Interpreting identity impressions through community making: From Brussels' autonomous collective through the ethnic Albanian triangle

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ABSTRACT

This paper, as part of a study explores the reinvention of identity and culture through community making, specifically in the process of creation and way of functioning of autonomous temporal groups and intentional communities through socio-cultural spaces. The analysis makes use of a network of four different organized communities from Western and South-Eastern Europe, namely Toestand (Brussels, Belgium), Termokiss (Prishtina, Kosova), Space Tetova (Tetova, North Macedonia), with a specific focus on the performance of the project – event Uzina (Tirana, Albania). Through an ethnographic approach, based on active participant observation and interviews that are shown below, this research is an attempt to engage the participating members of the different groups in the construction of the thorough insight of the research. The patterns of intercultural contact and reflexive behaviors in this collective's endeavors, accentuate the complexity of relationships that arise in the course of the collaboration of the network and wider, revealing the 'agonistic' dynamics of Self and Other, West and East, unity and diversity, giver and receiver, hierarchy and equality, global and local, concentrating on new social movements and contemporary identity practices in Europe.

KEYWORDS:

community making, culture, identity, autonomous, collective, social movement, dichotomy

The Belgium based NGO Toestand, while seeking creative DIY solutions to reactivate empty buildings and forgotten spaces into temporary autonomous socio-cultural centers, have helped build several centers locally (in Belgium) and internationally. For several years, their international projects have been intentionally concentrated in environments where the (cultural) needs and interests of youth are being neglected, therefore, no accessible spaces to create and perform their creative identity is being available to them, apart from the 'bar and coffee-shop' culture. The aim of this organization is to push these youths, through community and space making, towards urban and civil exchange, reflection and change making, along with dialogue, creation, autonomy and action. They focus essentially on the transformation of abandoned spaces into temporary socio-cultural centers, making these spaces useful for the neighborhood and its inhabitants. Lately their international projects have been concentrated in the Balkans, namely in the mentioned above, three ethnic Albanian speaking regions: Prishtina (Kosova), Tetova (North Macedonia) and Tirana (Albania).

Taking into account the different ethnic, professional and cultural background of the participants in this event, it is important to notice that Toestand, being the lead organization, and also securing the financial means for the realization of the project

(which include the work discipline and sometimes the sense of community that they mean to transfer), have an advantage on experience, as well as on the environment they live and are active in. Ethnicity, being more accentuated in the Balkans, contrasts with the reality of the Belgian crew, who currently act in an environment where the politicization of culture has extended beyond ethnicity, and has been concentrated on a more ideological cultural identity. This assertion will serve as a lens in analyzing the realization of the project, where the main sources come from the Belgian organization and are allocated into 'developing' regions and communities. Regarding the notions of self and the other, this research takes into account the shaping of the self through otherness specifically through a lens of cultural and ethnic identification.

HOW DID EVERYTHING START?

In order to include and explain the historical context of the happening of the practical part of this event and how the groups got together, the question was brought up intentionally, during the interview with the main coordinator of Toestand, the Belgian organisation. Through this question, the aim was to have a clear chronological view of the process of creation of this network of all the organisations during the project making:

> Well, as a story, we first got invited to Ukraine and we found funding, so we went. It seemed fun to go to Ukraine. Then the first really international connection we had was because I know Fjolla [his Albanian girlfriend], but also because of [other Albanian friends] who are friends of us that are living in Brussels since, 30 years or longer, and that we were in high school with them. They also had a very good connection with a lot of people In Kosova. So that was the next step. The third step was Granada in Spain, and that was because some of the people here had a good connection there. And then after that came you guys [the community of Tetova], because Arta went to Termokiss and she contacted us so…. It's kind of a coincidence and because of having Tetova and because of having Prishtina I think the next step was Tirana because there are more and more concrete propositions coming.

This story illustrates the ways of the created partnership and network of these four communities and social centers, as well as the main idea of how the expansion of this network operates. From the implementation of all the projects initiated by Toestand, the only ones that survived and developed into communities were the three ethnic Albanian based ones.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SELF, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OTHER: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CULTURAL/ETHNIC BELONGING

When the participants of all the four different groups meet in the event of the project making, they gradually create their first impressions and ideas of the other, based on

what they see, the interactions they're involved in and also on their previous experiences. The different historical backgrounds and socio-political realities of the places the participants live in and act, can also be a factor of defining their ideas about the other. In this case the main duality in these conceptualisations consists on one hand of the Belgian group, seen as the "western" from the part of the Albanians and on the other hand the Albanian groups seen as the "balkan — eastern" people.

ALBANIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE WEST

To give a clear idea of the ethnic identity and cultural background of the three Albanian participating groups, it is important to briefly explain the context of differences from a historical perspective. Recent, drastic but gradual transformation of political systems of the ethnic Albanian states of South-East Europe happened for the last 30 years; Albania getting out of the communist regime, Kosova coming out of a war in 90', and both Kosova and North Macedonia getting out of a socialist federative system, where especially Kosova and Albanians of North Macedonia in general, had been under specific treatment from this regime. Starting the transition period to a democratic political system much later than Western/European countries, in an era of globalization, the public discontent grew to a distrust for the governing structures and the state. This phenomena drove the social development into a reliance of the society and people between each other, instead of depending on the state or the system, creating thus a collective autonomous survival system, instead of one streaming from the 'republic' concept which is the individual. To illustrate an example of how this difference is expressed in everyday life behavior, and what it means to live and act in such an environment, a member of the socio cultural center Uzina, from Albania says:

> Definitely a difference in culture was very obvious. For me, I always feel it, anytime I travel in some Western European country, that they're not very … mmm… for example I didn't feel very free to just go to a Belgian and hug them and be like [exciting voice]: " heyy how are you? How are you feeling today?" Give them a kiss in the cheek, and stuff, you know, it would be more like… more calmed down like [official voice]: "Hey, how are you? How's your day?" You know, kind of like that, which for me is not that natural, but when you're working with people from a completely different background, which you don't really know, like what are their boundaries? How do they function? What is not the norm for them?

Here the interviewer highlights the differences felt and taken into consideration when she greets someone from the Belgian group, which for her is not a natural way and it cannot be as 'familiar' and warm, as she would normally do it with the people that surround her in a close encounter. This due to the difference of the background and the unfamiliarity with the boundaries and norms of this 'otherness'.

This process of creating and defining the ideas of the other can often be interpreted based on stereotypes and stigmas, but also, the "different background" is pic-

tured through demonstrations of the behaviors in the course of the everyday life, during the project, starting from the way of greeting someone, the communication, working together, the perception of time etc. As much nonstatic as this perception is (because after every meeting a clearer idea of the other appears on a more individualistic level), during the project making and the procedure of working together this interpretation can create conflicts or misunderstandings. During an observation made in the process of the project building, a member of the Termokiss, the Kosova group says:

> We're warm like the Middle East or somewhere in South America… They're more organised but they just want to finish work, not teach or help… yeah…. This is the last time I'm participating in this kind of project.

According to the participant, the Albanians are more heartwarming, comparing them thus with people from the Middle East or South America, whereas the Belgian for her are organized but very asocial, tending to appear more bound to the work but also more egoistic in the process of it, while not helping the others. This view can create a discontent to a point when, in the process of work where the interactions are inevitable, the differences tend to explode in impulsive conclusions regarding future decisions, like in this case.

Due to the difficulty of the work, sometimes the cultural differences that influence the behavior and thus the necessary teamwork, become boundaries and divisive, making the participants find themselves out of their comfort zones. For some Albanian participants, this distance that Belgian group members show in their behavior and social interaction, is part of their culture and thus, it transmits also in their objective of the project, where the main goal for the Belgians becomes utilitarian, which is to finish the work and the building, whereas for Albanians the socializing part of the project is the most important one. Here are two examples from both parts:

> — One of the members of the Belgian organization:
> There's a lot of people, me as well, who like the aspect of coming and just working hard and doing things with their hands and creating things, and they want to limit the part of discussion to a minimum.

> — One of the participants from the Tirana group:
> For example the Albanians, I have seen them more often sitting in the couches and benches and stuff, and it is maybe because we really enjoy having conversations.

Considering that the making of the project lasts for two week of intensive building, there is a distinction in the dynamic of the work and this dynamics again translates through the system the participants function in the places they live in. Hence, one of the most recurring characteristics that Albanian participants see in the Belgians are *"hardworking"*, *"strict"* and focusing on their work. A perception of work culture in this case includes its identification with the general western stereotype: "they're like machines". In its relation to the work ethics, it comprises the systematization of the work

and time, the planning, the coordination of the people, the behavior during work, as well as the way the tools are classified and used. One of the youngest members of the Kosova group says: "Us Albanians, we are very hardworking, we could work anything, but them, as to say, their way is more „schooled", they have more work culture, as you can see". This impression seems to be based on the contrast with the understanding of their own culture, their rituals of work and everyday life, as well as their surroundings, where the importance of work and the sense of time takes a different dimension. Here is one example of this perception from a member of the Tirana crew:

> We usually take our time, drinking a coffee in the morning, then one at work, and then during the breaks, slowly… and for example I don't think that us Albanians we identify with work ethic as being one of the most important things in our culture. But from what I have seen in western countries, is that the work ethic is very much, like work, work, work. It's very strict. But for me, growing up in Kosova and now living in Albania, I have never felt like we associate with work ethic as the first trait. When we think of Albanians, we think about hosting each other, we think of „Besa"[1] , we think of how we love guests, how we love being with people, going out for a coffee, being social and that's where we get our energy from.

