



ViabilityNet 3.0 Program 2017/2018

A Case Study on Community in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

Lenka Dušková



Illustration: Milena Simeonova

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¹ Lenka Dušková is trained mediator, evaluator, and participatory qualitative researcher of development processes, transforming societies, and post-conflict. She is currently affiliated with the Department of Development and Environmental Studies at Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic.

Dear Readers,

This publication is a case study of TAM, a community bar/café in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. The case study examines TAM both as a physical space as well as a community of active people in the context of Veliko Tarnovo. An active member of the community, the facilitator, took part in the ViabilityNet 3.0 program, which supported development of local community leaders from Central and Eastern Europe. The program offered development guidance to local community leaders as a way of supporting local communities to become more resilient, thriving places where people engage as neighbors, both in the present and with an eye to the future .

The envisaged impact of the ViabilityNet 3.0 program is two-fold, as both the local community leaders and their communities were the focus of our attention. Accordingly we deemed it important to gain an understanding of the changes the program brings to both.

A complementary study entitled ViabilityNet 3.0 program 2017/2018 evaluation: Community leaders' learning path ("impact measurement") examined the community leaders and their development. This study, on the other hand, looks at one particular local community to see what potential impact the program had through the leaders – the participants – in their own communities.

By participating in four meetings, creating and implementing a community project and spending time with a mentor and ViabilityNet 3.0 managers, the program participants were guided through different concepts and experience that were intended to help them analyse, understand and improve their work. These were:

- the concept of resilient communities as described in Building Resilient Communities: A Preliminary Framework for Assessment,
- the Asset-Based Community Development approach,
- the concept of well-functioning communities as introduced by John W. Gardner in Chapter 11 of his book On Leadership, and
- Via Foundation's 22 years of experience working with local, or place-based, communities.

The case study was devised to discover how much the theoretical concepts introduced in the program translate into participants' practice and what impact they might have on their local communities. Relating the study to the concepts listed above, you will find perceptions of assets and potential in the local community that can be connected to the ABCD approach, examples of connectedness, institutional memory and innovative learning as described in "adaptive capacity" as well as diversity, performance and redundancy of resources that are part of "resource robustness" in the Preliminary Framework for Resilience. And, sometimes between the lines, you will be

able to touch on the desire to engage with neighbors and a notion of giving, which is a message that Via Foundation tries to pass on to local community leaders.

Despite many connections to the different aspects of the ViabilityNet 3.0 program shown in the study, not all the changes were solely influenced by the program itself. As you will learn reading the study, there had been a lot of growing potential and resources in the local community before the facilitator took part in the program and many other initiatives happened along with it.

Enjoy reading.

On behalf of the ViabilityNet 3.0 team,

Monika Novosádová

Co-facilitator and program manager, Via Foundation

ViabilityNet 3.0 is a Via Foundation program that offers local community leaders space to learn, reflect, connect and grow together and funding for projects that focus on empowering their own local communities. ViabilityNet 3.0 is focused primarily on the Central and Eastern European region (CEE), with secondary reach into Western Europe.

Via Foundation supports development of local, or place-based, communities, mostly in the Czech Republic, both through financial support as well as development and support of community leaders.

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation supports non-profit organizations that are working to strengthen their home town of Flint and communities around the world. They envision a world in which each individual's quality of life is connected to the well-being of the community, both locally and globally.

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Why, where, and how was the case study done?

My story of the Community in Велико Търново/Veliko T"Arnovo² (as many non-native Tarnovians say at which the locals laugh hearing the long "A" pronunciation) starts with a person, who participated in the ViabilityNet 3.0 training program for community leaders, organized by the Czech VIA Foundation. I had a chance to learn about and from him and 11 other community leaders from Central and Eastern Europe over the course of a year and a half while working on a longitudinal evaluation study. The findings are compiled in the report *ViabilityNet 3.0 program 2017/2018 evaluation: Community leaders' learning path* from February 2019. It focuses especially on the learning path of the involved community leaders (the agents of change) as a group in relation to the training program provided by the VIA Foundation.

However, already in the process of studying the learning path of the leaders and the spillover effects towards their respective communities, we (the VIA foundation representatives as the organizers of the ViabilityNet 3.0 program and I as an external evaluator) came to the conclusion that it would also be useful to look under the hood of a concrete community where the leaders operate to better understand it and the different processes occurring. Therefore, we began our selection of the specific community suited for the in-depth case study. Knowing the leaders, their work, and the needs of the stakeholders involved in the processes and setting the research criteria for

² The town of Veliko Tarnovo is located in North Central Bulgaria on the crossroads between larger cities including Sofia and Varna. It is a place with a long and important history in the context of Bulgaria (former capital in the second Bulgarian kingdom) as well as in the wider Balkan context (an important place on merchants' trails), which until now marks both its visual character as well as the perceived atmosphere in the town (i.e. the glorification of the past, external influences, etc.). Situated on the river Yantra, it is a relatively calm place with small houses and lanes in the town center (which stretches across along a relatively long road relatively heavy traffic). The lines of cozy small houses situated on the hillside above the river bank are at times interrupted by modern buildings (some of them reminiscent of the communist era). For nearly five years now, as different respondents mentioned, there can be observed a growth of different informal groups, initiatives, and organizations that try to engage different target groups. The activities are very diverse in character, size, and audiences. People say that many of these initiatives have been driven by the need of local people to create places where they can engage with and for others and meet like-minded people. Aside of these organic processes, there are a number of cultural programs, organizations, and institutions operating in the town that are organized in more formal ways and respond to the conventional (as they say "mainstream") needs of the citizens, while some of them try to find the way(s) in-between. The town is largely visited by tourists both Bulgarian as well as international and both it and the surrounding villages have consistently attracted foreign settlers. Today it has become home of one of the largest expat communities in Bulgaria. (Field diary)

a case study selection, we finally decided to choose the case of the Facilitator (i.e. the case of what we anticipated to be the community around TAM³ in Veliko Tarnovo in Bulgaria).

By local community, the ViabilityNet 3.0 implementing team means “a group of people living in a geographically defined area (e.g. village, small town, city district, neighborhood, etc.) that includes diverse people with diverse interests, lives and age. In this understanding of local community, people can develop personal face-to-face relationships and work together on tangible projects, in the real world. Therefore the program itself is not designed to work with leaders of the following types of communities: i) ad-hoc (e.g. festivals and gatherings), ii) virtual (especially on-line communities), iii) geographically dispersed (i.e. beyond the scope of a city), iv) issue based (i.e. working only on a single specific issue such as environment, health-care and/or handicrafts), v) interest-based (i.e. homogenous communities with interests, focused on a specific target group, such as young people, LGBT, minorities).”

The selected case is an example of a Community, where there has developed a multidimensional network among engaged and active people, despite a general “fatigue” in public participation and engagement as well as a lack of trust prevailing in the society. The network is believed to be characterized by cooperation, sharing of know-how among each other, and support-

³ TAM itself is a specific place in Veliko Tarnovo, which played/plays an important role in the Community/communities’ life. It is a space situated on the first floor of a two-story building, in the vicinity of the historical center of Veliko Tarnovo. It is more than a regular bar offering beverages and events to its visitors. Sometimes it is even difficult to make a distinction between who are the visitors and who are part of the team officially “working” there. The place is characterized by non-conformity and has a very open and welcoming atmosphere where people can be served, serve others interchangeably, or serve themselves in front as well as behind the bar counter. It is a similar way visitors participate in the events either as audience, performers, or interchangeably (field diary). It is very difficult to draft a definition of the place, but the following quote from Respondent 24 serves the purpose nicely by stating that “when I came for the first time, I went behind the bar and started to work there...but for only a very short time I thought I am working in a normal bar, in a common bar, but soon I realized that this place is something more than just a bar to drink...thanks to this place I met other people, many people, like artists, and that are part of the contemporary culture...and also this place cannot be explained by words, it has to be felt...with its spirit, because it has its difference in everyday rhythm...this variety in many aspects...before coming to TAM, I never experienced that every guest could be so special...the people coming here can even have their cups according to their mood they have today...it’s not important if you are rich or poor...whether you are part of the minority...TAM is a community...it is balanced and gives balance...here I can meet people with strong personalities...it is a mixture of many people who create one thing...which is beautiful.”

ing each other in wider sense (i.e. beyond the organization of ad hoc activities) with the common cause of invigorating public life in Veliko Tarnovo and contributing to the creation of atmosphere for meaningful engagement of the locals. The project aiming at strengthening these processes (Co/share) had just begun during the “community leader’s” participation in the ViabilityNet 3.0 training and was therefore believed to be easier to separate it and its effects from other actions (in contrary to some other projects implemented by community leaders involved in the same training).

The aim of this case study is to describe the processes and relations in the Community and to better understand what meaning the members of the Community and others attribute to it vis-à-vis the wider social life in Veliko Tarnovo. The additional aspect to understand is in what way do they get out of the rather narrow “art field background” focus/target group and outreach to the rest of the people.

It was best to start the case study with a person that represented the direct link between the VIA foundation and the Veliko Tarnovo and its Community/communities.⁴ However, the case study was not just his story; it was a story of local Community/communities through the stories of 39 people in total, that have been interviewed in the course of 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews averaging one hour each, two group interviews, and two focus groups in March 2019. It was also a story of many others: individuals, groups, processes, and institutions that were observed (in a non-participatory way) during the field visit in March 2019 and many other non-formal discussions, talks, and encounters with people living in Veliko Tarnovo, nearby villages, towns, and people that had knowledge about the processes in Veliko Tarnovo as well as wider insights into the non-formal sector in Bulgaria (which was recorded in the researcher’s notes in the field diary). In the process of case study elaboration, the primary data collected were complemented by the ViabilityNet 3.0-related project documents.

The research sample was constructed theoretically with the aim to cover members with a wide diversity of characteristics and their combinations and was extended until saturation. The included respondents were characterized by different demographic indicators: age (ranging widely from teenagers, adult population, to aged-people); sex (male, female, and other); nationalities (Bulgarian and other), and origin (born and bred in Veliko Tarnovo

⁴ In the case study, we attempt to understand the difference between the Community in the wider sense and the distinctive communities (nodes of social activities) which develop in Veliko Tarnovo. Since the people in their own words label both entities as “communities,” despite the complexity and in some cases close interdependence between the two, it is important to make the distinction in order to understand the situation concretely (more in Chapter 4).

vs. recently moved). The sample varied also in characteristics relating to different backgrounds: i) professional (people that were engaged in business, higher education, public authority bodies, civic initiatives, art-related occupations, maternity leave, students of university and/or secondary school) and ii) related to their interests (art: music, visual art; sports; technologies; tourism; health; ecology; cinema or theatre; outdoor; folklore; history; literature; animal rights, etc.). Another aspect taken into consideration was the different relation to TAM including those that are: a) considered to be the Facilitator's team in TAM; b) visitors of TAM with different lengths of experience with the place and different frequency of visits; c) people that engaged actively with TAM activities and d) those that came as (passive) participants; e) people that lived permanently in Veliko Tarnovo and/or surrounding villages and f) people that just came to visit. The sample also included people that are not visitors of TAM. Those included members that were active in other areas of cultural life in Veliko Tarnovo (e.g. running their own programs and projects; people that are consumers of the cultural programs). The respondents that did not live in Veliko Tarnovo but were aware of the context of Veliko Tarnovo, the activities happening there, and the wider context of civic engagement in Bulgaria were incorporated in the sample as well. The other criteria were to include people that participated in the Co/share project and those that did not.

