

Academy for Young Leaders in Civil Society by Schüler Helfen Leben - SHL Bosnia and Herzegovina

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We had the pleasure of interviewing **Maša Galić**, Project Coordinator for the Academy for Young Leaders in Civil Society, a flagship program by the foundation Schüler Helfen Leben (SHL) in Sarajevo. From its beginnings during the wartime in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it transformed into an incubator for young leaders and a host of good practices in local youth work. Maša shared with us all about the Academy's program's goals, activities, and local impact.

Can you tell us more about your organization and its efforts to facilitate reconciliation within Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Foundation Schüler Helfen Leben (SHL) is an organization that has *worked* and *lived* in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1994. During the most difficult times of war, for people in BiH, SHL volunteers showed their courage and humanity. Volunteers who first came from Germany wanted not only to help, but to show solidarity with their peers in BiH who were, at the moment, struggling to survive and to stay „normal“. So, by saying that SHL lives in BiH, we think that the mission of our organization is deeply rooted in the challenges the country has been going through and is dealing with.

SHL, through the years, went from a humanitarian organization to an organization that provides education and support for young people. Again, this is because of the solidarity of young people in Germany who go out of their school benches to work chairs once per year. All the money they earn on „social day“ is allocated to educating young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The education program of SHL in BiH is focused on providing support to those young people who want to change their environment, who want to influence different processes in society, who want to see change in their local communities, and who want to live in a peaceful surrounding. SHL supports young people from each part of BiH. One of our goals is to fight against discrimination and not make any difference between young people. Also, one of the most important parts of our job is to transfer the idea of change to our students, the possibility of being different and accepted.



What are the main challenges when it comes to active citizenship and youth participation in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Bosnia and Herzegovina has been fighting crime and corruption for many years now. Difficulties with the legal system and judicial authorities do not decrease. Sometimes, it is hard to stay positive and

think that your participation can change society. Most of the time, young people feel compelled to act and do something big for society, but that is not always easy. There, we use our space, and through our education program, we offer young people inspiring and motivational lectures and praxis where they can have support and knowledge on how to act in certain moments, think critically, and observe multiple sides of the situation. Through our program, we pay attention to the people who directly work with youth (teachers, professors, professional associates) and offer them education on improving their work with children and young people.

The passion young people feel for change at the beginning of the SHL education program abates years after. Still, the main challenge is to keep the young people motivated even after they finish the seminar and start doing business.



What is the Academy for Young Leaders? What are the methods and tools you use in the program? Who are the participants, and what skills and competencies can they gain?

Academy for Young Leaders in Civil Society is a comprehensive program that aims to empower and

civically engage young people who build trust and lead social change initiatives within and between communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, resulting in prepared young people who envision a shared future and act together. The Academy and its components are built on values of empathy, tolerance, solidarity, justice, morality, antifascism, anti-nationalism, human dignity, and human rights. Along with education and empowerment, the Academy supports the growth of its participants in the light of fellowship and unity. The participants of the Academy are young, highly motivated, and engaged people from all over BiH, aged 19-26.

The Academy provides its participants with a sense of shared identity. Graduates of the Academy will make a cohesive group of young people ready to face the challenges together and, when in doubt, lean on the values of the Academy to prevent possible conflicts in the future. After the Academy, participants can develop practical approaches to change management and understand the position of the change agent in the context of Bosnian and Herzegovina's socio-political and economic system. They can understand the basics of the functioning of BiH's economic and political system. Also, they can apply some of the basic methods of activist action to concrete strategies, such as writing a letter to a government representative, creating and distributing promotional material, petitions, public gatherings, and methods of resistance. They can apply the methods and steps of creating a strategic plan to solving a specific problem and many more.



Who are your main stakeholders for the program, and how do you collaborate with the municipalities and possibly other local-level structures?

Most of our stakeholders are young people who work as trainers in our seminars and PhD professors who hold lectures at the Academy's program. Besides them, we cooperate with the high school professors and pedagogues from BiH, as well as universities, governmental institutions, NGOs, and practitioners from the business sector. The Academy has a strong practical component for students, who undertake a one-month internship in various fields of their interest. As a result, our stakeholders include governmental institutions, cultural organizations, civil society organizations, and the business sector, where young people have the opportunity to meet their future employers. Most of them receive job offers after their internship, having distinguished themselves as responsible and proactive individuals.

In addition, we actively collaborate with municipalities and other local-level structures through partnerships in implementing youth initiatives, facilitating student internships, and organizing educational events. Municipalities provide crucial support by offering venues, promoting our activities within their communities, and connecting us with relevant stakeholders at the local level.



What do you see as a longer impact of the Academy's program?

For us at SHL, the Academy represents the soul of our organization, making it crucial to ensure its continuity. Over the past ten years, with five generations of participants behind us, the Academy has proven to be a truly transformative program that fosters profound personal growth and development. It empowers young people to become agents of change by providing them with a safe space to openly express their thoughts while receiving the support they need to thrive.

The long-term impact of the Academy is evident in the participants' ability to assess their capacities, design initiatives to enhance their skills and attitudes, and develop relevant, sustainable solutions to challenges within their communities. We have witnessed remarkable transformations among our alumni, many of whom are now successful decision-makers in their respective fields. Their strong connections and collaboration across different sectors fill us with pride and reinforce our belief that meaningful change is possible, even in the most challenging circumstances. This unwavering belief in the power of youth and their potential for change continues to drive our commitment to the Academy.

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