



# BETWEEN LABELING AND NEGLECT

*The role of youth organizations in fostering  
intercultural understanding and tolerance among  
young people in Macedonia*

**Annemarie Vast**

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**Supervisor:** dr. Stijn Sieckelincx

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**Student no:** 4273923

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**Utrecht University**





## **Abstract**

This article examines the role of youth non-governmental organizations [NGOs] in fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance among young people in Macedonia. To this day ethnic tensions remain between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians. Previous studies have shown that the organization of extra-curricular intercultural activities generally is left to the non-governmental organizations in Macedonia. Grounded in the belief that intergroup contact can reduce prejudice, this study therefore focuses on the realization of interethnic contact by youth non-governmental organizations. Taken together researchers Allport and Pettigrew formulated five conditions that must be met for intergroup contact to result in greater intercultural understanding and tolerance. These conditions guide the examination of the practice of youth organizations. Within this qualitative analyses perceptions and experiences of both youth organizations and young people are taken into account. The findings show that youth NGOs range from not realizing interethnic activities at all, to working on interethnic relations in an explicit, direct manner. This study suggests that youth organizations in some cases may be overemphasizing diversity, and attempts to make practical suggestions that could improve current practice.

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**Key words:** interethnic relations, intergroup contact theory, youth, Republic of Macedonia

## **Samenvatting**

In dit artikel wordt de rol onderzocht van niet-gouvernementele jongerenorganisaties in het kweken van intercultureel begrip en tolerantie onder jongeren in Macedonië. Tot op de dag van vandaag heersen er etnische spanningen tussen de etnische Albanezen en Macedoniërs. Uit eerder onderzoek blijkt dat de organisatie van buitenschoolse interculturele activiteiten over het algemeen wordt overgelaten aan de niet-gouvernementele organisaties [NGO's] in Macedonië. Geworteld in de overtuiging dat contact tussen groepen de onderlinge vooroordelen kan verminderen, richt deze studie zich op de realisatie van interetnisch contact door jongerenorganisaties. Tezamen formuleren onderzoekers Allport en Pettigrew vijf voorwaarden waaraan moet worden voldaan wil contact tussen groepen resulteren in meer intercultureel begrip en tolerantie. De praktijk van jongerenorganisaties is onderzocht met behulp van deze voorwaarden voor contact. In deze kwalitatieve analyse werden de opinies en ervaringen van zowel jongerenorganisaties als jongeren in acht genomen. Uit de resultaten bleek dat de praktijk van jongeren NGO's sterk uiteenloopt, namelijk van het niet realiseren van interetnische activiteiten, tot het werken aan interetnische relaties op een duidelijke en directe manier. Deze studie suggereert dat de jongerenorganisaties in sommige gevallen diversiteit te veel benadrukken, en doet praktische suggesties die de huidige praktijk zou kunnen verbeteren.



# INTRODUCTION

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, hereafter referred to as (Republic of) Macedonia, is a small landlocked country in South Eastern Europe, bordering Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. Following the disruption of the Yugoslav federation Macedonia gained independence in 1991. Macedonia was considered as the 'success story' of the Balkan, as it gained independence rather peacefully in contrast with the violence that erupted in the rest of the Balkan. Nevertheless Macedonia faced similar interethnic tensions after gaining independence (Czaplinski, 2008; Ortakovski, 2001; Petroska-Beska & Najcevska, 2004). The country's population is made up of roughly two-thirds of ethnic Macedonians, one-quarter of ethnic Albanians and a mix of Turks, Roma and Serbs. The division between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians is mainly based on language, although the communities have also been separated along lines of religion, with ethnic Albanians being predominantly Muslim and Macedonians being predominantly Orthodox. Next to language and religion the two groups are also socially, economically and politically divided (Petroska-Beska & Najcevska, 2004; Tankersley, 2001). An example of this division is the existence of Macedonian and Albanian political parties.

After the break-up of the Yugoslav federation, Macedonian authorities promised Albanians and other nationalities an equal treatment. While Macedonians and ethnic Albanians lived together rather peacefully, structural inequalities persisted (Petroska-Beska & Najcevska, 2004). In neighbouring country Kosovo ethnic tensions resulted in a war between Serbians and Ethnic Albanians in 1999 (Tankersley, 2001). Partly due to the great amount of Albanian refugees entering Macedonia ethnic tensions rose to an all-time high in 2001, resulting in an armed conflict between armed Albanians and Macedonian security forces. This conflict lasted for seven months. Pressured by the international community to end the fighting, in the same year the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed. In the Ohrid Framework Agreement it was set out that the Albanian minority should gain more power and get greater recognition of their language (Anger, van 't Rood & Gestakovska, 2010; Petroska-Beska & Najcevska, 2004).

Although the Ohrid Framework Agreement put an end to the armed violence between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians ethnic tensions remain until today. The interethnic relations between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians are still characterized by unease and mistrust. They tend to live in more or less separate social, cultural and economic environments; living side by side and not disturbing each other. Considering that contact between different groups can foster intercultural understanding and respect, the fact that there is little contact between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians is discouraging to say the least (Anger et al., 2010; Czaplinski, 2008).

### *Education in interethnic environments*

In accordance with Daswani (2004) who argues that educational systems reflect the socio-political make-up of societies, the education system reflects the segregation between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians. Part of the Ohrid Framework was the agreement that every ethnic group that consists of more than 20% of the population either nationally or in local communities has the right to have education in his mother tongue (Anger et al., 2010). While the focus throughout the years following the conflict in 2001 has been mostly on the division between the ethnic Albanians and Macedonians, it is not only Albanians who have the opportunity to attend separate classes at preschool, primary, secondary and high school levels. Full curricula are also offered in Turkish and Serbian (International Crisis Group, 2011). The focus on ethnic Albanians and Macedonians is understandable though, as research of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE] has shown that secondary school students of Albanian and Macedonian ethnicity express by far the most negative feelings for each other in comparison to young people with other ethnic backgrounds (OSCE, 2010).