At this point, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone that agreed to meet me and spend time helping me understand the place they live, work, and dream about. I must say that it has been a very welcoming experience, full of reflections, deep thoughts, descriptions, strong opinions together with lots of laughter, new questions (both for me as well as for the people being interviewed about their experience),⁵ and learning points on all sides. This was also a reason why in this report the headings of individual chapters are constructed as questions rather than statements.

As promised during the field visit, I pay respect to the integrity of the respondents by following the high standards of research ethics and guiding my research with the principles of anonymity and confidentiality (both in the process of transcription as well as during the analysis of primary data). The only exceptions to this rule were the quotes and opinions of the participant in the ViabilityNet 3.0 training program. These were (with his consent) shared

openly since his views were important for understanding the complexity of the processes and his role in the processes was found to be one of the crucial ones. In the ViabilityNet 3.0 program, we used to call the participants of the program as "community leaders," however, when visiting Veliko Tarnovo in Bulgaria, we many times switched to a wide variety of other labels that resonate more with the people meeting and interacting with the "community leader(s)" on a regular basis. During the interviews we used names such as catalyzer, engine, social agent of change, facilitator, the person that is across the place, cultural operator, focal point (e.g. they sometimes associate the leader to the place/respective of space), etc. This showed the diversity of perceptions of the role(s) of the "community leaders(s)" in Veliko Tarnovo. However, given the specificity of the Bulgarian context and the character of the ViabilityNet 3.0 participant's role in the community, we (together with him) chose the label "Facilitator" to be used in this report when talking about this person.

The data collected was analyzed using the qualitative thematic analysis, combining the deductive (related to the research aims) and inductive (categories emerge from the data available) approaches while constructing the codes and categories.

⁵ This can be illustrated with the following quote from respondent 13: *"its good more people are coming to the town...they can inspire more ideas...to support the power to change things...because without the...knowledge and reflection it is just excitement...which can go for some time, but then it stops...like people like you coming and asking us all these questions that make us think about what we do here...it can help us understand more what is it going on here..."*

2

**What role does
the Facilitator play in the
Community/communities
of Veliko Tarnovo?**

The role of the Facilitator is most generally associated with the word **CONNECT** at all different levels and seen from many different perspectives. He was the one that was said to connect people through the processes of networking, attracting interesting external people, introducing individuals to one another, and inspiring them to establish collaborative relations; he was also the one that connected people that had no place to realize their activities with the space/place/venue (either offering them TAM or helping them connect to other places); he was also connecting people with their dreams, internal energies, and aspirations (i.e. motivating and energizing them to start doing something); he was the one that managed to connect different styles together as well as connect the diversity of activities and areas of engagement (music, visual art, education, networking, etc. – see below); he was the one that was able to connect the ideas he heard and came up with while reflecting and had them inspire the actions of his own as well as the ones of the others; he connected the past experience with recent histories that were relevant for the life today in Veliko Tarnovo; he connected the lessons learned with the new strategies and actions; he was many more things as well.

Going back in time (approximately five years ago, as the respondents referred), people described him as a person that did not have a very clear and explicit formulated vision, but he was clear on the values and things he wanted to do and achieve in response to the context he lived in including the way he wanted to achieve it. He was said to be more intuitive initially, there was a lot of non-formality, and a need for better management: *“you know the founders are usually influenced by the spark, but if there is no more management, it would swallow you up”* (Respondent 3). *“He was hands on, little naive, but you needed to be like that...since there was very little positive happening at that time, little drive in Veliko Tarnovo...there was needed the [so called] let’s try approach”* (Respondent 6). As opposed to that, he now seemed to be more trained and, using the words of Respondent 2 to illustrate the descriptions heard within the Community, *“now he seems to be more calmer, more wiser...well no actually, he was kind of wise to begin with, he always had an authentic energy and wisdom...he had the never ending drive, but he is now more thoughtful, more reflexive.”*

The mentioned intuitive approach and values he carried on were said to have resonated with the wider visions about any possible community actions in Bulgaria at the time (a period about five years ago), where the entire non-formal sector in the country was described as lacking in capacity.⁶

⁶ It can be illustrated by the quote from the Respondent 3: *“The generations before us went through all the different trainings, capacity building seminars western style...and they become the professional activists in the field. But most of them ended up organizing*

In this respect, back in the time, he was described to represent the following roles: active to do things differently, persistent, engaging wide variety of others through very authentic, and a trustworthy and personalized approach for what he believed was common cause. It can be illustrated through the following quotes: *"he was one of the pioneers, there was no much of other alternative to him in the area," he was "patient and persistent at the same time...looking for partnerships, engaging the different stakeholders...he was crating the change environment in the city and he did it, he simply did it"...*"he also did it through keeping very personal relationships to people, to different people...he was able to motivate the people...he knows how to do it" (Respondent 1); *"...and...wanted to experiment"* (Respondent 4). Also he was referred to as being able to manage to *"synchronize the very diverse group of people...to let something like an authentic community to be created," "he was not politically engaged, just simply activated the citizens...contradictory to the politicians, or traditional NGOs whose focus is more short lived (for different reasons)...his engagement was emotional, through shared learning, experience and seeking the common cause...to go for"* (Respondent 1). He proved to be a positive example showing that, even in the given context (described to be difficult and complicated), things could be done and achieved by devoting a longer term commitment, as illustrated by the following: *"I think it is very important that people like him are...were here and exist, he is a very positive example of what could be done with a persistence and hard work in the long run...what could be achieved with hard work in the long run process, may be five years...it is really a good example, people often expect fast results...but here you could see a real visible change in about five years of work"* (Respondent 23). What was also mentioned as important was shared in the following quote from Respondent 27: *"He is very humble... but he is on the other hand very confident in what he is doing, he is very devoted, very persistent...and he is doing well, he is setting the standards for other people."*

2.1 What is the Facilitator's working mode?

He had **his strong vision to try to do things differently**, to experiment, to look for solutions for the issues that were important for him, and at the same time to be humble and to see and learn about what happens around to be able to build on (field diary). He also mentioned that *"he was afraid that the things he creates will end and that is it just an exception that the thing have worked for*

the funds rather than organizing the ideas and this is wrong...they lost energy, enthusiasm and the freedom to act...and we need more real visible actions connected to the communities here in Bulgaria"). For further explanation, see Chapter 4.1.

some time." At the same time he shared the story of how important it was to have confidence, that he learned from his friend and took it as a statement for himself. He also knew/learned that he was not alone to go, that there were people around to do and/or talk things over and make them happen. Using the words of many people who knew him, but also observed him during the ViabilityNet 3.0 training program as well as talked with him informally during the field visit, we learn that the Facilitator was a very **reflexive person** that **listened attentively to the others and learned** from them, their ideas, their stories, and opinions as well as from the different situations and occasions (field diary). *"He is changing and developing through the things he is doing, he meets a lot of people and talks to lots of people and he gets the best from the people and the situations he is through"* (Respondent 26).

In addition, he constantly **asked himself a lots of questions** that made him think, learn, and develop his skills as well as strategies vis-à-vis the Community and also other domains of his life, such as: how to stimulate and encourage people to take an initiative, how to innovate without making people frustrated, how to better reflect what the needs and dreams were of the people around him, how to get people on board and give them enough space to develop themselves as well as what they wanted to do, how to make the things happen to keep people at the center of it (even when organizing events, for some it could just be art or an experiment, but for him foremost it is about people and their lives, histories, and the places they related to, so there was a need to balance and maintain sensitivity), how to be inclusive but not compromise on certain values, how to communicate to people so the message gets across, how to find the space and balance between what was needed and what was wanted, how not to forget to reflect and develop and to be aware of their own and other's actions, etc. (field diary).

He himself also admitted that in this sense he used to be more directive in the past but learned to change his approach (field diary), which can be illustrated by his own words: *"I was at the time even worse on domination...let's do this and that...also I have this thing that the things need to be just right... including the moving of the cushions [in TAM]."* He concluded that some of the changes of his approach were an outcome of participating in the ViabilityNet 3.0 program and undergoing a personal change during his learning path. He mentioned, for example, *"that there are borders that shall not be crossed...because people [the ones he used to be directive to] got excited about the things that I keep proposing and creating, but after several months they might still be a bit excited, but they are unstable...it's not their thing...its mine...it's not their dream...not their thing...they are coming into my dream...even if it was always in the good intention, I wanted to help them, to find something for them to be active and realize themselves....but when they fall again, they would not blame themselves, they would be pissed with me...so in the end it is all bad...all this [learning] comes from the Viability and the exercise we did...if you put people always on crutches and help them walk, it is*

not going to help them...when they fall again...they need to start trying how to walk on their own...also to balance...you could help them to get on...but walking is up to them...if you want to give people pleasure, you need to give them their thing to do...there is much more space for them to do so...I still keep choosing the program [in TAM he is responsible for creating the program and connecting the bar with the artists from the area but also from all over the world], because I have the advantage of having the links, but they can do their part...even now when we want to make changes in TAM...they can come up with the ideas.” Even during the specific project implemented in Veliko Tarnovo, which was related to the ViabilityNet 3.0 program, the Co/share project (discussed further below), that was planned and prepared in advance, he still continued being flexible with respect to changes during its implementation. This was based on one hand on his experience in the ViabilityNet 3.0 training (field diary), and on the other hand on suggestions of others as illustrated by Respondent 6: *“in general we did not change much in the program, but after second or third meeting, we decided to give more space to the participants of the Co/share program...at the first meeting, people did not know each other...and it was a nice opportunity to gain more trust between the different participants and share skills that are more relevant for the context here.”*

The other changes in his approach, as he also shared, were due to his reflections of different stories and situations (he went through or heard about) translated into different learning points. For example the following related to the work of the a leader sharing tasks: *“single musician is not good...if you have a band of 100 people and one gets a let’s say heart attack...it could eventually be replaced by someone else knowing the part...all of them have experienced him playing and they know the piece...so he could be replaced and the whole group could continue and perform...they will find the way to replace him and to teach...show another one how to go on...but if there is only one man playing...then...once he is gone, he is gone.”*

However, before getting engaged into an activity or process, he realized that it is good to think also about how it related to and resonated with the needs of the others and/or the community. This quest can be supported by a story/metaphor about the research on notebooks he heard about. It was aimed at finding out whether people would buy a specific product. However, the questions were asked in a poor manner giving way to incorrect information being collected. He shared, *“They asked whether the people like that notebook...they prepared and showed the example..., even if many people liked it, or they said so... they did not buy it in the end. The more precise question should rather be if people would use the notebook and for what [laugh...]”* (field diary).

He also admitted that he became more serious on focusing on what came out of the activities that were implemented, things that were completed (this was what he said he took from the impact measurement sessions during the ViabilityNet 3.0 training): *“I want to see what other people think about the things that are happening as opposed to the things that are just in my head”* (field diary).

2.2 And... how is it to work with the Facilitator, then?

Answering this question allows us to shed more light on what the Community members and the Facilitator’s closest team members said and how they perceived him as a person that worked in/with his team and with wider groups of people (in the Community).

