Workshops for the Future

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When I read papers presented at the workshops organised by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, I see them as a good experience for the future. It is very inspiring that at the workshops participants are historians, curriculum experts, teachers trainers, textbooks authors and teachers (at universities, secondary and primary schools). It is very important to say that at the workshops there is a great tolerance between participants even if they have different opinions about textbooks and historiography issues. Every time the working group proved a great company where I worked, learned and exchanged my own opinion without barriers.

We can thank the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe for the great interest in history, history teaching and history textbooks in Southeast Europe. It is really a great job for the future. It is a beginning for a new conception of this research field in Southeast Europe. It reminds us of the basis for the current attitude towards history textbooks in West European countries - not only their long time experiences, but also a more than a century long analytical interest in this field. I think that the workshops of the ODRSEE are based on the same conceptual attitude and that they will contribute into getting rid of faults, political and religious prejudices and negative stereotypes in history textbooks, namely of all that causes or influences people to show no tolerance to the “other” or
to the "different one". Therefore, the measures should be provided and carried out assuming that the distortion of the facts should not be possible for the objectives of political or religious manipulation. At the same time schoolchildren should develop their critical views, respecting their own history and that of the other nations, as well.

From the papers I can see that all national textbooks and historiographies in Southeast Europe contain controversial and sensitive issues. When listening to these detailed presentations, I can better understand problems and questions in history textbooks of Bosnia and Herzegovina. But, I also think that in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are more problems because we are a multiethnic society having experienced a terrible ethnic war at the end of the 20th century. We are geographically in Europe but in reality very far from Europe with respect to political, democratic and economic conditions of living. During the Bosnian-Herzegovinian postwar period we have to make a new democratic society and it is very important, I think, to overcome the most complex problems of textbooks in different school subjects (history, geography, music, art, domestic language) for all ethnic groups in our educational system, but it is sure that history comes at the first place. If we want to find the right way of teaching history, we have to learn from other European nations and their own experience in this field.

To begin with, I do not think that it is important to make "only one historiography for all the nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina"; it is better to find out what is common for all of us in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and other neighbours. Also, we have to learn why we explain the same events in different ways. If we get that knowledge we can understand better one another and without prejudices. If necessary, we can put in the textbooks different explanations for the same historical event as an activity for the development and consolidation of a democratic view in teaching history. I am convinced that the CDRSEE's workshops could teach us how to fight against violence and to build up an open-minded educational system which will cultivate peace, human rights, democracy, tolerance, international understanding and respect for other different cultures. Aiming at this kind of history, teaching may be an excellent means for international understanding particularly with the neighbouring countries and peoples; first of all by learning that history should not be limited only to glorifying national identity. At the workshops of the CDRSEE, neighbours have the opportunity to talk and learn about each other.

The conferences in Budapest, Pyla, Skopje, Athens, Istanbul and Ljubljana aimed at fighting stereotypes and prejudices in history textbooks in Southeast Europe, I think that workshops were in the spirit of the postulates for democracy, human rights and peace. Also, a network should be established among countries for a wide mutual exchange among pedagogical institutes (sections of history) in order to establish common projects which will aim at abolishing the outlived nationalistic prejudices and negative stereotypes of presenting the neighbours in the textbooks. I think that projects on textbook research already exist but the results of the projects have scarcely been used. It will be useful to circulate summaries from workshops to some important addresses in different countries or different parts of the same country (as ministries of education, pedagogical institutes, universities...). If they are interested they could translate summaries in domestic languages and distribute them to their teachers. Particularly, it is necessary to do the best to contribute to a better mutual understanding and accepting "these" and "those" without a
denial or neglect of the long history of wars, discrimination and persecution in the Balkans. If we explain with honesty what happened, at the same time it is a contribution to the strengthening of a culture of peace in the region which transmits to the young generation the message of nonviolence and tolerance based on democratic principles and values.

