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Participatory-observation-research about “Constructively Dealing with the Past” within RYCO youth exchange projects

A project developed by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, crossborder factory and the Franco-German Youth Office, with the support of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs

1. Context:

One of the goals of RYCO, as defined in its statute, is to support youth projects which aim to contribute to “fostering reconciliation and constructive approaches to remembrance”. The topic “reconciliation and remembrance” constitutes a challenge for societies in general, and also for each international youth exchange. Bringing young persons from different contexts together provides the opportunity to build up positive ties between them, but at the same time past and present conflicts can interfere in these encounters and constitute a burden. Among organizers of international youth exchange we can in general find different attitudes: some choose to explicitly address the difficult past in and through their encounter, others prefer to avoid to tackle the topic in the exchanges they organize, because they do not think the topic is important, or because they think it is a too sensitive matter and they don’t know how to address this topic in a constructive way.

RYCO is aware that dealing with the past is a difficult topic also for youth encounters. Nevertheless, youth exchange projects can be an excellent opportunity to address the past in a constructive and sensitive way, and therefore to foster both remembrance and reconciliation among young people.

How are youth encounters tackling the topics linked to history and memory? RYCO wants explore this question in order to know more about the possibilities and challenges when working on questions linked to “remembrance and reconciliation” in the framework of youth exchanges, with the aim to build capacities of youth organizations to address these questions in the framework of future exchanges. In other words, RYCO would like to encourage and to empower youth organizations to constructively deal with questions linked to history and memory in the framework of youth exchange, so that on the one hand, organizations which want to make it a main topic of their encounter are equipped to do so, and that, on the other hand, organizations which focus on other topics in their exchange can react when questions related to the past pop up – what can happen involuntarily and unexpectedly at any moment during a youth encounter - and know how to turn such situations into positive learning experiences. In this perspective, RYCO foresees, in the year 2019, to organize a specific training for youth organizations on question why and how to address the topic “reconciliation and remembrance” in and through international youth exchange, and also develop a pedagogical manual which can encourage youth organizations to deal with these topics within RYCO-projects.

2. Objectives and content of the participatory observation-research-project “Constructively dealing with the past”

The participatory observation – research-project on the topic “Constructively dealing with the past” in the framework of RYCO youth exchange is situated in the above-mentioned context. It has been developed and will be implemented by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), crossborder factory and the Franco-German Youth Office, in cooperation with an interdisciplinary team of researchers and youth workers from the six Contracting Parties of RYCO, and with the support of the German Ministry for Foreign Affairs. It is related to the Open Call for RYCO-youth-exchange for 2018, where “Ensuring a safe environment for young people to constructively deal with the past” was one of the specific objectives defined by RYCO for which youth organizations and schools from the Western Balkans could apply with their projects.

The general aim of this research project is to contribute to the development of the work of RYCO on the topic “reconciliation and remembrance” and in this perspective to provide food for thought for the above mentioned training and manual which are planned for 2019, and possible other activities RYCO could develop in the future. Before coming to the step “What should we do”, it is first necessary to analyze and to discuss the question “How is the situation now” within RYCO-projects. The concrete aim of this research-project is therefore to collect data and to provide an analysis on how questions related to the past appear and are approached within current RYCO-projects, and then on this basis to develop suggestions for the further work of RYCO in the field of “constructively dealing with the past”.

In order to achieve this concrete aim, research-teams will use the method of “participatory observation” regarding several RYCO youth exchange projects which will take place in 2018 (more info about this method see below point 3). Out of the 33 RYCO-supported youth exchange projects in 2018, four have been chose to be included in this research, because they are dealing with questions linked to history and memory in one way or the other.

