

XXth English Speaking Summer University

Religion, Identities and Politics, 1 - 21 July 2002 in Ohrid (Macedonia)

Transeuropéennes - Paris ; Co-organised with Euro-Balkan Institute - Skopje, supported by: The Council of Europe, The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Open Society Institute - Macedonia.

General Assessment

The XXth Summer University took place in Macedonia, a very symbolic country for what concerns the relationships between the Religion and the Politics and their role in the identity building or claiming processes. Co-organised for the second year with the Skopje-based Euro-Balkan Institute, the Summer University has been held in the aftermath of Macedonian events – which prevented the holding in this country of the 2001 Summer University - and in the expectation of the forthcoming general elections of September, crucial moment for the future stability of Macedonia. Thirty students from all the countries of the region and from various disciplines took part in this Summer University. Despite the very pleasant place where the participants spent three weeks, everybody could feel the tension and the worrying of Macedonian people for what was currently at stake. The meetings with Macedonian intellectuals and activists and the presence of Macedonian students, whatever their cultural “backgrounds”, contributed to reinforce among the participants the feeling that there is an urgent need to open a dialogue, and showed as well how relevant the the emergency of some dialogue and the issues tackled by the Summer University were.

Courses and Methodology

The working language was English.

The students followed lectures in the morning (3 hours, of which 1 or 2 hours of lecture and 1 hour of discussion). The afternoons were generally dedicated to workshops, with works in groups, selforganised discussions around film screenings, material brought by the students for discussion, as well as visits and meetings with local media, local NGO's, minority groups, other professional groups, as well as with local authorities and representatives of international organisations, like the Council of Europe. The programme was enriched with cultural visits and excursions.

Student's preparatory works

Before coming to the summer university, students were asked to prepare working material, based upon photos, video tapes, articles, suggesting their personal approach on the question dealt with during the SU. Each of them was to present that material and its personal point of view on the topic, avoiding any "official" statements.

In concrete terms, two preparatory works have been asked from the students for Ohrid. The first one described the relation either their grand-parents, great-uncle/aunt or any relative of this generation around them (for example, an old neighbour) had with the religion. They could describe the cults they were following, the religious manifestations they were attending (related to birth, wedding, prayer), they could describe how important or not were these manifestations as regards the town or village's social life (presence of officials, of the whole population, etc.) This work was intended to re-link the students with the past of their home-country and to inform others students about it so as to initiate a comparative process of discussion. In the second one, they were asked to present briefly but thoroughly what their country's own Constitution or Fundamental Law specifies as regards the place of the religion(s) in the society and the attitude of the State and government towards the rites (quoting the relevant articles, etc.) Taking into consideration these official elements they subsequently gave their opinion on what is the real relation between the religion on the one hand, and the State and society on the other hand.

The students were given the opportunity to present the results of their preparatory works during four sessions either individually for what concerned the claimed identities of their grandparents or in groups for what was related to the constitutions.

The outcome of these preparatory works revealed a good level of awareness about their respective grand-parents' own history and life, despite the recent rupture that occurred in the Balkans with the fall of the communist regimes and the collapse of Yugoslavia, but a lack of knowledge for what regards the others' history. Besides, the study of the constitutions showed how much different were the situations for what concerns the official place given to the religions in the Balkan countries. In that perspective, the students' practice and knowledge of their societies were very helpful in determining whether the constitutional provisions squared with what happened in the reality.

Lectures and workshops

The courses and workshops were held during the three weeks of the Summer University. The first week was dedicated to courses of political science and philosophy setting out to define some key notions and concepts related to "Religion, Identities and Politics". These courses were followed by workshops stressing upon identification by the students of elements of identities according to mainstream ideology in their respective society. It helped in defining eventually what was pertaining to a process of exclusion on the one hand and inclusion on the other.

Therefore, during the courses, they were asked to participate in the discussion with lectures, to organize themselves in order to debate on the current issues proposed in the programme, to present their works, to give account of their visits and meetings with

local realities.

Working groups

They were as a final work asked to produce group works, which consisted in depicting main traits of an imaginary country (heroic history, national pantheon, political system, minority groups, relationships between the religion and the politics, elements of national geography, etc.) that took the form of a tourist guide. The work's intention was to help them taking some critical distances towards their own national elements of identities and to be more tolerant towards other's. Besides, this work brought about a final strengthening of transnational friendship feelings for it has been done in a somewhat very humorous way.

Above and beyond, what emerged from the final evaluations made by the students is that feeling of having met different opinions and representations especially when it comes to deal with touchy subjects like religion, identities and politics. They had to face these differences that they overcame thanks to the scientific approach of the themes, on the one hand, and the fruitful democratic debates that were inevitable on such issues, on the other.

