

Thematic Article



**Education in the whirlwinds of “transition”:
On people who won freedom but must now
learn how to enjoy it properly**

Hungarian Educational Research
Journal
2016, Vol. 6(2) 9–23
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<http://herj.lib.unideb.hu>
Debrecen University Press

Pavel Zgaga³



DOI:10.14413/HERJ.2016.02.02

Abstract

This article addresses the role of educational researchers in the process of the so-called transition in Slovenia. The concept of transition is critically reflected; we believe that understanding of transition processes needs to be installed in a broader historical, social and cultural context. This context is briefly outlined. Processes that have gradually led to a transition are tracked through some key public debates about educational issues that arose in the 1970s and 1980s. They contributed to preparing the ground for radical changes that occurred at the turn of the 1980s into the 1990s. In the final part, the question about the role of researchers in the post-transitional society is addressed. With analysis of the relationship between political discourse and academic discourse we claim that relativisation of the role of research and researchers is progressing in modern times.

Keywords: Slovenia, transition, education, educational policy, political vs. academic discourse

³ Pavel Zgaga, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, Centre for Educational Policy Studies, Ljubljana (Slovenia), pavel.zgaga@guest.arnes.si

Introduction

For a social science researcher it is particularly exciting if he undertakes an analysis of a social process about which he has his own and direct experience. The greater this experience, the more exciting his work could be. In this respect, analysing the role of educational research over the period of social and political transition is really exciting for me. Neither personal experience nor the need to analyse a reality can't be deleted or suppressed. Therefore, I will not pretend to search for an "objective scientific truth" beyond subjectivity (no need to repeat here what has been explained by several contemporary theorists: why this concept is an illusion and how it is constructed). However, I do not intend to tell a "personal story", but to approach analytically to accumulated material as in books, articles and archives as well as in personal memory.

The direct challenge that I started this work was my participation at the roundtable on Central (or Eastern?)⁴ European views on these issues, which was held under the ECER Conference 2015 in Budapest. In addition, long personal involvement in education, educational research and, last but not least, educational politics contributed importantly to increase motivation. Discussion with colleagues at the round table stressed the importance and the necessity of such reflection; inter alia, in this discussion some features of the so-called transition became visible which occurred at approximately the same way in all the countries of Central / Eastern Europe.

But my opinion is that it is precisely exposing the similarities what complicates the understanding of the so-called transition processes and contributes to the creation of questionable generalization and even prejudices. This problem can be seen in particular with authors who do not have their own experience on these processes: on their pictures cows in dark are often black. My opinion, therefore, is that when displaying common characteristics of a societal phenomenon as this one is more energy should be devoted to knowing and understanding diversities, particularities, oddities, paradoxes, and the like. In this article I will not discuss Central / Eastern Europe as a whole (as it was already mentioned, the very definition of Central / Eastern Europe is a challenging topic itself), but limit myself to my country: Slovenia. Since the approaches of colleagues who contribute to this issue are similar (i.e., country case studies), a reader may find herself or himself easiest way to draw a comprehensive image.

⁴ The concepts of Central and Eastern Europe seem quite simple in physical geography, but when the two are approached from a perspective of history, culture, politics, etc., we meet with a shocking complexity. In today's popular discourses of the western world, the term "Eastern Europe" is often synonymous with "the former communist countries" and includes a large part of that space which can also denote the concept of Central Europe. Sancta simplicitas.

The transition: Where does it start and where does it end?

Transition: what a word! This is not a notion to be used only in an intellectual language; it also occurs in everyday conversations – at least in the so-called transition and post-transition societies. Simply, one would say that it is about change: a move from one site or position to another. But this is happening constantly in our life; we are constantly “in transition”. It appears, however, that the term we are talking about includes certain surplus: e.g. a move from “oppression” to “freedom”, from “dependence” to “independence”, etc. Throughout history, this was promised many times – and one of the results of these promises has been growing skepticism about the teleological fundamentals of human history. For a detailed discussion on this topic we do not have enough space here; however, some things must be said before we begin with the “Slovenian story”.