From this perspective, the Albanian cultural identity correlates firstly with an ethnic aspect, but also a regional one. Due to the current socio-political realities in the Balkan region and the fact that Albania, Kosova and North Macedonia are countries that are not part of European Union, historically because of the insufficient possibilities the state systems had to offer to it's populations, the people have massively, through time, migrated to European countries in search of a better quality of life and future. This situation has also been a factor in the creation of this perception of cultural differences. A member of Termokiss, illustrates this condition like this:

> What can be different between us and them is the level of collective and social development, which in our case is much more behind, because of the isolation that we have had as a region.

Even though in this example the development of culture appears to be perceived in a linear way, what comes out during the observation is a sense of cultural development which is immediate and dynamic. This phenomenon seems to be the result of the intense digitalization that Balkan region is, as the rest of the globalized world, also going through. While western cultural dynamics have been moving and developing slowly, throughout the past 50 years, the Balkans being during that time in much more different political realities, will experience the development gap much quicker. This cultural transformation and progress are happening faster due to the digitalization era where information is served ready, an occurrence which reflects clearly the materialistic living and working conditions of the region. Another Albanian participant from the Termokiss Kosova group states:

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1   Besa: pledge of honor — is an Albanian cultural precept, usually translated as „trust", that means „to keep the promise" and „word of honor". (Kushova, A, 2004).

And for me, for example, what I have learned from this is that if I would've had their tools, I would've been able to do the things like them, but all I have in Termokiss is just a saw and a drill machine, but If we would've had their conditions, we would've been able to do more than them or just as much as them.

What highlights this perception of the 'West' is the cultural development which occurred as a consequence of a functioning state, thus placing them in the so-called 'developed countries' spectrum, something that granted the people the conditions for further possibilities. On this topic, one of the Albanian participants of the Tirana group recalls a moment when the Belgians would talk about their political problems in Belgium, the Albanians would joke, among them saying: "uff if only we had those kinds of problems the situation here would be just fine." It was a general idea among the Albanians, that as people, they are being perceived as, she describes "overly warm, and very enthusiastic, very out there, very intense, very much in your face, very friendly and very social". While perceptions of the generally friendly social characteristics remain obvious on the idea of the foreign view, nevertheless, it remains unclear to them about how Belgians perceive the socio-economic status of the hosts. As the interviewee from the Tirana group exclaims: "I wonder though, if they have those assumptions when it comes to for example privilege or economic status..." This uncertainty (insecurity) seems to be a general phenomenon which eventually is the result of the ideas of inferiority present in the region, which links a great amount of the complete cultural values to the materialist success and efficiency that the Western countries have in comparison to the Balkans. Another Albanian participant comments:

This is a very big generalization but most of the time I feel like people in the Balkans perceive anybody that is not a part of the Balkans as somebody that's a lot more authoritative and has a lot more to say and to teach.

For some, this impression is unfortunate because it leads to a false judgment of generalizing the intentions and objectives of the other as well as the creation of hierarchical ideas about the other. A participant of the Kosova group, Termokiss, says: "sometimes we perceive them as very good, and very perfect, but they're not. No one is perfect, you know and we should perceive them simply as collaborators and we should go with the same flow and same energy with them". This generalization which applies to a lot of people, additionally gives place to an understanding of the reasons for these perceptions. Functioning in an environment where the ethnic and cultural identification have crossed the initial common limited view and comprehension, Belgian people are faced with a variety of cultures, which, according to the Albanian viewpoint as a participant from the Kosova group notes: "they've taken what they wanted and given up what they don't like about their culture so to speak and so now they kind of found themselves on a personal level maybe."

The general idea from the Albanian perspective –including members from all groups – with regard to their Belgian counterparts, appears to be a mixed impression of values, be them working values or general cultural ones, streaming from their socio-cultural reality. This mixed impression of values tends to be full-heartedly ac-

ceptable, and this not always as a result of the actual behavior of the other group but rather for two explicit reasons: 1) the Albanian groups' need for hope for social change in their locality; 2) their overexposed cultural trait of hospitality with the regard to the notion of the guest. These two reasons are also (counter) reflected in the Belgian perception of the Albanians, as such. The way that they have been hosted influences their perspective on the Albanians and the impressions they have accumulated before and after working together with them.

