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SECOND
EUROPE-WESTERN
BALKANS **YOUTH
MEETING**

THE BERLIN
PROCESS – A NEW
**IMPETUS FOR
YOUTH WORK?**

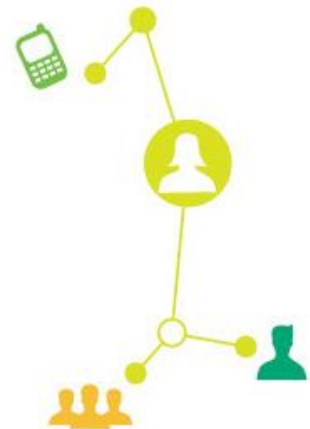
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Rethinking Regional Youth Work within the Context of the Berlin Process:

Follow up thoughts and projects from Kosovo
after the Second Europe-Western Balkans Youth
Meeting

by **Mary Drosopulos,**

PhD Candidate in Intercultural Studies,
external analyst for the Kosovo Foundation of Open Society (KFOS)
within the project “Building Knowledge about Kosovo”



Abstract

The enclosed article features two good practices in the field of youth which took place after the Second Europe-Western Balkans meeting in Podgorica (22-25 May 2018)¹, as a result of the contacts made during the event between participants from Kosovo and Greece. Both initiatives reflect the concrete positive effects that follow-up initiatives can have, when ideas discussed in round-tables and panels turn into practice. These projects are the first ones happening in Kosovo actively involving Greek youth and coincide with the official invitation of Greece to participate in the Berlin Process.

Furthermore, reflecting on the challenges in youth participation and policy identified during the meeting, the article discusses the projects implemented as a paradigm for the need to revisit the philosophy and practice of youth work in the region, in order to make it more meaningful, relative and effective for young people. This can only be made possible by rethinking existing attitudes and tools, and by eventually shaping a new model of youth work, adopted to the unique history and tradition of the specific geography.



Introduction

The Berlin process has been one of the most promising initiatives with regards to building bridges between European and Western Balkan states, aiming to enhance bilateral cooperation and prepare the ground for a potential EU enlargement (European Commission 2018, Hackaj & Hackaj 2018:14). The Action Plan on Youth Policy created within the process aspired, on the one hand, to foster the role of the youth and youth work in promoting peace, stability and cooperation inside the region, and on the other hand, to start a meaningful dialogue among young people all over Europe through the sharing of European values and standards, such as democracy, rule of law and the respect of human rights.

The establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) has been one of the most successful outcomes of the Berlin process, in the sense that it constitutes a tangible and sustainable product of the shared EU-Western Balkan efforts, which has been embraced and ardently supported by all stakeholders. Following up the decision to strengthen the role of RYCO in the regional youth strategy (RYCO 2018b), important steps have been made, including the launch of the first call for youth projects implemented with the support of RYCO in spring 2018, a vigorous promotional campaign inside and outside the region, the highlight of which has been the international attention given to the organisation at the fifth Berlin Process Summit in London between 9-10 July 2018. The consolidation

¹ The Second Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting: The Berlin process - a new impetus for youth work? (Podgorica, Montenegro, 23 - 25 May 2018) was organised by the SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre in partnership with the German, Macedonian and Slovenian National Agencies and the Contact Point for Erasmus+: Youth in Action in Montenegro, ADP-Zid. [More information](#)

of the organisation in the region has been marked with the establishment of local branch offices, the latest of which was inaugurated at the end of August 2018 in Skopje.

In this context, various youth initiatives connected with the Berlin process have been and continue being realised. It is extremely hard to assess the quality and effect of these projects due to a number of factors, such as lack of visibility, limited or distorted dissemination of the results, as well as different understandings of what constitutes youth participation or even youth work. Findings of research (Pasic 2018, Hackaj et al. 2017, Flessenkemper 2017:28) suggest that the overall impact of the Berlin Process on youth has been to a large extent positive, given that it has put regional youth on the top of the agenda², boosted investments in the Western Balkan countries and revived the political motivation to proceed into policy reforms and engage in dialogues and negotiations that would potentially facilitate the entry in the EU and other international bodies. On the other hand, when the discussion comes to European integration and values, figures indicate that “although the number of projects linked with the Berlin process has been on the rise, the project activities and exchanges are taking place mainly within the region” (Pasic 2018:5). Despite the acknowledgement of the “value of Europe” and the benefits of strengthening the European dimension of the youth sector in the region (SALTO SEE 2018), most projects are restricted only to regional youth³ and consequently, address regional needs and challenges (Pasic 2018: 14). This situation creates a vicious circle, whereby regional youth becomes more and more isolated, detached from European or global reality and absorbed into the issues of its own microcosm, and at the same time, finding European partners, experts and participants gets difficult due to the “strictly regional” character of the respective projects.