I am prone to write the word “transition” in inverted commas; it is very hard to use it in the sense in which it appears in the dominant discourses of our time. This word has its own contexts and its history. As it is rather broadly known, the intellectual use of the concept originates in political sciences around the 1960s (e.g. Lipset, 1959; Rustow, 1970) to define the transition from undemocratic (less democratic) to (more) democratic political order. However, in a few decades the concept “transited” from scientific language to media and general jargon. According to some authors, in particular if they come from “(post-)transition countries”, it flowed in the 1990s into a vast ideological swamp. It ended in “an ideology called ‘transitology’”, as Croatian philosopher Boris Buden says:

It is based on the cynical idea that people who won freedom through their own struggle must now learn how to enjoy it properly”. He is even more clear at the beginning of his article: “A curious set of metaphors marks the jargon of postcommunist transition: education for democracy, classrooms of democracy, democratic exams [...] This language of postcommunism discloses a paradox that points at what is probably the greatest scandal of recent history: those who proved their political maturity in the so-called ‘democratic revolutions’ of 1989–90 have become thereafter, overnight, children! (Buden, 2010: 18-19).

Changes that happened around the year 1990 in the countries of Central / Eastern Europe can be called “a transition”, but we also know that it was held by different routes and different logics, because they were a result of protracted and complex processes. Understanding the transition in Central / Eastern Europe is in irreconcilable conflict with the “holy simplicity”. As we begin with the analysis of the “transition” in Slovenia, we therefore need to devote a few paragraphs on the historical context while we will

follow the role of education and educational research in these processes in some details from the period after 1968.

A very brief outline of the history of education and educational research

In the 19th century, the territory of today's Slovenia belonged to the Habsburg Empire; Slovenians – like some other nations in the region – were at least lucky enough to receive the impulses of the educational progress fostered by the Viennese court. The law on education of 1869 introduced a comprehensive elementary school which lasted eight years. Language of tuition was Slovenian; it can be understood as right which was later, during certain periods of the first half of the 20th century, unfortunately radically denied. After the First World War, a significant part of the national territory was excluded from the new state, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; this meant, among other things, an end to tuition in mother tongue (e.g. in that part of the territory that belonged to fascist Italy).

Sensitivity to the national language has been always very strong; whereas national identity could not be based on political and economic powers, their role was to a large extent substituted by culture. The perception and appreciation of institution like school (library etc.) has to be understood in this context. This aspect has been further strengthened during the Second World War, when the land was broken between three invaders who all denied the right to language. Strong resistance movement which acted at least in the first years of the war as a coalition of different anti-fascist political and ideological groups (this was a distinctive feature from resistance movements in the rest of Yugoslavia), acted with “a gun and a book” (Repe, 2015). During the war, newspapers and books were published and radio emitted, a professional theatre and even a scientific institute operated in (temporarily) liberated territories – and, of course, schools. Towards the end of the war and after, the political hegemony passed firmly into the hands of the Communist Party, later the League of Communists, as it was renamed after the conflict between Tito and Stalin in 1947.

Socialist Yugoslavia was a federation consisted of six republics. Power was quite decentralized; it was necessary not only because of significant differences in level of economic development but also because of differences in culture, language and the like. Most decisions about the educational system were in hands of the six Republic Ministries of Education and not at federal level; tuition was held in various languages and curricula differed between the republics. Of course, League of Communists was carefully awake regarding all political developments. But the League itself was a kind of a "federation" – union of its organizations in individual republics. Among them controversies occasionally encountered; they were hidden for the public but not always successfully. Due to the conflict with the Soviet Union and “Eastern Bloc” the country

was rather closed towards the east and open towards the west: the border towards Austria and Italy was open and visas were not required. Opposite to the Soviet "etatism" the theory and practice of "socialist self-management" was established and opposite to the "proletarian internationalism" the "Non-Aligned Movement" was promoted.

