

A preparatory workshop for
the NECE Conference in Vienna 2014

1914 – 2014
**Conflicts and the role of citizenship education in
conflict management and reconciliation**

30 March - 1 April 2014
Belgrade, Serbia

**“Nationalism vs. Europeanization? Which memories and narratives
form the basis of a European consciousness in the Balkans?”**

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Nationalism vs. Europeanization – a rather difficult dichotomy that – looking at it from the perspective of the Balkans – entails at least four different questions. The first one is related to memories and narratives, particularly the question of conflicting, exclusive and aggressive memories and respective narratives on the one hand, ~~side~~ and a quest for memories and narratives able to transcend the conflict and deep divisions of the past on the other. The second question puts the character of nationalism under scrutiny, while the third one looks closely at the process of Europeanization of the Balkans. And finally, the fourth question stands for a rather critical examination of the notion of a European consciousness, asking the fundamental question whether there is something that could be described as European consciousness. Here we can, paradoxically enough, argue that the Balkans with its history – last but not least in the year 2014, which reminds us of conflicts of the past and bloody wars like ~~the~~ World War I and II – has always formed at least a part of the European consciousness, be it a bad or good consciousness like in the wars of the 1990s.

Clashing memories and narratives in the Balkans – Prolonging the conflicts

Coming back to the first question related to memories and narratives existing in the Balkans we are still witnessing an array of fragmented narratives and memories, clashing against each other, producing conflicts and creating obstacles for peace and prosperity in the present. Here, a self-victimization is for sure one part of the story (internal strategy for producing a particular picture – and thus a consciousness – about a certain group/nation), while demonizing the other as an aggressive strategy directed towards the other group is the other. In both cases these groups engaged in producing conflicting memories and narratives can be understood as imagined communities (in the sense of Benedict Anderson), a theory only partly applicable to the Balkans however because they are not really homogenous. Even the grand national narratives of Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Albanians or Macedonians are contested within the group and a closer look at the dynamics of the narratives reveals several layers of dissent and difference in the midst of seemingly homogenous groups.

Transformative character of nationalism – From poisoned ideology of the past to pragmatic power tool today

The second question related to the character of nationalism offers a picture of a Janus-headed phenomenon, flexibly adjustable to new societal circumstances, common to the modern history of Europe in general and certainly not only to the Balkans. Nationalism understood as an aggressive ideology of the 19th century is one side of the story, obviously still important but not a decisive aspect of nationalisms in the Balkans and Europe nowadays. The modern face of nationalism in the Balkans is first and foremost the face of a powerful and quite pragmatically (mis)used tool to rule and to protect selfish interests of political elites. Such a nationalism has become banal (Michael Billig) and an all-encompassing force with multiple faces, ranging from Dodik's nationalistic rhetoric in Bosnia to debates about the usage of Cyrillic in Vukovar in Croatia, or the rather ridiculous invention of "our" history embedded in the project of Skopje 2014. The latest transformative layer of nationalism in the Balkans is a new pragmatism in some parts of the region that seems to replace the old-fashioned nationalism of the past. The transformation of new leaders of Serbia today is the best example of a rapid transformation from radical nationalist to pragmatic political leaders accepted in Europe.

European project in jeopardy

When it comes to the process of Europeanization of the Balkans, we have seen that the merely formal aspect of Europeanization understood as an institutional rapprochement to the EU can be undertaken even in rather questionable democratic environments (like in Djukanovic's Montenegro or Vucic's Serbia). Even this aspect of Europeanization has undergone a deep change from huge promises in Thessaloniki 2003 to disillusionment in the midst of the European crisis leading to a very deep enlargement fatigue within the EU. The general crisis of the EU has played a role in damaging the EU as a democratic role model for its Eastern and Southeastern neighbors. As a matter of fact, the EU's attractiveness has suffered a lot, putting the enlargement project – or to put it differently, the completion of the European peace project – into jeopardy.

