



# EU-CARES

**EUropean Collective nArratives for Reconciliation and  
trauma hEaling through youth engagement and Storytelling**



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## **Compilation – NATIONAL REPORTS**

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The National reports are a summary of the round-tables organized in partner countries, reflecting individual viewpoints of participants in each country.

## **Introduction**

The Western Balkan countries are still recovering from a legacy of war crimes, human rights violations and ethnic divisions. In this area, as Sisson (2010:172) puts it, a “decade of internecine war [...] had left behind not only a terrible legacy of human losses and material destruction, but also an unprecedented level of traumatising among the population at large”. The new geopolitical reality in which Europe woke up on February 24 this year, inevitably has and will continue to create huge socio-political and economic implications for the entire Europe. Nevertheless, for the Western Balkan region, the situation bears a particularly heavy burden, with its inhabitants reliving past war trauma as Russia continues to invade Ukraine. For those who survived the wars/conflicts in the former Yugoslavia<sup>1</sup>, the war in Ukraine feels too familiar. This collective trauma that a society carries, makes people feel like they are in this together, but it also makes them feel more fearful and particularly vulnerable to the possibility of a new war.<sup>2</sup> The collective and trans-generational trauma faced by the Western Balkan population constitutes an obstacle to societal transformation, but a deeper understanding of it could help to build strong regional connections and strengthen a collective European identity, especially in the wake of what is being reported as the worst security crisis Europe has faced in decades, and the largest refugee crisis of this century.<sup>3</sup>

The current conflicts in Eastern Europe are further aggravating the post-war complex political and socioeconomic transformations which have caused the younger generation of the WB region to be as disillusioned with their past, present and future as the older ones.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, even if young people from the Western Balkans have been able to overcome the disputes of the past, there is still a general distrust among the population in the region, especially between different ethnicities. People in the region do not believe that they share common cultural spaces. In some countries, the skewed lens of the nationalistic narratives that often permeate history classes has made the younger generation even more distrustful than those who lived through the war. This indicates that there is still a lot of work to be done in bringing young people closer together based on their common values and heritage to continue the path of reconciliation.

The idea of the EU-CARES project is to emphasise that there are different ways in which the past can be translated into the present, with the help of memories and storytelling. The process of self-healing from traumatic events is a steep climb. To heal entire communities is even harder since collective trauma leaves intergenerational scars and causes divisions in society. In the reconciliation process, storytelling – with its many techniques – can be an effective tool providing a social space to bring people together and elaborate on each other’s experiences. Simultaneously, the EU-CARES project aims to address collective trauma, aid the recognition of remembrance and

support the reconciliation process among disadvantaged young people in the Western Balkans, and transfer the knowledge about the process to the organisations working with displaced and disadvantaged young people of the Eastern Balkans.

The report presented herewith is a joint work effort of partner organisations that come from Belgium, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The report is a compilation of 7 national reports wherein round-tables have been organised in the partner countries. Subsequent to the findings of the research conducted through interviews in partner countries, the round-tables provide further foundation for the continuation of activities of the EU-CARES project.

1 Tabeau, Ewa (15 January 2009). "Casualties of the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia (1991–1999)" (PDF). Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia.

2 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/28/time-for-bosnia-to-get-rid-of-russian-influence-analysts>

3 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60030615>

4 20 Years After 1991: A Tale Of Two Generations, Simonida Kacarska In Cooperation With: Nina Branković, Jelena Džankić, Ervin Mete, Engjellushe Morina, Vladimir Pavičević, Antonija Petričušić, Vladimir Todorić, Miroslav Živanović

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA – SMOC



The round table was organized by SMOC in Sarajevo on April 26, 2023, at the premises of the EU Info Centre. A total number of 16 participants were present during the round table, moderated by SMOC staff – Dino Mujkic and Jana Carkadzic. The opening remarks were delivered by the director of the National Erasmus+ Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mr. Suad Muhibic who spoke about the opportunities of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Youth programme, but also about the great benefits and support in various processes that projects such as EU-CARES bring to the country as well as the Western Balkan region.

Prior to the individual introductions of all participants, SMOC staff delivered a short presentation about the EU-CARES project, its goals, activities and anticipated results over the next 20 months.

