

Title: After Kosovo: A Project for Peace

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Project Summary:

After Kosovo: A Project for Peace was a three-month project held in Belgrade, Serbia from June 9th to August 19th. Its mission was to bring together students from Kosovo and Serbia – two communities largely isolated from each other – to engage in dialogue and to challenge the prevailing air of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstanding. The project consisted of eleven two-day sessions of workshops, held each weekend during this period, at the Anglo-American School of Belgrade. Each weekend-session consisted of four workshops (two per day) and involved 12-14 participants on average. A diverse and energetic group of young people – 94 in total – participated in this project in all the sessions combined (most participated only on one weekend session, though about a dozen attended two or more sessions). Fourteen cities and villages in Serbia and Kosovo were represented, as were a variety of ethnicities/nationalities: Serbian, Albanian, Kosovo Albanian, Roma, Jewish, Hungarian and Bulgarian. The workshops were held on an array of topics, ranging from creative communication workshops, to community activism training, to discussions and political debates. Workshop leaders and facilitators included, among others, psychologists specializing in communicology; professors of political science, sociology and history; a documentary filmmaker and author of an award-winning documentary of a Kosovo community; an expert in youth policy development; the head spokesman of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Belgrade; a former member of the Serbian government’s negotiating team on the final status of Kosovo; and a media affairs official with the current Serbian government. In addition to publicity in several local Serbian newspapers and a Belgrade radio station, the project was featured in *Rez*, a journal of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, and appeared in a segment on Serbia’s national broadcaster, RTS.

The project received precious non-financial assistance from a variety of NGOs and other organizations, including the Anglo American School of Belgrade, the Association for Creative Communication and Debate, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Radio Televizija Srbija, Mjaft, the Belgrade Open Society Fund, YesPro Media Company, Atelje Varan Belgrade, the Fourth Belgrade High School, the office of the Dean of the Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy, the European Youth Parliament, and the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs. By contributing workshop leaders, publicizing the project, attracting new participants, providing video/audio equipment, assisting with transportation, and facilitating the approval of UNMIK travel documents for students from Kosovo, these and other organizations played a generous role in realizing *After Kosovo*.

In addition, this project benefited from a fruitful partnership with one of its “sister” projects, *Talk for Tomorrow* (another Kathryn Wasserman Davis Peace Project), headed by Behar Xharria in Pristina. As the heads of the two projects, Behar and I have collaborated extensively on several occasions, including on a video-conferencing event between students in Pristina and Belgrade, as well as several exchange visits. On two occasions, *After Kosovo* workshops were held in Pristina, making the project truly bi-directional and effective in crossing borders, both cultural and political.

Project Results:

Overall, the major goals of the project were accomplished. The general purpose was to establish a network of university students in the region and educate about the concrete possibilities for ethnic reconciliation, as well as to foster productive and resourceful dialogue on painful political issues. Through a variety of voluntary, engaging, cooperative and fun activities, a large number of young individuals were involved in participatory activism, grassroots education, creative communication and, most importantly, dialogue. The scale of multi-cultural and inter-ethnic interaction alone was something largely unparalleled by other projects dealing with youth in the region. A large majority of workshop participants from Kosovo had never been to Serbia – and a good number of all the participants had *never* interacted with members of

communities “opposite” their own – until this project enabled them the experience. Some of the participants were uniquely privileged to converse with some of the region’s leading authorities on the Kosovo conflict, from a variety of professional and ideological perspectives. Finally, precious connections have been established between students for future collaboration and friendship.

At the level of individual workshops, occasional problems arose. Given the political and emotional burden attached to the subject matter, participants sometimes took the opportunity to express enormous pessimism, frustration and anger about a variety of social conditions and, more delicately, personal histories related to the Kosovo conflict. Although it was a positive sign that participants trusted the facilitator and the overall workshop setting enough to speak their minds and express themselves freely, the level of emotional intensity sometimes made it difficult to facilitate and keep the program on track. More unfortunately, it sometimes made overcoming the ethnic/national divide within the group impossible. Even one participant’s anger and somewhat aggressive approach could risk affecting the entire group and reinforcing a sense of hopelessness and division. Situations like this required that facilitation be stricter and more directive, which in turn risked hampering free expression or making the workshops more rigid. Notwithstanding these setbacks, the general feedback from participants about their experiences was overwhelmingly positive.

Implications:

The project was an important, if relatively modest, contribution to bringing a generation of people affected by Kosovo’s past together in a collaborative and creative effort. It overcame a seldom-crossed boundary to connect two isolated and forcefully-estranged communities, and opened the doors to similar efforts in the future by students from the area. Many of the workshops – the ones with a psychological/communicological orientation in particular – generated a variety of candid and moving reactions from participants about the loss, pain and hope that they feel about the Kosovo question. The experience of debate, discussion, and especially interaction with the various workshop leaders was commonly described by participants as “empowering” – giving many a sense of their leadership potential in their respective communities, with an accompanying sense of confidence. Above all, the project challenged deep-seated prejudice, stereotypes and ethnocentric viewpoints by exposing participants to a multi-ethnic experience that most will surely remember all their lives.

As Serbian-Kosovo relations begin to recover from a volatile and unpleasant period, the youth of the region must not be underestimated as agents of peace-building. It is only they who can bring a decisive break with the conflict-ridden past and sustain a peaceful dialogue in the future. By giving the opportunities and support for peace-building activities, this project helped participants develop, improve and coordinate their various initiatives and concerns. In a relatively short period of time, it trained a substantial number of young people to build personal and organizational capacities necessary for positive social change, which they can now participate in confidently and effectively.

As of the beginning of September, there are several options for extending this project into a sustained effort in the region. One initiative currently underway is the establishment of an exchange program between Belgrade and Pristina universities, which would institutionalize a regular flow of young people between Serbia and Kosovo. Other possibilities are a multi-ethnic documentary film project based on *After Kosovo* activities and additional research in Kosovo, and the registering of an NGO dedicated to peace activism. Whatever the ultimate outcome, a dedicated subgroup of participants now exists that will surely continue to work for dialogue and inter-ethnic cooperation in the years to come.

