



RESTORATIVE CIRCLES
for Citizens in Europe



ONE YEAR OF
**RESTORATIVE
CIRCLES**

edited by **Krisztina Galgóczi and Tali Padan**
2017

This booklet contains the thoughts, remarks, experiences, questions and suggestions of the restorative facilitators and members of the circles taking part in the international project of Restorative Circles for Citizens of Europe.

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Using our Differences to Work Together for the European Community by Boróka Béni



Goal of the Project

The goal of the Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe project was to invite citizens with diverse socioeconomic and political backgrounds to dialogue circles in 5 EU countries to share their views regarding the EU and to come up with next steps at a time of crisis.

Project Design

The design of the project is based on a conflict resolution model in which personal connections between individuals and harmonious relationships among members of a group are a prerequisite of solving problems and carrying out common tasks within the group. In the design, citizens of the European community were invited to groups of up to 28 individuals in 9 cities. Through the circle process facilitators helped participants to build personal connections so they could then turn to controversial topics that usually generate high tension and negative emotions. Grounding the conversation in participants' shared humanness then supported members of the circle in overcoming the difficulties that arise in everyday

conversations among citizens with conflicting views and stereotypes represented in public discourse.

Timeline

In October 2016, 27 facilitators (3 from each city) were trained together in Lecce, Italy by Kay Pranis (US), in a circle context. Members of our facilitator team came from a variety of professional fields, such as psychology, mediation and journalism. Each city team of 3 circle keepers then had the freedom to structure the script of their circles based on local needs, hot topics in the media, and issues raised by the participants. A series of 6 circles were held from January to June, 2017, in the 9 cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, Lecce, Milan, Budapest, Pécs, Trebnitz, Berlin and Copenhagen. As the closing event of the circle series, our team held a workshop conference in Budapest, Hungary, in September, 2017, entitled *Bridging Polarities*.

Challenges

1. The greatest challenge we met in the majority of the cities was the recruitment of citizens with conservative political views. The project was funded by the European Union, and the aim was to talk about our attitudes toward Europe – factors that could have determined that only a few conservative participants entered the circles. Additionally, in the theoretical working model of our team, dialogue itself is based on democratic values and symmetrical relationships, where the power in the circle is attributed to the talking piece – an environment that may be uncomfortable for people with a conservative mindset where emphasis is largely placed on the respect of authority figures. Conservative participants who did join the conversation, however, actively took part in the dialogue and proved the circle process to be effective in circles of citizens with diverse political views.
2. As a member of the Hungarian facilitator team I would like to mention an additional, local challenge. Due to the Hungarian culture that largely lacks positive and constructive feedback, and relies on critique in the form of plain, even hurtful truth, participants from the fields of conflict resolution and group therapy often expressed their critique in many forms during the circles, regarding the project and this particular use of the circle process. These circumstances made it difficult to experiment with the use of the circles in such a context.

Outcomes

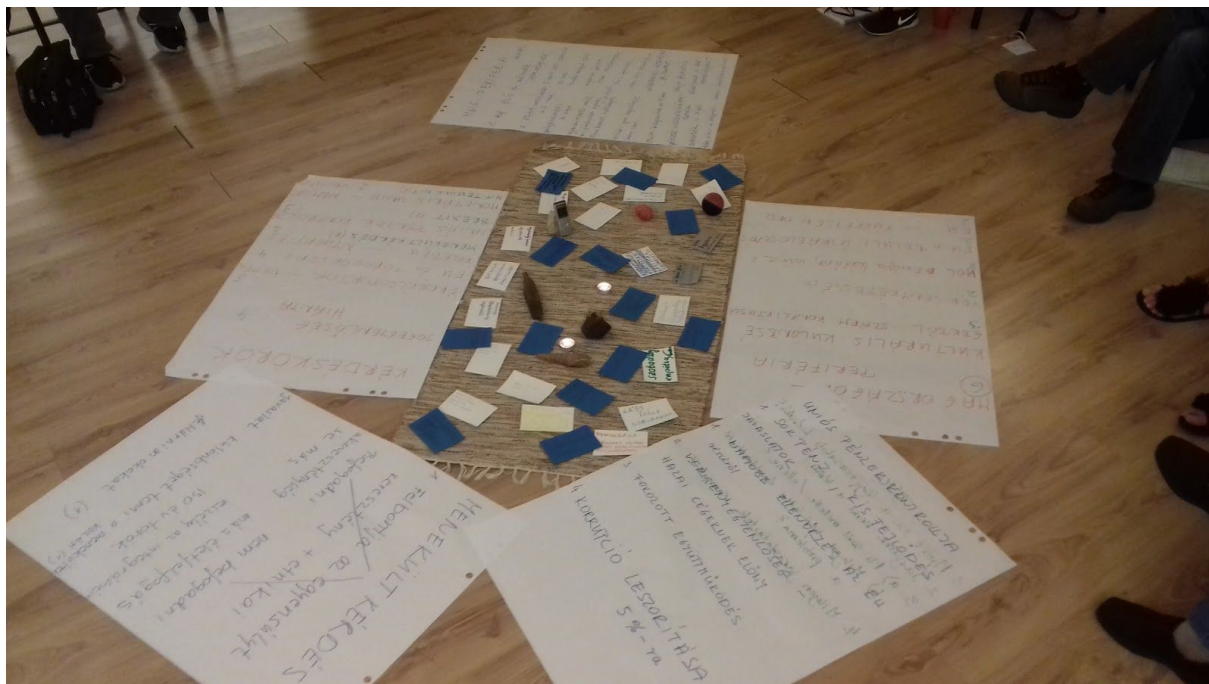
1. The experience of the professional project team in the 9 cities shows that **the circle process works**, and it is a useful and effective tool for holding dialogue among participants with varied political views. The process allows members of the circle to listen and share their thoughts and feelings, creating a sense of connectedness that serves as the ground for collaboration. Coming to the end of the project, currently there is even a potential for conservative and liberal participants, and circle keepers and coordinators in the project to build partnerships and work together on future projects.
2. The international project team of facilitators and coordinators has developed into a **collaborative partnership** that plans to continue using the restorative process in the field of democracy building in European civic communities.

3. Members of our team have made **audio recordings** and **notes** of each weekend-long circle, and have converted these into **48 structured diaries**. These diaries will be processed in our next project to find scientific results.
4. In the circles facilitators were able to **gather information regarding the state of local communities in terms of participants' communication skills** (self expression and active listening), and were able to **identify points in the dialogue where it couldn't proceed**. For example, building the guidelines (developing the set of rules based on which members of the circle communicate with one another) has proven to be a jamming point in Hungarian communities. Even at the *Bridging Polarities Conference* the question of how to name "The Guidelines" in Hungarian developed into a controversial issue that was overcome by reflections coming from international circle participants.
5. Facilitators also had a chance to experiment with **hot topics (local and EU-wide)** within the circles. Examples of topics raised in the Hungarian circles are: "How can I respect those who do not respect me?", or "What is my responsibility in building a better society?" Please refer to additional topics in other articles.
6. The RCCE project has provided our team with a wide range of experiences that will serve as the **bases for restructuring the project**. Among other project structure elements our next project will largely focus on the **development of strategies to address and recruit conservative citizens**, so circles can be more representative of our societies.
7. In most of the circle series the dialogue process ended in an exploratory phase where participants were scanning one another and building community within the group, while also discussing issues that mattered to them concerning the EU. Nonetheless during the last circle weekend in **Pécs (Hungary) participants with varied views** bonded in a way that they were able to transit to the next level in the process, and **together made a list of suggestions to members of the European Commission..** Please find the list of suggestions from Pécs after this article.

I am grateful to the committed and enthusiastic international team of facilitators for their ongoing effort to make this project work, and to all the participants of the circles who have given us hope for a peaceful and collaborative European future.

the author is the originator, professional leader and international coordinator of the RCCE project

Recommendations to the European Commission



The following list of recommendations was created by a group consisting of individuals with diverse religious and political backgrounds and beliefs

Renewable energy

We should invest more in technological development related to alternative sources of energy. We should decrease the ratio of fossil fuels (to less than 30%) to renewable energy.

We should focus more on water policy.

Politicians

Representatives should be recallable.

Politicians should be paid no money for their political activities.

Multinational corporations

The role of multinational corporations should be decreased.

0% GDP increase in order to ensure sustainable development.

Large corporations and other business companies should prepare regular reports on their investments and economic interests in various geographical regions.

The operation of the EU

We should develop a strategy and determine which EU body and/or national institutions could or should decide on or influence particular processes. There should be a strategy

also for ad-hoc interventions, e.g. in case of hunger. Each intervention should be followed by restorative circles with all the stakeholders.

Taxation system

A reform of the taxation system is needed: poor people should have a larger share of wealth.

Non-governmental organisations and other actors should have a say and some control in how tax revenues are spent.

Let us develop a common tax policy for the European Union: we should promote fair trade, and penalise companies whose business activities are not in line with fair trade requirements.

Support

Support should be provided to health and education, as well as to young people, new families, expectant mothers, vulnerable people, people with disabilities or poor health, and marginalised people.

Spending of grants from EU funding programmes should be monitored (front-end monitoring is required).

Civil rights

We want unconditional basic income. (The required technology and wealth are available.) Work and income should not be directly dependent. In underdeveloped countries, such basic income should be financed by developed countries.

The statutory retirement age should be removed, and early retirement reinstated; all should have the opportunity to have a sabbatical, e.g. when experiencing a burnout.

We want fewer working hours. The importance of leisure time should be acknowledged.

Relationship between ordinary citizens and decision makers of the European Union

EU institutions and bodies should directly communicate with citizens; EU level decisions should be directly communicated to citizens and not only through national governments.

There should be dedicated channel(s) for citizens to make their voice heard by the EU decision makers. (E.g. these recommendations too should be delivered to EU commissions and committees.)

A monitoring system is needed to monitor the impact of EU decisions and follow related trends. The public needs to be kept *informed*. There should be a strategy with various scenarios, and the decisions should be made by the citizens.

Right to information

Information should be objective and accurate.

The European Union should promote the right to information and make education on the rule of law, responsible EU citizenship and the culture of refugees available to the citizens.

Foreign policy

The European Union should lay embargo on trade (e.g. of crude oil) with Arabic and/or authoritarian countries that are unwilling to accept refugees, even if such sanctions would harm our economic interests.

European Union member states should undertake financial responsibility vis-à-vis former colonies, e.g. Syria.

Peace should be maintained at all cost.

Refugee crisis

Comprehensive research among asylum-seekers should be carried out regarding their social, religious and moral background, as well as their travel to the European Union, their knowledge and expectations regarding the EU and plans for their life here.

We need information on migrants: their exact number and composition (e.g. proportion of males).

Asylum-seekers should be provided with adequate information about life in the EU, e.g. the roles of and relationship between males and females in our culture.

We should learn from the past and think about what we consider valuable about our history and the deeds of past generations.

We should learn about the culture of migrants (e.g. tribal or ethnic background, religion, history).

Restorative circles with mixed groups including migrants and citizens of host countries should be organised.

Community building among refugees should be supported; professional help should be provided to improve their capacity to voice their goals.

Restorative circles should be held so that migrants could understand the fears of people in host countries and we too would understand their fears.

The restorative circles would also allow the participants to clarify the meaning of particular concepts in various cultures.

