



Europa eine Seele geben A Soul for Europe Une âme pour l'Europe Дати душу Європи

Much past, more future

Forum Belgrade, a public exchange of views between people from Eastern and Western Europe about the questions that arise in connection with European cooperation and the role played in it by culture, was held in the Serbian capital Belgrade on 30 and 31 March. Felix Meritis was one of the organisers of the meeting, together with the Berlin-based 'A Soul for Europe'. The participants included several politicians from European Union institutions and from individual European countries, but the tone was set by a diverse company of people who play an intermediary role of some kind between the government and the arts, directors and programmers of cultural and debating centres. They joined in the search for ideas and methods to guarantee the vitality of civic society, particularly in the young democracies of Eastern Europe.

The emphasis was on guests from Bulgaria and Romania, which only entered the European Union recently, and on the politico-cultural class of Serbia that longingly tries to look beyond Serb nationalism and isolationism. What is the relation between national peculiarities and transnational cultural life in Europe, how do independent cultural institutions deal with the ambitions of their governments and their social responsibilities, what can you expect from international cooperation, can we learn from one another's experiences, is the relation between Eastern and Western Europe necessarily asymmetrical, and if it is, how do you cope with it there?

The two days of debates and workshops centred on these and similar questions. Michaël Zeeman chaired a number of the discussions and reports on them.

A memorable moment during the public exchanges of views in Belgrade at the end of last March. With some measure of pathos – the location encourages that, after all – you could speak of a disconcerting moment, even of a watershed.

One of 'us', in other words a member of the delegation from Western Europe, from countries with a long record of democracy and of membership of the European Union – countries, in short, that can allow themselves a degree of light-hearted scepticism and frivolous self-mockery regarding democracy and the Union – has just made mincemeat of the statement by the Bulgarian Minister of Culture that has been read out. In spite of his initial promise to take part in person, the minister himself turned out to be unable to come at the last minute, so one of his officials has had to act as his spokesman – that is, he has read out the letter, which he probably composed himself, with a mixture of appropriate modesty and timid dignity. After all, it bears the signature of his minister.

That member of 'our' delegation does not like it: neither the statement nor the way in which it is presented. 'Bullshit', you can see him thinking, rocking back and forth in his chair as he endures the reading session, sweating with irritation.

Many of 'us' feel reassured by his dramatic body language: after all, he is familiar with the conventions of behaviour of the countries of Central Europe which used to have 'real existing Socialism'. He may have made his career among us, in the West, but he originally came from here, from Belgrade. His irritation is a windfall.

And the fact that he makes no secret of it is a relief: so our irritation is apparently justified too: 'I am a cultural activist', he says provocatively, after the crestfallen Bulgarian official has finished mumbling. 'I know them, the fine phrases of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture. They have not understood a bit of it, everything has remained as it was. Packaged in hypocrisy.'

So far no news from the Balkan front.

But then it happens. One of 'them', a young woman from Cluj in Romania, who has energetically and keenly taken part in the debates, asks to speak. With a three-month-old Bordeaux

red European passport in your pocket and less than two decades of standing on your own democratic feet, what do you want? Freedom is there for you to grab, including freedom of expression.

'I do not agree', she says, rather bashfully at first in the face of the Western superiority and experience in discussion, but gaining confidence as she proceeds. 'It is not a question of opposing the government on principle, but of trying to find solutions to their problems. After all, they are ours too. There is not much point in proposing cultural activism as the alternative to the minister's clumsy attempts.'

Her words part the waters like Moses' rod: a cultural division, a generational division, a division of starting point and vision. The way that participants from Sofia, Timisoara and Belgrade agree with her provokes a mild embarrassment in 'our' delegate: here is someone speaking who probably carries a heavy cultural baggage with her, but it is also someone with a future ahead. Here is someone who is looking for a relation between people and state, between civilian and government, someone who is perhaps bowed down by all that past, but who at the same time perks up at the sight of the opportunities that the future still affords. Here is someone who is not in the mood for deep-seated oppositions.

'Democracy', I note, 'is a verb: it can make you pretty tired and get you into a rut, but you can also regard it as an invitation.'

If a meeting like *Forum Belgrade*, which Felix Meritis organised in March 2007 together with several other organisations, teaches you anything, it is that although the relations between Eastern and Western Europe may be asymmetrical, that does not mean that there is also a hierarchy in terms of politics, political experience and political forms of behaviour. Living together is not just a matter of experience; it is also one of ambition.

I mean that the novices in European cooperation may have had less training in the practice of democratic debate and a relation of trust with the government, but that does not necessarily make them less solid participants in civil society. To combat that assumption is to implicitly recognise that it exists and that it is regularly applied: it would be naïve not to do so. Young democracies, young Europeans: they all have to learn.

Compare it with the bitter observation that the Bulgarian recently appointed to the European Commission made during the same meeting: we know a lot about your cultures, but you do not know anything about ours. Except that I was personally offended by it for a moment – for more than twenty-five years I have been engaged in telling my compatriots about the secrets of the literature of Central and Eastern Europe, while who in Bulgaria is doing the same for the literature of the Netherlands, Flanders or Denmark? – she is right, of course. The cultural relations are asymmetrical: 'they' have become members of 'us', not vice versa.

And the same goes for politics.

And that is precisely what makes them interesting, the difference in expectation between the old, tired, ironical and sometimes even frivolous part of Europe – think of the coquettish Dutch 'no' to the European Constitution – and the new, restless, more serious and ambitious part.

The confrontation with it has something unpredictable – hand in weapons at the reception desk, how many borders have I passed? – but also something challenging. The questions concerning the rules of behaviour of civil society are after all the same, whether they focus on the democratic deficit of the European Union or on the curbing of liberties of the premissive society. That is where a beginner can sometimes choose more surprising approaches than an old hand. As I have already said, democracy is a verb: only those who have to work hard at it learn from the process.

Michaël Zeeman