Osler (2004) argues that schools can play a part in teaching children and young people how to live together in a cultural diverse society. Many recognize that there are two faces of education in multicultural communities. Education can either foster interethnic relations or reinforce conflict (Czaplinski, 2008; Osler, 2004; Petroska-Beska & Najcevska, 2004). Schools thus have a major challenge on its hands in avoiding interethnic conflict in communities in Macedonia. Considering that children often study in separate shifts or even in separate buildings, if left unchanged, the schools will only contribute to the segregation (International Crisis Group, 2011). Even in ethnically mixed schools the lack of communication between Macedonian and Albanian students is obvious. This lack of communication allows for different notions of history to be taught. In addition language is becoming more of an obstacle over time. Leading to misunderstandings between the two groups on many levels. Anger and colleagues (2010) even speak of the risk of English becoming the language of communication between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians, as already is the case in Kosovo between ethnical Serbs and Albanians.

In addition to language, prejudice and violence are among the most pressing issues in relation to education. In the past several years an increase in violent incidents was noted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in and around schools. To gain a better understanding of prevailing perceptions and attitudes among young people, the OSCE therefore conducted a survey among secondary school students in 2010. This survey showed that there is great variety in attitudes among students towards peers of different ethnic backgrounds. The lack of reciprocity in terms of positive feelings was one of the major findings. Results showed that while one third of the ethnic Albanian students report positive feelings for Macedonian students, only thirteen percent shared the same feelings towards Albanian students (OSCE, 2010). The OSCE

was one of the organizations that responded to the increase of school violence by initiating projects aiming at the improvement of school safety. Among the projects they organized were for example conflict-resolution trainings and mediation activities (OSCE, 2015).

As García states, this challenge of working on interethnic tolerance and integration should not be restricted to formal education, because *(1) the educational process is a lifelong process, and (2) educational processes are increasingly reaching and taking place in non-formal educational sectors and are even playing a decisive role in the set-up of many educational and social mechanisms* (García, as cited in Lafraya, 2011, p. 18).

Educational processes can be categorized in three different types, namely formal, non-formal and informal education. For matters of clarity the three different types will be shortly discussed, though one should keep in mind that this division is in fact not that clear-cut as all forms are complementary in nature (Lafraya, 2011).

First of all, formal education is defined by the European Commission as taking place in a distinct, institutionalized environment with specialized staff and a strict category of learners. Formal education is often compulsory. Informal education is regarded as non-purposive learning in everyday life. It is generally not even thought of as learning (Chisholm, as cited in Lafraya, 2011). Non-formal education is regarded as comprising the voluntary learning that takes place in a diverse range of environments. In these environments, learning is not necessarily the main activity. Non-formal education covers learning fields such as youth work, cultural-, sports- or environmental associations, voluntary service or training for example (Lafraya, 2011).

### *Young people in Macedonia*

Youth (15-30 years old) constitute approximately 23% of the total population. Even though Macedonian youngsters are facing serious challenges with regard to employment, housing, independence and participation (Kirkovski, 2011), the youth sector in Macedonia is still underdeveloped. Youth issues are very low on the social and political agenda (OSCE, 2014). There are almost no studies or official reports on the state of youth in the Republic of Macedonia (Markovska-Spasenovska & Nashkovska, as cited in Korunovska Srbijanko, Korunovska Avramovska & Maseska, 2012). Research of Korunovska Srbijanko and colleagues (2012) indicates that Macedonian youth shows a high level of apathy, detachment and separation of their communities. Almost half of the high-school students wish to leave the country within 10 years of time. The students neither have faith in their ability to change the situation in their country, nor in the ability of the government to do so. While discontent can spark youth activism, this research shows that the opposite is true for many Macedonian youngsters. This research may be outdated however, as the amount of students protests in the past half year indicates that young people do take action.

The discontent of young people with the current situation is not ungrounded, when one considers that young people in Macedonia are usually at the margins of the main governmental, social and educational policies (OSCE, 2014). It was only in 2005 when the first attempt was made by the government to contribute to the improvement of the situation of youth by establishing a National Youth Strategy.

The main governmental body that is in charge of the youth domain is the Agency for Youth and Sports [AfYS]. They are an independent body with their own budget and responsibilities and do not fall under any ministry, which means that they report directly to the Prime Minister (Kirkovski, 2011). The AfYS was also responsible for designing the National Youth Strategy.

In the National Youth Strategy (2005-2015) youth is defined as the population aged between 15 and 24 years old. Crowover (2009) argues that young people are often the most resilient in adapting to changes in post-conflict situations, as well as often among the main victims of conflict. This view on youth can also be recognized in the National Youth Strategy. It is indicated that young people are particularly vulnerable to socio-economic changes in society, but are at the same time recognized as a valuable resource for young people are often more critical and urge for change and future progress. However, in light of the recent socio-economic crises they recommend that any serious youth action or program take into account the age group 24 to 30 as well, because of the many obstacles they face in developing as active and responsible individuals (AfYS, 2005).

Eight different domains are discussed in the National Youth Strategy, namely education, youth self-employment and support prior to employment, life quality, health and prevention, youth participation, youth information, culture and local youth work. As number one of the action priorities within the youth dimension the Agency for Youth and Sports lists 'the social development and social integration of young people by means of quality formal and non-formal education'. With regard to social integration the following objectives are set out:

- (1) Build active, democratically oriented and responsible citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, (2) promote ethics of peace, tolerance and co-habitation among young people, (3) eliminate the segregation in the schools of young people of different socio-cultural origins, and (4) promote informal education in the schools (AfYS, 2005, p.5).

Among strategies to accomplish these objectives, the Agency for Youth and Sports suggests the introduction of integrative extra-curricular activities in ethnically mixed schools, inter-school cooperation in organizing extra-curricular activities or sports activities for example. They stress that special emphasis within these activities should be on interethnic cooperation. Besides discussing the responsibility of schools in organizing these kinds of activities they also state that schools should be open to civil programs organized by non-governmental organizations [NGOs]. The Agency for Youth and Sports (2005) encourages the cooperation between schools and youth



NGOs when aiming on improving the quality of extra-curricular programs and out of school activities.