A contract specifying the rights and responsibilities of refugees should be signed if they want to stay in the EU. Asylum-seekers would be granted a temporary refugee status first, and be required to return to their home countries as soon as the situation there has stabilised. The contract should also define what happens if the situation does not stabilise in their home country for a long time: how to integrate into and live together in the local society.

Education

Schools should teach and promote cooperation.

Education to promote tolerance should be delivered to both migrants and EU citizens: we should accept and respect each other's culture and values. (E.g. the immigrants should respect gender equality.)

A large proportion of young people should enter university, with many of them dropping out after a few semesters if not able to meet academic requirements (late maturers should have a chance, and hard work should be rewarded).

Recommendation to local decision-makers (to the Hungarian government)

Strategy for migration within the country should be developed.

Security should be improved, e.g. in shopping centres.

Citizens should have access to information about the government's plans and operation, and be able to voice their opinions e.g. in local community meeting and other fora.

Made by the participants of the circles held in Pécs, 27-28 May, 2017

Translated by Vera Juhász

CIRCLES IN 9 CITIES

European Awareness: What true dialogue can provide¹ by Emanuele Murra



The European continent is living in **fraught times**. Political, social, and economic challenges are present everywhere. The stakes are existential. In summer 2016 a referendum had an almost-physical effect in expanding the distance between the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. It was the first serious 180° turn in a half-century long history of continuous integration among European states. Beyond this, economic and migration crises are bringing forward **old and new fears everywhere**.

In any newspaper, talk show or café these topics become subjects of discussion sooner or later. Very often, though, people do not go beyond an outburst, a talking point, or a stereotypical refusal or support to what seems to be sensible to them at first glance.

But what if people could have the possibility to talk about Europe far away from the noise of microphones and cafés? **What if people could have a whole weekend to quietly talk** with no distracting interruptions? What if they had time to talk and to express their own opinion while listening to the opinions of others?

This was the challenge of the project “Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe”. The project meant to organise **small dialogue groups** in different European cities. These groups

¹ Special thanks to Timothy D. Thomas for his proofreading of the first draft.

assembled people from different backgrounds, ages and political ideas. For six weekends they sat in circles and through guided conversations took time to answer, one by one and all together the question, “**What is Europe?**”

In a world that makes speed a virtue, the restorative circles methodology goes against the grain. Circles need time to create the right atmosphere. They need time to give participants the chance to consider **guidelines for discussion**, and to communicate to one another the values each participant thinks necessary to make the dialogue work. These steps may seem time wasted at the expense of the main topic, but these preparatory moments in fact make a more open and sincere conversation possible, avoiding mere debate to achieve a real dialogue.

For people attending a restorative circle, the wonder lies in the experience that it is possible to express any idea and any position. This is so even if an individual is absolutely in the minority and expresses an opinion completely at odds with the opinions of the other participants. Restorative circles methodology produces a kind of **safe zone** in which free expression carries no fear or consequences, no matter what is shared.

In a circle, the regular and slow movement of the talking piece (an object passed from hand to hand that gives the right to speak) gives everyone **time** to organise their thoughts and to pose questions. They may also share personal anecdotes and build on what others have said. In a restorative circle the aim is not to erase differences at any cost. Rather, the circle intends to enrich the participants and to increase their awareness of the discussion through the help of the others around them. The circle makes the participants understand that it is still possible to realise a common enterprise, even if you do not share another person's point of view.

Independent of the different ideas on the future of Europe and its institutions, what was clearly pointed out in the circles held in **Taviano** (Apulia) and **Milan** (Lombardy) is that European history is a history woven of the countless histories of all the citizens of this continent. These personal histories exist prior to political history, which takes its life from them. Many of the older participants told of the waves of migration of relatives and friends from Italy to northern Europe during the Sixties and Seventies because of lack of work. Everybody talked about their trips, about the European cities where they had been, or where they would like to visit in the future. The younger participants talked about their international groups of friends and their study experiences in Europe thanks to the Erasmus project.

Many reflected on the concept of **identity**. Within this concept there are tendencies both of flexibility as well as rigidity. To what extent today are we European as a part of our own Italian national identity? How Italian has the common European culture become? On the contrary, what aspects of Italian culture cannot exist outside our own territory, this famous boot in the middle of the Mediterranean?

The dynamic of the restorative circles project is not based exclusively in a cerebral exercise but in the activity of discovering **what it means to be a European citizen** through experience. This is the way to understand our strengths and weaknesses as people engaged in the European integration process.

It is not enough to be aware of the news from Brussels, and too few know what the word Europe really evokes in our hearts, memories, emotions, and imaginations. The Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe Project made it possible to discover the Europeanness present in our daily lives. We then recognised the strong links already present in the network of people who make up our continent.

This **awareness** is the real gain of the true dialogue regarding Europe that the Circles methodology has made possible. The participants of this project did not necessarily leave the circles with an altered opinion on what ought to be done in Europe. However, they may now **recognise** that Europe is not a mysterious stranger, but is an integral part of the context in which we make our daily choices.

This may only represent an inkling of awareness, but this awareness is essential to develop a citizenry up to the task of the challenges that Europe now faces.

the author is a facilitator and the national coordinator of the Italian team

Can a method that is so non-directive work?

by Adrian Garcia-Landa



In the last days of september 2017, a group of 30 people from five European nations gathered in Budapest. It was a group committed to **an idea that was new to Europe, and was yet, at the same time, one of the oldest traditions of mankind**. This is not the beginning of a pompous historic conspiracy novel, this is my recollection of the final event of the project Restorative Circles for Europe. Its aim was to start a Europe-wide dialogue between EU skeptics and EU supporters. It was financed by probably the most un-mysterious thing on Earth, an EU fund. I was one of the thirty.

Before telling what happened in these three days in Budapest, I must tell how we 30 people met and changed from being total strangers from five EU countries to having the feeling that we were a group - **united by one idea**. We had met in the south of Italy at the beginning of October 2016, in the city of Lecce, which is roughly localized in italy's heel. Amateurs of gothic novels will be interested to know Lecce is about 20 kilometers from the real castle of Otranto. Amateurs of German history will be thrilled to learn that legendary emperor Fredrick II Barbarossa built his perfectly octogonal castle Castel del Monte just 50 km from there. There are elements that would fit in a historic conspiracy novel, in case someone wants to pick up the thread.

The experience that turned us into a group was a three day workshop on restorative circles. **Restorative what?** That is what I thought when I first heard the term a couple of weeks earlier, before deciding to join the project. The Internet told me that restorative circles were a particular method used in **restorative justice**, an entirely new way of defining a judiciary

system. It was a completely different vision than the traditional guilt, punishment and incarceration approach we are accustomed to. I was skeptical, but a few google searches later I found that restorative circles were used in America and Canada for juvenile delinquents since the 1980s, and the method was highly effective. This meant that youth offenders going through restorative circles programs had a **much lower relapse rate** than when you sentenced them to prison. Another reason that convinced me to join was the person holding the workshop. Kay Pranis had worked a couple of years in the Minnesota justice department to introduce restorative circles.

So during this three day workshop in October 2016 in southern Italy, we, a bunch of total strangers to each other, sat patiently in an monastery converted to a hotel and were introduced to the technique of restorative circles. To summarize, restorative circles can be described as the most ancient form of group communication and **the most radically democratic**. The rules are simple: in a circle, there is no hierarchy; everybody is equal. And the only person that has the right to talk is the one that holds the talking piece. This piece gets passed from person to person, so as we were 30, you had to wait quite some time before being allowed to speak. You can see it as a subtle form of torture, or as a way to make you listen to your fellow humans. There is just one of the elements of a restorative circle.

The consequences of these two simple rules are very important: as soon as a circle starts, the control of the process is not in the hand of one - or a couple of - persons, but the entire circle becomes responsible for it. With the rule of the talking piece, the highly important decision of who has the right to speak is not the prerogative of a judge or something similar, but it is left to the rule of the circle. It is depersonalized. So the group that gathers to use the method of the restorative circle accepts its rules, which is already a form of bonding. The rules are the same for everyone in the group.

The workshop was meant to get us acquainted with the method. We had no conflict to deal with, as we didn't know each other then. But when I learned that restorative circles were used in cases of serious conflicts, or even crimes ranging from theft to murder, **I was fascinated**. Can a method that is so non-directive work? Don't you need some kind of professional to direct it? **Can you really bring an offender and its victim together** and make a meaningful encounter out of it?

I must make a side-step and explain why the term restorative is used. Our current justice system punishes and incarcerates, but does it address the needs of the victims? Does the offender take responsibility for a crime he commits, or understand the harm he has caused, when he is shut away or has to pay a fine? The restorative justice idea intends to restore justice by making the offender take responsibility for his crime, making him understand fully what he has done. There is a drawback: the offender must be willing to engage in the process. But you will be surprised how many actually want to.

The revelation of this new approach, of this new method, Kay Pranis' wealth of experience in which we were infused, the atmosphere of this town in southern Italy and the project ahead of us helped form us 30 something people into a group. The idea of the project was to bring EU opponents and supporters together and hope that they wouldn't smash each other's heads by using this new communication method.

I was eager to use the method and to see **what would happen if you put German EU pros and cons in the same room**. In 2016, the million migrants that Germany had accepted was still top of the news, and as a new right wing party soared, the topic was becoming divisive. It was approaching a situation where you could be either for or against Merkel's immigration policy. The EU was seen as forcing countries to accept migrants, even if they didn't want to. These are ideal conditions to use a method meant to defuse strong antagonisms.

The group of 30 people disbanded, and we all went back to our home countries. For the next 8 months, until June 2017, we recruited critics and fans of the EU and sat them in circles to test the method on political discussions. After months of testing in Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Greece, I can now say the following, which applies only to the German part, carried out by a team of six. Circles take any form of debate out of the right or wrong corner, which is in most cases a dead-end. It does, in effect, allow you to see a person with a particular opinion, where in other circumstances you would first see an idiot having a completely wrong idea about things. With the circle method, even if someone has ideas and opinions radically opposed to yours, **you see the person first**, and in the best cases, you can understand why he thinks that. **Circles develop empathy**.

My colleagues and I were sometimes witness to **highly unlikely encounters**. The most improbable one being between a German aristocrat, heir to an industrial fortune, writer of romantic TV films, engaging in a fruitful dialogue with a working class right wing extremist, who considered himself to be resistant against the illegitimate authority of the German Federal Republic, in his view, and who advocated the funny notion that homosexuals were safer in Russia than in hedonistic Berlin. These two peoples would normally never have met, or if so, they would probably have ignored each other.

This is a glimpse into **what we shared during the three days of the closing event** of the Restorative Circles for Europe in Budapest. Apart from that, there were many other workshops in a beautiful old community building that was about to be closed. Some of the workshops addressed Hungarian topics, like one about prejudices against the Roma minority.

The most lasting impression was the feeling of being reunited as a group, which was more or less the same as the one in Italy a year earlier. Even if most of us only knew each other in a superficial way, that didn't matter: we knew we were united by a project that served one idea. To be honest, plotting and scheming, designing conspiracies at the scale of a continent does

have a **team-building effect**, I can only recommend it. Even if the conspiracy is only introducing restorative circles to Europe.

And if you look at it in a neutral way, the **European Union was intended to be some kind of a circle with all nations having the same rights, hence its flag**. I do not know if currently there is no hierarchy between the heads of state and if they use a talking piece, with the German chancellor waiting patiently until the 27 other countries have made their points. In our experience, this takes between 60 and 90 minutes. But maybe they should, since **circles are also used in project management with remarkable results**.