Generally, many Respondents agreed that it was very interesting to cooperate with him at different levels and that they had a nice, positive feeling associated with working with him, admitting that he had his *“specific vision(s)”* how things should be. The involvement of others increased, especially a year or so ago, as he allowed people to have more of an influence on the different processes. However, when asked the question *“How is it to cooperate with him,”* all of the Respondents started laughing at first and then only elaborated on the answers which highlighted the following aspects: e.g. the working relations and his attitudes to other people were currently described as open and collaborative; motivated to contribute their own skills and ideas; energizing, inclusive, and supporting. This, including some of the reasons for “primary emotional reactions” (such as past experience contrasted with current relations, reflecting the ability to develop workable strategies for cooperation with him including the division of roles, cherishing the complementarity, more openness to let the others shape both the visions and strategies, etc.), can be illustrated by the following selected quotes:

“[Laugh....]. It is interesting...we also have been talking about it with him recently...and I have to admit that in the past he had some problems with other people, working with other people on his visions, but since like some time now, he has no problems with other people, very important that they have similar ideas about the vision, it’s not any more like working for him, but it’s more like working for a common vision...some people have been even motivated to continue working and extending the projects even on their own and establishing their own things...in Veliko Trnovo...” (Respondent 13). *“[Laugh....]. I was part of the organizing team [of one of the projects], responsible for [...] and I worked with [Facilitator], and he had his own vision, but I took part in shaping it...I gave my advice on one particular thing related to my tasks and my specific capacities...and it worked...we complemented each other”* (Respondent 10). *“[Laugh....]. In fact I enjoyed to be part of the team, it helped me also to get to know the environment...although it is not that everyone always agrees with everyone, including [the Facilitator] [...laugh....], but everyone was very motivated to do things...many times I felt like between the different team members, they had different modes of working...but it was fine with me...I did not feel bad about it...I felt like I can contribute with my skills”* (Respondent 10). *“[Laugh....]. ...it is a person with the most energy around here...he is so organized. At the beginning when we met, it was a bit strange...bit like I could feel the distance, say we could be a concurrence, but it was all in my head, all from my part...but seriously, the moment I met him, I sensed the energy and support and inspiration*

and I felt like I want to be part of such energy..." (Respondent 14).

"[Laugh....]. ...he is different to me...sometimes it is a challenge for me, but it helps me to develop the other part of me...we are doing different things, in different way but similar in a sense...we have many common points...we are developing communities...and we are complementing each other...and also the roles in the communities" (Respondent 24). "[Laugh....]. He is Capricorn, these are like we must do it...we must try it...he is very direct, he is very devoted...to the things he is doing...and it's really nice to work with him and to try to help him and be part of the changes and processes..." (Respondent 26). "[Laugh....]. I am a bit more structured, sometimes he is like let's do it this way...I think he has his style...he is very committed to what he is doing, and he is having this big vision in his head...I love to see the spark in his eye...sometimes he is doing the things in a non-conventional way...and this is really important to do the things like this sometimes...and sometimes I can see that he is driving some more organized people mad, but in the end it is complementary...people and I also appreciate, how he does things...I would not change anything in him...he is like he is...and it's his specific way of doing things." (Respondent 30).

Although most people admitted that they always found a way to cooperate with the Facilitator through division of tasks in the team, when they worked together on a common project, they also realized that there were differences in the working mode and personalities, and they experienced professional clashes. Sometimes even some of the team members had to find the way in between the other colleagues where the Facilitator was one of them and they needed to mediate the processes. The Facilitator became aware of these constraints and tried to find ways how to do things differently by discussing with people more. At the time when the research was done, they had divided their roles and responsibilities in the team in TAM more clearly and invited new people on board to take specific tasks such as financial stability, etc. (field diary). Moreover, when opening the discussion over the future of TAM, its functions, and its possible spatial transformation, he was very open to invite other people, both from the closest team as well as from a wider group of visitors, users, and attendees from TAM. It was communicated to them as "we want your ideas to be discussed, it is important for us to have different ideas, we do appreciate you to have a say...what do you want to see in TAM and how do you want to see TAM" (Respondent 13). In addition, there was an intention to include all the different groups of people which visited TAM as not to lose them if their views and needs were not represented. More generally, with respect to the Community, he wanted the other people to take more initiatives and responsibilities.

2.3 What role and value added people attribute to the Facilitator with respect to wider Community development?

The Respondents were very eager to share their views about the role of the Facilitator in contributing to the development of the Community/communities in Veliko Tarnovo and the meaning his personality and preferred approaches had for the processes there. He was portrayed as positive and **constructive in problem solving**, good in **communication, sharing, and in motivating other people** to engage and take action to realize their ideas. "He is kind of soft, he does not push the others, he is totally non-conflict person" (Respondent 2). He was also the person that did not hesitate to talk to others and discuss their ideas, fears, and challenges helping them to not only get inspired, but also be more energized to think of their own stuff to do, own projects, and develop their ideas. Respondent 9 shared that they "...enjoy to share some ideas with [the Facilitator]...he is at the core of my thoughts and plans to be realized...for example while establishing my own initiative, a place ... common space for the others to share the plans for activities, opportunities, to have access to internet and library, etc." Another Respondent (10) mentions that "[the Facilitator] made me come back to more structured way of working when I wanted to make a functioning project...for example to be more doing research before starting the project...few years ago I met people that wanted to do projects but they did not realize there are methods to it...and seeing [the Facilitator] working and also sharing with us his experience, helped me to realize how important it is...I started thinking...I can do things if I have the knowledge how to...I can know what I want...it is possible to make things seem achievable...may be there is a way to start doing things and achieve something." Respondent 11 mentioned that he can remember the Facilitator coming from the project abroad [ViabilityNet 3.0 training] "super enthusiastic and excited...sharing what kind of training he has received and what kind of contacts he has established...I do remember his energy...he was pushing me to explore it more." The Respondents also agreed on his role as an engine and catalyst for the actions taken in Veliko Tarnovo: "He acted as an catalyst, he is one of these that could create the atmosphere...environment...that facilitates the processes of contacts...but not managing...connects, he is an engine, engages..." (Respondent 1).

One of the ways he was seen to catalyze activity in Veliko Tarnovo and to contribute to the engagement of the Community/communities was through being a person that facilitated creating **networks and establishing links** among people. "His huge asset are the contacts he has established with different people of different skills and experiences and is still establishing" (Respondent 3). "I am amazed how many people he knows and it is very helpful for us because anytime, anybody shares the idea with him, he responds: I know someone, I give you contacts and you could collaborate together and so something...make something happen...he has many connections, because of his active life...and active work...and I am thankful for that..." (Respondent 23). Moreover, he was often-

times, by many Respondents, associated with being a gate keeper, helping people who are new comers to Veliko Tarnovo, or return back from their studies or jobs in Sofia and other towns, or who just decided they needed or wanted to start to be more active and creative in their own home town. "It took me several months before I really built my structure...In Veliko Tarnovo, it was not easy to get beyond the skin of the city, although it is a small place...but when I met [the Facilitator], he was just a gate keeper to me, he opened the door, he told me about the events and then I kept meeting more people and it was just my tribe..." (Respondent 6). "I came to visit the place many times before I moved in, but before I met him, I did not have a clue what is happening in the town and how I can find my space there" (Respondent 10).

The Facilitator was also perceived as a good **ambassador and diplomat**, able to build bridges between the different groups, connecting different ideas without compromising the vision of diverse, open, and inclusive Community/communities. He was able to organize and host seemingly controversial programs but created the atmosphere of acceptance, at least within the event (there were groups of people that would be more hesitant and/or suspicious of the activities; in such cases he tried to talk to people and explain where possible). People mentioned the example of Roma film festivals, inviting different specific groups of people to share their stories, showing movies, or hosting discussions that would allow for the sharing of different points of view. He was also referred, by both people working closely with him as well as those that were not so closely collaborating with him, to be able to create an inclusive environment and invite different kinds of people to programs and events in which he was involved with, connecting different audiences (field diary). "With the time, I saw he become more open and more diplomatic with the people that sometimes fight each other, have different approaches, and he finds the way how to connect them and how to balance and I like how open he is all the time about the world of arts, even when he connects with some other areas, kinds of things, ideas, he somehow brings the art in...like to the organizations ..., like other...he brings the creativity there...inspiration...and also he tries to always to find answers, to connect people of different backgrounds...to make space for things to happen..." (Respondent 18).

He was also seen as a great **bridge** in a sense of inspiring people running different cultural, and not only such (this is important to be mentioned because he was able to cross-connect to others than by art-related initiatives), places to cooperate together, **support one another in their causes and events**. "...he has been able to show that there are also some other places in Veliko Tarnovo that offer some good things" (Respondent 6). Even in cases when the Facilitator did not cooperate directly with other people on their concrete projects, he was very supportive of them. There were some concrete examples shared, among others, by different people in Veliko Tarnovo. "We had a possibility to get grant to support my project and

[the Facilitator] helped me a lot to organize it...the idea was not only to have an event, but to also invite a lot of interesting people and start a dialogue with them...and I asked [the Facilitator] for help, because he knows everybody, ha ha ha ha...and we organized the meeting..." (Respondent 8). "Even if we do not have so many direct interactions, in a sense of organizing concrete projects together, I did quite a bunch of things in his place [TAM], ...in case I do not have a location for my specific thing to be done, his best strategy was to give me his location and also to other people in the similar case...when need be...like a nice symbiosis...we had different programs there...for me it was important to have a community that talks and thinks about different things.....so we also had the movies there, and the discussions and book readings...and he had invited us for a bunch of get togethers...for example the different trainings..." (Respondent 11).

Even people that were not exactly around the Facilitator showed **respect** for him and for what he accomplished over time, how he contributed to public events, and generally how he made the city alive. "We meet and we talk about what we do and about the culture in Veliko Tarnovo" (Respondent 15). They mentioned that they had the similar goal of making Veliko Tarnovo a cultural place full of different possibilities for people not only to entertain, but also to become engaged even if their activities might be different. They were similar in a sense of not just to consume, but in a sense to spend time more fruitfully, engage, learn, and get to know new things.

3

**TAM: what was
the role of this space
in Veliko Tarnovo?**

Another focal point, oftentimes referred to in connection with the developments of the Community/communities in Veliko Tarnovo, was the place/space called TAM, which was created by the Facilitator and his friend nearly five years ago. Since then there had been several changes in the team, some people left to do other stuff and some came in to support the running of the place. At the time of the site visit, there were about four to five people on the main team,⁷ but many others were involved in the discussions on and about the place and its future developments. The description of TAM is part of this report since it played an important role in understanding how the Community/communities function and how it/they were shaped in Veliko Tarnovo. The space and environment around TAM was characterized by words of feeling good, welcomed, included, being a “second home like atmosphere” and also had the environment where you could not only spend your time peacefully but also develop your ideas.

The space,⁸ called TAM, started as a contemporary art and party space and has grown into something much more today, not just seen from the point of view of offering a relatively wide variety of different activities and programs that complement each other, but also from the point of view of the functions it fulfilled and continues to fulfil in the Community/communities in Veliko Tarnovo today.

However, it needs to be mentioned that TAM was not the only “hub” (i.e. it was not the only focal point referred to by people in relation to the communities in Veliko Tarnovo). When asked about other “hubs” (apart from TAM focal point), people spoke about several other centers that have developed in Veliko Tarnovo (e.g. around the digital activities; board games; Tarnovo-run community representing the healthy culture/green culture; dancing community; university and several centers there and/or the community of people that care for animal rights). When speaking about the other places to go and spent time, people repeatedly mentioned the names of different bars, clubs, gallery, co-working spaces that create the possibility for meaningful activity in Veliko Tarnovo. **However, it was generally accepted that TAM played a very crucial role in strengthening the Community across as well as the processes**

⁷ It was not very clear who was counted as member of the team, since it changed with the time and given the character of the place, there was no formal structure and hierarchy established. The team, besides the Facilitator (who continued to play the central role there) usually entailed people that collaborated with the Facilitator very closely on the daily operation the place (bar tending and logistics, running programs, finances, development of ideas, helping with the organization, etc.).

