

CENTRAL EUROPE

Generally original essays are published in this column but we were told about a speech dealing with almost the same topic which appears in this number. This speech* was delivered at the International Conference “Higher Education, Minorities, Europe” in 13th of February 1999 in Komarno. We hope this speech is as interesting for the reader as the former articles were in this column.

It is a special honour for me to appear before you today and to share with you my personal observations about the issues which in my view can be associated with or need to be discussed when we look at those three key words constituting the title of this conference – higher education, (national) minorities, and Europe. But before going into the very analysis of my presentation I would like to admit the limitation of a “broad brush” approach of my analysis which is related to a common difficulty when we try to deal with such complex set of issues.

Let me start my analysis by sharing with you some observations about the role of higher education for which I shall use also a generic term – the university, in this part of Europe for which such town as Komarno would qualify well as a symbolic centre – the Central Europe. The region which re-emerged on a cultural map of Europe after a collapse of ideologically-predetermined and militarily imposed hi-polar division of Europe for “the West” and “the East”. It is the region about which Milan Kundera wrote in his 1984 essay entitled “The Tragedy of Central Europe” that; “It would be senseless to try to draw its border exactly. Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation”. He also see it to be “a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space”.¹

What I find relevant in the context of the issues we deal with during this meeting is that when trying to figure out which institutions have contributed to this cultural diversity of Central Europe Kundera was attracted by the university. He points out that the university, even if many aspects it reveals general characteristics and developments independent of their national context, nevertheless they have an important role in the quest for cultural and national identity. Already from its inception in the Middle Ages, the university represented the germ of the idea of multinational community in which each nation would have the right to use its own language inside the university. But we have also to keep in mind that all teaching was in Latin. Some historians even argue that university, which institutional structure based on a system of colleges of masters and scholars was divided into *nationes*, could be seen as the nurturing spot for an idea of “the nation” which later on, particularly in the course of the 19th century, was reinforced by the “nation-state” concept.

The early universities were founded in Central Europe foremost as the institutional agent of Catholic faith and Western civilization. But already at that time they were also seen as an

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¹ Milan Kundera: “The Tragedy of Central Europe”, *The New York Review* (26 April 1984).

important institutions allowing to claim by the given country or nation a place what French historian Maxime Leroy called “the grand family of civilized nations” or to serve as a kind of tampon in the spreading of foreign cultural influences. He argues that, for example, the creation of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow was to a great extent stimulated by desire to counter balance the dominant role of the Charles University in Prague.²

Many universities and other types of higher education institutions were created since that time in Central and Eastern Europe. In the course of their institutional history it was not unusual that they were an object of fierce religious and political rivalry and were obliged to change their religious or national allegiance which usually also required the change of the language of instruction. The latter one was particularly prominent when borders of a number of states had been modified as the outcome of two world wars which, and this is worthy to keep in mind, started in this part of Europe. The fall of the communist regime which, among other things, had liberated individual and collective humanistic aspirations, brought in life various educational projects, including creation of new universities and other types of educational institutions. If the creation of higher education establishments was seen by the previous regime as an expression of power, the current initiatives, particularly when coming from national minorities, should be seen foremost as an expression of those collective humanistic aspirations. As we know such initiatives are an object of vivid public discussion at the national and international level. In the latter case we took at the international laws and position taken by various international bodies. In this regard it should be pointed out that from the legal point of view while the principles of equality and non-discrimination of persons belonging to national minorities are formulated and defended by “hard law” – the whole body of international human rights instruments, positive rights are mainly formulated by “soft law” – in the form of recommendations and documents of intergovernmental organizations. In 1960 UNESCO had adopted a Convention Against Discrimination in Education and its Article 5, point 1c states: “it is essential to recognize the right of member of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including the maintenance of schools and, depending on the educational policy of each state, the use of the teaching of their own language, provided however: that this right is not exercised in a manner which prevents the members of these minorities from understanding the culture and language of the community as a whole and from participating in its activities, or which prejudices national sovereignty...”³ If the international framework and standards are helpful an important and positive role in dealing with the problem of institutionalization of educational rights for national minorities play bilateral treaties because a particular national minority is usually the majority in another country.

The assessment of history of the university, the oldest surviving European institutions with the exception of the Catholic Church, also shows that the university is extremely dependent on the human factor – students, faculty and supporting staff as well as the political system which predetermines its relations with the authority. The latter one is essential for determining the space allowing the university to reaffirm its institutional autonomy while its students and staff can benefit from academic freedom in exercise their functions. The recent histories of the Central European universities provides strong evidence of the need to defend the principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom as a precondition for their proper existence, normal functioning, carrying out their mission as well as meeting the society’s expectations.

2 Maxime Leroy: “L’Université de Cracovie”, *L’Esprit Européen*, Paris: Rober Laffont, 1957.

3 Janusz Symonides: “The legal nature of commitments related to the question of minorities”, *International Journal on Group Rights* (No. 3, 1996).

A university also demands stability and continuity; innovation or changes for the sake of innovating does not make too much sense. However, higher education needs also be observant – a watchtower. New fields of enquiry and scholarship need to be reflected in curricula. We observe that more and more universities offer courses in various languages. In most cases that second language is English but the other language combinations are to be found too. Correspondingly, the institutional structures are adjusted too. So we can find bi-lingual or tri-lingual universities, universities federating various linguistic colleges or particular courses given in various languages, etc. All these show that the modern university cannot remain behind the scientific advances, technological developments and cultural changes. Searching of a proper balance between continuity and change is what characterises the modern university.