For my part, I am extremely grateful that this project made me acquainted with restorative circles, even if I do think that it is best suited for issues that impact your personal life. I want to thank the two initiators of the project for this, Boroka and Krisztina, as well as Carolin from the German team who was instrumental in managing the funds and the administrative work. I am also grateful to have met this group of people that were open enough to risk a workshop held in a remote corner of Italy by a lady from Minnesota.

I am on the verge of using the method in a difficult neighbourhood in Berlin, where there is a recurrent problem of violence among children and teenagers. We hope that the restorative circles will show teenagers that there is a different way of dealing with conflicts apart from starting a fight. I'll keep you posted.

the author is a facilitator of the German team, Berlin

Some Historical and Personal Remarks

by Ferenc Gerlóczy



It could have happened differently, with another set of European Union countries (Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia were also among the planned participant ones), but finally five countries happened to take part in our European restorative project: Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, and Italy. These five countries (as any other 5 countries out of the 28 member states) were able to represent the entire Union.

The participants in our restorative circles, in fact, were not countries but civilians from these countries. Still they were able to represent the idea that the EU is not only a necessity, but a chance for dialogue. The circle form fits quite well to a European Union with no capital or centre. It is similar to the ancient Greek city states, where people spoke the same language (but in different dialects), adored the same gods (but in different order), belonged to the same civilization (but differed in local attitudes and identities).

“Bei dem Namen Griechenland ist dem gebildeten Menschen in Europa, insbesondere uns Deutschen, heimlich zumute”, writes Hegel in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy. It says: when hearing the name of Greece, educated European people, especially Germans, feel at home. I am Hungarian, an educated European too, and whenever I read Plato or Aristotle, I really feel at home. I think rather of Greek philosophers as my ancestors, than of those nomad horse-riding tribal pendragons, who settled in the Carpathian Basin before the end of the first year thousand A.D.

Ancient Greece is but the cradle of what we call Europe now, and Pericles, Archimedes, Praxiteles or Socrates are not (just) Greek national heroes, but also ancestors of all European democrats, scientists, artists, and philosophers, respectively. On the other hand, modern Greek people are not the only descendant nation of the ancient Greeks within the European Union, but they are just one out of 28.

A widely used Modern Greek self-definition, formulated by the sociologist Konstantinos Tsoukalas, doesn't even refer to ancient Greece at all, but states three things about what (Modern) 'Greek' means: it is 'European, but not Western; Balkanian, but not Slavic; Near-Eastern, but not Arabic'.

I have no doubts we, Hungarians are Europeans, too. We have fears however, that the government, if it stays in power after the elections in spring, might manage a Hunxit, and one day we'll find ourselves out of the EU. Our other fear is that the effects of the government's hatred propaganda may accelerate, and hatred could turn to be a fast growing epidemic.

Among these fears we found our restorative circles both in Budapest and in Pécs really successful. (I took part in the circles of both cities.) An amazing achievement of the Pécs circles was that at the final circle participants were so creative, that they managed to collect a huge list of real and vital questions and suggestions for the EU leadership (you may find the list on page 7). The Budapest circles were more successful in having recruited (not many, but enough) eurosceptics, who then proved to be among the most active participants in the Hungarian circles. One of them, in an unorthodox way, we even imported to the above mentioned creative circle at Pécs (where he, prior to the project, had studied and lived for several years). Personal involvement counts a lot.

I myself have always been a peaceful person, also a pacifist, but I have to stress here that during the process of our restorative circles project, my whole thinking changed a lot. It is not just my opinion - my friends and members of my family also have observed and expressed several times that I became obviously more peaceful than I had been before. I am really glad about this, but I don't want to exaggerate it.

Shame or not, what has just happened to me at Christmas time is like when the fireman's house is set ablaze, or when a dentist has a terrible toothache. There has been an animosity between a brother and a cousin of mine for over ten years, originally about inheritance disputes. As Christmas came, I hoped I could help to reconcile them, since I have some restorative skills, why wouldn't I try it? So I tried - and I failed. But I think it is not the method to blame. It is true, that I was unable to gather together all the family members on Christmas eve, because of two, who both refused to meet the other, so we had to organize two family Christmas celebrations at the same time. It was definitely a fiasco.

What I could do was that I kept two 2-person mini circles in different times, one with my brother, one with my cousin, about one hour each. Neither of them was a regular restorative

circle (rather preliminary talks for a future Christmas Circle), but it was good that in both cases we could have real dialogue on the hot issues. I could talk about the circle method, and later they might think about it.

We, participants and circle keepers of the project have to think, too. We also need to get to conclusions. The main question to think about may be whether it is true, that the more we stress our identities, the more we lose our peace?

the author is a philosopher, journalist, and a facilitator of the Hungarian team

Let's Talk About The Eu

by Silvia Nicola



As a Romanian born millennial, having studied in both Spain and Germany as well as currently working in Germany, I am - as some claim - **on the winning side of globalisation** and enjoy the perks of belonging to the European Union. While I had never denied enjoying many privileges as a citizen of a member state of the European Union, I was neither fully aware of how much I did take the European Union and the - some would claim - utopian values behind it for granted.

Both the Brexit referendum as well as the election of the latest president of the United States have come for me unexpectedly as a **wake up call** from my cosy and convenient European Dream! Since I do resonate genuinely with the - for many other still too abstract - concept of a European Identity I felt that my engagement in European issues could make a difference against the apparent shift to the right spreading its chilling grip across the old continent. At the same time, I also wanted to understand how so many people can see the European Union - for me a blessing - as a curse. And there could not have been a more proper environment to do that as the one offered by the Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe: a **safe space** for exchanging and entrusting personal stories to other people of all political colours. And while so many claim, that the issues related to the European Union are extremely boring, there has not been a dull second during the six months of the projects' implementation and the many more months of the preparations.

One of the first organisational challenges turned out to be the “recruitment” of the European sceptics. We realized soon, that our six-headed German team, had a pro-European inclination and was not fully aware of the communication strategies employed by the sceptics, even while knowing where sceptical people might be found. This has brought us to AfD (the newest right-wing party joining the German parliament called “Alternative für Deutschland” (Alternative for Germany)) “citizen dialogues”, PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West/Occident) demonstrations, a press conference, and made us stroll facebook pages (with often highly disturbing and racist content, since web-anonymity made it easier for both people and trolls to instigate to the rejection of other people than invite to constructive dialogue).

During the demonstrations we attended, **we were able to easily engage in conversations with many critics.** Making them commit to attending at least one weekend - and ideally three weekends - has not been that easy! One demonstrator explained why this would be a challenge: the people demonstrating expect change, a revolution and not just mere dialogue; additionally our discussion partner claimed, that they (the demonstrators) know all of the arguments of pro-Europeans, but these do not know the contra-arguments. Due to this, “we” are seeking dialogue.

This “**knowledge gap**” developed to be for me the most unexpected leitmotif throughout all of our circles and taking many different forms. There has been an extremely deep confusion about what the EU is and what it does, can or cannot do. In a somehow exaggerated summary, this confusion about the EU went hand in hand with an underlying mistrust: since the EU is designed in such a way that it is difficult for a regular citizen to see through the whole bureaucracy, there must be something fishy with its business. Regardless if pro or contra EU, most participants found it difficult to trust the EU as a political body, while the level of trust in the homologue institution on the national level was much higher - even without more knowledge. This deep lack of understanding about the EU exists despite a huge amount of free information that is available. Little information reaches the regular citizen. Many participants claimed that this status quo is due to a communication problem of the Union, which has been portrayed by many as perhaps the biggest problem of the EU.

This “knowledge gap” has been even more interesting, since the celebration of 60 years since the Treaty of Rome took place during our six month event series. This meant that the majority of our participants have been living in the European Union or one of its precursors their entire life, or at least most of their life. Its presence has been, nevertheless, not actively acknowledged. It might be that in comparison to newer members of the Union, Germans cannot remember a time without the European Union and thus might not realise how Europe would be without the EU. I would claim, that many **of our participants took the EU for granted.** One very interesting question posed by the participants was if Germany has become too European or if the European Union is currently too German.

While there are still many differences between the members of the European Union, the societal well-being remains still very high in Germany. Due to this, many people are not as aware as in other less wealthy countries of the hardship other fellow citizens might encounter - in the same European Union. **It is never easy to put oneself in the other’s shoes.** Nevertheless, the Restorative Circles have been a huge help in allowing the participants to acknowledge each other firstly as human beings regardless of one’s political beliefs. While many participants might have felt to still afford the luxury of not worrying about such abstract topics such as the EU, the method resonated very well with the need of the participants **to communicate in a considerably deeper way** than the age of social media made

fashionable. But exactly this other way of communication has been a challenge at the same time, since not everyone can make the sacrifice of engaging in a decelerating method in such busy and accelerated times.

the author is a facilitator of the German team in Berlin

Terror over the Globe and in Europe by Alexandros Somataridis



The terrorist attacks in May and June were a thing that the Restorative Circles **could not pass by**. So we raised the subject and gave our participants the chance to have their say about it, asking how it affects them and if they see European society being transformed under fear and the safety measures taken.

When asked how Europe is shaped from the multiple terrorist attacks, what Great Britain's politicians' statement "we learn to live with the danger" means, and about the feeling generated by the constant presence of police in all major European cities, the answer came on two levels. Firstly, Greeks still feel safe against the threat of terrorism. From this feeling came the reactions that **we must think more and deeper** about the situation and not get carried away by all this new exposure of terror.

Most of them believe that we don't have access to the truth, or at least not the whole truth of what is happening. On the other hand, the participants expressed sympathy for fellow European citizens in other countries and understand the feeling of insecurity, one that is amplified by the media all across Europe, Greece being no exception. Doubts are growing bigger and most of the opinions stated were on the side that **Europe has to change its external policies** that are considered to cause turmoil in many states of the Middle East, thus being a stepping stone for the terrorists.

As for the question about **how life is shaped under the shadow of an invisible enemy** and how should a European citizen react, between terrorists and police, the responses were that the Europeans don't live carefree. They just do the essential and tend to forget things they

knew. Fear is eating them up from the inside, resulting in less dreaming and creativity. Some people are losing touch with reality, constantly living in a drama.

After full circles on the subjects above and sensing that the conversation was heading that way, we contradicted the principals of a civilized world, and Europe even more, for being against prejudices and guarding human rights and asked our participants **how can we stay loyal to these principals**. Maybe it's sad to read it, but even people that are pro-EU replied that European values don't exist, continuing that not only Arabs' rights are trampled over but all of us, with the anti-EU outbidding that **EU has failed**.

One voice distinctly said that this is something that is being built up since the fall of the Twin Towers (9/11). Discriminations are constant, expanding the issue to women, that have more to fear in a patriarchic society. As for prejudice, it is proven to be deeper than the attempt for multiculturalism, so more and more people **fall into the trap of taking sides and feeding the hatred**.