The participants profiles varied from different age groups to different ethnic & cultural backgrounds who live in Sarajevo. Statistically, **7 participants** were ages 14 – 20; **4 participants** were ages 21– 39; and **5 participants** were over 40. Out of those, 5 participants come from other cities in BiH, who came to Sarajevo for work or school seeking better opportunities.

### The discussion

The participants were very relaxed and open during the discussion session, revealing their thoughts, experiences and emotions during the event. The younger participants also sought some answers from the older participants by posing questions such as: *If research says that 6 trans generations feel the effect of a conflict region (eg. war in terms of collective trauma) then how do we bridge this great gap and heal faster? What kind of memory culture should exist in BiH that doesn't right now? How can we better understand what's behind us?*

In general, young people in Sarajevo and BiH do not feel safe. One reason for this could be the war rhetoric that is ongoing and passed on from older generations to the younger ones 30 years after the war ended. The feelings of insecurity and fear lead to destructive emotions. Fear likewise leads to conservative points of view wherein people start making selections and believe that they need to belong somewhere – to their own ethnic group. There surely exists a clash of generations in perception. Youth is migrating from the country not only because of economic opportunities but because there is less politics of this sort in the EU or USA. They live through this constant fear of insecurity and uncertainty. Fear of new conflicts in the country or the region. The hygiene of mental health is easier to accomplish outside of the BiH borders, which leads to a more fulfilling life.

Another key finding revealed during the round table is how parents or elderly in the society often make divisions between different ethnic groups in BiH which they're maybe not even aware of (e.g. they, we, they are, we are, etc.).

\*A personal example shared by one participant was the following story: a 22-year-old female is veiled and she wanted to go to Belgrade, Serbia to run the marathon. Her father opposed this desire by telling her that it isn't safe for her, being who she is and coming from Sarajevo, to go there. She might put herself in a very uncomfortable or even dangerous situation because people have prejudices. Nonetheless, she went and returned satisfied. Her attitude is *'I don't respond to insults, provocations or threats'*.

We're witnesses of a time when hate speech is very frequent, not only in BiH but everywhere in the world. This is where we need a lot of education. Most elderly people aren't aware of this, but we, the youth are.

Also, the young participants shared some examples of how their school teachers years back behaved, what they said and how regretfully badly influenced their pupils by the war rhetoric. At the same time, family upbringing has a lot to do with how youth shapes their perception.

\*A personal example shared by a 20-year-old Muslim boy: He had a best friend and her name was Marija (a Christian). They've known each other since they were very small. When they turned 16, Marija came to him one day and told him that they couldn't be friends anymore because they belonged to different ethnic and religious groups. He was left thinking, and still is today, from that devastating separation – 'what am I supposed to think of 'others' then (other ethnic groups religions, societies), why is there so much distrust among people, how long will this go on for'?

Young participants believe that society as a whole needs to stop with the negative narratives. When the topic of storytelling was introduced in the discussion, the majority of young participants came to understand the power of voice, the power of a story, and the power of healing through narration and storytelling in general. Organizations and societies could work together to build new healthier societies through learning, events, positive campaigns, reconciliation alerts, and storytelling. They could do this through projects, but also social media. Countries belong to the people, not the government. The government is supposed to employ all efforts so that its people feel safe, secure, and protected – not the opposite.

The discussion further led to ideas about us as individuals – what do we do on a daily basis to improve our societies?

## Conclusions

To conclude, all participants unanimously said that this type of event is very desirable and are looking forward to receiving more invitations from SMOC for such events, as well as other organisations.

There were no tears triggered by strong emotions during the event, however, there were some concerned faces around the room. The importance of **communication skills** was emphasized during the last session. More precisely, how we as individuals communicate our thoughts and experiences to other people. The necessity for non-formal and informal learning is evident in this city and country. When it comes to using storytelling as a tool for conflict resolution, collective trauma or promoting reconciliation, the group didn't address any specific examples. However, they all concluded that this could be a powerful tool for supporting collective trauma healing and reconciliation. They also concluded that everything starts at an individual level and that we should all, every day of our lives, think of how to improve our surroundings/societies when the mentioned topics are at hand.



