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THE DEVELOPMENT AND ACTIVITY OF THE SOCIETY “OUR CHILDREN” BELIŠĆE

Abstract

The paper provides an overview of the development and activities of the Society “Our Children” Belišće (cro. *Društvo „Naša djeca“ Belišće*) through seven decades of work. From the very beginning until today, Society has been gathering teachers, educators, parents and, at the very end, children to carry out activities to contribute to children’s growth and development and to fill their free time in a fun and quality way. The paper aims to present the origin, development, and conduct of the Society and to determine the impact on upbringing and education in the city of Belišće during its seven decades of existence and activity.

Keywords: Society “Our Children” Belišće, Belišće, history, childcare, volunteering

Introduction

Civic societies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are important segments of contemporary democracies. With their activities, they create added value, but also upgrade, shape and influence public and state institutions, systems and organizations, both on a national and local level. In Croatia, civic society and NGOs saw rapid development in the 21st Century. However, when primarily considering care for children in a non-institutional aspect, i.e. outside of public and private institutions for childcare, upbringing and education, one of the most relevant NGOs is the Union of Societies “Our Children” Croatia (*Savez Društava „Naša djeca“ Hrvatska*). According to Mendeš and Krpeš (2022), Union of Societies “Our Children” Croatia is the largest and oldest organization for children with a continuity of active existence for 72 years to this day.

From the very beginning of its existence, the Union initiated activities to promote the quality of toys for children, while in 1955 the *Center for Children's Toys* was founded. The Center worked on the collection and classification of various toys for children, the formation of museum collections, domestic and international exchanges and exhibitions, and the publication of professional publications. In the publications, we can follow the works of different authors on the psychological, pedagogical and other influences, as well as the qualities and roles that toys for children have in the growth and development of children. The work of the Union developed over decades, and in more recent times it is especially recognized for its activities and actions as part of the large projects it implements, and some of them were included in the *National Strategy for Children Rights in the Republic of Croatia for 2014-2022* (*Nacionalna strategija za prava djece u Republici Hrvatskoj za razdoblje od 2014. do 2022. godine*). Some of the prominent conducted projects are *Towns/Municipalities – Friends of Children* (*Gradovi i općine – prijatelji djece*),¹ *Together for Child's Smile in Hospital* (*Za osmijeh djeteta u bolnici*),² *Children's Forum* (*Dječji forum*),³ and *Children's Council* (*Dječje vijeće*). With actions such as *Towns/Municipalities – Friends of Children* and *Together for Child's Smile in Hospital*, aimed primarily at local-level communities, the standards of systematic care for children are being raised and the conditions of hospital treatment for children are improving. The Union carries out all of its activities, actions and programs in cooperation and

1 For more about Towns/Municipalities – Friends of Children consult: <https://childfriendlycities.org/croatia/>. (Accessed 10 August 2022)

2 For more about Together for Child's Smile in Hospital consult: <https://savez-dnd.hr/together-for-childs-smile-in-hospital/> (Accessed 10 August 2022)

3 For more about Children's Forum consult: <https://savez-dnd.hr/childrens-participation/childrens-forums/>. (Accessed 10 August 2022)

partnership with other associations, educational institutions, organizations and local communities, donors and sponsors.

It was the special emphasis on local character and direct work with children in practice within the community that led to the emergence of numerous separate Societies throughout Croatia. One of them is the Society "Our Children" Belišće, which today according to the Statute (2016) is defined as a non-profit, non-governmental, apolitical, non-partisan, social, independent, voluntary, humanitarian and educational association that operates in the area of Osijek-Baranja County, that is, in the area of the town of Belišće.⁴

