

Small European Countries Prepare for Globalisation: The Challenge of Diversity and Engagement

Case Study: Slovenia



Summary Report on the Fifth Intercultural Practice Exchange

30th November - 1st December 2011, Ljubljana, Slovenia

*This event was organised by Platform for Intercultural Europe
in collaboration with Kud Pozitiv and Zavod Exodos.*

*It was supported by the Municipality of Ljubljana,
and the boarding school Dijaški dom Ivana Cankarja.*



ZAVOD



EXODOS



Students' Halls of Residence
Ivan Cankar, Ljubljana

Overview

The Fifth Intercultural Practice Exchange was held on 30th November – 1st December 2011 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. It was organised by [Platform for Intercultural Europe](http://www.intercultural-europe.org)¹ with local non-governmental member organisations [Kud Pozitiv](http://www.pozitiv.si/)² and [Zavod Exodos](http://www.exodos.si/)³.

The Practice Exchange involved 74 participants from the arts and education fields, social work and politics, and included guests from Austria, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and the UK. Intercultural work with ethnic minorities was showcased and discussed by media workers and cultural practitioners, members of NGOs, anti-discrimination activists, anthropologists and representatives of political parties.

Sabine Frank and Drago Pintarič introduced the event and along with the Mayor of Ljubljana, [Zoran Janković](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoran_Jankovi%C4%7C)⁴, welcomed the participants.

DAY ONE - 'PRACTICING DIVERSITY, CULTIVATING EMPATHY':

Examined local project work with minorities from a European perspective – minorities whose lives are often the subject of heated discussion and prejudiced views, and tend to be represented in the European media as problems: Muslims and Roma. Case studies concerned the long running controversy over the building of a mosque in Ljubljana, and media education work undertaken with Roma communities.

DAY TWO - 'SHARED SPACE, SHARED VALUES, COMPLEX IDENTITIES':

Looked at projects which worked across cultural divides on inclusive topics such environmental care and intercultural education.

The meeting concluded with a public forum for which several eminent Slovenian politicians – though none of the sort who “frighten voters about foreigners into voting for them” - took time out of their busy election campaign schedule – national parliamentary elections took place a few days later - to present their viewpoints on diversity and intercultural engagement.

Summary of Practice Exchange

While the value and benefit of cultural diversity are debated across Europe, smaller nation states, which might have displayed a preoccupation with cultural homogeneity, must still face the challenge of diversity from small minorities within or new minorities from outside.

Key questions posed at the Fifth Practice Exchange in Ljubljana:

- Are minorities engaged with?
- Is the role of migration in a world economy acknowledged and inclusion of newcomers facilitated?
- Is fear or hate of foreigners taken seriously?

The first day of the Practice Exchange offered an opportunity to examine projects, which engaged with specific minority communities in challenging prejudices and stereotyping; the second day presented projects, which aimed to build dialogue between diverse communities through a common issue – in particular, by focusing on environmental concerns.

¹ <http://www.intercultural-europe.org>

² <http://www.pozitiv.si/>

³ www.exodos.si/

⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoran_Janković](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoran_Jankovi%C4%7C)

Practitioners demonstrated how culture and education professionals can engage with wider political agendas of minority recognition, human rights, and economic and social justice through a process of intercultural dialogue. As has been pointed out at previous Practice Exchanges, engaging in this dialogue is a '[precursor to a more just and equitable social democratic disposition](#)'⁵.

The featured projects built understanding and empathy between different social and cultural groups. Participants experienced diversity as a welcome addition to their world. Their outlook became more inclusive through a structured engagement with 'the other'.

In the documentation of the 'Divided God' project, one of the young participants, **Sara Bungartz**, commented on the conflicts between cultural and religious groups: "The only way to clear these kinds of problems is to communicate. And this is not so easy when you speak a different language or when you're afraid of being honest. It's so easy not to talk. I've learned a lot about human behaviour through other cultures... that will be important for the rest of my life."

PRACTICING DIVERSITY, CULTIVATING EMPATHY

Much of the presentations and discussion on the first day revolved around **recognition and visibility**, and the **challenging of stereotypes and prejudices**.

