

Coyote meets Trainers



They both are 27 years old, have a university degree, spent quite a lot of time in the U.S.A., have activists as a mother and love to play chess on the Internet. Even more important for Coyote: they both have a clear and sharp insight about 'what's happening', a wild eagerness to communicate and a bewildering passion for their region. On top of that, what kept me as the interviewer awake for almost two nights: even though they both looked exhausted, neither one of them could stop talking.

We proudly present: Aleksandra (Asha) Vidanovic from Serbia and Montenegro and Besim Nebiu from The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Aleksandra has more than one occupation. She is the regional organizer and trainer for the YouthNET project. Youth Net focuses on the cooperation of young people in South East Europe by supporting cross-border initiatives, providing training activities for multipliers and creating an information network in the region. It is initiated by the Interkulturelles Zentrum in Austria and supported by the Youth programme. Next to that she is also a country consultant for the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation.

[Editor's note: just before this article went to print, Aleksandra got a full time job with PRONI as a youth policy coordinator for Western Balkans].

Besim used to work for the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation in Skopje. At the moment he works for the Institute for Sustainable Communities, where he acts as the programme coordinator in the Community Action Component of the Democracy Network Programme. As such he works closely with Macedonian communities undergoing a process of community action planning. He assists the target group in needs assessment, the designing and delivering of training, providing them with ongoing technical assistance and the monitoring of their activities. All of this in the field of local environmental action plans which is a community-based policy making process.

[Editor's note: just before this article went to print, Besim also got a new job with Habitat for Humanity International - Europe and Central Asia, as programme development manager.]

I met Asha and Besim in a very green Radovljica in Slovenia, where they met with the rest of the trainers team to prepare the Salto Training Course within the Youth programme supporting cooperation in the field of youth work with the South-Eastern European countries.

Coyote Do young people in the Balkan region have special needs compared with young people in other parts of Europe?

Asha: In a way yes, I do think that we experience another

youth in many aspects - political, social and humanitarian - than other parts of Europe. I like to call it the 'Abort Transition Phenomenon'. Which means that young people from the ex-Yugoslavian countries - let's call them like that - at a certain point are excluded for 100 % from a normal process of development. It's not only about them as a person but also about the structures they are part of and should benefit from like, for example, youth work. The normal economic security which other young people in Europe have, has been totally absent for a long period in the past and even a longer one to come. It's this small but important thing of having a secure life, feeling secure and not having to depend on other people for housing and living. In the Balkans you are dependent even when you are 30.

I consider us as being deprived. I believe we are a third country. Many people find it offensive to call us this way because it sounds like countries of the third world: very poor and very unadapted.

Young people here need training. But the concept is completely new. Training can be an answer to some things, but we just are starting to get a better view on what our needs really are. And they are very specific. There is a lot of work to do in the area of conflict resolution, peace management, reconciliation... But for sure also in the field of project-management. I believe very strongly it is necessary to give the opportunity to young people to create their own projects. Probably that is already one important step on our way to conflict resolution.

Besim: If I take a closer look to the Western Balkans, one can say that in the nineties because of the wars, the brain drain and the political and economic instability; we had a silent or yet better a soundless generation, basically a reluctant generation. It was a generation that was silent for 10 years or went away. Now we have a generation of young people who are active in society but cannot benefit from continuity with the generation before them. Which is a sad thing because continuity provides a transfer of whatever has been done and learned before. There is a missing link. In many ways the generation now who is active, is starting out new things. They are inventing on the spot. Not only do we have to reinvent society in the ideological sense of the word ... also physically we have to rebuild structures. For ten years in a row, nobody was doing anything and that is a very specific problem in itself. In the West you can go to any youth organisation and find out it has been established 20 years ago or more.

Another thing, which strikes me, is the lack of mobility. It is very much shaping personalities or individuals. Young people rarely go out of their country.

They are stuck within their borders because of the visa regime, the hate that was created and the inability to find money to travel. There are really not a lot of physical barriers to communicate or to get in contact, but merely mental and psychological barriers. This created a situation where youth workers trying to build projects, to create acquaintances and knowledge, are losing their constituency and ground. They are isolated. You have islands of several people but they don't affect the sea.