The history, tradition and significance of the Society are best evidenced by the fact that it has been operating since 1951, the year of its foundation, with only one four-year interruption (1992 - 1996) caused by the Homeland War (*Annual report*, 1952, 1996). It is also one of the oldest members of the Union of Societies "Our Children" in Croatia, which has been active since 1950 and unites individual independent Societies.⁵ Through decades of activity under the motto "Love for children above all else!", the Society from Belišće has gained a special recognition that goes beyond narrow local boundaries. In its work, it gathers parents, friends of children, and children themselves, and carries out activities and actions intended for the welfare of children in the broadest sense. As an organization, it has the status of a legal entity and is represented by a president and secretary, who are elected for a mandate period of four years. As a member of the Union "Our Children" Croatia, it also has a recognizable emblem adapted to the local characteristic of the Society. Thus, along with the basic symbols of the graphic representation of the Union, which in the form of a circle shows the silhouettes of two children and an adult person behind them who is helping, there is also an inscription of the name of the Society in the upper part (Statute, 2016) (Picture 1).

4 Belišće is a small town in eastern part of Croatia, located on the western bank of Dravu river. The town was established in the Year 1884, when the company *Gutmann* from Nagykanizsa in Hungary acquired the rights of logging operation from Valpovo's estate holder, baron Gustav von Prandau, on local large areas of forest (Frajtag, 2003: 20). According to 2021 national census, Belišće has 8884 inhabitants.. In terms of institutional early education and childcare, primary school opened in 1886 and is still only of its kind up to day in the town (Komaromi, 2009), while first institution for early childcare started operating in 1942. (Glasovac 2009). According to Glasovac (2016), it took several decades for first early childcare institution to develop to more contemporary Kindergarten, which is today operating in Belišće under name "Maslačak". Both these institutions, primary school and Kindergarten, are tightly connected to activities of the Society "Our Children" Belišće.

5 For list of current member Societies in Union "Our Children" Croatia consult: <https://savezdnd.hr/mapa-drustava-nasa-djeca/>. (Accessed 5 September 2022)



Picture 1. The emblem of Society “Our Children” Belišće.

Society “Our Children” Belišće

Activities during the Socialist period (1951-1990)

According to the first annual report from 1952 (*Annual report*, 1952), we can follow the process of the creation of the Society and its early activities. Mrs Magda Frajlić, who at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century saw a great need for enriching the free time of children in the town of Belišće, is primarily responsible for the establishment of the Society “Our Children” Belišće. For this purpose, with her up-to-date activities, she moved to gather a group of activists and enthusiasts, primarily women, and given that she was aware of the immediate creation of the Union of Societies “Our Children” Croatia, she founded the Society “Our Children” Belišće. The new organization for working with children was one of the early civil societies founded in a wider area (Petovari, 2021). The first activities of the Society were dedicated to the opening of children’s playgrounds in Belišće, bringing forward a new concept of spending leisure and extracurricular time for children that was not known to the town until then. The result was the opening of the first children’s playground, which was located next to the football stadium (*Annual report*, 1952).

After the successful realization of the initial idea, the activities spread over time to various segments. Soon it was successfully organized for children’s theatre from Osijek to come to the cinema building once a month and present plays and puppet shows for the children of Belišće. In addition to hosting the theatre from Osijek, the Society had the honour of hosting a children’s theatre

from Warsaw, which presented one of its puppet shows. The positive reaction of the director of the children's theatre from Warsaw was especially noted since she was in awe that such a small place as Belišće offers so many worthwhile activities for children. During the following time, the Society also organized a ballet school for the youngest, which the children attended under the supervision of professional instructor. After completing ballet school, a performance was organized in which the youngest showed what they had learned during the school year. In addition to extremely valuable cultural achievements in the field of theatre and ballet, the children of lower economic status were not forgotten either. A joint summer vacation in Makarska (Croatia) and Kropa (Slovenia) that lasted for 20 days was organized primarily for them, which made it possible for a large number of children to have a summer vacation that otherwise would not have been able to experience it. During the first decades of its existence, the Society regularly organized well-attended children's fairs in the courtyard of the Kindergarten in Belišće. Considering that public financing of the Society was completely absent, income for work was collected primarily through the organization of party activities during which personal donations were collected. During the time of the SFRY, first-year pupils who attended school had to take the pioneer oath on November 29 of every year, that is, on Republic Day. On that occasion, the Society organized a reception for the pupils, who were then presented with an appropriate modest gift. In addition to Mrs Magda Frajlić, the Society "Our Children" Belišće was also led by the following people during this period: Dragica Jerbić, Mato Čokljat, Jozefina Križan, Marija Popović, Vera Iveković, Ida Podobnik, Blanka Maričić, Bosiljka Jakšić, Suada Koralija, and Marija Anić. All of the aforementioned leaders left a deep mark on the development and progress of the Society and the welfare of the children of Belišće (*Annual reports, 1953-1985; Assembly minutes, 1986-1989*).

