

## Transcript of the interview with Borbála Fellegi

### **Foresee Research Group, Hungary**

*This is one of the eight interviews partly used in the final film of the ALTERNATIVE project, produced by KU Leuven in collaboration with the European Forum for Restorative Justice. All films are published in an online platform: <http://alternativefilms.euforumrj.org/>. To view this video as well as other interviews, click 'INTERVIEWS' on the home page.*

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### **A personal story on security and justice...**

What's the connection between security and the sense of safeness in my life? By answering to that let me recall a recent case, a recent scenario that is very strong memory in me.

Within the ALTERNATIVE project, we had an appointment with the very recently newly elected new mayor in the village where our action site was and where we have been running our action research then by two years already. However, of course in the village we started to work with the previous mayor and although the whole village said 'yes' to our program and gave a permission to start, it was -in that political context- a very important fact that we were invited by the other mayor. So the newly elected mayor was welcoming us –we initiated an appointment- because we thought there were issues to ask and to raise about the project and the cooperation and we knew it might include some confrontation or risky areas, so insecurity feeling was already there.

So the case, the scenario is that we are sitting in the car with the two colleagues of mine: Eva and Gabi and we are planning what will happen and how we feel about it, what are the objectives and what can we offer and what are our fears and concerns. I have to say we were really ourselves in that situation, not like professionals but individual human beings.

I felt that we really could talk about the possible outcomes, the possible impact, the possible risks, the possible concerns of us and we could have an open discussion on ‘who can do what’ in this scenario to bring the best out of it.

So, while we were in the office, it was indeed a tough meeting; it was indeed a confrontational and emotional scenario with the mayor. However, just knowing that I am not alone, I have my colleagues and we have an agreement on ‘who will do what’ and I was part of this decision and I felt safe because I knew that I will do my best as I can, I won’t stay alone in the situation and the team of us will put something together and with that we will bring out of the best of this otherwise quite unsafe and insecure situation. And this is what happened, so we divided the work and we divided the discussion amongst us and this is how by the end the mayor was actually asking us going back and continuing the work.

Going back to the idea of safeness and the sense of safeness I think I had a voice in what will happen, I had a voice what I can offer. I felt I’m not alone, I had connections with some personnel and trusty people who also respected me as a person and in that kind of teamwork we could very much better live and use risky and unsafe situation to actually use as opportunities rather than failures or bad happenings.

## **Coming from Hungary...**

It is very difficult for me to understand justice and fair treatment. I just imagine the school where the teacher expect the student to arrive by 8 o’clock sharp in the morning and let’s say if they delay we should punish or sanction all the children who are late in an equal way but do we really know from where these children really come – and some of them in the current Hungarian situation are coming from a far settlement with a muddy road or not even a road, no shoes, just barefoot in the winter sometimes, no light in the house, no heat so we expect them to do the very same homework as their other fellows from the city or from the centre of the village and these children are trying to be integrated in the same school and the teachers are expected to teach them according to the same rules. Of course they feel that some children don’t respect, or cannot respect the very same rules. I think it illustrates that Hungary at the moment is a country of huge social, economic differences and the

difference between the poverty and the richest group is extremely big and it leads to a kind of mistrust and weakening of the legitimacy of justice system, democratic system, school system.

I also think that dialogue in this setting can at least help us to understand that there are very different stories behind being late in the morning at 8 o'clock from the school and we should know and should allow space for people to understand these stories.

## **If ALTERNATIVE was a journey...**

I was thinking a lot on why this whole idea of this project came up in our context and what was the vision beyond it. With my current mind I would say that 20 years after the democratic changes in Hungary – what I feel about my country is that it's a beautiful land full of treasures and beautiful environment and also the people – it's a wonderful treasure valuable land- and on that what I feel and see is that different groups of people, political parties or interest group start to build different buildings, some I liked some of them I can't connect to, but what is a common characteristics of all these buildings: there are no bridges. Anyone build something on that land feels it's my way, I am right and the other building is wrong. So my original question was that: Why is it so difficult for people to build bridges towards others who feel differently? So that was the initial idea: ok, let's dig into this and let's look beyond and let's focus on one little community and see how these differences work and live besides side by side.

So in our action research we selected a village. It was very important that we had to find a community who allows, gives the permission to go in, because it was not a kind of request or question from them towards us: Please can you help us, what could we do better? No. There were no questions. It was our request: to allow us go in a community to do research and I have to say already the word of 'research' created resistance in people because sometimes they feel that I will be judged in a way, that I don't want to.

