

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS VIII: BULGARIA & ROMANIA – JULY 2004

REPORT BY S. LOWRY, RECTOR, ST. STITHIANS COLLEGE

Introduction: South Africa and Eastern Europe

1. Eastern Europe is very similar to South Africa, in that it has changed from a very autocratic system of government to a democratic one in the last 10-15 years. The region is steeped in national conflicts stemming from a two to four millennia history of human contact and conflict. Nationalism and ethnicity bedevil the region. The former communist states are also struggling to change their state-owned economies into free-market ones. Likewise, SA is attempting to create a common future from a disparate and divided society with the potential for ethnic conflict based on our various racial and ethnic groups. The concept of trying to create a single culture that transcends ethnicity is important and needs to be based on a common humanity and set of human values.
2. The most profound lessons were learnt from the East Europeans, those living in the former communist states. Democracy is a tenuous concept. Although it is 250 years old in the USA, it was unable to stave off the worst civil war in history, which happened only a hundred years ago. It is only 35 years old in countries like Portugal and Spain, and little over 15 in most of the countries of Eastern Europe. Furthermore, in most of the latter it was preceded by generations of systems of government that were not kind to their people. I learnt most from those who lived in the former Eastern Bloc countries and spent many hours talking through issues of democracy, civic education and education in general with those from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia and the Ukraine. I was struck by how similar their situations were to South Africa's. Like SA, all of those countries emerged from autocratic, repressive regimes, although the repression and lack of political mobilisation and personal freedom was far worse in those countries than in South Africa.
3. Change in those societies generally happened through geo-politics involving the intervention of the Western World. The final collapse was as a result of some mass-based demonstrations and massive rejection of the regimes by the population, but usually only in the closing months of the regimes. In SA, however, change came about through 30 years of intense political mobilisation and conflict. Consequently concepts of democratic control, accountability and transparency are far stronger, in SA than in many of those societies, where there still tends to be an autocratic culture. Many of the people still uncritically accept policies and procedures dictated by the authorities, even though the authorities are appointed in terms of a democratic dispensation. We South Africans tend to be far more suspicious, critical and sceptical of those in authority and perhaps more similar to citizens in Western traditions of accountability. That leaves one with a profound sense of hope in the democratic dispensation in South Africa.
4. As the countries of Eastern Europe attempt to integrate themselves into the Western World and the global economy, they face a real danger of heightened impoverishment. While the presence of multinational corporations is keenly noticeable in Romania, (much less so in Bulgaria), the danger is that nett capital will flow from those countries into the West.
5. Both nations look forward to, and already to some extent experience, the benefits of being part of Europe, with huge injections of capital for reconstruction of the infrastructure and various elements of those societies. Both countries expect to be accepted into the European Union in 2007, having recently joined the NATO Alliance. There is a strong sense in both countries that their ultimate salvation is dependent on an alliance with the rest of Europe. Europe has accepted that unless they embrace their poorer south eastern cousins, they will be inundated by a continual wave of illegal immigration, and social instability in countries on their border.

Democracy and education and the building of the nation

6. It is clear to all concerned that for democracy to be protected a society must create a democratic culture at both the macro and micro levels. At school level, it is crucial that a democratic culture is built up both in the formal curriculum (through lessons and themes taught in particular learning areas) and

through the institutional curriculum, i.e. in the way we choose leadership structures for the learners and allow pupils to exercise authority and responsibility within the school.

7. Furthermore, the hidden curriculum, i.e. the nature of the relationships between the various stakeholders that make up the school community (teachers, parents, students) should also reflect the democratic culture and values. These should be based on mutual respect, trust, transparency and openness, where the starting point for all the relationships is to trust one another and to accept in principle that everybody works in the interest of the common good and is not motivated by selfish intent. Although this is not easy in a multicultural environment because the definition of so-called universal values is not necessarily the same, the concept of *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* seems to unite the various cultures and value systems of the world. Such a value system needs to apply universally in the education of children.
8. More importantly, and particularly in Bulgaria, most of the young people we spoke to have no intention of remaining in the country. Since the Wall came down, Bulgaria has lost almost 1 million of its 9 million population to emigration. All the youngsters we spoke to aspired to leaving their country for a future in the West. Interestingly enough their English language skills were less impressive than the Romanian children, all of whom that I spoke to have no intention of leaving their country. They were very keen to follow professional careers in their own country. Given the fact that South Africa also faces a skills export crisis it was heartening to speak to young people who were very keen to build their futures and careers in the country of their birth.
9. This Romanian sentiment seems to be built on a strong culture of pride, loyalty, patriotism to the country and achievement and pride in the nation since the advent of democracy 15 years ago. However, despite the autocratic nature of the previous regime, the communists did leave a society with high levels of skills and education, as well as housing for all citizens. The threat is, however, the shallowness of democratic practice, which means that countries are susceptible to wide swings of national sentiment based on the promises of particular individuals. For example in Bulgaria, the heir to the deposed king's throne has recently been elected Prime Minister, while the previous leader of the Communist Party is the President. In Romania, elections have swung between the Far Right and the reconstructed Communist Party. This tends to lead to wild oscillations in government policy, dependent on the promises of the politicians. Stable democratic governments with enough power to implement effective policy, coupled with powerful mechanisms of accountability, perhaps hold the best hope for the development of a country.
10. Romanian teachers are highly motivated in spite of being very poorly paid. Starting salaries are in the region of 80 Euros per month and a teacher after 20 years of service earns approximately 130 Euros per month. Rentals of flats (on the outskirts of town, Bucharest) cost in the region of 150 Euros per month. As a result all teachers usually have second jobs, often teaching extra lessons. The profession tends to be dominated by females. Students whom I met were highly motivated, and other young people that I entered into discussions with were often holding down full-time jobs to earn their keep while studying at the university. My overall impression was of a highly motivated, hardworking youth with a good education system and a sound work ethic.
11. Romania appears to be significantly more religious than Bulgaria. The teachers and students reported a possible 90% of Romanians at Sunday Services (mainly orthodox). There is a strong sense of the power of family values and community, which many give as the reason for the unwillingness of the people to leave the country. I was told that if people are forced to work outside the country to earn money to support families back home, they return after a short while.
12. In both Bulgaria and Romania there are dozens of monuments to a range of historical events and personalities who have impacted on the growth and development of the country concerned. Of course this is no different to cities in the West such as Paris, London and Washington. It attests to a profound loyalty and pride in a nation's history, language and cultural heritage. (Perhaps in South Africa we need a bit more in the way of monuments and culture and a sense of pride in our new democracy and political dispensation, as we attempt to rebuild our nation.) The negative consequence of this sentiment in Eastern Europe is that the different countries and peoples within the region compete for claims to the same heroes and cultural traditions. In fact all the people of the region have been subjugated or assimilated by all sorts of "conquerors" (Slavs, Turks, West Europeans) over the centuries.

Conclusion

13. The journey provided an opportunity to engage with people from a range of cultures, languages and nationalities, gathered together by our common humanity; and especially with those from the Eastern Bloc, with very similar historical experiences to our own. It was a great privilege to engage people at a deep level of human solidarity, and without any personal or professional façade. It opened one to a conference of spiritual exploration, as well as intellectual, professional and academic advancement.

Stephen Lowry
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