The attention to social integration and interethnic cooperation, as well as the link sought between schools and (youth) NGOs is a positive element of the strategy. As was mentioned before, the organization of intercultural or interethnic activities is generally left to NGOs (International Crisis Group, 2011). However throughout whole South Eastern Europe there exist only a few well financed organizations. Most organizations are organized in a similar way, with only one or two paid staff with the rest being voluntary youth workers (Crownover, 2009). The cooperation that is sought between youth NGOs and schools may offer a solution in this regard.

Although from the National Youth Strategy it appears that the AfYS recognizes the issues that are of importance within the field of youth and interethnic learning, the strategy has been under a lot of criticism by the youth sector. This is mostly due to the lack of implementation and monitoring (OSCE, 2014). Only one action plan has been created in 2009 and youth organizations indicate that there is a lack of knowledge and support for the implementation of the strategies. The Agency for Youth and Sports finances youth projects through open competitions, however, their budget is limited. In 2010 due to the economic crisis they were not able to support any projects. The last couple of years a lot of money has been put in the realization of sports facilities, which significantly limits the available budget for the youth department within the Agency for Youth and Sports. On a local level no system for financial support can be found (Kirkovski, 2011). This severely limits the possibilities of youth NGOs. Considering that many scholars argue that young people can act as peacemakers in their community and promote intercultural understanding (e.g. UNESCO, n.d.), this lack of support is reason for concern. Especially since the opposite can be true if young people are neglected and no social integration activities are provided, as Fischer (as cited in Crownover, 2009) points out.

#### *Non-formal education in Macedonia*

The Republic of Macedonia has a wide variety of youth non-governmental organizations operating within the country, some focusing on social and recreational opportunities for young people, others focused on environment or culture for example. The term youth non-governmental organizations is used because it refers to all types of youth organizations, youth led as well as youth serving organizations (Crownover, 2009). Considering that the organization of (extra-curricular) intercultural activities is generally left to NGOs (International Crisis Group, 2011), non-formal education definitely has potential to bridge the ethnic divide in Macedonia. Since young people spend almost half of their waking time in voluntary activities, such as sports or school clubs (Larson & Verma, as cited in Korunovska Srbijnako et al., 2012), the role of youth NGOs should not be underestimated. The research of OSCE into perceptions of high-school

students has shown that more than 80% of the young people are interested in participating in extra-curricular activities with students from other ethnic backgrounds (OSCE, 2010).

### *Design of interethnic activities*

Killen, Rutland & Ruck (2011) argue that intervention programs in the context of discrimination and prejudice should be informed by developmental theory. Therefore they describe a developmental framework that they consider necessary in the creation of such intervention programs. Already from a very young age people are able to make judgments about fairness, groups, individuality and personal choice (Nucci, as cited in Killen et al., 2011). Children are confronted with conflicting messages about individuals based on group membership. Group membership can be based on gender, race, ethnicity or culture for example. Through their own experiences and world interpretations children make sense of these message about individuals.

People surrounding the child are an important source in this process of 'making sense' of conflicting messages. Besides adults, peers are also influential actors in the lives of children, therefore one of the recommendations for interventions by Killen and colleagues (2011) is related to peer relationships. According to Tropp and Prenovost (as cited in Killen, Rutland & Ruck, 2011) peer relationships and especially cross-group friendships are an important factor in reducing discrimination. This is based on the same principle as the one that Rodenborg and Huynh (2006) set out, namely that a lack of knowledge about the 'other' can breed prejudice. Limited interaction between people from different ethnic background in a segregated society can result in stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. Logically, increased interaction can possibly bridge the divide between different groups.

There are several authors who have researched and theorized this principle. Allport (as cited in Pettigrew, 1998) is one of the most well-known authors who researched this topic. He has set out the so-called 'contact theory' which builds on this principle of fostering intercultural understanding through increased contact. Allport argues that intergroup contact can have positive effects, however, only when this contact satisfies certain conditions. According to Allport's theory the following four conditions should be met in order for the intergroup contact to have positive effects: equal status among participants, common goals, intergroup cooperation and the support of authorities, law or custom (in Pettigrew, 1998). According to Pettigrew (1998) one condition should be added to this list, namely 'friendship potential'. This condition indicates that the contact situation is supposed to provide an opportunity for the participants to become friends. It implies that there has to be a potential for repeated contact over a variety of contexts and there should be close interaction.

# RESEARCH DESIGN

In the previous chapter it has become clear that quite a lot of research attention has gone out to interculturalism within educational contexts. When it comes to the context of Macedonia many authors refer to the lack of communication between Macedonian and Albanian people. Although García (as cited in Lafraya, 2011) indicates that there is a tendency to focus on formal education within research, it is recognized that the non-formal sector also deserves attention. Considering that youth NGOs are one of the most important actors in organizing interethnic activities within the non-formal sector in Macedonia (International Crisis Group, 2011), in my view it would be valuable to examine the role of youth NGOs in overcoming prejudice among young people. In general Macedonian youth has received little (research) attention (Kirkovski, 2011), and to date no research on youth non-governmental organizations and interethnic relations appears to have been done in Macedonia. This study is an attempt to fill that gap.

This paper aims to increase our knowledge on the role of youth non-governmental organizations in 'planting the seeds of peace' in young people in Macedonia. The research is supposed to give insight into the extent to which youth NGOs are concerned with organizing interethnic youth activities, how these activities are designed and what kind of obstacles can be identified in the organization of interethnic activities. The contact theory of Allport provides the theoretical framework for this examination. The five conditions as defined by Allport and Pettigrew will be kept in mind when reviewing the design of interethnic activities of youth NGOs. These conditions will act as a base of reference for the quality of the activities.

The research question that is central to this research is: 'To what extent do youth non-governmental organizations have a role in fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance among young people in Macedonia?'. The following set of sub questions is supposed to help answering the central research question:

- How do youth non-governmental organizations perceive their own role in regard to interethnic relations within youth work?
- How do youth non-governmental organizations contribute to the realization of interethnic contact among young people in Macedonia?
- How do young people that are involved with youth non-governmental organizations perceive the issue of ethnic segregation in their environment?
- What are young people's experiences with interethnic contact within youth non-governmental organizations in Macedonia?

