

Chapter 9

Structured Encounters in Post-conflict/Post-Yugoslav Days: Visiting Belgrade and Prishtina

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Introduction

In the past decade, an extensive number of publications have analyzed the Kosovo conflict, the declaration of independence, as well as the international presence in Kosovo. Often, when analyzing the conflict in Kosovo, more attention is given to the territory itself than to the people living in Kosovo and Serbia. While political processes and politicians are in the media and policy analysis spotlight, everyday realities and peoples' lives in Kosovo are often overlooked or forgotten. In the same line, on going local civic initiatives as part of transitional justice processes aiming to transform the conflict relations between citizens of Kosovo and Serbia were not systematically studied and analyzed.

This chapter therefore looks at meetings and projects initiated and facilitated by local civil society groups with the purpose of generating exchange between young people from Serbia proper and from Kosovo. I here refer to such meetings as to *structured encounters* and focus my analysis on meetings taking place between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs from Serbia proper in the form of the *Visiting Program*, a project initiated and facilitated by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), a Belgrade and Prishtina-based NGO. My aim here is not to offer a description of the project, but rather to offer a glimpse into what it generates: exchange of perceptions and firsthand experiences between young people from Kosovo and Serbia in relation to the recent war in Kosovo, the past relations and the present state of affairs.

The chapter analyzes the possible contribution of such a program as the *Visiting Program*, to the transformation of relations between Serbs and Albanian, in the context of transitional justice processes enhancing civic engagement and civic identities of young people in Kosovo and Serbia. It acknowledges and highlights the

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shift in power relations that has occurred between Serbia and Kosovo as consequence of the 1999 international intervention. I understand this shift as crucial in reshaping intergroup relations inside Kosovo and between Kosovo and Serbia.

It is often argued that war tends to polarize and reduce the space where people can debate freely. Yet paradoxically war also tends to promote civil society and groups formed in reaction to it (Kaldor, Kostovicova and Said 2006, p.94). A number of liberal civil society groups were indeed established in Serbia early on during the wars of the 1990s.¹ Other groups were only formed later, in the aftermath of the wars, as it became clear that the regime change in Belgrade in October 2000 did not lead to the abolishment of the legacy of the Milošević regime (Fridman 2011, p.518). The YIHR was formed in that context in 2003 in Belgrade.²

Since its foundation, YIHR has become a regional NGO with programs in Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia. It was formed by young people from these countries in order to enhance youth participation in the democratization of society and empowerment of the rule of law by driving the processes of facing the past and establishing new progressive connections in the post-conflict region of the former Yugoslavia. The *Visiting Program* started in 2004, as an exchange program for journalists between Serbia and Kosovo and later developed into a broader exchange program for young people of various profiles from Serbia and Kosovo (Visiting Program 2006, p.47).

The *Visiting Program* is here analyzed in the context of bottom up approaches not only to transitional justice but also to peacebuilding and social change as generated by civil society groups. The concept of transitional justice is commonly understood as a framework for confronting past abuse as a component of a major political transformation that involves complementary judicial and nonjudicial strategies (Bickford 2004, p.1045). In this chapter, my interest is primarily in transitional justice in the context of conflict transformation and peacebuilding after armed conflict and less on its initial use in the context of societies transitioning from undemocratic regimes (Lambourne 2009, p.29).³ The literature on peacebuilding points at the importance of and the need to transform relationship between people in addition to ending the state of war and violence between them (Lederach 2007). For such transformation to take place and remain sustainable, it must be based on recognition of the particular culture and conflict context and the effective participation of civil society (ibid, p.20). Based on this understanding, the model of *transformative justice* was developed proposing a focus on civil society participation in the design and implementation of transitional justice mechanisms

¹ For a discussion distinguishing between anti-war and anti-Milošević activism in Serbia in the 1990s see (Fridman 2011). The distinction between civil and uncivil society groups is also important in this context (Kopecky and Mudde 2003; Kostovicova 2010, pp.289–290).

² The fall of Milošević paradoxically also led to the proliferation of uncivil society and ultra nationalist groups in Serbia promoting illiberal ideologies, including anti-Semitism, xenophobia and racism (Kostovicova 2010, p.290).

³ For additional discussion regarding developments and scholarly trends in the field of transitional justice see for example (Teitel 2003; McEvoy 2007).

(Lambourne 2009, p.35). Others have used the term *transitional justice from below* to denote a “resistant” or “mobilizing” character to the actions of community, civil society, and other non-state actors in their opposition to powerful hegemonic political, social, or economic forces (McEvoy and McGregor 2008, p.3).⁴

In discussing structured encounters as the *Visiting Program* in the context of the current Kosovo–Serbia frozen relations (or frozen conflict), I here highlight the need for scholarly analysis of such projects “from below” and explore their potential to become transformative. From that point of view, this chapter contributes to literature already analyzing the Dealing with the Past processes in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia in an encompassing manner (Franović 2008; Subotić 2009; Dragović-Soso and Gordy 2011).