BELGIAN PERSPECTIVE OF ALBANIANS/BALKANS

In the course of the discussions with the Belgian participants in an attempt to understand the perception they have of the Balkans and in particular the Albanian people they have worked with, many differences come to sight. Along with general cultural particularities, such as way of communication, way of work and questions of politeness, ethnic identity is seen as being one of the most important cultural identifications in Albanian culture. A Belgian participant, having many Albanian friends and acquaintances, and who has been part of all three projects involving the Albanian groups says: "Albanians tend to be very proud of their nationality. And Brussels people tend to really not give a crap about their nation." Another Belgian participant in the project, adds to this idea: "like our identity is more in the diversity, but then again, when we come with a group there, apparently we are really Belgians." This view is coherent with the multiethnic reality Belgians live in, where being 'Belgian' does not represent an ethnic identity but rather a national one, where 'nation' has the meaning of citizenship/statehood. While in the Balkans this 'nationality' is expressed as statehood, whereas ethnic background is often interpreted as national background, thus nationality.

One of the coordinators of Toestand is in a long-term relationship with an Albanian girl. Living with her, having many Albanian friends in Brussels, as well as working with Albanians of different regions during the projects of International Toestand for the last 4 years, he has elaborated an idea of the cultural differences between Albanians and Belgians, even though "this is a very hard question" because he is "a bit more sucked into it than the average person". He explains how he and his girlfriend find a difference in politeness, or the way of communicating it through language in everyday life, depending on the cultural difference:

> For example, when my girlfriend asks for something, not saying please. She will not say, "give me the salad, please". But she will say "can you give me the salad". Belgians tend to say please after everything, while Albanians take it for granted you help. And if they say please, it's because they really need it. Our politeness is in the words, yours in the action. And it is maybe a cultural difference, but this is just the Balkan way of saying something.

This perception of the culture is based on language. Geertz (1973) in the Interpretation of Cultures, suggests that human beings can be a complete enigma to each other on account of different spoken languages (p. 13). To illustrate a difference: in Alba-

nian language, the politeness displays in the form of intonation during the question, instead of an additional word such as "please" to show gratitude. Moreover the simple 'services' that come to show by default in everyday common life, are not counted as services that demand a considerable effort from the other, but more as everyday exchanges that are inevitable for a communal routine.

While discussing the language barrier with the participants in the project, and considering that the communication is mostly held in English, the language issue often comes as a result of misunderstandings about other concepts of culture. A member of Toestand, the Belgian organisation, shares his views on cultural differences between the two groups, highlighting the language part, especially regarding work efficiency:

> *We are different. We have another surrounding, we have another way of talking, you guys can talk with people from here, we cannot. This means you have more capacity to understand what they really really want.*

Disintegrating this quotation while analysing the context, it appears that according to him what makes the difference between the two groups is not only connected to the language barrier but also an understanding barrier. Due to the nature of the work, the communication between the Belgian participants of the project and the rest of the participants who do not speak English, has to happen through the Albanian speaking participants who also can speak English. This includes the exchange between the Belgian and for example truck drivers who bring the work materials, the locals etc. The indicated procedure shows that language barrier creates misunderstandings and communication discrepancies and the message that is meant to be transmitted, often undergoes substantial changes.

One of the Toestand coordinators speaks of difference in ways of organizing and commitment as well on the fact that when working with the majority of the Albanian people, the communication is not always very easy because the response is not immediate, the date and hour for the meetings are more flexible and not fixed, and this makes the continuation of the procedure harder. For him, it is easier to work with people who are *"more organized"*, and he prefers to work with Albanians who are more organized. Given his cultural background and the place he comes from, when he highlights these problems, he uses as a reference point Western European countries. This is an idea (or practice) that is shared by some members of the Belgium crew: their sense of work, organization and communication is based on the societies they live in or are more familiar with and the system they're part of. He remarks the encounters he experiences when visiting Termokiss, in Kosova:

> *When I go to Termokiss* [Kosova social center] *nowadays, it's so funny to see them working because they're just chilling all day and drinking coffee. And it seems so unorganized, but in a way, it's just another way of organizing. They also are 100% horizontal when it comes to decision making and it's super nice and maybe I'm jealous of the way they work. It's like …no stress at all.*

From this point of view, what can be clearly seen is a sense of comparison between different ways of organisation and a surprising positive outcome from the activity of the Kosova group during the Tirana project. During the making of the project, the understanding of time and its management is being challenged for both parts in a collective but also individual matter. A prevalent impression of Albanian behavior and sense of work seems to be based on stigmas and generalizations but also, as a member of the Belgian organization says, "*quick judgements*":