The first sub question is designed to examine the perceptions of the youth organizations themselves when it comes to improving interethnic relations among young people. The second question is meant to shed light on the actual practice, including the design of youth activities. The

third question will help to examine the relevance of the work of youth organizations when it comes to working on interethnic relations. Finally, the fourth question will shed light on the work of youth organizations as seen from the viewpoint of the youngsters. The intention is that the sub questions uncover the views and experiences of both young people and youth organizations to obtain a full picture of the situation.

Qualitative methods can be very helpful in exploring a problem, honoring the voices of different participants, mapping the complexity of the situation and retrieving multiple perspectives (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). In qualitative research there is often more room to build trust and gain more in-depth insight in an issue. Therefore qualitative methods were considered to be most suitable for this research, with semi-structured interviews as the main research method. Within the range of interviewing techniques that are more or less formal, semi-structured interviews are often regarded as in between both ends (Bernard, 2011). To some extent the interview is structured, because the interviewer has decided on topics that he or she would like to discuss. On the other hand there is room for variation as the questions are not set beforehand, which allows for the interviewer to dive deeper into certain interesting issues that come up. It is therefore a well-suited method when there is limited time for data collection as is the case in this research.

#### *Procedure*

As the sub questions indicate, two groups can be distinguished in this research, namely youth non-governmental organizations and young people. This first group of respondents was rather easy to find because of available information of the OSCE and the list of the National Youth Council and the Agency of Youth and Sports of youth non-governmental organizations that are registered in Macedonia. The OSCE Mission to Skopje assisted in selecting youth organizations, as they had knowledge on which of the registered youth organizations were still active. The second group was more difficult to reach. Snowball sampling was used for this matter. In this sampling technique one asks every respondent to come up with new possible respondents (Bernard, 2011). The goal was to continue interviewing people until no new information is presented by the respondents, thus reaching a point of information saturation. Although time was a restriction herein.

To get more acquainted with the sector of non-governmental organizations in Macedonia an orientation phase was included in which more informal duo-interviews and a group discussion took place. Together with a colleague of the Youth Department of the OSCE two meetings were held. One of these meetings was with the National Youth Council, a youth umbrella organization, the others were with youth NGOs in Skopje and Kumanovo. Later two semi-structured interviews were held with two youth NGOs in Skopje in order to further explore the variety of experiences

and make the final adjustments of the topic list. The information gathered in these meetings contributed to the final design of a topic list for the interviews.

In the next phase eleven staff members of youth non-governmental organizations were interviewed, representing eight different youth NGOs. Two duo-interviews took place and at one organization two separate interviews were held. There was a close to equal representation of men and women in the sample, as the group of respondents consisted of six women and five men. When it comes to ethnical background most staff members were Macedonian. Seven of the respondents were Macedonian and only four were Albanian. While the goal was to interview youth organizations all across the country, most of the organizations were located in Skopje. Only two organizations were located in Tetovo and one in Prilep. Different types of organizations were included, that offer youngsters volunteering-, cultural-, or educational opportunities. It is important to note that within the group of interviewed organizations, some do not only work with young people. They also work with younger children for example, or focus on all age-categories. All will be referred to as youth organizations nonetheless.

In addition to interviewing staff members, interviews were held with young people. The group of young people that were reached through snowball sampling consisted of eight respondents, four young women and four young men. Slightly more Macedonians were included as five respondents were of Macedonian and three of Albanian ethnicity. The age range of the respondents was from 19 till 27 years old. Similar to the sample of youth organizations most respondents were from Skopje. Only two respondents were from different cities, namely from Kumanovo and Tetovo.

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. During the meetings and interviews in the first phase of the research only notes were made. These notes were also digitalized and coded. This kind of analysis is quite labor-intensive and can be quite subjective as themes are never found based on only text. The researcher's previously acquired knowledge influences the themes he or she will identify (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). However, an advantage of this technique is that it allows the researcher to uncover big themes that are hidden within the details and nuances of a text. A qualitative research program called MAXQDA was used to digitally code the transcripts.

The identified themes helped to uncover the main perceptions and experiences of youth organizations and young people. Many researchers have tested the conditions of the intergroup contact theory with surveys or experiments (Pettigrew, 1998). In this research a different approach is taken, as the conditions are guiding the analyses of the findings. This way the role of youth organizations in fostering interethnic relations among young people is examined.

### *Research limitations*

Before discussing the findings of this study, it is important to reflect on several limitations of this research design as it shows in what light the findings should be considered and how this research could be improved.

First of all, an often mentioned limitation of qualitative research is that it is difficult to generalize the findings to a larger population. Combining quantitative and qualitative research methods can contribute to gaining a more comprehensive account of the situation and enables the researcher to triangulate findings in order to see if they correspond (Bryman, as cited in Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Although there was no room to include a quantitative component in this study, it should be considered in future research as it would increase the external validity.

In addition it should be recognized that the size of the sample was small. Because time was limited no more respondents could be included. Although in the last interviews with both youth organizations and young people little new information came forward, it may be that the point of information saturation was not reached. Besides discussing the size of the sample, it is important to reflect on the respondents that were included. Although the aim was to include youth organizations and youngsters from all over Macedonia, all respondents originated from the north-western part of Macedonia, with a majority residing in Skopje. In addition the study focused on Macedonians and Albanians and did not incorporate respondents with other ethnic backgrounds. However, it is important to note that many researchers have the same focus, because the greatest tensions are still between Macedonians and Albanians that mostly live together in the north-western part of Macedonia. This is also the area where the conflict arose in 2001. In addition Skopje offers the most work, leisure, social and cultural events and is a desirable place to live for many youngsters (Topuzovska Latkovic, Borota Popovska, Serafimovska & Cekic, 2013). A great majority of the youth organizations in Macedonia is thus also located in Skopje and its surrounding area.

# RESULTS

As discussed in the previous chapter, the purpose of this study was to examine the role of youth non-governmental organizations in fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance among young people with different ethnic backgrounds. A set of four sub questions was formulated in order to guide this research. In this chapter the findings will be discussed accordingly. To ensure anonymity all used names of youth respondents are fictional.