At the outset **Rajko Muršič** offered an anthropological perspective on the idea of exclusion and 'fear of the other'. He pointed out that culture is a human construct, not an unchangeable fact. He challenged the listeners to recognise that we can and do shape cultures and attitudes for our own purposes, and to take responsibility for how we choose to treat each other.

The presentations which followed drew attention to the fact that in seeking to define the identity of their 'nation' - and in search of 'homogeneity' - small states often ignore or stigmatise particular minorities within their borders (whether they have been resident for generations or whether they are newer migrants). For example, Roma communities have long experienced discrimination. A number of media projects demonstrated ways in which prejudice can be contested. The NGO DZMP from Krško, for example, engaged Roma groups with media professionals so as to tell their stories, to provide them with training and access to the tools of media production and distribution, and to make the media reflect the life of their community better in the longer run. The initiatives aimed both to build the confidence of Roma, and to increase their recognition and visibility as equal citizens. Education was seen as a key to inclusion, from nursery and primary school onwards - including the education of parents. It was noted that participation and expression are a core of our democratic society. In this spirit, Roma participated in the presentation and spoke for themselves. **Michael Walling** noted that a democratic society does not require that everyone should think the same, but that people think different thoughts, which can be shared in a public space.

A recurrent theme in the discussions was that nationalism creates divisions in society by determining who is a citizen or a non-citizen, by creating mythologies of 'land and blood' ties and promoting prejudices against some groups in society in order to exclude or even expel them. In the session '**Controversy over the building of a mosque in Ljubljana**', we learned about the issues of recognition and visibility with regard to Muslim communities both in Ljubljana and elsewhere in Europe, in particular the growth of strong opposition to building new mosques. The recent resolution of this longstanding issue in Ljubljana was discussed in detail. The role of politicians was scrutinised - their choice between fanning the flames of prejudice and intolerance or acting responsibly to ensure that the rights of all citizens are respected regardless of their ethnic origin or their religious affiliation.

With regard to the Muslim community, it was stressed that it is not a single entity - contrary to its portrayal as a singular global problem in the rhetoric of 'The War on Terror' and the impact

⁵ This is a quote from the conclusion of the report on the 2009 Vienna Practice Exchange, 'From Intercultural Dialogue to Intercultural Democracy' by Francois Matarasso.

of violent campaigns from Islamic fundamentalist groups. It was pointed out that the Muslim community in Slovenia – contrary to the Muslim communities in Denmark, the UK, or France, which resulted from immigration - is deeply culturally 'European', although different strands exist within it. **Chris Torch** reminded us that the idea of homogeneity and discrimination against religious groups is not modern only: 300 years ago the Protestants in Europe faced the same problem as Muslims today, in that their churches were in some places not allowed to have towers. It was noted how the international competition to find an architect to build the Ljubljana mosque had generated visibility for the Muslim community (and a great deal of interest in the project) locally and internationally – with a large number of submissions received.

The presentation on the '**Divided God**' project demonstrated the importance of creating an open dialogue on the contentious issue of religious belief. The project offered a space for objectivity and reflection, which is inclusive, valuing discussion and opinions of both 'experts' and 'non-experts'. The project gave participants of different ages, gender and ethnicity the opportunity to eliminate prejudices about religious communities and gain a greater understanding and empathy with people who hold different beliefs.

As **Brankica Petkovič** expressed it: building coalitions between people, between media, artists or institutions is vital in breaking down the wall of isolation and ignorance; it is important not just to patronise people of a different culture but to learn acceptance.

SHARED SPACE, SHARED VALUES, COMPLEX IDENTITIES

The second day focused on the idea of finding common ground between different people and communities by addressing environmental issues.

The '**BITI / Being**' project aimed to increase the environmental awareness of the young with topics such as healthy eating, keeping their campus clean, recycling and re-using waste. The project gave pupils an awareness of good environmental principles in their daily lives, but also reached out into the local community through media work and festival events with messages about responsible consumption. A summer school and exchange with students in Bosnia and Serbia gave the project an international and intercultural dimension.

