The impact of historical enemy images within education

In East and South-east European textbooks there is a strong presence of stereotypes and matrices about historical enemies. Although research results show that the formation of collective memory and enemy images is most strongly influenced by the personal and family experience, by the media and only then by the school (teacher instructions, textbooks), they have a particular important role in education, especially in teaching subjects like history, sociology, ethics and society, and also literature.

The History Education Committee, led by dr. Christina Koulouri organized seven regional workshops, each with a different location and theme, to analyze and compare school history textbooks and curricula. The content of the textbook workshops consisted partially of responses to a questionnaire that was circulated prior to the workshop.

Preliminary analyses of textbooks (particularly of the ones used in history classes) shows that, “it will require years, if not decades, of dedicated work to combat the damage done by historical stereotyping, to establish the values of democracy, tolerance and open-minded historical enquiry, and to achieve reconciliation in those places where today hostility and misunderstanding prevail.”

The presentation of enemy and of the "other" side is particularly rude and awful in Serbia, where the textbooks create the image of Serbia as being a nation which has been constantly suffering injustice. A similar approach can be found in some Croatian textbooks, particularly in those published in Tuđman's time. However, the situation there is more complex than that, since Croatia is the country with far the greatest number of alternative textbooks in the region. Hardly any different approach can be found in Turkish textbooks when writing about the Greeks and vice versa. On average, the most negatively described nation in the textbooks of the whole region are the Turks. The image of their medieval campaigns of conquests is still negatively engraved in the collective memory of the nations

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2 The History Education Committee is a part of Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, a non-profit, non-governmental organization founded in 1988 in Holland. It begun groundbreaking work in the field of historical research and history teaching in Southeast Europe in 1988 In the framework of Southeast European Joint History project seven regional workshops, each with a different location and theme were organized. Eleven countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey and Yugoslavia) are involved in this project.
3 Hungary and Hungarians, Cyprus, Macedonia and Macedonians, Albania and Albanians, Balkan Empires, Greece and Greeks, Turkey and Turks, Yugoslavia, Yugoslav nations and successor states and the problem of religions were evaluated in this workshops.
4 The first part of questionnaire is general (In which grades is history taught? How many hours per week? Which historical periods per grade? Are other history subjects taught besides national history? What are the proportions between national, European and world history? What is the system of authorization, publication and distribution of textbooks? The second part of questionnaire is devoted to individual countries, i.e. how the Turks and Turkey is treated Greek textbooks and vice versa (historically evaluation, heroes and anti-heroes, negative stereotypes, controversial issues etc.).
5 The participants submitted their answers to the questionnaire, and these answers were distributed to the participants, presented and discussed at the workshop.
6 Processing of data and final analyze is still going on and it will be publish in English and in languages of participating states in the first half of year 2002.
7 Costa Carras, Joint History Project rapporteur, Teaching The History of Southeastern Europe, Center for democracy and reconciliation in Southeast Europe (edited by Christina Koulouri), Thessaloniki, Greece 2001 page 13.
The temptation of succumbing to national myths, stereotype images about other nations, and glorification of one's own history is present in school lessons of all the countries of southeastern Europe. It frequently presents the foundation for (often uncritical) patriotism. The attitude according to which "the others are mean and do us wrong" is particularly evident from the official textbooks (and until recently in Serbia there were no others). It has been applied to the entire history, in Yugoslavia however, especially so for the period of World War II. In most countries taboos or better to say firmly established images about one's own history exist which are difficult to overcome. The instruction of history mostly reflects what politics desires and what on the other hand, is a part of the collective historical awareness. In different textbooks the treatment of some persons is diametrically opposed to each other. In Serb textbooks, for example, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić is presented as a "hero", whereas one of the Croatian textbooks describes him as the beginner of the Serb hegemonism, because - according to this textbook - he wanted to "submit" the Croats to Serbia. Some people, previously treated either as national or class traitors remain to be seen that way, whereas some others have been turned to "heroes" after the national states had been constituted (i.e. cardinal Stepinac: in Serb textbooks he is described as an enemy who encouraged the genocide over the Serbs, and violent rechristening from the Orthodox into the Catholic religion, whereas some Croat textbooks see him as a hero). The same approach can be observed with Tito: in some of the former Yugoslav republics he is now perceived as an enemy and a negative person, whereas in others (the Muslims) his positive reputation has even increased. In the recent years yet another stereotype has emerged and become stronger, namely the stereotype according to which there is a dividing line between the nations belonging to "Europe" and those belonging to the "Balkans". In this context an interesting turnover can be observed in Slovenia during the disintegration process of Yugoslavia in the eighties. According to the opinion polls, the Germans (the Austrians) and the Italians used to be perceived as the main enemies of the nation, which can be contributed to the negative historic experience. However, due to the internal conflicts in the eighties, these traditional enemies have been replaced by the Serbs. The Germans (and Austrians) were suddenly seen as friends, particularly because they helped Slovenia in the process of attaining independence. After all the pressures and obstacles Slovenia has experienced in its attempt to enter the EU from the first Berlusconi government, as well as from the present Austrian administration, the affection for them has declined, which can be observed in public life, in education, as well as in other forms of daily life.