> *I saw a lot of people from the Termokiss crew like taking breaks to smoke joints. And I was working really hard and I was thinking, „God damn, they're so lazy, ahh they're always taking breaks and blah, blah, blah... and we're working and all, that's not fair!*

In this case, the judgment of what is fair and not fair, is based on a personal assumption of the present perception of the other, but also constructed throughout experience and previous beliefs built upon general stereotypes. What is demonstrated to have helped in the transformation/change of already defined conceptualizations in the mind, is the continuous interactions and cooperation as well as time and place (place being unusual from the natural environment that one is used to performing in). Spatiality, in this way, plays an important role in the identity formation and meaning of identification of the other. According to Kevin Hetherington (1998) identity involves an identification with particular places: "certain spaces act as sites for the performance of identity" (p. 105). To illustrate an example of how the process of this transgression, especially when the challenge is faced with an experience on a personal level, the above-mentioned Belgian participant comments:

> *And then the last day I wanted to take a break. So I went to the Kosova people and I listened to their conversation. And we kind of talked, too. And they made me realize that, yes, sure, they might not rush as much as we in the process, but that does not mean that it's better or worse, it's just a different approach. And they were just questioning why everything has to be so rushed? And then I was like, Oh, yeah, that is so true. Why does it have to be so rushed? And I didn't really think about that before.*

The perception of the Belgian girl about the Albanians being "*lazy*" was initially based on her own idea about work and time, as well as the major importance of it in this project, but also from what she has heard "other Belgian people say". The moment she got physically exhausted from the work and decided to take a break she realized: "I was kind of judging them for taking breaks, when I should have better taken a break once or two". Through this break and conversation with the Albanians she realized that her judgment was positioned outside of the context of the experience of these people, and even though she thinks that "sometimes stereotypes are based on truth, they can be very harmful and dangerous". On another occasion, after a month of the completion of the project in Tirana, several participants of the Belgian group, including her, returned to the Uzina social center for a visit. While looking at the place, where very little additional work was done, based on their stereotypical conceptualizations, she recalls her first thoughts upon entering the space: "What? They

haven't done anything and they've had like a month and they've been here almost every day. What did they do here everyday? Why are they so lazy?". After talking to the Tirana community members she further explains that they didn't have the tools or any other support and in Albania it is a lot harder to raise money than in Brussels: "I was already making a judgment on them because you know, they're supposed to be lazy, but…" For this kind of practice to be avoided in the future encounters and collaborations, her suggestions are that "more time to talk to each other and listen to each other" should be incorporated in the process of the project as such:

> We need to listen more to other people's experiences and know that these people are not more lazy than others. Maybe the Belgian people go too fast. And maybe it's not divided into groups. Because Pajtim, for example, he's from Termokiss, but he was working just as hard as somebody else from the Belgian group.

Thoughts are constructed through experience and of how much we know about the other. While for some people, being and working in the Balkans, with Albanians, was the first time, it was not so evident how the perception of time and work functions in comparison to their own. Others, who had been participating in the previous projects and having already worked with or met people from the same ethnic/regional background, have a different view regarding the culture and the way of functioning of the other. One of the Belgian coordinators of the project reflects on his view regarding the stereotypes based on Albanian 'working culture' or traits:

> I always experienced Albanians as being the most hard working Balkan people that I've met. Even my dad, who knows Albanians from everywhere that came to Belgium in the 60s or 70s, he also says that all Albanians we know, either own a bar, have a restaurant or have a shop. Everyone is working like crazy.

The idea of what it means to be an Albanian or someone from the Balkans, from a Belgian perspective, appears to be mostly constructed depending on the experience they have had in close encounters with these people and their visits to the respective countries. The other part of this idea encompases conventional sterotypes based on what they have heard from people of their surroundings, as well as judging it from their standpoint, without always considering and questioning the ground of their judgment and the context of the socio-cultural reality of the other. Even though the principal dichotomy of perception seems to be rooted in only 'Albanian' vs. 'Belgian' encounters, the participants don't hesitate to repeatedly bring up the differences they feel inside the groups.