## ITALY – CESIE



On June 6<sup>th</sup> 2023, a round table was held inside the Santa Chiara church complex in Palermo. During the event, the movie *Freedom Writers* was screened after a general introduction of the Eu-Cares work and context. *Freedom Writers*, which came out in 2007 and was directed by Richard LaGravenese, is based on the true story of the teacher Erin Gruwell and her students. The movie reflects on the importance of education in the fight against gang violence. The screening was followed by a debate on the topics of identity, social divisions, and divisive narratives as well as on integration and reconciliation through storytelling. The participants belonged to different age groups, providing a varied perspective on the topics presented. Moreover, although they were all Italian, some of the participants were from other cities allowing a comparative work in different geographic locations regarding inclusion, polarization, and identity. *Freedom Writers* was deeply appreciated by the attendants and it was perceived to be a transversal movie that can be immediately understood regardless of your social standing and background.

### The discussion

The discussion started with a reflection on the concept of identity and how it can become a divisive factor. Starting from the movie, participants discussed the *us vs. them* narrative and how a strong sense of belonging to a community can become a divisive factor, even in the Italian context. One of the participants mentioned, “Even if the movie is set in the USA and our environment is different, we believe that fractures in our communities are present and deep, in Italy as well as in the city of Palermo.” Following this prompt, another participant stated that, although he was not very aware of different social contexts in Palermo, he knew that these fractures do exist, and they seem to mirror the social background of each individual. In Palermo, social ruptures reflect geographical discontinuities; according to most of the participants, there is a correspondence between social classes and neighbourhoods. In particular, one of the participants highlighted, “As you see in the movie, the students seldom came out of their neighbourhood. When I was little I remember that I would do the same in my middle-class neighborhood. Although it is the opposite thing, the concept stays the same: it’s like living in a bubble. In this sense, Palermo is pretty much like other places”. Another participant (who is not from Palermo) chimed in giving an outsider perspective: “I still have to understand this peculiar characteristic of the city. It’s something that in Rome does not happen, but in Palermo, you can cross the street and everything changes.”

The discussion then focused on the topics of integration, and on how to promote social cohesion and overcome these ruptures within our society. While reflecting on the themes, a participant stated how important the role of schools and teachers is: “Schools should not be places where you just go to get good grades. Schools should open your eyes, give you an opportunity to get a new perspective and be open.” Another participant stressed that integration is a long process, that takes the work of

many generations, while another participant expressed a more pessimistic view stating that “in the real world there is no integration”. However, she was also hopeful that younger generations can do a lot and can truly make a difference in fostering real and long-lasting integration.

Speaking about storytelling as a means for social inclusion and integration, two participants were positive about the potential of such a methodology to foster reconciliation and peace. Referring to the movie, in which students are encouraged to write a journal, one of the participants mentioned that “journaling does not just allow the students to tell their own stories, it also becomes a means that helps to process one's experience, both as an individual and as a collective, as well as to be seen, to bring one closer, to move beyond divisions, as well as a tool for collective memory. Also, storytelling encourages mutual exchange and active listening”. This statement was followed by an evaluation of the therapeutic value of writing to work on self-awareness and dismantle stereotypes, starting with those that are interiorized. We should ask ourselves “Where can I start? What small actions can I take in my daily life to make a change?”

## Conclusions

Finally, the general setting of the roundtable felt harmonious and, despite the different perspectives expressed by each participant, there were some points everybody agreed on. The importance of education is a cross-generational topic and it becomes a starting point for the development of a more inclusive and fair society. Moreover, it gave participants an example of how the inclusion of storytelling in the classroom can constitute an approach that, diverting from traditional methods of teaching, allows the individuals to bring out their full potential and embrace their identity.



## ALBANIA – IRSH



The round table workshop was organized on 26 April 2023, in the Youth Centre “IRSH”. The event lasted for 1 hour and 45 minutes. Mainly young people attended the round-table, including youth workers, journalists and representatives of youth NGOs, hosting a total of 16 people.

### The discussion

The workshop was held according to the agenda which was distributed to all participants. In the beginning, the main goals and activities of the EU project were presented. Then according to the agenda, participants got to know the key findings through the three interviews that were held previously. The round table was moderated by Mr Altin Nika, a psychological expert who was trying to gather from participants their feedback regarding the collective trauma they faced or heard in their lives. One of the participants Mr. Edmond Dibra journalist of Albanian Radio Television stated: “In my life, I am faced with several psychological shocks. My daughter had a car accident and she was nearly to die. Second, my son went on to emigrate and I felt very bad. So maybe the second one is part of collective trauma that we Albanians have faced and we continue to face as far as many parents like me are missing their kids, are living alone and our heart feels empty” Another participant in the workshop Orgesa Troshani, student she said: “The period of COVID was very much shocking, staying at home with connection with classmate and relatives I thought I am living a bad dream without watching the light at the end of the tunnel. During this period I got to know stories from my grandparents who were telling the years of 1997 when the state collapsed and someone they knew was killed almost every day without getting to know who is the enemy”

