

ANTONIO ARAS-VRSAC  
NEDELJKO SIMIC-SREBRENICA

Report on project **`Uniqueness in diversity`**

**PROJECT TITLE: Uniqueness in diversity**

**PROJECT SUPPORTED BY:** IREX Washington, Municipality Srebrenica, European Movement B&H, Council of youth Srebrenica, and Serbian Eparchy in Belgrade

**GENERAL GOAL OF THE PROJECT:** Meeting with ethnic groups in different living conditions, and connecting people among each other

**DATE WHEN REALIZATION BEGINS:** February 2009.

**PROJECT LENGTH:** three months

**REGIONS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT:** Serbia, B&H (target groups-young people from the territory of municipality Srebrenica, youth and religious teachers from Serbia)

The bearers of this project are participants in program *Faith and Community: A Dialogue*, Antonio Aras (Vrsac) and Nedeljko Simic (Srebrenica) with the team for logistics.

The participants in this project, which has for aim, to overcome prejudice and establish dialogue, were groups of young people from Srebrenica and Vrsac. The primary goal of this project was to introduce young people who live on the territory of Srebrenica, and to find out about the possibility for their joint action. Because of this, it is important to emphasize that the group from Srebrenica consisted of 6 members and that it was multiethnic, in order to be able to spread what they learnt to the community in which they belong.

Project implementation happened in three phases, and those are:

- preparatory phase (February)
- organizing platform in Srebrenica (first half of March)
- meeting of youth from Srebrenica and Vrsac in Belgrade and Vrsac (second half of March)
- preparing and making of report (April)

Platform: `Richness in diversity`

The first public platform- `Richness in diversity-B&H` took place in the hall of the assembly of municipality Srebrenica. This public assembly was organized by Youth Interreligious Council of Srebrenica and the sponsors were: European movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina- Local Council Srebrenica, municipality Srebrenica and Embassy of Hungarian Embassy in B&H.

The following participants took part in activities of the platform: Zeljko Teofilovic (Serbian Orthodox Church), Damir Pestalic-imam of Srebrenica (Islamic community Srebenica), Dario Atijas from Doboj (Jewish community of Bosnia and Herzegovina), and Redzo Seferovic from Zenica (Roma community), while the assembly was moderated by Predrag Prastalo (General Secretary of European Movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Public platform with introductory presentations was welcomed by major of municipality Srebrenica Osman Suljic, and on behalf of sponsors and partners Zoltan Horvat (Deputy of the Chief of Diplomatic Mission of Republic of Hungary in B&H). In their comments and expositions, after the introductory presentations in public discussion, the visitors of the platform stated indispensability of holding this and similar assemblies more frequently, until tolerance and nourishing culture of dialogue in diversity become common for every day, in Srebrenica and in whole Bosnia and Herzegovina. It has been emphasized that in Srebrenica all citizens want to share the same destiny, whatever is their religious and national belonging, and that the situation, when tolerance and coexistence are in question, is much better than it is shown outside of Srebrenica. The importance of platform that has been held, is reflected in the fact that Youth Inter-religious

Council of Srebrenica, managed, for the first time, since the end of the war, to bring representatives of all four religious communities to participate in the platform. The success of this platform was reflected in constant interaction between moderator and citizens who attended the event.

It has been pointed out, that, among other things, platforms of this type should be held more often and should give the possibility to `common` citizens of Srebrenica to take part in creating and building mutual trust.

### Visit to Belgrade and Vrsac

At the end of February, some preparations were made to organize this seminar. It was foreseen to fold one workshop as part of this seminar in Vrsac and to visit religious communities in Belgrade, in order for the young from Srebrenica to see how, in a given region, different religious communities can function and lead dialogue among them. The preparations consisted of two parts. One part involved finding the place, hotel, in which seminar would be held, and in relation to that, having meetings with hotel managers. The second one comprised setting talks with dignitaries of religious communities ( Catholic, Jewish, Islamic and Orthodox).

Since this seminar was planned in Vrsac and in Belgrade, the second bearer of the project- Antonio Aras set meeting with the youth from Srebrenica and Vrsac, in hotel ` Vila Breg`, where it was possible to work on seminar. This hotel contains everything necessary for having a seminar, meeting room, with all additional equipment. Since we were their guests, we got the opportunity to use the room, free of charge. This was probably the easier part of the job, since that is what was done in Vrsac. In this period Antonio found the contacts of religious communities

and the only thing that remained, was to establish relationship with each of them individually, and to arrange personally arrival of our group.