PERCEPTIONS FROM WITHIN

Within the two dualities Albanian and Belgian, and apart from ideas about the otherness, what also appears is concepts of self perception and identification in cultural and ethnic bases, in comparison to the other. Albanians speak of a common Albanian

identity and then about each group of the three regions: Albanians of Albania, Albanians of North Macedonia and Albanians of Kosova. Because of the common language but also the culture, the general understanding between the three groups turned out to be simpler. According to an Albanian participant from Tirana, she sees it like this:

> *Normally we all know and understand the context of Tirana, the Tirana people, the Prishtina people and Tetova people, we could understand each other, without knowing each other.*

A couple of cultural differences between these three groups that seem to be more evident among participants, are due to the different things that took place historically and hence experiences. For example, during the time of the project some participants would feel that in consequence of the communist regime that Albania went through, there were some cultural differences due to the homogeneity of the population because of the closure of the country that happened during the communist regime. This is in contrast with the two other groups of Albanians, Kosova and North Macedonia, who, on the other side have different collective memory and experiences where the main reality was national based oppression from the majority ruling slavic nations in Yugoslavia, resulting thus in multicultural tendencies. This notion seems to also be a part of the Belgian reality, though through a different form, which according to a Belgian participant from Toestand is a luxury: "in Brussels, we are confronted with so many different languages and cultures that we are not even aware anymore about these differences…"

However, though for some of the Belgian participants, not being familiar with the history of the region, and participating in this kind of project for the first time, it was confusing the difference between Albanians of the three distinct groups and regions:

> *I wasn't sure when I was there and was really confused, like you're from Kosova and Macedonia, so why are you calling yourself Albanian? So what's Albania? Huh? I didn't understand! And only after, when I talked to the people… And I also didn't know if I could ask. Now I know. Because of the culture, it's really open, you can talk about it, it's ok.*

Being aware that sometimes, these situations can be very delicate because of the consequences people have endured, one of the Belgian participants explains her confusion and fear to ask, because of her recent trip to Palestine, where "you can't just ask 'Why do you hate Israel so much?' Or you can't just call a Palestinian Israeli. So I was like, oh, my God, is this the same kind of thing?". Then she expresses how she heard the Albanians talking "so much about it" and then she heard the people from Macedonia also calling themselves Albanian: "I was so confused… that's definitely part of the Balkan culture that I don't understand. Or is it just Albania?".

She is rightly questioning a supposed Balkan phenomenon of fragile multiethnic states and their existence where, as was earlier noted, the concept of belonging to a certain ethnic group is more central to the overall culture and identification.

Whereas Belgian participants speak about a Belgian identity, and a Toestand (the organization) identity which is different from that of the "normal Belgian" as one

of the Belgian members of the organization says: "I think we look funny enough not to be just normal Belgians…the group is just bizarre enough by having a 65 year old Christian and having a 19 year old Engel…"

In this identification, the symbolic self representation that manifests collective identity within a group plays an important role. In order to illustrate this statement better, it's worth mentioning Cohen, who in his writings explores the concepts of culture and identity as the most "frequently abused" two terms in anthropology (Cohen, 1993). He sees culture fitting into identity and being represented as identity through symbols, where he introduces "the efficacy of symbols" recognizable in their capacity to express in ways which allows their common forms to be retained among the members of a group, (Cohen, A. P. 1986). In the case of Toestand, the participants coming from a multicultural environment, make the difference between for ex. French speaking and Dutch speaking people, where one of the participants through a discussion explains the differences in the way of communication, the perception of time significance etc.:

> It's a daily challenge, for instance, to have meetings… we have two people who are French from France, a person who is Spanish, and they all have different ways of communicating… and sometimes at the moment that somebody says 3 sentences, everyone is already looking at their watch…

This example shows that even though they might be seen, from the outside as a homogenous group of Belgians, within the organisation there are people from different backgrounds: regional, class, professional etc. This fact leaves a lot of space for discussion and dialogue within the group, highlighting the different ways of working and decision making.

In his writings about social identity, Jenkins (2008) explains that "people have their own generalised other; but every group member will, also in principle, have much in common with every other". (p.62–63). While portraying a 'Meadian self' which is incomplete without the generalised other, he cites Mead (1934):

> only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self … only by taking the attitude of the generalized other toward himself, in one or another of these ways, can he think at all; for only thus can thinking — or the internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking — occur (p. 155–156).

Although differences inside the groups are evident within them, people still rely on their unity through a common identity or common culture, in order to function. That commonality in the Albanian groups is based on the common Albanian national/ethnic identity, including especially the language, while in the Belgian group is mostly accentuated in the 'celebration' of the cultural diversity values. Regarding the joint functioning during the project, the general idea of 'unity' prevails and is crucial to the outcome of the project.

THE COMMON GROUND: "A LAYERED, SUPER-INTERSECTIONAL PUZZLE"

Through the discussion about felt differences in 'symbolic' culture based on historical/socio-cultural background, here referring to family origin or geographical origination, one of the participants from the Belgian organisation makes a colloquial analogy of the meaning of culture, in contrast to the ones we usually see in the academic world:

> *Culture doesn't mean your cultural heritage, or your kind of family parties, or your religion! Culture means daily life. It means how you interact in your surroundings, it means how… if you wake up in the morning or not. All of these things, and also if you say out loud what you think, or not.*

This exclamation shows that according to him, among the participants the usual elements of culture that we are used to define as such, are not as relevant as the elements of everyday behavior that encompasses a general idea of culture. This claim appears to be an obvious evidence of an alternative view on life and culture.