Structured and Unstructured Daily Encounters: The Broader Frame

This chapter is part of a larger and broader research project comparing structured encounters such as the *Visiting Program*, with daily *unstructured encounters* referring to encounters between Albanians and Serbs from Kosovo. Given the limited length of this chapter, I here present the analysis of the structured encounters portion of the research only. In the larger frame of this research project, in addition to analyzing the *Visiting Program*, I also analyze unstructured encounters between Serbs and Albanians from Kosovo, from the point of view of Serbs who remained in Kosovo after 1999 and attempt to interact and part take in public and social life, in what is now an Albanian space. Such interactions are almost nonexistent as Serb communities in Kosovo are segregated and disconnected from the newborn state. Yet they do take place on a small scale. The analysis of the unstructured daily encounters focuses on three chosen sites of daily encounters: (a) the American University in Kosovo (AUK) campus in Prishtina; (b) work spaces, mostly of international organizations in Prishtina; and (c) the Albanian side of the Merdare border crossing between Serbia and Kosovo, controlled by local Kosovar Albanian forces (Fridman 2009). By analyzing and contrasting these two types of encounters, structured and unstructured, I attempt to shed light on hidden practices and exchanges between ordinary citizens, at times away from the spotlight of the international actors and policy analyzers.

In focusing on Serb–Albanian intergroup relations and highlighting the issue of power relations, I do not claim that this is a region torn between Serbs and Albanians only, nor do I wish to oversimplify other existing divisions and issues in Kosovo’s population and societies today or ignore the rich history of other communities in

⁴For additional literature analyzing such processes see (Shaw and Waldorf 2010; Hinton 2010). I thank Olivera Simić for introducing me to these texts. For a discussion about transitional justice mechanism and truth telling to ensure a real political engagement and agency to a population that has been subject to violent conflict see (Lundy and McGovern 2008).

Kosovo (Duijzings, 2003).⁵ I do, however, focus my study here on Serb–Albanian relations in the context of the new post-Yugoslav realities, and more specifically, the realities created after June 1999.

The literature about Serb–Albanian relations in Kosovo mostly captures relationships defined by conflict and victimization, competing narratives of the past, animosity, and ongoing state of crisis (Zdravković-Zonta 2009; Zirojević 2000). The aim of this research is to uncover additional forms of relations existing today, resulting on one hand from everyday needs (and from the change in the power relations) (*unstructured daily encounters*), and on the other hand from civil society initiatives (*structured encounters*) that may offer an additional perspective and shed light on possibilities for transformation of current and future models of relationships.

About the Research

My interest in studying these issues in Serbia and Kosovo stemmed from my former experiences in Israel during the 1990s, first as a participant and later as a facilitator of political encounters between Israelis and Palestinians. The impact this work had on my political and social awareness and therefore my approach to the field of peace and conflict studies was and still is invaluable as it shaped my understanding of the internal dynamics of societies in conflict, group dynamics, and work towards transitional justice and conflict transformation. Seeing the similarities and differences between the dynamics of groups from the Middle East and the Balkans has sparked my interest in learning and writing about encounters in the post-Yugoslav context.

While the topic of structured facilitated encounters between Israelis and Palestinians was well researched in the last decades and generated a solid body of literature (Bekerman 2007; Maoz 2000; Sonnenschein 2008) and pedagogical discussions and debates,⁶ publications analyzing similar work and issues in the context

⁵ In *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, Duijzings captures realities... that in many ways no longer exist in Kosovo after 1999. I particularly think of the author's postscript comment in the Preface, as he explains that his manuscript was finalized before the start of the NATO actions against Serbia and therefore were not included at his account: "although these developments have put my work in a completely different light, I could not include them in my account. It is sad that this book now bears testimony to a world that may have ceased to exist" (Duijzings 2000, p.12).

⁶ By pedagogical discussion I refer for example to debates among practitioners and educators in encounters between Israelis and Palestinians who over the years have come to criticize the "contact hypotheses" model of encounters. This model assumes that the act of bringing together people who belong to groups that are in conflict, cutting them off from their group affiliations, and introducing participants on a personal basis, can reduce both their alleged hatred for one another and the stereotypes they have about each other. Such an approach was highly criticized by some practitioners as it became clear that such encounters, not only disregard the controversial issues that are in the heart of the conflict, but also generate the same inequalities existing in the realities from which participants are coming, and therefore depoliticize the encounter and the issues between them. Approaching such encounters as political education offers an approach that understands any of such encounters to be a mean for political/social change, and not an aim in of itself (Halabi and Sonnenschein 2004).

of the post-Yugoslav conflicts are scarce. In that sense, this chapter aims to broaden the literature and discussions on encounters in the context of today's post-Yugoslav states looking at Kosovo–Serbia in particular.

In the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, all educational and encounter projects, dealing with the recent wars of the 1990s and their legacies, are initiated and implemented solely by civil society actors/groups, absent from official curriculums of state institutions. Leading actors in prominent civil society groups frame their work in the pedagogical lenses of what is generally referred to as to the “Dealing with the Past Project” theoretically leaning on transitional justice models of peacebuilding and reconciliation (Rangelov and Teitel 2011).⁷ Projects of encounters between Serbs and Albanians were not thoroughly researched by social scientists, nor were they analyzed through the lenses of understanding groups in conflict or the political aspect/impact of group encounters. While descriptive materials of projects implementation are available (Nansen Center for Dialogue 2007), analysis and discussion of the pedagogical approaches to work with groups in conflict or of the impact this work has in shaping participants' perspectives towards the past and the present, as well as their civic engagement is limited. In that sense, this chapter may also offer a bridge between literature analyzing bottom up approaches to transitional justice processes and literature focusing on peacebuilding and education for peace in the context of conflict transformation. As Lambourne suggested “analyzing and evaluating transitional justice in terms of its contribution to peacebuilding enables a more holistic perspective that takes into account the expectations of conflict participants, as well as links between dealing with the past and building peace for the future” (2009, p.29).

Based on the materials and data collected for this project, I here discuss not only structured encounters such as the *Visiting Program* and their impact, but more so, I generate a discussion on what else can such encounters tell us about the post-Yugoslav conflicts, and the related experiences and perceptions they generate. Given the limited scope of this chapter, my discussion will not focus on analyzing the pedagogical aspects of this work, but rather, it will focus on its contribution to our understanding of the conflicts, their legacies today, and the way they shaped Serb–Albanian relations.