Closing this article, but not the least closing the subject, I will leave you with one specific opinion being stated in the Restorative Circles of Thessaloniki in June: "I don't know what terrorism achieves neither what counter-terrorism achieves. Religion is just an excuse, terrorists are not as they are stereotyped to be, they were members of European societies that considered themselves out and against, and maybe they are armed by lack of spirituality. They have a need to believe in something in the middle of this crisis. **Could they consider this to be a transformation of Class Struggle?**"

the author is a facilitator of restorative circles and the national coordinator of the Greek team

The Art of Listening: Restorative Circles in Denmark by Tali Padan



“Listening is an art not easily come by, but in it there is beauty and great understanding. We listen with the various depths of our being, but our listening is always with a preconception or from a particular point of view. We do not listen simply; there is always the intervening screen of our own thoughts, conclusions, and prejudices...To listen there must be an inward quietness, a freedom from the strain of acquiring, a relaxed attention. This alert yet passive state is able to hear what is beyond the verbal conclusion. Words confuse; they are only the outward means of communication; but to commune beyond the noise of words, there must be in listening an alert passivity. Those who love may listen; but it is extremely rare to find a listener. Most of us are after results, achieving goals; we are forever overcoming and conquering, and so there is no listening. It is only in listening that one hears the song of the words.”

On the last weekend of January of 2017, 16 participants met in Copenhagen’s Mellempøbeligt Samvirke, to sit together for the first circle in the 6-weekend series. The two days were devoted to having a conversation, discussing politics and engaging in a dialogue using the restorative circle method. In fact **this ended up being a lot more than a conversation**, but an opportunity to see each other beyond our political ideologies. The first meaningful question asked about connections to Europe – **how does Europe affect you personally?** Here participants shared whether they felt like they belonged to this big mass of land we call Europe. Some said they inevitably were European but did not feel the need to be

defined by this, while others enjoyed this link to the identity, which provided a sense of comfort and home. This led to a discussion about identity, and people shared personal stories of what it means to be home, to belong, and on the flip side – not belonging, being excluded, and our current political climate and discussion about immigrants and people new to Denmark.

As the weekends continued, the conversation deepened. The larger groups contained more diverse opinions, giving us a chance to look at **how we communicate through differing ideologies**. The smaller groups presented the opportunity for a more intimate discussion, personal and emotional, containing questions of belonging that shape human behavior; questions that shape ourselves.

Those sitting in a circle form a society. For those few hours, those in the circle get a safe space in which they can share themselves. Though the questions start out seemingly about the “outside world” (politics, news, ideas), every circle inevitably ended up giving the inside and personal perspective. The power of the talking piece is that it gives 100% attention to one whole individual. For that time period, that individual is fully free to express, as much as they want and can. Equality here is not dividing the time and space equally per individual, but that each member of the circle is equally free to express, in their turn.

This also leads to a reflection about **how we listen**. Do we listen through our own intentions? Do we listen to agree or disagree? To compare what is said to what we think? Do the other's words have to pass through a filter of judgement before they get received? The circle allows these questions to come up and be explored.

The last circle weekend in Denmark took place in September, with a group of Israelis who were struggling to find common ground in their fierce online political discussions. The weekend can be summed up by one of the participants, who said:

“We got **basic tools for a respectful dialogue** based on listening in spite of disagreement. The most amazing part was the feeling of community and strong sense of belonging that was formed, despite the fact that no-one actually changed their opinions at all”.

In the end, maybe that is exactly the change - that we can feel the **sense of belonging** we so wish for as human beings in a diverse and multi-perspective society, without the diversity as a source of division but as our tool to learn, connect and be ourselves, together.

the author is a facilitator and the national coordinator of the Danish team

Enter the Circle. Big City, Quiet Town and Talking People by Tim Kucharzewski



Encompassing five EU nations, having taken place in nine different cities, and with hundreds of people engaged, the project *Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe* has been an **enormous endeavour**. Of course, mere numbers are never able to convey the wealth of experience that such a project granted for everyone involved in it.

Most participants stayed with the project for **several weekends over the course of half a year**. Within these six months, German participants returned to the picturesque, sleepy town Trebnitz, on several occasions. Located 30 kilometres from the Polish border as the crow flies, there is a historical castle in the heart of this small town in Brandenburg, which hosted one half of the German part of the programme. Throughout the duration of the project participants could witness the snows of January, the thawing weather of spring, and finally the rebirth of the surrounding nature in the early summer of 2017. The other half of the project in Germany took place in Berlin, a metropolis that needs no further introduction.

The reason for people getting together again and again for such a long period of time, however, was not (only) the tranquillity of Trebnitz' scenery or the more frantic pulse of the cityscape of Berlin. People were invited to the Circles to discuss all things connected to Europe: the good, the bad, and the Union. Under the banner of this topic, the project attempted to introduce a **“new” method of communication to political and social discussions**. Originating in the area of Anglo-American restorative justice and post-conflict societies around the world, this special tool for communications has been more or less unknown in Germany and Europe. The roots of the restorative circle method date back to

rituals of Native Americans. A “centre piece” in the middle of the circle might be the most evident heritage of this origin, since it is said to represent a fire around which the circle participants sit.

In written form, the method may actually appear **quite simple**. Yet, as is so often the case, theory and practice appear to be worlds apart. The participants sit in a closed circle of chairs. A “talking piece” is handed around within this circle. Whoever holds the talking piece has the privilege of speaking without interruption about whatever is on his or her mind. At the same time all other participants have the privilege to **listen to that person uninterruptedly**. Everybody has the chance to utter what is on their minds in every rotation, when their turn comes around. Of course, skipping a turn is also possible. A facilitator usually structures the debate a bit, but the lion's share of the content is generated and presented by all participants equally. Advantages of this form of discussion is that there is **no hierarchy**, that people who usually do not actively engage in discussions are integrated as well, and that there is a slowing down and de-escalating mechanic in place.

This last feature held a special importance for the project because the participants which entered the circle were consciously taking part in order to speak with other people, with whom they mostly disagree on political and social questions. **Sceptics and supporters of the European Union**, people from the left and the right wing of the political spectre, as also people indifferent but curious about European matters, came together to share their views, ideas, and personal stories.

The personal level is of utmost importance in order for this method to function. Participants become able to see the actual human behind the ideas, world views and ideologies they seem to represent. Young students and pensioners, former citizens of the GDR, political activists, academics and right-wing conservatives, in a nutshell: people from all walks of life came together to speak and listen to each other, often for their first time in their lives. New ideas were formed, opinions were changed or reinforced, and thoughts were provoked. At times the debates were so **intense**, that some participants had to leave the room for awhile, yet, mostly the method ensured a calm manner of personal communication. Just like the content of the discussions, the question if the project was a success or not is one that only each participant can answer individually. If you have the opportunity, do not be shy. Go ahead and ask one. They will probably take up a metaphorical talking piece and share their personal story with you.

the author is facilitator of the German team, Trebnitz

Ideal Active Citizen...Not Quite The Way You Had It In Your Mind

by Alexandros Somataridis

It is true to say that many interesting issues were discussed inside the Restorative Circles that took place in Thessaloniki the first semester of 2017, as part of the Europe for Citizens Program “Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe”. The one I want to let you in on with this note here is the **shaping of the ideal active citizen**, and the way our participants have thought about this.

You may have guessed that a citizen like this would be in the center of all the commotion, always trying to be as near as possible to the places where important decisions are taken and policies are designed, stating her/his mind about most of them as loud as possible and to all directions. Whether this is right or wrong is not our issue this time. The subject of this article is that the people that took part in our Restorative Circles procedure adopted a more decentralized notion, through exchanging opinions and **playing a game of collective construction**.

They placed the active citizen in a house near the sea, yet in full communication with society through the internet and other mass media, in the company of animals, cultivating vegetables, being close to nature, using a bicycle. Caring for society but not driven into the rush of the modern age, **a part of the whole but with quality time for themselves**.

When asked to describe this citizen they mentioned characteristics like cosmopolitan, thinking with the heart, self-respect, courtesy, dynamic, intuitive, visionary, open to new actions, unprejudiced. More specifically, when dealing with bureaucratic issues, the active citizen **shows patience, openness, humanity, care, courage, anger management, motivation**.

As for how all this talk and exercises worked on them, the participants mentioned thinking of and/or feeling creativity, imagination, the capability to work from a distance, feeling of being loose, cooperating, lack of formalities, sustainable living, caring for the environment, informed citizens, no technocrats, taking calm decisions and more generally not acting under pressure. I would add the sense of community when they realized all the ways the thoughts coincided.

Well, one could say that all the above do not formulate the ideal recipe, and perhaps this is right. The general idea that was shaped by the behaviors of the participants facing the themes given to them and the questions that gave direction to the discussion is that there is **plenty of room for improvement** for the standard EU citizen to reach the status of being active in a beneficial way. To become useful not only for her/his self and country, but for nature, human society and the sustainability of this earth.

All this concentrates in food for thought for more than one meal, more than one table, more than just today. So you are welcome to join us. Feast your minds!

the author is a facilitator and the national coordinator of the Greek team

Talking piece – a tool for listening
by Ondrej Stastny



The Restorative circle is a method that brings people together and gives them the **opportunity to discuss difficult topics**. However, arguably the biggest strength of this method is in the mere sitting and listening before reacting to someone else's opinion.

In ordinary day-to-day situations everyone is and perhaps will be challenged by meeting people with different beliefs and opinions. Often these situations may bring up a feeling of **discomfort**. The easiest solution in these moments can feel like simply leaving this uncomfortable situation. Another may be one of defending one's own opinion against another by some form of **aggression**. But will these behaviours serve us as individuals, as a society or will they create more boundaries between each other?

One of the most important aspects of the method of the restorative circle is the fact that only one person can speak at a time. The use of a talking piece within the circle means that everyone has to wait for the talking piece to go the entire length of a circle until it is their opportunity to speak. Precisely this gives everyone time to listen, to reflect on opinions of others and also on their own point of view. Questioning the truth of one's own opinion and the empathy to see from the perspective of someone else can **break the tendency to "defend my opinion"** and bring up more openness towards others. Simply put, the use of talking piece gives everyone time to reflect before reacting.

The more challenged we feel, the stronger is the tendency to “fight or flight”. And from what we have experienced in the circles kept in Denmark, it is not always easy to be faced with a strongly conflicting opinion or belief. For example in one of the Copenhagen’s circles arose a discussion whether **Islam is Danish or not**. There was an exchange of opinion mainly between two of the participants where one expressed an opinion that Islam is certainly not Danish and the other one felt insulted and hurt by that statement. When the round of this circle ended, even though there was an open discussion about this topic, the second participant decided to leave.

The use of the talking piece in the Restorative Circle is an unspoken invitation to **create more space** between the feelings that come up when we are confronted with a difference in opinions and with the way we choose to react to the situation. It may not always work perfectly but what is on offer is a **time to pause, reflect and question**. And that is what may be one of the biggest benefits of this method.

Perhaps the most valuable outcome of the Restorative Circle method is not creating solutions, but just the fact that people learn to simply be together. The use of the talking piece facilitates a process in which we are indirectly taught through our own experience how to create a space for listening and open exchange of different opinions which leads to mutual understanding and true dialogue.

The author is a facilitator of the Danish team

Tips for Facilitators

Applying the method of Restorative Circles to discuss contemporary and controversial issues

by Giorgos Papadopoulos and Amerissa Giannouli

Restorative Circles is a dual process of self-discovery and fruitful communication. Applying the method just to simply discuss contemporary issues and everyday life situations has proven an effective way of promoting active listening and generating new collaborative ideas. The active participation of all the members of the Circle inspires and enriches the discussion. The dynamic process of the Circle creates challenges and opportunities both for facilitators and participants. Self-organization of the discussion from the participants is embodied in the process while the facilitators are also participating in the Circle. As the experience goes on, participants find themselves part of a small community, exchanging emotions, ideas, and stories. The personal stories become a collaborative experience that has the power to be inclusive and non-judgmental.