As stated by Geertz (1973), the most efficient way to treat culture is as a symbolic system. In order to characterize the whole system in a general way, the elements that compose it need to be isolated and the relationship between them needs to be defined, so that the meaning of the ways these elements are organised and the ideological principles upon which this system is based get identified (p.17). In the process of creation of a common culture during the making of the project, the symbolic system is the overall community that takes part of the project, composed of all participants of all groups. The cross-cultural environment takes over the differences where during the event, all participants form one group, within which many small groups are created, especially during work and coordination times. The grouping gives the participants a sense of belonging and having a common goal. This process coincides well with Brubaker's idea of groupness, which he treats as a "variable contingent rather than fixed and given", a procedure that is a consequence of a strong momentum of cohesion and collective solidarity (Brubaker, 2002). While discussing how the *"common cultures get discovered"*, one of the Belgian participants explains:

> *So there is the group and the group comes together, and even if the group sometimes stays in different groups, you will always have like these crossroads, and these people while working together discover they both like that kind of music and those discover they like this, and then the group of the skaters is discovered and I think there are a lot of common interests that are being found.*

In the course of the project, through the different activities and practices, all participants are expected to fulfill their duties and complete their part or role in the accomplishment of the final product. This exercise seems to drive participants to overcome cultural differences and focus on the commonalities and joint goal, as one of the Albanian participants says: "and maybe we have a lot of differences, but I think in every country in the world, you can find people alike and there will be differences." Even

though it was proven through the observation that these differences in culture and especially the stereotypes and judgements sometimes create conflict, some participants believe that addressing them more creates a kind of a barrier. Within that barrier it would be possible to discuss the conflicts in relation to the work that needs to be done, no matter how much time it would take, "but with Culture, that's not possible", exclaims one of the Belgian participants. To this, other participants disagree, because, as another Belgian participant remarks: "only by addressing and discussing our conflicts we will learn to know each other and communicate easier". When she speaks about conflicts, she refers to the misunderstandings and disagreements during work, sometimes regarding decision making and some other time the sharing of tools or tasks. Learning from each other and these differences and respecting the other, are the main approaches the majority of the participants agree with. An Albanian member from the Tirana group reflects:

> You need to make that effort so that your actions won't have the same intensity as they usually would have, I think, because it can make them feel uncomfortable, it can make them feel like you're affecting their personal space. And this is a basic guideline, when you're meeting new people, whatever culture they come from, you don't know what they're comfortable with or how they would want you to talk to them or if you can make a joke immediately or not…

Through this quotation is accentuated the need of finding the common ground in order for the work to be executed and the end goal reached. All parts involved in the interaction have to make an effort and have a consideration about their counterparts, regarding their behavior, so that the relationship will be created with both parts being comfortable around each other. One of the Belgian participants explains that, for her, seeing people having different ways of doing the same thing can be "both very liberating but also annoying." On this note, through a discussion regarding the common ground of the different approaches to simple everyday life activities, another Belgian participant comments that all these kinds of things meet in a "very layered and a very super-intersectional puzzle".

In his writings, anthropologist Frederik Barth aims to understand collectivity as a product of distributive cultures that are temporarily merged into one, always taking into account that it is a result of choices and decisions taken by individuals in regard to each other, reproducing thus a distributive character of culture as such (Barth. F, 1966, p. 2; 1989, p. 138).

This theory concurs with the practice of the happening during the project-event, where participants being from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, merge their cultures through subcultural interests, discovering thus "typical cultural habitats". A Belgian participant comments:

> I think there are geographical cultural differences, but there is also the cultural common ground, which can be from electro DJ sting ray or acid techno, to maybe contemporary arts or to other things. Maybe some people will be connected through skate or through a sport or people will be connected.… I would say maybe just alternative cultures. That's

maybe our common ground and that's maybe the culture that brings us together, is the alternative form of culture. You see what I mean?

The common ground of the cultural differences, according to the participants of all groups, appears to be the particularities they all share and the key word is "alternative" group of people, in contrast the "mainstream of the society". What all the participants have in common is that they are people who want to have "another kind of lifestyle" which differs from a traditional lifestyle or the common one, from the place they come from. One of the Belgian participant comments: "The fact that we have to create a place for meetings for people, it's because they're a bit on the borders of society, you know?

