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March 3, 2015

Thinking about the future

Questions arise as to how to transmit history to the new generations, how to learn history, and why it is important to learn it? Knowing history is important because of the interrelation between the past and the future, and the need to overcome problems that existed in the past. In order to broaden perspectives on history, we visited several countries to learn about different approaches to teaching history.

Kosovo – different from what is written in the history textbooks

In one country a person is hailed as a hero, while in a neighboring country he is considered a terrorist. In the territory equal to the size of France, the Balkans is a place where 13 countries coexist next to each other. The people living here often have very different views about the history of the region, each of them looking at history from his or her own perspective; this might have been one of the causes for the many bloody wars among different ethnic groups living here.

After the end of the most recent of these wars, Kosovo became independent, and this February celebrates the 7th anniversary of its independence. We are in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. We visit a modern, newly built high school to attend the history class of Professor Enver Sadiku (50). The topic of this class is related to the Second World War. Professor Sadiku displays on a computer photos of several leaders from the Second World War. Asking his students: “In which photo is Tito?” None of the students was able to recognize Tito, the political leader who united various ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia in the fight against the fascism and created modern Yugoslavia. He was one of the symbols of the Balkans in the 20th century, but none of these high schools students was able to identify him on displayed photos. Students in this school, where Albanians make up the large majority, were able to identify only the Albanian leaders. One of the students, who was asked by professor Sadiku to express his opinion, said that after hearing the story about Tito and his fighters (partisans), he felt sympathy for them.

How to approach history at the level of an individual in order to re-establish links among the ethnic groups that were in conflict? The same historic facts/events are given different interpretations. Wars in the past had as a consequence that people look at history with “different eyes” (different perspectives). Under such circumstances, professor Sadiku is trying to offer to his students different perspectives and approaches to the history. He uses

for his classes literature from the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, based in Greece, which gathers 13 countries from the region. This organization has prepared a joint collection of history texts based on sources from different countries, which often interpret history in very different ways. Professor Sadiku took part in a seminar organized by this organization eight years ago, which gave him opportunity to hear presentations on various approaches to history. He would like to share this experience with his students by opening for them perspectives on history that are different from those found in the official history textbooks. For example, after being occupied by Ottoman Turkey, Kosovo came under Serbian rule after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. For Serbia, Kosovo represents “sacred land”, because the State of Serbia was created here in the Middle Ages, so from Serbia’s perspective, Kosovo was liberated. On the other hand, for many Albanians this event is understood as breaking apart of Albania, as Kosovo was taken away from independent Albania, which was created. Professor Sadiku thinks that it is important to hear the students' opinion on this by offering them two different views on this same historic event. Out of 1100 schools in Kosovo, 32 schools and 132 professors have attended seminars organized by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe.

Besim Haliti (38) is professor of a high school and ex-fighter of the Liberation Army of Kosovo, which was declared to be a terrorist organization by Serbia. Professor Haliti now explains to his students that some opposition leaders in Serbia at the time of Balkan wars opposed those wars and condemned atrocities committed against other ethnic groups. His point is to show that in Serbia there were different opinions. In the south of Serbia, in Bujanovac, professor Jovica Velickovic (55) uses the “Joint History Project” of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, with the goal to prevent the wounds from the past from becoming deeper and to work on common understanding.

In countries that were created in civil wars, the history represents an important part of national identity. In Kosovo, history texts that challenge its independence are not acceptable and history is under political influence. Ms. Zvezdana Kovac, the executive director of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe says that it is important not to hurry reconciliation, and that goals should be achieved through a gradual process, step-by-step.