

Transcript of the interview with Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović

Victimology Society of Serbia (VDS), Serbia

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...

My life in Serbia very much shaped my understanding and my feeling of security. Living in Serbia in 1990s actually meant being faced with overall social context on daily basis. So, bearing that in mind, for me, security actually means that I have feeling of control of my life, some kind of predictability what will happen next, because in 1990s it meant that I could not really predict what will happen tomorrow. And that meant existential insecurity, that meant also economic insecurity and many others feelings which are connected to overall worsening of the situation in the society. In addition, it also meant that when something happened I could not rely on institutions of the state, but also not so much on local community. For me also feeling of security very much is connected to having possibility to rely on institutions and people in general whom I may trust. Today in Serbia it is much better in terms of this kind of feeling, it's more stable, but still I can tell that many people, including myself, do not feel completely secure, particularly when it comes when we become victim of crime, discrimination or some other bad thing happen to us. So, it would be really good if there a more victim support services, and also if really we have some kind of rule of law. I say some kind, because we cannot talk still about having institutions who really apply laws and we don't feel confident in terms how institutions respond to us. So, it's really big problem in terms people don't having trust in institutions and

it is also interesting just in that gap I look for the at least temporarily solution for me and many people who can find some kind of security in learning the skills which can bring solutions for our problems, our conflicts even outside of state institutions. And also, that is maybe the way for us to prevent really conflicts, or to prevent conflicts we have with other people before they really become much more serious problems.

If ALTERNATIVE was a journey

Action research that we did within ALTERNATIVE project was part of long-term activity of VDS, which we actually started in 2005. That was the time we started to look for a new way of dealing with the past in Serbia within the informal initiative which we called 'Joint action for truth and reconciliation'. Why we started this? Looking for the new way of dealing with the past is actually connected to the situation we had since 2000. After the political change and the end of wars in former Yugoslavia, we faced kind of conflict within our society between people who are for dealing with the past but mostly connected that to sending war criminals from Serbia to International tribunal in The Hague, and the other part which actually wanted not to cooperate with The Hague tribunal and actually they celebrated these people as national heroes. This was process which threatened to paralyze all kind of reconciliation work in the society because it produced new conflicts almost on daily basis. We (VDS) wanted to do something for the society which will bring more complex way of dealing with past, more inclusive way. At a time when we joined ALTERNATIVE project we were very glad that we got opportunity to test what we started earlier to develop the Third way in multi-ethnic communities in Serbia. Because earlier we did that more with Serbs. Now we wanted to test that in three multi-ethnic communities which are near to borders with countries which were in war with Serbia during 1990s. These three communities are near the borders with Croatia, Kosovo and Bosnia, and these actually a parts of Serbia where ethnic groups who were in war, live together. They have been living there for years, but they were affected much more than other parts of Serbia by the wars in former Yugoslavia. So, we thought it will be good to test these approach in these communities and also to use the knowledge both theoretical and practical of our colleagues from other countries to further develop our approach, or maybe to modify it. Because we wanted to make it usable. Also, in other parts of former Yugoslavia where much more direct conflicts

were happening during 1990s. Obviously, in the beginning we were not sure whether we will be accepted well in local communities, particularly whether this kind of approach which very often is understood as soft approach to dealing with the past, would be acceptable to people who were victimized during the war. Now, when I look back at what we did, I think that we achieved much more than we expected. First, we were accepted very well by people in local communities. Maybe because we did good preparation and we had very good network of NGOs. Partly, these people were members of 'Joint action for truth and reconciliation' and they helped us to make contacts with other NGOs in these communities who became organizers, and who helped us very much in doing action research. Also, we were accepted quite well because of our organization is respected as organization having knowledge in the field of victimization, victim support and reconciliation. So I think we were accepted well, but also what is more important is that restorative justice approach is accepted very well despite the fact that our society is very authoritarian. And also we have very widespread presentation of victims in media as having need of punishment of offenders as priority need. But that was not the case because people realized only a part from these cases go to the court, while there are so many conflicts and problems in relations in their communities they should be solved. And they recognized restorative justice as a good way to doing that. I have to say that I used also this opportunity to test combined use of restorative justice and yoga techniques and principles, and it showed like very good synergetic effect, and people appreciated very much. This was a kind of discovery and a kind of inspiration for future explorations of combined use of yoga and restorative justice. Also, I want to tell that the result, that we got, which we did not expect is that people not only accepted restorative approaches, but they also wanted to create inter-sector bodies which they called restorative teams, and they even made the plans for their future work within these teams for developing restorative justice and approaches in their communities.

Local response to ALTERNATIVE

People very much appreciated on our workshops the fact that they could talk about difficult issues in easy way. This is actually the quotations of some of them who told us that it was for them most important thing, that it was not difficult to talk about difficult topics. I think that it is very much connected to the way how we did these

workshops. Like, we used different exercises. We offered to people different possibilities for expressing themselves. Like, they can speak or they can write down about their experience, they can also use drawing and they can also relax between talking about harm and their needs. I used breathing techniques and meditations as a kind of break between different exercises were they discussed or talk about their experiences. In evaluation when we asked them how they felt they told us that it was not difficult, that was easy, they felt secure to speak about what happened to them and to exercise different communication skills.