Thus, and in contrast to other socialist countries under the auspices of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia was characterized by a certain degree of "liberalism", particularly in its western part, which is bordered on two "capitalist" countries. This also affected the development of the education system and educational research. For example, the main foreign languages in schools were English and French, which enabled transmission of information and intellectual links with the West. However, the level of educational development was very different between different parts of the federation. The second half of 1960 was particularly marked by a "liberal" wave, which among other things allowed a million of Yugoslav workers (mainly from less developed regions) going to work in the countries of Western Europe.

It would be difficult to talk about educational research in the period before 1945 and immediately afterwards but already the 1950s brought about some changes in this area. In 1965, the Educational Research Institute in Ljubljana was established, the first institution whose primary purpose was to do research and support development of education. Iva Šegula, the second director of the Institute, explained the circumstances of the foundation by the fact that the "rapid development of the majority of the structural components of society, particularly the economy, made education 'obsolete' and clearly revealed the need for reform of education"; however, implementation of reform aims is not possible without "the necessary scientific procedures – thus, the pedagogic institutes or their variants are born" (Šegula, 1970: 5).

A guess that ideology completely dominated over intellectual life at that time becomes questionable when we begin to search in the archives. To take just one example: in 1966, Vlado Schmidt, the doyen of Slovenian educational sciences, discussed the "methodology of school reform" and tried to investigate how "social science, ideology, educational policy and direct participation of [socialist] self-managers [samoupravljavci]"⁵ encroach in this field. He wrote:

Misguided position on the role of these factors can lead the designing of school reform astray. This question is for us the more interesting because there is no doubt that the drafters of the 'Proposal' [i.e., a proposal for a new reform] gave

⁵ Language of the "socialist self-government" or "self-management" is today understood by only a few; needless to say, it is also very difficult to translate. A "self-manager" or a "self-governor" (which sounds extremely strange) was anyone who was employed in the "organizations of associated labour", that is, the economy and public services. Small, normally family businesses and farming was permitted but excluded from this system.

wrong answer to it. [...] With their attitude to any science that was shown above they confessed loudly enough that sufficient ideological formation and socialist political orientation suffices to cope with the school reform while the scientific research is not necessary. We must admit that this view is only partly mistaken because the school reform is really an arena of ideology and politics – but also science (Schmidt, 1966: 99-100).

Ideology, liberal thought and education: Towards a critique of educational paradigm

The end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s – in particular in Slovenia – was marked by the liberal trend in politics and public life. At the political level, it can be illustrated by the removal of the “hard” wing politicians in the League of Communists (the Ranković case), condemnation of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, searching for a “socialist self-managerial market model”, etc., In intellectual circles it was marked by more freedom (and more courage) of expression. During this time an internationally known and recognized philosophical and sociological group Praxis was very active, which organized high-profile international summer school on one of the islands in the Adriatic. In universities radical student movement grew up which was at least partly connected to similar movements in the West. It culminated in spring 1971 when students occupied the University of Ljubljana for ten days; one of their slogans was: Close down faculties (as they are now) – Open your mouth! Not only concern for democracy in general appeared on the public agenda, but also critique of the prevailing educational paradigm.

The most famous example in the field of educational research from this period is the so-called anthropological interpretation of the foundations of education, as developed and presented by the then director of the Educational Institute Franc Pediček. This interpretation expressed a need which should be inherent to the mission of any research institute: the need for a critical examination of dominant paradigms and seeking new ones. Of course, we can't ignore that such a search could quickly come into conflict with the dominant ideology. He presented his views at a national educational conference in 1972 (a provocation which ended with a political anathema and dismissal from the post of the director, but not from a position of researcher at the Institute), which may be briefly very well summarized by the following passage:

If we run the risk [...] of a trial definition of education, we might say: Education appears only as a function of a man in a particular social reality. [...] In other words, education as a true paideia can never appear in well-known frameworks of 'societies-institutions' and 'societies-ideas', because in these societies the

fundamental pedagogical relation man – man is often abolished in rough and veiled ways (Pediček, 2013: 27).