It is better for the facilitators to have a more 'passive' role, posing intriguing questions that would enhance participants' self-awareness and understanding. They should be ready to act and react according to the feelings produced through the discussion and presence in the Circle. In specific:

- Facilitators should moderate the discussion with caution, allowing free expression of ideas and emotions. This is highly important especially at the early stages of the Circle. If the facilitators achieve that, then the Circle itself will create the necessary safe space for its participants to open themselves up with honesty and respect.

- Facilitators should monitor and observe the discussion. If it is needed (e.g. If the group is feeling lost), they may give clarifications or summarize the basic points raised, redirecting the discussion to the main attributes of the question posed initially to the group.

- Facilitators should pay attention to the participants' body language. If the group is feeling tired, it is suggested to use some non-formal activities that aim to energize and reinforce the expressing emotions before starting posing questions of interest. The activities are suggested to be implemented in a circular format while participants could be either standing or sitting in a Circle (reflection activities, text analysis, introduction of multimedia). Energizers are suggested to be used in caution between different sets of questions and themes and, most importantly, after a small break (e.g. Lunch break).

- Facilitators should always have in mind the guidelines defined by the group and monitor their applicability. But, ultimately, it is up to the Circle to honor and respect them, and that's because there is no hierarchy of any kind inside the Circle and everybody is equal.

- Facilitators should pose provocative and explicit questions to boost the interest of the group and support the development of tangible ideas.

- Facilitators should give time for ideas to be expressed, especially the case of participants that lack self-esteem and may need more time to understand the question.

- Facilitators should inspire a feeling of belonging within the group. Bonding of the group is essential for building trust with each other and promoting openness. Hence, facilitators should be first and foremost calm, conscious, and friendly.

- In case of crisis and negative emotions and reactions, facilitators are suggested to go back and mention the values of the Circle. Sometimes emotional reconnection may be needed when the bonding atmosphere is disrupted.

- A warm, welcoming and comfortable space plays a key role for keeping the group together and bonding with each other. Inviting participants to decide on some space organizing matters (such as the windows, the A/C, where to sit, etc.) is a good start to make the participants feel like home. In a recent Circle, participants felt so good that they shared some of their personal items after the first coffee break.

- Facilitators should also focus on time management, organizing time according to the participants' availability and ensuring that this is respected by everyone.

- Facilitators should follow participants' interests and level of knowledge regarding the questions, making sure that everyone is familiar with what is introduced to them. Avoid excluding participants from the discussion.

- Short breaks are essential for fostering bonding between the participants, especially in the process of including the least confident and least comfortable participants. Furthermore, these breaks allow personal space for digesting the information and ideas expressed during the process of sharing.

The above tips were developed based on the reflections and evaluations of participants during the Restorative Circles in Greece (Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe, Europe for Citizens, 2017, Inter Alia).

Giorgos Papadopoulos is a facilitator of the Greek team and Amerissa Giannouli was a participant

Bridging Polarities Conference

21-23 September 2017. Budapest

by Krisztina Galgóczi



The three-day conference in Budapest was the final event of our international project of one and a half years where we gave **a report of the experiences regarding the restorative workshop series** of 50 restorative weekends. Additionally, we included other forms of dialogue that aim for participants to communicate with one another and discuss common hot topics. We invited experts to offer a workshop with different methods like **sociodrama, forum theatre, debate forum, sociopoly, gypsy labyrinth as well as European Constellation**. Our aim was not only to build bridges between various and sometimes diverting opinions and attitudes but also to build a network of those professionals who help to understand each other better on a social level.

The first day was planned only for the 23 international facilitators to make a big circle after having finished all the circles in 9 European cities, sharing our experiences, facing our challenges we had during the project and summarizing our achievements. The overall outcome of this circle was a very positive one. Although we saw the structural difficulties we had mostly during the recruitment stage of the project, we all agreed that once the circles were organized the method worked well and offered an exceptional opportunity for a **more democratic and less judgmental** way of communication compared to other methods. We also detected that the method needed further improvement especially on two territories: how

can we improve our technique to keep the guidelines without introducing more “rules” by the facilitators and how can we mix this method with other communication and action methods.

Time was unfortunately not enough to go into every detail of the main ideas that came up during the how-to-do-better brainstorming, but we continue planning the development of the method and the **continuation of our collaboration** online quite frequently since then.

On the second day we offered an opportunity for participants to try the restorative (peacemaking) circle method and other techniques with different topics and facilitators. The conference was bilingual (English and Hungarian) and also we provided simultaneous interpretation for the events taking place in the big Auditorium of MÜSZI, an independent social and cultural space that existed in that time in the heart of Budapest. (<http://muszi.org/>) I had to add ‘in that time’ because for partly financial, partly political reasons, this venue was shut down a week after our conference. Actually it became the last big social event of MÜSZI. It made us, organizers, a bit proud of this important position, but on the other hand it was a sad ending of a highly popular and innovative initiative in Budapest’s social life.

The specialty of this first open day was a restorative circle so big, the possibility of which seldom occurs. **What if 70 or even more people sit down in one circle** and start to pay attention to each other? We had our concerns that morning. Until then we had been working with 15-25 people in a circle and came to a conclusion that an operative circle was optimal with a maximum of 20 people. But this time it was different. We only wanted to introduce the method, build relationships by letting all participants introduce themselves briefly and build the grounds for the forthcoming discussions in all workshops held later on that day. We planned to ask just one question as a warm-up for the two days of dialogue: **what does it mean to you to be European?**

Coming to a consensus, just like in almost all circles held in Hungary, was not an easy going process even this time. Surprisingly the intense debate on the guidelines – that is to be decided by the actual group of people in every circle – broke out not about the guidelines themselves as often did in previous circles but about the linguistic but also symbolic question of how we should name these rules. It was a hot and fruitful debate, and we did find a solution in the end by using two expressions at the same time to make it acceptable for all members of the circle. As a drop in the ocean, a circle like that depicts society in a certain way. We should not forget that building democracy is a rather complex and time consuming phenomenon especially in post-socialist countries where the lack of democratic tradition in the past still has its impact on our ways of communication and decision making strategies. We have to learn **how to take responsibility** as individuals in the life of our community.

On the third day participants could try several other methods of communication as mentioned above. We began the day together again, this time with an open space technique, to explore the topics that interested participants the most after the conversations of the previous day. Participants shared the themes, and the invited guests offered different approaches so the **themes and methods would be paired**. We encouraged everyone to take initiative in this process.














We closed both open days together in a big circle sharing our experiences. The outcome of this sharing showed us that these people with diverse views, approaches and attitudes came closer to each other circle by circle, day by day. All agreed on one thing: this dialogue was

the first step towards a better understanding of ourselves and of each other and has **to be continued**.

















the author is one of the initiators of the RCCE project, facilitator and the coordinator of the national team, Hungary

Program of the Open Conference at Műszi, Budapest

FRIDAY

9.30-11.30	PLENARY RESTORATIVE CIRCLE How shall we communicate with one another? <i>Béni Boróka & Galgóczi Krisztina</i>					
11.30-12.00	coffee break					
12.00-13.30	PLENARY RESTORATIVE CIRCLE continues <i>Béni Boróka & Galgóczi Krisztina</i>					
13.30-14.30	lunch break					
	AUDITORIUM	MÖBIUS	WORKSHOP	M19		
14.30-16.30	From Me to Europe: a Sense of Community – restorative circle <i>Daide Boniforti</i>  	Equality and Equal Opportunities: Moderation Method of AVM Pécs (The City Belongs to All) <i>Áron Szatmári</i> 	European Identity – restorative circle <i>Silvia Nicola and Tim Kucharsewski</i> 	Not One Iota? Or What Is Christianity? – restorative circle <i>Ferenc Gerlőczy</i> 		
16.30-17.00	coffee break					
17.00-18.00	The Experiences and Results of the International Restorative Project Round-table discussion with the coordinators of the five countries <i>Moderator: Boróka Béni</i>					
18.00-18.30	CLOSING CEREMONY					

SATURDAY

9.30-10.30	OPEN SPACE <i>Carolin Wenzel & Tali Padan</i>			 with Hungarian interpretation
10.30-11.00	coffee break			MÖBIUS European Constellation <i>Anna Melocco</i>
	AUDITORIUM	SPEAK EASY	WORKSHOP	
11.00-13.30	Restorative Circle on one of the themes of the Open Space <i>dr. Borbála Fellegi</i>  	Sociopoly <i>László Bass</i> 	Sociodrama on one of the themes of the Open Space <i>Ágnes Blaskó</i>  	
13.30-14.30	lunch break			
14.30-16.30	Debate Forum <i>Zoltán Bodnár</i> Közös Ország Mozgalom (Country for All Movement)  with English interpretation	Community Islands <i>Mátyás Domschitz & Géza Varga</i> 	Forum Theatre and our critical incidents <i>Edina Tarján</i>  	Through My Eyes <i>Edina Tordai</i>  
16.30-17.00	coffee break			
17.00-18.00	Open Space <i>Carolin Wenzel & Tali Padan</i>			 with Hungarian interpretation
18.00-18.30	CLOSING <i>Boróka Béni & Krisztina Galgóczi</i>			 

NEXT STEPS

Passing the Knowledge on by Alexia Stouraiti



Greece, 2017. At the very top of the economical, social and moral crisis which, in my opinion, has been going on in the whole humanity for quite a while now, the Greek state, in collaboration with the Restorative Justice & Mediation Lab of Panteion University, decided to provide a training on restorative practices, to the curators of minors serving in all over the country, through the National Training Center. And I had the honor to be part of the trainers' team.

Curators of minors since 2003 are supposed, according to greek legislation, to provide (facilitate) restorative practices for minor offenders that appear before them, both before trial and as a corrective measure enforced by the court. Mediation between the victim and the minor offender is the main one, but also, under the umbrella of the curators' duties and responsibilities, Restorative Circles should be held for the victim, the offender and their supportive environment, or even within the family of the minor, in cases that his/her delinquent behavior is a result of family issues that could be readjusted through this practice.

But there was a problem: curators of minors had never been trained in any these procedures. That led to limited or/and inefficient practice, which in turn led to feelings of distrust towards these methods both by the curators and the citizens that came across them.

Preparing the whole training was a big challenge with only having 5 days to familiarize people to the principles, the values and the perspective of Restorative Justice, as well as provide full training on mediation tools and facilitating Restorative Circles skills.

But applying the training was an even bigger challenge. Since trainees were not totally unaware of restorative practices (on the contrary they have been trying for years to achieve better results for both the victim and the minor offender through them, however with little or no knowledge at all), one of the most intriguing parts of the training was to build trust, especially concerning the experiential parts of the training. Trust that yes, these practices are in use in so many foundations, in so many countries, and with so much healing and reconnecting, that they are worth the effort, the embarrassment, and all the uncomfortable feelings that usually arise in the participants, as well as the facilitator. They are worth giving it a chance. And they are worth believing in them and struggling for their application in the criminal justice system with all our passion and faith.

In all three groups of trainees, the reflection in the end of the training was about the same: they had definitely gained skills to deal with their cases by facilitating restorative practices. But still, they felt that there is a long way to go, and that a second, advanced training after they had applied this knowledge in their work would deepen their understanding of the whole philosophy of Restorative Justice.

