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European Commemoration: Locating World War I

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III Perspectives and projects

Bogdan Murgescu:
Teaching multiperspectivity in 21st century Europe. Challenges and limits of extra-curricular historical education projects

Extra-curricular historical education activities have flourished throughout Europe during the last two decades. This trend responds to both the crisis of the traditional education system and to the expansion of civil society initiatives regarding the civic component of education (Schäfer et al. 1999). In the following, I will draw on my direct experience in shaping two such initiatives – the EUSTORY network of history research competitions and the production of alternative teaching materials for the Joint History Project of the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE) – and outline also some structural limits of such initiatives.

During the 1990s, the post-communist transition brought to the forefront the importance of history education in shaping identities and democratic values (Roberts 2004). At the same time, the wars which accompanied the demise of Yugoslavia increased the awareness that historical elements can be misused to foster images of hatred and contribute to ignite conflicts (Höpken 1996, UNESCO 1999).

Promoting multiperspectivity through history research competitions – EUSTORY

In this context occurred the expansion of EUSTORY, a network of non-governmental organisations carrying out historical research competitions for youth in various European countries. The origins of EUSTORY are to be found in the joint initiative of the industrialist Kurt A. Körber and of the federal president Gustav Heinemann, who, in order to strengthen the allegiance of young Germans for the democratic traditions, established in 1973-1974 a history research competition for youngsters (Schmid/Wegner 2002: 206-217). According to this model, the organisers (i. e. in Germany the Körber Foundation in cooperation with the Office of the Federal President) establish the general theme of each edition of the research competition, and the pupils (individually or in groups) choose a concrete topic relevant for the general theme and search for historical evidence in their immediate social environment; the entries for the competition are assessed by teachers and academic historians, and the authors of the best entries are awarded significant prizes, which are handed by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany. The topics of the German competition ranged from the liberal tradition of the 1848 revolution to the

everyday life during the Nazi regime, to the image of foreigners, to environmental history and to the history of intergenerational relations.[77]

In the 1990s, under the impulse of Wolf Schmidt, coordinator of the German competition, later manager and member of the board of the Körber Foundation, the model began to be exported to other countries, mainly to post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Up to 2000 there were established similar history research competitions in 14 countries ranging from Wales to Russia; some of these competitions were based on local initiatives and resources, while others relied on the direct help of the Körber Foundation. In 2001 the organisations running history research competitions established the EUSTORY network and adopted the EUSTORY Charter (EUSTORY 2001: 1-3). The Charter started from the sobering acknowledgment that:

> "Historiography, history teaching and the general perception of history […] also played a part in:
> - developing exclusive and assumed superior identities by various groups
> - creating hate between nations, ethnic, social, political and religious groups
> - justifying policies leading to discrimination, persecution, conflicts and wars"

Considering that "we live in a changing world, which requires a new awareness of history", the Charter recommended developing a European perspective on history, having at its core multiperspectivity:

> "The same historical subject has to be systematically checked from different points of view on three levels:
> - sources and material
> - reconstruction and interpretation
> - implications for the present"

Or, as phrased by one of the main authors of the charter, "we have to look at the past through the eyes – or better the sources – of different stakeholders: our own national group and the others, women and men, winners and losers, the rich and the poor, minorities and immigrants and many others" (Schmidt 2010: 213).

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[77] The competition website (Geschichtswettbewerb 2014) provides a searchable archive of the competition entries (http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/bildung/geschichtswettbewerb/datenbank.html) and an annotated bibliography of publications originating from the competition entries (http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/bildung/geschichtswettbewerb/portraet/bibliografie.html [05.04.2015])

The political and educational goal of this approach was outlined as follows in the EUTORY Charter:

> "Developing multiperspectivity and the critical thinking of young people will contribute to the progress of intercultural and mutual understanding and cross-border dialog in Europe, thus helping living together in peace. Dealing with history will also help young people to develop their sense of responsibility and active involvement in the life of their own communities. A new understanding of the past is thus a means for an active integration in the current world. It is a way to prepare young people for the challenges of the 21st century." (EUSTORY 2001: 4)