Evidence⁴ shows, however, that regional youth *wishes* to be more included in the European realm:

In their discussions, participants emphasized that a European dimension in youth work was needed because the Western Balkans constitute an integral part of Europe and because European values are important for the further development of the region; Europe also represents a window of opportunities for the region. [...] Participants also underlined that cooperation must be a two-way street (what can others learn from us?) and that reflections about European identity and values are accompanied by questions linked to (Western) Balkan identity and values (“them” and “us”).

(SALTO SEE 2018:2)

In this context of thoughts and facts, this paper presents two good practices that took place in Kosovo after the Podgorica meeting and which aimed at putting in place the values and key essence of the participants’ message: a meaningful cooperation with a sustainable perspective between young people from Europe and the Western Balkans, where one can learn from each other and through the

² Although the actual and direct impact on youth and the youth sector, in general, is open to discussion. So is the inclusiveness, applicability and sustainability of many of the projects developed within or inspired by the Berlin Process (see Pasic 2018:14).

³ According to the results of a survey conducted by Lana Pasic (2018) in the preparatory phase of the Podgorica meeting, “only 7% believe that the process has enhanced the European cooperation” (ibid: 13). Figures suggest that ‘the majority of the project’s activities take place in the Western Balkan countries, with approximately 30% of the activities being implemented in a member state of the European Union, or internationally” (ibid: 14) and at the same time, finding partners and participants from EU and other Programme countries is often challenging (ibid:10-11).

⁴ Evidence based on the outcomes of the author’s ongoing research in the context of the KFOS programme entitled “Building Knowledge About Kosovo”, as well as on the outcomes of the Podgorica Meeting and the *Regional Youth Forum* in Novi Sad (June 2018).

debunking of reciprocal myths and prejudice, foster a sincere and trustful partnership. These projects aspire to underline the positive effect of initiatives such as the Podgorica meeting, which are not only bringing both EU and WB youth together, but also giving them the space to interact, discuss challenges and solve problems together.

The projects were implemented in June and July 2018, respectively, and addressed the shared needs and visions that were identified and analysed during the meeting; they were both led and designed entirely by young people, with the prospect of having a long-term effect and a possible continuation. With regards to methodology, both projects involved grassroots youth work conducted according to the principles of non-formal learning, aiming at promoting reconciliation, intercultural dialogue and youth participation.

Kosovo and Greece in the Berlin Process



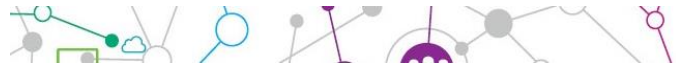
Greece had not been a part of the Berlin Process since its beginning. The country was absent from the first two annual meetings, in 2014 and 2015 in Berlin and Vienna, respectively, but had been invited in the 2016 and 2017 meetings as an observer country (Nedos in Kathimerini 2018). The first official Greek presence was at the London summit last July, when the Greek prime minister was invited to join the meetings, a gesture which was warmly welcomed inside the country (The National Herald 10.10.2018, Kathimerini 28.6.2018). Despite the fact that Greece joined the Process in a belated manner, the name agreement between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has been marked as one of the success stories of the Berlin process and an example of goodwill for other countries having diachronic bilateral disputes. The fact, however, that Greece had been on the margin of the Berlin Process for years led to the non-existence of respective youth projects involving Greek participants, although these kinds of initiatives would have been very relevant and needed for both the Greek and regional youth.

Coming on now to the bilateral relations between Greece and Kosovo, it is a fact that, despite their geographic proximity, shared cultural values and common visions towards their European orientation, Kosovo and Greece remain strangers to each other and maintain minimal bilateral relations (Armakolas 2014: 5, Kursani et al. 2014:43-44). There is a number of reciprocal misconceptions between the two nations, which, in fact, have never been in direct conflict with each other and whose “disagreement” stems mainly from their different interpretations of the Yugoslav tragedy during the ‘90s (Armakolas & Karabairis 2012:111-112). Touristic, academic or project-related activity is also extremely limited between the two nations: on the one hand, visa restrictions in combination with Kosovo’s non-recognition by Greece discourage Kosovars from visiting the country. On the other hand, many Greeks still think of Kosovo as a place of conflict and unsafety; this impression is further consolidated by the image of Kosovo projected on the Greek media.