The data collected and analyzed for this project comprises general observations and informal conversation I began to have from my very first visit to Kosovo and more than a decade ago, and culminated in two main phases of field research that took place from 2009 to 2011 and included: (a) interviews conducted in Belgrade and Prishtina with young participants of the *Visiting Program* from Serbia and

⁷ Most of the available work and the writings focus on the triangle of Serbia-Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, not including Kosovo. See for example (Franović 2008). The work of the Center for Non-Violent Action (*Centar za nenasilnu akciju* (CNA)) with former combatants is framed in terms of Peace Education (Vukosavljević 2007). An exception to that is a text about the work of the Nansen Center (Steinar 2011).

Kosovo as well as with the organizers from the Youth Initiative offices in both cities⁸; (b) participant observation of the *Visiting Program* itself.⁹

Structured Encounters

I approach structured encounters as the *Visiting Program* as a matter of choice, rather than the result of everyday needs or the necessities of life (as in the case of the unstructured daily encounters). Such meetings and projects are initiated and facilitated by local as well as international groups and organizations to generate exchange and interactions between young participants from Kosovo and Serbia proper who otherwise would not have the opportunity to meet each other as equals or to interact directly.

Such encounters should be understood in light (or in the shadow) of the reality of a deepening disconnect between Belgrade and Prishtina. The two cities and their populations seem to be miles away from each other, with barriers and distance that only grow, as the conflict remains frozen. Even though an official dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina started again in late 2010, it has not yet generated any sense of change. On the contrary, official statements of politicians continue to create an atmosphere of unwillingness to transform the conflict, or the relationships it has generated over the past decades.¹⁰

Even if occurring on a small scale, structured encounters between activists, educators, and artists who believe in the importance of generating open lines of communication and exchange between the two capitals despite the general atmosphere of stagnation and conflict—may shed light on some links still existing between Belgrade and Prishtina, its populations, their pasts and futures, in spite of lack of will for change among politicians.¹¹

One platform of such exchange takes place on Radio-Free Europe, in its program *Most* (Bridge) hosted by Omer Karabeg. The program has initiated a series of dialogues between prominent individuals from Serbia and Kosovo on the question of “how to unfreeze Serbia-Kosovo relations.” On January 5, 2009, Karabeg’s interlocutors were two writers: Migjen Kelmendi in Prishtina and Vladimir Arsenijević

⁸ While the visits and interviews took place in Belgrade and Prishtina, some participants were born and raised in other towns or cities in Kosovo and Serbia, but currently attend universities and reside in the capitals.

⁹ The data collected for the unstructured daily encounters portion of the project also includes interviews conducted in Prishtina and Gračanica with young Serbs from Kosovo working or studying in Prishtina and daily crossing imaginary borders by entering the city.

¹⁰ See for example in the interview with the chief negotiator of the Serbian team upon his return from Brussels from negotiations with the Kosovar team who referred to Albanians as to “people from another planet” in an interview on Blic daily newspaper (Spaić 2011).

¹¹ See for example transcripts available from a seminar that took place in Prishtina in 2008, titled: “Cultural Policies as Crises Management?” (Heta and Osmani 2008).

in Belgrade (Belgrade is a Far Away Place for Albanians from Kosovo 2009).¹² The exchange between the authors was far more political and direct than any of the structured or unstructured encounters I have observed thus far. They were free to talk about real issues with a high level of self-confidence and self-criticism. Additionally, they were not bound by the language of the international community, in the sense of using the paradigm of multiethnicity and multiethnic society—a discourse that does not leave much room for meaningful/open discussion on issues of the past as well as the present.¹³ In this exchange, the two writers spoke as equals, as two statesmen from their capital cities of Belgrade and Prishtina and no longer as the oppressor and the oppressed.

While the recognition of Kosovo's independence is experienced as a direct threat reinforcing the fears among many Serbs in Kosovo, for Arsenijević from his perspective as a Belgradian the declaration of Kosovo's independence has created “the first serious basis for a complete re-definition of Serb-Albanian relations, and thus for a new future” (Belgrade is a Far Away Place for Albanians from Kosovo). Such redefinition takes place in the interactions between young Kosovar Albanians and Serbs from Serbia Proper, as part of YIHR's *Visiting Program*. In this case, the change in power relations that occurred in 1999 offers the possibility for an encounter between equal citizens from Serbia and Kosovo, unlike the oppressive relations that existed prior to 1999.

Sites of Structured Encounter: The *Visiting Program*

The *Visiting Program* began in 2004 as an exchange program for journalists between Serbia and Kosovo, later developing into a broader exchange program for young people of various profiles from Serbia and Kosovo. The aim of the program is to “tear down the ‘wall’ between the Kosovo and Serbian societies, in order to enable young people to see the actual situation and social changes in Serbia and Kosovo through the direct experience of life in Pristina/Belgrade” (YIHR website). The program also aims to “connect (young people) with their peers ‘from the other side,’ meeting people with similar interests and establishing new relations and

¹² Karabeg also published his conversations between Albanians and Serbs (Karabeg 2000).