Coyote: Is training an answer to these specific needs?

Besim: I believe training in itself is never an answer to anything. It is one of many learning tools. I don't believe it can be a goal in itself. It is probably not even the most effective form looking at it from the learning perspective. Job shadowing is more effective than training but it is equally important. I think that training is one of the sequences through which people learn. If you do one sequence alone it is probably less effective than if you combine.

But it is a powerful tool because, from the practical perspective, it is the most feasible. The importance of training in a European context is that it is an occasion to create that intercultural context which otherwise wouldn't happen. In that sense it is a good opportunity to bring people together. Impossible to create those kind of effects from the bottom up, working merely on the local level. Second it is a good opportunity to learn methods and concepts for work.

Asba: I agree with Besim. Even more, training for the cause of training without clearly aiming at a multiplying effect afterwards has no effect what so ever. Probably it is building personal capacities. But training targeting at individual action is not that productive. It cannot stand alone. What is done in the field is the product of training. With training you get the capacity to do it better. We are belonging to the small circle of elitist people who are aware of it. Maybe more important than training itself for our region is the need for raising awareness about the possibilities and opportunities training creates.

Coyote: You both describe the relativity of training, the need to connect it to other means, systems.... Can you try to describe what it really does? What is the real effect from training?

Besim: Training brings people together as such. When you analyse outcomes after training courses, one of the things which really last are the Yahoo-groups where participants communicate about the projects they developed. That is the impact of training and a tangible result at least. Second thing is the improvement of skills, which might help participants to undertake concrete action. But it is never guaranteed that they all will. Let's take an example in my country, Macedonia. We had quite a lot of multi-ethnic dialogue groups and loads of organisations doing conflict management training. The issue is whether training itself can solve the inter-ethnic dispute in Tetovo? Will the participants in training on project management all become good project managers? The issue for me is if you don't do a good follow-up on the participants in their communities, the training has been useless. Do you know a training out of which everybody has followed up with everything? There will never be an equal balance between your input and your output.

Asba: What I do find important is finding the right target group, which is extremely difficult in our region because the monitoring of needs of young people hasn't been done properly yet. We didn't have adequate data. We are just starting youth research. We really are like newborn children. I like to call us the wolf children,

the children that were locked in the cupboard by terrible parents. They don't know how to talk properly and how to walk properly. We were isolated in some way. Now we are learning how to talk and walk. We are learning the terminology of a European society, in many different fields: youth, arts, architecture and agriculture... It is the key to our development, which is needed for the younger generation. I consider them to be our biggest problem. We do have the largest unemployment rate. Young people are lost after school and before the first job, which doesn't come. We need a lot of vocational training but we don't have the institutions or capacities for that. In that sense training can solve a lot. After the wars thousands of training organisations came to us because we are a "sexy region". Many of them are not doing a great job. First, people have to build trust into training as an institution, into new informal ways... Serbia is a bit different than Macedonia because we put a lot of faith in alternative education. Our university was ruined during the terrible years of the Milosevic regime. We had two non-formal universities, which we went to, to be saved from the classical universities that were terrible. With training you are aiming at creating possibilities for people to learn skills and tools and as such it is useless if you don't put it into context. If you organise trainings like that in our region, you are creating useless, meaningless air. It needs to be targeted.

Coyote: How would you organise training in your countries?

Besim: I am convinced we should focus on two types of trainings at two levels. One type I would describe as conceptual training, meaning dealing with attitudes and values. The second type is skill-based or methodological training, learning how to do things, related to communities, regions and organisations... Both types are linked because they are targeting the same goal. The two different levels can be applied to any type of training because it deals with the starting position of your target group. One level is when you train people to build awareness and to have general knowledge. A second level is when you train people who already have awareness and want to apply it. Most of the training in our region is training on the level of raising awareness. Some youth workers are giving training on methodologies but without the context. It is like an arrow, which doesn't attack its target. We see a lot of training institutes that only have one type or one level training offer. As such they are very ineffective. For example, if you do not touch or work around the concept of civil society in a training then you fail to draw the big picture. Of course after training like that you probably can start with project management or being a volunteer or organise an exchange but a lot of people don't have a context as to where it fits. I would start with basic things to broaden the scope.