The topic of environmental care and responsible cohabitation as a factor in overcoming cultural differences and conflicts was also tackled through presentations by practitioners based in Austria, Denmark, Slovenia and Serbia. They discussed environmental care and recycling in their local contexts, emphasising the need to 'act local and think global'. This was particularly made explicit in the example given by **Bent Blindbaek** of Fair Denmark, a project which recycles old computers from local businesses and institutions for use in educational contexts in Malawi. These were projects - as was pointed out by **Sabine Frank** - which addressed the difficulty of cultural differences by firstly addressing the topic of environmental care. Environmental topics were embedded in activities, which could appeal to young people – whether film-making, dance, or bicycle-building. This was also described as "intercultural work through the back door" by **Chris Torch** in his summary, where the focus was to build community on a sense of shared space, rather than on a particular ethnic or cultural background.

During the day participants visited a public art project created by Bulgarian artist **Venelin Shuralov** on the outskirts of the city and opened in 2011 – a new park with trees planted in the shape of a labyrinth and conceived as a new meeting place for communities, young and old.

The final presentation on the second day focused on a research project - **Education for Intercultural Relations** - recently undertaken by the Slovenian Migration Institute at the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts. This was the first research of its kind in Slovenia, examining how people cope with intercultural relations in everyday life, looking for good practice in the field of education. The added value of the project was the establishment of a

network of practitioners. As with many of the other projects discussed during the Practice Exchange, the presenters stressed the value of ensuring good documentation of the work. In this instance, the results of the work were disseminated through seminars, publications and comprehensive web resources.

The Practice Exchange concluded with a public forum, about the value of developing intercultural competences. This was moderated by **Chris Torch**, inviting comments and reflections from participants and additional guests involved in local politics.

Želimir Žilnik noted Slovenia had a great potential for embracing and practicing multi-cultural dialogue given its experiences and connections from the former diversity of Yugoslavia. He felt the problem was that the political parties did not recognise this potential, relying on nationalist rhetoric and creating a climate of fear.

The responsibilities of politicians to be a positive role model to their society were highlighted, along with the question of our own personal willingness to be changed in the process of meeting someone from a different culture and background. The value of continually creating opportunities for dialogue between different cultures and perspectives was endorsed by participants. Whether through a recycling initiative or a media skills training project, in bringing different people together, in exploring and sharing concerns, these projects helped deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices.

The question of visibility of a minority community - as a first step to recognition as an equal - was a constant theme. As **Tarafa Baghajati** expressed it: "Do we want a Europe of exclusion or inclusion, a Europe of accepting each other, or a Europe of refusing each other?"

Ahmed Ahkim noted that people working together on common challenges – as exemplified by the environmental projects shown on the second day - was an example of using classic mediation and conflict resolution techniques.

The meeting was conducted in English; interpretation between English and Slovene was only available for the session on Roma inclusion in public life.

Conclusion

The event in Ljubljana offered participants a stimulating mix of 22 individual presentation, two film showings, a theatre performance, a study visit and a public forum. The presentations are represented as fully as possible in this report. They provide a valuable insight into practice and personal experiences of practitioners working with intercultural issues.

The participants of the Practice Exchange acknowledged that it was of great value to have gained an understanding of the presented projects - all of which illustrated a range of constructive partnerships and intercultural practices. It was noted that a lot of this work deserves a wider profile, and that there is an opportunity here to utilise resources such as the Platform's intercultural resource collection 'Panorama'.

The variety of presentations offered examples of tools to tackle social injustice and methodologies for organisations and institutions to engage with the minorities in their midst. They also demonstrated how to build effective coalitions and partnerships, develop intercultural skills and competences and share ways of disseminating documentation of good practice. In profiling their processes and problems, their methods and results, these two days of discussion and dialogue offered individuals and organisations both a source of inspiration, and a resource for the transformation of their own practice, which can be disseminated through their own networks.