¹³ The shift in the asymmetry of power relations in Kosovo has created a new reality on the ground, which culminated in Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008. However, much of the discourse on intergroup relations in Kosovo, shaped by the massive presence of the international community, is frequently reduced to the term *inter-ethnic society*, a phrase which in my opinion is emptied of the political context of minority-majority relations and identities whose power relations have been reversed. Terms such as *inter-ethnic society* and *inter-ethnic cooperation* shape meetings hosted by international organizations, constitute structured and planned facilitated encounters between local politicians as they focus on an open discussion that may “encourage cooperation on non-status issues ... and provide assistance in building a stronger multi-ethnic society in Kosovo” (Strengthening Interethnic Political Dialogue in (Kosovo 2008)). My question here is can such encounters help address the issues stemming from the change in power relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo?

communication between the two societies” (Visiting Program 2006).¹⁴ Finally, the *Visiting Program* aims to establish a network of young people with various interests who will remain involved in civic activism (ibid).

Visits usually last for 3 days and the agenda of the visits is created according to the interests and wishes of the participants, with different areas of interest: from visits to institutions, political parties, universities, local non-governmental organizations, museums, media houses, etc. In the discussion that follows I will address and analyze some of the dynamics and experiences of this program. I focus on differences in the aims and motivations between participants from Serbia choosing to visit Prishtina and participants from Kosovo who choose to visit Belgrade (often for the very first time), as well as differences in the motivations and experiences of organizers and participants.

The Ride from/to Prishtina and Belgrade and the Border Control

The participants of the *Visiting Program* use the Belgrade-Prishtina-Gračanica route, operated by a privately owned Gračanica-based company. In many cases, the participants do not know each other prior to the start of the program, and meet for the first time at the departure meeting point.¹⁵ For those traveling to Belgrade or Prishtina for the first time, much remains unknown, and hesitation or even fear may color the start of their journey. These fears however are *not* similar.

The Belgrade participants going to Kosovo may at times keep their participation a secret from their immediate family and friends, worried about a general disapproval. Often the trip to the unknown is accompanied with hesitation about what it will be like in Prishtina. Will it be safe? Will they be able to speak in Serbian or will they need to conceal their Serbian identity and speak in English only?

For the Prishtina participants, visiting Belgrade primarily means traveling to a big city. While these participants also express concerns about safety, their fear as related to crossing the border is more specific. It is related to the fear of facing the Serbian border police, and men in Serbian uniform again. As some interviewees put it, this was the first time, since the end of the war that they encountered again the Serbian uniform. Such an experience immediately recalls painful memories from the 1990s, flashbacks from the war and harsh feelings. They are all of an age to clearly remember the war, to remember how they were forced to leave their houses by Serbian armed men. This was a theme that arose in all the interviews I conducted

¹⁴ According to the organizers, more than a thousand young people, students, activists, journalists and professionals from various fields have gone through the Visiting Program, and for all of them it was the first time they saw Belgrade, Prishtina and later Sarajevo.

¹⁵ The Prishtina meeting point for the departure to Belgrade is Hotel Victory, while the Belgrade meeting point of departure to Prishtina is the train station. This is set in accordance with the existing Belgrade-Prishtina-Gračanica line.

with youngsters from Prishtina who visited Belgrade through the *Visiting Program*. In the words of one of them:

in the border we saw the police, they reminded us of when we last saw the police in our streets ... at that time I was scared. When I saw them at the border I was not scared but I remembered that bad time ... I have strong memories of the Serbian police in Prishtina ... I was ten years old when the police came to our house and ordered us to go out ... we then had to leave to the train station and on our way [to Macedonia] they were maltreating us ... the police, uniforms and flags of Serbia, all make me feel unsafe (Interview with the author, Prishtina, June 30, 2011).

Indeed for the young participants from Prishtina, the border is an important reminder of the past inequalities as well as of the former power relations when Kosovo was under the control of the Serbian police.

The bus rides I joined in both directions revealed some of the existing gaps between the participants from Belgrade and from Prishtina. From either direction, approaching the border generates some loud silence among the passengers; conversations now take place in lower voices or grind to a complete halt. The distance of Belgrade from Kosovo reveals and emphasizes the lack of knowledge of the situation in Kosovo by ordinary people in Serbia. The daily news coverage from Kosovo in Serbia mostly emphasizes contested issues and violence, with barely any reference to Kosovo as a place where life has continued to develop since 1999, or as a place of normality. Even though Belgrade is covered with graffiti stating that “Kosovo je srce Srbije” (“Kosovo is the heart of Serbia”), most people (especially younger generation) have never been to Kosovo and in fact have very little interest in going there. As one of the visiting program organizers explained: “the majority of young people in Serbia are completely ignorant towards Kosovo and Prishtina, they truly do not care about it, do not want to think about it ...” (Interview with the author, Belgrade, July 15, 2009).

Though program participants are clearly more curious than their peers, they too lack current knowledge of what they can expect. On the road to Prishtina, I noticed that some of the participants were not quite sure who will check their document at the border (internationals or local Kosovo police) or what the procedure will be like. Is there a border at the administrative line? If so, who is in control of it? This lack of knowledge in my understanding contributes to a sense of fear, nervousness or simply lack of interest to go. As a result, Kosovo’s independence, and the recognition or lack of recognition of its independence, seems like a distant idea in the hands of politicians, detached from the lives of ordinary people.

For the young Albanian participants on their way to Belgrade, much more is known about Serbia and unlike for Serbs going to Prishtina, recognizing Serbia’s independence and its sovereignty is not in question. The encounter with the Serbian border police after crossing the Albanian side of the border generates some tension and discomfort. On the ride that I joined, the policemen instructed all passengers with other documents than Serbian IDs to step off the bus. This included the four participants, the YIHR coordinator and myself. We were asked to get off the bus, show our bags, and answer to: “where are you going and why” type of questions. The participants were taken aback by the fact that the policeman addressed them in Serbian even though it was clear that they do not speak the language.