This is not any easy task especially if we observe the on-going changes in the world for which an encompassing axiom was minted not much more than a decade ago – globalization (some prefer the term “globality” which would reflect not only the process but also the result of a process, a place, a condition, the new situation that comes afterwards). There is no doubt that we are experiencing great shake-up in many areas of economic, political, social and cultural life. In this incessant march towards a “borderless world” we observe the revival of the “spirit of a region” along its cultural and local traditional dimension, it is thus understandable that some national or ethnic groups are rallying together to press their identity claims. In some parts of the world this shift brings about historical memories and national conscience which is foremost but not only rooted in historical facts as it also includes a variety of cultural and psychological factors, individual and collective experiences, and why not the virtual images about the past. By no means I am advocating a historical amnesia but coming to terms with the past (what is in German called as ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’) is essential for further democratisation and integration of any kind in Europe or any other part of the globe.

There are many social and cultural differences, some of them can have an ethnic origin, and as such cannot be automatically dismissed. Under the banner of justified anxiety vis-a-vis the pace and dimension of changes, we can also observe a gradual reinforcement of individual and group suspicion which in turn often breeds hostility. In such situation a minor event can lead to situation in which the spiral of non-tolerance against national, religious and other types of minorities is spinning. We should, by all means, try to prevent the discrimination which would result in balkanization of Europe along ethnic lines. The relevant part from a message of 1 January 1999 of the Pope John Paul II for the celebration of the World Day of Peace is particularly pertinent: “One of the most tragic forms of discrimination is the denial to ethnic groups and national minorities of the fundamental right to exist as such. This is done by suppressing them or brutally forcing them to move, or by attempting to weaken their ethnic identity to such an extent that they are no longer distinguishable”.⁴

What Pope John Paul II is warning us about is the very idea that ethnicity and borders should coincide. It might look appealing but it is an short-term illusion that such what I would call a “cartographic form of peace” is sustainable in our interdependent world. It is also worthy to remind that quite a number of studies on the competitive advantage of nations show that national differences in cultures, values and institutions are not threatened by global competition but are actually vital in order to succeed in such competition. This last observation is of particular relevance in the context of process of transformation and integration which are underway in Europe which have started with free trade and the single market. But if

⁴ Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace 1 January 1999, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999.

this is to be a lasting arrangements it has to have also a cultural dimension. However it should not have been understood as Vaclav Havel bitterly observed that “everyone wants to enter into united Europe in his national costume”. Undoubtedly, higher education has its role to play on institutional, national and international level in order to deal with those issues and difficulties.

In conclusion, it is quite evident that further development of the countries in the Central Europe as well as other regions within and outside the Europe, cannot be seen without understanding of intimately entwined reality – on the local, national, regional or even global levels. It is the reality in which a control over territory is of lesser importance than control and access to all kinds of markets, ability to generate and use knowledge as well as a capacity to develop new technology and human resources. It is more than ever clear that a crucial question is human capital to which we can also add a cultural capital. The countries which have it prosper. And those who don't, don't. Education, in general, and higher education, in particular, is expected to play a prominent role also in the future as all societies, whether modern or modernizing, post-industrial or developing, are experiencing increasing demand for access to higher education foremost in order to respond to increasing requirement for trained citizens for economy which more and more depends knowledge-related skills and ability to handle information. Without assuming monopoly, nevertheless only higher education institutions can produce in big number and varied kind of such citizens. The lessons from the troubled history of Central and Eastern Europe are sometimes too quickly forgotten and too easily omitted when pressing group or egoistically interpreted national interests. We need more ecumenical politics also with regard to education. It is unfortunate when searching of solutions for educational problems becomes embroiled in highly publicised politics. Let me quote in this regard Andrei Marga, the minister of education of Romania, and the former Rector of the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, who in his guidelines for the reform of education in Romania points out that “a wide, democratic, and modern management of interactions between majority and ethnic minorities is a condition of success for the reform of education. In this country [Romania – JS], an intense nationalist approach to the problems of education and an intense political approach to education have to be avoided in promoting the reform of education”.⁵

Higher education and its various institutions, despite their far reaching academic, institutional and organizational differences, are not only the place of studying and searching of greater scientific competence but important settings of intellectual independence as well as an expression of cultural and social commitment of a multitude of the stake-holders. As such they have an important role to fulfill in order to equip us better when we deal, individually and collectively, with challenges of this “intimately entwined reality”, including the problems related to realization of educational aspirations of national minorities reflecting moral unity and cultural diversity. Therefore let me congratulate and thank the organizers of this conference for undertaking this topic which is of great importance to many, including my own organization – UNESCO. I see the organization of this conference as significant and encouraging coincidence with what I have found out reading a special issue of *Time* magazine. In its part where map of “European I-Tot Spots” is shown and analysed, Komarno, Slovakia is mentioned as a site of “previous tension”, foremost due to the fact that a newly elected government is “expected to pass a law enshrining the rights of minority languages, including Hungarian”.⁶

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⁵ Andrei Marga: *Guidelines for the Reform of Education in Romania*, Bucharest, Ministry of Education, 1998.

⁶ See, Bruce W. Nelson: “NATO's New Challenge”, *Time Special Issue*, Visions of Europe (Winter, 1998–1999).