Since the adoption of the EUSTORY Charter, the network has expanded, encompassing in 2014 competitions organised in 25 countries.[78] Some 170,000 young Europeans have participated in the national EUSTORY competitions with about 85,000 contributions; about 2,500 teachers, experts, scholars and volunteers have supported the participants and/or the organisers of the competitions and of the international activities of the network (EUSTORY 2014). The network organises yearly two to four EUSTORY History Camps (previously called Youth Academies), where prize winners from all national member competitions meet and are exposed to various interpretations of history. These EUSTORY History Camps have a general theme and combine workshops with opportunities to get to know each other and to learn more about the host country. For the history teachers who act as tutors of young participants at the historical research competitions, the network has organised several workshops and has published on the website "Tips for Tutors" as well as a detailed set of work sheets with methodological advice structured under four headings: "Planning a project, Searching for material, Interpretation of sources, and Presentation" (EUSTORY 2014). Alumni activities have also flourished, starting from Internet forums and subsequent meetings on topics like "The Long Shadow of World War II: Young Europeans on "The Future of Remembrance" (2005) and "Remembering Protest, Resistance, Civil Disobedience. An International Research Project on Politics of Memory" (2006-2007) to various seminars and workshops like "The Desire for Freedom – European values in times of crisis" (2013).

[78] The 25 participating countries are Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine and Wales.

In recognition of its role in furthering the European integration, the EUSTORY network was awarded by the German National Foundation the German National Prize for 2007 (Deutsche Nationalstiftung 2008). Yet, the enthusiasm and various projects regarding the contribution of EUSTORY to building up a more integrated Europe were sobered by the economic crisis and by the slowdown of the integration drive in the European Union. EUSTORY succeeded to organise in 2009 a first Europe-wide history research competition with the topic "1989 – Images of change" (see the analysis in Murgescu 2010), but the number of participants was lower than expected, discouraging the resumption of such endeavours in the near future.

These ups and downs should not preclude us from pointing out some structural problems and challenges for the EUSTORY approach. Participation in history research competitions demands a considerable time and energy input from participants and their tutors, and therefore only a tiny minority of the relevant age group do take part to the EUSTORY competitions; besides, from those who participate, only a fraction really succeed to combine several perspectives on historical topics, and stand up thus to the requirements of the EUSTORY Charter. Another significant problem is the discontinuity of the competitions in several countries. Competitions in Turkey (organised only once in 1997-1998) and Scotland (founding member of the network in 2001, but having withdrawn in 2003) have been discontinued since a long time, while other five member countries (Finland, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine) did not succeed to organise competitions in 2014 (EUSTORY 2014).

Changing the teaching of history with additional teaching materials – the workbooks of the CDRSEE

The CDRSEE is an international non-governmental, non-profit organisation founded in 1998 in order to foster democratic, pluralist, and peaceful societies in Southeast Europe by advocating principles of social responsibility, sustainable development, and reconciliation among the peoples in the region (CDRSEE 2014). Located in Thessaloniki, the Centre developed diverse activities, but history and history education were from the beginning one of its main focuses. Therefore, the Centre established in 1999 two committees, an Academic Committee and a History Education Committee. The latter, chaired by Professor Christina Koulouri, became the driving force of the Joint History Project, which is, according to the webpage of the Centre, "the original CDRSEE programme", which "remains at the heart of everything we do" (CDRSEE 2014). Its goal is "to revise ethnocentric school history lessons", to encourage critical thinking and debate, to acknowledge diversity and to promote the idea of multiple interpretations of one event (CDRSEE 2014).

