

The University Students: Challenging the Status Quo, Doing Their Part for Peace

Proposed Project and Objective:

My work experience with the Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo and my active involvement with DIALOGUE as well as the Americans for Informed Democracy (AID) at Earlham, have helped me develop a model for facilitating dialogue between two ethnic communities. Through small group and then larger group engagements, I hope to apply this model as a means of executing face-to-face video-conferences (VC) between university students of Serbia and Albanian students of Kosovo. The goal of this project is to bring the youth of both places closer by engaging them in formal and informal dialogue that addresses all kinds of differences as a means of accomplishing more understanding and education about one another's views and positions on ethnic conflict, politics and future relations. Through dialogue, I believe, communication between the parties involved will become easier and cooperation will strengthen.

Background of the Situation:

Following the recent conflict in Kosovo (1999) the relationships between Serbians and Kosovar Albanians have not improved. To the contrary they have worsened. Such a sad reality is prevalent partly due to lack of communication between the two communities, and partly because the understanding of one another (views and beliefs) is weak and deteriorating.

Factors that significantly shape this divide, despite the recent conflict, are the lack of common language, biased and propagandistic media (at times driven by the governments), different historical narratives (education based on nationalist views), politicized religion (used to enhance sense of nationalism, therefore ethnocentrism). Essentially, both sides are exposed to a one-sided reality.

As a result, the younger generations of both communities have grown further apart from each other. The perspective for co-existence and cooperation looks bleak. Hence, I propose to engage university students in dialogue with one another via live face-to-face video-conferences.

Why University Students

The many attempts to involve different age groups to promote dialogue between the two communities have been successful only on a small scale. At an adult level, politicians as representatives of the two groups, Kosovo and Serbia, have been unsuccessful in their attempts to engage with one another in dialogue. Political pressure and party interests among others have not given our politicians the chance to cooperate. On the other hand, international organization initiatives have brought teens from both groups together to engage in dialogue; however this has been effective on a personal level only. These attempts have been useful but not successful. It is clear to me that we need a new model.

I believe dialogue will be most effective in a student to student level. University students are intellectually free, passionate for change and willing to take risks. Also, the university students are those who will be taking power in the next 10-20 years, and they thus represent the most immediate prospect for change and transformation of the larger society.

In addition, the role of university students in Kosovo and Serbia has historically been crucial throughout the periods of instability in the region. While Kosovo youth led the resistance against the Serbian government, the youth of Serbia organized and mobilized the campaign to bring down the former dictator of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic. They were both successful in their respective places; however they have not come together yet to work on lowering the barriers of ethnic hatred. With this project, I intend to initiate dialogue between Serbian and Albanian (Kosovar) students who are open and willing to cooperate with one another. This will seek to develop the role of the youth in peacemaking.

As with any new idea, this project will be a challenge. Many people will express discontent and some might even try to prevent it from happening. Yet university students that I have contacted have expressed passion and support for it. We are ready to take on the challenge.

Smaller Group Engagement, June 20th – June 30th, 2007

- The primary goal is to bring twelve students and myself (12 +1), six from each community, in a semi-neutral place (Montenegro), where we could engage in intimate dialogue with one another and build interpersonal trust. Dialogue at this level will be a practice and part of the development/preparation for the larger VC conversations.
- The selection criteria of those 12 students will be primarily based on their passion and willingness to work with other communities; applicants will write an essay on the role of youth in cross-community cooperation. The language of work and activities will be English.
- Applications will be posted on a website that will be established for the sole purpose of this project. Facebook.com groups such as the Serbian students, Independence for Kosovo, etc, will receive invitations to apply; also will seek to advertise locally.
- For 10 days the participants will live together, share rooms and engage in collective activities (i.e. cooking, themed activities, house chores, etc). By living together, they will manage to gain a larger sense of tolerance, intimacy, education and understanding of one another.
- Meanwhile, they will have the task of developing a means of peer-to-peer training on how to facilitate dialogue in larger groups. In this way the group will be able to gain intellectual capabilities to organize the larger event that will involve wider participation and audience. They will also serve as coordinators for their institutions in their respective places.
- The peer-to-peer training will not be organized nor led by any expert of dialogue and facilitation. This is mainly due to several reasons: a) Hiring a local expert from either of the places will add a sense of biasness; an expert from one place cannot teach participants of the other place how to engage in dialogue; b) bringing a third person, a national of another country, will be another attempt to allow the outsiders to teach us how to deal with one another; and c) it will be costly.
- The goal of the peer-to-peer training will be to find out how a home grown group can create things together from scratch. This will be an attempt to establish an alternative idea for dialogue, which can then set a precedent for communities all around.

Larger Group Engagement, the July 10th, 2007 Live Video-Conference Event

- After the ten-day experience, the original group (six from Kosovo and six from Serbia) will organize a live video-conference event between the University of Belgrade and that of Prishtina.
- I project that each site will have fifteen participants (thirty total) and a larger number of observers. They will be recruited and selected by the team of six in their respective institutions.
- Of the twelve original participants, in each site, two will serve as facilitators, two will work on logistics, and the other two will join the panel of fifteen. This will be on a rotating basis.
- First there will be a closed-door trial run of the live video conference dialogue session, immediately followed by a public one. This way we can minimize the problems that might arise during the latter.
- The topic of discussion will be decided by the original group. Also, the format will develop during the ten-day peer-to-peer training. In addition, a document of the process will be produced.

Factors for Success

- World Bank offices in Kosovo and Serbia have agreed to allow me to use their facilities (see appendix).
- American's For Informed Democracy has promised intellectual and logistical support (see appendix).
- Networking I have done through Facebook.com and other means of internet use have allowed me to identify Serbian counterparts who are passionate about the initiative.
- My experiences and lessons at the Office of the Prime Minister, engagement with Dialogue and AID have given me a great deal of confidence that this project is possible.

The Possibilities for Post Project Continuum

- I envision that the original group of twelve will continue to be involved in promoting dialogue even after the project is finished. Depending on the project's popularity and success, additional resources from civil society development funds, I plan to encourage a continuation of trans-boundary dialogue. I also hope to connect with universities from other countries through Americans for Informed Democracy.