The “liberal” wave, which began in the second half of the 1960s, was stopped in the early 1970s and after the constitutional reform of 1974 it seemed that all the levers of power are firmly back in the hands of the League of Communists. The “liberal” Slovenian Prime Minister Stane Kavčič was deposed (1972); critical intellectual circles were controlled, the student movement was diminished. However, this period left some important outcomes. At the level of the political system it was the new constitution, which strengthened the decentralised model of government. At the level of intellectual life these were new experiences that have shaped a new generation, as well as new institutions that have survived over the next decade (critical journal, book editions, cultural centres, etc.).

These processes had very important effects also in education. In the circles of the League of Communists a plan for a new and thorough educational reform was formed, which is known as career-oriented education (official translation of that time). This was the last educational reform of the ancien régime; it was an ideological response to the socially critical and oppositional movements of the time, as well as a response to the increasingly tight economic challenges in the Federation. On one side, education was identified as the culprit for the “mismatch in the labour market”, as we would call it today, in the language of the European Commission and the OECD; on the other hand it aimed at stopping “socially unacceptable phenomena” as were activities by rebellious students and critical intelligence.

It would be difficult to argue that the design of the “oriented” education was completely ideological product, in which the research circles would have absolutely no words. A glance at the bibliography of that time is sufficient to reject such an argument. Certainly it is true that this reform, on the one hand, was launched as a prime political project; on the other hand, its creators were not totally blind for the trends which at that time appeared in the international field of educational sciences and educational policies. The theoretical concept of the Zagreb professor and politician Stipe Šušvar (holder of the new conception) on the integration of “school” and “factory” could be in some elements linked to the strategies that arose in the period after 1968 in the western world – and which were later gradually leading to what today is often marked as a “neoliberal” paradigm in education: education being reduced to a tool of economics (and political power). It seems paradoxical, but only at a glance.

According to this doctrine the following issues should be ensured in particular in education policy:

1. Equal starting opportunities for all – and this is a quality primary school and initial vocational education;
2. Selection regarding further education based on strict criteria for the quality of knowledge and skills;
3. The more generous approach to job training on the basis of demonstrated capability, gained work and self-managerial experiences. (Ela Ulrich Atena [the then Minister for Education], see Milharčič-Hladnik and Šušteršič 1986).

Five years later, the Law on Career-Oriented Education passed the Slovenian Assembly (1980); its main objectives were formulated as follows:

Oriented education is education for work and self-management, and results from the need of associated labour, social development and all-round personality development in socialist self-managing society. [...] Basic social aim of the career-oriented education is to create a free, responsible, creative, all-round developed personality in socialist self-managing society (Zakon 1980).

But the realization of these objectives and the law as a whole became not only the main – and extremely hot – topic in the field of political and expert discussion on education, but also one of those topics that later gradually lead to a “transition”. In this discussion educational researchers occupied a special position. The most acutely controversy took place in 1985, at a research colloquium entitled “All-round developed personality?”. The colloquium was organized in the framework of two research projects, which were implemented at Pedagogical Institute, and contributions to it were published in the journal *Problemi* (1985). Reasons for the colloquium were primarily in the necessity of a critical confrontation with the supporting reform category “all-round developed personality” (ADP) which was a conglomerate of ideology and pedagogical theory.

The starting point of the colloquium was that ADP is “the fundamental category of socialist pedagogy”, which is considered as “self-evident and unquestionable aim of the entire educational activity”. Therefore, “a thorough theoretical and conceptual analysis needed”. This concept is the “unstructured and vague” and “contains germs of potential ideologisation, it forces into pragmatic interpretations, depending on the current balance of power and partial interests”. This was reflected and exacerbated with controversies in connection with the reform of the career-oriented education. It abolished, for example, the general secondary school (gymnasium) and a final examination; there were only “career-oriented” (professional) secondary schools. These policy ideas led to harsh criticism by some academic fora and individual professors: schools, which would prepare students for university studies, were abolished. A law on

higher education was abolished as well and universities were legally regulated together with “oriented” secondary schools.