But interestingly enough, in spite of the discomfort and the imposed interaction in Serbian, there may have been something empowering about that border encounter for them: as some mentioned in interviews conducted few months later, being treated as foreigners meant at that moment, they are not considered to be coming from Serbia, but crossing the border, with what it meant, politically.¹⁶

Structured Encounters: Issues and Realities

Motivations

Civic Engagement and the “Dealing with the Past” Project

The difference in how the war in Kosovo was experienced by young Albanians from Kosovo and young Serbs from Serbia proper is important here in understanding the motivation of the organizers. While for young people from Serbia proper, the war was happening somewhere far away or seen on the TV screens only, with the NATO bombing being the event that shaped their war experiences, young Kosovar Albanians en masse experienced 1999 as a catastrophe, as they escaped their homes and became refugees. The levels of awareness are therefore different and generate somewhat different political agendas as well as understanding of the “dealing with the past” project.

From the point of view of the organizers at the Belgrade YIHR office, the aim of the *Visiting Program* is to inform people, raise awareness, and normalize relations between Belgrade and Prishtina. Additionally, they aim to expand the circles of young members of their society who are “dealing with the past”; increasing the number of young people interested in learning more about the events that took place during the wars of the 1990s and consequently enlarging the antinationalist circles among young people in Serbia. In that sense, this project has to do with enforcing the issues of the recent wars on a society that wishes to forget. It offers to break the silence, allowing young people to move away from discourses of victimization in order to enhance the engagement of young people in civic action.¹⁷

I therefore understand the *Visiting Program* to be an educational project about the recent past, offered to a generation that came of age during the 1990s, who did

¹⁶ Later on, the visits from Prishtina to Belgrade were put on hold, as participants who after the declaration of independence carried Kosovar travel documents (while before they carried UNMIK passports or still the Yugoslav passports), could not enter Serbia who refused to recognize Kosovo’s independence and all symbols generated from that unilateral move, including the new passports. Serbs are still able to enter Kosovo with their travel documents (ID is in fact sufficient). Following the February 2012 round of negotiations, it seemed like Serbia will allow Kosovar Albanians to enter Serbia with their Kosovo IDs. At the mean time YIHR were able to receive special permits for the visits, and the visitors had to leave their travel document at the border, and receiving them back upon their return to Kosovo.

¹⁷ About Silence breakers in Serbia see (Fridman 2011).

not know about what was happening, at times in their name in the neighboring countries. As mentioned above, this agenda of raising political and social awareness in Serbia today is still completely in the hands of civil society organizations, absent from the official education system.¹⁸

The initiators of the program define their aim to raise political and social awareness, by highlighting the experiential component of the program: visiting Bosnia-Herzegovina (including visits to sites of war crimes) and visiting Kosovo.¹⁹ In that sense such projects are at the heart of their social and political agenda, as stated by the organizers: “the visiting program aims to establish a network of young people with various interests who will remain involved in civic activism” (*Visiting Program*, p.47). While this statement may be read as a vague one, in essence this work is extremely political and should be framed and understood as political work and political education. However, the organizers do not often use terms as such and prefer to think of politics as something that they bring, but only from the back door.

Visiting Prishtina: Reclaiming the Yugoslav Space?

Rebuilding bridges between the citizens of the former Yugoslav republics, especially between the young generations who came of age during the post-Yugoslav wars, is a theme of numerous current civil society run educational projects in the post-Yugoslav states and particularly in Serbia. The participants of the *Visiting Program* are all young people in their 20s who were born during the very last years of Yugoslavia or as it was already disintegrating. They have never experienced Yugoslavia as adults, and barely as kids. Does the *Visiting Program* have elements of reclaiming the Yugoslav space?

The differences between the Serb and Albanian participants here is most apparent, as well as the generational differences with their parents' generation. While their parents' generation who grew up and came of age in Yugoslavia, may have met each other studying on faculties in larger cities, or (fathers) in military service, their generation already had no opportunities to meet each other.

¹⁸I heard reference from activists, referring to themselves as people who “professionally are dealing with the past” referring to that as to more than a job, more as a way of life a matter of values. Images of civil society in the Serbia vary among ordinary people but are mostly negative: as if it is common knowledge outside of these circles, that NGOs have a lot of money, but since the results of their work are not seen, they must be doing nothing, or as earlier addressed to, still in the 1990s, they are anti-war profiteers (who should be therefore seen just as culprits as the war profiteers). In a conversation with one of the YIHR coordinators, she explained how prior to joining YIHR she had a very bad image of NGOS in a very abstract way: “yes I was aware of their anti-war action, but even that was not enough for me; during my studies, in the late 1990’s and even after 2000, I was not in these circles, I didn’t know much about what they were doing, but I knew that a priori they were bad. I think it had to do with my ignorance and lack of knowledge. And this is still the connotation people have with NGOs” (Interview with the author, Belgrade, July 19, 2009).

¹⁹The importance of seeing in one own eyes is crucial in the approach to raising awareness and generating change in the process of knowing and breaking the silence. See also projects as the Helsinki committee for Human Rights School.

The difference between visiting Prishtina and visiting Sarajevo or other cities in Bosnia–Herzegovina from Serbia is interesting in understanding the motivation to organize and participate in the *Visiting Program* to Prishtina. While visiting Bosnia–Herzegovina especially Sarajevo was already normalized in the eyes of many people in Serbia, a similar process did not take place in regard to Kosovo and Prishtina. As one of the organizers explained: “most people in the streets of Belgrade will be happy to talk to someone from Sarajevo, someone who speaks with a Sarajevo accent ... it is more familiar and acceptable. But at the same time, people from Belgrade would not be happy to know that next to their table in at café or at the restaurant someone who is from Kosovo sitting, someone who is Albanian” (Interview with the author, Belgrade, June 3, 2011). From that point of view, going to Prishtina is something that is still not acceptable nor is it normalized in Belgrade. It raises questions such as “why would you want to go there? What is in Prishtina for you?”

