	28	
2022 Skopje Training Week	Skopje	8/12/2022	12/12/2022	36	Moved from Mitrovica because of security situation
2023 Skopje Training Week	Skopje	9/10/2023	12/10/2023	36	
2024 Mitrovica Training Week	Mitrovica	3/6/2024	8/6/2024	30	
2024 Skopje Training Week	Skopje	27/11/2024	1/12/2024	28	
2025 Mitrovica Training Week 1	Mitrovica	5/3/2025	10/3/2025	36	
2025 Skopje Training Week	Skopje	3/11/2025	7/11/2025	36	
2025 Mitrovica Training Week 2	Mitrovica	1/12/2025	5/12/2025	30	

2.3 - Summer School					
2022 Summer School	Skopje	21/8/2022	28/8/2022	61	10 mixed bands (10 recorded)
2023 Summer School	Skopje	20/8/2023	27/8/2023	61	10 mixed bands (10 recorded)
2024 Summer School	Skopje	25/8/2024	1/9/2024	71	11 mixed bands (10 recorded)
2025 Summer School	Skopje	17/8/2025	24/8/2025	66	11 mixed bands (10 recorded)
3.1 - Student recruitment and daily music lessons and workshops					
Daily lesson and band program at MRS	Mitrovica			357	7,500 music activities (music lessons, band sessions, recording sessions, workshops, etc.)
Daily lesson and band program at RRS	Skopje			200	5,520 music activities (music lessons, band sessions, recording sessions, workshops, concerts, etc.)
3.2 - Mixed band program and concerts					
Mixed MRS bands				31	
Mixed RRS bands				12	
Number of concerts (MRS, RRS, and together)	Skopje, Mitrovica, Pristina, Sarajevo, Brussels, Berlin, 's-Hertogenbosch			36	36 concerts and performances of ethnically mixed bands

3.3 Student traineeships					
MRS student traineeships	Mitrovica			22	8 paid, 14 unpaid
RRS student traineeships	Skopje			8	8 paid, 4 unpaid
4.1 Exchange Berlin					
2023 Berlin exchange	Berlin	9/7/2023	14/7/2023	19	
2024 Berlin exchange	Berlin	22/7/2024	27/7/2024	22	
2025 Berlin exchange	Berlin	16/7/2025	21/7/2025	19	
2026 Berlin exchange	Berlin	29/4/2026	3/5/2026	16	
4.2 - Residency Brussels					
2023 Balkan Trafik	Brussels	24/4/2023	30/4/2023	23	2 mixed MRS-RRS-Fontys bands
2024 Balkan Trafik	Brussels	24/4/2024	28/4/2024	21	1 mixed MRS, 1 mixed RRS band, 1 Fontys band
2026 Liberation Festival Brabant (Netherlands), in lieu of Balkan Trafik	s-Hertogenbosch	4/5/2026	8/5/2026	10	1 mixed MRS, 1 mixed RRS band

APPENDIX B

BASELINE QUESTIONNAIRES (YEAR 1/2022)

1. TEACHERS – INDIVIDUAL

Biographies and teaching

- Can you introduce yourself – where you are from, your work & musical expertise
- Please describe what you teach and describe your students (demographic)
- Why do you play/teach rock/music?
- What ‘social work’ does ROCK do?
- Examples from your own life/teaching?
- How does Rock differ to other genres? What are its special qualities?
- Can you explain your pedagogical approach/philosophy

Social exclusion/inclusion....

- How is social **exclusion** experienced in your community?
- What is your understanding of social **inclusion**?
- What would a socially inclusive society/region look like?
- Why is social inclusion an (urgent?) need in your own locality, and across the region (EU & Balkans)?
- expectations of what students may think of the other? Why important to challenge perceptions?
- Is social inclusion the same as artistic resilience?

Project

- What other ‘evaluations’ have you been involved with; what was your experience and what did you learn from the exercise (e.g. ‘First of all be friends’ Australian group)? What does NOT work?
 - How will you (or do you hope to) contribute to the project process?
 - What are your expectations of this project over the 4-yr period? (Concerns/hopes?)
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2. STUDENTS - FOCUS GROUPS

Biography and community background

- Can you introduce yourselves – where you are from, your age, gender

Music making

- What is your instrument? How long have you been playing music?
- How does musicmaking fit into your everyday life / into your home, family, community?
- How did you get involved with this school? What motivated you? what have been the obstacles?
- Why Rock music? how is it different to other genres?
- How does rock music make you feel (physical/psychological/emotional) - describe the sound, rhythm, vibe...
- What is the difference when playing alone and playing with others?
- Examples of good/bad experiences of playing in a band?

- Do you compose your own songs; if so, what do they tend to be about?
- What do you want to do with your music? Future aspirations?

Project

- have you been involved in an exchange project before?
 - what do you know about the Music Connects project?
 - what do you think of musicians' experiences in the EU?
 - what do you think European musicians think of your musical experiences?
 - how does rock music differ in the EU and here? Sounds, rhythms, lyrics, equipment, audiences....
 - Can music change our minds about the world? how does music help to construct understandings across groups?
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