Asba: In my country we had a helter skelter situation in the youth and training field. Can you imagine a spring salad with all possible vegetables put together? Everybody was doing everything and everybody else's job, whether they were trained for it or not. The enthusiasm for the youth field was huge but nothing was conceptualised. So you were doing project management without previous introduction to what the project was about and what the project proposal was and what the target was. In other words: there was no big picture.



We have to make the big picture now. If you want to deal with minorities as an issue, you need to think about participation and citizenship. I would organise long-term training courses introducing the very fact of youth work in Europe and our place in that puzzle. You know, we feel we are a part even though we are a very confused part with a big crisis of identity. Where are we? Are we Balkans? Are we South Eastern Europe? What exactly is this Stability Pact initiative? What do all these concepts mean: nation, country, and youth...? Can we actually do anything with the concept of an exchange? We definitely need time, space and opportunities to think about national identity, regional identity, ... We need time to think about the general concepts because now we are doing bits and pieces but we don't know where it leads. Despite our bitterness, coming back to life, we have to know where we stand at this moment. I believe youth work has a role to play in the context of 'Big Europe' and 'Southern Eastern Europe' in reconvalescence after its sickness. That is why both concept and skills training are needed.

Coyote: Is Europe an example for you?

Asba: There should be a demystification of what Europe is. I am not sure normal citizens in my country understand what Europe is or what it is about except for the political fact that there is a striving for EU accession which has not been translated to people very effectively. Even though there are quite a lot of programmes trying to do that.

Besim: EU accession, EU enlargement is a word that is abused a lot. It has been used without content. People talk about enlargement or accession as a goal. There is no translation of what it means to citizens. EU accession is not the goal. It is a tool to build democratic institutions and make progress. Henry Kissinger said: 'If I want to call Europe, whose telephone do I ring?' Maybe the difficulty about it is that at the exact moment I am asking the question, the definition of what European identity is, has changed. There is a simultaneous process of development. We need to develop a new big story for our region. Will it be a European story? Will we influence the development of the process of looking for the definition of European identity?

Asba: I believe we have a funny situation. On our side of the question, we all have Ministries for European Integration, which is a very interesting phenomenon. I guess you need them as much as we do? Their programmes and TV shows say: 'We are a big family. You are a little brother. It is time you learn how to become a good brother.' People can't get accustomed to the borders of their country because they change all the time. People can't get accustomed to the concept of Europe. We do feel part in a certain way. Europe accepts us to some extent.

For me it starts from the French revolution: Fraternité, Egalité and Solidarité. Up to us now to explain what this brotherhood, equality and solidarity among young people means and why do we need to nourish it? This challenge to me is Europe. Especially to me as a trainer. No matter if we are a member state or a third country, Efta or Peco or whatever strange names you give us. It is a question we all should answer.

Do we know what Europe means more than the economic liaison? The fact that there are a lot of extreme right wing people for the moment, is that Europe? Europe with tendencies like that and fear for globalisation is a Europe I don't like very much. I like Europe helping Bielo Russia dealing with the dictator they still have. I liked Europe when it helped us when we needed it. I wanted Europe to help

actively during our bloody wars. I didn't want EU watchers. Europe of my dreams doesn't exist for the moment and I am not sure when it will. I am afraid it is going to exist only within the limits of economic cooperation and visa regulation.

Coyote: Is training a Western European concept? If you say yes, can you apply it in East Europe or what do you need to change?

Asba: Training as seen from the perspective of the Youth programme or training which is going on in Western European countries can be seen as a Western European product. We even might call it a Northern European concept. We have a lot of American influences in training in the Balkan region. Loads of American organisations are coming to our region working with adults, refugees, minorities and youth. But you can't just copy training concepts or methodologies completely. We have to implement and adopt them to our ways. Talking once more about the different needs: we need to decide on our own priorities because the region is in a way specific.