So the first stage after selecting the community and after receiving this green lamp, we had to put a lot of effort into trust building and that we planned in advance so they don't see us only as a researcher, examiner or monitors shadowing their daily lives

but rather an opportunity for them- and this is what they stressed- they want a kind of mirror from this project, they want to see themselves in the mirror so this is what we can help with.

So with our actions first we just tried to map the different conflict areas and the issues within the community and immediately we presented our findings to them and we asked for feedback whether it said anything new to you or it's something that you already knew or you agree or disagree so it was a dialog with them.

After this kind of research we asked them: Ok, now you see our capacities and skills, what do you think, how can we help you? So we asked about their needs, their wishes and their requests towards us. This kind of 'need communication' led to certain activities including for example:

- We created a local support-group that worked together with us on 'how and what we can do within the village'.
- We did some actions within the local school with young people and children and with the teachers to teach and show nonviolent communication how it can be transformed and transported into the school life.
- We realized that the online conflicts, the online communities are extremely strong: as like people bring their conflicts much more to the online sphere than in the real life scene so we offered a Facebook moderation assistance for these online communities so that they can moderate in a more conscious way toward a more peaceful approaches.
- We also created a learning group of conflict resolution technics. Some volunteers wanted to learn more and make these technics more conscious in their life so this was another activity of us.
- All kinds of workshops and dialog processes focus groups went on.

Our initial idea was that they will refer conflict cases to us and they will ask 'You are mediators, could you please help us in finding peaceful outcomes?' But it didn't happen.

We saw that even these two years that we spent in that locality very intensively weren't enough for these people to feel this kind of trust that they want to talk about

their conflicts in such an open way and they want to include someone from the external world.

I think the learning points of all these activities were that first of all we have to accept that talking about harms and conflicts and past with the other side is a very tough issue in Hungary. I wonder that this kind of lack of trust between them and the lack of trust towards a possible external mediator from where it might come from? I think that our history and the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Hungary really give reasons why it's not so much there. I understand that for restorative justice interventions trust is not only an outcome but it's also an input criteria.

This mistrust shows a kind of high level of silence. People keep their issues, keep their conflicts and they might discuss them within their own groups but they don't want to confront the others, they don't want to share and they don't want any external catalyser in that.

I think that during the project we could hear the voices beyond the silence and I think it was important and one element that helped us was the filming because with the films with the records we somehow could create an indirect dialog because people listen to each other through the film. That was the way how we could show the different narratives to each other.

Another lesson learnt was that what I realized when we entered the community and said we are mediators and we are neutral and we are interested in bridging between different buildings, between different views, stories, we thought honestly that is a neutral standpoint and I realized it's not a neutral standpoint. If you say that you believe in dialogue, that you believe in finding common solutions and you believe that it's important to sustain to build bridges it's already a standpoint and some people might not want this way and you have to accept because if you push it then you will be one of the 'other sides'. This is what sometimes had happened during the four years. Sometimes we were the ones who they had conflicts with because they felt that we might have pushed too much our belief and hope that we think people should be linked to each other.

Although I detailed some of the disadvantages and challenges which we were not only as observant (observers) but also as subject of these tensions that we felt however, what I also understood, and we discussed it with the team, that this emotional and

strong connection to their locality, the village became very important common ground for everyone. This is what I said with the land that to me it's very valuable, so all the people regardless what they think or how they think, they want to belong to this village and they feel connected to this village. This is the starting point where we can start from and the other starting point is the children. They all believe that their children should stay here and should be happy here and should receive every help that they can have.

What we saw that there are some common grounds that are very important and as researchers we have to accept that maybe besides that they might not like each other, they might not like the idea of dialogue. This is what they have as resource this connection to their own village and their own children.

What we saw that for some people in the village it's very important that they've been living there for generations and even though some of the other habitants just moved there for fourteen years or thirteen years which seems to be a very long time, they are new comers in the village and also this Catholic non-Catholic or Reformist or this kind of – I wouldn't say religious conflict because it's not, it's more to which community you belong to. And obviously the social class issue and the Roma non-Roma issue, not because of being Roma or non-Roma but rather the level of poverty and the level of social class creates a different way of life and might create a different value system.

I would say these kinds of differences- and of course lastly the political background. This is what I mean by buildings that conservatives and liberals, socialist they started to build their buildings and I would not say that any of them are wrong by definition but what I see is that none of them feel at the moment the ability to create bridges towards the others. It shows that somehow it would weaken their position and this is what we saw in the village, in a small laboratory, that whenever you want to connect to the other side, it weakens you and that is scary. So I prefer to just enlarge my perfectness and reduce the other side goodness. So it maintains the tension between the communities.