⁸ At this point in the report, it was still labelled as space since it originated as a physical place of a certain characteristics. However gradually it gained a much wider meaning and importance for the Community development (to be explained later in the report).

of engagement in Veliko Tarnovo, which made it a different/very specific "hub" compared to the other places.

The way how TAM came "to be" (well beyond its establishment as a bar and organization of the specific cultural events⁹) and played a special role for the people, can also be explained through the different ways people were attracted to the place. In addition the ways how people discovered TAM in the first place and the ways their relationships to the place developed across time told a lot about its special ambient and character (i.e. the spirit that was hard to grasp with simple words, as people said) and thus its role in developing the Community in Veliko Tarnovo.

When different Respondents were asked about their experience discovering TAM (i.e. how they first got to know it), some of them mentioned certain reservations and some mystery TAM was surrounded by at the beginning, such as *"I really did not know what to expect, it looked different, I did not have much trust...but heard it's an interesting place, not knowing what to imagine...before we come to visit for the first time"* (Respondent 2). People in the interviews agreed that in the past (four to five years ago), when going around the town, others would talk about TAM as *"it's just a gay bar...you could feel all the myths around it...just like an urban legend...although some concrete program, the events were happening there, you just had to check the fb to see what the events were like...then you checked that out and you realized you liked the atmosphere inside, there was no judging and also there was an interesting program a different than in other places that we also visited"* (Respondent 5). More recently, some residual comments of suspicion when referring to TAM can be heard, but at the same time there are also people that are not associated with the TAM and still share their respect to what the Facilitator has done and the role TAM has played in the public life in Veliko Tarnovo.

Some of the other first comers were invited by their friends that had visited TAM events previously and had found it accommodating. Others were dragged by the feeling *"let's try something new and different and took the courage through the curiosity"* (Respondent 7); some of them were attracted

by the particular event (concert, exhibition, etc.); some people were simply looking for an open environment where they could realize their activities *"because before TAM, they say, there was no other similar place where they could do it...and they had to rely on open air spaces, on the streets, and/or flats of some friends..."* (Respondent 3). Some others mentioned that they did feel included in Veliko Tarnovo, that they could not find a place for their free time to relax: *"...where they would feel they belong, where they could meet "like minded" people"...especially when they felt they are not part of the mainstream"* (Respondent 2). Also, they mentioned the prevailing divisions in Veliko Tarnovo and the related need of some people to belong somewhere but not having a place to go. *"Growing in Veliko Tarnovo, meant divide, you had to identify yourself with some group...you had to belong to something...but TAM is different, it is not imposing something, people feel like at their place, the other places in town might offer your taste of culture/music, but they do not feel it's yours...TAM is something more, it is covering the niche but at the same time it is still wide enough for the people to feel like they are part of it...to feel like at home"* (Respondent 2). *"The drivers in this sense was to have people around you, that would understand you...so that you were not feeling alone...and you found the feeling of belonging somewhere"* (Respondent 3).

3.1 What value added is perceived to be associated with TAM?

After discovering it, most of Respondents agreed to the fact that TAM was a very interesting and special place and continued visiting it because they felt fine, there was no judging, and there were interesting programs (i.e. events that you could not take part in anywhere else in Veliko Tarnovo). *"In some other places, there were also interesting events to visit, but also people drank and in the end the people did not care about the event so much...the place did not care about the concrete people to be there"* (Respondent 20). The diversity of the group was and still is perceived as one of the main assets of TAM. There was *"nothing like filtering the people happening...everybody was welcome, you can learn from them and they can learn from you...and you feel safe...you can always encounter some friends there"* (Respondent 5).

When meeting other people there and becoming motivated through the talks, people started to mention that it strengthened and energized them to spend time in TAM. *"Together we can do things that we cannot do independently, on our own"* (Respondent 3). There **developed big synergy that helped to activate others to do something** and engage. *"It also stems from the fact that if the idea is shared it is no longer feeling like madness...it can actually be discussed and implemented...you could create new things."* (Respondent 3).

Gradually, more and more people visited the place as it made sense for

⁹ TAM was also very specific with respect to the art scene and culture in Veliko Tarnovo given the type of programs, its non-conformity, diversity, and perceived quality of guest performers. It was a place that manages to welcome and offer a very special sort of contemporary culture, both visual and audio. The Facilitator with his contacts managed to invite artists from not only across Bulgaria, but also from all different parts of the world, to perform in Veliko Tarnovo. Some artists did not perform in Sofia and could only be seen in Veliko Tarnovo: *"you can meet there some artists that you cannot meet anywhere else in Bulgaria"* (Respondent 9). Many TAM visitors even said that they kept returning to Veliko Tarnovo thanks to TAM.

them to spend time there. Though some say, *“there was still a group of people that came once and then it took them some time to rediscover TAM with time”* (Respondent 4). Some people mentioned that they felt more encouraged to come more often *“because the space allowed even those that have troubles to socialize to blend in”* (Respondent 13).

For many it was also the place where **networking and connections** to others happened and they were put in touch with other people and places that provided space for different events and activities in Veliko Tarnovo. *“It is a natural place of networking, I did not have many contacts before I came to TAM, and then through different events and talking I realized, people were helping each other, and helping me with my own projects, promotion, sharing the chairs and equipment with us for our events...sometime in the past we have tried some things without the help of others but you cannot work like this...it did not work...with more events and more bonding we realized how could we share and help one another, support one another”* (Respondent 27).

For some people, TAM played the role of **incubator**. They were invited to make their first performance, exhibition, or event there to start of their career: *“it’s just the spin off place...to go bigger...to start there with the first exhibition or something and then to spread out from there”* (Respondent 6).

Gradually, the structure, not only of the events but also the character of the place, **developed a natural response to the needs of the people**. At its very beginning it was a lot about parties, *“the party culture”* (Respondent 7), but after that, as illustrated by Respondent 6: *“[the Facilitator] tried to keep it down to do more cultural stuff...there were conferences, people hosting something, book launches, exhibitions, lecturing, presentations...all horizons...it is offering also the movie screenings, theatrical performances etc.”*. *“It is a mixture...you have everything...and still people find something in common here...on Monday you could be drinking tea, Friday you can dance, next week something else...little pieces of something spatial...whole place...like whole community...there is something for everybody...”* (Respondent 20). TAM was also said to be **creating the “hunger” for people to search for different activities** and diversity.

The atmosphere also changed throughout of the day, *“...not exactly the atmosphere...but the dynamics...it is a cozy place early in the afternoon, like a second living room, like your home and then it becomes a board games stadium and then there is either an event happening or it is just a bar a place for people to meet and share...”* (Respondent 8). *“It’s full of friends...I know lots of people there and they know me...even if I do not know them...it feels like coming to second home...they are like friends...like a small community...you cannot find people who are here...just...like...well,...people that are coming here may be coming for some reason...they are coming because they know what to find here...”* (Respondent 9). This adds to the **inclusiveness and attraction for different kinds of populations** and allows for them to share the place together even if each comes for/with different interests (but a similar purpose). Recently, there was an increase of different people coming. *“Before it was*

more like underground place” (Respondent 6). Now it is completely open as *“it is a more relaxed place...more open than ever, for different kinds of people and different ideas”* (Respondent 7). All people that came there were referred to be *“very unusual people in a sense”* (Respondent 7) (i.e. they cannot fit easily with the mainstream environment). They were all *“interesting personalities, having the out of the box thinking”* (Respondent 7).

It also allowed for **meetings not only across the different backgrounds but also across different generations** that have the possibility to interact to some extent. The younger guests came for their stuff in the early afternoon and then some of them stayed for the program and had a chance to talk to other people and exchange. Recently there was an increase of relatively young people who found their way to TAM. They also come because of the atmosphere and, as illustrated by the quote from Respondent 34, *“to seek a place to stay freely in their free time to drink chocolate.”* They also said, as shown through the words of Respondent 21, that *“they do not feel peer-pushed to alcohol, [they come to] to play board games, and or to chat.”* Some of them also came for the educational purpose, like the people involved in the Wave program¹⁰ (field diary). In addition, they *“get exposed to different culture that you cannot find anywhere in Veliko Tarnovo, and the start to have curiosity about the art and community problems that are discussed there, such as health, alternatives in education, live style”* (Respondent 5). Although some people took it as an issue that the generational change was happening and asking themselves a question whether it was a good development, others talk about a very natural transition: *“what you can see now...it opens at early afternoon and young people are eating their chocolate and plying the board games and older come to visit the event...but the exchange is very natural...some people are sitting with their computers doing their stuff in between...just a natural transition...”* (Respondent 6). *“It is possible to share the different events and also to be here to some extend together to some extend separated by different interests, because we all come to be with people that are fine to spend the time with”* (Respondent 23). The young people them-

¹⁰ The Wave is an initiative of young people associated with the space in TAM where they meet and run four clubs (as they are called): drawing, theatre, photography, and creative writing. It is basically a peer-to-peer activity to engage other young people to spend time in a meaningful way, develop the skills related to the four areas including soft skills while organizing. They shared that they are not professionals, but in TAM they always find enough people that can help and support them, sometimes even to share other ideas help. They also said that the atmosphere in TAM is peaceful and that it helps them to feel that they want to create something. It also inspired them to think about greater responsibility; in a sense to think of the future and how to pass on what they do to other younger people so that they could have the same experience. (Field diary)

selves shared in the focus group that to them the different age groups did not matter here because *“we move and talk also with other people...we can exchange a lots of ideas...also about the art, but not only”* (Respondent 34).

TAM was said to contribute to the **increase of the level of trust** among people, which was generally missing in Bulgarian society. *“It is there for them to be able to interact with each other...and in order to do so, they need to trust each other”* (Respondent 8). *“The personal meetings and personal talks in that environment are more trustworthy...it is something that seems to work here...and you can find people you could imagine doing things together...”* (Respondent 23). The other aspect of trust lied in the ability of TAM to be welcoming and inclusive. *“If I come alone, even if I came alone...I enjoy talking to other people, it does not matter what I do here...if it is the events, the cinematograph, the board games, or just I am there.”* (Respondent 26).

People said they could not imagine their lives without TAM, and since it played so many important roles in their lives, it could be said that TAM was not a static place. As seen from above, it changed and developed and yet continued with the same spirit that was hard to grasp by people, but all referred to and appreciated it for all the different roles it played. Currently, there is a discussion open and there are many questions being asked about TAM and how it should like, what it should provide to people, and how it should be organized.

4

**Does it mean that TAM
and the “Community”
in Veliko Tarnovo is one?
Is it then a “TAM Community”?**

A quick answer to the above questions may seem yes, according to what the Respondents attribute to the place known as TAM, but it is more complicated. Nevertheless, it might be quite difficult to describe, because the situation is very complex. Now, as time passes, the roles of the Facilitator and TAM develop and contribute to the strengthening of the processes within the society in Veliko Tarnovo. There is currently something as “two TAMs in one” which exist: one is the place/the space and its programs and activities (to fit the category of communities/hubs); the other is the wider Community that is linked together thanks to the place and the dynamics happening there/in relation to it. *“It is the space that is both physical and non-physical, something that makes you think beyond the borders of the conventional...not just in Veliko Tarnovo, but generally in wider Bulgarian context”* (Respondent 3). *“On one hand it is a safe space, a container, on the other it is a supportive network of people.”* (Respondent 3). *“For the second one it takes time, and it involves a certain necessary amount of trust, among other, a shared trust...”* (Respondent 3). However, in order to understand what the Community is in Veliko Tarnovo, how it developed, and how it relates to other processes in Veliko Tarnovo, it is firstly necessary to understand the general context in Bulgaria related to civic engagement as well as the specific situation in Veliko Tarnovo.