You cannot tackle the issue of intercultural learning just like that in our region. You cannot play with it or use it as a general tool for obtaining general insight or whatever. Either you deal with it or you don't. You cannot just 'run' through it. Training in Western Europe uses intercultural learning as a concept or a tool for understanding. In Balkans you work on it. It can bring a lot of emotions, a lot of bitterness, a lot of things you don't want to see if you want to be a safe trainer. It is not easy to see your participants cry and go deep into emotions, remembering bad things. Many things were lost, many lives and many hopes. We know what a conflict means. People immediately refer to their own experience. In Balkans you don't want to pronounce it but you are actually working on a conflict, which is happening there on the same spot and in real life. Unfortunately in many cases you cannot really do it as it should be done. Being a participant in a Western European training activity, you keep silent. You don't want to express and when you come home, you realise you didn't talk about the most important things. In every training situation people from the conflict areas find themselves in the same group. The training can be on the topic of project management but you end up talking about conflict resolution.

Besim: The concept 'Western European' training is too broad. I see quite a lot of differences between the Northern European concept and the Southern one, differences in the beliefs attached to the concept. For example, there is an important difference in the way training deals with power. The belief in the power of the individual that can be changed or can change him or herself through training, go back home and act differently in his or her home situation is not so different from the belief which is lying at the basis of American concepts of training. Training approaches are a collection of tools, lessons learned, experiences from the past. In that sense training is for us most definitely Western European because in our region there was not a lot of acknowledged informal learning going on. The West is a channel and a circulation of ideas. On the other hand, how to do training is not necessarily to be put in boxes. Of course we see a huge import for the moment of Western European and American experiences in the region, but it is also evident that changes are taking place while practising. Some aspects are socially or culturally incompatible.

Doing public campaigns for example, you discover that some things are not done. Basically the issue is to take what is essential, universal, helpful and working.

A town forum as a way to allow public input in decision taking is somehow usual for villages in New England. In Croatia or Bielo Russia it is hopeless. Even the concept of an NGO itself is a very specific concept. Physical activities like icebreakers or games are sometimes difficult. People feel treated like idiots. They feel they are participating to learn and not to play.

Asba: We organised a street event in Vienna with small theatre performances teasing people in the audience. You would get beaten in Belgrade because people would think you are making fun of them. Teasing people in public, taking their attention on something you want to say, works in Vienna but not in Belgrade. On the other side, massive demonstrations we have here do not really work there. What might be feasible in London is definitely not necessarily feasible in a Serbian village. Part of the campaign against Milosevic was giving women in the villages aprons with 'go out and vote' on it. I guess a Western European woman would probably be offended? Here women needed the apron, they loved it, they got it and they went out and voted. There are differences between a patriarchal Italian village and a liberal Dutch city. In Novi Sad we organised a theatre performance near the fish market, did the same thing in Southern Serbia and no way: people nearly threw tomatoes and cheeses at our heads and shouted. 'Go away, we are working here!'

You organise a fundraising activity you have read about in a European manual. You ask artists from the area or city to give away some of their work as a donation, hoping the selling will make a lot of money and your organisation will have a budget to live on. But the auction doesn't work because people that attend to auctions organised by NGO's in our region are not the people that tend to buy paintings to hang on their wall.

Some training manuals on advocacy say: 'Lobby your parliamentary group' 'Do you have Youth MP's in your parliament?' 'Yes, we do.' 'Lobby them so they make a youth parliamentary body that will fight for youth rights and promote youth policy in the country.' 'No way! In my country these people love their party, they don't see each other as young people but as members of their party. You can't make them talk together and lobby for shared viewpoints. The same situation when you want to do something on woman's rights for example. They forgot about their gender status the moment they became member of a party.'

Coyote: You both have very clear links with activism. What's the relation between training and activism?

Asba: One doesn't go without the other. In my life history I was volunteering for a long time, mainly political because my country was in that situation where whatever you did it was political. Even if you didn't do anything, it was a political act because you didn't want to change anything. You did human rights education in your own small village and that already was political enough for some radicals to put a bomb in the backyard of your small poor little NGO. Activism showed me that I needed more skills and new tools for developing and multiplying my ideas. It urged me to a wider perspective.