## Sub question 1: *The role of youth non-governmental organizations*

Considering that a great variety exist among the interviewed youth NGOs in their vision and mission, it may be no surprise that there was also a great variety in the responses when asked about their thoughts on the role of youth organizations in improving interethnic relations. Some feel that it is exactly because of their work focusing on youth, they can play an important role. They argue that young people can be molded, their ideas can still be influenced, and they can set the example for others. Youth Can for example reflects on the ideas of older people in contrast with younger people: [for the older people] *it's much more difficult to change their perspective. They have lived like sixty years with that thinking. But when you are much younger, you can see that there is more than just ethnicity and, you can change your thinking. And with young people, joining these NGOs, they can write this call for tolerance, so to say.* (interview Youth Can, 16-04-2015).

Many youth NGOs feel that their work has made a contribution towards a more peaceful and tolerant society. Positive outcomes the youth NGOs mention are less violence in schools and neighborhoods and the development of interethnic friendships for example. However many also express remaining challenges. Youth organizations worry that the young people they reach may already be more open and tolerant in comparison with their peers. This might limit the effect of their work. Young people themselves express similar concerns. They indicate that not that many youngsters are active within the NGO sector. Besides limited youth activism, organizations also point towards the segregation in institutions and communities in general. One organization states: *It [our work] still has a small effect, because communities are still really segregated. Albanians and Macedonians go to different bars, different markets and different schools, or classes for that matter* (personal communication CID, 27-02-2015).

Another limitation that is mentioned by all youth organizations is the lack of support of authorities, like the municipality and the government. The lack of financial and organizational assistance limits the work of youth NGOs extensively. Currently most youth NGOs are dependent on international funds and therefore mostly do ad-hoc, short-term projects. To set up a fixed year-round program is difficult and for many organizations impossible as they have to tailor their projects to the prerequisites of available funds. Some therefore argue that at the moment only the

big, international organizations can really accomplish something in this field.

Though the effects of their work might be limited, no organization calls into question whether youth NGOs should work on this matter. They argue to have a leading role in working on interethnic relations among young people. According to them institutions set the wrong example, and lack the willingness to change the current situation. In this light many refer to the lack of interethnic contact and cooperation in several domains, like education or politics.

A couple of organizations have therefore decided to work more closely in cooperation with primary schools, high schools, universities or governmental bodies. This way they try to influence the institutional sphere. Loja is one of these organizations and explains: *After five years working in non-formal education we understood that the source of the division in Macedonia is institutions themselves. That's why we entered the universities, because when you look in curricula there the division is prominent, and when you look at the government and the institution, they promote hatred* (interview Loja, 15-04-2015). Other organizations cooperate with primary and high schools in the realization of their youth activities. One organization recently has shifted its focus completely towards the formal sector and works on mediation within schools for example.

When examining the main mission and vision as expressed by the organizations, it becomes apparent that the youth organizations can be divided in two groups. There are organizations that were established to work on interethnic relations in society and those that aim to work with young people in non-formal education activities. When one examines the practice of the organizations this division is not very strict as both types of organizations may organize workshops on intercultural dialogue or on CV writing for example.

Workshops on intercultural dialogue are an example of how some organizations work on interethnic relations. About one-third of the interviewed organizations works on this in a different manner. While they keep the ethnic diversity of the participants in mind when designing and executing youth activities, they prefer to work on interethnic relations in an indirect manner. One organization, the Youth Educational Forum, explains their approach: *They get to choose what to debate on, or what they organize an event on, on their own, and our approach to integration here is to ensure that there is an environment where the young people can meet each other, build tolerance, confidence and cooperation towards the matters that all of them care about. So there is no prefix saying we want an integrated club or something like that. But we do try to have it done.* (interview YEF, 07-04-2015). They occasionally step in and mix the groups, or choose statements for the debate club that somehow relate to ethnic diversity.

The main argument for taking up an indirect approach to interethnic relations, is that overemphasizing ethnic differences can actually strengthen the divide. They feel that their work should focus on the common issues that young people in Macedonia face with ethnic difference being just one of these issues. For many organizations it is difficult to find this balance between



paying attention to ethnic diversity and organizing activities that are simply of interest for young people. An example that illustrates this difficulty is the situation in which an organization experiences that the presence of Albanian translators, can cause Turkish participants to protest and ask for Turkish translators as well. While the translators are simply meant to facilitate the activity, it can actually emphasize the ethnic differences of the participants.

*Sub question 2: The realization of interethnic contact by youth organizations*

The previous paragraph showed that all organizations acknowledge the importance of paying attention to ethnic diversity in their work. As SEGA, a youth umbrella organization, points out: [...] *it's a fact, it's not something we can change, we live here and we have five different ethnic backgrounds in one city so you should consider this fact.* (interview SEGA, 14-04-2015). Even though many organizations align themselves with them, it became clear that they have different ideas on how to deal with this diversity. In this paragraph it will become clear that some organizations are not able to bring their ideas into practice at all.

Two out of ten youth organizations are not successful in bringing young people of Albanian and Macedonian backgrounds together. Many organizations have difficulty involving young Albanians, and many argue that language is an obstacle herein. But only the scouting organization regards language as such an impediment to cooperation that they have no mixed groups of Albanian and Macedonian children. They argue that simultaneous translation is out of the question because a great deal of their activities take place outdoors. Since there is no language barrier between Albanians and Turks, young people from these ethnic backgrounds are active within the organization in mixed groups. Although in fewer numbers than Macedonians. Their intention is to realize more interethnic scouting groups in the future.

When it comes to language, youth organizations deal with this in different ways. Some organizations make use of professional Albanian translators, others make sure to have someone present that speaks Albanian and only translate when asked. Simultaneous translation or occasional translations are preferred by most as it does not slow down the activity too much. Two organizations prefer to make the activity bilingual. One organization explains: [...] *we always have like two trainers there or at least a volunteer, like one trainer holds the first lecture in Macedonian, the second one in Albanian, but we don't divide and we don't use simultaneous translations, because we want to ensure that there is still dynamics within the group.* (interview YEF, 07-04-2015). Only one organization chooses to use English as the main language of communication when young people from different ethnicities are present.

