



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summer School

"The Evolution of mentalities in Eastern Europe and the Future of the European Project"

4-9 September 2005

Vama Veche (Romania)

Introduction

The ambition of the seminar organized by the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies (LIEIS), the Black Sea University Foundation and the European Cultural Center, Bucharest, from 4 to 9 September 2005 in Vama Veche was to bring together postgraduate students and young researchers from various Eastern European countries. There were participants from Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Turkey, Ukraine, and Spain. Whereas in previous years about half of the participants came from ministries, administrations, political parties, media etc., this year the non-academic world was represented only by a few people from the Office of the European Commission in Bucharest (which by the way paid for their participation).

Focus

The focus was on the change of mentalities, if any, and its possible implications for the participation in the European project. Among the main items discussed were:

- a new look at the concept of mentality as used by historians and social scientists
- perceptions of differences in mentality between various Eastern European countries
- possible mental lines of divide between Eastern and Western Europe
- mentalities under communism and since the early 90s



- correlations between mentalities on the one hand, economic and societal progress on the other hand (taking into account concepts such as social capital and trust)
- how may mentalities affect the participation in the European project?
- mentalities and national minorities: Roma, Jews, Muslims
- is there, and should there be, a convergence of mentalities in the wider Europe?

Format

The seminar was conceived as a brainstorming exercise (laboratoire d'idées) where freewheeling discussions would hopefully lead to the emergence of new ideas and insights. This exercise would eventually help the young academics to understand each other and their nations better, get rid of some old stereotypes and show the way towards new approaches. The sessions were introduced and the discussions steered by Armand Clesse with the active involvement of Prof. Gerhard Michael Ambrosi from the University of Trier and Mario Hirsch. Prof. Dumitru Sandu of the University of Bucharest and Prof. Mircea Malitza, President of the Black Sea University Foundation, made more formal presentations on specific topics.

The seminar was funded by the LIEIS; most of the organizational and logistical tasks were assumed by Maria Popescu and the staff from the European Cultural Center.

The concept of mentality

Participants were asked to give their own definition of mentality and they came up with a variety of propositions: mentality as the way people are coping with the world; a set of conceptions of life and people; the mindset of people to interpret the external world, the historical and social aspects; a superstructure of social presentation for coordinating lives where one presentation may clash with another one; a concept related to the one of "Weltanschauung"; one should distinguish between a cognitive and a behavioral part; a community influences the mentality of individuals whereas mentality makes one feel part of a community; a key word for interaction with life; something that one inherits; language and innate knowledge are important in this context; the way people think and behave depends on identity; one should distinguish between social and personal mentality and take into account a centuries-old experience; there is a body of values which coin mentality and vice versa.

There were some discussions about the use of the concept of mentality in the works of the French historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre dealing above all with feudal society, and the world historian Fernand Braudel.

Three working groups were set up to discuss the following items, formulated in a slightly polemical style: Is the Western European mentality superior to the Eastern European one? Is the American mentality superior to the European mentality? Is the Asian mentality superior to the Western mentality? These groups were to prepare short reports. (s. two reports enclosed)

A number of possible correlations between factors such as size, climate, geographical location, religion, political institutions, historical experience on the one hand and mentality on the other hand were debated.

Is it more difficult to change a mentality that has been prevailing for a very long time? Can one talk about a Balkan mentality? Is there perhaps something like a Balkan mentality where the individual tries above all to fool the system?

Most societies seem only to be able to function on the basis of myths, a selective interpretation of history or even collective lies.

Perceptions of mentality and national prejudice

Participants from various countries described how they perceive themselves and how they perceive others, particularly their neighbors.

What should one do about stereotypes? Try to get rid of them through education? It seems that it will be impossible to eradicate all stereotypes. Moreover not all stereotypes are necessarily bad.

- *Albania*: In Albania there has been a lot of distortion of history. Albanians used to say “Our best neighbor is the sea”. All neighbors have been perceived as bad. Albanians see themselves as hospitable. People of the South of the country perceive themselves as more open and warmer than the people of the Northern part (Enver Hodja didn’t like the North himself).

In Western Europe people often have a negative image of Albania: “Albanian mafia”, honor killings. There is a revival of religion, even of religious fundamentalism. People want only to talk about the last 15 years and not about what happened before.