I see this as part of the motivation for young people from Serbia to go to Prishtina, searching for more cutting edge activism, for the adrenaline to flow: while going to Sarajevo is now normalized again and may be perceived by many as an ordinary or touristic thing to do: visiting Bašćaršija, the summer film festival, enjoying the best Burek and Čevapi though not disregarding still the politics of that, there is no tourism to Prishtina from Belgrade, and going there may now be seen by some people as a betrayal, especially if it is in order to meet with Albanians and take part in such projects of structured encounters.

The generational difference among activists here is again insightful: while for the older generation of antiwar activists going to Sarajevo right after the war was emotional and painful, given that for them, Sarajevo was their city too, and was attacked brutally in their name; for the younger generation of activists it was already different. In the words of one of them who explained: “people my age, we do not have any memories or emotions regarding Sarajevo, it was never part of our country” (ibid). However, even for the older generation of activists, Prishtina never seem to hold a special or emotional role. For the younger activists it did become meaningful, as offering a real possibility to transform their relations with Albanians, and as an opportunity to allow them to form their own thoughts, independently, based on their own experiences, and based on access to knowledge and information, enjoying the kind of activism with a flavor of engaging with the forbidden.²⁰

Visiting Belgrade

Some curiosity or attraction to the forbidden is also involved in the choice to visit Belgrade for youngsters from Prishtina. As one of them put it: “everything that is prohibited to do is attractive” (Interview with the author, Prishtina, July 1, 2010). Most of all, Belgrade is seen as a large, cosmopolitan city that has a lot to offer, both

²⁰ This as a motivation I especially noticed among the organizers of the program. Some of them joined activism in YIHR through first participating in the *Visiting Program*.

culturally and socially. But connections between Belgrade and Prishtina were completely broken, and while for some it is too early to reestablish them again, the *Visiting Program* is doing just that, allowing young people to meet each other and reestablish connections.

Discussing these broken ties on the radio program *Most*, Omer Karabeg (the host) asked Migjen Kelmendi: “do Albanian artists from Kosovo want to work with Serbia, to have their books translated there, to exhibit their paintings, to have a theatre performance there, or do they want artists from Serbia to come to Kosovo, to Prishtina?” Kelmendi replied:

No. They are definitely no longer interested in Belgrade and Serbia. They are fully oriented towards Tirana and Albania. It is there that they wish their works to appear. I would say that the Kosovo Albanians have turned their backs on Serbia for good. There is not the smallest wish to know what is going on there. It seems at times that Belgrade for them is a faraway city, that Serbia is a faraway land ... apart from occasional individual contacts, communication has practically ended (Belgrade is a Far Away Place for Albanians from Kosovo).

As an alternative to this perspective, it seems that most young people who choose to visit Belgrade, do see it as a city and that has something to offer them in spite of the recent past, the wars and the way Albanians were and are treated there. Visiting Belgrade means that one has to struggle with what the city, and Serbia in general, represent for many Kosovar Albanians: the home of the Milošević regime and of Serbia as a crime machine in the 1990s. As one of the organizers from the Prishtina YIHR office reflected on the first time he visited Belgrade: “in 2007 I went to Belgrade for the first time, it was April 1, 2007, exactly 8 years after I was forced to leave my home on April 1, 1999 by Serbian police” (Interview with the author, Prishtina, June 30, 2010). Going to Belgrade is a challenge, it means taking the time and space to think for oneself, and think critically, learning that in fact the way Serbia and Belgrade are represented in local media in Kosovo is also one-dimensional. Wanting to form their own opinion and to decide for themselves seems to be an important factor in the decision to go. Among friends and family, reactions may be discouraging. For many, Belgrade is the city of the enemy, especially for families who lost their loved ones during the war. For some, this is exactly the reason why they choose to go: “the *Visiting Program* is a small step for a big change in the relations between Kosovo and Serbia; this is the best way for us to get to know each other” (Interview with the author, Prishtina, July 1, 2010).

The wish to travel freely, to have options and opportunities, also has to do with the decision to go to Belgrade, as young women and men in Kosovo still feel isolated. Currently for those carrying a Kosovo passport, the only destinations they can travel freely to, with no need for a visa or a special permit, are Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania. Traveling to Belgrade helps to break this sense of isolation.

Understanding this choice through generational differences may shed light on the communications that were broken and on the current sense of isolation. For young participants from Prishtina, visiting Belgrade is something their parents’ generation can relate to. While for them there is almost nothing left from Yugoslav times or Yugoslav memories, their parents did come of age and live in Yugoslavia;

they speak fluent Serbian and in some cases are even nostalgic about the days of socialism as I heard in some of the interviews and conversations in Prishtina.²¹ Many of their memories about Yugoslavia that they shared with their kids have to do with traveling. Thus, some of the parents do encourage their kids to take this opportunity and travel to Belgrade, talking about the days when they could travel freely, everywhere.²²

One participant spoke about her father, who used to work in Belgrade: “when I went to Belgrade he wanted to come with me, for both my parents had jobs, security and stability during Tito’s Yugoslavia” (Interview with the author, Prishtina, July 1, 2010). In that sense, reference to Socialist Yugoslavia was often mentioned, mostly in juxtaposition with what came after, the Milošević regime. For some, this shared past still holds meaning as something that should not be erased or ignored completely. The *Visiting Program* may allow these shared pasts to resurface again or at least to be explored.