3. What is “participatory observation”?

Participatory observation is a qualitative research method which enables researchers to learn about the activities of a group under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities. In our research project “Constructively dealing the past”, one or two researchers will be present during some phases of the respective RYCO-youth exchange which appear particularly relevant for the research. The role of the researchers is not to judge, evaluate or correct, but to collect data, through observation, informal conversations and interviews with the organizers and the participants of the project. They will participate in formal (as presentations, visits, ...) and non-formal (meals, informal socializing) group activities, without interfering directly in the formal activities, as the main role of the researchers is to collect data: In this stance, the researcher is an observer who is not a member of the group and who is interested in participating as a means for conducting better observation and, hence, generating more complete understanding of the group's activities and on ways to address questions linked to history and memory during youth exchange. The researchers are not and cannot be “invisible persons” during their presence, and the participants are aware of the researcher's observation activities; in this perspective, the researchers introduce themselves at the beginning of their presence and explain the aim and method of the research to the group. In the reports they will write, the researchers will preserve the anonymity of the organizers and participants they have been talking with.

Prior to their presence during the youth encounter, the researchers and the project organizers will be put in contact, through the Local Branch Officers of RYCO, in order to make acquaintance with each other and to organize the cooperation in the best possible way. After the end of the research project, the organizers of the RYCO-youth exchange which have been part of the project will receive a specific feedback regarding the results of the research.

4. Time-frame and activities of the research-project

On 17th and 18th July, 2018, in Podgorica, a preparation meeting, which gathered the coordination team as well as the six researchers and youth workers involved in the project took place. The aims of this meeting were to make acquaintance among each other, to define jointly the concrete aims and the methodology of the participant-observation-research, and to agree on the “Who-is-doing-what-when”-distribution of roles for the project among the research-group.

In summer and fall 2018 the participatory-observation-research itself will take place, led by different research-teams on four different RYCO-projects. In general, one research-tandem will work on one RYCO-project.

After the research period itself, which will take place during the youth encounters, each research-team will write a report with their main observations and findings.

A second working meeting with the coordination-team and the researcher-group will then take place beginning of January 2019, where the results of the research will be discussed in depth, on the basis of the different participatory-observation-reports which have been shared before within the group. A final report will be written by the coordination team, which will include the reports of the each research-team, and common conclusions and recommendations to RYCO for further work on the topic.

5. Coordination-team, research-group and involved RYCO-youth exchange

a) Coordination team:

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Nicolas Moll, crossborder factory, Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Olivera Komar, University of Montenegro, Podgorica (Montenegro)

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b) Research group:

Fitore Bajrami, psychologist, Skopje (Macedonia)

Nemanja Batricevic, political scientist, Podgorica (Montenegro)

Selma Gashi, psychologist, Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Tijana Jokic Zorkic, psychologist, Belgrade (Serbia)

Andi Rabić, youth worker, Executive Director *Youth Voice Network Albania*, Tirana (Albania)

Aferdita Sylaj, youth worker, Executive Director *Community Building Mitrovica*, Mitrovica (Kosovo*)

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence



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c) RYCO-youth-exchange

“Your Past, Present and Future”, organized by *Youth for Peace*, Bosnia and Herzegovina; *Somborski Omladinski Boom*, Serbia; *Montenegrin American Youth Alumni Association*, Montenegro

“Is it warring time again?” Organized by *Grupa “Hajde da...”*, Serbia; *Red Cross of Tuzla Canton*, Bosnia and Herzegovina; *Center for Youth Progress*, Albania ; *Association for Education and Development PsihoIntegra*, Skopje, Macedonia

“Balkan Debate Academy”, organized by *Youth Educational Forum*, Skopje, Macedonia; *Open Communication*, Belgrade, Serbia; *Centre of Cultivating Dialogue*, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; *Debate Club “Agora”*, Podgorica, Montenegro ; *Debate Centar*, Pristina, Kosovo

“Building Bridges For Balkans”, organized by *Hemijsko-prehrambena tehnološka škola*, Belgrade, Serbia; *Economic and Law High School ,“Vasil Antevski –Dren”*, Skopje, Macedonia; *JU Srednja škola “28. Juni”*, Istočno Novo Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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