The frame

Democratisation and Knowledge : the issue of Training and Citizenship

Transeuropéennes' and its partner-organisations' goal, through the summer universities programme "Taking Action in South-East Europe : democracy building and the challenge of differences" is to provide an alternative form of training for young students and professionals from the Balkans region, destined to be the opinion-makers of tomorrow. It is based upon linking academic knowledge and a theoretical approach with issues of the city, citizenship, and a tangible understanding of various modes of co-existence.

The idea is to encourage future opinion-makers as well as trainers of trainers to be aware of what is at stake in their societies and in their regions, and to think through their role on the basis of a reflection on citizenship.

Such an undertaking requires that the summer universities set up by Transeuropéennes and its partner organisations continue to deepen their understanding of the society in which they are situated, at the same time allowing the students to distance themselves from more traditional modes of learning, by incorporating into the three-week curriculum sessions for which they alone assume full responsibility (the workshops), as well as meetings with leaders from the cultural, associative, economic and local political communities, etc.

Participants and recruitment

The summer university is dedicated to students in their third, fourth or fifth year of

studies in the humanities (comparative literature, philosophy, history, ethnology, anthropology, cultural sociology, linguistics, etc.) who, through their extra-academic activities, have demonstrated a deep-seated involvement in their society. These are graduate students for whom there exists no alternative training project or possibility for intraregional meeting, and future opinion-makers.

The students enrolling in this summer university program all do so on their own initiative and represent only themselves regardless of the fact that they are originated from all the countries of the Balkan region. They are recruited independently of any institutions, through an informal network of teachers and researchers, media decision-makers and NGO administrators. They are chosen not only on the basis of their intellectual and language skills (or their professional experience, in the case of the journalists), but also in light of their commitment as citizens and their desire to establish lasting ties of co-operation amongst one another.

Pedagogical principles and speakers

An inter-disciplinary approach, bringing together academic research and field work (nongovernmental organisations; European institutions; local cultural and political life; local, regional and cross-border media, depending on the circumstances) through a common foreign language (French in Strasbourg, English in the Balkans): such are the key ingredients of the programme, based upon the intense human and intellectual involvement of the teaching staff at the universities and partner organisations as well as the participants' unflagging motivation.

The Follow-up

Participants to these sessions are connected afterwards to a network of around 600 alumni, who have been taking part since 1994 in Transeuropéennes' summer universities. They keep in touch through forums of discussion and smaller projects, as well as through other networking activities.

Transeuropéennes and The Euro-Balkan Institute : a fruitful cooperation in 2001- 2002

In 2001, the Euro-Balkan Institute and Transeuropéennes organised together the seventeenth Transeuropéennes Summer University. Initially scheduled to take place in July in Ohrid, Macedonia, it was first postponed, then relocated to Montenegro, because of the events that have shaken Macedonia since March 2001. The summer university was ultimately held in Cetinje (Serbia and Montenegro) from 20 August to 7 September 2001. It brought together around thirty Englishspeaking students in the humanities, law and literature, from throughout the region, to work together on a collaborative thought process on the theme of History and Historiography as political questions. The students' multidisciplinary backgrounds, as well as the multidisciplinary course approach,

contributed to deepening exchanges and broadening reflection both on the role of the past and on its use in social and political life, within the region as well as in the European Union.

Students remained in contact and some of them are now taking part in networking projects. Some others, who aim at teaching, will be involved in a new Training of Trainers activities, to be launched in 2002 by Transeuropéennes and its regional partners.

Taking account of their fruitful cooperation in 2001, the Euro-Balkan Institute have decided to go ahead in their cooperation and to organise, this time in Ohrid, Macedonia, the XXth Transeuropéennes' Summer University, on a very touchy and important issue : "Religion, Identities and Politics".

Religion, Identities and Politics

This topic has been developed in Sarajevo, in Nov. 2001, in the frame of a Regional Cooperation Workshop held by Transeuropéennes and the Atelier for Philosophy, Social Sciences and Psychoanalysis, together with The Nansen Dialogue Centre (Sarajevo). The main objectives of the summer university was to describe relationships between religion and politics on the one hand, and, on the other, to reexamine in theoretical terms building elements of identity, religion and the secularity in contemporary societies, as well as their impact on the construction and reconstruction of social ties. These two issues were discussed in the light of the recent events that took place in the Balkans in the aftermath of the Yugoslav federation collapse and which generated (re?)-constitution or (re?)- invention of ethno-national identities along the religious affiliation lines.

The current situation in the region, deeply marked by the tumultuous recent past, and still haunted by its ghosts, seems very ambiguous and unstable. In the heart of the region, struck by tragic war events, the peace is fragile and threatened by still burning ethnic conflicts and weak democratic institutions. Numerous challenges are posed today by the countries created from the disintegration of Yugoslavia in their endeavor of building democratic societies, among them Macedonia is a very crucial subject. They are not much less numerous for the other countries in the region, especially for those that have also recently abolished their communist regimes. When comparing the most vexing dilemma and crucial questions that remain to be resolved, as well as long-term objectives declared by their political leaders and elites, it may be concluded that all these countries share, in the ultimate analysis, a *common political agenda*.