Remarkable is that in contrast to youngsters, many organizations regard language as the main obstacle in realizing interethnic contact. Only a couple of organizations refer to the influence of parents or teachers as problematic. Partly for this reason, some organizations seek cooperation with schools. Few, however, believe that it is feasible to involve parents in their work.

### Sub question 3: *Ethnic diversity in the daily environment of young people*

Although the focus of this research is on non-formal education, the findings discussed in the next section will discuss how young people perceive ethnic diversity in their daily environment. Since for many youngsters the school environment makes up a large part of their daily life, this paragraph will pay more attention to formal education. Other aspects that will be discussed relate to the family sphere and the social or political sphere.

From the interviews it becomes clear that young people experience ethnic diversity and the consequences of ethnic segregation on a regular base within different contexts. One of these contexts is education. Over half of the interviewed youth start to talk about their experiences within university, when asked about how they experience ethnic diversity in their daily life. Besides university being the environment where a lot of young people spend a big proportion of their time, it is also an environment that is not as much segregated as primary and high schools. For many it is during their studies they come into contact with young people of different ethnic backgrounds. They mention study friends that have a different ethnic background, or mixed study groups working together on projects.

While this sounds as if there are not that many problems within university, one Macedonian girl mentions that some students tend to form working groups with people from the same ethnic background. She explains: [...] *I think it's again about language because it's just maybe easier for them to communicate, for example when they are Turkish, to communicate in Turkish, and we would not understand that so they might have smaller groups and make discussions. But that does not mean they don't hang out with us.* (interview S. Jankulovska, 06-04-2015). In addition some youngsters indicate that there are a couple of universities that enroll either more Albanian or more Macedonian youth.

As the literature already indicates, this division is even stronger in primary and high schools and does not remain inside the school context. An Albanian girl states: *So Albanians and Macedonians don't mix. They don't. It is like in school and outside the school.* (A. Metarapi, 21-04-2015). Katarina, a Macedonian girl, illustrates how far this separation goes: *I mean we have different cafés, we have like Macedonian cafés and Albanian cafés, we have different boutiques, like Macedonian and Albanian. We even have different places to walk [...].* (interview K. Naglova, 15-04-2015). One concrete example of this spatial segregation in Skopje is the Stone bridge, dividing most of the ethnic Macedonians from the Albanians and Turks. That this separation affects the amount of interethnic contact is not in question. One Macedonian guy even admits that his first encounter with Albanian youngsters was at university, because he grew up in a completely Macedonian environment.

For some it is at university, for others through their involvement in NGOs that they come in (more regular) contact with young people of different ethnicities. While the youth expresses

mixed feelings about the segregation in formal education, all express the wish to bridge the divide in society. Murat, an Albanian guy, states: *If you just keep people segregated like the way things function here, that segregation is not going to solve the problem. People are still going to hate each other, maybe hang out once or twice or if you live to next to one another you will be nice to them, but you will still hate the others as a group. And yeah, it's not just, let's say life is not just about not being killed or killing others, it's much more than that. Or at least it should.* (interview M. Bahtiri, 21-04-2015). Some youngsters express that education in multiple languages should be kept in place as it benefits the quality of the education as well as the equality in rights. In general language is often referred to as an obstacle in bridging the divide in society.

When it comes to language almost all youngsters are on the same page. They regard language as a small obstacle that is easy to overcome. When living in Macedonia, everybody should speak Macedonian is the general opinion. Although both Macedonian and Albanian youngsters acknowledge the difficulties some Albanians have in expressing themselves in the Macedonian language no one feels that this is therefore the biggest problem to overcome. Katarina explains it as follows: *You know it's interesting, the language thing is the last thing you can use, because it's more of a social thing. For example like the conflict here in Tetovo, you use the language like an armor. You are like, okay I am not understanding you, or you speak my language or we do not communicate so we use it as an armor. To not overcome the problems that we have. But elementarily it's not the problem.* (interview K. Naglova, 15-04-2015).

Both youth organizations as youth often refer to willingness as the real, underlying problem. People lack the willingness to get to know each other, to empathize with others and to bridge the divide. According to the youth for a large part this is rooted in the upbringing of young people. Almost half of the youngsters refers to the influence of parents and family on the attitudes of young people. Two girls discuss that the example their parents set possibly influenced their own ideas.

Besides the influence of the family many refer to the bad example set by politicians and government officials. Adelina states: *[...] I don't really see a lot of them trying to bring people together.* (interview A. Metarapi, 21-04-2015). One Albanian guy takes it even further by stating that the ethnical problems and conflicts that arise are mostly political. He states: *[...] they [the politicians] have problems among them and then they have to make this the opinions of the masses through the media and that way, the masses of the population around here arise the conflict* (interview Z. Gjergji, 20-04-2015 ). Two youth organizations have clearly expressed similar thoughts, that politicians through the media not only give a bad example by using discriminating words, they also spark ethnical conflicts by continuously emphasizing the two sides, Macedonian and Albanian, us and them.

#### Sub question 4: *Young people's experience with interethnic contact within youth NGOs*

All young people agree that youth organizations can and should play a role in bringing young people of different ethnic backgrounds together. An Albanian girl states: *I think that the NGOs, their work with young people, organizing activities to bring people together, I think that helps a lot. To mix different ethnicities so they see and realize there is no big difference, like we are similar and we can communicate.* (interview A. Metarapi, 21-04-2015). For many youngsters their involvement in youth NGOs has been a great learning experience. Besides the skills and knowledge they gain from the activities, over half of the youngsters mention that their involvement has affected their opinions and attitudes towards other ethnical groups.

Many state that their experience has changed their perspective on things. Zamir, an Albanian guy explains: *[...] when you are not integrating with [others], you don't know about something and usually mistake the opinion of the others. You are close-minded in a way. And these whole activities and NGOs and seminars and trainings have helped me to see things in a different manner. I think and I believe that that is what this is all about. To get to a different perspective of things, to understand and to have cooperation among each other.* (interview Z. Gjergji, 20-04-2015). Many youngsters discuss how they are more tolerant now and more open to contact with others. They come to realize that the different ethnic groups have a lot in common.