What we also found as researcher and someone as people in believing in the power of dialogue, that dialogue somehow destroys black and white pictures and somehow it brings insecurity. I feel very safe if I feel I am the good and the other side is the bad.

This is black and that's right. Once someone comes with the idea of share stories share your views, share who you are, then the black and white picture will be much different, much diverse and that brings an insecure situation and feeling for those who are fear from chancing.

I understood beyond the mistrust or this kind of resistance that maybe people are not yet ready for this kind of mixing their black and white picture and again, we have to accept this tempo this speed and we have to maybe first better show that: look, we accept you as a person and we accept your narrative and story, it's not that I judge it, and maybe it's not yet the time to make it more subtle and bring extra stories in. We have to better find a moment for that and maybe some more preparation and more trust building is needed towards that.

For me dialogue, the setting scenario for dialogue is also creating a kind of critical thinking towards black and white pictures. We as researchers have to see when and who is ready for that kind of changing process, which is an unsafe area for many of us.

## **Challenges in Hungary today...**

What I see today in the Hungarian society while talking to ordinary people about their attitudes and ideas is that there is a great deal of past we are all bringing in our backpack either us or even our parents or grandparents because of the wars, because of the many things that happened to us and we weren't active agencies deciding on them controlling the situations but things that happened to us. As I mentioned at the beginning with the feeling of safety, things happened to us which is one thing, I mean wars can happen in other societies as well, but none of these happenings, none of these tragedies have ever really been discussed between people, citizens, families. Who felt what? Who did what? How it impacted my present? How it impacted my children? So all these stories are there in the cloud in the air without actually opening them, discussing them talking about them.

So whenever you bring a new idea there will be a kind of competitions of pains, competition of importance. Why do you think that your issues are more important



than my issue while you have never recognized how difficult it was to me in that war, because you know in the WWII It was the Jewish community that was really victimized however after the 50's in the communist regime some different tendencies went on, some people were victimized in both regime, some people were ruling both regime – but the stories are not unfold and these pains, these traumas I think have an impact on our present attitudes towards each other. These fears of dialogue is also because of mistrust and because I feel that if I talk about my pain you will say it's not a pain that is big enough compare to yours and I don't want that. So I have my prejudices and I prefer to connect to my own community that also means that we don't have bridges, we don't have to see the other side and as I said, if it's safer to stay in this black and white pictures than to move towards others.

However, recently I saw more and more people wishing and striving for something less black and white and something more connection with others and I saw in more and more people this bravery this courage that they might confront with their own groups and might find partners from the other groups.

I would consider that as a very brave step, because if you build bridges towards other groups it might weaken your position and sometimes I see that if you apologize, then your own community might say ' Oh, you apologize to them? You should have not.' And they might exclude you from the community because you are not strong enough. So you see that one sees that for building these bridges you need to have a very brave and courageous autonomous personality. I think that what I see in Hungarians that more and more people feel their need towards that however the mainstream politics is happening towards the other way and it's very difficult to maintain this kind of autonomy.

What I miss and what I would love to see, that people finally start to sit down and talk about their stories their family stories from the 20<sup>th</sup> century as humans to humans. And not within boxes, I am left wing you are right wing, you were the victim of that era, you were the offender of that era but instead just what happened to us and what kind of trajectories impacted our decisions and who are we now and what we would like to give to our children.



I believe the strength and power of such a dialogue but it has to be done between individuals from humans to humans and not between groups like between the left or the right.

When I think of how scary this kind of bridge building is, I am thinking of recent story that one of our context from the village just wrote us; he is part of a sport club and unfortunately within the sport club there was a division between the Roma and non-Roma people and non-Roma people created another group so now there are two sport clubs. With our help, with the Foresee Research Group help, we offered some kind of support for both communities because we were thinking of the sport people all together. First, they said 'It's a nice idea and let's try to do it' and think of different ways of how this support could be of help, how this support could be used; but when the people heard that this would actually mean that something, a support from outside that we would receive together and it would require a kind of bridge building between us, they said 'No thank you, we don't need this kind of support'.

They would have received exact and very concrete support but even this was not enough to overcome this kind of concern and fears and I think it tells a lot of the level of this kind of 'how scary it is to build bridges towards others'.

## **Links between the four action research sites**

I felt very connected to the Northern-Irish activities and action site and specially the attitudes that our colleagues explained to us from the Northern-Irish people. Concerning this identity politics and dividedness and how difficult for them is to build bridges towards others because it's like losing their identity somehow and I could feel connected to that.