4.1 What is the context for the communities and civic engagement in Bulgaria in general and in Veliko Tarnovo specifically?

According to research¹¹ by Petya Kabakchieva and Desislava Hristova (published in 2012, though its findings correspond with the perceptions of the Respondents interviewed in our case study) the Bulgarian citizens’ general alienation and their low trust to civil society is combined with their low level of participation and engagement in public space. Historically, there was a certain atmosphere in Bulgaria where it was not easy and accommodating for people to engage in collaborative activities. As one of the Respondents (3) put it, *“there is a certain deficit, the lack of culture of collaboration...also there is a deficit in the values of the common social good.”* Moreover, the society is characterized by absent trust in a wider sense (not only with respect to civil society, but also to one another, among neighbors, fellow citizens, etc.). This often stops people from participating in activities in the public sphere. As illustrated by Respondent 8, *“the 500 years of Ottoman*

¹¹ Kabakchieva, P. and D. Hristova. 2012. Civil Society in Bulgaria: NGOs versus spontaneous activism. Bulgarian report for the study: How our dream come true? A comparative study research of Central and Eastern European Civil Socialites. Open Society Institute, Sofia.

Empire and 40 years under the Soviet influence, co-shaped the mentality of people, people were and still are hiding between the big walls and not sharing between themselves...also in these times the state was observing everything and it was hard and even dangerous to say things."

In addition, Kabakchieva and Hristova (2012, p. 7) informed us that *"the [traditional] NGOs do not manage to fully embody the concept of civil society and to channel the citizen's needs and demands, which is consecutive to their problematic embeddedness."* On the other hand, the spontaneous grass-roots movements started to appear in the civil society arena in Bulgaria and paved the way to mobilize civic participation [in much better way] (ibid; Respondents 1 and 3). Among the problems NGOs face, beyond the above-related aspects of legitimacy, is their dependency on the state and/or foreign donor's grant financing, which leads to the decreasing ability to deliver as most of the energy of people involved is consumed on the funds' "hunting" and completion of administrative obligations deviating the energy and focus from the relevant activities' implementation.

At the same time, at least in the case of Veliko Tarnovo, there is a significant urge in some part(s) of population and/or with a number of individuals to engage with respect to the wider public, as seen from the below motivations of the interviewees in our case study, and could also be illustrated by the following quote from Respondent 23: *"I need to meet other people and for me it is very important to feel I am part of the community...I have to have my own community and to have my own network...and that is what I am doing here...I was looking for some social cause to give my life a new purpose...I was trying to do some volunteering with other platforms, but it's not like this."* In case of Veliko Tarnovo, there were also some people that did think that the general atmosphere in Bulgaria could and should change because they believed it was up to the people to make up the place they wanted to live in, which could be illustrated by the quote from Respondent 24: *"...for me to live in one kind of town is up to you, it could be nice, it also could be bad, if you choose to live in a bad town, being passive you would be unsatisfied, if you choose to live in a beautiful town...with beautiful people around you...there is a big quality...if I can recognize the quality around me."*

At the same time, people across different ages and backgrounds (no matter if they now live in Veliko Tarnovo/or did previously) mentioned that the context was always very specific there. *"Living in Veliko Tarnovo always meant that you had to identify yourself with a specific group, you had to belong to something. And there was a relatively large group of population that felt like they do not particularly belong anywhere, and these were seeking their own community: 'the tribe' as some of them call it"* (Respondent 6). In this sense a lot of the Respondents themselves mentioned in the interview that they had both the need to belong somewhere and an urge to do something, to engage. These people then gradually found their "refuge" in TAM and there they found the possibility for connection, networking, inspiration, energy, space,

and partnerships.

Moreover, even if there were people in Veliko Tarnovo that did aspire to do something or engage, for them it was, until recently, difficult to do it as an individual. They shared that they felt like they needed a group and to be interconnected: *"you need a network, otherwise you lack the energy and soon you burn out doing things that are not oftentimes visible"* (Respondent 3).

Although the Respondents describe Veliko Tarnovo as a place that was very nice, picturesque cozy, warm, and welcoming, *"it is a good atmosphere to live here, you can relive the stress"* (Respondent 27), they also tended to mention oftentimes that it was complicated with respect to the relations between people, as illustrated in the following quote: *"there is not this open mentality as in other places [they have lived before, for some part of their lives]"* (Respondent 14). People also kept mentioning that about four or five years ago, the atmosphere in the town was *"more sleepy, there were not very new places being opened, the town started to live let's say two to three years ago"* (Respondent 6). People shared that there was *"quite a lot to be done in relation to the very old history...but the current life is also shaped by the more new history, more contemporary events and this was not really reflected till relatively recently"* (Respondent 8). *"People have to start catching up with the idea of what is going on today...and if you have at least three things happening in the town and you will have a choice...whatever, but it cannot be just one thing...you should have many things happening in wide areas...So people could choose and now we have several generations of people coming out of their homes"* (Respondent 16).

In addition, people mentioned that in the past they experienced a *"lack of open communication within the cultural scene"* (Respondent 7), also in relation with the public authorities. But at the same time, they admitted that now they were working to improve it. However, most communication occurred informally was shared through word of mouth (field diary).

4.2 How are the Community/communities perceived in Veliko Tarnovo? What kind of Community/communities are we talking about?

The answer to the previously mentioned question on whether TAM and the Community are one is partially answered through a more thorough understanding of how the Community/communities are understood in Veliko Tarnovo.

Talking about Veliko Tarnovo's life in early 2019, people often naturally mention the word "community." However, what do they refer to when they talk about it? Is there just one Community? Is it the "TAM community" or does it expand wider? Is it homogenous or is it diverse including more than one nod? Are there more communities? The reference to the "community" can be

differentiated into several entities if analyzed in the context by i) the Community in a wider sense and ii) the individual communities (including TAM). The Community in Veliko Tarnovo in a wider sense has developed gradually and been influenced by the environment related to TAM, both as a space as well as a symbol (i.e. the open, inclusive, and connecting place). It has been further influenced by the persistent, inspiring, and energetic agent of change that played the role of catalyzing and facilitating the processes both in TAM (TAM community) and, even later more broadly, within the Community. The Community therefore is wider than the TAM community (i.e. venue and people providing different, alternative kinds of activities and creating specific environment for meeting, sharing, and networking). It is important to mention that such a community would not have developed and the processes of creation of the cooperative network which define it today would not have developed without the existence of the groups and individuals that wanted to become engaged and do something for/with the others in the town and public arena.

The Community is perceived a value-based community. People, that think they are a part of such a community, attribute the meaning to it as illustrated by the following quotes: *"in the town itself, there are many people that are socially active and socially aware of the causes...the need to feel that this is my town, the people that will do something to make the town their home...to care about the environment, also the social environment, social spaces..."* (Respondent 23); *"people that are passionate about something and they share it"* (Respondent 27); *"and they do something also for the others, for the community"* (Respondent 26). It is also the *"people that need each other, and complete somehow each other to feel happier to live in the town, it can be something very diverse, something with different interests but what connects"* (Respondent 24).

Because of the above situation, many people call this Community to be such as illustrated by the following quote: *"authentic one...not politically engaged, but simply a fluid of active citizens, whose engagement is emotional, sharing, cooperative and grounded in the common cause and common need driving them to do things and to achieve things that are important for them...although the people have different agendas, they have also the same cause"* (Respondent 1).

The Community as well as the individual communities in Veliko Tarnovo (for further description, see below) are also characterized by the collaborative and supportive elements. One of the Respondents described it as *"there is something very important...which I appreciate here and it is the ethics, not just being nice to other people, doing something with/for other people...having integrity...even if you are running business, you need more...things that you cannot do yourself...we discovered that there are people that do have similar values and that are on the same boat and trying to help, support the others on the boat where they can...and in such a way we are making the wider community stronger...with these ideas"* (Respondent 12).

When saying "community," people also referred to something that

should rather be labelled as different "communities." They meant that there are many different nodes of activity (or as they sometimes call them, different "cultural operators") in Veliko Tarnovo such as the IT community¹², board games, university-related communities, activities for the children community, dancing community, healthy-life styles/sports community also known as "Tarnovo runs,"¹³ a wide and diverse contemporary art community, music community, etc. These have their own origins, their own particular "lives" and dynamics, and their particular core audiences.

Apart from these nodes/communities, there are more venues that are engaged in providing cultural events and activities open to the wider public, aiming at the enrichment of public life in Veliko Tarnovo. Their motivation and core audiences are a bit different than in the case of the above, but nowadays they provide an ambient where different people and groups of people can meet for events (i.e. providing space for the mixing among audiences and communities). They are represented by different bars, clubs, and the Gallery Island space offering a wider set of programs. As even the usual TAM visitors admitted, *"sometimes we look what's the program there and we go there for an event or other"* (Respondents 31 and 32, [saying together and with a smile]). More and more places provide programs that are more than "classical consumerism" (as they call it) as they also provide programs where audiences can learn and connect, for example, *"culture, sport, and music."* They are known for that as they are *"almost for two years now...inviting lots of famous people, DJs but also those who make books and achieve in sport...talking about their lives and success...and so people could learn something new about these people...everything is different, one day [there is] presentation of book, next day there is a presentation of some champion...it's a culture club...sometimes party with different music..."* (Respondent 15). Other such places provide cultural programs, mostly in the summer, and are open to a wider public, offering diversity. Sometimes they provide programs in partnerships with other clubs, groups of people (i.e. Latin American dancing community, or others like the Facilitator) and they

¹² Within this community, its members organize different events in the region that are related to technology, providing extracurricular training to people of different generations and needs (including also e.g. connecting the artists and technologies; bringing children and parents together), engage with the youth and spark their interest in technologies as well as in entrepreneurship, spending time in a meaningful way, and sharing (field diary).

¹³ Their activities stretch beyond what is imaginable from the name (i.e. the organization of running and other sport events). Additionally, they organize cleaning events in public spaces where people can make their environment nicer and cleaner as well as spend meaningful time together including learning new skills and sharing stories across generations. (Field diary)

offer a wide variety of programs for both the day and evening: *"they offer something more than just restaurants and bars where you just sit, it's much better to come to the event and get familiar with something new..."* (Respondent 27); *"they also give chance to the musicians that are at the beginning of their career to find their own audience...want to support the local bands...like an incubator...for some bands it was their first concert outside of their school or club..."* (Respondent 16).

Gradually through the values of collaboration, inclusiveness, openness to new comers, sharing, and respect to others and diversity, they (the communities/nods definitely and to a more limited degree, other venues) become fluid communities that are to some extent related to each other. And according to what people said, the important glue was the values they all share as well as the connections between each other and to TAM and/or the Facilitator in different times of their lives (that have both/together or individually played different roles in their creation, continuation, and/or connection to others; see above in the section on roles of TAM and the Facilitator). There is yet another thing that connects them all, as they say, and which can be illustrated by the following: *"what connects us all is also the problems that we meet during our events, and it is that we are not always really understood by the others...people that are not engaged anyhow...they do not understand why we are doing anything like this...like let's say the cleaning of the town or so..."* (Respondent 14).

When we speak about the Community, it is something that extends over individual communities and to some extent other venues (described above). The higher intensity of connections and fluidity (that developed gradually) are very much associated with the Co/share project experience in 2018.