Participants noted that such topics need to be discussed more and in general the role of the psychologist is very much weak. Indeed, there are many graduates in psychology but for people is not easy to create the right confidence in order to explain in detail what they need. Participants stated that meetings like that and discussions need to be organized more maybe in smaller groups where participants can sincerely tell their problems. Mrs. Mikela Topalli explained that she is very much connected to her grandmother. She said that her grandmother with her storytelling from the past contributed very much to her education. The technique of storytelling could be very much useful but in general, participants are not aware of any organizations working with this technique.



## Conclusions

The event was very useful and the participants looked very much satisfied. The moderation of expert Mr. Altin Nika was very professional and the photos he showed the participants made them active during the workshop and allowed them to give their best. Such an event needs to be followed and create a better connection with young people which needs to be heard. Mrs Luljeta Alibali Social Youth Worker at the Women's Center "Hapat e Lehte" stated that in their organization the victims of domestic families whom they assist in many cases are afraid to talk and is not easy to build the right confidence with them.

The technique of storytelling is very good for making people tell their stories. They have used this technique in their daily work and in most cases it has helped them to get to know better their clients. So in conclusion we would like to state that **more dialogue is needed to be established in order to reconcile conflicts** and overpass situations of shock.



## POLAND – IDEA LAB



The round table event took place at the IDEA LAB Foundation's main office in Wrocław, on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2023 at the IDEA LAB Foundation's main office between 11:00 and 14:00, followed by common lunch. The participants were 17 guests and 3 people from IDEA LAB Foundation's team, with Michał Hermanowicz and Ufuk Bal as moderators. The event was opened by the programme director of IDEA LAB, introducing the foundation's vision and activities dedicated to youngsters in Poland and beyond. The participants were of different ages and profiles, e.g. students, youth workers, activists and professionals from the education sector. Out of them, 13 were residents in the city of Wrocław and 4 came specially to the event from different cities in Poland. The group included participants with migrant backgrounds (from Ukraine and others). The majority of the participants were under 30 years old.

### The discussion

To create a common safe space for the discussion, the event started with a 20-minute long getting-to-know session, where everyone had a chance to introduce themselves and their background. Afterwards, the EU CARES project details and the programme of the round table event were presented to the group by a project manager from the foundation's team, Michał Hermanowicz – The main focus of the round table was defined as *Youth Perspectives on Conflicts and Peace Building*.

The first guest to speak was Dr Dawid Junke from the Institute of Culture Studies at the University of Wrocław. He gave an introduction to the general concept of storytelling and his observations of how it works with young people, particularly university students. This brief presentation was the start of the panel discussion, where each of the participants was encouraged to share their personal experience in order to define the common young people's perspective regarding the topic.

In general, in Polish reality, it was difficult to define the concept of collective trauma, as the participants did not have such strong experience. The other thing is that young people are also not so much interested in looking back into the history and the traumas of previous generations but they prefer and tend to focus on the future. However, the conflict in Ukraine started back in 2014 and migrants started to appear in the society. One of the youngsters said: *Before we could only go to Auschwitz, listen to the terrible war stories from the past, and then go back home and forget about it. We don't have conflicts with our neighbours nowadays, everybody is more aware and we thought something like that would never happen. But now after the war in Ukraine started we see it around us in the streets.* Another participant shared an experience from one of the international projects she attended: *Young people from Ukraine come to Poland, change their surroundings and do not know if they will see their friends again. Once I was on a project, there was a task about fear and there were girls from Ukraine - they*

*were supposed to show their emotions about fear. Each of them said that they feel fear differently, so they perceive life differently. It is very difficult for a young person. Afterwards, she explained: Young people in Poland may now feel more left out because there are so many Ukrainians who are being helped more. But I don't know if it's trauma or more misunderstanding.* This led to the conclusion, that even the young Polish society members do not experience the war trauma directly themselves, they currently witness the Ukrainian trauma which is a different type, but also a traumatic experience.

