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History Textbooks and the Creation of National Identity

by DUBRAVKA STOJANOVIC
*Vice-chair of the History Education Committee
University of Belgrade*

History textbooks are among the most important means for shaping national identity and historical awareness. Owing to them, pupils are at an early age imbued with images of their own nation, its place in history, its characteristics, as well as with images of other, notably neighboring peoples. That fact gives history teaching a special mission, which surpasses its educational tasks and turns it into an important instrument of state politics. It is particularly important to have this in view when speaking about the nations which based their model on romanticist assumptions stemming from the image about glorious national past, tradition, national culture, language, customs. Most nations in the Balkans are based on that ethnic model of nation and that is one of the reasons why historical awareness plays a big role in people's everyday life and easily becomes the means for giving legitimacy to the policy that tends to present itself as the expression of "authentic", "historical" and the only proper values of a nation. Due to all these reasons, devising of desirable past has played an important role in 10-years long war that has been going on in various parts of former Yugoslavia.

Six workshops organized in the past year by Textbook Committee, as a branch of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe have shown that in

most countries in that part of Europe national identity is being built on almost identical matrices based on the described model of a nation. These matrices are a specific expression of desired image of one's own nation and a basis for establishing images about "the others". Precisely because of that, the analysis of these matrices can help in studying national identities that are formed in Balkan countries today and which will have their prolonged effect in the future. That model of national identity, national awareness and historical memory creates a specific type of socialization of young people that can more easily lead to conflicts among neighboring nations in the future than to peaceful settlement of sensitive issues through compromise.

The foundations of national identity and historical awareness in most analyzed textbooks are established implicitly, through manipulation with historical facts. The effect of that procedure is even more dangerous, because in that way a story about the past acquires the authority of objective knowledge and truth, while possible explicit propaganda could perhaps cause resistance among students and thus reduce its chances for success. In most countries of the region an image is created about "historical correctness" of their own nation, which has not taken any action in the past that harmed its neighbors. Pupils are thus deprived of the possibility to face the past of their nation, and even to face its present realistic position. Those historical moments in which one's own nation could be blamed for undesirable events are either completely ignored or, by omission of certain and emphasizing of other facts, they have been presented as less important or even as the responsibility of the "others". That creates an image of one's own nation as "eternally righteous" which takes the beating of historical injustice as a kind of metaphysical necessity. This results in

unrealistic attitude toward one's own place among other nations, but also establishes authoritarian perception about history as something mystical, elusive, unfair as a rule, but most of all something similar to the fate that is beyond one's control and for which individuals hold no responsibility.

That is particularly important to have in view when analyzing the other important "national characteristic" established in almost all textbooks. Namely, almost all peoples of South Eastern Europe see their main historical role as those of victim and, what is particularly important, as a victim of most neighboring peoples. Historical events in textbooks are interpreted in a way that gives an impression that most neighboring peoples have territorial aspirations to the territories that are considered historically "ours", that it has "always been like that", which leads to an implicit conclusion that nothing will change in the future either. Such interpretation of the past produces at least three malign effects: (1) creates a wrong perception that only one's own nation is a "historical victim" and hence retains an unrealistic attitude towards oneself; (2) breeds unconscious fear from most neighboring peoples; supported by brutal description of crimes in textbooks this results in anxiety, animosity, aggressiveness and possible revanchism; (3) imposes dangerous and wrong idea that relations between peoples and their "historical characteristics" never change and that history turns in a vicious circle; this is an authoritarian concept of philosophy of history - a reliable foundation of any xenophobic society.

Due to these and many other elements of desirable historical awareness, the Textbook Committee came to a paradoxical conclusion. Interpretations of certain historical events in textbooks can be so different in various countries that one can hardly believe that it is the very same historical event described. National heroes of one nation

can be perceived in the other as the main anti-heroes, almost enemies. At the same time, the same historical personalities may be presented as exclusive national heroes in historical awareness of two or as many as three peoples, with their names adjusted to a particular national language. This can further deepen mistrust and conflicts. Certain territories, again called differently, are experienced in textbooks as parts of "historical lands" of different peoples. Yet, in spite of these "divided histories" which often resemble reflections in a broken mirror, all textbooks look alike. The paradox referred to here arises from the fact that most schoolbooks about history rely on the described identical matrix of desirable national identity. That paradox leads to the following outcome: despite sometimes strikingly different interpretations of historical facts and invested effort to separate them historically, Balkan peoples come to substantially similar concept of their own past. Paraphrasing Tolstoy, we may even say that all Balkan nationalisms resemble one another.

Due to everything said above it is hard to give recommendations for changes that could be made in history textbooks. Identity matrix in them is their most perilous message, but being the foundation of national consciousness, it will be most difficult to change. It would be good when in all South East European countries it would be possible to have free market of textbooks that would offer greater choice of different interpretations of the past to teachers and students. That would at least question the alarming monopoly of the state over historical truth which has consequently changed in the past in accordance with "state needs". Changes in the understanding of the past and rational attitude towards it could be brought about by introducing a larger number of lessons devoted to social history, history of everyday life or historical anthropology.

These lessons would enable students to understand that politics and wars are not the only contents of history and its only meaning, contributing to a more mature view of contemporariness. In addition, should the past be observed from these different angles it would become obvious that peoples of South Eastern Europe have much more in common than they have differences, by which the awareness about the whole region would be set on new and more constructive foundations.