The fact of the need of such a place in a community is not only related with the formalistic approach to it such as the physical space but the idea of identifying with the 'other', that is a symbol of the representation of the self (Hetherington, 1989, p. 71). Whereas in the case of the collective collaboration during a project making, this identification is not simplistic due to the diversity. However, according to Jenkins (2008), "symbolisations of community are umbrellas under which diversity can flourish, masks behind which a considerable degree of heterogeneity is possible". (p. 140). He considers the mask or the umbrella as a nominal identification, meaning symbolised through different forms such as language. On this point, one of the Belgian participant explains his concerns regarding the conflicts of communication:

It's like The Tower of Babel. You know this story? It's a tower which is super huge and it was never finished and it was a tower built by different communities who don't speak the same language and they never finished because they could not communicate... and this is a symbolic of saying like it's it's difficult to be different and... it's difficult to be different because there will be conflicts, of course...It's something we have to accept.

He evokes this story, while working on the project, with the intention of accentuating the obvious distinctions between the ways of thinking of each participant, regardless of the background. There's a fear that these distinctions might result in an 'unfinished tower', which in this case would be the project building of Tirana center, and this, due to disagreements concerning the importance of details of the building. Nonetheless, the whole activity was started despite these differences, in a way which created a collective identification to the main goal.

If we are to consider communal identification as a collective fabrication, Cohen A. P (1985) suggests that this is only possible within a comparison of differences and similarities from the outsiders of the community and the inside part of it, between the members of the community itself. Hence, the difference is per se, that the similarity is 'symbolically constructed', a statement which therefore helps the fact of communal identification and belonging as a necessity, as a "defense against the categorisation by outsiders" (p. 118).
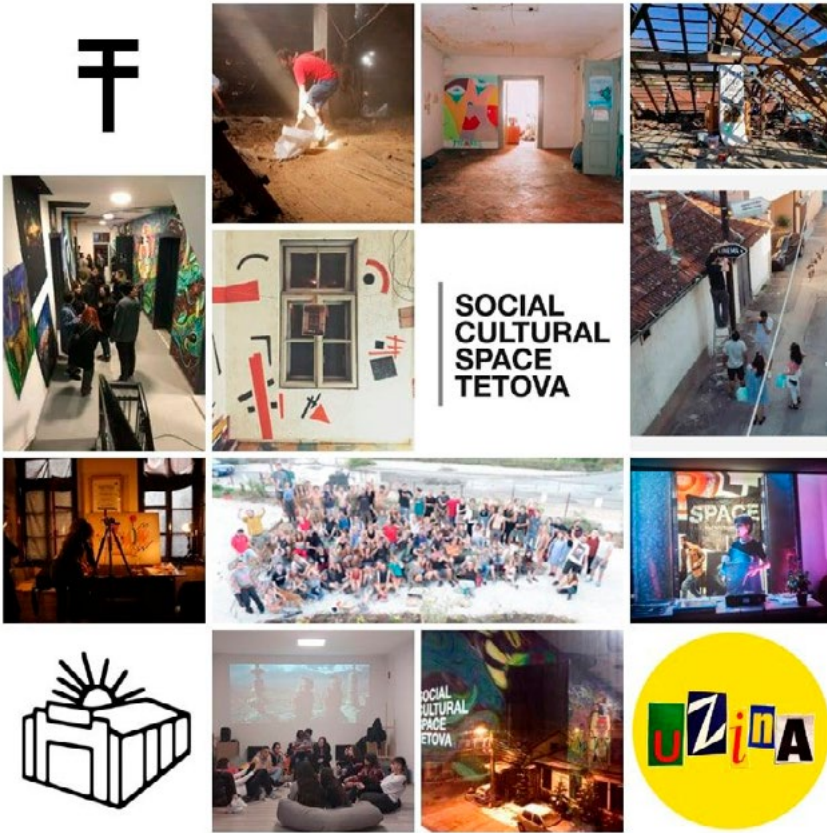
PHOTO N. 1: Collage of moments of work, community building, and activities through-
out the years (2018–2022) in Space Tetova, by the involved network. Source: Trime Halili

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to understand how different conceptualizations of cultural/ethnic be-
longing and individual/collective performativities operate based on different socio-
cultural backgrounds, in a particular social setting, the identification of the self from
the perspective of the other is inspected based on the internal logic of cultural prac-
tices of the different participants – members of each community participating – for
the time of the project and in their everyday life. Whereas the main highlights of the
differences encountered in the dichotomy of perception were rooted in 'Albanian' vs.
'Belgian' perspective, internal differences between members of each group (within
the Albanian groups and within the Belgian group), regardless of the ethnic identity,
are another component that questions the presence of collective identity that can
overpass different socio-cultural realities of individuals.

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