While in Serbia, some participants from Kosovo see it as an important opportunity to change the image people have about Kosovo and about Albanians, and even more so, about the right of Kosovars for an independent state. As one participant who returned to Belgrade several more times after her participation in the *Visiting Program* put it:

During my very first visit, I was more in a position of observing and absorbing, trying to see what Serbian society is like, what do they have to offer me as an Albanian from Kosovo? Can they treat me equally? Did they change their approach towards Albanians [after the war]; the next time I visited the city, I was already louder, expressing my beliefs and also making a point of going there from a better position, visiting a neighboring country Serbia, saying “I have a state now too” (ibid).

Connecting with like-minded young people from Serbia, those who are not nationalists or radicals, allows such statements to be made, and therefore may offer an empowering experience.

Revisiting What Used to be Home

A few of the participants of the *Visiting Program* choose to participate in the program and visit Prishtina because they were born and raised in Kosovo, members of families who left Kosovo when the war ended the way it did in 1999. For them, this is the first opportunity to go back and visit their sites of childhood, the city where they were born and grew up. This may be an emotional journey, mixed with personal memories and heavy feelings. I asked Jana, a young participant of the program

²¹ More on memories of Socialist Yugoslavia in post-war Kosovo see (Schwander-Sievers 2010). The biography of Adem Demaçi is illuminating in portraying the images and of Yugoslavia in Kosovo (Gashi 2010).

²² Similar sentiments towards the Yugoslav days were heard in Serbia prior to the abolishment of the visa requirement to enter the EU in December 2009.

who left Prishtina as a refugee to Belgrade when she was only 10 years old, if she had found what she was looking for. She replied: “I went there to search for feelings, I wanted to see the city and the people there and to compare it with my memories ... I also wanted to talk to people from Prishtina to see what were their emotions towards the situation that Serbs are no longer there” (Interview with the author, Belgrade, December 29, 2010). Through her eyes, while walking in the streets of Prishtina, the other participants could learn more about the way the city was before; the layers of the city that changed completely, as the names of the streets and the buildings are no longer the same.²³

The meetings held in local organizations and with local people while visiting Prishtina usually begin with the participants introducing themselves and where they are from. With younger presenters these meetings take place in English; with people who are a bit older (in their late 30s and older) the exchange takes place in Serbian, as they are all bilingual. In a meeting at one Prishtina-based NGO, Jana introduced herself as born in Prishtina and now living in Belgrade. In a powerful gesture, the presenter welcomed her back to *HER* hometown, emphasizing how he would love to see all people who were forced to leave the city in 1999 return. This was a powerful way to enter the presentation with the group, as the presenter had positioned himself to make a point about where he stood politically.

Possible Transformations/Movements/Changes?

Unlike participants born in Kosovo who came back through the program to see their childhood city, most of the participants from Serbia who visited Prishtina through the program did so for the very first time. They had an image of Prishtina as a small town, even village-like (often using the term *seljački*, meaning peasant). After spending a few days in Prishtina, meeting young, energized people, and being exposed to fascinating information generates a whole new image of a city they realize they knew so little about. As one participant put it: “going to Prishtina was as if someone showed me I was in the darkness [in my thoughts about Kosovo and about Albanians] ... it made me understand that my thoughts are based on pure ignorance” (Interview with the author, Belgrade, July 19, 2009). The concept of the *Visiting Program* exactly builds on this recognition that the dominant discourses in Serbia make use of such ignorance for manipulation and anti-Albanian propaganda. The organizers’ way to resist that is to offer people an experience through which they can define their own thoughts for themselves, through their own eyes, to take a stand that is based on knowledge, information, and firsthand experience.

²³For example she kept referring to names of the streets and buildings that have changed. The *Lepa Brena Building*, which is now called the KEKS building, Kosovo’s electric distribution company seemed as a marker for her to find her way around. For a discussion and analysis of changes in space and landscape modifications as related to citizenship and identity in Kosovo see (Krasniqi 2012).

It is important to mention that stereotypes in Serbia towards Albanians are not new or so recent. In some ways Albanians were always seen as “the other,” which goes back to relations during Socialist and the kingdom of Yugoslavia. The language was always a divider between these communities; Albanians were not Slavs and earlier in the second Yugoslavia were subject to oppressive mechanisms of control (Malcolm 1999, pp.314–334).²⁴ As one participant from Belgrade put it: “for me change only came when I realized I was a racist, that this is racism and that it was present in Yugoslavia towards Albanians, and not among Serbs only. But I needed to go there [to Kosovo] have that experience, so I could become aware of that” (Interview with the author, Belgrade, July 19, 2009).

Listening to firsthand stories from young Albanians who lived through the war seems to be a very powerful and important experience of the program. Such exchanges do not occur in the format of a lecture, but in arranged meetings by the organizers, taking place in offices and cafes, in quite an informal atmosphere. For some, the impressions left by such an encounter are so strong that they could not stop talking about it upon their return home. For some, this was their entry point to activism with YIHR, leading to volunteering and even taking full-time positions within the organization. What they encounter while visiting Prishtina is a celebration of Albanian identity, a sense belonging and pride, that many of them sense nothing of in Serbia. While in Serbia such sentiments would be connected with Serbian nationalism, from their point of view, in Kosovo this nationalism bears no such negative connotation yet, but a sense of pride and of freedom that people were denied of, for a long time.