However, what I also felt that it's good to see what could have happened in Europe because I think that in Hungary we still can live with this kind of tensions and we still can stay silent, we still can cope with it somehow while in Northern-Ireland... so I would say in Hungary it's not bad enough. And we can see that there were other societies where it was bad enough for people to take guns and take their own autonomous decisions to make justice. So I think we have to bear it in mind that we can push people down more and more and we can allow not giving respect them but

the story might end up in a serious conflict that I hope we will avoid. It's good to know what can happen in such a divisions within the civil population.

I also felt very connected to the Austrian side because of the way how our colleagues could have a connection to the different cultures and subcultures and a very personnel kind of narratives and discussions they had with the habitants. I also felt that in Austria all groups, all subcultures had some kind of channels towards the welfare state system and trust which was a more higher level compare to Hungary where these institutions and this kind of trust towards the statutory bodies I don't really see anymore. So it's a big difference compare to the Austrian side.

I felt connected to the Serbian side as well because of our shared past of what it means for a nation for a country to start a new life after dictatorship. It's not that something was wrong and now everything is good, we were the happiest barrack in the socialist era and we felt in many ways very secure, much more secure than in the free democrat system. I think this kind of struggling with how we can live in this freedom how we can build the respect that we couldn't because we didn't have this history of democratic citizenship I think we share this with the Serbian site.

## **European cooperation in ALTERNATIVE**

Although I'm not so old but I would say that so far in my life this was the best project ever. I felt as part of a family, a European family, of course primary because of the people who were involved in this project from every side and the coordinator and the leadership.

For four years or with the preparations for five years I felt that I could participate in it, that coming from central-eastern Europe it's not a disadvantage but it benefits. We can have our identity we can contribute, positively contribute to a joint work and this kind of contribution is as important as any others' input. So this really balanced way of involving us and allowing space for us to do what's best for us within our site. I think this was a luxurious context for us and I think I wouldn't be able to imagine any better or more convenient setting for doing such a work.

I could live with the European diversity. I think we much better understood the differences within each society and we really could understand that diversity and

differences add to our quality life and it doesn't mean compromises but it means learning and becoming, having a more complex picture of our life and work. This is how I saw the European corporation. It was very diverse, it allowed us critical thinking which I really find very important and it allowed us to contribute in a very respected and active way.

I didn't mentioned but why I felt this project also as a luxurious way of working and getting the best out of us was also the team of Foresee and the team of the people I was working with because we really got into areas vague areas, risky areas that we had no idea what would happen and because of this joint work and joint brainstorming and connectedness to each other and shared responsibilities instead of just being cautious each of us felt that we acted 150% level because we got reinsurance and support from each other. This leads to one of my conclusions, which is that this kind of work can-in my eyes- only be done in a team. You alone, you can be the smartest person ever, you won't be able to provide this kind of thorough and diverse support for any community. When we are working in such field it is extremely important to have others around us who are better than us in certain ways and in things that in which they are not so good we can support them. I can't explain it, but when we work with colleagues who with we are compatible and we can create one team and act as one person within different sites. Maybe one extra sentence added to the team that within a team we all become much braver and much more ourselves than without a team.

## **European challenges and ALTERNATIVE**

I'm thinking of four main areas that are important. Current and very emerging questions in Europe, I'm not sure that restorative justice is the answer all I see is that currently I haven't seen answers that seem to be more effective to me.

One is the issue of radicalization, which is a hot topic now in the European sphere and whenever we saw the stories of people who became radicalized we can show the points, the very points where they made decisions where we as communities and societies around them somehow edit to their decisions so I think this kind of connectedness and bridging towards people it might be one of the elements with which we can work towards preventing radicalization.

I just want to say that diversity and how to survive, how to live well in a diverse community this is also an issue and I think that we can cope with that in a much more effective way and a happier way if again we go beyond people and look at the stories and try to connect. So again I think that restorative justice has a lot to do there.

Another challenge is the challenge of social inequalities and this kind of injustice that we feel in many areas that people just can't take part of their decisions, they can't be active and they can't control the future because of other decisions and I think although restorative justice cannot necessarily solve financial economic or social issues in general but at least if people can sit down and understand the stories and understand the causes that led to their current position at least it can put the themes on the table, at least it can help people prevent labelling each other and have a more complex view.

I recognize the importance of children. Experiencing what it means that I don't agree with the other person however I have a positive experience of this not agreeing with each other. Or I'm wrong, I did something wrong and instead of being blamed and rejected I have a positive experience of although I was wrong.