Having these perceptions in mind, launching a youth project between Kosovar and Greek youth is indeed a challenge, but at the same time, a positive coincidence given the belated, but welcomed, presence of Greece in the Berlin Process. The idea of working together found prosperous ground to grow during the Podgorica meeting, where by sharing the same table, we understood how much we had in common. Therefore, the discussions during the meeting led to two distinct projects, where

Greek youth would be invited to Kosovo⁵ and participate in intercultural activities aiming at challenging and changing mutual stereotypes.

The “Intercultural Week”⁶



Increasing the intercultural understanding and meaningful interaction among young people from different ethnic communities is still a challenge for Kosovar youth in general, and especially in the region of Mitrovica, where ethnic communities are divided. Reciprocal stereotypes and prejudices discourage the creation of dialogue and cooperation among different ethnic groups, leading to stagnancy and isolation. The Intercultural Week Project started initially with the aim of bringing Kosovar youth together and providing equal opportunities to artistic expression, training and networking, regardless of ethnicity and/or ideology. It was considered, however, that the presence of young people from a country with which Kosovo maintains minimal relations, such as Greece, would be a stronger cause to discuss the European perspective of Kosovo and to explore with concrete examples and real interaction the notion of intercultural dialogue.

In this context, the "Intercultural Week" took place in June 2018 in the historic city of Vushtrria, with the aim of exploring the values of cultural diversity, promoting cultural awareness and creating bridges among young people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds inside and outside Kosovo. For the Greek participants, it was a unique opportunity to debunk the myth of Kosovo solely as a place of war and tragedy and discover, instead, the hospitality of the people and the vibrancy of its young generation. For the Kosovars, who had studied ancient Greek history at schools, but had never seen a modern Greek before, interacting with their peers was a unique experience. The ambition is to turn the “Intercultural week” into a tradition; a regular youth festival with a European dimension, which will be beneficial to the local economy and the touristic sector and will help bridges between European and local youth through arts, culture and a shared history.

The “Regional Youth Camp”



One of the representatives of Kosovo⁷ at the Podgorica meeting had been organising during recent years a summer youth camp in Pristina, with children aged 14-17 from all over the region. At the seminar he had mentioned that his organization had never had the opportunity to host teenagers from Greece, a country which is geographically and culturally so close, but with which they never had shared projects or partners. Without knowing if the endeavour would be successful or not, it was decided to make a try and launch a call for Greek participants, with the support of organisations based in Thessaloniki⁸.

⁵ Due to travel restrictions, bringing Kosovar youth to Greece would be quite challenging. It was, therefore, decided that the beginning should be made in Kosovo. Follow-up initiatives, however, between Greek and Kosovar youth have been planned for autumn 2018 in Thessaloniki, Greece.

⁶ This project, which was implemented by the NGO “Access”, was supported by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of the Republic of Kosovo (represented in the Podgorica meeting by Mr Xhevat Bajrami) and UNICEF.

⁷ Leon Gojani, from the TOKA organization in Pristina. Name and information reproduced with the participant’s written consent.

⁸ The “Balkan Youth Forum” and the Organization “Jeta”/“Zwń”.

Finding young participants was a difficult task, as Greek parents were in the majority negative towards sending their children to a youth camp in Pristina. Their reaction was mainly triggered by the fear of Kosovo being a place of public unsafety, high criminality and political instability. Although the camp was completely free of charge (unlike summer camps in Greece and other European countries, which are quite costly) and the teenagers would be accompanied by a member of a partner organisation until the premises of the camp, it was extremely hard to convince Greek parents to let their children participate in the programme. In the end, the ones who accepted were immigrants of Albanian origin living in Greece, who had a personal experience in Kosovo. As they had said in the interviews that followed, their only concerns had to do with the fact that their children were girls and they felt that they had to be more protective towards them.

The Regional Youth Camp took place in July and it was the first time that there had been a Greek table at the intercultural evening. The interviews with organisers and participants showed that young teenagers were very intrigued to learn more about each other's countries and way of living, about the educational system and family values. The positive narratives of this year's participants who travelled from Thessaloniki to Pristina will hopefully motivate other young people and parents from Greece to overcome their stereotypes and give Kosovo a chance.

Thoughts and remarks about youth work practice in Europe and Kosovo



The experience from the preparation, implementation and evaluation of these two projects in Kosovo led to the thought that European and Western Balkan youth can become stronger by learning from each other. Learning comes from sharing, understanding and interacting with others, therefore, projects meaningfully involving both European and regional youth at all stages can be of indispensable value.