The History Education Committee undertook first an analysis of the existing history textbooks, focusing on major controversial issues, like the Hungarian legacy in Southeast Europe, Macedonian identity, teaching Cyprus, the relations of the Albanians with their neighbours, Greek-Turkish relations, the heritage of Byzantium and of the Ottoman Empire, the history of Yugoslavia, and the relation between religious education and the view of the other. Seven workshops organised in different cities in 1999-2001 allowed the accumulation of a wealth of insights regarding various aspects of history education in the region. This phase allowed publishing first a short book with first insights (Koulouri 2001), and then a major academic contribution to the assessment of textbooks and political implications of history education in Southeast Europe: "Clio in the Balkans" (Koulouri 2002). Based on the experience of this round of seminars, which had united academic historians and history teachers, the History Education Committee started in 2002 the production of four workbooks designed to serve as additional teaching materials for history teachers in all eleven countries of Southeast Europe. In the attempt to focus on themes which are relevant to people from all these countries and which are crucial for defining identities and the relations with others, the History Education Committee chose following subject areas for these workbooks: the Ottoman Empire, Nations and States, Balkan Wars and World War II. According to Christina Koulouri, the general philosophy of the project is to provide "a lesson of method rather than content" (Koulouri 2005: 10). Therefore, the workbooks do not provide an authoritative and cohesive narrative of these historical topics in Southeast Europe, but supply a rich textual and visual documentation drawn from historical sources, illuminating various aspects of these historical topics from different perspectives. The choice of topics and the approach were based on recent scholarships in the field of history and on the experience of similar projects for reforming history education in other parts of Europe. The scholars who coordinated the four workbooks were helped by twelve national contributors in the various Southeast European countries, who identified historical sources, translated them into English and supplied background information related to them. The drafts of the workbooks were assessed in cooperation with history teachers from all Southeast European countries in four workshops organised throughout 2003. Finally, the workbooks were reviewed by five independent readers with different national, professional and intellectual backgrounds – CDRSEE board member Costa Carras, historians Robert Stradling, Maria Todorova, and Peter Vodopivec, and political activist Ivan Vejvoda – who provided valuable comments and useful suggestions for improvement. At the end of this laborious process, the English version of the four workbooks was published in early 2005 (Berktay/Murgescu 2005; Murgescu 2005; Kolev/Koulouri 2005; Erdelja 2005), and subsequently has been translated into Serbian, Greek, Croat, Bosnian, Albanian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Bulgarian and Japanese; together

with a second (slightly revised) English version published in 2009 as well as a user's guide (Sutton/Sutton 2009). All these workbooks are available not only in hardcopy, but can be downloaded without any charge from the website of the Center (CDRSEE 2014).

At the same time, the History Education Committee engaged in a lasting endeavour of organising teacher training activities. At various workshops, teachers from different Southeast European countries shared the ways they taught various historical issues, exchanged ideas, became aware of the harming role of various prejudices and stereotypes, and engaged in finding mutually acceptable approaches, which at the same time were close to the historical truth. Besides their role in early identifying critical issues in history teaching and in assessing the quality of the workbooks when these were in the making, these workshops allowed the participating teachers to acquire the capability to use the workbooks effectively in their concrete teaching. By 2014, 1,950 teachers participated in 65 teacher training seminars, while 3,850 more received materials through their peers. It is estimated that these 5,800 teachers are teaching about 900,000 pupils/students (CDRSEE 2014). Besides, all interested persons, including teachers and pupils, can use the material online and download all the workbooks.

Based on this experience, in 2011, the Center has started planning the production of a second group of history workbooks for the region. Currently, the History Education Committee is steering the preparation of two new workbooks focusing on Southeast Europe in the post-1945 era, including the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia. In spite of its value and partial success, the approach of CDRSEE History Education Committee to use the workbooks to promote multiperspectivity and a more balanced and open way to teach history in the region is not without challenges. Various partisans of nationalist versions of history capitalized on the widespread ethnocentric sentiments of parts of the public and attacked specific attempts to provide a more balanced vision of the historical past – e. g. a moderate 6th grade textbook in Greece or the deconstruction of the misuse of the Batak massacre of 1876 - generating public controversies, for which professional historians as well as history teachers were often unprepared (Kechriotis 2013: 304-305). Besides, the use of the workbooks and the discussion of sources attesting multiple perspectives in history classes ask for more time, being thus in contradiction with the current situation, when "the curricula are generally overloaded and do not allow sufficient time to use interactive methods of instruction that foster critical thinking skills" (Fajfer 2013: 144). Besides, the situation in the classrooms varies a lot, both with respect to the ethnical composition of the classes and to the different levels and sources of pupils' interest in history (Koulouri 2010: 141-142).

Limits of the extra-curricular projects fostering multiperspectivity in history teaching

If we are to conclude, it is obvious that, in spite of their differences, extra-curricular projects like the EUSTORY focusing on history research competitions and the Joint History Project of the CDRSEE providing workbooks of additional teaching materials for teachers to use in class, share some common difficulties and face similar challenges:

One of the difficulties resides in the resilience of ethnocentric visions of history, and in the fact that the use of multiple perspectives inexorably conflicts with the prevailing national narratives. Generally, the proponents of multiperspectivity try to avoid direct confrontations.