At the workshops, many reports were presented instructing how to overcome the history textbooks concepts and introducing proposals how to realise the above mentioned principles. The first step towards understanding is the acceptance of differences in order to revise the self-definition of "we" and the picture of the others - "them". In Southeast Europe it is a long and difficult process because we have to learn that the neighbours should be observed as they are, to study them, not to observe them according to a picture before hand assigned. We have to learn not to think always what they did, most frequently to us, in the course of frequent conflicts, and history should not be a barrier between "us" and "them". In such a point of view, the relation between history and future is established in the most direct way. Therefore, the workshops of the CDRSEE suggest changes which should take place at the present time and they offer analyses of our present situation. The workshops analysed Balkan textbooks and showed that they underline the consequences of certain historical events, particularly the conflicts which occurred in the national past, and they consequently leave space for manipulations in the future.

Thus, the concept of the future appears as influencing the presentation of the past. In many textbooks, the past is equalised with the present, what means, the future is determined by the past, what in any case a misuse of history.

According to these thoughts, we may ask ourselves what kind of future awaits the children. Have they got a choice to develop their own interest in and interpretation of history? So many people say that human rights begin with children’s rights. What do we offer to our children? Have they rights at school, at home, at play etc.? Unfortunately, we infuse into them our perception of history. The message for the third millennium is "Keep Children Smiling in the New Millennium". I think that we have to do something in our schools in such a perspective. Our textbooks for young people should be followed by: the right to life, freedom and safety; the right to freedom of thought and conscience; the right to freedom of opinion and to express it; the right to education; the right to participate in cultural life freely etc.

When we are talking about teaching history in schools, we can teach about the rise and fall of different civilisations; we can teach about the meeting of civilisations in the Balkans. And what do we have then? We have so many nations, religions, cultures, artistic creations etc. It is a wealth. We can put a focus on social history and the history of everyday life in different periods, rather than on the much more contentious political history. We can use oral sources: the history of workers, children, childhood, peasants, women, art, architecture, music, cloth, fashion etc. It will be more interesting to use pictures, historical documents, films etc. It is very important that children can see by themselves the different versions of events from a variety of points of view. It is much better than to use just one textbook.

If history textbooks are looked upon as the official social record’s memory, then, they present, what the old generation wanted to happen. They present the direction of thinking of a certain society or the dominant tensions of this society, expressed in the ruling politics, namely the one fighting to be dominant. In most of Southeast European countries there is no quick solution. The future is still questionable, and as for now, there is no feeling of confi-
dence to know the direction of development of these countries, each of them being in a specific position, conditions of development, historical background and contemporary problems. Except for Greece and Turkey, the rest of Balkan countries are in transition and besides, a part of them has been involved in war conflicts. The Balkans are considered to be a region of a long history of conflicts. The recent war showed in the strongest possible way the damage and tragedy, and at the same time how urgent is the need to fight against prejudice and stereotypes in school textbooks as a prerequisite for the development of tolerance. Although we talk a lot about history textbooks, we are also faced with the problem of the relation of the mass media to education. The mass media are, for sure, much more attractive than textbooks, almost beyond the state control. Many people doubt, that the textbooks along with the mass media, have good influence upon young people. The recent events of the nineties have shown the mass media influence on the development of conscience, a very strong influence regarding all generations, but especially the young generation. We have no lessons about European integration in our textbooks, but our students know about it as they know that ex-Yugoslavia has disintegrated and that the awakening of national sovereignty has a superior place. We have to state that this ex country desperately needs developed school programmes and plans, teacher training and new modern textbooks to teach tolerance and democracy. The way to success has no quick and immediate solution.

The workshops of the CDRSEE could help by bringing a view from outside that may loosen the tensions in respect of the general problems in the region which specify themselves in issues concerning a certain partner. In the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, for the time being at least, the problem seems to be beyond a solution. First at all, it is difficult to develop the understanding of differences, because these countries have a strong conflictual view of their neighbours. The common history of the region does not mean that peoples, confessions, social categories, other groups and individuals lived in the same way or that they have a similar collective and individual memory. History separates peoples in the region but unites them as well. It should not be erased from school curricula and textbooks - schoolchildren know it - but we should teach them, at the same time, to understand, to be tolerant and to accept the differences of the same history, to be able to understand better and know what are their links today and in the future.

Generally speaking, workshops of the CDRSEE helped us to think that we can find support if we, our teachers and our students are going to try to learn about controversial and sensitive topics in our history. Also, workshops helped us to know what is common for all of us and how we can begin to present our neighbours without nationalistic prejudice and negative stereotypes.