Various “informal circles”, especially gymnasia and university professors, were very critical of these reform plans and they wrote a petition (1982; nearly 1,000 signatures), addressed to the political authorities with a request to stop the reform. It was a great surprise and strong provocation to the current political establishment. On the other hand, within this movement a group of young researchers (the so-called School Field group) began systematically to engage in a critical analysis of education in general. In addition to traditional pedagogy [Pädagogik] they promoted sociological, anthropological, philosophical, historical, etc. approaches. The colloquium was thus part of this trend and has raised a lot of dust because it touched on one of the fundamental dogmas of the socialist pedagogy. To illustrate, let's look at just a few spoken and written observations:

[ADP] acts as a norm in whose name it is possible to take action against those who have not developed to the full, as an argument which can be used against anyone and to anything precisely because of its abstract character, once as an anti-intellectual slogan and, for example, against classical education, “gray” theory, etc., the other time as “anti-biologistic” support against the penetration of psychoanalysis in education. (E. Bahovec, *Vsestranska ...*: 3)

All-round developed personality means in the pedagogical and social discourse that it practically means nothing; it functions so that practically doesn't mean anything else but completely conformable personality, personality that is fully integrated in society. This is a real base; what is protruded from the social conformity, it is one-dimensionality or it is called so. (S. Žižek, *ibid.*: 13)

Even a cursory review of ADP definitions in textbooks, dictionaries, etc. in lands and real socialism and in our law on career-oriented education shows one key point: ADP acts always together with the category of “work as a fundamental value”. The aim, which is to be achieved through the establishment of ADP is therefore unambiguous: diligence, obedience, etc. (V. Miheljak, *ibid.*: 16)

If Stalin proclaimed that the class struggle tightens in the development of socialist society, today we learn that educational dictatorship exacerbates with the maturation of socialism. (T. Mastnak, *ibid.*: 43)

Colloquium had considerable repercussions in the media and brought much trouble to organizers. Nevertheless, anything serious happened to participants of the colloquium. One of the reasons was that at this time a new “liberal wave” (1986) already started in Slovenia, which led towards a “descent from power” of the Slovenian League of Communists and towards pluralisation of the political space. In 1990 Slovenian

Communists left the Yugoslav Congress; it took place in parallel with the formation of independent state and free parliamentary elections (1991). This was the “transition process”; its logic was quite different from other parts of the former common state, which were pushed in the fire of war in the coming years.

In general, the second half of the 1980s was very dynamic in the field of educational research and development. In the context of the new “liberal wave”, the results of the colloquium on the ADP encouraged free and critical discussion on almost all key issues of the national education system in the future. Criticisms of the concept of oriented education reform resulted in the fact that the law on education was thoroughly revised already in the socialist Assembly. Even before the end of the 1980s, therefore, there were important developments and changes in the education system. Gymnasium was reintroduced and its further development was closely linked with international trends (e.g. International Baccalaureate Organisation – IBO). Preparation work for the introduction of a new national external examination (Matura) was launched. Universities were given the mandate to draft a new law on higher education. A number of innovations sprung in primary education; initial teacher education was extended from 2 to 4 years, with a possibility to continue studies at the master’s and doctoral level. “Ideological” subjects were abolished from schools. A debate on private education in schools and kindergartens began, etc. Many teachers and educators took part in these turbulent developments but researchers from institutes and universities also played an extremely important role.

By the end-1990s all the key new democratic institutions were in place; last but not least, the new education system. Slovenia was preparing to enter the European Union. According to definitions this was the period of “transition”. Soon, the country found itself in the “post-transition” and we were faced with new problems.

Transition: political vs. academic discourse

There are two discourses which substantially determinate education and educational policy: political discourse and academic discourse. These two discourses are structurally different, to a large extent incompatible, yet both are interdependent. Periods when they are in mutual conflict are alternating with periods of cooperation. A necessary condition that science and research can actually “benefit society” is the existence of “enlightened” politics. The problem, however, is that this is not a sufficient condition; much also depends on science itself and its own enlightenment. The more the politics is losing the enlightened character, the more questionable is “usefulness” of research and it is becoming increasingly urgent that critical and provocative notes are strengthened in academic discourse, otherwise it can be reduced to an sterile apology. However, this is what the “non-enlightened” political discourse doesn’t like.