## **Lessons learned during ALTERNATIVE**

Throughout the research and during filming all the other interventions we had in the locality, what we've found that the biggest strength and the biggest potential is in personal stories. So this is what I've found as a very strong connection with restorative approaches that you can be the smartest person ever and you can have the best model ever but it will generalize things and people might not feel connected to that. If we can pay the same attention or more attention to actually dig into the personal story and get know that person and the approach that will open up the story and the potentials for bridging towards others.

This is what happened when we faced our conflicts with the locality, for example with the current leadership that was the question that we could ask: 'Dear Miss Mayor, we are so happy that you just raised these critics. Can you tell us more about what made you feel this and how you feel that, what's your story?' We just only asked: 'What is your story?' And at that point she felt that we are not interested in her position, we

are interested in her story. This was the first step when resistance and the conflict were reduced.

I think that one of the most important message and ingredient of restorative approach is the sense of connectedness. You and I as human beings we are connected in one or the other way. This is that can be a common ground on which we can build up further cooperation and on which we can accept that in some ways we might not agree, in some ways we might not like each other, but we are connected and we respect each other and we accept each other. I think this kind of belief in it helped us through in this project in many points and when we can bring this message to the people, even though they didn't say: Ok, now I understand and now I like much more the other side, they didn't say that. They say: Ok now I better understand the causes, the reasons of this conflict and I better understand what I can do or what I should let go.

A very important methodological learning point was that we started with many formal ideas, formal settings and protocols. We had to let them go very quickly because communities, localities people don't work as it's written in our handbooks of restorative practices. Instead of having formal protocols and asking people to be a decent subject of those protocols we had to let those protocols go and instead we had to look how things happen organically and how we can actually see their daily life and how we can use some of the restorative elements, restorative principles: connectedness, trust, participation, storytelling within their daily operation. Once we did that the resistance was much lower because they felt it was part of their daily life.

During the project I realized how important, maybe one of the most important things is to show children and support them to create an environment in which they cannot agree with each other, they can feel what it means not agreeing with each other, and having this opportunity to experience it that not agreeing with each other is actually a fun, can be a fun. It's not something we have to afraid of, because if I don't agree with you I loose respect and I won't be a person for you anymore.

Having positive experience above not agreeing with each other as well as having positive experience of 'I'm wrong but somehow we could solve it, somehow we could bring something good out of it'. Another important experience that how important it is to teach for children because what I saw in this project that once we are adults and

people come and say: look, accept that some people think differently, don't be afraid being of yourself, don't be afraid of differences, I'm not sure people in that age can accept and understand and trust that process and they fear so much of not agreeing fear so much of being wrong and admitting it that they do all kinds of things just to defend themselves.

So if we want to strengthen the potential of dialogue I would start from the children and I would start from teaching them that you can disagree and you can be wrong and still it can be very good lesson learning and a positive experience for all of us.

I understood throughout the project the most importance of personal stories that it would be much more appealing attracted to lead big highlights and big theories and big statements, but it's not there. Stories are there and persons and very individual differences are there and once we understood it and we were able to ask and read and write the stories and people were able to tell they felt that they could connect to us and I think in my future work this is the level that I will bring further. I might not write big theses or theories of social science but I will promise to stick to the personal stories level and give this respect for everyone to let their stories to be heard.

I knew but I just became reassured again that finding the common point, finding the common ground within communities that might otherwise suffer of certain tensions and issues is the key. What I saw that many processes around us, the politics and different other dynamics are focusing on differences. Even theory, even researchers focus on the differences in order to write down their theses but if we have a lens that look at the common ground and make evident for the people that 'Look, the village is important for all of you, these children are important for all of you. You wish to stay here and not move because of the tensions. This is the ground from which we can start this work.' I think we have to value it as researchers that it's there and it exists and people don't feel same that maybe this is the only thing that exists there but they have to receive this acknowledgement from us that we recognize it's there and it's ok to have only this, because it's a big thing.

I think if people feel researchers have an expectation towards them how should they behave, then things will not happen. Things should happen because they understand

and feel they would like to connect to the other side and not because someone else from outside goes there and say ‘Hey, you should connect to the other side!’

It became evident that I believe in power of dialogue and power of these resources and tools and what I recognize throughout the project is that people and groups have very different capacities and possibilities to use these tools according to their position in the power system.

In other words people who are in power position they have more responsibility to use these techniques. It’s not that they have the very same as people living in poverty and fighting for their daily existence. People in power they have much more various and wider scale of using and choosing and deciding on what tools they choose. I think that if they understand that they might not agree with others and it’s ok that they can be wrong and they can admit it and they can connect to and they can listen to personal stories, if people in power choose these tools then it will really make a difference. If they don’t, people who are not in power position or others who believe in dialog their work just won’t have any impact.