According to an Annual report from 1986 (*Annual report, 1986*) Marija Anić, a graduate of teaching school, was elected president of the Society "Our Children" Belišće with a mandate period of 1986-1990. Anić was the last president of the Society in the Socialist period, and the mandate was in an era of increasing turmoil that eventually led to the breakout of Homeland war. Regardless, the Society saw that its activities were conducted correctly and noticed several new tendencies among its members positions. Namely, people working in the education system occupied the majority of seats in the presidency of the Society, while regular members were usually housewives or women that eventually used to work for a limited number of years in the Industry Colony of Belišće. One of the early prominent activities of this period was the organization of winter holidays in

Delnice for the senior classes of elementary school. The trip was by train and all students had secured hotel accommodation. More than a hundred students from Belišće participated in this event, accompanied by another hundred of their colleagues from Valpovo. The group was led by the cooperation of members of Societies “Our Children” from Belišće and Valpovo, and in Delnice was met by a ski instructor who provided full ski equipment. The children who have not dared to ski were provided with sledges (*Annual report*, 1987).

In February a traditional carnival for children took place on the town streets, where the local population could observe creative and innovative costumes. The carnival led to a traditional children’s fair in the centre of the town, where every attendant would be treated with treats made by members of the Society. In July central activity of the Society was the organization of the *Flower promenade*, where the flowers made of paper were provided to children by their teachers, parents or members of the Society, after which the children would walk through the town to the yard of the Kindergarten (*Annual report*, 1987). During the summer holidays, one of the activities was the organization of a weekend stay of children from Osijek’s orphanage Klasje with the local families in Belišće. For the start of the new school year in early September, a stage show conducted by Osijek’s Children’s Theatre took place for pupils of Belišće, continuing a long tradition of cooperation with this noteworthy assembly (*Annual report*, 1988).

From its establishment, the Union of Societies “Our Children” Croatia took over the responsibility to commemorate Children’s Day in Croatia, moreover, of bringing the commemoration to every village, settlement, town, municipality, etc., which had an established member Society. Over time, the commemoration grew into a Children’s Week, which is held during the first full week of October and lasts for seven days. Therefore, it is a lasting responsibility of the Society “Our Children” Belišće to commemorate this event in the town of Belišće. In the observed period, Belišće saw several activities carried on by its proactive Society and which could be classified as follows (*Annual report*, 1988):

- Painting and writing of letters
- Presentation of children’s artwork
- Traditional games with jumping in bags
- Egg and spoon race
- Creative activities with the parents
- Stage shows
- The magician shows for children
- Children’s fair

The latter activities were not organised for frivolous purposes but aimed to raise awareness of children's rights and their position within society, as well as of children's basic needs, such as:

- Love
- Studying + schooling = education
- Play
- Food
- Drink
- Life
- Name
- Nationality
- Religion

The last activity of the Society in the given period was conducted in December 1989 and was named *Days of Children's Joy*. In cooperation with Belišće's theatre, amateur actors and singers held a stage show with a Christmas theme, while presents were given to children by Santa Claus costumed actor. The presents were contributed by the Industry Colony of Belišće, while the members of the Society were in charge of packing and organization. The activity was summed up by group photo shooting (*Annual report*, 1989, 1990). Unfortunately, the merry Christmas time was followed by escalating turmoil of political tensions and armed conflicts. It is possible to conclude from the presented agenda that the local Society "Our Children" was responsible for the conduct of the majority of extracurricular activities for children in Belišće during the Socialist period.