Most of the trainers are former and present activists. That is how they started! Training is not only related to the youth field but to the field of NGO's in general. I consider it to be a tool for a trainer to be an activist or to have had experience as an activist. It most definitely helps you a lot to train others to become activists. Do you believe it is possible to train people in fields you don't have any experience in? There is no such thing as a laboratory where one can breed trainers in different fields out of the blue. This means you need the activist's experience.

Coyote: What is the difference between the two?

Besim: My mother was an activist, not a trainer. She worked with women of her neighbourhood but she never was trained. She did different activities in order to reach the community but she didn't have the wish to make the women she works with learn. When they need an input on advocacy she invites external trainers. The women work, plan and organise. They learn by doing. In training you provide a structured way of learning. You provide an input and you have an educational agenda with a specific choice for educational methods.

Is training political? Training skills is not political. You are always working in a political context but you don't really profile yourself politically. You allow people to act in a political way once they get out. We are not organising training like the training institutions within the framework of political parties, that is something different!

Asba: Not being interested in the future of your country like what is happening now in France is perhaps the most clear political act young people are showing now. People not being aware that everything they do or don't do in a way is political, are idiots. I consider myself as dealing with politics, mainly youth politics. I don't think that being a member of a political party makes you political. I don't belong to a political party but I do believe that everything I do is somehow political because I am working for and with a new generation in my country that will be voters. We are directing them. We do change attitudes and mentalities. But it doesn't mean I express myself politically while giving training. I do talk about civil society and the role of people in civil society.

If you jump to the grassroots level as an opposite to the European level training, you can be surprised how obvious the political aspect of training gets. I had a real life experience, it is the most difficult training I ever did. In a group of 40 very young scouts, there were 14 members of the radical skinhead movement and the Serbian Radical Party. It was an 'All different-All Equal training' somewhere in the mountains. People openly declared themselves against Roma. In a case like that you do the activist thing! I was really scared. I really believe we managed to get some changes through. They are young, easy to influence if you are persuasive enough. They are coming from that kind of backgrounds and that kind of families. You show them by simulation what it feels like being discriminated and you feel their hatred towards what you are representing directed towards you as being different from their backgrounds. Poor, non-educated extremist environments with parents paid 5 Euro by Milosevic to attend his meetings. You know at least that you did already something important only by pronouncing different opinions than the ones they are hearing every day over and over.

Coyote: Where did you find the mustard? The inspiration to be a trainer?

Asba: Where did I find the mustard or the strawberries and the cream on the top? I believe it was the NGO me and my friends and mother created during my studies. We are the generation that created the NGO's that are now active. We created the concepts, we organised the field out of the blue and it gave me the push to educate myself more going to training courses. It felt like home!

Coyote: Besim, you have been in the U.S.A. What do you think about the American Dream? The wish to create a new multicultural society?



B: Obviously I experience significant differences between the American and European multicultural society. The historical, geographical and socio-economic context they were developed in, is different. The American society was created as a push to build a new society, with people fleeing away from the old continent, being Europe. It was meant to be a place where old traditional cultural backgrounds would disappear and you would turn into this new man because of the abundance of the new continent. But the incoming population was obviously very diverse. On the other hand, the very fact that they all left their old clans, in a psychosocial sense, meant they were prepared to compromise, re-configure, and change... The melting pot seems to me the logical consequence of that kind of situation.

The multicultural European society is a result of the old European cultures searching for a *modus vivendi*, a path to recognise and co-habit with each other after a history of reluctance, denial and animosity. You could say it is a result of a historical search. The European nations have always been fighting for more space for themselves. No matter, the search was long; they ended up building a common space.

In that sense, the American multicultural society was built in a situation of a nation using an abundant space, the European multicultural society on the contrary – old nations rationalising the existing space. And I hope sincerely we will manage.

Read more about Besim's projects on
www.rec.org/REC/Programs/LocalInitiatives/LEAP/

Read more about Asha's projects: before: www.iz.or.at/youthnet
 and now: www.proni.se

Contacts addresses:

*aleksandra.vidanovic@proni.se
besimnebiu@yahoo.com*



Asha Vidanovic



Besim Nebiu