While the lack of a common language is sometimes mentioned as an obstacle, the youth argues that the most important elements for success is having common goals and the willingness to cooperate. As Zamir states: *[...] now the reason for being integrated and being included in this youth activism it is not a matter of language, it is just a matter of will.* (interview Z. Gjergji, 20-04-2015). Within the NGO sector many youngsters seem to find peers that have similar interests, no matter their ethnic or religious background. Some argue that when you are working together within a project of a NGO interethnic friendships develop more easily. After successfully working together, hanging out is the easy part.

While the youngsters agree on many fronts, they have divergent ideas on how youth NGOs should realize interethnic youth activities. Some argue that organizations need to ensure the participation of young people from various ethnic backgrounds. As many NGOs either work with open calls or have limited places within their activities, youth organizations can decide on who to incorporate. One Macedonian girl strongly feels that organizations should not take your ethnic background into account as selection criterion, while some think that this might be necessary to realize interethnic activities. Either way, all youngsters argue that youth organizations should not 'label' neither the participants nor the activity as being interethnic. They believe that this would have a counter effect. Sonia explains: *I think that the tendencies not only in Macedonia but in entire Europe right now are that people stress more the sides that are negative of every relationship, but it probably is because the more we speak about getting together and being together, people feel the*

*need to be separated.* (interview S. Jankulovska, 06-04-2015). Most of the youngsters therefore prefer youth activities that only work on interethnic issues in an indirect manner.

While generally the young people are positive and optimistic about the development of the NGO sector and their influence on interethnic relations, some youngsters also express concerns. For example, an Albanian guy expresses his concerns about the youngsters that are not active: *It's just the youth, the new generations have less and less will to be included in this youth activism. That is kind of a problem now, because they do not find the motivation to be included and they do not find themselves as a part of the society, that can improve the society.* (interview Z. Gjergji, 20-04-2015). Although some of the youngsters try to influence their friends by sharing their experience, many feel that their influence is rather limited. One Macedonian girl gives an example of her friends that do not want to go out with her when she brings an Albanian friend. She states: *[...] you cannot teach anyone, I mean on 23 years I cannot tell someone you should hang out with Albanians they are good. But I am trying to prove them that's good, by my experience. By sharing my experiences.* (interview K. Naglova, 15-04-2015).



# ANALYSIS

In this chapter the findings will be discussed and analysed with help of the contact theory of Allport. As was set out in the beginning of this study, within the contact theory of Allport four conditions are discussed, an additional fifth one is suggested by Pettigrew. In order for interethnic contact to have positive effects the contact needs to fulfill these conditions. As this study aims to shed light on the extent to which youth organizations are able to positively influence interethnic relations among young people, the findings will be reviewed in light of the five conditions for intergroup contact.

## *Equal status among participants*

There are several aspects that could influence the status of participants. In the Macedonian context choices related to language can significantly influence the extent to which the youth participants feel equal. Since it is difficult to realize translators for all ethnic groups, one could argue that it is better for the youth NGOs to either create bilingual activities or to simply use the state language. Bush and Saltarelli (2000) indicate that in many cases the imposition of a dominant language on ethnic groups can be perceived by the ethnic groups as repressive. Remarkably, none of the Albanian youngsters have expressed this feeling, while most of the youth activities they participated in were held in Macedonian. In fact all young people express that language is not the biggest concern.

A more pressing issue in establishing an equal status among the participants might simply be the low number of Albanian youngsters that are active within youth organizations. Nevertheless all Albanians indicate that they have never felt subordinated to the others. They do indicate that some Albanians might be hesitant to get involved in an organization that is predominantly Macedonian and often need encouragement before freely expressing themselves in the Macedonian language. The choice of some NGOs to work with Albanian co-facilitators is therefore a strong one. While many organizations work with people of different ethnicities on the execution level, most organizations do not reflect the ethnical diversity on higher levels. This may however influence the extent to which the participants feel equal in the situation, as the organization in a way sets the example. This suggests that there is still room for improvement.

## *Common goals*

Pettigrew (1998) states that prejudice reduction will be obtained when the contact situation requires an active goal-oriented effort. Both youth organizations and young people agree that similar interests and common goals within the organization and the youth activities are a big necessity. Since the involvement of youth within the organizations is voluntary, generally this is not the issue. The theory suggests that activities that incorporate elements of team work and

competition furthers the positive outcomes. Among the youth NGOs there is one that organizes debating tournaments. This is a textbook example of how youth NGOs could incorporate the abovementioned elements. While many others promote teamwork within their activities, most organized youth activities seem to lack this competition element.

#### *Intergroup cooperation*

In a sense the condition of intergroup cooperation is a complement to the condition of attainment of common goals. As was mentioned above it is important that people work together in groups towards the same goal. An additional requirement is that within the group there is no competition. The findings show that young people can be hesitant in cooperating with peers that belong to a different ethnic group, either due to language or prejudices. However, many youngsters indicate that when they overcome these hesitations, they all cooperate and have fun together. While organizations mention an occasional incident among the participants, this is not noteworthy as it hardly occurs.

#### *Support of authorities, laws or custom*

Another important condition set out by Allport is the support of authorities, laws or custom. This condition uses words that are very comprehensive. Authorities can be understood as the government, the municipality, but in this case also could mean teachers or parents, as they are also authority figures for young people. In this analysis the term authority will be used in this broad sense, thus including teachers and parents.

The findings suggest that in general support is lacking within the youth sector. First and foremost financial support from the municipality or government is low. When one reflects on the laws that give ethnic minorities the right to follow education in their own language, this is also not necessarily beneficial for the situation as the education system in its current form only strengthens the divide. The government therefore has a big role in changing the situation for the better. Both youth organizations and young people indicate however, that these institutional authorities lack the willingness to change.

This lack of willingness is not only present within the institutional layer, but also among the young people. Research indicates that young people in general show a lack of engagement in their communities (Korunovska Srbijanko et al., 2012). The findings show that for some the discontent with the current situation in Macedonia sparks their motivation to be active in the youth sector, however the youngsters also indicate that not all peers follow their lead. Considering the many (student) protests that took place from the start of this year (Gjorgjioska, 2015), an attitude change among the Macedonian youngsters may be up ahead. Although it also shows that discontent with the government on multiple fronts is still evident.