A participant from Ukraine, who lives and works in Poland, shared her perspective: *Youngsters from Ukraine are facing depression. They don't know what to expect in the future, if they can come back home or if they need to plan their life elsewhere. It's very difficult.* Another one explained how it affects their national identity and feeling of belonging: *Our trauma includes negative and positive effects. A negative one is total hate towards the Russian population, which is basically destroying individuals' mental health and leads to nothing. But a positive one is how Ukrainians became united.* Other participants observed that this could lead to the increment of popularity of nationalist movements, which is a threat and might not have a positive effect itself. In conclusion, additional efforts on trauma healing and the power of storytelling might be needed as a post-conflict humanitarian intervention in Ukraine. The outcomes of this project can be a good start to define best practices for the reconciliation process after the conflict.

## Conclusions

All the participants were happy to have the possibility of openly speaking and sharing their feelings about the conflict. One of them said: *The conflict is all the time around us and it affects everything so much that it's hard even to find a topic where it doesn't appear in the background. We are so saturated that we avoid it, we want to be able to focus on other things, our normal. That's why this space was very useful because we could all speak and be listened to.*

A strong point of the event was the presence of Polish and Ukrainian youth. Many said that just hearing about people affected by the conflict or even passing by anonymous people in the streets is something else than directly meeting people and talking to them as they started to see them not as *Ukrainian* but as specific persons who have their faces and stories.

There is a strong need for direct contact in the era of social media and digital reality. The introduction made by dr. Junke was inspiring and it was noticeable that the participants were interested in the concept and power of storytelling itself. Many declared interest in participating in events regarding storytelling as a tool in the future, which the IDEA LAB Foundation will consider organizing.



## MONTENEGRO – NVO PRIMA



A round table on the topic of *Overcoming collective traumas using storytelling techniques* was held at the EU Resource Centre for Civil Society Organisation, on June 3, 2023.

In total, 21 persons attended the event. The variety of the profiles of participants include different age groups, both male and female participants while only 4 men attended, different ethnic, cultural and political backgrounds. Regarding professional background, participants were students, social workers, psychologists, journalists, peace activities, health workers, and teachers.

The event was moderated by Lidija Brnovic, an external consultant. Approximately three hours were devoted to the event.

## The discussion

The event started with a welcoming speech by Aida Perovic, director of NGO Prima and a short presentation about the objectives of the EU-CARES project, international partners and foreseen activities. This was a typical but good start because participants commented that they hadn't been involved in similar activities for more than a decade.

Participants presented themselves by using metaphorical cards with different sorts of trees, which served to start a discussion about how they feel about their roots at individual, family and societal levels and slowly introduce the main topic.

In the course of a brainstorming session on the collective trauma, the following comments were made:

- *It is what the whole population is affected by when certain things happen;*
- *A condition that affects the further course of life and has a particularly detrimental impact on mental health;*
- *Having a sense of guilt for some turbulent event that we were not present for.*
- *It's been all these years and you're now asking?!*
- *An unsafe environment.*

Participants reacted differently to the topic: those who were older than 35 had more direct experience and shared their own personal stories. It was difficult for some of the youngest participants to articulate their position in relation to the topic, while those engaged in the work of NGOs provided more complex elaboration:

*"I'm 23 years old, and somewhere I saw that if we always stick to that collective, which I would call somewhat schizophrenic, then we can't go anywhere. The first memories I have from elementary school are of children telling weird stories. I didn't hear them at home because my family and I are pretty pacifists, so we didn't care.*

*That's why I always came home with questions, like Why do we keep talking about dark topics, why do we hate each other, I mean, we were only seven years old?! Later, when I decided to work on myself and even started counselling, I realized how much we actually pull from society and the family. No matter how pacifist my family was, sometimes when we come back to those long-ago generations, we realize they're still people who've fought in the wars or were victims of the war and had to migrate."*  
- a male participant, student.

Many participants over the age of 35 reacted emotionally and expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to share their difficult experiences after a long time. One of them provided a comprehensive explanation of the events that shaped collective trauma on the Montenegrin territory.