Did the “transition” lead to an enlightened politics? In fact, we should ask whether enlightened policy exists today? In its core, today's politics is less dependent on the national power relations, and increasingly on the world free market. It appears that the only science that politics entrusts today is economics, or rather its specific current that believes in the infallibility of the market and the effectiveness of austerity measures. This shift has had important consequences for the area of education in the recent period.

It is required from today's research to be relevant and that its results benefit. It is hard to dispute such a claim; it sounds so “rational” and “normal”: what else should be required from research institutions, funded by taxpayers' money? However, if you put the claim under a microscope, some tough questions occur. E.g. “relevance” and “benefit” are categories that presuppose an interest but the classical academic requirement has been that search for truth requires impartiality. How to solve the contradiction that this opens? Let us help with two famous names of the past.

At the first dawn of European culture, Plato wrote: „Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one [...], cities will never have rest from their evils, – nor the human race” (Plato, 1998: Book V:18). Over two thousand years later, at the end of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century, Kant answered him as follows:

That kings should philosophise, or philosophers become kings, is not to be expected. But neither is it to be desired; for the possession of power is inevitably fatal to the free exercise of reason. But it is absolutely indispensable, for their enlightenment as to the full significance of their vocations, that both kings and sovereign nations [...] should not allow the class of philosophers to disappear, nor forbid the expression of their opinions, but should allow them to speak openly (Kant, 1917: 160).

Today, the relationship between the “rulers” and “thinkers” plots in a new way, as the separation between them is increasingly vague and unclear. Rulers assume the role of thinkers and thinkers assume the role of rulers – but this is not the realization of Plato's utopia. Belgian researcher Maarten Simons speaks of “the hybrid character of the modern university housing both governmental and spiritual technologies” (Simons, 2007: 439). This is what makes the relationship between research (science) and politics (governance) more complex than it was in the past. Simons mentions that academic institutions can act as the “Republic of Scholars” who go beyond the state and civil society and their only practical and pragmatic interests. But even great leaders publish collected works – in a democracy – after the expiry of the mandate they work in universities.

Let us return to the requirement of the relevance and usefulness of research. I think that even in the categories of "Republic of Scholars" the importance of practical relevance of research can't be denied; only dirty details of what we understand by "relevance" remains open. Relevance and usefulness of the so-called "useless academic theories" can be confirmed also in a negative way: in a way of critical analysis of the present and the past. The practical significance of social sciences "rests on shaping the conditions for the future" and, therefore, social sciences "have to be forward looking" (Teichler, 2003: 171). This is the point at which social research comes in close touch to politics, activism and alternative social practices. The mixture of these three components is anything but harmless: "Research can be future-conscious if it raises the critical questions and counter-hypothesis to the assumption of the actors" (Teichler, 2003: 181). Herein lies the source of the problem.

The more the dividing line between "philosophizing" and "governance" becomes loose, the more we have to deal with another shade of relativity of research. In the context of the so-called transitional and post-transitional societies this relativity often occurs with a particular justification, e.g.: "Democracy requires pluralism of political parties – and what's wrong, if you ask for pluralism among researchers and experts?" This trend will be briefly outlined by a controversy which occurred in Slovenia in the middle of the previous decade. Fifteen years after the so-called transition and democratization of education the country was faced with a necessity to reflect on situation and to decide about further developments.

In 2005, the Ministry of Education issued a document that would indicate the direction for further development of the education system. But unlike the documents from the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, this document came to the public without mentioning the authors who have written it as well as without any prior consultation with research and developmental institutions. Therefore, a public question was addressed to the Ministry: Who are the authors and on which bases their claims were justified? Two answers were given: according to the first names were not given, because the Ministry don't want to expose these experts to public criticism; on the other hand, it was said that the documents was written by the ministry officials themselves as it is their duty.

This has led to public controversy, in which one of the participants pointed out that the argument of the Ministry is not new at all:

We used it before some twenty years ago [i.e., around 1985]. But then [...] it was a time when the only real profession [i.e. expertise] was considered Marxist, or more precisely, diamat [i.e. dialectical materialism] pedagogy. At the time, this thesis opened a space of freedom for a variety of so-called "bourgeois theories" and philosophical views on education. Today, the repetition of the argument in

circumstances where it was raised as an argument in defence of the measures taken [at the Ministry], is leading to a complete relativism. It wants to create an impression that all professional [i.e., expert] views and ideas are equal, equally well-grounded, and that it therefore does not matter which of them educational policy takes into account (Kodelja, 2005).

