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*Colloquia Humanistica 4 (2015)**Neighbourhood as a Cultural and Social Problem*

COLLOQUIA



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11th Congress of South-East European Studies. Sofia 2015

The 11th Congress of South-East European Studies took place in Sofia, Bulgaria, between 31 August and 4 September 2015. It was organised by the International Association for Southeast European Studies (AIESEE – Association Internationale d'Études du Sud-Est Européen).

When reviewing such significant cyclical events as congresses and conferences organised by AIESEE every five years (congresses) or annually (in the case of conferences), we also have to mention the International Association itself. It was established in April 1963 as an offshoot of an international symposium held the year before (1962) by the Romanian National Commission for UNESCO. The event focused on the Balkans and South-Eastern Europe. Debates held at that time were the main inspiration behind the establishment of a permanent commission composed of researchers from around the world focused on that European region. Its members are associated in national commissions making up AIESEE. One of them is the Polish Commission, appointed during the 10th Congress, held in Paris in 2009.

The 11th Congress in Sofia was traditionally held under the patronage of UNESCO in co-operation with such institutions as the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, Sofia Municipality, the American Research Center in Sofia, and the Institut français in Sofia. It was organised by a group of scientists from Bulgaria's leading research and development

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centres, including the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences with its Institute of Balkan Studies and Centre of Thracology, as well as the Economic Research Institute, and the Institute for Historical Studies. Other partners included the University of National and World Economy in Sofia, the G.S. Rakovski Defence Academy, and St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University.

Worth mentioning was the prestigious setting of the five-day Congress in the Hilton Hotel, where all events (including the opening day and the closing ceremony attended by all participants) were held. In the evening of the first day, a classical music concert was brilliantly performed by the Sofia Soloists Chamber Orchestra conducted by Prof. Plamen Djouroff. The orchestra performed works of such composers as Camille Saint-Saëns, Béla Bartók, and Alfred Schnittke. The passionate, virtuoso performance took place in the Auditorium of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Visitors who wanted to enrich their Congress experience or wished to spend a few extra days in the picturesque Bulgarian countryside had a chance to visit a number of exquisite locations. They could enjoy two all-day excursions: a trip to the Rila Monastery, located about 100km south of Sofia, and an excursion to the town of Kazanlak, about 200 km away from the Bulgaria's capital. Set in the heart of the famous Valley of Roses, Kazanlak used to be the seat of Thracian kings and boasts numerous objects of cultural significance dating back to the ancient Thracian period, one of them – the Thracian Tomb – currently listed as a UNESCO's World Heritage Site. Finally, after the Congress wrapped up, there was another, three-day excursion that took visitors along the trail of tourist attractions in various regions of the country: Plovdiv-Kardzhali-Kazanlak-Veliko Turnovo.

First and foremost, however, the Congress was a scientific event that brought in more than 250 researches and academics from all around the world, whose efforts and work focus on South-Eastern Europe. During each of the thematic panels held between 1 and 3 September, 5 to 25 papers were presented. The speakers explored a number of topics from various academic fields, including history, linguistics, cultural studies, literature studies, musicology, political science, and international relations.

The historical panels focused on different periods: there were presentations on the integration of the Illyrians, archaeological records, and epigraphic evidence from the Roman Empire period, the integration of the Greeks within the mediaeval Principality of Achaëa, as well as Western European political solutions for the 19th century Balkans. There were also recurring 20th century topics and themes: the role of the Greeks as the *carriers of the European civilisation*, the region's industrialisation, social integration as shaped by the construction of railroads in the Ottoman Empire, or the establishment of modern Turkey as a result of Kemal Atatürk's reforms.

Additionally, the historical panels featured interdisciplinary presentations on the history of culture and history of international relations. The delivered papers offered a profound insight into Ohrid's role as a place of cultural integration and discussed the failure of integration and co-operation between religious organisations. A wide range of topics in international relations included such issues as conditions for the development of economic relations in the Mediterranean Basin from the 11th to the 17th centuries, social and economic changes, the presence of the West in the region in the 19th century as exemplified by Thessaloniki, and also cultural assimilation underlying cultural (and other) relations existing between the South-Eastern Europe and the Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the modern era. A few presentations dealt with the Russian-Romanian or Serbian-Albanian relations at the turn of the 20th century, French and Italian influences in the region in the 20th century, and the regional multinational experience of community as an outcome of both the Christian and Roman legacies.

