



Human Rights Education for Active
Citizenship in the Western Balkans

23rd Regional Human Rights School for Youth, Mitrovica, Kosovo November, 2012

“Divided Communities: Diversity and Dialogue” was the main topic on the agenda of 23rd Regional Human Rights School for Youth organized within the Regional Program for Human Rights Education for Active Citizenship in the Western Balkans. It was held in Mitrovica, Kosovo from 8th until 13th November 2012.

Mitrovica has been selected as a meeting place for the opportunity it provides to participants - activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia to obtain first-hand information about the life in an ethnically and physically divided town, and how these divides affect people’s everyday life on both sides.

Through lectures, workshops and discussions participants explored the events that led towards such huge divisions. They were presented chronology of Kosovo developments culminating in Kosovo’s independence declaration, but also learned about present-day challenges people of a divided community have to cope with, segregation, social exclusion, cultural, economic, political and educational divides. Ms. Valdete Idrizi, one of the founders of NGO Community Building Mitrovica, addressed them on this topic and moderated the ensuing discussion.

Mr. Zeljko Tvrdiscic and Mr. Musa Mustafa shared with participants their journalistic experience: they broached the role the media have played in fueling ethnic tensions, their actual influence but also the potential of the “Fourth Estate” for building bridges of solidarity and sense of belonging across ethnic lines. The school was visited also by Kosovo governmental officials Mr. Sadri Ferati and Mr. Avni Sahiti. Participants prepared questions for them in advance – they wanted to have a quality discussion with decision-makers and get straightforward answers from them. According to participants, the meeting was most useful and up to their expectations. What kind of life their peers had in Mitrovica the participants learned first-hand from activists from different ethnic communities in Northern Mitrovica. Work and efforts of local NGOs were discussed during the working lunch with representatives of D4D and Humanitarian Law Center. The lunch was hosted by TACSO Office in Prishtina. In order to empower participants to react to situations imbued with prejudice and violence, and to learn more about social distance, participants attended the workshop moderated by Tamara Tomasevic.

A special treat for participants of the 23rd Regional School was a party with special guests – bands from Mitrovica Rock School (<http://www.mitrovicarockschool.org/>).

These bands not only played great music, but also the rhymes of their songs put across powerful messages – there should be no borders between people, and all divides should be overcome.

This is how Valentina Jakopec from Zagreb, Croatia, describes her stay in Mitrovica: *“School in Kosovo was special for several reasons. First of all, talking about divided communities and life in it for us was the story with which we have never met directly. I was shocked by the fact that young people were so restrained and could not exercise their fundamental human rights. Freedom of movement, freedom of speech, right of assembly, the basic freedoms that are necessary for normal young people growing up – do not exist. This struck me the most. I would like to congratulate them on their courage and strength, the life is not easy for them. Also, what is special about this school are new friends one make and some probably lifelong friendships. I would like to thank the participants, regional and local coordinators. This was a wonderful experience to be remembered as long as one lives.”*

Tijana Mirkovic from Belgrade, Serbia, says: *“I must say that this school was something very special for me. I started with the fact that some things I know may not be true, and that really confused me. I wanted to see for myself, and learn something that would help me to get a clearer picture of the situation in Kosovo. I must admit that I came back with many more questions that I had before the School, and a bit confused over the whole story. But certainly I was happy that I had a chance to go and see, to hear, and I had a chance to come back with a picture that is really far clearer than before, but still not the whole. I will definitely continue to follow developments in and about Kosovo in hope to find proper answers to all my questions.”*

Srdjan Petkovic from Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, describes his impressions: *“This was my first regional School for human rights. I’ve attended basic and advanced level of the School, and now I made it to the regional. And where could it be this time? In Kosovo, of course. At first I was in a dilemma about going there, because, after all, it was Kosovo and were getting so many news about horrible things that happen over there. Nevertheless, I decided to go. And so, eager to learn about what really goes on over there I went on this journey. The topic was delicate, at least for us coming from other countries and who didn't get enough information about developments. Therefore, I refrained from serious discussion at the beginning. During the first few days, we realized what the situation was like, we met new people and understood that almost everything „over there“ was the same as in our country. I was delighted with lecturers who gave us so much new information. It was great that we had the opportunity to hear both sides of the story straight from Serbs and Albanians. And yet the people I spent six days with, are all incredible. They are really great. I will never forget them, the same as I will never forget wonderful time we had in Kosovo, Kosovska Mitrovica and beautiful Prishtina, as well as all those wonderful people who trying to make the grim reality a better place to live in. And after such an experience you realize that not only the politicians and theirs speeches are what make a country, but also the people, ordinary citizens who live side by side regardless of the so-called divided communities.”*

Amira Softic from Pljevlja, Montenegro says: *“This was my first regional Human Rights School, held in Kosovo, a specific place in the Balkans. For several reasons I wanted to attend this school: to meet new people and to see Kosovo for myself. All six days, which is all it took, were wonderful, the days went by very quickly. The first lecture by Mrs. Valdete Idrizi introduced us to the reality of Mitrovica. And, day after day, new teachers diligently did their job and helped us perceive the real situation. We had the opportunity to listen to the stories told by people coming from different ethnic communities in Mitrovica. And then, after a series of topics, we set ourselves to Pristina, where we had a working lunch with organizations TACSO, D4D. We spent hours touring this beautiful city. Slowly we came to an end, the people I used to hang out with will remain in my memory. I'm glad I gained new knowledge, and learned how hard it was to live in a divided community. I hope the situation would improve in Kosovo, and that the next generation would not allow the mistakes of the past to be forgotten, or repeated.”*

And Selvije Kurti from Mitrovica, Kosovo: *“23rd Regional Human Rights School that was held in Kosovo, from my point of view was very interesting. The topic of divided communities and the conflicts between them was quite difficult to be understood by some participants from other countries,, maybe because they were not informed about the reality or did not have to cope with such situations in their homelands. But, after all, this is the goal of our EDU Regional program - to be faced with the past and present in order to build the future, to get to know better one another and to avoid prejudices. The topic was very sensitive and everyone had to pay much attention to manage the situation. It's not easy to explain the situation in North Kosovo to people from the outside world. Sometime it's even as much difficult when it comes to citizens of Kosovo. It's hard for many to understand, let alone accept the realities. I really liked this School because it was the opportunity for my friends from the region to come and see the life in my homeland and clarify the picture about it that too many media have been bombarding them with for years. Many friends said that that was their first time to be in Kosovo, and they enjoyed the time spent here, and it was a great opportunity for them to overcome the prejudice about the life in Kosovo. This makes me so happy and satisfied with this School.”*

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Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia