

DAVIS PROJECTS FOR PEACE 2019 / I-House NYC

Supported project: WESEUM

Country of execution: Bulgaria

Sponsoring college: School of Professional Studies at Columbia University/International House NY

Project leader: Pavel Kounchev

FINAL NARRATIVE REPORT***A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project***

The goal of the project was to conceptualize and implement the pilot edition of the innovative concept WESEUM – a global series of pop-up museums curated by different invisible or marginalized communities across the world, with the aim to open a space that empowers people to own their narratives and rise above the stereotypization and misrepresentation. This is to be achieved through exhibiting the everyday objects/artefacts/mementos they feel best represent their stories and selves, in this way fostering empathy, promoting a common humanity, and becoming a solid building block for peace.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

No further funds were necessary to implement successfully the project. Thanks to a careful planning and budget management, I was able to use the allocated grant to cover all project expenses. We will be securing additional funds for the global development of WESEUM.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

I have been developing the idea of WESEUM for the past year, in the context of the organisation I co-founded in 2015, Fine Acts Foundation. Fine Acts is a global platform for socially engaged creative solutions.

The pilot edition of WESEUM was co-created with one of the largest Roma communities in Bulgaria, situated in Sofia, with the goal to counteract the harassment, violence, discrimination and exclusion towards Roma people, who are the largest minority group in Bulgaria.

My team and I are based in Bulgaria, and are well familiar with the reality and problems of the Roma community. Due to increasing hostility, over the years initially local incidents between Roma and non-Roma people in Bulgaria have sparked major regional and national protests, feeding on existing and unresolved tension. These protests usually quickly turn violent and require considerable police intervention, leading to local government officials and politicians to introduce populist measures to appease the majority non-Roma population. Incidents are often further exacerbated by politicians and the media. The widespread negative stereotypes are so loud and divisive that they completely muffle any Roma voices and distort society's perception of the Roma community's identity.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

According to recent studies, over 70% of Roma in Bulgaria say they face discrimination in housing, education, employment and health. Not only that, over 75% of the Roma population currently live in segregated neighborhoods. More than ever before, in 2018, 81% of Bulgarians, who have witnessed hate speech, say it was directed towards Roma. Over 30% of Roma say that they have been harassed. The lack of progress with regard to Roma integration and the rise of anti-Roma sentiment

makes this a major point of division and clashes in the country. Bulgaria is among the EU countries with the largest share of Roma within the overall population (over 10%).

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

For the past couple of years, we have been closely following the Roma neighborhood, which lives on Gradinite Street in the Orlandovtsi neighborhood in Sofia. In 2017, their houses were destroyed, automatically making at least 50 people – 30 of them children – homeless. The people were given only a week's notice. Some were given tents by church representatives, while others created makeshift shelters comprised of debris from their destroyed homes. None of the families, who lost their only homes, were provided with an alternative shelter. When we started talking with them about the co-creation of WESEUM, they felt encouraged to share their story through our concept and we were convinced that channeling their voice will raise awareness for the larger issues that Roma people in Bulgaria face on a daily basis.

What was it like to work in your host site?

It was a long process of co-creation and building of mutual trust, which was emotional and rewarding for all people involved. For us it was important to create the conditions in which the Roma people can feel confident telling their story.

We asked them to bring two objects that best answer two questions – “What makes you happy?” and “What makes you sad?” We told them that these could be various items - so they brought objects showcasing a shared humanity (children's toys, family photos, etc.), or underlining the existing fault lines (brick of a recently demolished house, ground they kept in a jar from their old yard, etc.).

By fostering this process of co-creation, we managed to facilitate an exchange of ideas and experiences that chipped away at the decades of barriers put up between communities.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

We didn't face any problems which could put the project at risk. We only had a minor issue with the exhibition space which required a short delay of the opening. We opened the exhibition on July 24, 2019.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

We did not face any significant communication challenges. Over 500 people visited the pop-up exhibition, thousands were reached online, and we foresee tens of thousands to be engaged with the project going forward, and with the launching of the global website. Furthermore, the Roma community understood right away the concept of WESEUM and was actively engaged in the creation process (27 people from the community participated as co-creators). This was a crucial proof for us that the concept works on a human and emotional level and can build bridges between communities.

How do you define peace?

We define peace as a lack of hostility and conflict and a state of non-violence for individuals or groups. We believe that creative collaborations across real or perceived lines/borders can largely contribute to fostering peace and reconciliation.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long term?

In the short-term, we managed to empower the Roma community to own their narratives and rise above the stereotypization and misrepresentation. In the long-term, we will develop the already proven concept of WESEUM to a global series of community-curated pop-up museums with the aim to gain global visibility and impact. WESEUM will promote understanding by providing an extraordinary space and a meeting point to rethink stereotypes.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

The project demonstrated a simple yet very impactful way of making invisible people visible. In this pilot edition, WESEUM counteracted the progressive dehumanization of Roma, tackled existing labels and narratives, and in this way promoted a common humanity. I found transformational the very emotional reactions of both participants/co-curators and visitors of the pop-up museum, which once again convinced me that tolerance, compassion and action can be elicited through creative collaborations.

Please provide a 1-2 personal statement sentence, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing how and why this project was valuable and what was the most important thing you learned as a result.

WESEUM is a global series of community-curated pop-up museums which empower invisible people to become visible and own their narratives so they can counteract stereotypization and misrepresentation. The project demonstrated how equity in the creation process can give people the voice that have been deprived of and become a building block for peace.





Photos: Mihail Novakov for Fine Acts

See more photos from the exhibition opening [here](#).