So this training was a great start. But still, it is no more than that: a start. A starting point for all of us who believe and trust Restorative Justice in general, and Restorative Circles in particular, to create a movement throughout EU for the establishment and application of these practices in schools, communities, prisons, rehabilitation programmes and, of course, the criminal justice system.

Special thanks to Kay Pranis, our trainer in Restorative Circles and my personal mentor, for being next to me during this training, not only in practical ways such as proposing training material, but also -and mainly- for her support and trust in my values, ethics and beliefs.

the author is a lawyer, accredited mediator, restorative circles keeper, psychodramatist, facilitator of the Greek team

#Me-Too Restorative Circle

Alexia Stouraiti

October – November 2017.

Women all over the world speaking up, feeling strong enough and safe enough to share their personal stories of sexual harassment, abuse, insult, violence, even rape. And as each story followed another, the feeling of strength and safety got bigger and bigger.

It seems like something was in the air these days; as if women were reclaiming back their inner power. And this is something that not everybody could sense or even guess. It was like a secret truth coming out and becoming visible for everyone who was ready to see.

And it had the same impact on me.

Following Brene Brown's teachings on vulnerability and courage, I as well came up to the point of fast heartbeat and an irresistible need to share my own story on Facebook. And then there was the fear of shame. And then there was the fear of them who had harassed me, coming after me for sharing, even if I never revealed their names.

This is when it struck me.

There was so much internalised fear and anger and shame, that women globally created a whole movement out of nowhere (and conscious men globally started asking for the first time “what can I do to help”).

There was a huge need for Restorative Circles on this matter.

So, the same evening I created an event on Facebook announcing that I would facilitate a pro bono Restorative Circle on this matter, asking all who were interested to send a private message, so that privacy would be protected and there could be confidentiality. The day of the Circle came, and six (the maximum number of participants that I had set) women appeared. Six participants and myself, seven women, total strangers, with no-one but me knowing what a Restorative Circle is about, or how it is conducted (which may also be considered as another verification that these women, along with many others that also responded to this event announcement, or never heard anything about it, had a *deep need for sharing*).

I was amazed by the openness to share all these hard experiences and emotions, and I thank every single one of these women for their trust in the process and myself as a Circle keeper. We all came to face our deepest traumas, even from childhood, and until the Circle came to its ending, the group managed to experience the so-called post-traumatic growth, or PTG – the phenomenon of people becoming stronger and creating a more meaningful life in the wake of staggering trauma.

Restorative Circles create this *safe space* for sharing and opening up vulnerability, which by itself is healing. And in my opinion also as a psychodramatist, this is the only thing which is actually healing. The talking piece is our confirmation that we are at last authorised not to react. In this world that everything is teaching us to be fast and effective, Circles, through the talking piece, provide the space for us to transform our human nature from reactive to reflective, and stay with whatever has arisen. Opening up our painful moment with all the

feelings that emerge, sharing it in a safe space, and being able to stay with these feelings. Observe them.

As Jiddu Krishnamurti said, "Trying to control, suppress, or sublimate emotions and attachments in no way reduces the conflict, does it? First one has to be conscious, aware, to know or recognise, to see, that one's emotions are strong and also that one is attached. The division in our lives is the structure of thought, which is the action of the observer who thinks himself separate from his thought. But there can be no thought without the thinker and no thinker without the thought. So the two are really one. He is also the experiencer and, again, he separates himself from the thing he experiences. The observer, the thinker, the experiencer, are not different from the observed, the thought, the experienced. When the mind sees the reality of this, the division can no longer exist. *All conflict is this battle between the observer and the observed*".

So to be given the space just to observe... this is true healing and personality development. And this is the empowerment that Restorative Circles offer.

the author is a lawyer, accredited mediator, restorative circles keeper, psychodramatist, facilitator of the Greek team

PARTICIPANTS' FEEDBACK

The followings are informal accounts of the restorative circles from the perspective of the participants. All participants were asked if they wished to contribute to a final report about the circles, and all entries were accepted into this report. The following articles represent some of their voices.

What I have learned

The methodology of the Restorative Circle is a totally new way of communication for me. I am quite experienced in some other fields of group communications like world café, workshop, also using the 'talking object' in a different way for one or maximum two games was familiar to me but building on the whole program on this excellent tool was fascinating.

Using the methodology of Restorative Circle could be adapted as an element in conflict solving situations, trainings, workshops along with meditative sessions, during patience-learning, teaching processes.

The real advantage of this method is that I realized within myself how the feeling of urgent importance of an answer, communication, reflection, comment, expression of disagreement sometimes really disappears with a little bit of time while waiting for your disciplined turn during the circle discussion.

Personally I experienced during and after the 'discussion game' that among the numerous participants only two participants were really active corresponding quickly with each other on a subject they really disagreed on. After the session I had a very long conversation with one of the passive participants of the group - an experienced communicator..on her/his field - who told me that his/her verbal contribution is usually quite intensive but this is restricted only on her/his field where the participant has experience. In an unknown field which was the case - his/her participation in the conversation is blocked because of two other participants' intensive and rapid involvement. This participant would have been active if those dominant participants would have given more time to engage in the process. In other words, giving time to each other and respecting silence for a while would be the solution.

Since I was participating frequently on this program, I can recall during the months how many times I definitely tried to change the rules - with not much success, which taught me acceptance.

The main input for myself was to learn Tolerance and Patience.

One challenge during the restorative circle happened when a participant was reading something out from his paper which was obviously something he/she wanted to declare, a well prepared subject in advance instead of reacting in a spontaneous way on the real subject of the ongoing discussion. Tolerating this kind of lack of focus of the subject made me nervous.

New self-knowledge is how impatient I am in certain situations - what a big need there is to learn and practice tolerance, how participants need to 'speed-up' on the way of gaining self confidence to speak-up even on a subject far from their experience. It is not any more enough in modern life to communicate only within one's own topic or field of expertise.

There is an urgent need of leaving the comfort-zone (and then coming back)!

We need to support starting younger generations to speak-up, give focused presentations, talk in front of minimum of 10-20 people with confidence for 3-5 minutes maximum. We need

to be able to communicate on whatever the topic is, disregarding our own experience or special field of interest.

With so much frustration now in society, what an advantage it is for somebody to have a partner in everyday life who is listening - not judging, problem solving, criticizing, or neglecting - but just carefully listening and reflecting.

As they say, there is sometimes no need for help at all, just to be listened to by someone honestly and without interest. Just for the sake of the other human being.

In **conflict situations** I really experienced the tension in the room and within myself as well. I even left the room once when somebody was not recognising that he/she was not reflecting on the subject given and their only goal was 'self-expression'. This was self expression on any subject no matter how long and how far it was from the common goal and topic.

My main focus and inspiration for the future regarding using Restorative Circles is how the methodology of the restorative circle could be combined with a brand new methodology called "CONFACTION", an expression stemming from the word of CONFERENCE and ACTION (registered trade mark) combined. This is a very efficient holistic program with the goal of 'theory and action' combined on the same day. The following is an example used for the UN Sustainable Development Goals:

- mini morning conference with experts (room, 120 minutes)
- active 'field program' depending on topic with involvement of all participants in groups (streets, parks etc. 90 minutes)
- group feedback on common activity, personal experiences (room, 30 minutes)
- lunch-time
- surprise program, performance, game (room, 30 minutes)

All in all, the restorative circle method is

- a perfect tool for mastering patience, tolerance but also on how to focus given topics with a need of self reflection, and self control.
- a way of learning about ourselves and others, and the need for agreement on topics and the methodology
- a process of learning how to focus, and how important it is for other human beings to concentrate on a given subject.

written by Gábor, a participant of the Budapest circles

The Circle Methodology, a Hope for Dialogue

I was privileged and pleased to attend the meetings held in Milan from January to June 2017. It was my first experience with the Circles philosophy. I was particularly interested to apply the Circles methodology in relationship to the European project. Through the Circles encounter I was able to listen, to speak, to share, and to learn from the other participants. **As an American living in Europe** I valued this opportunity to engage with my adopted community, which I care about and to which I attempt to positively contribute. The Circles project gave me hope for dialogue and mutual investment in society, which is especially important these days.

The Circles' spirit of cooperation and collaboration made a powerful impression on me. I learned about the significance of the physical circle at the center of our group as well as the symbolic circle that we all held in common. I quickly relaxed and got comfortable with the individuals around me. They quickly went from being strangers to neighbors. As we moved around the circle and discussed our values and ourselves, I learned that the Circles methodology is something that serves to unite very different people in a unique and intimate way. The long period of introducing the Circle and of establishing our code of conduct was an excellent prelude to discuss the main question of citizens in Europe in 2017. Everyone took mutual ownership of the project and also learned to respect one another's contributions. Above all, the talking piece was an excellent object and symbol to regulate speech and to pace the discussion.

My experience was very positive. **We took time to answer a series of linked questions** regarding the concept of Europe, the European project, and our own experiences of the European project. I am an American but have lived and worked in many European countries over the last ten years. Thus I have my own perspective and experience of the European project, which I value and regard in a positive manner. This proved to be useful and especially constructive as we interacted with one another in a group. During the process of listening, speaking, and responding, we developed our thoughts and were able to think through the questions posed to us. **We found unity in our diversity.**

The very first question asked to the circle from our facilitators was a very simple one, namely, **"What do you think about the European project?"** Our group considered divisions and also shared points among European nations and peoples. We related this to the concept of our circle held in common. We also discussed the question of immigration using the Circles philosophy of welcome and accommodation. As part of an attempt to consider an improved European project, we discussed strengthening the European institutions and in particular the European parliament. One point that emerged was that the European institutions and project needed to become more transparent in order to be able to effectively communicate with European citizens, just as the Circles philosophy encourages honesty and discussion. This could strengthen Europe and engage its people. Our group produced interesting and diverse responses, which were always respectfully guided by our token piece.

In my opinion, the Circles philosophy is well adapted to a discussion of the European project: both are communal projects with communal goals. For example, the Circle considered the question of a universal basic income as guarantee of human dignity and security. This could

strengthen European society by providing opportunities for personal development and employment. The Circles methodology provided us with an opportunity to consider that the European project is and ought to be primarily organized for its citizens. A strong component of this social focus needs to be the development of the social state, which has been a defining characteristic of Europe in the last sixty years. A stronger social state could also better address the question of young people in Europe, providing them with opportunities to develop their talents and then to use them in the European Union. The European Project and the Circles Project are both focused on development and support of their citizen participants.

Davide Boniforti, Carlo Pistoni and Emanuele Murra were excellent facilitators for our Circles meetings. They explained the methodology and philosophy very clearly. They also positioned themselves as members of the Circle rather than as individuals in positions of power. Because of them the encounter proceeded very well. They were prepared and attentive to the participants. They connected with the participants, who were very diverse. At the same time they advanced the project and facilitated our discussion in a warm yet professional way. Davide and Carlo's training as psychologists and familiarity with the Circles methodology were both very valuable.

The experience of the "Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe" made a very positive impression upon me. I had never encountered the Circles methodology and philosophy but **immediately appreciated it**. I particularly valued its use of the symbol of the circle and the talking piece, as well as the activities designed to bring the participants together in an atmosphere of mutual support and involvement. I am looking forward to a new series of meetings to continue our discussion of the European project for 2018 and beyond.