The question of religion, which figures strongly in these current political agendas, might be a clear indication of a regionally shared political reality, discernable in spite of the diversity of political realities particular to each country. This question appears both on the list of major objectives and on the list of major obstacles to the project of democratic and economic development. Today's marked importance of religion might be explained in terms of a burden of the past and of a fruit of liberation. In any event, it is evident that there is something akin to a 'return of religion'. This return is most noticeable in the political field; it is in the first place a return of a 'reference to the absolute' (P. Legendre)

in the public sphere and its dominant discourses. It is this return of religion to politics that needs to be examined.

This tendency towards re-introducing religion into the public sphere and the affinity to religiously inspired politics are particularly pronounced in some ex-communist countries of the region. It casts a shadow over some of the greatest achievements in the recent democratic revival. The will to restate, reaffirm, and re-emphasize fundamental values and norms of traditional religious life, in particular the social forms of religious communities, by modern political means and the within institutional frameworks of the modern nation-state, may be perilous and undermine the very fundamentals of a democratic society.

These phenomena, by which a fusion of politics and religion is noticeable, are usually referred to under the heading of 'Balkan ethno-nationalism'. It is this ethno-nationalism that has emerged in the era of post-totalitarian liberation, and it is also this popular movement that has been blamed for all resistance and slowdowns in the anticipated development of the region. In the Balkans, in the time of modern politics, a predominant influence of religious consciousness and its social forms and patterns on social relations entails the (re)ethnisation of the whole society. Namely, the inherited ethnic identities were most often constituted along borderlines that separated religious communities. The return of religion, therefore, occurs in the form of a return of the ethnic. It is a political return in its most 'substantial' form. This, ethnic, form indicates that a typical modern configuration of the social and political reality is not yet produced, that a pre-modern fusion of the most important instances of the social production and reproduction still resists their modern differentiation. The ethnic, the political and the religious are not easily distinguishable. To explore one of these instances implies the exploration of all three in their mutual relations, or otherwise, in their inextricable confusion. Besides, to make easier this exploration, one has to expose precise definitions of the concepts according to various disciplines.

The summer university intends to undertake such studies. It will refer as well to the historical experience of developed liberal democracies, thereby providing us with the basic standard on which to base our judgments. Nevertheless this will not be considered as an unquestionable model, but as a –so far - operative reference in given contexts. In tackling in an academic way such a theme, the summer university will address some of the most urgent issues that the Balkans has to face nowadays, trying to offer alternative thoughts to young scholars who are future opinion multipliers.

Summary prepared by Christophe Ingels

Speakers

Robert ALAGIOZOVSKI, Skopje, Macedonia, journalist, editor for Culture in "Studentski zbor", Macedonian stringer for Transitions Online (Praha), contributor of essays, political commentaries to various newspapers and magazines. Alumnus of Transeuropéennes' summer university (Plovdiv 97). Besa ARIFI, Tetovo, Macedonia, participant in the Women activists' across the border project, and in the Women's Caravan, Transeuropéennes' alumna (Strasbourg 00). Ana Daniela BUDICA, Bucharest, Romania,

researcher, editor of Editura Domino, working on the nationalist discourse of the Orthodox Church in Romania. Tamara BUSHTRESKA, Skopje, Macedonia, member of OSI – Macedonia, local coordinator for the Women activists' across the border project, participant and in the Women's Caravan. Jovan DONEV, Skopje, Macedonia, historian, director of the Euro-Balkan Institute. Slavica INDZEVSKA, Skopje, Macedonia, Open Society Institute, Deputy Executive Director for Joint Programmes. Christophe INGELS, Paris, France, doctor in political science, Programme manager at Transeuropéennes. Dona KOLAR PANOV, Skopje, Macedonia, researcher at the Euro-Balkan Institute Tchavdar MARINOV, Sofia, Bulgaria, doctoral student, works on national identity building in Macedonia. Slobodanka MARKOVSKA, Skopje, Macedonia, cultural anthropologist, researcher at the Euro-Balkan Institute. Ognyan MINCHEV, Sofia, Bulgaria, Director of the Institute for Regional and International Studies. Nenad MISCEVIC, Rijeka, Croatia, professor of philosophy at the University of Maribor (Slovenia). Teta PAPADOPOULOU, Athens, Greece, Journalist at Eleftherotypia. Antoanela PETKOVSKA, Skopje, Macedonia, researcher at the Euro-Balkan Institute. Vladimir RISTOVSKI, Director of the Council of Europe Information and Documentation Centre Branko SARKANJAC, Skopje, Macedonia, St-Cyrillus and Method University.

Partnership

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Scientific coordination : Christophe INGELS.

Notes
