

Empathy Through Expression: Actualizing Perpetual Peace in Post-Conflict Societies

Pristina, Kosovo

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I. Building Perpetual Peace

Kosovo is a Balkan country with a legacy of conflict. The Kosovo War (1999) undermined institutions and deepened rifts between ethnic groups in the region. Kosovo declared its independence only 10 years ago in 2008, and its sovereign status is still not accepted by nearly half of UN member states nor by neighboring Serbia. This liminality is a risk to the nation's stability, and developments in 2018 further threaten Kosovo's path to peace. The decision in December 2018 to create a full Kosovar army heightened the risk of the country backsliding into conflict. Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia are rising, with each nation threatening armed intervention to defend or diminish Kosovo's sovereignty, respectively.

This process of rearmament puts at the country's youth most at risk. According to peace scholarship,¹ large youth groups in countries with burgeoning security forces are most often susceptible to military conscription. This begins the arming of civilians and the institutionalization of normalized violence. In the capital city of Pristina, where our program will operate, ethnic diversity includes an Albanian majority with some ethnically-Bosnian and Serbian groups. These children have come of age in a country and region where reminders of conflict are rampant: infrastructure and institutions are scarred from war. In a country where no global consensus exists on even a name, its citizens, too, have complicated notions of identity and nationality. By providing an outlet for creative expression, children facing a history of violence and daunted by its potential return can begin to build empathy and understanding across their differences.

As playwrights, we know the theatre to be a place for humanizing and empathizing with people unlike ourselves. By providing this outlet for creative expression, children facing a history of violence and daunted by its potential return can begin to build understanding across their differences. We are dedicated to providing a practical way to build this sense of togetherness, devoid of otherizing, among members of the post-conflict society where institutional factors may otherwise condone hostility and competition among groups. As outlined by contemporary peace scholars, programs, institutions, and organizations are critical to providing opportunities for "individuals from respective groups... to envision themselves as part of a shared community."² Without opportunities for reflecting on one's identity in a broader global context, the capital and country could risk another generation disinvested in peace.

The theatre is a place to develop empathy and explore one's own humanity. In Kosovo, groups like the *Bond Street Theatre*³ created movement-based performances in public spaces during the war and set a precedent of artmaking as a realization of nonviolence. We will build on this historical legacy and reintroduce theatre as a tool for maintaining peace in the now-turbulent region. We believe creative expression is instrumental to establishing a common understanding from which sustainable peace can be created and enacted in the country. During our proposed playwriting workshop, individuals will humanize others through a collaborative process that will deter violence and promote understanding.

II. Program Objectives and Local Partners

We propose a 5-week playwriting and theatre workshop from mid-July through late-August 2019 for local students in Pristina, ages 8-18. During the program, students will further their awareness of the importance of pursuing collaboration over competition as members of a global society. By mid-July, students will be out of school for the summer, and the workshop will provide them with opportunities to develop their artistic voices while engaging with theories of peace-building. Workshops will run daily Monday-Thursday and will take place in *Kino Armata*, a film and stage theater restored after the conflict now seen as a symbol of the war's end. This program responds to the slated creation of a national army in Kosovo, which will pose a threat to the peacebuilding process in the region. The program builds capacities for empathy, where participants will be deterred from engaging in military-related violence as they come of age. The rich history of performance as a successful means of coping with conflict in the region makes resonant these workshops.

¹ Nordås, Ragnhild, and Christian Davenport. "Fight the Youth: Youth Bulges and State Repression." AJPS. 2013.

² Davenport, Christian, et al. *The Peace Continuum*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

³ Bond Street Theatre worked in Kosovo and the Balkan region in 1999. See: <http://www.bondst.org/balkans.html>

We are partnering with the Kosovo branch of *Changing the Story*, an organization exploring how the arts, heritage, and human rights education can support youth-centered approaches to civil society building in post-conflict countries. Their research brings together a variety of Kosovar art collectives with multiple modes of expression. We will host *Changing the Story*'s artists and artist groups as part of our daily workshops to help local students connect with the conceptual art scene underway in Pristina. By partnering with this network of creatives and researchers, our project will continue in years and programs to come. *Changing the Story* will research the effectiveness of our workshops and will support re-implementation.

Nita Luci, Professor of Anthropology and Peace at the University of Pristina, leads the Kosovo branch of *Changing the Story* and is our partner and collaborator. Her expertise informed our programmatic work and ensured its cultural relevance. With her support, two University of Pristina students will be joining our creative team as peacebuilders and artists. They share cultural knowledge and a creative vision. Our curriculum is designed in consultation with these student partners, who join in the transcontinental process of brainstorming, editing, and iterating the program content. Additionally, they assist with getting local families and their school-aged children interested in the workshop, registering participants, and preparing materials preceding the end of the school-year. Their local insights ensure the workshop's goals are represented in formats that are accessible to local students. These student partners will lead the workshops alongside us, featuring their own artistic processes. While English is spoken by Kosovo's youth, and we are informally studying local Albanian, our partners are fluent in both languages which will bridge any existing language barrier.

III. Project Logistics and Plan for Continuity

The program utilizes both verbal and nonverbal techniques as well as varied artistic mediums, including visual arts, text, music, and movement. During each day, students will engage with each other and the world around them through improv games, dance, collages, scene-writing, and more. Participants will also get the chance to engage with local artists, ask questions, and explore the real-world implications of their own creative capacities. Guest artists will be those working in creative collectives associated with *Changing the Story*.

For months, we have been working with our partners to establish five themes for our program. The first two weeks include introductory activities involving personal reflection on identities. The third week considers the global context of Kosovo as well as individual roles in society, highlighting their own power to create and maintain peace in times of conflict. The last two weeks are dedicated to the creation of a final *Summer in Revue* showcase. Community members will be invited to this culminating performance featuring the student-created scenes, choreography, poetry, physical art galleries, and other products resulting from the 5 weeks of workshops. Through the final revue, we hope for the community to see the work of the participants and witness the impact of creative expression on their own country's journey towards peace. By the program's conclusion, students will have engaged in relevant dialogues, worked together across their differences, and learned the value of collaboration, all of which will contribute to this generation's impact on perpetual peace in Kosovo.

We hope the program will be long-lasting, and its impacts continuous. After the 5-week workshop is concluded, *Changing the Story* will continue to operate in Kosovo under Professor Luci, who will observe and collaborate with us on the project in recurring years. This moment is a turning point in the Kosovar development of security, military, and sustained peace. Working with the targeted youth population during this and future years will create an alternative to relying on state-sanctioned violence as the path of the future.

The program can be edited and changed year to year to accommodate participant feedback and new political landscapes. Our program is designed with specificity for application to the geopolitical situation in Pristina, Kosovo but is adaptable for various cultural contexts. The workshops are applicable in any country where youth are in danger of backsliding into conflict and where the wounds of past violence are still healing. It is our hope that, in time, programs like this become expected, not extraordinary.

IV. About Us

Emily is a rising peace scholar in Political Science (B.A) who recently gave a keynote address on *Global Citizenship and Perpetual Peacemaking*. She served in the monitoring body tracking adherence to UN Human Rights agreements in Iceland. She has written both plays and academic articles on human rights. Matthew is an International Studies major with a minor in Playwriting from the University. He has worked in both Warsaw, Poland and Dehradun, India, where he taught English and wrote plays for elementary school students to perform.