5

What was perceived to be the role and value added of the Co/share project?

The Co/share project,¹⁴ which is marked as an important milestone on the path to a more complex and connected Community in Veliko Tarnovo, came into the game in the time when there were already various public/social activities and engagements happening in the town and wider region. When the people (representing the different initiatives, activities, projects, associations, businesses with social cause, individuals seeking the ideas and motivation to get engaged, etc.) met to participate in the Co/share project, a significant majority of them already had their cause, they were already doing something in the public domain including realizing their projects for/with their particular audiences (field diary, project documentation). The situation before the Co/share project was such that some people referred to the feeling that there was some community of "like-minded" people whom they met most of the time in TAM or in relation to TAM. Others knew that there were some things happening, but even though Veliko Tarnovo is a small place, they did not necessarily know much precisely about various activities and about one another, unless they had connected for a concrete event and/or invited to

¹⁴ The Co/share project, which was part of the ViabilityNet 3.0 program learning cycle (aimed at supporting skills of the community leaders and strengthening their communities to achieve positive social change through providing additional resources for testing and development of new approaches), was implemented in Veliko Tarnovo by the Facilitator, his team and other collaborators in TAM in 2017/ 2018. The Co/share initiative was focused on increasing the skills of local people that engaged in non-formal activities and to strengthen their links and interactions as well as to create networks. The project was implemented through consecutive meetings of these leaders focused on educational programs, which also gave the participants the opportunity to meet and interact more intensively over the period of six months. The general aim of the project (expected to occur in three to four years) were to support the leaders in implementing their initiatives in a more professional way, share their knowledge and experience, create sustainable networks of the initiatives, establish community grants for projects encouraging the further collaboration, and to get more businesses involved in the community initiatives. The immediate aims of the project (to be visible after one year) were to increase the knowledge of the representatives of local NGOs/grass root initiatives/non-formal groups about various aspects of project creation and execution through lectures by professionals, create a meeting point on regular basis for six months for community leaders and experts, engage them in the working processes through workshops, stimulate them to come up with common solutions to problems related to the local community, and make the local non-governmental sector more visible via media coverage that the project would have (project documentation, field diary). The activities implemented during the project included workshops (topics: environment and its influence on the project cycle; relationship between the project and context; project programming; how to reach the people, make the initiatives more accessible, and develop creative ideas; how to develop communities; resources and financing the projects), meetings, and a final roundtable.

take part in a concrete event. Moreover, there were also some participants that were more encapsulated in their own activities with their own target groups related to different areas of interest not connected to the others. Some people repeatedly complained about being alone and not having enough energy to do stuff they focused on, seeing mostly problems rather than possible solutions to them. It is clear that people did not think about a wider Community building consciously and actively (field diary, project documentation). On the other hand, more recently, different communities/nods, individuals, and venues started to hold more events in partnerships with the others. More processes started function in Veliko Tarnovo's public sphere.

5.1 What were the reasons to take part in the Co/share and what were the expectations from the initiative?

When the Facilitator introduced the upcoming Co/share project to be implemented in TAM (taking advantage of the space and the atmosphere perceived as inclusive, welcoming, allowing for diversity, etc.), and set the open call for participation, different people applied with diverse expectations, many of them with anxiety. Some people mentioned they wanted to grow their network, to meet new people, to see what was happening in Veliko Tarnovo. Some mentioned they wanted to find out how to work more effectively with their initiatives and to learn more about what the Community wanted. Still others wanted to get inspiration and generate ideas and energy to engage. In addition to the open call, some of the potential participants were even contacted by the Facilitator personally and encouraged to take part, being explained why it was important to apply, especially since it was to be about community work, about connecting to the others, and building "something through which we could all stick together" (Respondent 4), which usually resonated with their declared needs.

The process of application as well as the final decision on the selection of the participants was open and perceived to be inclusive as the approach in TAM-related activities usually was. The people from the organizing team even shared their concerns that they struggled with fears of how to select and how to refuse applicants; they did not want the task of selecting people who were going to spend time together and build the Community (field diary). In the end only a couple of people were not included in the group because of the relevance of the project for them. Most of the applicants continued to take part throughout the entire project that took over six months. Only some people gave up because of declared time constraints (field diary, project documentation).

5.2 How did the participants perceive the value of their engagement in the Co/share project vis-à-vis the strengthening of Community in Veliko Tarnovo?

It needs to be mentioned that although a relatively long time has passed since the Co/share project happened (as the Respondents commented) and since that time there were many other important events and processes developing in Veliko Tarnovo (in the past year or so), the particular event (the milestone) still resonates within the Community in Veliko Tarnovo. Even if people sometimes did not mention specifically the "Co/share" name, they implicitly talked about "The project" because it left an important impression on them. It was perceived that it influenced the processes in the Community in Veliko Tarnovo. When asked to recall some events they took part in TAM, they often times referred to it in similar way "...yes of course, we had these lectures and yes, yes,... these meetings...when progressive people came and met with the local active people, informal groups...it was very rewarding...since then we really had the feeling we know what's happening here and were more connected...we are more one..." (Respondent 7).

People appreciated to be part of the Co/share program because it created a **platform for them to meet** together, get to know each other better, and **learn about what kind of things were there taking place** in Veliko Tarnovo. This was very motivating and inspiring for them especially with reference to the then-prevailing feelings of being alone and needing to be a part of something bigger. They shared that, "We realized how important it is for us, the local people to meet...to gather together...to share what we do and also to share our motivation...and we were looking for the opportunity to realize it...to use the energy on something concrete...it was a psychological aspect..." (Respondent 8). Another one adds, "I started to be more curious about what other people do in the city, and I felt like I want to also start doing something actively there, and now I knew whom to collaborate with...before we were more closed groups just the ones interested in our own thing and did not know much about the others....now if we know we could support one another, we could connect to them and help so thing could grow...and community is also about people carrying about what is happening in the city...what is going on here" (Respondent 13). "Thanks to Co/share initiative, more than 20 different people came together and not everyone knew each other at the beginning, and now we all have personal contacts and we could call each other, it was amazing to see what are all the different things happening sometimes with no money involved...I'm no more pessimistic..." (Respondent 16). "Thanks to Co/share, I started to notice all the beautiful things happening in Veliko Tarnovo, it opened my eyes, I notices the beautiful things and environment...and I just changes my attitude to the place...including the things like, if there is not a dust bin in the park, I would just take the paper in my pocket and carry it along..." (Respondent 24).

During, but more importantly after, the Co/share, many people **felt more**

included which also motivated them to start new things in Veliko Tarnovo. *"I felt more fine here...I could see the different atmosphere...I am also not a very sociable person, and thanks to Co/share, I met really closely many people and then I found it easier to open my thing here...after realizing there are also other things happening, I feel more like at home, more confident to do my own thing [the Respondent actually started their own activity in Veliko Tarnovo after the project], the participation in Co/share accelerated this process"* (Respondent 10).

People also very much appreciated the diversity so everyone could fit and find their part in the project. In the larger sense it provided space for the inclusion of people representing a much wider context than art. The inclusiveness for diversity was also appreciated, which can be illustrated by the shared feeling of Respondent 14: *"I was the only one not coming from the what I thought serious project here in the town, I was involved in entertainment, and I was wandering what I am doing here...but the most important was to learn about that different people we doing different stuff here in the town and I could found my place there in the group."* Some people even did not think that the diversity could work at the beginning: *"it was strange at first to bring in people with so many different interests and backgrounds...to make them work together....the young ones with the more aged...also...some that are freelancers, some that have NGOs, some that are part of informal groups, some did not have the groups at all...even...or just may be had the cause...idea..., but it worked and everyone could take something out of it...because we had something in common...and also the lecturers, there was no distance between us and them, the Co/share helped us to overcome this distance"* (Respondent 24). People also referred to the diversity as it allowed them to *"experience the problems and issues with all different senses and be included in taking something from them"* (Respondent 10).

Moreover, the project created an opportunity for them to meet interesting people, including professionals from Sofia and other places, who were able to provide good content to the participants. In addition, they appreciated the diversity of the selected topics that made it different from any other more topic-focused training. The participants also appreciated that the topics were relevant for their own context and that they could relate to them: *"The lecturers were bringing in big themes, but they were talking about similar problems that we have in small teams here...so we could learn from their ideas"* (Respondent 14).

However, it should be noted that there was an agreement across the range of Respondents, that the real value of the project was well beyond the trainings and it was the getting to know the people, meeting people, sharing, and getting inspired that they appreciated the most. And it also helped them to find new directions and developments, through the ideas and lessons learned from the professionals and, more importantly, through learning about other local people's stories, their achievements, and sharing similar problems. This also included the enthusiasm brought in by the Facilitator as

he was said to have always come back from his project (ViabilityNet 3.0) so excited, regenerated, and full of new ideas...*"sharing with us that every time he has discovered something new there...which was important for some people here, because sometimes living here in small Veliko Tarnovo where not so much was happening, you could be discouraged to develop something sometimes...it's important to discover that you can do things in some other way, and there are actually methods how to do things other way, like the impact measurement..."* (Respondent 10). Some people realized that they started to understand the activities that they were already doing in a bit different, wider way. One aspect was that there was potentially more social aspects to business they were involved in and that they could start making it more open and public, such as create a foundation that would be able to generate resources for the socially beneficial parts of activities. There were also a lot of education in the services provided and this foundation could look for ways to support the educational part of the activity. (Field diary)

During and after the Co/share project experience, people shared that their perceived level of "feeling as the Community" intensified, including their engagement within the Community. *"Everyone knows everyone now, so it's easier to dedicate their work with others"* (Respondent 5). People mentioned that the Co/share *"helped the community to grow"* (Respondent 11). There was an agreement on this statement among people that were not part of the Co/share project themselves as well.

People began to organize small meetings in TAM and in other places. They used the Co/share program as a trigger to meet other people and discuss possible future cooperation. *"We started to talk more in depth about what we want to do in the city and now we could even work with one another on it..."* (Respondent 13). People, however, mentioned that they would appreciate to meet more and, that in the future, it would be great to have more joint initiatives. It was also important to continue doing the stuff that they were doing, because they felt they were doing a great job (field diary).

Moreover, already during the Co/share sessions and especially afterwards, people supported one another and developed new initiatives. *"What was nice was that the people did not have a problem to share"* (Respondent 9). *"The people were helping one another, like to get more online with their activities, to expand and grow, like [one of them] helped the dancing community to become more visible and expand on its membership...sharing the information among their own respective audiences and using the momentum of activating the people in the way the Tarnovo runs always did; helping each other to develop their products, [like the other] helped with the book, so it was also about supporting each other in the business, also to [the Facilitator], we were discussing the ideas of crowdsourcing to support his project, because both of us we are always looking for alternatives"* (Respondent 9). *"Also new places have been opened after the Co/share...and all these small events are so important for us...they make it different here"* (Respondent 10). Another Respondent

mentioned another example of a concrete outcome: *"I was shared contacts to people who could help me to do fundraising and we are already working on it"* (Respondent 17). Respondent 23 added, *"everybody was so open, and at the certain moment when anybody needed help, like with marketing, we could always contact them...or with connection, I have the confidence to ask anybody for the connection and the help...even more useful and important the connections between the participants...and also there is this Facebook group created where we continue to share the information and help one another, the group is very active, and the people do not hesitate to share the information...also if I need advice from someone, I can always ask and discuss some topics, for example any help with the documents, and chairs or tables needed for the event, you really have the support from the group, ...one person helped me with the design...we are also looking for the shared projects and currently we are actually working on some things."* Another concrete example of the outcome was the city map, which was developed for Veliko Tarnovo and is now being upgraded to include other interesting routes and has another level(s) of the project to be developed (field diary).