Back to the value roots – A plea for a value-oriented European consciousness

Having the ongoing crisis of the technocratic and formal aspects of the European integration in mind, I would argue for a notion of Europeanization bringing the question of values, of civic-ness, and finally of the quest for open societies to the fore. A return of values of open societies is what we need, both in the Balkans and in the EU. Such a deeper and fundamental notion of Europeanization also concerns the European consciousness. Here we close the circle and conclude with a plea for a European consciousness as a consciousness of a democratic, free and equal society, more precisely an open society in the sense of Karl Popper.

Such a plea for a value-oriented European consciousness is at the same time a plea for the same kind of consciousness in the Balkans. As the Balkan consciousness has always been a European consciousness and vice versa there is a need to move beyond the Balkanism and all the mutual prejudices between the two parts of the same – Europe and the Balkans. The two nominally separated imagined entities are actually two parts of the same: everything that has happened in the Balkan part of Europe (wars of the past, crises, etc.) has been immediately reflected in the rest of Europe (refugees, interventions, migrants). This obviously works vice versa: everything happening in Europe (financial crisis, Euro-crisis, crisis of democracy) is immediately reflected in the Balkans.

More generally speaking we can argue that the Balkans have already become a part of the globalized world and of a globalized Europe. Thus, its fate is and will be determined by global and wider European developments. The economic crisis and its impact on the Balkans is the best proof for it. What are the crucial global/European developments shaping our common future?

Firstly, as Habermas argues, the global and European relationship between democracy and the social state is being renegotiated. Social or welfare states of today are either disappearing or do not exist anymore. As the foundation of democracy is a social equality, and the world and Europe are suffering from ever-deeper inequalities, we can assume that this issue will shape the future of the Balkans, too.

Secondly, we live in times of social and protest movements. Citizens are seemingly not satisfied with democracies – they have been disappointed, they have lost trust, they have started losing interest in formal institutions and politicians, they simply want something else. Social protests from Spain to Greece, the Ukraine to Bulgaria, Slovenia to Bosnia, are shaping the future of the global world.

Finally, we are facing a general crisis of democracy and an emergence of authoritarian competitors to democracy. With the general crisis of democracy in the West we are facing an emergence of grey-zones between democracy and authoritarianism and even new forms of authoritarianism in some parts of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Classical authoritarianism seeks for an absolute obedience, is directed against individual freedoms and liberties and is always ready to use repression against opponents. New authoritarian regimes are chameleon-like – they are able to adjust to new circumstances, they have institutionalized the representation of a variety of actors and they even incorporate some democratic procedures like elections and thus create a structure resistant to change. Even in the Eastern and Southeastern part of Europe, in a region that went through two decades of democratization, we are witnessing new semi-democratic or new authoritarian regimes (or grey zone regimes), which – under the guise of democracy – limit individual freedom and reduce liberties. The question here is what does it mean for the notion of democracy and for the future of democracy.

Instead of conclusion: The way from *vita passiva* to *vita activa*

“What is going on?”, asked radical French philosopher Alan Badiou two years ago. “Of what are we the half-fascinated, half-devastated witnesses? The continuation, at all costs, of a weary world? A salutary crisis of that world, racked by its victorious expansion? The end of that world? The advent of a different world?”

The question here is precisely, for both sides of the same, Europe and the Balkans: Do we want to sit and watch the end of the free world as we knew it and as we want to have it? Or do we want to shape it, to question and challenge the obvious and to fight for more freedom, liberties, open societies?

And there can only be one answer: Unless we want to see the downfall of the free world there is no other answer than YES. Yes, we need to shape this world and to fight for it. Such a fight includes a fight against radicalism, against those exclusive narratives mentioned above. It includes a fight against nationalism, against all forms of extremist ideologies of the 19th century being executed by self-interested and opportunistic politicians of today. It finally includes a fight against exclusion and discrimination of any kind. If the LGBT population wants its freedom of expression and sexual orientation guaranteed we all have to fight for it.

By fighting for a free world based on universal values of open societies we fight for a normalization of the European and Balkan consciousness, for a new common partnership between the two sides of the same. We all have to walk the path from a vita passive to a vita active in the sense of Hannah Arendt – if we need to join the protests against nepotism, corruption, self-consumed elites or any other opponent of democracy, we need to do it. There is no other way but to free emancipatory potentials through engagement and fight for the sake of the values of a free world.