

## Study Visit "Youth Work Realities in Armenia", 25. – 31. March 2012

Between 25 and 31 March 2012 the Åland Islands Peace Institute's EVS coordinator Sarah Stephan participated in a study visit to Armenia which was arranged in Yerevan and Gyumri by the Salto-Youth Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre in cooperation with the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. Sarah and her 18 colleagues from altogether 8 Youth in Action programme countries were invited to learn about youth policies and youth work realities in Armenia and to get a general overview about the developments in the programme's Eastern partnership region . The objective of the visit was to meet youth workers from Armenia, to network and build lasting partnerships (for more detail see <http://www.salto-youth.net/rc/eeca/activitieseeca/svtoarmenia/>).

Integrated into the study visit's programme was a parallel Salto event, namely the "Eastern Partnership Platform 4 Youth" (see <http://www.salto-youth.net/rc/eeca/activitieseeca/eapyouth-event/>). The Platform hosted not only representatives from the European Commission's Directorate General Education and Culture and the Directorate General EuropeAid but also representatives of youth organizations from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine. The group of more than 100 participants can thus be described as a very diverse, working on very different levels with the EU's Youth in Action Programme (YiA). The platform was a rare opportunity for youth workers to meet Commission staff and vice versa for Commission staff to meet those you actually implement and benefit from YiA. The Platform focused largely on information concerning the so-called "Eastern Partnership Youth Window", a policy which aims at encouraging youth organizations in the EECA region to seek funding from the European Commission for cooperation with European partners in the youth field. Practically, the Eastern Partnership Youth Window entails an increase in funding opportunities for youth exchanges, voluntary services, training courses etc. with partner organizations in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. This is great news for the Peace Institute of course, as it will allow the organization to continue its cooperation with organizations in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the framework of EVS and training courses on conflict resolution. While being of great added value and very informative, the platform event did include non-formal elements to a very limited extent only.



Left: Salto multiplier and study visit leader Anahit Minassian facilitating a partnership building activity during the Eastern Partnership Platform 4 Youth. Right: Visit to the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs of the Republic of Armenia.

The study visit by contrast, which Sarah attended for three more days after the Platform, constituted a genuine non-formal learning experience. Salto succeeded in bringing together organisations from the EU's member states and Switzerland with experience within YiA and “newcomers” (but not only) from Armenia. Altogether Salto organized three youth fairs with poster presentations and the opportunity to mingle in a non-formal environment. Salto also organized a visit to Gyumri, a city of half a million North-West of Yerevan which in 1988 was devastated by an earthquake. Reconstruction has since proceeded only slowly and the young population of Gyumri is faced by high rates of unemployment, which is a big challenge for Armenia in general. Sarah also used the opportunity of her visit to Armenia to visit the Women’s Resource Centre Armenia in Yerevan which works to promote women’s rights and offers legal and psychological counseling for women that have experienced domestic violence.



Left: Artur from Gyumri and Sofia from Yerevan presenting their organizations at a youth fair. Right: the Peace Institute’s youth fair poster.

The Åland Islands Peace Institute’s interest in the South Caucasus has over the last years grown deeper as the Institute has facilitated a number of events which brought together civil society representative from Armenia and Azerbaijan, two countries which formally have been in war since 1990 and have since no diplomatic relations which leads to the fact that citizens of Armenia and Azerbaijan rarely get the chance to meet. The Åland Islands and the Åland Islands Peace Institute can represent a physical meeting space and has done so, for example in 2008 when young women from both countries met on Åland do discuss the role of women in peace processes in the framework of a YiA sponsored training course. Similar activities are currently under preparation at the Peace Institute.

Sarah, who in 2009 participated in Salto’s study visit to Azerbaijan, from a comparative perspective noted that young people in both countries do not only underline their national identities but present themselves as young Europeans who are eager to exploit the possibilities presented by the Youth in Action Programme. The European Union, originally a peace project, might thus have a positive spill-over effect also in the South Caucasus by promoting peace through what in Youth in Action jargon is called “people-to-people contacts”, positive personal encounters on the civil society level.