Although some people had some personal preferences and specific expectations (given their background or experience) and they thought that the format of the Co/share program could have been a bit different including more informal parts than formal ones; more structured in the methods used to generate the momentum and active participation of the individuals in plenaries as well as in the group sessions; better structuring of the program and information; giving an earlier space for introduction of the individual participants and allowing them to get to know one another in depth; to include more interactive sessions, etc. Generally, however, the participants concluded that they appreciated the established process(es), including the diversity at all different levels, *contributing significantly to making the Community processes in Veliko Tarnovo more intensive and strengthening the Community in an unprecedented way (as compared with the perceived situation in the past, before the project).*

Many people shared their hopes for the process(es) to continue to grow and their aspirations for further changes and developments in the future of Veliko Tarnovo, both internal as well as external to their Community.



What are the aspirations for the future developments in Veliko Tarnovo (as seen by the Community members)?

6.1 Aspirations towards the Community

Some people hope for **more gatherings** to be organized to “keep them going.” They are however still not very specific and there is not any agreement across the community on the format and on the responsibilities for the calling for and/or organization of such meetings. Some of the ideas resonating with the community members can be illustrated by the following quote: *“...the meetings could be...like... not so big as the Co/share was, more like smaller groups of people with similar interests to meet to reflect and help one another with the concrete challenges, which could happen also without the external speaker...something like monthly gatherings...or with the impulse from outside to learn more from someone different and to see their things from the bit distance...or have gatherings more on personal, soft-skills lever, which could be used across the different areas of interest”* (Respondent 30).

Some others are looking for **ways to develop TAM** as a place that played/plays an important role in the Community and/or communities, **to reflect on its more specific focus**, and to respond adequately to the existing needs of the Community/community. In order to do that it would be necessary to see more in depth into what people currently expect from the place and see if the expectations have shifted from the role(s) it played so far. In that case there should be more inquiries and discussions to see and learn (field diary).

There is a shared hope that **more “places like TAM”** would be created, not more TAMs exactly, but spaces that share the qualities and role in the Community and allow more people to continue to find places of sharing, inspiration, and meaningful ways of spending their time, in a similar way as others did previously in association with TAM. *“That more young people will take on similar initiatives and develop them in their way, so there are more cultural places here that will break the boundaries of the usual (Respondent 7). “People want to see more openings happening in the town at the same time, so that they can choose what to do and how they want to spend their time, but we are talking quality rather than quantity, of course...”* (Respondent 6).

In addition, people would be happy if, as illustrated by the words of Respondent 29, **“more engines of change”** would be seen in Veliko Tarnovo, *which come with ideas, do something and better activate others to do something.”* There is also a pronounced need for more “helpers” (as named by Respondent 11) and/or supporters (i.e. people wanting to get engaged in an active way, not just participating, although at the same time, the participation of wider communities of people to support the changes already taking place is highly appreciated).

Some people start thinking and others **rethinking about their specific role in the Community/communities** and about what they want to do and how they want to contribute to the life in Veliko Tarnovo. This includes the creation of an environment for more people to take the initiative and lead

events and processes. Moreover, some people want to see how to make the distinction between the dynamic role as a driver/ engine in the Community processes and a more static role¹⁵ of representing rather a symbol (mirroring their past contributions) for events and processes. Some people think to create conditions for the sustainability of the initiatives and communities themselves and how to share and pass on the missions so that the initiatives do not die if they proved viable, useful, and interesting to the people in Veliko Tarnovo (field diary).

Some people think of the **potential positive role of explicit rules** for places associated with the Community/communities and the processes in the Community/-ies after a period of their more organic development. Some find it important to set such rules naturally in the early stages of development of the communities (i.e. before the need to use them comes up so people could organically agree and elaborate on them without contradictions and controversies). Some people reflect over the possibility to set rules and, at the same time, they are not sure whether any such rules exist at least in the form of explicitly commonly agreed principles that can guide their communities (field diary).

6.2 Aspirations beyond the existing Community (could entail the role of the Community in finding ways to make them come true)

The Respondents think it would be nice if there were **more balance between the focus on the old and contemporary heritage** in Veliko Tarnovo, between *“digging into the past and the contemporary stuff that also starts to importantly define Veliko Tarnovo”* as illustrated by Respondent 7. Both tourists as well as people living there could enjoy the diversity that is more visibly communicated to them. People admit that there is already a lot happening in reality (that there are many new events and places) to balance it, but it needs to be more visible and more connected naturally to show that there is this diversity *“including things like advertising the diversity even on the postcards and information channels”* (Respondent 10). The communication between the different groups and initiatives would also have to be improved to take into account of different needs.

Respondents want to see **more young people in Veliko Tarnovo, to be attracted to stay there**, and/or to be attracted to come back after they gained experience somewhere else and hope for them to feel accommodated, even more actively welcomed *“to seek the opportunities here to be engage more in*

the community life...to be able to create their own opportunities here” (Respondent 9). In order for that to happen, they think it is necessary to find ways to support them: *“to help them find out how to start something, more ideas and skills, but also including having space for that, since they might not understand why some things are not going so well as they would wanted”* (Respondent 13).

People want their **city to be cleaner, greener, and environment friendly** including having more people interested in caring for nature and preserving ecology: *“if they not only think this way but they would also act more in this way”...“for that they would need more structures to be developed but also the existing ones to be more open to these (such as schools)...”* (Respondent 18). Others, such as Respondent 23, added that they would wish to have *“more green spots...and...also meeting areas developed which would also make the old town more vivid and pleasant to spend more time outside and interact.”*

There was a relatively widespread agreement among the Respondents that they **wished for a public space in Veliko Tarnovo** that would allow more people to spend time outside naturally, walk around and meet one another, connect and naturally engage with one another so more activities and spin offs could develop in this process. *“The city is not big, so when you want you can go around and if you look a bit, you can find your friends, but if you do not have something like pedestrian area, something like a center...it is a bit difficult, because it is not very inviting you to go around and...it's like you have the mains street and it is nice, but it is also full of cars, so people go, because they need to get to places, but not really stroll around and spent their time there...it's not very inviting to walk there...so sometimes the city feels like empty and dead...if there is a center, then it would be inviting for lots of stuff to happen...including the new initiatives to develop”* as Respondent 30 put it.

People also see **more potential for the university communities** to play an active role in the life of the city by making it more vivid.

Another aspiration mentioned by the Respondents is that people want to **see the relationships and communication between different layers of people, including the municipality, improved** so there is more relationship between the different initiatives and different layers of society and more synergies between the processes in Veliko Tarnovo.

Although many of the above aspirations stay only at the level of hopes and wishes, and there is so far not any existing comprehensive strategy or plan and/or any organized process within the community focused on them, some members of the community started to meet and discuss the ideas and possible plans for actions through combined affords. This is a signifier for further development of the community and its actions.

¹⁵The static role is perceived rather in a critical way, as opposed to a dynamic role.



**What possible challenges
for the Community
in Veliko Tarnovo are
perceived to exist?**

In the long run, the Community needs to continue to mature and create its agenda in a more structured way (including formulating a more concrete vision). So far, the relation(s) between the different activities and the processes are rather personalized and thus potentially fragile (in case those people will leave the community). As things grow (the agenda, number of people, intensity, and levels of networking), there is usually a need for more management, structure, and more clear division of roles. The “spark and intuition” is not enough for people to understand the needs and to work with their teams and wider Community, and/or to grasp their respective roles vis-à-vis the processes happening. On the other hand, there is already quite a wide and relatively intensive collaborative network developed in the Community, so it should provide some potential to deal with the developments in the short run.

In many of the shared thoughts of people within the Community, there relatively strongly resonates the name of the Facilitator and his expected focal role in supporting and catalyzing the processes is generally tightly linked with a certain over-reliance on him from the part of other people. At the same time it can be seen that the Community (i.e. the collaborative and supportive network) has developed to the point where the base for the structure is there (i.e. more natural processes of meeting, talking, helping one another; the experience that things can be done and can be changed, etc.) and such an atmosphere could support people if they allow it themselves and if they assume more confidence and courage to take the initiative.

The Facilitator’s role could still be strong in being a partner for discussions and reflections, bringing inspiration and drive with energy, enthusiasm, and ability to be flexible and to respond to the needs and learn from every event, moment, and encounter with different people. However, it is also very important to remember that every engine, every driver of change needs i) to re-capacitate to derive new energy and focus, and ii) using the metaphor: *every pillar, if people decide they need it for their house construction, also need other pillars to support, to stand and hold. If not, there might be a danger of burn out and/or withdrawal from the process.*

On a more concrete level, there is an intention (followed by the concrete steps by the Facilitator) to make the operation of TAM (what has become to be perceived as “the Community space”), the organization of the events, and shaping its character to be more participatory, open to and shared with other independent voices. Nevertheless, there is still quite a central role played by the Facilitator (related both to his specific skills and contacts, but also to the prevailing appreciation and trust others feel towards him transformed to certain level of dependence on him), which might potentially slow down the desired process of change/development beyond his own initiative(s).¹⁶

¹⁶Note: in the time between the field study and the publishing of this report, there has

Sometimes people refer to TAM as it is something that will always be there. They feel it is playing/played a crucial role for them (see the role(s) of TAM above) and they see it as a focal point for the Community. They cannot simply imagine another situation where it would cease to exist. This can be illustrated by the quote from Respondent 13: *"it would be hard [without TAM]...I cannot imagine ...probably we will not be able to talk to so many people and cooperate with them...even if you have a fire and there are some small things coming out of the fire...they cannot make own fires...or can they?...still you need this fire place...there will be couple of the smaller fires, people will be doing, starting to do their own things...but there will be missing the big fire."* Taken from a different perspective, when people think about TAM, they still see its great practical as well as symbolical role. However, at the same time in many cases (with important exceptions), they take it almost for granted without actively taking steps to support its sustainability. At the same time the different cases of collaboration and support in the Community are clearly visible from the concrete examples shared and which stems from the structure, existing beyond TAM, which has developed itself in Veliko Tarnovo over time (and more intensively after the Co/share project). Nevertheless, there is still a need for more confidence and feeling of empowerment and "can-do" spirit to be strengthened in the Community. Using the words of the Respondent 8: *"TAM has created this hunger for people to search for the meaningful culture...and it is somehow related, the new things started to open...so if there is a potential that more places open...then the people will search the alternatives."* Other people share their hopes such as *"a new place will pop up...but here it is so different...but still I hope in any case that there are more similar places created to carry on the torch"* (Respondent 6).

been an active step done to formally share the responsibilities for running the place. The changes were done after the process of discussion and reflection with the involved parties.

8

**Any recommendations?
The potential is there,
it exists within
the Community...**

Reports and studies usually end up with recommendations, however talking to the people in Veliko Tarnovo, I realized there is a great potential for locally grown recommendations and ideas for possible solutions vis-à-vis the aspirations which already exist in the community. Therefore, my suggestion would be to encourage the Community/communities to meet during the formats that are preferable for them and continue discussing the next steps and plans that they want to develop in/for/with Veliko Tarnovo. The informal network and processes are there including the ideas, so it is just necessary to talk them over, structure them, and keep on going without the loss of authenticity, openness, diversity, inclusiveness, and collaborative spirit. It has been an amazing time to discover what has been created in Veliko Tarnovo as a collective endeavor so far, so it would be interesting to see future developments.