The interdisciplinary panels also dwelled on a range of other, mutually intertwined topics relating to history, anthropology, and the mass media, dealing with such issues as the shaping of Bulgarian national identity and the way how this process was fostered by by the media in the 19th century. In fact, the topic of national identity was discussed in a broader context, which is especially important in view of the present day integration, and the ongoing search for the European identity and traces of *Europeanness* in the Balkan region from the mediaeval times until present. Another interesting discussion focused on the modern culture of remembrance about the deportations of Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War.

Among the historical panels (including sessions that explored recent history) there were two events: one dedicated to the Black Sea region and another focusing on the issue of the Republic of Serbia. The papers presented in the Black Sea section dwelled on both historical issues of political significance and modern topics, such as security and the influence the European Union has been exerting on the region in the recent years. The Serbian panel revolved around the issue of the influence of the European policy on the Serbian state in 19th and 20th centuries, as well as on the outcomes of the internal policies of Yugoslavia, of which the Serbs were a part, in the interwar period and the Communist era.

Yugoslavia and integration-related topics were also reviewed during the political panel that offered an analysis of Yugoslavism after the death of Josip Broz and after the year 2000. Participants of the session discussed the process of historical reinterpretation (particularly in the context of the 20th century history) dating back to the post-Communist era, as well as the period of political and economic transformation in post-Yugoslav states.

The panellists had a chance to discuss the period of transformation set off by the fall of the Eastern Bloc, the formation of democratic states and problems related to the process. They looked into the evolution of ideologies and political leadership and the paths leading towards the *European integration*.

The political panels also featured interdisciplinary presentations (discussing ethnographic, sociological, cultural, and linguistic topics), addressing such issues as demographic changes and minorities from a perspective of modern politics. Some of the topics reviewed were more general in nature, like ethnic changes in the Balkans in the 20th century and minorities in the context of aspirations on the part of various nations to join the European Union. There were also more specific presentations, dealing with such topics as, for example, Islam, Muslim groups and their political and social relations. One of the panels focused exclusively on Muslim communities in Europe and featured papers on religion, migration, culture, and identity of Muslim groups who have lived in Europe for centuries, as well as of those who came to Europe after the Second World War. Additionally, there were analyses of the situation of specific ethnic groups, including Slavic minorities in Albania, the Gorani people in Kosovo, Aromanians, the Gagauz people, and Pomaks. Other issues that were explored included linguistic identification and identity of the selected ethnic groups and the language policy implemented in particular states or regions.

Papers on international relations were less numerous, yet the panels that focused on those problems were topically diverse. They dealt with the existence of and co-operation between nation states in Southern Europe in the 20th century as well as the modern economic crisis and its impact on the integration policy. Some speakers were interested in the economic policies of European and Asian countries (particularly China and Russia) in South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, the NATO's military policy in this corner of the European continent both during and after the Cold War as well as the NATO's presence and the role of the Russian Federation in the Balkans.

The literary studies panels focused on the analysis of both historical (e.g. 17th and 18th centuries) and contemporary literature in the context of the Balkans. References were made to European and international literature. Some papers discussed links between Balkan and Western European poets and writers in the 19th and 20th centuries, others presented profiles of Bulgarian, Turkish, and Greek men of letters.

Some presentations were dedicated to the so-called engaged literature. They focused on a body of works produced in Greece in the interwar period dealing with the new reality after the First World War, border changes, and the shock caused by the tragedies brought about by military conflicts.

Another presentation offered an interdisciplinary insight into the influences of Ismail Kadare's work on the shaping of national identity.

Some speakers discussed the area of historiography: there were presentations on archives, the writing of history, and the historiographic discourse in the South-Eastern Europe relating to the 20th century, and more distant past.

Next to the literary panels, separate sessions were dedicated to linguistics. Speakers in the section compared Balkan and European linguistic concepts to discuss issues including theoretical research on the changing idea and typologies of linguistic terms. There were also presentations on the study of alphabets and ancient languages, focusing on the Glagolitic alphabet or analysing the linguistic structures of old Russian songs. The papers delivered in this section offered an interesting insight into the multi-ethnic character of South-Eastern Europe, discussing the common origins of the region's languages, language evolution, the fusion of Slavic and non-Slavic languages, and providing a semantic analysis of the languages spoken in multi-ethnic and multilingual countries.