Timothy D. Thomas, member of the Milan circles in Italy

Being alone with my opinion in a circle

First of all, as the CEO of Generation Identity in Hungary, I applied via Facebook for these circles. I saw the event on one of my friend's site. Later the organizer of the event invited my Partner CEO of Identity Generation of Hungary for the second round.

During this year I took part twice in this project.

I saw and felt at the very beginning that my **conservative-liberal**, Christian views will get a lot of negative comments and counter opinions. Before my arrival I had the same expectations, so it was not a surprise for me. I know exactly the current political situation in Hungary. I do not mention this in a negative context at all.

For me, the beginning was quite **hard to concentrate** and answer all of the counter opinions, but afterwards, the next rounds of the conversation went a very different way.

My biggest challenge was not to get embarrassed when I interpreted my personal opinion or **accept other's opinion**. I am empathic, tolerant and partially liberal. Thinking back, the biggest challenge was for me **to protect my personal values** and my personality at the same time that the counter party represented his/ her own views.

I decided at the very beginning before the meeting to stay empathic but not to give up my ideas. By the way, the facilitators of the circles let us freely introduce our points. This was a very big **positive disappointment** for me.

We spoke about current politics. I represented the conservative, right party. The rest of the people (90%) were left party supporters. We could not achieve a win-win situation in the main questions, but at least we listened to each other's presentations. I feel I got a lot from these circles. I learned how to listen and tolerate different point of views.

I am so sorry that the values which I represent (and the other CEO of Identity Generation of Hungary) were not understood by anybody. For some of the questions we were able to make a kind of alliance with the others.

If I would have a proposal to the organizers of the event, it would be: Please focus on target groups. In Hungary, in such a circle at least half of the people (50%) should have the same opinion as my personal values, based on statistics.

Time was running as we got to know one another. I found it funny that my arguments had so many counter opinions.

At the second round we had a funny situation. Unfortunately I could not stay until the end. I was in a hurry, so I could not reply to all of the questions.

My personal opinion is that such events (circles) create a nice environment for conflict management. It is the organizer's responsibility to manage the target group in similar rate (Like 50-50% for example).

I believe with this methodology we can solve the social conflicts between the different groups of people, and this is a very good opportunity to get to know different points of views about the same topic.

Unfortunately in Hungary the **society is divided** nowadays. Like in Ócsény, Hungary, for

example, many atrocities happen because of the **lack of normal conversation**. For opening such channels these restorative circles are more than perfect.

For me it was a big pleasure to attend this forum, and hopefully it gave some ideas for the participants.

Thank you and big respect to the organizers. I am very happy that we met, and I got to know this methodology.

Kindest Regards,

Bence Szabó, participant of the Budapest circles

Restorative Circles in Pécs

I have learned at least two very important things from my experience with the restorative circle, which will stay with me for the rest of my life. One is related to the process, the other is to the subject: Europe. First, I will explain about my experience regarding these two aspects, and then discuss how the two are related.

During the circle discussions, the restorative circle technique had been questioned multiple times by some participants who raised the question whether this process was fruitful or meaningful at all. Some suggested that the circle process made the development of a real conversation impossible, as one couldn't immediately react to what other people had just said. I found, however, that the point of the restorative circle was not to have a conventional dialogue between people but to offer our ideas or perspectives to the circle: the community. The process ensures that none of the participants can steer the conversation; still it goes to a particular direction. Each time we held a restorative circle, I had the feeling that we eventually had gotten somewhere, and I had learned something new about the subjects discussed. I guess it happened so because the dialogue was taking place not on the surface where arguments usually are presented, attacked and defended, but deep inside in each participant. What is more, the outcome we created together was not what I or any other participant had thought or expressed. Instead it was a shared product, independent from the individuals who created it. All the misunderstandings and associations contributed to this shared product, which was more than the ingredients we had added, and which belonged to none of us but to all of us at the same time. What I learned from the restorative circle process is that sometimes it is not me or my idea or my intended message that really matters but the community we are creating through sharing our minds and listening to the others. The thought being born and connecting us all is important.

When I came to the first restorative circle discussion, the values and principles I held in high importance were not necessarily or exclusively related to being Hungarian, but more to being European. I believed I had a European identity rather than a Hungarian identity. This understanding of my own identity has changed partially and this change goes deep to the very core of my identity. When talking about our values and related concepts, I realized that what I had previously considered European values or the very essence of being European are actually universal human values. In other words: the European ideology is, in fact, the ideology of universality. This recognition eventually nullifies the idea of a European or any national identity for once and for all. If I associate love, freedom or solidarity exclusively with

being Hungarian or European, it is not about real love, freedom or solidarity. Values and principles considered European actually reflect the concept of universality, i.e. the understanding that we are all human beings regardless of colour, religion, job, or nationality. This is not the ideology of Europe but that of universal humanity. It doesn't matter where I live and cherish these values or with whom I share them.

I think these two new realisations are connected by and rooted in the same concept: giving up of the self. We define ourselves: who we are and what we do in the world, through identity elements. Our identity makes us feel secure. But at some point we'd better give up these particular identities when we realize they cannot be more important than universal humanity. When we understand that everybody we meet is human just like us. The same holds true for restorative circles as well. Here we should be able to let go of our ideas or the desire to defend our position or win an argument. As soon as we share our ideas, they get out of our control and become the assets of the group, independent from us, and thus anything can happen to them afterwards. This too means giving up yourself. The restorative circle offers an opportunity to experience community of thought and shared thinking not dominated by any participant.

written by Áron Szatmári, civil rights activist, participant of the Pécs circles, Hungary

translated by Vera Juhász

My Experiences in the Restorative Circles Program Regarding the EU

I participated in the Restorative Circles program because of my interest in communication techniques and consensus-based strategies. As a moderator of the Living Memorial (an activist group in Budapest), I am familiar with the principles that discussions of controversial issues are based on, as well as the ways to reach a consensus. In the Living Memorial Group, this principle is the importance of listening to one another in the order of signaling the wish to contribute, with the help of a microphone.

I like the restorative method partly because I am fond of Native American culture, where restorative communication is rooted.

I was looking forward to participating in the conversations regarding the EU between sympathetic and skeptical participants. Before this project I had already participated in some circles, but these groups consisted mostly of people with similar attitudes. There was no real confrontation. It was important for me to see people as they become familiar with the use of the totem object, learn not to interrupt, and wait for the other, and its impact on participants' empathy. There is a great need to experience this, both on a community level and the macro level involving the entire country. Hungarian politics can be characterized by an attitude of "dog eats dog". Communication should not be a game between winners and losers.

It was interesting to see the kind of people who attended such circles. I have to admit that some of the people were annoying me a little, especially the ones who were in love with their own voices, and spoke unlimitedly with a lack of focus. It's not my style. I felt even more offended by some of the responses of leading personalities who were very critical towards the circle keepers. I was wondering what their motivation might have been.

I participated in two rounds of circles with EU sympathizers and in one round with skeptics. I was mostly looking forward to be in a circle with the skeptics. I was very curious of their attitudes and views.

As a EU sympathizer, I heard many comments of the union fans at some opposition rallies and political events.

The main important difference between an ordinary political rally and the restorative circle was that participants of the latter did not interrupt each other and could not dominate each other by non-verbal communication tricks.

In one of the rounds some people were talking about the EU in terms of what we expect of it (as some kind of a father figure), instead of talking about what to do in order to live in a better union, and what our responsibility is in creating a livable Europe. There is great need for a sense of adult-minded, civic responsibility.

As a European citizen, I'd like to find the balance between the two attitudes.

The shared circle with the skeptics was less harsh than I had expected. Unfortunately, there were only three skeptics in our group, and I do not like debates where one party is in the minority and suppressed. The moderators ensured a fair discussion, and the majority group of EU sympathizers was not looking to overcome the minority group. But empathy between

the two groups did not grow very strong. During the breaks the two groups were mostly looking for each other's company, and were slightly reinforcing each other's values.

There were two delicate topics: the relationship between the nation states and the Brussels center, including the question of monetary union, and, not surprisingly, the refugee issue.

The unlimited expression of opinions, and the black and white thinking was overcome in the discussion of both topics. Conspicuous EU criticism was very rare, especially concerning the refugee issues. Both liberal views regarding the refugee crisis, and anti-refugee voices were beautifully represented. Germany accepted 15 million refugees after 1945 and a number of Hungarian refugees after the 1956 revolution, so why not accept 1 or 2 two million refugees in this current situation. It would have been better to spend a couple of more days together to discuss delicate subjects without taboos.

I also thought it was contradictory when a participant who had been living in a wealthy country of the EU for decades was very critical of the EU. The hostile tone in which he expressed his views towards refugees of the recent crisis was also surprising, given the fact that he was an immigrant fleeing from post 1956 Hungary, and he was accepted at the time as a citizen in a safe country.

All in all, the circles were very enjoyable, because of the sense of togetherness, and it would be good to continue talking to each other. I consider the restorative method to be an indispensable remedy of all social exclusion, trauma and disagreement in Hungary.

With love: Péter Galgóczi, participant of the Budapest circles

My participation in the restorative circles in Athens

I participated in the Experiential Seminar “Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe”, which took place in Athens, Greece the first semester of 2017.

I decided to apply for this seminar, because during the summer of 2015, I found myself in a personal and professional situation that was directly being affected by the current-at-that-time political and economical developments (**Greek bailout referendum, its implications, post-election reactions and political decisions**) – and consequently, I was questioning my personal standpoint regarding the European Union, its structure, its ideology and its policies.

In addition, I was interested in experiencing the use of Restorative Circles as a **debate methodology on political and social issues**, since I knew nothing about the so-called Restorative Justice, and it seemed to me just another psychotherapy method.

When I started participating in the seminars and became acquainted with the main principles and guidelines of the Restorative Circles, as well as their history and possible uses, I got really excited. The **anti-authoritarian character** of the Circles (i.e. the fact that we were all - co-ordinators and participants - treated as equals, so we could equally shape the principles and topics of our debate), as well as **the right to remain silent** (whether we had nothing important to add to the discussion, or we had no will to share our thoughts and feelings at a specific moment of the seminar) made me feel **comfortable** from the very beginning to open up and express calmly my personal experiences, my ideas and my emotions in a group of strangers. Likewise, the rest of the participants shared their own - and soon enough, I found myself situated among like-minded people with similar concerns.

Of course, during this 6-weekend-long discussion process, **we had our disagreements**, but we could listen to each other with patience and respect, since we expressed our opinions focusing on our personal experiences. But this focus on our personal life stories - in a framed context of discussion about the European Union and citizenship - also functioned as a reminder of the **interconnections** of the personal and the socio-political spheres and motivated us to remain or become more active as (european) citizens.

After the end of the ‘national’ Restorative Circles, I had the opportunity to participate in the first of the two **international online meetings** (June and September 2017), that were held for the participants of the project coming from all the countries where the project was implemented (Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Greece and Italy). Creatively coping with technical issues (for example, internet-connection problems, no physical talking piece that could be given from one participant to the other), we managed to have a very interesting discussion comparing our experiences from our local Circles.

Overall, my participation in this experiential seminar was a **truly restorative process**. After a stressful period of personal and professional difficulties that led me questioning my standpoint on many aspects of private and public life, I stopped feeling lonely and gradually, I managed to rebuild my trust in the power that we have - as active citizens - to shape our common present and future.

Revekka Kefaela, participant of the Athens and the international online circles

The method was very strange at first

Taking sides is not a new thing. Due to globalization, mass and social media, however, **polarization is more visible than ever** before, and it seems that humankind has never been so divided.