- *Macedonia*: Macedonians often exhibit an attitude of humility and even self-deprecation. They think of Serbs as being aggressive, conquering and nationalistic. Bosnians used to be considered to be the most tolerant (s. Mostar), joyful and having a good sense of humor. Tito tried to unify the cultures of the various parts of Yugoslavia but failed. In fact he wanted to make the Serbian culture the dominant one.
- *Turkey*: In Turkey there are enormous differences between urban and rural areas and there are different types of Islam. The change from a big empire to a relatively small nation-state has caused frustration and mistrust. A strong military spirit is permeating the Turkish society. There has traditionally been a sense of bravery, honor, strength and patriotism. There is also a strong longing for hierarchy. People from Anatolia accept hierarchy more easily. There is in Turkey quite a high degree of military mentality. At the same time Turkish people have in general a positive outlook on life.
- *Armenia*: The Armenians feel as victims (self-victimization). As to their perception of Azerbaijanis one can almost talk of a mirror image. One can notice a certain revival of communism as well as a growing nationalism; this nationalism goes together with a pro-Russian attitude. There has been a decline of religious faith, now there seems to be a revival.
- *Bulgaria*: Bulgarians contrary to Romanians are not anti-Semitic. They are also more egalitarian and more self-critical. Bulgarians see themselves as the most aesthetic of all people.
- *Lithuania*: Lithuanians have the mentality of children looking for new parents (above all the EU). There exist negative stereotypes about Estonians (far less about Latvians). Lithuanians do not like Poles because they perceive them as arrogant. One part of the Lithuanians hate Russians, the other part not. Lithuanians see themselves as sad, conservative and pessimistic people.



- *Latvia*: The Baltic states are very individualistic. They are also longing for paternalism. There is no tradition of working together. The perception by Latvians of Estonians is a positive one. Russians are perceived as arrogant. The Latvians see themselves as introverted.
- *Ukraine*: West Ukrainians dislike the Russians and East Ukrainians whereas East Ukrainians have not such negative feelings towards West Ukrainians or Russians. It is not well regarded in Eastern Ukraine to have friends in Western Ukraine. There are strong differences of mentality between people working in agriculture and those in mining.
- *Moldova*: Moldovans are politically apathetic. There is a major difference between Russian-speaking and Moldovan-speaking Moldovans. Moldovans seem to be even more submissive than Romanians.
- *Romania*: Romanian intellectuals such as Mihail Sebastian, Emil Cioran, Panait Istrati have described Romanians sometimes as fatalistic but also slightly megalomaniac, subdued, endowed often with a low self-esteem and a tendency to blame others for their mishaps. Romanians often see themselves as having good humor, as being optimistic and hospitable people.

Romanians tend to perceive Transylvanians as having strong intellects but also of being slow, Moldovans being quick but superficial. Social capital seems to be higher in Transylvania than in the rest of Romania. Hungarians are often perceived as stubborn, cruel, obsessive and nationalistic but also as serious and reliable; they are sometimes seen as a threat but there is also a high number of mixed marriages between Hungarians and Romanians.

Prof. Mircea Malitza, President of the Black Sea University Foundation, former Minister of Education and former Ambassador to the United Nations, in his presentation referred to the work of Geo Bogza who distinguishes between two types of Romanians, those from the Danube who are outward-looking and those from the mountains who are inward-looking. Lucian Blaga also talked about Romanians as the children of the hills and the valleys.

The various regions of Romania were occupied by foreigners; until 1848 there was a pervasive feeling of insecurity and mistrust. This meant that the people had to become quick-minded, to adapt rapidly to new circumstances. Under the feudal system from the 12th, and up to the 18th, century the peasants formed communities. Inside the Ottoman Empire Romanians enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. The peasants had to pay their tribute in grain since the Turks didn't accept corn. That's why the Romanians started to eat corn themselves.

The institutions were terribly corrupt: there were no salaries; to have a privileged position was considered sufficient. The historical experience was the same for Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldova. As to Romanians abroad there has always been a lack of solidarity between them.

M. Malitza has experienced five dictatorships in his life. Royal; iron guard; military dictatorship (Antonescu); dictatorship of proletariat; personal dictatorship (Ceausescu). All five dictatorships were bloody.

Romanians are like the *“roseau dans la fable de Fontaine qui plie mais ne rompt pas”*.

The last 15 years in Romania have witnessed a lot of destruction. The transition has caused unbelievable suffering.

Culture, argues M. Malitza, is everything that is specific - contrary to civilization. Cultures produce war. Fortunately the construction on which Europe is based is about civilizations.

Other participants described the Romanians as very creative people endowed with a great sense of humor, spontaneous, superficial and flexible. They prefer to be vague rather than explicit in their statements. There has been a strong Western influence and a more oriental one in Moldova. One may talk about a conjectural mentality. Romanians tend to be tormented about their mentality. It is said that people from the South of Romania have a winner's mentality.

There is a major gap between the old and the new generation. The parents tend to be fatalistic and pessimistic. Young people are looking for clues regarding their identity.