Towards the new millennium and democracy

The events during the early 90s heavily affected the actual possibilities and actions of the Society, especially since the geographical position of Belišće made it dangerously exposed to the war aggression that was being waged against Croatia. After the first attempt educate children through the Valpovo radio station, most children were evacuated from the town to less exposed parts of Croatia or abroad due to the immediate and increasing danger. The status of war caused the Society "Our Children" Belišće to cease all of its activities. This situation of inactivity lasted until the year 1996, when, in January, a reconstitution assembly took place and where Branka Vidaković was elected a new president. Besides the president, the Society voted on a new Statute, financial plan, programme and supervisory board, there fully reestablishing its most necessary structure for a new era of actions. Also, planned actions were supposed to be in accordance

with the Convention on the Rights of the Children and were divided into three sections: A) activities for preschool children; B) extracurricular activities for school children; C) children's creativity (*Annual report*, 1996).

With significantly changed objective circumstances of Belišće and the local community in comparison to the pre-war period, goals and activities of the Society were reevaluated and finally oriented towards the support of children in their development, upbringing and implementation of their rights in light of recent stress caused by the war. As the Society itself had articulated at that time, actions were supposed to be a wheel of will, love and work that would provide faith and hope for a brighter future (*Assembly minutes*, 1997).

Some of the traditional activities from previous decades were reestablished in this new period, while also new ones were created and conducted. Therefore, the initial activities could be summed up as *Children's carnival*, *Children's week*, *Bestowal of pupils*, *Children's game day*, *Christmas gifting* and *Friend-to-friend*. In 1998, the Society started a free children's playhouse for children aged 4-6 who did not attend kindergarten. The playhouse was open every Saturday for 2 hours and was run by experienced early childhood educators, as well as accompanying trainees who were receiving valuable professional experience in working with preschool children. It is estimated that approx. Sixty children attended these playhouses every year (*Assembly minutes*, 1998).

In 2002, the Society joined a national initiative of the Union to establish a *Children's forum*, which was soon brought to life in Belišće by the Society's president Branka Vidaković, who undertook a special education in the matter.⁶ The aim of the *Children's forum* was and still is, to acquaint children with their rights, to spread concepts of peace, tolerance and cooperation, to pass children's appeals on to adults and to nurture democratic behaviours, and a capacity for democratic action. The *Forum* is aimed at children aged 9-14 and is based entirely on free and open participation. The first *Forum* in Croatia was started in 1992, and as of 2022, there are more than 70 *Forums* nationwide.⁷

After more than a decade under the leadership of Branka Vidaković, in 2008 it was time for a change. Namely, the position of a new president of the Society was offered to Ivana Belcar, who previously worked for several years as a trainee at Society's children's playhouse on Saturdays (*Assembly minutes*, 2008). Belcar accepted the opportunity and ended up leading the Society for another decade.

⁶ For more information consult: <https://belisce.hr/djecji-forum-strumfovi/>. (Accessed 5 September 2022)

⁷ For more information consult: <https://savez-dnd.hr/childrens-participation/childrens-forums/> (Accessed 10 August 2022)

In the given period, one of the prominent activities was the re-establishment of the traditional *Flower promenade* but with a new impetus. Over time this activity developed and surpassed its initial content, becoming one of the main summer events for children with a performance on the central summer stage of the town of Belišće which was attended by numerous different assembles and choirs (*Assembly minutes*, 2018).