Security and justice in Serbia

Ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and NATO bombing of Serbia influenced very much in negative way on relations within society, interethnic relations, but also overall relations between people. They influenced feeling of security of the majority of people. People experienced large deep feeling of insecurity in their everyday life. This became better now and our empirical research showed that the people now feel much safer than in 1990s. Still, there are many problems which are also the source of insecurity. It means that still we have quite lot of cases of discrimination of people because they belong to different ethnic groups or different political party, of religion, or whatever. Also, we have a hate crime, and people said to us that economic insecurity, which is connected to transition, is huge problem, because people are losing jobs on daily basis now. Also, one of the most important factors of insecurity people told us is inefficiency of the state. They meant actually inefficiency of the state in different aspects of the life, and that there is general problem with institutions which they cannot trust, they cannot be sure that police will react in unbiased way, that the court will apply the law without been biased, etc. So, these are all the problems which still exist. Also, there are new problems which affect security of people like prevailing influence of political parties in all aspects of life. So now it seems, it's not so big problem with divisions along ethnic lines and interethnic relations, but much more serious problem is now connected to affiliation of people to different political parties. Many people told us that within the same ethnic group there are now a lot of conflicts between people who belong to different parties. So, this is a new source of conflicts. Also, in our research we learned that the Serbs, as a majority in these local communities are often feeling insecure because they feel

threatened by increasing rights of ethnic minorities. This was something new and we did not expect that. Also, new source of insecurity, or new source of conflict, which is connected to ethnic wars is conflict between refugees and people who have been living in these local communities for quite long time. This brings some new light on interethnic conflicts in Serbian community because we always thought that interethnic conflict is the main source of insecurity. But now we can see that it intersects with different features of people and with other conflicts.

Links between the four action research sites

What we learned and found out in our local sites is quite comparable to other sites but we did not expect that from the beginning. We expected that we will find similarities, mostly with the situation in Northern Ireland, which is still the case, but we also found out lot of similarity with Austria and Hungary, particularly in terms of much more complex conflicts which exist between people who belong to groups which were focus in our research. For example, although we focused our research on interethnic conflicts in Serbia, it was more connected to religion in another sites or to other kind of otherness, we also all noticed this intersection of different conflict and different relationships. Also, we all noticed the necessity for using wider restorative approach for solving wider conflicts in everyday life of people as kind of, not only responding to what happened earlier, but also of the prevention of more serious conflicts. So, I think that is something which is very important, together with our common understandings of importance of communication skills, which people need to have for handling their conflicts, and also I think we all come to that the people really need to feel comfortable, to feel secure, in order to be able to speak about their harm.

European cooperation in ALTERNATIVE

ALTERNATIVE project is really big project which deals with a lot of important issues in very complex way and for me and my colleagues from VDS it was big honour and also pleasure to work in this team. It has really been a great learning experience because we could learn a lot from people who have a huge theoretical and practical



knowledge, much bigger than we had. And I think we will have much more benefit from that in future than we already had. I think that KU Leuven people who coordinate this project did great job, and for us from Serbia it was important that they treated us as equal partner and it is completely different experience comparing to some other projects in where we have been earlier were we had marginal role.

Restorative justice and ALTERNATIVE

In ALTERNATIVE project we had a chance to exercise and test restorative dialogue and a restorative circles. This is very important for us because in Serbia restorative justice is still rather undeveloped and mostly it is identified with mediation. That was an opportunity for us to present in our local communities the other possibilities of using restorative justice. That was something which also told us about broader use of restorative justice, which even make us think we can use restorative justice, restorative approach as a kind of living model, as a way of life. Because we really think that people should learn communication skills, of living together even they are very different and they should learn to communicate even when they don't agree with each other, when they stay on their starting positions. They should learn to manage these differences and not be angry because they are different which is often case in our community. This is why we thought that we should teach our children since the very early age about being restorative in their communication with other people. This is something which really came up from our action research and this is one of the recommendations of participants of our workshops, that in their communities they should introduce this restorative justice as inclusive way in dealing with various issues, from kindergarten, as they said. Very important is the respect people should have to other people, regardless of who they are and what they think, what is their position about certain issues. Restorative justice is seen as possible way of people to come closer together, to understand each other better, as a way of restoring one selves, restoring individually, but also restoring relationships and allowing people to find peace in themselves, and also with others. I think that is the line of connection between restorative justice and peace building. Also, I myself, as a yoga teacher, find connection in that line between restorative justice and yoga.

European challenges and ALTERNATIVE

I think that alternative approaches could be very useful in countries such as post-communist and post-conflict countries. Particularly countries of the former Yugoslavia, which are undergoing process of EU integration. And since ALTERNATIVE project is European and which tackles various relations and the harms, which are done in different societies, I think that these countries would have benefits much from this approach. Particularly bearing in mind that transitional justice, which is applied in all regions of the former Yugoslavia, is punitive one, which is limiting by itself because it doesn't touch large part of population who endured a lot of losses and who has much more needs, which are not solved, not even dealt with current transitional justice frameworks in these countries. These societies need to communicate. There are also needs of ex-combats and victims. Not only a needs of past atrocities, but also additional needs connected to post-communist societies which are in transitional phase, and problems with freezing of ethnic divisions in these societies. I think restorative justice, in a way it is developed in this ALTERNATIVE project, is great to be used by these people. This was recognized on the regional workshop, which we organized in Belgrade, when our participants from Bosnia were very much interested to work on developing this approach in their country.

A final message

ALTERNATIVE project showed that the restorative approaches are recognized by ordinary people and professionals, and they realized that there is potential in this approach. I really believe that people of different belonging, people who are different in any way, can live together, rather to live besides each other. When I said that, I had in mind particularly people in the region from where I came, where I live. I think people really need to learn skills such as skills of communication, of having restorative approach to dealing with conflicts. Also I think people really need to start to appreciate differences, to feel that they can enrich their life rather than to threaten themselves and make them feel bad.