> "Ignoring national identities, national myths, national views and experiences would result in failure. Nevertheless, a European perspective has to be introduced into national histories in order to overcome divisions. This means telling our stories not only for their own sakes but also for others, so that we all may gain access to history from a range of different perspectives. […] Last but not least, we need a quality which is always useful when people of different backgrounds come together: sensitivity in giving our own interpretation without offending others." (Schmidt 2010: 213)

A similar argument has been made by Christina Koulouri. Starting from the prudent assessment that "we were aware that national history would continue to be taught in all Southeast European countries and that it would be utopian to try to abolish its teaching", she argues that the innovative attempt of bringing into the classroom perspectives from the other Southeast European countries and elements originating from a common Balkan cultural and institutional heritage "should integrate national history or at least be compatible with it" (Koulouri 2010: 140). This cautious and sensitive approach is obvious in the treatment of very sensitive issues, like war, trauma and human suffering. According to Koulouri, "the method chosen in the Workbook was neither to keep silent about violence and conflict nor to overemphasise suffering and victimization", and the unveiled display of crimes and suffering throughout the whole region was supplemented by the documentation of examples of human solidarity in times of war despite religious, political and national differences (Koulouri 2011: 63-64). Bringing into the forefront the suffering of other ethnic groups and celebrating the courage of the individuals or communities who, often at the risk of their own physical survival, decided to help fellow humans in dire circumstances.

Prudence and the indirect approach supposed by the use of multiple perspectives generally helped to avoid massive backlashes. It is true, there were some nationalist reactions (Kechriotis 2013), but overall their impact was limited and both projects discussed above can document significant progress in the ability of involved teachers and pupils to use multiperspectivity.

Yet, more problematic is the cost-effectiveness of such extra-curricular history education projects. Organising history research competitions, producing additional teaching materials and running teacher training workshops and history camps cost money, academic expertise and various other resources. Inputs of time and energy are significant also for participants, be they teachers or pupils. The magnitude of the investment required by such projects limits their reach and puts at risk their sustainability. From a purely pragmatic perspective, the best solution would be to integrate the teaching of using multiple perspectives in understanding the past into the formal history education, and to make it thus available without additional costs for all young people enrolled in school. Yet, such a solution is not realistic in the current context. Even if governments and teachers would be willing to embark on a more open identity building process which would suppose teaching the pupils to consider various perspectives, sources and interpretations in their approach towards past and current social issues – a prerequisite which is by no means universally secured – this would demand allocating a larger slot of the curricula for history education, either at the expense of other disciplines, or at the expense of pupil's free time.

In fact, the current trend seems to lead in a different direction. The world has entered an age of "communicative abundance", dominated by "images of abundance, talk of information overload, and cornucopias of communication" (Keane 1997). Although this development is considered to favour the development of a more democratic society (monitory democracy), it entails also significant risks:

> "Monitory democracy certainly feeds upon communicative abundance, but one of its more perverse effects is to encourage individuals to escape the great complexity of the world by sticking their heads, like ostriches, into the sands of wilful ignorance, or to float cynically upon the swirling tides and waves and eddies of fashion – to change their minds, to speak and act flippantly, to embrace or even celebrate opposites, to bid farewell to veracity, to slip into the arms of what some carefully call 'bullshit'."
> (Keane 2009: 747)

The use of multiple perspectives in understanding the past, or the present, is closely connected to a certain sense of complexity. The danger that people living in the context of communicative abundance will prefer the simplest explanations or interpretations of the world is not to be discarded easily. Equally threatening is the perspective that adults who have not been trained during their formative years to use multiple perspectives will no longer be able to perceive complexity, even if they will try to better understand what is going on with them and with the world they live in. Yet, as shown by the way young people use the plurality of information sources in their everyday life, we are not doomed to "the spread of a culture of unthinking indifference" (Keane 2009: 747). And the enthusiasm experienced by the participants to the history research competitions, as well as by pupils discovering new insights into the past by adequate additional teaching materials clearly points to the fact that the study of history can be both fun and intellectually stimulating.

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