*"I concluded that the topic we are dealing with today represents a labyrinth from which we are looking for a way out of the traumas we had in previous years and decades, some traumas we acquired and some we inherited. For these inherited traumas, I would not even relate to the period from the Second World War, but even for that period of the Ottoman Empire and that certain period that goes back centuries and that we had the opportunity to absorb quite descriptively, some through literature, some through some narrative that existed in a certain period in our society, as well as from our families where various anecdotes were recounted. There's also the first world war, the Balkan Wars, and the second world war, which is the freshest*

*since we have grandmothers, grandfathers, and parents' testimonies.. And of course there is also the moment of sanctions, bombings and all of that added to all the trauma we grew up with. Because of all this, the labyrinth best associates me with all our wanderings in the system, in society, where you go down one path but come across a closed door, so you try something else, but even those are some limited possibilities. I also wanted to comment on that moment where, on the other hand, for the past couple of decades, we have had a media representation that rather idealizes the situation in which we find ourselves and the system, which does not match what we feel at all. – female participant, social worker.*

- In response to a question about their perception of storytelling as a method of coping with collective trauma, all the participants responded positively. Additionally, the following points were made:
- Storytelling is a valid, creative, and effective method of reaching youth with topics related to collective trauma and reconciliation.
- Storytelling should also be viewed as an educational tool for young people, since not everyone possesses the same background knowledge, information, and experience, and therefore does not perceive identical events in a similar manner.
- The realization of the idea does pose certain risks, including a possibility of unanticipated stress or retraumatization among youth involved in storytelling activities (for example, visiting sites of massacre or museums with sensitive content). There are a number of factors to take into consideration in order to mitigate the risks associated with storytelling, including the specific goals of the story, the target audiences of youth, the messages appropriate to each youth group, and the format that is designed to be youth-friendly.
- Collective trauma work does not have to be psychologically challenging, but it is a safe practice to assess the risks before using a particular storytelling method.
- It is important that those who lead the storytelling process are empathic and well-trained in youth work and trauma work. It is desirable to have a psychologist on the team.

*"It is very important to be aware of who our audience is, i.e. careful selection of the audience and participants is necessary. We have to be aware of how much one can bear..." – male participant, psychologist.*

According to participants, storytelling techniques can help young people of different ethnicities and cultures build empathy and understanding. Possibilities for different storytelling are significant: live libraries, dialogues and panel discussions, storytelling at the location when certain historical experiences occurred, any form of structural dialogue on the topic, etc, participants agree that video forms have remained attractive to the young generation (although today shorter video format are recommended):

"Film/video production is an effective storytelling medium because it presents a living person in front of you through the magic of film image and sound, provoking you to feel emotions, which can trigger some personal trauma, but can also trigger a flash of emotion that will assist the individual in overcoming the trauma." - a male participant, producer.



## Conclusions

Both the project team and participants agreed that the event, including the whole project, was extra relevant. This relevance has significantly increased over the last period of the challenging political situation in the country, including the escalation of conflicts based on various identities while using historical narratives in a severe manner.

Participants and the project team agreed that the event, including the entire project, was exceptionally relevant. The relevance of this issue has significantly increased over the last period of challenging political relations in the country, including the escalation of conflicts based on various identities while using historical narratives with a severe tone.

All participants were proactive and expressed a desire to continue to participate in future dialogues.

The concept of thinking and healing, of ending generational and transgenerational trauma, is powerful, but we do not want to tell young people "You are suffering from trauma, but you are not aware of it, now I am going to assist you". It is important not to blur the line between reality and fiction, but we must acknowledge that young people in disadvantaged socio-economic situations are much more likely to experience trauma, have fewer opportunities to travel, spend quality free time, attend diverse events, and participate in dialogues. Furthermore, they should be key factors and indispensable actors in telling stories and using other techniques that contribute to healing and reconciliation, since their experiences are different, their traumas are more severe, and their consequences are more widespread.



## SERBIA – CENTRIFUGE



A round table on the topic of *Overcoming collective traumas using storytelling techniques* was held at the elementary school "Rudovci" on March 16, 2023, which is located in a rural area near Lazarevac, where the head office of NGO Centrifuge is.

Approximately 20 people attended the meeting. The group was diverse as attendees were from different age groups, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and diverse professional orientations. The discussion was highly productive as almost all the attendees participated. The conversation lasted two hours (from 5 pm to 7 pm).

The moderator of the discussion was Marija Djokovic, the president of NGO Centrifuge. During the presentation of the project and as introduced in the agenda of the meeting, key findings of interviews with youth workers and experts in collective trauma, reconciliation, and conflict transformation were presented by Ivana Radojicic, a youth worker who participated in one of the interviews.