Another remark is that there is a different understanding of the notion and practice of youth work in the region, compared with the more “professionalised” version found in central Europe, where youth work is a recognised profession and its practitioners have access to a plethora of tools and training or mentoring opportunities.

While the regional youth field lacks vital mechanisms, the sophisticated term of “reconciliation” has been branded as a remedy for a number of problems in the region and it appears, almost as a prerequisite, in the description of most projects conducted. Research on regional youth (RYCO 2018: 7), however, emphasises there is not a clear and concise conceptual frame of what “reconciliation” is, although it should be considered as “something important”. Consequently, it is questionable whether youth work in the region can explore its full potential when trying to fit in the prerequisites of a “fuzzy concept” (RYCO 2018:7) which is open to so many different interpretations (RYCO 2018b:24) and which has been used so far as a placebo. Isn't it time to speak openly about the shared challenges faced and revisit, accordingly, the philosophy of youth work in the region?

Rethinking youth work within the context of the Berlin process



The Second Europe-Western Balkans meeting which was held in Podgorica, Montenegro between 22-25 May 2018 was launched under a thematic title bearing an open question: *Is the Berlin process a new impetus for youth work?*

The question itself makes room for a number of thoughts, many of which are connected with the adjective “new”, and mainly, the place it should have in the above sentence: I would argue that the Berlin process should be viewed as an impetus for a *new* kind of youth work, one that is especially designed for the unique needs of the region, thus combining both European and Balkan elements with regards to values, orientation, methodology and practice.

Looking at the participants’ message to the policy makers, European institutions and the youth work field, one of the key ideas reflected is the need for an *equal* relationship between Europe and the Western Balkans (SALTO SEE 2018:3), based on solidarity and mutual respect for each other’s history and cultural uniqueness. The foundation of such a relationship is a regular and meaningful cooperation based on the real principles of intercultural dialogue, where both sides will be willing to listen to and learn from each other, without labelling, exoticising or trying to impose one’s identity on the other.

Youth work can play a significant role in bringing the two sides together and in promoting the frequently discussed “reconciliation in the Western Balkans”. RYCO’s logo “A better region starts with Youth”, along with its ambitious strategic plan for the next four years (RYCO 2018b), highlights on the one hand, the weight of the investment made on the youth and on the other hand, the great expectations placed upon young people and all the actors involved in the youth field. In this endeavour, lessons learnt from Europe are often promoted in the Western Balkans as a pattern to be followed. The creation and enlargement of the European Union is indeed a peace project in itself (SALTO SEE 2018b:2) and usually, the European model of reconciliation is widely projected as a prototype for the region. Consequently, regional youth work is called upon to follow this path and apply a methodological and philosophical approach based on the “Franco-German” success story. It is open to discussion, however, whether the European narrative “per se” fits the profile of the Balkans.

First of all, the pattern followed in which the geography is more or less culturally and religiously homogeneous cannot be put in place in the Western Balkans, which are characterised by intense religious and cultural diversity. Secondly, the EU has been the mature fruit of the European Coal and Steel Community. In other words, it was through economic growth that social harmony and progress was made possible. Likewise, reconciliation cannot be achieved in dire economic traits, when general dissatisfaction against society and its institutions serves as a ground for blame-culture to grow; it cannot be possible either when stagnancy and the lack of perspective forces young people out of the region (Flere, Sergej, et al., 2015:42), instead of giving them reasons to stay and work for their country.

The EU narrative can make sense in the region only if it is adapted to the unique socio-cultural profile of the geography and studied as an inspirational guide to a comprehensive agenda aimed at boosting employment, commercial cooperation and economic prosperity in the region. Furthermore, with regards to youth policy and youth work, instead of trying to direct regional youth towards ideas and patterns based on the European formula, the youth policy needs to be the genuine voice of young people (RYCO 2018:25). This requires a bottom-up approach, based on the actual youth-related needs (RYCO 2018:1). Youth work, too, could benefit from becoming more inclusive, organised and transparent; linked to credible research and practised by professionals with the relative training and expertise, who are also aware of the region’s idiosyncrasies.

In conclusion, it should be said that the youth in the region *craves* to be heard. It has been silenced for years, out of respect for the dominant culture in the Western Balkans, according to which certain issues concerning history, religion, war and trauma should *not* be discussed (Slana 2015:18). Regional youth, however, longs to talk about the past, cry over the past if needed, and heal its wounds first, before moving on forward and claiming its right to a brighter future.



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