

Slobodan Milosevic and the heroic quest for the 'truth'

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By Nenad Sebek

The death last week of former Serbian and Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic before the end of his trial at the Hague War Crimes Tribunal is bound to add yet another controversy to the plethora of historical perspectives in the Balkans.

Without a definite verdict by a court of law, Milosevic and his legacy will remain an issue of dispute. But while the verdict in Croatia or among Kosovar Albanians is bound to be clear - devil incarnate - among Bosnian Serbs and in Serbia proper, the jury will be out for decades to come: saint or sinner? Defender of Serbs or their own worst enemy? Nationalist hero or a communist opportunist? Martyr or butcher?

The controversy of a past which is too close for comfort to be history is not surprising. More surprising is that people, events and processes which have been dead for more than a hundred years can still be controversial and viewed from completely opposite sides. For example, was the Ottoman Empire really the greatest evil that befell the Balkans, as it is perceived in the history books of Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria? Or was it an enlightened era during which the Ottoman Turks showed generosity and tolerance for their Christian subjects - as is being taught in Turkey or among the Muslims of Bosnia?

It was with a firm belief that a one-sided view of the past can seriously harm the future that the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), a Thessaloniki-based Dutch non-governmental organisation, embarked on an ambitious endeavour - the Joint History Project. Eight years of research, study and writing went into a series of four history textbooks covering the Ottoman empire, the Balkan wars, nations and states, as well as the Second World War. Rather than one "acknowledged truth" the textbooks present points of view that exist in different countries, respecting the facts that can be securely established but also exposing the relativism of what is often thought of as historical "truth" and establishing multi-perspectivity in history teaching. Instead of presenting one consensual view, the workbooks show the perspective of the 'other' by comparing different versions of the same event. It is no small feat considering that they have been compiled by a team of more than 60 historians from 11 countries.

So far, the books have been translated from English into Greek and Serbian and with the support of the Serbian Ministry of Education they will enter schools this year. Beyond the wildest dreams of the authors, a Japanese version will be launched as a commercial venture later this year as an official history of Southeast Europe. While delighted and encouraged by this development, the CDRSEE is pushing for translations into other regional languages: Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian. Initial responses from the education authorities in these countries have been encouraging, but funding this endeavour is a major problem.

So far, the project has benefited from funding from the US, UK, Germany, Norway, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the Open Society Institute and a number of private foundations and companies including the Leventis Foundation, the Hellenic Bottling Company, the National Bank of Greece, Titan.

Disappointingly, not a single cent has been received from the European Union even though the project embodies all the values and goals of the EU. It costs about €130,000 to translate, print, distribute and train a group of teachers for every language. That is roughly one thousand times less than the cost of a single Eurofighter airplane. Or 13% of a second-hand German-made Leopard II battle tank. Billions of euros have gone into post-war reconstruction in the Balkans. Hundreds of millions go into peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Kosovo today. Surely, investing in reconciliation is a part of post-conflict efforts and, surely, prevention is cheaper than peacekeeping.

• *Nenad Sebek is executive director of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE)*