Another important finding to discuss is the fact that many stereotypes and prejudices are



still present among the Macedonians. It seems to be that the custom still is to avoid interethnic contact. To break with this prevalent thinking will cost more time and effort, from more than just youth NGOs. The respondents indicate that both politicians and parents have a big role in the continuation of these negative attitudes of young people towards peers that have a different ethnic background. When it comes to the involvement of parents or family, youth organizations have room for improvement. Hardly any organizations make efforts to incorporate parents in their work.

### *Friendship potential*

The development of interethnic friendships is often mentioned by both youth organizations and young people as a positive outcome from the youth activities. However, when critically examining the work of youth organizations only a small number actually fulfills the friendship potential criteria of Pettigrew. Pettigrew (1998) explains that friendship potential within a contact situation implies a potential for repeated contact over a variety of contexts and close interaction. Since many youth organizations in Macedonia work with open calls and have ad-hoc projects young people do not necessarily meet on a regular base within the organization.

Since many youth organizations work with volunteers, this involvement may have the biggest friendship potential as they often have to work together within different projects. In addition two youngsters indicate that active youth often meets again within different projects organized by the NGO sector, as the sector is not that big and there are not that many youngsters active. While this may increase the friendship potential it is not necessarily a good sign, as it also indicates that not many youngsters are involved thereby lowering the impact of youth work.

Another matter in which the youth organizations still can make progress is related to what young people refer to as 'labeling'. The literature shows that in earlier stages of contact emphasizing the ethnical background is not preferred, as it is actually similarity that attracts people (Pettigrew, 1998). However, as the Macedonian Civic Education Centre rightly points out, being friends with someone from another ethnicity is not enough: *If I have five friends Albanians and they are my best friends and I don't respect the absent Albanian, that I have never met, then I cannot claim that I am fully integrated. I am exotically integrated, in friends, because friends they don't have ethnicity or gender background, they have the friendship background.* (interview MCEC, 21-04-2015). In a later stage it is therefore important that this ethnical background is noticed, as this will make it possible to extend the positive effects beyond the immediate contact situation. It will help young people to recategorize an ethnic group as a whole, instead of just having one friend that has another ethnical background. This whole process of decategorization, salient group categorization, and recategorization is discussed by Pettigrew (1998) and should be taken into account within youth work in order to maximize the positive effects of developed interethnic friendships.



## DISCUSSION

'To what extent do youth non-governmental organizations have a role in fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance among young people in Macedonia?', that is the question that was central to this study. Theory already suggested that there is a role for youth NGOs in fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance. Previous studies have shown that the organization of extra-curricular intercultural activities generally is left to the NGOs in Macedonia. This study shows that most youth non-governmental organizations are indeed concerned with organizing youth activities that relate to interculturalism or even are interethnic in nature. The findings suggested that interethnic youth activities positively influence the attitude and behaviour of young people. Whether there is a role for youth organizations in fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance among young people is thus beyond question. Analyses suggested, however, that the extent to which youth organizations can contribute to improving interethnic relations is somewhat restricted.

Allport and Pettigrew formulated several conditions that must be met for interethnic contact to contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance. Organizations do quite well in certain areas, for example when it comes to intergroup cooperation, common goals or the development of interethnic friendships. Though the analyses also show that there is still room for improvement. Some will argue that a lot of these improvements depend on the support from authorities, law or custom. It is true that it may be difficult to organize youth activities on a regular base if there is little financial support for youth organizations. Limited funds may also restrict the ability of organizations to hire translators or intercultural facilitators. Support of custom in the form of existing societal norms may be an even bigger obstacle in realizing interethnic activities, as many young people deal with conflicting messages about the value of interethnic contact. While these are all important factors that influence the contribution that youth organizations can make when it comes to improving interethnic relations, in my opinion focusing on this side of the story would detract from the responsibility of youth organizations themselves. It is important to note that some improvements can be made without financial or societal support.

The findings showed that youth NGOs range from not realizing interethnic activities at all, to working on interethnic relations in an explicit, direct manner. As Schell-Faucon (2001) rightfully points out there is a tension between recognizing and emphasizing diversity. This study suggests that youth organizations in some cases may be overemphasizing diversity, or 'labeling' as young people state. Just as the youngsters indicate, this could have the opposite effect. Research showed that (over)emphasizing diversity in early contact stages may strengthen the division along ethnic lines (Pettigrew, 1998). One could say that the optimal approach lies in between

labeling and neglect. In order to foster intercultural understanding among young people, ethnic differences should only be emphasized by youth organizations when a certain degree of mutual trust is built. This would enhance the benefits from formed interethnic friendships significantly.

Practice could also be improved by greater involvement of other educators, like parents, family members and school teachers. Some organizations already seek cooperation with schools, but parents and family members often remain out of sight, while all are important role models for the youngsters. If parents become more involved in the work of youth organizations, they may provide greater support of their work and extend the positive effects. Besides having attention for other role models, youth organizations should also be aware of the example they are giving themselves. If the staff of the organization is ethnically diverse and show good interethnic cooperation, this may be taken up by the youngsters as well.

Another area in which there is room for improvement is related to youth activism in Macedonia. Research has shown that only a small portion of the youth in Macedonia is actively engaged with their community (Korunovska Srbijanko et al., 2012). Based on this information some would argue that regardless of additional efforts made by youth organizations, the influence of their work on interethnic relations will remain limited, unless more youngsters become motivated to join youth organizations. It is important, however, to realize that positive attitudes can be transferred to others, as extended contact theory has proven (Dovidio, Eller & Hewstone, 2011). This is not to say that no further steps should be taken by youth organizations on this front, but taken all together the study gives reason to be positive.

With this research a contribution has been made to available research, as it expands our knowledge on the practice of youth non-governmental organizations in Macedonia and gives insight in what role they can have in improving interethnic relations. In this research contact theory guided the examination of the work of youth organizations with regard to interethnic relations. An attempt has been made to make practical suggestions that are theory-based, but as Pettigrew (2008) indicates himself, further research is needed to transform intergroup contact theory into an 'easily applied remedy' within institutional settings like that of youth work.

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