



INTERVIEW WITH SILVIJA MITEVSKA, PRESIDENT OF TAKT, ABOUT GRASSROOTS SPORT DIPLOMACY

IRIS - What is the TAKT and why did you decide to get involved in Grassroots sport diplomacy?

SILVIJA MITEVSKA (PRESIDENT OF TAKT) - Together Advancing Common Trust (TAKT) is a non-governmental organization¹ which uses sport as a tool to empower girls and young women and promote social inclusion of marginalized youth.

I heard for the first time of the term “sports diplomacy” in 2016 at a conference in Molde, Norway from Richard Parrish who was describing the origins of sport diplomacy in European and broader context. That time, I went to present the project that we have concluded which was about inclusion of refugees through sport, but I flew out of Norway with great new interest in sport diplomacy. Additionally, I have participated at the Global Sports Mentoring Program, a Sports Diplomacy Program at the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in the United States of America. I have experienced myself what means sports diplomacy and how important and effective it is when a country uses sport as a strategy to build ever-strengthening relations with other nations. Even though the focus of that program was empowerment of women through sport, we were exposed to US culture, networked with sports people from the USA and established long-lasting relations and collaboration between Macedonian and USA sports organizations.

Can you describe your pilot action? How did you decide to work on this specific matter? Why did you choose to work with young girls?

TAKT is very vocal and passionate about empowerment of girls and leadership through sport. In each project and program we run, we pay particular attention to have girls in the centre of the activities. We believe they have fewer opportunities and therefore we engage and educate them about leadership and general social change through sport.

The project action “Building Bridges” can be categorized as Grassroots sport diplomacy transfer or sharing of successful practices through non-governmental partnerships, meaning it is an initiative that obtained to share experiences and good practices implemented by civil society organizations with a view to promote sports and social development. Throughout this project, we tested the efficiency of grassroots sports diplomacy in tackling barriers and prejudices that were present in the past between North Macedonia and Kosovo. We wanted to see if through sport we could transcend the differences and create long-lasting partnership instead of isolation, among youth from

¹ Website : <http://www.takt.org.mk/>



two municipalities in these neighbouring countries. We believed that sport could not be only limited to professional athletes or sport clubs. Instead, we believed that sports diplomacy can be practiced by everyone who has a genuine interest in sport and bringing people together.

You explained that you had 3 main objectives: increased cooperation/ empowered women / raise awareness. What are the main results?

The main objectives we achieved throughout this project is that now we have empowered girls and women who became active agents of change and peer-leaders within their communities; increased collaboration on municipal level and particularly between schools who pledged to further their collaboration. Additionally, more people in both Macedonia and Kosovo are educated on the importance of sport to connect two nations and youth from two different ethnical backgrounds. I believe that the long-term result is that we have created a climate that change is possible and that sport can bring youth and communities together.

What were the difficulties that you had to face?

The difficulty at the beginning of the project was to convince the parents of the underaged girls and boys to travel to the neighbouring country for a sport camp but after the first visit and the evident enthusiasm of the participants, we had full support and confidence from the parents. Moreover, some of them got involved in organizing the sport clubs in Macedonia and helped us carry out our sports activities.

In addition, we have faced language barrier that we overcame by selecting sports and activities, which were not too complex and did not require long translations.

What will be the next steps? (with these girls? With this project?) – Do you want to develop in other countries? With other communities?

Since this grassroots sports diplomacy project was very effective and cost-efficient, we plan to expand the same model in the neighbouring country Greece. There has always been political turmoil and limited understanding between these two countries, and we see grassroots sports diplomacy as a great way to challenge this. We plan to start and support connection between various schools, sport clubs and municipalities from the two countries, thus opening the door to high-profile negotiations and more importantly changing the narrative that has been present for many years. By engaging the youth as active agents of change within their own communities, we will send a message that through sport we can have more open, accepting and respectful society for all.



GRASSROOTS SPORT DIPLOMACY

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As well as in the first project, again, girls and young women will be in the centre of our actions. We believe that equality should be the postulate of sports diplomacy and more girls and women should have an active role in the upcoming sports diplomacy activities.