While a change in opinion may occur for some, for others this encounter may generate more hesitation. Here as well as in other cases of such encounters, some participants end up engaged in a competition over victimization. This is a common phenomenon amongst other groups in conflict and participants in educational projects that aim at raising awareness (Fridman and Abu-Rish 2008). In this case, it may also be attributed to the way the war in Kosovo ended and how the events after 1999 have played out: after all it was quite clear that Serbia and Serbs in Kosovo emerged as the losers of this war and that the power relations shifted. As one participant put it: “visiting Kosovo made it clearer that they [Albanians] are the winners in this historic battle of Serbia and Kosovo; they got what they wanted, they got their independence and their state ... in general, the public in Serbia has a feeling that we lost in this conflict, but it is hard to say it openly and publicly” (Interview with the author, Belgrade, June 16, 2010).

As a young man with political ambitions in Serbia, he was reluctant to openly acknowledge the independence of Kosovo, and chose not to post on his Facebook wall any of the many pictures he took, while visiting Prishtina with

²⁴ For further discussion on Serb stereotypes towards Albanians see (Marković 2003). Slobodan Naumović’s analysis on popular narratives on Serbian disunity also sheds light on those dynamics (Naumović 2007).

the *Visiting Program*. And yet many others were surprised by the warm and positive welcoming attitude towards them, what helped break many of the images they had prior to the visit (such as that Albanians are less educated, hate Serbs, etc.), shaped by TV and newspapers images in Serbia. Being exposed to the Albanian point of view and narrative is almost impossible in Serbia, and yet is a key to any change or movement that may occur in the perceptions and world-views of young people.

Closing Remarks

Through an investigation of encounters, this chapter sought to offer a more complex approach to the study of conflict transformation in Kosovo and Serbia and more insights to dealing with the past processes in those societies. By analyzing structured encounters in the context of the change in power relations that took place in Kosovo, this study highlights the need for an in-depth analysis that approaches Kosovo not as a disputed territory only. A program such as the *Visiting Program* and the processes and dynamics it generates as analyzed above, shed light on the difference between Serbs from Serbia proper and Serbs from Kosovo in relation to the challenges and dilemmas they face in Kosovo today.

Both among young participants and activists from Serbia and from Kosovo, I did not encounter any individuals who discuss their everyday experiences or work in terms of peacebuilding or reconciliation; the use of these terms are usually made use of only by members of the international community. Nevertheless, the analysis of the *Visiting Program* offers an insight into its potential to become transformative in the awareness and understanding that it raises among its participants, towards the conflict. It does suggest though that relations between Prishtina and Belgrade may be easier to restore or transform than those between Serbs and Albanians within Kosovo itself.

Additionally, analysis of the dynamics and processes of the *Visiting Program* suggests that more work needs to be done in Serbia in order to transform the official and public approaches towards Kosovo. Public discourse in Serbia generally refers to Kosovo as a territory only, with no reference to the population living there, or with reference to the Serb population only. Stereotypes in Serbia that are tainted with racism towards Kosovo Albanians are commonly present, especially among those who have never been to Kosovo. Such racism is not a new phenomenon; however, the events of the past decades seem to have further entrenched such views as the result of a lack of direct knowledge of or contact with the population of Kosovo. In that sense, the *Visiting Program* interrupts and even combats such ignorance, offering a more engaged form of citizenship based on access to firsthand experience rather than propaganda. Even though such stereotypes are not completely absent among members of the Serbian communities in Kosovo, they too are often looked down at by urban population in Serbia proper.

These structured encounters therefore should be understood as encounters between young urban people. As such, they do not explicitly combat segregation but rather help to generate a sense of freedom as well as more critical thinking and the critical consumption of knowledge. As many young participants in the *Visiting Program* have explained, they wanted to have the opportunity to meet young people who are the same like them. This may raise the question as to what extent this program addresses otherness and differences in a systematic or complex way. More broadly, it sheds light on the contribution of such a project of structure encounters to the ongoing processes of transitional justice in the region; more particularly it sheds light on perspectives “from below” and their affect on young people. It raises yet another question as for how far below even civil society can reach. It points at the challenges of civil society groups to broaden the circles of participation in their projects that are often perceived as elitist; as well as at the complexities in enhancing more engaged forms of citizenship as part of transitional justice processes.²⁵

Pedagogically speaking, while the program at first may seem to be leaning on the contact hypothesis model,²⁶ it may in fact offer a new and locally developed model for conflict transformation work, education for peace, and/or mechanisms for transitional justice from below in the post-Yugoslav successor states. While the program is not defined in pedagogical terms and is not even framed as political (or as political education) by its organizers, it clearly has the intent of including more young people in civic engagement, in particular of enlarging the circles of those involved in the *Dealing with the Past* project, which is seen as the main mechanism for peacebuilding and transitional justice in the region.

In such a model, the *Visiting Program* does offer elements of reclaiming the past Yugoslav space. But even more so, by offering young people from Serbia and Kosovo the opportunity to visit Belgrade and Prishtina, it accepts and acknowledges the change that has occurred in the power relations between Serbs and Albanians, as well as between Belgrade and Prishtina. This is the entry point of the project, which rebuilds bridges between the citizens of the former Yugoslav republics, especially between the young generations who came of age during the post-Yugoslav wars or after. As a consequence of their participation in the program, it may be possible for some of these young people who did not experience Yugoslavia as adults to find and redefine these lost connections as a platform for change in future relations, between equal citizens of now various independent states.

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²⁵ My thinking about engaged forms of citizenship is shaped significantly by the work of Ariella Azoulay (Azoulay 2008).

²⁶ See endnote 5.

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