



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies
Black Sea University Foundation
European Cultural Centre, Bucharest*

Alumni Meeting

“The evolution of Romania and other Black Sea countries since 1990”

2-4 June 2006

Sibiu

Introduction

The Black Sea University Foundation (BSUF) was created in 1992 by Professor Mircea Malitza. The Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies (LIEIS) has been associated with the BSUF from the beginning and has organized once a year a week-long summer course or seminar on topics relating very often to the European integration process but also to the evolution of the European societies and to the international system.

Participants have come from Romania as well as from other Black Sea countries, such as Ukraine, Bulgaria, Turkey, Russia, Georgia, and even from countries beyond the Black Sea, namely Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Armenia, Albania and a few from Western European countries.

They were students from various disciplines such as political science, economics, history, law, sociology, mainly in their graduate or even post-graduate stage of studies; young journalists; politicians; lawyers; civil servants from various ministries, etc.

The lecturers came both from Western and Eastern Europe. Whereas at the heydays at the BSUF more than 30 courses took place in one year, the course sponsored by the Luxembourg Institute, with the logistical help of the European Cultural Center in Bucharest, remains now practically the only one. However, Professor Malitza is maintaining other kinds of activities on a global scale.



The ambition of the meeting in Sibiu was to bring together alumni from the various years to have an exchange on their personal, above all professional experience, but also to discuss how Eastern Europe has evolved in those 16 years, where it stands and where it may be moving to. Some 35 alumni accepted the invitation; they covered their own travel expenses whereas the LIEIS was offering accommodation and meals during the meeting.

Maria Popescu, head of the European Cultural Center, had done the whole organisational and logistical work for the Institute; Professor Gerhard Michael Ambrosi from the University of Trier, whose ancestors are from Transylvania, had also actively contributed to make the meeting a success. The founder of the BSUF Professor Malitza was present during the whole meeting as were the lecturers of the last 8 or 9 years, namely Professor Ambrosi, Professor Christopher Coker, Mario Hirsch and Armand Clesse who was steering the discussions.

Besides the debates there were also a number of cultural visits in Sibiu (among them of course the Luxembourg House, the Brukenthal Museum, the Orthodox Cathedral, the former Town Hall, St. Mary's Evangelical Church, the Passage of Stairs, the Lies' Bridge, the Old Market Hall / House of Arts, the Council Tower, the Roman Catholic Church), in Sibiel (the Icon on Glass Collection) and in Rasinari (the house where the famous philosopher Emile Cioran was born, and the St Parascheva Orthodox Church).

Elements of the debates

Mircea Malitza insists on the importance of the freedom of the press, of initiative. Decentralisation constitutes also a great progress.

Among the shortcomings one has to mention that there are too many rights without responsibility. As to the economic record, there were before 4.5 million hectares of irrigated land; now there are only 25,000 hectares left. Public goods were destroyed, the shipping fleet disappeared. After 1989 there was a complete rejection of the past. Then the country started to develop a strategy for sustainable development (1996-97). A post-industrial society emerged. The idea of work was rejected and replaced by hedonism; discipline was considered as something bad. Only things that were fashionable in the West were accepted. The notion of solidarity vanished. A different kind of man was produced, putting forward an image rather than facts. One could watch a deprofessionalisation combined with politisation.

There are different agendas in Western Europe and Eastern Europe: Eastern European countries try to catch up. But Western Europe needs a new agenda. The present xenophobia may be due to the fact that Eastern European countries were very closed. Now they need intercultural skills. Among the key features of future societies there are: an open society; striking the right balance between materialistic and spiritual aims; a non-discriminating society; a more tolerant and a more flexible society.

Romania has a history of powerful neighbours (empires) which produced a tradition of accommodation and survival. Romanians are afraid of uniformisation. They would like to preserve a Romanian spirit and specific Romanian qualities and virtues.

C. Coker emphasises that there have been a lot of reforms but not much change. We do not ask why for example the Romanian mentality is different from the Western European one.

Politicians are there to manage our risks; we try to manage the consequences of what we do (death of utopias). There is no understanding how best to react to risks.

There is the phenomenon of the declining purchasing power of the state. The states don't tax as much as before which means that they can't provide as many services. Among others they cannot provide security which is leading to a privatisation of security. A new model of state is emerging, a kind of minimalist state.

Contrary to what Gordon Brown is saying, there is no such thing as Britishness; there is Englishness and Scottishness; England is the key. This awareness goes back to 1789.

G.M. Ambrosi speaks of a subsistence economy in the area of farming. There is a patent failure of producing agricultural goods. Romania is experiencing an acute deforestation. In general there is an increasing commodification of life. Professor Ambrosi wonders about the possible enactor of a model for Romania and asks: Where is the middle class? Will the EU have a uniformising effect?

A. Clesse talks about the existential fears of the people previously and now. Are the attitudes of young people changing? Is it true that some people expect that Brussels will replace the old communist system? Are they longing for a new kind of paternalism? Will dissatisfaction become endemic in European societies? Will there be no place any more for ambitious designs? Does Romania perhaps still pay for proclaiming a revolution that never took place, and which has engendered self-delusion and complacency, or may the fact that there has been no real rupture after 1989 be an advantage?

The danger is that with the prospect of joining the EU Romania once more is not thinking for itself and is not conceiving its own project for the future, that the EU is thinking and acting for the Romanians as did the communist system before. There are certainly elements for a Romanian societal model, but is there a coherent project?

What kind of country will Romania become? Just an ordinary, average EU member country or will it maintain some specificities? Should it really try to become a "perfect" society? What is the impact of the ravages of the previous system? How to tackle the problem of the increasing socio-economic polarisation, of the people who feel - and are - neglected and who are not part of the game of enriching oneself. And in the economic field: Where might Romania find a competitive edge?

Most of the participants and former students express some mixed feelings and opinions about the situation in Romania, some being very optimistic and others very pessimistic. They describe the changes from a totalitarian to a democratic regime which can be felt above all in public administration, the fact that people become more independent and take more initiatives.

Some participants mention corruption, inertia, nostalgia for the previous system, a lack of values, of orientation and of solidarity, people becoming more self-centred; they complain about the demographic decline and the destruction of the family.

A participant from Bulgaria mentions the lack of good governance; a participant from Croatia sees the biggest flaw in his country in the field of public administration; a participant from Macedonia talks about the lack of accountability and asserts that labour productivity has been declining and that there is too much speculation.



Conclusions

Many of the participants are reluctant to discuss in depth not only the problems of the past but also the present and the possible future difficulties as if they were afraid that by debating them these problems might materialise. There is a tendency to eschew what is potentially painful from a moral as well as a material point of view. This kind of escapism seems to be widespread in many post-communist societies of Central and Eastern Europe.

People tend to focus on their own situation and fate, their career and wellbeing but are much less interested in the general prospects for their society. There is a lack of introspection, of critical self-analysis, of questioning the foundations and the direction of the political and socio-economic course their countries are engaged in. Many people expect a kind of salvation from their participation in Western organisations and above all from membership in the EU, without examining thoroughly the possible benefits and costs such a participation is likely to entail.

The geostrategic and political upheavals of more than a decade and a half ago in Central and Eastern Europe have not been met by a real change of mentalities and attitudes in most realms of the society. The new elites which to a large degree are the old ones have been compliant with Western demands. This situation of course does not bode well for the Eastern European societies themselves and also not for the European projects in general.

A. Clesse