Some participants stressed a survival mentality of Romanians as well as their individualistic character (tendency to "go-it-alone"). At the same time the Romanian society is quite family-oriented. Another trait might be a certain duplicity, double standards (school *versus* home) and double-speak. During the Ceausescu years one found even a lot of treason inside families.

A few participants mentioned the Romanian tendency of shying away from responsibility. Communism may have reinforced certain traits but certainly has not changed anything in a fundamental sense. The question is how one can recover from a certain imposed mentality.

One may wonder why there is no public pressure to learn about the communist past. It seems that people in power since the end of the Ceausescu regime do everything to prevent a scrutinizing of the past.

Constantin Radulescu Motru referred to the collective spirit of Romanians but also their gregarism, the lack of pride about their own work.

Correlations, interactions and divergences

Among the issues that were debated were the relationship between various religions and mentality, between isolation and mentality (the differences in mentality between people living near the sea, for example Black Sea, Mediterranean, and those in the mountains), between a political system and mentality (how far does a given political system shape the mentality of a nation but also how far does a certain mentality favor the emergence and preservation of a given political system), between institutions and mentality ("*esprit de corps*"), between the size of a country and the prevailing mentality.

Most participants agreed that music tells a lot about the mentality of people. In many East European countries music tends to be very sad (particularly in Georgia, Armenia, etc.)

Among the most delicate issues debated were those relating to the question whether there is a specific Jewish mentality and whether the Roma differ in their mentality on the majority of the people in the countries they live.

Prof. Dumitru Sandu, sociologist at the University of Bucharest, submitted some empirical findings about the Roma communities. He defined mentality as a pattern of values transmitted through socialization and associated with certain groups and organizations.

D. Sandu stressed the importance of language and the fact that the highest degree of identification seems to exist in poor communities. He distinguished between various types of discrimination of the Roma: unequal access to public goods; limitation of social interaction; artificial labeling of the Roma as deviants and what he called "fuzzy" discrimination. He insisted on the importance of institutions in building social trust. What distinguishes the Roma minority and the ethnic majority in Romania is for example the lower mobility of Roma, the



specific jobs they are assuming (trade, music, certain crafts), language, housing and living conditions.

Some of the participants seemed to share the existing prejudices about Roma. Most however were critical about the situation of the Roma in their country: the participant from Lithuania, for example, described how waitresses refuse to serve a cup of tea to Roma, and doctors refusing to treat them.

In Albania where Roma do not consider themselves as Albanians, they are discriminated against in every respect. In Armenia there exist special villages with the Roma trying to survive as beggars. In Bulgaria they were obliged under communism to register and settle in specific areas. Many now are said to have destroyed their “houses” on purpose and gone to the tribunals or European institutions. A majority of the Romanians think of the Roma as a burden and people who cannot be educated.

Is there, will there be, should there be a European mentality?

What, if any, are the prerequisites for being a “good European”? Is the “ideal European” a particularly rational, focused, future-oriented, problem-solving-minded person endowed with a feeling of solidarity, a specific ethos and approach of life as well as of work? If so, is the objective then to bring everybody to that standard so that after some time there may emerge a completely harmonized union where there will be no major clashes of basic attitudes? In Romania most people really don’t know what it means to be European, except when it comes to very practical things.

What kind of Europe is there to come out of the integration process? Should national characteristics and thus also mentalities be preserved or rather eradicated? How far is a preservation of national characteristics compatible with a well-functioning EU? Is a change of mentality a prerequisite for membership in the EU? One may take the example of Turkey and examine how that country tries to conform itself to imposed norms, but does such a change enter the blood or will it remain at the level of the skin. And anyway: is it desirable? There seems to be a strange paradox here: while many things are falling apart in Western Europe at a fundamental level the EU tries to impose rigid standards at a technical one. One may ask to which degree the EU is afraid of thinking beyond the *acquis communautaire*.

Do mentalities have to change in Eastern Europe? In Western Europe? In both parts of Europe?

It is a fact that many people tend to hide behind figures, so-called facts and want to avoid any painful debate.

There were also some discussions between mentality and economic success referring to Max Weber and the protestant ethic, to Confucianism, to Fordism, to Taylorism.

Similarities and differences in gender issues between Eastern and Western Europe were hotly debated.

Conclusion

The seminar was certainly the best ever co-organized by the LIEIS in the framework of the Black Sea University, in terms of the intrinsic quality of the participants and the intellectual level of the discussions.

All the participants were highly involved throughout the seminar. They were able to become aware of their own prejudices regarding each other and particularly ethnic minorities and above all the Roma. Despite some doubts and hesitations at the beginning, the seminar became an intellectually rewarding event for all participants.

A. Clesse