The political atmosphere in Hungary is one example of this. We set up **boxes**, label them and there is no genuine intention to understand and listen to the “inhabitants” of the other box. The moment someone makes a positive remark on Viktor Orbán, he or she is labelled as conservative and the moment someone makes a positive remark on György Soros, he or she is claimed to be liberal by the majority around. If a former Bajnai supporter says something positive about Jobbik, he is immediately considered a traitor by some without question, and one cannot really read a HVG or a Heti válasz without getting mean political comments or even arguments from unknown people. People are very much opinionated about politics lately, which, in itself could be a positive thing, if it generated conversation. Unfortunately, it does not.

In March 2017 I attended a **media conference about the polarized media**. First of all, there were liberal participants only. Secondly, they all proudly claimed to have ceased to talk to former colleagues and friends who still work at a pro-government media. Is this really something a journalist should be proud of?

Real conversations are getting extremely rare. If you are both liberals, there is nothing really to talk about, you fully agree. If you talk to someone who seems to represent a different box you believe yourself to be in, then again, there is nothing really to talk about: you completely disagree. Intelligent and meaningful clash of opinions, with mutual respect and genuine intention to understand and listen to each other is so rare.

When I came across the Facebook advertisement of Restorative circles, I thought, this is what I am looking for. A platform that creates meaningful conversations between different opinions.

The method was very strange at first. Honestly, I was even disappointed at first because the session seemed to be a series of monologues. But after a while I realized that I am more attentive than in any other conversations I have been involved before. I did not have the urge to react: to agree or disagree. I listened instead. I did not start to collect reflections about what I have heard, I just listened. After a day of listening the automatic need to react on things stopped completely. There were intelligent people in the circle with similar but slightly different opinions on Europe and we had no intentions to change these opinions.

There were about 20 people present, **except for 1, we all fit into the liberal, pro-Europe box**. Only one participant considered and opinionated himself as a national conservative. This was a disappointment to me. In the past years, thanks to social media, and the huge variety of media content, one can easily and completely avoid any connections with the „inhabitants” of the other box. Our ideologies are rarely challenged. We can live our life without being forced to rethink our beliefs or understand others. This circle theoretically could have been a space for challenging ideas. In the end, what I went for is to be the part of real

conversations between people of different opinions, to see that there are shades and overlaps. Due to the lack of real differences, no major ideas were truly challenged.

Being in the majority gave to the most of us the obvious and well-known psychological comfort. One advantage of the method of this circles is that if it is controlled well and all rules are respected, being in the minority is less discomforting than in case of any other social interactions.

On the other hand, this ratio could actually have some counter-effects on the majority: only one anti-Europe participant, being alone, cannot fight the preconception that all national conservative people think the same way. He obviously thinks the same as all national conservatives in the room do, as he was the only one...

Obviously, one cannot force anyone to participate. And still, even so I was happy to listen to and understand opinions different to mine on the roles of NGOs, how they should be related to the nation, what Europe can give and take away from a liberal culture and much, much more. I was glad to meet and listen to people who represent a wide shade of liberal thinking. **It was like being in a same big box with a number of slightly different small boxes.** And at the end, this is what the circles wants to achieve. Am I right?

written by Kata Toth, participant of the Budapest circles

How is this a different method

Being a psychologist, I was highly interested in the restorative circles. In general, my experiences with this technique were positive.

One has to find out how to adapt this method to specific local environments. I learned from the facilitators that this practice is rooted in the tradition of Native Americans who have used it to discuss issues sitting in a circle around the fire with the help of a talking piece e.g. a stone passing from one person to the other.

What I like about this technique is that it gives opportunity for each participant to share their ideas, letting treasures usually hidden deep in the soul to surface. Under the usual group dynamics, confident people speak more, while shy ones tend to remain silent so not everybody has equal chances to make their voice heard. Therefore, **equality is an enormous advantage of the circles technique.** Additionally, the person holding the stone, or another talking piece, will obviously look inside and enter into a meditative state, where they can access thoughts, memories and emotions from deeper and deeper levels.

On the other hand, this kind of communication leaves **less room for connecting to others.** It is more like a series of monologues. One may take notes so that they can react to something important said at some point during the circle, but by the time it's their turn to speak, they may entertain some totally different ideas and be less motivated to react. The technique helps avoid emotionally charged debates within the group but is likely to hinder deeper connection and emotional bonding between the participants. It is like a praying circle, where everybody says their own prayer without creating a real community.

I think the circles work best in a group if combined with other techniques; I mean there should be room also for free interaction and group dynamics to develop in order to build emotional connections. Instead of letting conflicts (rivalry, scapegoating) escalate and flourish the group can move to restorative circles if the primary goal is not learning about the self but thinking together about some issues like we did when talking about the European Union.

The role of the circle keepers is different from other facilitators inasmuch as they express their subjective thoughts when speaking as one of the group rather than remaining neutral and objective throughout the whole process. As a result, the group may lose its leader at some point. Or the circle keepers, who are the formal leaders of the group, may get too much involved due to their own emotions, which may influence the whole group. A calm and composed leader can show an example to the participants by presenting her ideas in a well-structured way and help them go deeper with processing and understanding. However if the group leader is in a personal crisis her behaviour may provoke strong emotions. If a facilitator expects empathy or solidarity from the group members and has difficulty with tolerating opinions different from her own, it will influence group dynamics and may weigh heavily on the group.

This technique requires more self-discipline, integrity and charisma, where the group leader's personal life remains hidden and she keeps a 'tabula rasa' position within the group. What I found most difficult was that I could hardly relate to the other participants because I could only react and receive reaction from others with some delay, which made me feel a little lonely.

On the other hand, I received a lot from the other participants when they shared their deepest feelings, the treasures of their soul such as memories, experiences, feelings, which gave me a lot of energy.

I have participated in the entire group process. Too bad many people had dropped out. Nevertheless, I received a lot and I think it was worthwhile to be a part of all this.

Regarding self-understanding, I would highlight a challenge we face in our modern world where we rush through life hardly ever taking time to look around ourselves or look at the well of the soul to take account of the values, memories and treasures we carry and on which we can rely on when facing difficulties.

This technique is like looking at the photos of our lives together with other people, our own pictures as well as theirs, and by doing so we integrate our past into the present and the future, and reinforce our identity and internal resources, and build our future together.

Thank you very much!

*written by Anikó Hazag, participant of the Budapest circles
translated by Vera Juhász*

The restorative circle method could be an answer to the challenges of our times

Water shortage, wars, the declining quality of soil, desertification and floods happening due to the deforestation to create more grazing areas because of the increase in beef consumption cause people to flee their homes. In the latter case greenhouse gases get into the atmosphere accelerating climate change.

We are witnessing mass migration due to increasing environmental and economic pressure. The EU is primarily at risk from **migration and terrorism**, and Hungary is not significantly threatened by these. In Hungary there are no parallel societies like the ones in Western Europe, there are no isolated communities which would be easy targets.

In spite of this, the subjective perception of safety is becoming more and more noticeable. The influencing factors of this are the media and everyday language. Expert opinion and society's opinion has to be separated as the gap between the two is becoming wider and wider.

During the sessions we could see that it is possible for people to pay attention to each other and listen to other people's opinions. These things are in short supply in our hectic lives and obsessions with mobile phones and work.

It is a general phenomenon to privatize profit and socialize deficit in the globalized world. The bases here are low wages and low levels of employment which increase imbalance and tension, these being also quite typical of our region.

Increasing production is a constant source of stress. It forces people to work harder in order to be able to afford the never ending gush of 'new' goods provided by the system.

Higher GDP makes an illusion that people are living better and better and more and more carefree when in fact they are working for longer and longer periods. They give up something that doesn't have a price (free time) for something valuable that does (working hours).

Families, love affairs and relationships **break up due to lack of communication**. People and interest groups should definitely sit down together and find the common position which involves compromises.

In certain cases, I believe, dictatorship can be more effective than democracy. If we have to react fast to a challenge, this method can also be applied provided those concerned are appropriately informed.

On the other hand, during the sessions it was interesting to experience that even **people who would never have met or sat down** to talk to each other in everyday life **listened** to each other's viewpoints.

The experts conducting the sessions introduced this process and the rules in a subtle and elegant manner and everyone accepted them in a short time.

We could also **get to know ourselves much better** during the discussions which is a positive psychological achievement. As I took part in two different sessions it was interesting to 'test' what the experiences were like at the sessions both in Pécs in Budapest.

I reckon, the standard of the comments was much lower at the Budapest events. People often added unnecessary information. At the Pécs events people reacted in a more factual and effective manner. Possibly this is due to the greater knowledge of the participants.

It was good **to find the hidden virtue** in other people and hear their clever and forward comments and the way we focussed on each other made it easy to resolve conflicts.

EU experts should also follow similar methods because they have several issues to deal with regarding the migrant crisis.

Currently there is rivalry about whose solution is good instead of reaching a common European consensus.

A common **consensus** means compromises as opposed to making other people accept our own viewpoint. This is what the restorative method highlighted.

written by Róbert Bársony, non-partisan military officer, participant in both Budapest and Pécs circles

My restorative circles experience

I first learned about the restorative circles in January. Before that, I had not even heard about this technique. It was in January when I registered for the 'Restorative Circles for Citizens in Europe' programme series. Frankly speaking, I wasn't interested in the technique but in the subject matter: I wanted to talk about Europe with other people.

When I arrived at the venue of the first circle, I found the setup of the room a little strange with all the chairs arranged in a circle, even though I could have expected it considering the title of the programme.

We sat down in a circle and started to share our ideas. When we first met, we didn't know each other, we were strangers sitting together in a circle.

The sequence of talking is controlled by the so-called talking piece, which allows for the holder of the object to speak, while all others listen. First it was difficult not to interrupt or immediately react to other participants, as one has to wait for her or his turn to speak with the talking piece in hand.

At the first circle, we established principles to guide all future circles. This process was not easy because a large number of suggestions were made, which filled more than one flip chart sheet. We considered all aspects and eventually reached a consensus regarding our guiding principles.

We reserved those sheets with the approved principles and used them at later occasions to guide our circle discussions. We were not total strangers anymore, although there were always some new people joining the process. When meeting again, we always looked at the principles again, made some amendments if necessary and agreed on them.

I attended a number of discussions talking about Europe using the circles technique. Some participants had ideas similar to mine, while others held very different views.

We have learned a lot about each other and ourselves, without ever attacking or judging each other in any way. This technique ensured that we had a civilised conversation.

I attended the Budapest conference as well. Here the number of participants was much higher, but it was still possible to follow the circle process, although it was necessary to pay attention to time limits.

The restorative circle is a great technique, as it gives each participant equal opportunity to express their views and participate in solving the problem at hand.

I would strongly suggest using this technique for groups in which the members need to make a shared decision and reach a consensus. I think the optimal number of participants should be around twenty.

I am grateful for having the opportunity to take part in this programme series and meet many interesting and valuable people. I also had a chance to look at Europe from new perspectives.

We must live together in Europe regardless of potential differences in opinions or beliefs.

In our ever-changing world it is highly important to live in peace, work together instead of against each other, and learn how to cooperate and be friends.

We have been part of this process. I think everybody present at the conference was as happy and content with the whole project as I was.

Best regards,

Mrs Perlusz, Julianna Villányi (alias Julus), participant of the Budapest circles

translated by Vera Juhász



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