Similar examples can definitely be found in other places. Clearly, the issue here is not the kind of the “pre-transition” conflict, in which “kings” periodically suspended “philosophers”. No, today we live in a democracy and we act on a free market. This case reminds us that we are today faced with the phenomenon of the relativity of research. Researchers offer their products “on the market” and “customers” are free to choose. This issue extends beyond the edges of this contribution; it raises the question of education and the role of researchers in the “post-transition”. We will save it for a next opportunity.

Conclusion

The iconic Slovenian weekly magazine *Mladina* recently posted two flags across the whole page (15.1.2016: 3): one with a white cross on a red square and the other with a red cross on a white square. Under the first it is said “Dreams 1991” and the second “Dreams 2016”. Really eloquent. Around 1991 it was not rare that the national future was announced with a metaphor of “Slovenian Switzerland”. And the today’s role of charity organisations that are not besieged only by migrants from the Middle East, but also by the poor locals, was unthinkable before a quarter of a century.

Particularly in small countries, international context is required to understand the so-called transition. It helps that it is possible to imagine the transition from “here” to “there”. I realized this very early. In 1971, I was a first year student at the University of Ljubljana and I visited a foreign university for a first time. It was in Amsterdam where I came by hitchhiking, met some students and stayed for three weeks with them. Foreign university was so different from home; but also my former country, Yugoslavia, was so different from the “Eastern bloc”. Unlike the countries of the “Eastern bloc”, we needed neither a visa nor permission to travel to the West. The problem was money and, therefore, “academic pilgrimage” was a scarce commodity. Mobility was allowed, but not enabled. My last academic journey from the period of “former regime” led me to a conference on perestroika in Oxford. It was in spring 1990: four colleagues were travelling by an old car and with containers of cheap Yugoslav gasoline in the trunk. During a stop somewhere close to Frankfurt, German police surprised us and took it for security reasons. But we didn’t pay any fine. They were very friendly; for the whole of Europe these were interesting times, full of expectations.

Then the 1990s came. With the disintegration of a country with 21 million inhabitants its education system also decayed. Yet, just before its sad end Yugoslavia negotiated an entry in the EU Tempus programme. At this watershed period, Slovenia, which avoided fiery cauldron, was the only one in the region who received significant funding from the Tempus programme. This was the first great new opportunity: we used it to thoroughly strengthen academic cooperation in Europe, and it indirectly contributed a lot to the development of a new national system. It was only at the beginning of 2000, this programme included other countries in the region, which was now renamed as – the Western Balkans.

The transformation of education in this region was also held at a different logic than in the countries of the former “Eastern Bloc”. It is not only the context of the wars that have devastated the greater part of the region. From a relatively uniform system of the former state (at least) seven national systems were created; today their comparability and compatibility is provided rather by some of the “common European principles” than by a common past. However, European and/or international cooperation is developed to quite different levels from system to system and from one educational institution to another; it typically depends on the level of European integration which individual countries have achieved. International mobility has increased, but it largely differs across countries and sub-regions. To travel to the “West” today, many people need a visa, which was unknown under the “former regime”. On the other hand, in the autumn of 2015 Slovenia set the razor wire fence on the border with Croatia. The symbolic dimension of this action goes far beyond the problem of migrants. All this creates mixed feelings. Even in the field of education. In the twenty-five years, the distance between the top and below-average education increased significantly. This could be optimistically rated as an achievement, if it had not sounded so cynical.

Are there unfulfilled hopes? Of course, there are. On the one hand, it is always the case with human desires that some are not realistic at all. But the number of those who have had experience – extensive enough – of the former system is declining according to natural laws; thereby their unfulfilled hopes are vanishing. They will soon be covered with unmet hopes of the new generation. Paradoxically: it raises optimism.

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