Another panel focused on musical studies and had as many as 25 speakers presenting papers on a wide range of topics. There were analyses of the works of Cypriot composers as artists coming from a place where Europe and Asia converge, presentations discussing music as a socialisation tool (music for peace) and contributions dedicated to the Caucasus region and the structure of the traditional *muğam* music in Yo-Yo Ma's work as well as the Silk Road organisation started by that outstanding musician. In addition to the presentations on Georgian music, there were papers dedicated to musical traditions of Albania, Macedonia, and Croatia, the Byzantine musical culture and Balkan religious music. Speakers focused on both music of the past and contemporary music (including popular and traditional) and on the influence that the political transformation and migrations after 1989 have had on its evolution. The final section was about new trends in musicology, especially in Serbia, Greece, and Romania. The session also reviewed musical historiography and changes in musical education of the first half of the 19th century and following the political transformation of 1989.

The final part of the Congress featured papers on mass-media topics presented as part of a thematic panel focusing mainly on Albanian media in Albania and Kosovo. Two of them explored the Western Balkans and the Bulgarian media in general.

The Congress also saw the Polish Commission debuting as a separate AIESEE unit, offering a very interesting interdisciplinary panel. Entitled *Vision of European Integration vs. the Image of Europe in the Balkans*.

The Historical and Educational Discourse, the session was run by the Commission's representatives Jolanta Sujecka and Jędrzej Paszkiewicz. The panel comprised two parts and was attended by researchers and academics from Poland, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Greece, and Italy, who discussed a wide spectrum of research material. There were presentations on the history of ideas, political subjects, cultural studies, the media and, finally, the history of church, all of which drew a large number of participants interested in the topics. Historical papers dealt with the 19th century Balkans as seen through the eyes of the French of the Napoleon era, and as reflected in some Turkish sources, but also offered perspectives on the region in the 20th century. One of the presentations explored the issue of Bulgarian policies in the interwar period and the political crossroads at which the country found itself at that time. There was also a paper that dealt with the way events from the Communist-era Yugoslavia are remembered today. Besides strictly historical papers, there were also presentations that focused on visions and concepts of Europe and the identity of new states based on the works of Krste P. Misirkov and on documents concerning the evolution of these phenomena; some presenters discussed integration ideas developed in the process of unifying the Serbian territories and more generally in South-Eastern Europe in the light of scientific and popular literature. Another important presentation analysed the modern educational discourse, revealing the instrumental use of history in the development of schoolbooks, as exemplified by Croatia, Hungary, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Politically-oriented papers delivered in the Polish panel focused on the Western Balkans: Croatian, Serbian, and Albanian transformation, European integration and the perception of these processes, covering a period between the early 1990s and the present. There was also a presentation on the very relevant topic of Albanian-Serbian relations in the context of challenges facing ethnic policy, shaped to a large extent by the influence exerted on the region's states by the European Union. Both the Serbs and Albanians are striving to become part of the EU and in order to achieve that they have to overcome ethnic animosities and reach the political standards required by the European Union. A mass-media-oriented presentation discussed the interaction between the European ideas and the Balkan integration, as presented in the Serbian daily "Politika," while another talk focused on the stance of autocephalous churches (in Ukraine and the Balkans) in the context of integration.

South-Eastern Europe is an area looked upon by world powers with a large amount of ambivalence. As the region's states are not considered to be key global players, the events that occur in this part of the continent draw attention that is cyclical in nature. Though relatively small, the area has been

a point of interest for many researchers for over 100 years due to its ethnic diversity and the related inherent multi-nationality, the scale of which is not encountered anywhere else in Europe. The cultural, linguistic, and religious pluralism of this region often produces specific social amalgams. Cyclical interest aside, for a little more than a century the main European (and not only European) political powers have been making efforts to exert influence in the region, understanding the significance of its geographic location, where the East meets the West. Regardless of the changing dynamics of the interest in South-Eastern Europe, the region will certainly remain one of the most fascinating focus areas for researchers and academics across the world, who will have a chance meet again not in five, but in four years at another congress, this time to be held in Romanian Constanța, to discuss issues and topics related to this corner of the world.

About

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