



# BREAKING BARRIERS: EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES TO CREATE A MORE INCLUSIVE SERBIA

## ACADEMIC INCLUSIVE ASSOCIATION (AIA)

In Serbia, young people with disabilities still face invisible barriers, not only physical, but also systemic and social, that limit access to education, employment, and public life. Bureaucracy, stigma, and a lack of institutional understanding often silence their voices.

With support from the SMART Balkans, the Academic Inclusive Association (AIA) set out to change this. From January 2024 to December 2025, AIA worked to empower young people with disabilities as agents of change, building their confidence, developing advocacy skills, and ensuring their perspectives are represented in policies and media.

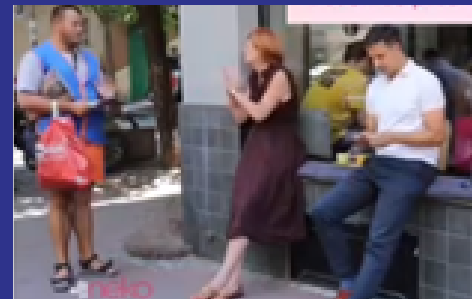
AIA's holistic approach combined capacity building, institutional advocacy, and systemic reform for lasting impact. Through 13 trainings, AIA reached over 230 young people, professionals, and decision-makers, equipping them with skills in advocacy, public speaking, and media engagement. For many, it was the first time they were recognised as equal contributors rather than recipients of support.

### DISCOVER OUR IMPACT:

<https://smartbalkansproject.org>



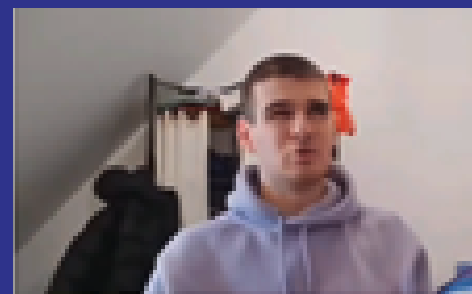
Dushan's story illustrates this transformation. A young man with a mental disability and a taekwondo athlete, Dushan joined AIA's media training and later approached a TV crew to share his message. His heartfelt words went viral nationwide, inspiring hundreds. "The training gave me the chance to be seen and heard. It showed that young people with mental disabilities can contribute to society." - Dushan, project participant (on the left in the picture).



Empowered by the programme, AIA youth developed a policy proposal for the "I Cannot Wait" card, ensuring people with inflammatory bowel diseases can access public restrooms without delay. The proposal, now under review by the Republic Secretariat for Public Policies, sparked a national conversation about invisible disabilities and human dignity.



Aleksa, another AIA participant, faced discrimination when applying for international volunteering. With AIA's mentoring and legal support, he successfully appealed, joined the European Solidarity Corps, and spent a transformative year in France. "Thanks to your support, I became more independent and gained the experience of living abroad. I've now enrolled at a university in France." - Aleksa Kuzmanovic, beneficiary. On his return, Aleksa helped integrate new European inclusion practices into AIA's training, proof that empowerment multiplies its own impact.



When the Ministry of Education digitalised its scholarship platform, students with disabilities were initially unable to upload required documentation. AIA's swift advocacy corrected the system, ensuring 158 students received scholarships on time. AIA has strengthened inclusive practice in Serbia by launching an accredited training programme for social protection professionals, approved by the Republic Institute for Social Protection. Grounded in the social model of disability, the programme shifts focus from medical treatment to empowerment and equal participation, a change that will benefit generations to come.



# AIA AT A GLANCE

## Results and Lasting Impact

- **230** direct beneficiaries through 13 workshops and trainings
- **3** policy and media publications produced
- **1** national network of journalists for inclusion established
- **1** accredited training programme institutionalised
- **158** students with disabilities retained scholarship access



In August 2024, it reached a key milestone when the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans, and Social Affairs granted official accreditation. Over the next three years, the programme will equip professionals with the skills and knowledge to actively promote inclusion, reflecting AIA's commitment to creating tangible impact for persons with disabilities and the communities that support them.

AIA's progress was strengthened by cooperation with the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, the Republic Secretariat for Public Policies, the Ombudsman, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, and Zvezdara Municipality.

Collaborations with the Belgrade Open School and the Journalists' Association of Serbia helped bring inclusion into the national media spotlight. These partnerships bridged the gap between institutions and citizens, making inclusion a shared responsibility and policy standard rather than charity. The true legacy of AIA's project lies in transforming both systems and self-perception. Young people like Dušan and Aleksa now stand as visible advocates and leaders, showing that when people with disabilities have platforms to act and speak, society becomes fairer, stronger, and more humane. With strengthened capacities, accredited programmes, and growing visibility, AIA will continue to build a Serbia where every young person, regardless of ability, has the chance to learn, lead, and thrive.

AS MILAN JANKOVIĆ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF AIA, REFLECTS:

“SEEING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES GAIN VISIBILITY AND CONFIDENCE—SPEAKING IN THE MEDIA, DEVELOPING POLICY PROPOSALS, AND LEADING INITIATIVES—SHOWS THAT INCLUSION IS NOT JUST A VALUE, BUT A PROCESS THAT TRANSFORMS EVERYONE INVOLVED.”