The town of Belišće was not standing idle concerning children's activities as well, especially since it was well aware of the accomplishments that the Society provided for its citizens. By the end of 1999, the initiative "Towns/Municipalities – Friends of Children" was launched nationwide under the leadership of the Union of Societies "Our Children" Croatia and Croatian Society of Preventive and Social Pediatrics and sponsorship of the UNICEF Office in Croatia. In close cooperation with the local Society "Our Children", the town of Belišće managed to acquire the title "Town of Belišće – Friend of Children" in 2011, hence officially joining the initiative. This marked a new era of increased cooperation between Society and the town, where the latter actively participated in the following activities: gifting the newborn babies, enabling the free kindergarten for all children of Belišće, support of *Children's forums*, organization of *Children's councils*, organization of art and literary awards, support for children's playhouse, support in the organization of *Children's promenade*, *Children's carnival* and *Days of joy*.⁸

The most recent era of the Society came about with the election of its current president, Emma Torjanac (*the author*), in 2020 midst of a challenging time of the COVID-19 pandemic (*Assembly minutes*, 2020).⁹ However, despite the lockdown and pandemic, the activities of Society did not falter. The paradigm of the "new normal" required a new approach, and therefore the Society organized a series of online hosted activities. One of the prominent newly introduced activities is the *Fairy tale room*,¹⁰ already organized and conducted numerous times in Belišće and surrounding settlements, both live and online.

8 For more information consult: <https://belisce.hr/belisce-grad-prijatelj-djece/>. (Accessed 10 August 2022)

9 Torjanac, 20 at the time, was the youngest president not solely of the Society in Belišće, but also of the entire Union. Her first experience with the Society "Our Children" Belišće dates back to 2003, when she was only 3 and attended children's playhouse on Saturdays. During primary school she attended every festivity of the Society, and in the high school she decided to be actively involved as a volunteer.

10 *Fairy tale room* is a part of the nationwide project "Let growing up be a child's game" (*Neka odrastanje bude dječja igra*) conducted by the Union, aimed at raising awareness of the importance of game for children's development (Balija et al., 2017: 7-8).

Conclusion

Society “Our Children” Belišće is the oldest and most impactful NGO oriented toward the care and development of children in the local area of the town of Belišće and therefore shines as a good example of how civic organization can provide various extracurricular activities and significantly improve quality of life for local children. For a long period, Society received limited to no financial support from local or national authorities, as well as major grants and sponsorship from big companies or other funds or institutions, functioning primarily out of individual fund-raising and volunteering, while at the same time was committed on developing a sector that was often significantly neglected by other instances. Over the passing decades and with the change of political systems, the overall situation shifted towards favourable conditions, summing up with the town of Belišće officially being actively involved in supporting children’s extracurricular activities on various levels. One could argue that Society played a crucial role in achieving this change on the local level. Since the Society consists not only of adult active members and volunteers but equally of children, who are not mere objects of aimed activities but agents themselves, and considering its now long tradition, it is not surprising that more contemporary generations of members and leaders of the Society often consist of those who were involved in the Society from their very early age of life. With the former being said, it can be claimed that the Society and its activities are not just a mere NGO, but also a way of life that is oriented towards the well-being of children. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude with Society’s motto – *Love for the children above all (Ljubav djeci prije svega)*.

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RAZVOJ I DJELOVANJE DRUŠTVA „NAŠA DJECA“ BELIŠĆE

Sažetak

Rad daje pregled razvoja i djelovanja Društva „Naša djeca“ Belišće kroz sedam desetljeća rada. Od samih početaka pa sve do danas, udruga okuplja učitelje razredne nastave, predmetne nastavnike, odgojitelje, roditelje i u konačnici samu djecu, a s kojima provodi aktivnosti kako bi doprinijela dječjem rastu i razvoju te kako bi ispunila njihovo slobodno vrijeme na zabavan i kvalitetan način. Cilj rada je prikazati nastanak, rast, razvoj i djelovanje Društva „Naša djeca“ Belišće te utvrditi njen utjecaj na odgoj i obrazovanje u gradu Belišću.

Ključne riječi: Društvo „Naša djeca“ Belišće, Belišće, povijest, volontiranje