

An Intercultural Program from a Balkan Perspective

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The Balkans as a “Burdened” Notion

Balkans and “Balkan” are terms that can best be described as “burdened.” Different interpretations and deliberate misuse during the last ten years have blurred the initial meaning, and nowadays, definitions of the Balkans are almost as many as there are scholars trying to define it. At the same time, sadly, it is often used as a synonym for “backward,” “uncivilized,” and “problematic,” thus, making necessary the gradual replacement of the Balkan term with South-East European.

Therefore, whenever the term Balkan appears in any written form, a special effort is needed to reach a common understanding. And the best way to do so is to go back to the initial meaning.

The origins of the term can be found in the name of a wide mountain range, currently situated in Bulgaria (*Stara planina*, mean-

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ing Old Mountain) that through the centuries was named “The Balkan.” Later, the term “balkanization” appeared in the early years of 20th century with the gradual disruption of the Ottoman Empire and the appearance of small independent states on the Balkan Peninsula.

The Balkans were given special attention after the collapse of the authoritarian regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s in most of the Balkan countries and was marked by turbulent historic events and unfortunate conflicts. It gave to the region both a false image and a distorted interpretation of the notion of Balkan itself.

An interesting interpretation of the word Balkan itself can be reached by literal translation of the two words “Bal” and “Kan”. In Turkish “bal” means honey and “kan” means blood. In other words, the “sweetness” and “bitterness” of the Balkans.

Nevertheless, in the present paper, I will use the “Balkan” perspective instead of “South East European,” trusting in the wisdom of the reader in differentiating the true meaning from prejudice.

In this paper, I shall use “Balkans” to include the countries of Greece, Albania, Macedonia/FYROM, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), and this understanding is based on the geography of the still uncontested Balkan peninsula. I will focus on the particular case of the Bosphorus International Network as an intercultural program.

General Overview of the Balkans

The Balkan countries ventured into democracy and entered the market economy in late 1980s and early 1990s with the collapse of different communist regimes, thus forming the crest of the process that Samuel Huntington referred to as “the third wave of democratization.” The required radical shift from a centrally planned economy and authoritarian state to a democratic political system and competitive market was a step upward and forward, involving an unprecedented break with the past in all spheres of political, social and economic life. The hesitance of most Balkan states and the very chal-

lenging internal and external circumstances doomed the Balkans to an uneasy transition. Shortly summarized, the Balkan countries (except Greece) are still attempting to rise out of the transitional quagmire.

An Intercultural Program

Bosporus International Network is a network of five independent and registered NGOs in Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Turkey and four local groups in Albania, Macedonia/FYROM, Slovenia and Hungary that share the same name, goals and aims. The name of the network comes from the Bosporus channel that links Europe and Asia, and serves as a link between two seas, and as a “bridge” over two continents and two religions. Thus, the goal of the network can best be described as “building bridges” between cultures. As the policy paper says: “the network is committed to promote mutual understanding, to break down stereotypes and develop the common European idea...”

Some historical background

In the early 1990s, a group of young students of political science from Bonn University, Germany, met with some students from Istanbul University, Turkey, and out of mutual curiosity about their cultures decided to try to organize various bilateral seminars between German and Turkish students. The enthusiasm of this group of people gave birth to the establishment of two NGOs—one in Germany and one in Turkey, which organized several bilateral projects each year over a period of seven years. In their willingness to share this activity with a broader target group and following the logical process of organizational development, in 1998, the Bosporus Gesselshaft e.v. organized the first multilateral project involving seven countries. The success of that project committed three more countries—Bulgaria, Romania and Greece—to undertake the same effort of intercultural learning as a way of overcoming

existing stereotypes and prejudices. The present network has been established in the last four years and is committed to promoting cross-cultural exchange programs for young people (18-30 years old). For detailed information on the activities, as well as past and ongoing projects, there is a regularly updated Web page that can serve as the best information source (www.bosporus.org).

The format of the intercultural programs

The process has been tested in various projects and has proven to be successful. It has two main goals: 1) intellectual exchange of information and ideas, and 2) cultural experience.

The programs usually start with an internal seminar (2-3 days) where the participants present papers on the main topic of the program. The topics themselves are based on suggestions of participants in previous projects, thus ensuring decisively needs-oriented programs. The presentation panels are divided into discussion fora where in an open setting, everyone is free to express ideas and/or feelings, trusting that “truth is born out of heated debates.” Afterwards, the program is complemented by visits to different institutions and meetings with experts, professionals and/or active politicians, familiar with the theme of the seminar. The participants have the time to mutually enrich their knowledge during the internal seminar and to broaden their information by listening to professional interpretations.

The cultural part of the program is achieved by visiting at least two different cities in the “host” country and is complemented by some cultural activities during the free time of the participants such as visits to museums and historical places.

Moreover, in one of the cities, the participants have private accommodations hosted by students, so they may gain first-hand experience of the daily life in the “host” country.

Perspectives for the future

With the establishment of local groups of young people in different countries, the hope is that it will open the way for a broader

network of youth organizations. While the format of the programs has proved to be efficient during the past ten years, the leaders of Bosporus International are trying to organize the first training courses on youth awareness. At the same time, the growing number of Bosporus alumni are urging the organizers to think in the direction of organizing expert's study visits on the Balkans and developing some kind of activity that will have as a target group people over 30. In fact, Bosporus International is growing together with its founders.

Conclusion

The case presented above has its roots in the Balkan reality. As we have seen, the attention of the intercultural programs is on promoting tolerance and reducing prejudice, involving crosscultural programs and inter-ethnic seminars. The real importance of this example lies in the fact that it represents the so-called "bottom-up" approach and has a real impact on the citizens, which after all, is the most valuable for any transition to democracy.