### The discussion

Based on the discussion at the Round Table, three main discussion landmarks were singled out: 1) the understanding of collective trauma, 2) the importance of storytelling techniques and 3) conclusions.

1) Collective trauma was understood as a response to any traumatic event that affects society and is often increased in the moment of some crisis. It can lead to questioning the core values of the society. The experience of collective trauma can be long-lasting and have significant effects on individuals and communities. The participants of the Round Table believe that several events in Serbia negatively affected young people in many ways.

2) Storytelling techniques can play a significant role in resolving collective trauma and promoting reconciliation among young people in Europe. By sharing their stories, young people can promote empathy, understanding, and a sense of shared humanity. Storytelling can facilitate healing and resilience-building, promote dialogue and trust-building, and create a shared narrative of the past. Overall, storytelling techniques can provide a safe and supportive environment for young people to share their experiences and work toward healing and reconciliation.

Some of the participants witnessed war and younger ones were exposed to different narratives from their parents, schools, media, and environment. War was not the only collective trauma mentioned during the meeting, Corona pandemic was one of the biggest traumatic experiences in the recent past and for some participants, the lockdown during the pandemic triggered some unpleasant memories from before.

3) The most compelling stories or narratives to support young people in healing collective trauma and working toward reconciliation would be those that promote



empathy, understanding, and a sense of shared humanity. These stories should focus on the commonalities between different communities, rather than reinforcing stereotypes or divisive narratives.

Narratives that acknowledge past wrongdoings and explore different perspectives can also be effective, as they help to create a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of history. Additionally, stories that emphasize resilience, hope, and empowerment can be beneficial for young people who have experienced trauma, as they offer a sense of agency and a way forward. It is also important to recognize the diversity of experiences and perspectives within communities affected by collective trauma.

One of the participants especially highlighted the “War Childhood Museum” in Sarajevo as an example of a place where stories are treasured that represent a range of voices and experiences as an invaluable resource in contributing to promoting dialogue and trust-building and ensuring that different viewpoints are heard and valued.

During the meeting, the age gap brought to light a different understanding of the term trauma. Most representatives of the older generation denied the fact that they went through trauma and took a disparaging stand when some of the younger participants expressed how the war in Ukraine makes them feel uncertain and apprehensive about their future, thus in a sense traumatized. They were a bit intrusive towards young people expressing their feelings connected to wars that are occurring. Most representatives of the older generation did not use assertive ways of communication and it created somewhat uncomfortable situations for some of the younger participants.

Representatives of the older generation who witnessed war had a challenge opening up and sharing their experiences. By the end of the meeting, they felt comfortable enough to share. The process of the meeting was brought out in a constructive way, where most of the participants had the chance to express their feelings and through the discussion, they shared that they had personal learning points. It is important to have a safe space for discussing these topics and to empower young people to do so. There is a need for the creation of new narratives about past events that are confirmed by reliable sources. Communities and organizations can foster inclusivity and diversity by creating opportunities for a range of voices and perspectives to be heard.

## Conclusions

From our point of view, the meeting went well. Participants contributed and had a chance to express their feelings and attitudes toward the topic. Even with some disagreements among participants, they were open to discussing and sharing. The overall opinion of the participants is that storytelling techniques can be useful for overcoming collective traumas. They advocated for a society that promotes critical thinking and does not suppress genuine thoughts, where socially desirable truths do not dominate.

A few of the younger participants were very interested in the topic and expressed a

desire to be included in the future activities of the project and our organization.

Some of the conclusions from the meeting:

- *Every new potentially traumatic event re-triggers our traumas.*
- *Trauma is like a physical injury that has not adequately healed and every time someone touches it, the same pain that we felt at the time of the injury returns (participants paraphrased Gabor Mate).*
- *Keeping quiet about the problem is not the solution.*



## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA – PERPETUUM MOBILE



PERPETUUM MOBILE  
Institute for Youth and Community Education

A round table on the topic "Overcoming collective traumas using storytelling techniques" was held at the Banja Luka Youth Center on April 25, 2023. About 20 young people, mostly high school students, attended the event. The conversation lasted two hours (from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.), which indicates the fruitfulness of the discussions in which almost everyone present participated. The moderator of the discussion was Dr. Jagoda Petrović, professor of the Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of Social Work.