9

Summary of findings

The case of Veliko Tarnovo is an example of Community where there gradually developed a multidimensional network among engaged and active people and the individual “hubs” of activities (i.e. the different interest-based and other cause-related communities; some of which existed in Veliko Tarnovo prior to the development of the wider Community, some of them developed in parallel to and/or with the help of the Community network). The interesting part of this case is that the Community in Veliko Tarnovo developed despite the general “fatigue” in public participation and engagement as well as a lack of trust prevailing in Bulgarian society.

The Community is characterized by cooperation and providing support among its members (both material as well as non-material), sharing know-how, allowing for the feeling of belonging, strengthening energies and motivation to engage further in the social domain/public space, invigorate public life in Veliko Tarnovo, and contributing to the creation of atmosphere of meaningful engagement of people both within and outside the Community (i.e. targeting wider populations). People in Veliko Tarnovo call this Community to be authentic as not being politically engaged, activist (as a whole, not saying that some individuals and parts of the community are not), but rather, using the words of the Respondent 1: *“it is a fluid of active citizens, whose engagement is emotional, sharing, cooperative and grounded in common cause and common need driving them to do things and to achieve things that are important to them...although people have different agendas, they have also the same cause”*. It needs to be added that the emotional aspect is also very strongly backed by the need of people to belong somewhere and to do something for/with the others. The Community is also characterized by wide diversity of characters and interests and areas of engagement involved, but at the same time the people and the “communities within” share similar values: openness to new comers and new ideas, inclusiveness, social engagement, social awareness of the causes (i.e. the issues necessary *“to feel and to make their town to be their home,”* using the words of Respondent 26), collaboration rather than competition, respect to the others, etc. They also mentioned that what connects them are the problems they are challenged with while trying to be active (i.e. the general context of the state of society and Veliko Tarnovo), but also lack of specific understanding by some people of why they are interested in being active, why they want to be engaged, and what it is good for.

The story of Community development (beyond the existence of i) different individual interest-based hubs: the IT community, the dancing community, the boardgames community, the contemporary art community, healthy-life styles community, activities for children, mothers and lots more; ii) cultural operators such as different actors providing variety of cultural programs and activities); and iii) businesses with social causes in Veliko Tarnovo) is marked by several aspects. These are: a) a relatively strong need of some people to engage outside the public domain and to seek the sense

of belonging; b) history of previous existence of several interest-based hubs/communities led by significant personalities (although it has to be noted that for long period of time of their existence they were rather separated, living their own “lives,” having their own rather narrow audiences); c) specific energy and activity of a key personality(s) that has/have provided the connecting role in Veliko Tarnovo; d) existence of specific “Community place” created in Veliko Tarnovo (TAM), which has become the base for wider Community development; and e) to some extent a specific project (the Co/share) that is strongly believed by the Community members and other Respondents to have contributed to the strengthening of the Community in Veliko Tarnovo, allowing it to expand and to develop further.

In spite of, or despite the general context in Bulgaria and the local one in Veliko Tarnovo, there was a **significant urge** in some parts of the population and/or with the number of individuals to leave the walls of their houses and work/business places and **to engage with respect to wider public, to participate on the development of their town/surrounding villages**. At the same time the people kept mentioning that they oftentimes felt they were alone and isolated in their cause, and despite their motivation lacked the energy to act. They also **felt they did not belong to any of the existing frameworks** and so they sought something like their “own community.” Some others were already engaged in the interest-based communities (the “hubs” of activities), but they lacked **connections, a wider Community where they could spend time, share and discuss with the like-minded people**, and/or to enjoy cultural programs different from the mainstream.

Some of these people gradually found their “refuge”/a **space in TAM** (after it was established about five years ago), where they shared to have found the possibility for connection, networking, inspiration, learning, energy, space to spend time but also to do some of their activities (as audience but also actively in case they did not have another venue where to organize them), and for developing partnerships with others; besides finding the space which offered them entertainment other than the mainstream and helped them to engage more meaningfully with the culture and different lifestyles.

The space and environment were characterized by them as **open, welcoming, inclusive, providing a “second home atmosphere,” relaxed, not-judging, inspiring through providing a wide variety of programs and activities as well as attracting interesting personalities** (not only the performers, but also the audiences). The diversity of activities and people coming to spend time there were seen as one of the main assets. Later, thanks to the specific atmosphere and the other people frequenting the place and engaging in talks and sharing, people became motivated, strengthened, and energized to activate themselves more because they felt that their idea did not seem to be so rare anymore and it could be implemented. Using the words of Respondent 3, **“there has developed a big synergy that is helping to**

activate the others to do something, to engage.” TAM became a natural place for **networking and connections** and sometimes it also played a role of incubator, providing space for the ideas, programs, activities, and performances to be “tested.” Gradually TAM offered more than cultural encounters, but also educational programs, etc. Thanks to the **diversity and variety of things** that could be done and experienced there, it also attracted a wide variety of audiences (background and profession-wise: business, higher education, people working in other professions, artists, students of the university as well as high schools, mothers on maternity leave, retired people that moved to Veliko Tarnovo to spend their time and lot more). They could meet and **exchange and learn from one other** including the topics that would be naturally distant to them. Generally, the place with its atmosphere contributed to the **increase of the level of trust** among the people, which is said to be generally missing in Bulgarian society (while being an important prerequisite for any further cooperative action, especially in the public space).

Gradually TAM gained two meanings (i.e. there developed two “TAMs” in one). One is the physical space itself, the bar providing contemporary art performances, that could not be found anywhere else (i.e. bringing specific artists from Bulgaria as well as from all over the world); second is the non-physical atmosphere that provided the creation of the wider meeting of people and networking, contributing to the creation of the Community. This specifically makes it a very specific “hub,” different to all the other ones in Veliko Tarnovo.

The two TAM(s) would, however, not have been created without the significant contribution of the Facilitator (the community leader that recently participated in the ViabilityNet 3.0 training program by the VIA foundation). He opened TAM about five years ago and since then (even before his participation in ViabilityNet 3.0) has been **perceived to be playing the role of connector** (i.e. he is most generally associated with the word **CONNECT** at all different levels and seen from many different perspectives). People also described him as a person that is very **thoughtful and reflexive, active to do things differently, persistent, engaging a wide variety of others through authentic, trustworthy, and personalized approach for what he believes is the common cause**. He is perceived as a positive example of what can be achieved over a longer-term commitment. He is also said to be humble in a sense of seeing and learning about what happens, what works, and building on it. He listens to ideas and stories of others and he is also shaping his opinions through the situations and occasions he goes through and reflects on them turning them into lessons learned. In order to do that he is constantly asking himself many questions. People said that he developed from being more directive to more opening towards participatory approaches and giving voice to other people more actively to be able to shape future developments of the activities and processes. People also highlighted his specific **role in sharing new inputs, contacts, and energy** with them, anytime he came back

to Veliko Tarnovo (e.g. also as he used to return from the ViabilityNet 3.0 meetings), **facilitating the networking of people across the community as well as between the community and the outside**. He also plays the role of **gate keeper** for newcomers to the town as well as the Community. He is seen to be **good diplomat and ambassador able** to build bridges between different people and groups without compromising the vision of diversity and openness. He was described as someone encouraging cooperation with and supporting people that are not part of his team projects (i.e. he provides the supportive role in much wider sense). This also means that people that are not necessarily cooperating with him directly respect him for his role.

One of the initiatives that is described to have become a **milestone in strengthening the Community** in Veliko Tarnovo is linked to the experience with **the Co/share project** organized by the team around the Facilitator and TAM as a part of the activities related to the ViabilityNet 3.0 program. The project built on the knowledge that there existed several interest-based hubs and other communities (as the local people called them) organizing different activities as well as individuals engaged in some public activities with others eager to get more engaged. However, these other individuals lacked the ideas, energy, network, and specific knowledge about how much there is already happening in Veliko Tarnovo. Although it must be noted that for long period of time of existence of some of the initiatives, they were rather separated, living their own "lives" and having their own specific audiences. Some of them were to some extent previously connected through TAM (meeting there), but still not actively and consciously thinking about Community building. The Co/share program was thus appreciated because it **created a platform and process where different people could meet, learn about what kind of things are already happening in Veliko Tarnovo, which was motivating and inspiring for them especially with the reference to the prevailing feeling of being alone and needing to be part of something bigger**. After the Co/share project people felt more included and they referred to their engagement within the Community as intensified. They also valued the encounter with the professionals from Sofia and other places, providing the needed contents and skills to the participants (especially as it was perceived as valid and related to their own context in Veliko Tarnovo and their own problems they meet). The very important value was seen in sharing and learning from the experience of the individual participants.

During and after the Co/share project some of the participants themselves **started to organize small meetings to discuss the possible future cooperation**. At the same time, people mentioned that they would appreciate to meet more in the future. While **developing concrete new initiatives**, or while trying to improve the current initiatives, the **participants supported one another with ideas, energy, experience, skills they have, but also with materials and space/providing venues etc.** Many people also shared the hopes that the processes will continue and their aspirations related both to the community

as well as wider ones related to the town they were situated in.

Among these aspirations there were: more gatherings to be organized to keep them going with their activities, looking for the ways to develop TAM as a place that have played a crucial role in the development of Community, rethinking the different roles people play in the community, developing more places like "TAM" to continue to allow more people to find places for sharing and networking, balance more between the identity of Veliko Tarnovo related to the past and present, attracting more young people to stay in Veliko Tarnovo and to feel more attracted and welcomed there, seeing more engines of change in Veliko Tarnovo that would activate more people to engage, have the city cleaner, greener, and environment friendly, have a public space in Veliko Tarnovo (outdoor, i.e. a part of the town where people could naturally stop and meet); having more university communities playing active role in the life of Veliko Tarnovo; and last but not least having improved relationships and communication between different layers of society in the municipality.

As a part of the process of learning more about the Community in Veliko Tarnovo, there also came up some **challenges**. In the long run the community needs to mature more, to create its agenda in a more structured way (including the formulation of the concrete vision). So far the processes and relations between different activities are rather personalized and thus potentially fragile. The major role in supporting the processes is played by a key agent of change (the Facilitator), to whom the Community members trust and to an important extent rely on his engagement. Also, people attribute a huge meaning to the "Community space" TAM as a place as well as a symbol of Community networking, meeting, and sharing. They communicated that it would be hard for them even to imagine this place not to be there. However, the perceived overreliance might potentially influence and/or slow down the processes of change beyond the ones initiated there. On the other hand, there is already quite a wide and relatively inclusive collaborative network developed, which could provide the impetus for the desired changes and further development of the functioning Community. The existing processes, energies, ideas, and/or shared resources if explored further, could support the Community members to continue. People also need to know the other active players in the town and about those that do have the capacities to facilitate some processes, as already seen in concrete the examples. The important prerequisite is to take the energy accumulated, keep meeting, discussing, reflecting ideas, and supporting one another.

There is no question that the important part of the development of Community in Veliko Tarnovo has been influenced by the events and spirit related to TAM (i.e. the open and connecting focal point), the Facilitator (the persistent and energetic agent), and to some extent the CO/share project. However, there is a lot more to it. The Facilitator and TAM have served as catalyzers and/or amplifiers to the processes that would not have happened there

without other people and their urge to be different than usual, finding their sense of life in doing something for/with other people, having an idea about what community is for them, and more importantly, what community means to them. Such people are referred as other engines. There are many people that are active and attempt to make an impact and they work to bring something back to the others in the community.

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Lenka Dušková

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