Since Antonio belonged to Serbian Orthodox Church, and the system of SPC (Serbian Orthodox Church) functions in a way that we, as individuals, have to inform, about everything that we do, our superiors, because without their permission, what they do as individuals would be illegitimate. In the name of that, first discussion with His Excellency, the parish priest, episcope from Zica, Hrizostom, who was also the member of Serbian Orthodox Church-synod. Since the religious fast has just began, episcope of Zica was in his Residence, Monastery Zica near Kraljevo, and therefore he had to travel to Kraljevo to get permission for organizing project. Since his Excellency, the episcope was informed about the whole project Faith and Dialogue, and about the fact that the small program that we planned to organize `Uniqueness in Diversity`, was only part of this huge project and he was also acquainted with the ideas of the both projects, His Excellency, the episcope was pleasantly surprised with the whole concept of both projects and agreed to implement this project `Uniqueness in Diversity`, and he himself took part in assisting the organization. After return to Belgrade, personal meetings were arranged with all representatives of religious communities, and later, the terms for our arrival. The first meeting held was with Jewish community, or in fact with president of Jewish community in Belgrade, Aleksandar Necas. He offered to us, within the visit to Jewish community, discussion with representatives of Jewish youth, and I was amazed with the idea of project and expressed a wish that this project shouldn't be the last, but that we should organize other projects in this sense.

In Catholic Archbishop`s Seat, we made talks with Secretary of Catholic Archbishop, Milutin Novakovic, and in Islamic

Community with their Secretary. Both of them expressed a wish that it would be good not to end with only this project.

Seminar started on Tuesday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, in Vrsac, where the guests from Srebrenica were awaited by the youth from Vrsac and by two religious leaders. Workshop was held and within it, accent was put on widening further cooperation between the youth of Srebrenica and Vrsac and in broader region.

On Wednesday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, we traveled to Belgrade and were awaited by graduate theologian and religious teacher Nikica Jaksic. We had the first meeting in Office of Catholic Archbishop, where we were welcomed by Archbishop of Belgrade, Stanislav Hocevar. He directed us towards communal activities of religious communities, on the territory of Serbia, and expressed hope and wish for deepening dialogue on the whole territory of ex-Yugoslavia, in the way in which, it has been done in Belgrade.

Within visit to Jewish community, we also saw Jewish association in Belgrade, where we were awaited by president of Jewish community Aleksandar Necas and president of Jewish youth of Serbia. Aleksandar Necas expressed sorrow for the fact that we couldn't be welcomed by Icaak Rabin personally, the main rabbi of Belgrade, but he pointed to further cooperation with Jewish youth and to involving of Jewish youth in further projects of this kind that would be worked on later. `While visiting the Jewish community, we saw the premises of Jewish youth, as well as the synagogue. In Islamic center we were awaited by Secretary of Islamic center Eldin, who emphasized the dialogue that this community established with other communities on the territory of Serbia and also the necessity for further cooperation among youth of different confessions.

The last in series of religious communities we have visited is Belgrade eparchy, and within it we saw the Museum of Serbian Eparchy.

After seeing these religious communities, we went for lunch where we were welcomed according to the order of Episcopo Hrizostom, who expressed his sorrow for having the obligations he couldn't postpone in Sinod, and since he couldn't personally attend the lunch, what was planned at the beginning, but he managed to designate a deacon Radomir Rakic, professor of Orthodox Theological Faculty in Belgrade, and the main priest in Eparchy for ecumenical dialogue, or dialogue led among different religious communities. Professor Rakic personally supported our project and said that there should be more projects like this one.

The group from Srebrenica slept that night in Belgrade, and in the morning, they started their return to Srebrenica.

Results accomplished:

- Direct participants of the project were young people from Srebrenica and Vrsac, and some of them had for the first time, an opportunity to visit religious institutions that are not part of their community
- Number of direct participants in the project-13
- Number of indirect participants in the project-about 100
- Interreligious Council of the Youth, founded in Srebrenica
- Initiative for establishing Balkans Interreligious Council launched in Vrsac
- The basis created for continuing organization and participation in activities that have the aim of spreading tolerance, among different religious communities, and establishing their mutual cooperation.
- Readiness to act in joint projects, on the part of the young coming from different communities.

Media: Radio-television of Tuzla canton, RTVTK, Radio Srebrenica, Srebrenica Journal,  
Information about implementing this project were set on the websites of EP in B&H, Council of Youth- Srebrenica, municipality Srebrenica, youth organization Friends of Srebrenica.

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This report was made by:

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