1. Nataša Brajdič 2. Members of Kud Pozitiv 3. Mayor of Ljubljana, Zoran Janković 4. Audience
5. Divided God film 6. Brankica Petković 7. Drago Pintarič 8. Šarenka Hudorovac 9. Dženi Rostohar
10. Bara Kolenc 11. Mateja Demšič 12. Radovan Jaušovec 13. Nedžad Grabus



1. Tarafa Baghajati 2. Discussion in progress 3. Ahmed Ahkim 4. Mirjam Hladnik Milharčič
5. Bent Blindbaek 6. Anton Baloh 7/8. Study visits to Labirint umetnosti / Labyrinth of art
9. Stojan Pelko 10. Chris Torch

The Platform for Intercultural Europe's Practice Exchanges as a Series

Practice Exchanges for Intercultural Capacity-Building are an activity format of the Platform for Intercultural Europe which is based on the policy paper it elaborated through public consultation in the course of 2007/8: "*The Rainbow Paper. Intercultural Dialogue – from Practice to Policy and back*"⁶. This document contains four chapters of recommendations, which the Platform for Intercultural Europe put forward at the end of the *European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008*. The Practice Exchanges are designed to address the issues of the Rainbow Paper's chapter II on building capacity for intercultural dialogue in (civic) organisations. This chapter makes recommendations on reviewing staff compositions and governance structures, serving constituencies, growing intellectual resources and advancing through comparison in a European perspective.

A number of Practice Exchanges have already taken place⁷:

- In Malmö, southern Sweden on 15/16th July 2009: This brought together professionals from artistic and cultural organisations from across the Nordic region. It was hosted by the Nordic Forum for Interculture.
- In Vienna, Austria on 20/21st November 2009: This brought together representatives from the cultural sector and from minority and migrants' rights organizations. It was hosted by *IG Kultur Österreich*.
- In Rome, Italy on 28/29th May 2010: This brought together representatives from trade unions and other civil society organisations. It was hosted by the Italian Trade Union Confederation CGIL.
- In Sidcup, London, UK on 15/16th December 2010: This brought together theatre practitioners, arts consultants, anti-discrimination activists and academics to discuss the position of ethnic minorities in the arts in the United Kingdom. It was hosted by Border Crossings and the Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance

Basic Concept

The core topic of Practice Exchanges is the intercultural adaptation of civic organisations to growing population diversity, which is a result of migration and/or the existence of indigenous minorities. However, depending on local specificities, intercultural project work, especially if it is conceived as a contribution to systemic change, can also be the subject of Practice Exchanges.

Given the Platform for Intercultural Europe's political role in the EU cultural policy domain, we are particularly interested in relevant practice in the cultural sector, but especially where collaborations with other sectors are evident.

The concept of Practice Exchanges recognises the urgent need to enable and facilitate dialogue about how different people and groups make sense of their experiences. This concept builds on the principle that intercultural dialogue is a democratic process that requires and enhances participants' competences for democratic engagement. Furthermore, the Practice Exchanges reflect the obligations and aspirations of the European Union by valuing diversity and by seeking common solutions, which can be also adapted to local situations.

⁶ See <http://rainbowpaper.labforculture.org/signup/>

⁷ For the reports on the Platform's Practice Exchanges please go to the "Past Activities" section of our website: www.intercultural-europe.org



Images of '15th Warrior', a performance piece by Kud Pozitiv's Pozitiv Theater, which takes as its starting point a post-apocalyptic world of environmental degradation, with only male survivors. Participants of the Practice Exchange enjoyed this piece at the beginning of a networking evening at Kreatorij, Dijaški dom Ivana Cankarja (Ljubljana boarding house for 600 pupils aged 15-19 from all areas of Slovenia). The evening also featured a musical performance and the screening of a selection of short documentary films by DZMP (Society of Allies for Soft Landing).

*This report was written by Brendan Jackson
on behalf of the Platform for Intercultural Europe
www.brendanjackson.co.uk*

Editor: Sabine Frank



This project is funded with support from the European Commission. It does not reflect the views of the European Commission and the latter cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



The Platform for Intercultural Europe acknowledges the support of the European Cultural Foundation.