In addition to the young people who gathered, Dr. Selma Porobić, doctor of psychological sciences, employed at the University of Palacky in the Czech Republic, who deals with issues of trauma, especially in cases of migration, attended the Round Table. She took an active part in the conversation, and together with the moderator encouraged the discussion and gave constructive clarifications.

Also, Spasoje Kulaga, president of the Association "Pravipožar", an association that gathers war veterans of the former three armies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was present.

### The discussion

Based on the discussion at the round-table, three parts were singled out: the understanding of collective trauma, the importance of storytelling techniques and conclusions.

"Collective trauma" is a term used to explain the phenomenon when a community is exposed to existentially threatening events, due to which most of its members are subject to chronic traumatization. The participants of the Round Table believe that various events in BiH adversely affect young people.

Many are dealing with the effects of cumulative personal and collective psychological traumas, which were caused by the war events of several decades ago, inflation and economic difficulties, and the "new normal" of life with the virus.

During the conversation, they singled out the impact of war events (1992-1995), but also different interpretations of war, which creates confusion and awareness among young people about life in a "divided country".

Young people are exposed to different "narratives" from the environment. Above all, they are subject to the view of reality offered to them by their parents. As participants or witnesses of war events, they convey to young people their opinions about the course and outcome of the war in accordance with the opinion of the majority of one side. Thus, the "three majority opinions" in Bosnia and Herzegovina hinder the formation of objective knowledge. Within formal education, information is scarce. According to the opinions of one group of Round Table participants, this leaves room

for tendentious explanations. One of the interlocutors believes that it is good that schools do not teach much about the recent war past from one (national) perspective until a mutually acceptable narrative is constructed over time.

"Young people are selfish," one of the participants points out. He believes that they are not interested in what happens to other people and the collective (community). Since man is a social being, losing a sense of community can be the beginning of various problems, including mental ones.

Young people "merge" with the opinion of the majority, because it's easier that way. "It's nice to be the majority," says the poet, but viewpoints that deviate from the established ones are important for bringing about change. That's why, according to one of the participants, young people need to develop critical thinking. The "intersection" of different narratives contributes to this. An example of such practice is the activities of the Association "Pravipožar", which promotes peacemaking by offering authentic stories of war participants from the former three armies in BiH to public opinion (constructive use of veteran experience).

Politics and the media influence the creation of opinions and attitudes. Young people are offered stories that are often full of problems and become part of their identity. Constant tensions about the danger of war and real problems (e.g. unemployment) among young people produce feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and/or fear of the future.

Storytelling techniques contribute to overcoming collective trauma and promoting reconciliation among young people, all participants agreed. From their presentations, some of the reasons can be singled out:

- by bringing one's own experience to the surface, one avoids "pushing problems under the carpet" and accumulation of dissatisfaction;
- when life stories are externalized and made conscious, the trauma is alleviated and/or eliminated, and thus the hostile attitude towards the environment;
- by listening to authentic stories, other people's experiences can be understood, and then more flexible narratives can be created;
- prejudices about the "other and different" are broken, thus opening a channel for communication, understanding and coexistence;
- stereotypes are broken, critical thinking is encouraged and an authentic experience of reality is developed;
- egoism, based on exclusivity in relation to the social environment, is mitigated;
- empathy develops, by supplementing the motto "I was taught to love my own and respect others" with "I empathize with others";
- a sense of community is maintained and developed, as a condition for the functioning of society and the psychological stability of the individual.

## Conclusions

The participants contributed to the successful realization of the Round Table with a constructive presentation and open presentation of their opinions. They expressed a

critical attitude towards reality and advocated for a healthy society. In such a society, socially desirable truths should not "suffocate" authentic thinking.

With their inspired discussions, young people showed their motivation for building such a society.

They consider storytelling techniques useful for overcoming collective trauma.

Based on their productive discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Speaking from different perspectives should be part of peace education.;
- Young people are aware that solutions do not come by themselves, but can only be realized through the initiation of activities in the community;
- Young people can be initiators of change, with the provision that they first change the way of understanding the environment, but also themselves;
- Narrative techniques contribute to freedom from collective traumatization, but also to training for creating a better reality - one in which traumatic events will be minor;
- The resources needed by young people to effectively use storytelling as a means of resolving collective trauma and promoting reconciliation are currently mostly in the informal sphere. These are: activities of civil society organizations, educational workshops, meetings of young people of different beliefs and commitments. These resources should be made available to young people who live in unfavorable socio-economic circumstances.



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