Born in Illyria: or *"How to build cultural cooperation with (South) Eastern Europe"*

By Corina Suteu

It was two days after the first of May glittering EU enlargement ceremonies ended. As usual before one of my trips to somewhere in Europe, I was taking the taxi in Nantes and saying bye-bye in Romanian to my sixteen year old daughter, who, despite her French schooling, still speaks her mother tongue pretty well. As I prepared to leave, the young French taxi driver looked on with what I thought to be the average curiosity that we are now so used to, after ten years of 'where does your accent come from?' and, 'what is your nationality, Madame, if I am not too indiscreet…?'

But I was wrong. My taxi driver was not a gentle, curious native. First, he took the wrong route to the railway station and was not happy that I knew a quicker way to reach my destination. Faced by a 100 euros bill when it came to paying the fare, he suddenly twisted around in his driving seat and started shouting at me, "One hundred Euros for this journey, I don't have change for this!… Where do you come from, lady ?… We can't turn around without you people all over the place…Who can live here?…". With this, he got out of his car, furiously removed my bag, opened my door and screamed: "sort de ma bagnole!"("get out of my car!") Which, of course, I did, trembling and scared, not by his shouting, but by his tone, his behaviour and the hatred on his face when he asked where I was from.

I have been living in France for ten years now, and this never happened to me until the early days of May 2004!

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This time we are in Budapest, end of April 2004.

We had just met, and Judith was asking me if I had enjoyed my evening. Judith is British, speaks perfect French and has a lot of international cultural experience, a significant degree of tolerance and a sound sense of humour. As I replied in the affirmative, she continued: "We had the most amazing experience coming back from dinner yesterday. I was with a German friend and ordered a taxi, as we had the night before. The driver took us to the hotel, but asked four times the amount we had paid the previous night for exactly the same distance. I said it was too much and we tried to renegotiate the fare.

"Immediately, he became so enraged that he pushed the button to lock us in, turned the car round, brought us back to where he had picked us up and made us get out of his car, all the while venting his anger about not being the 'oriental haggler they might imagine and Budapest not being an oriental bazaar'…

"I was SO shocked ! We finally walked our way back to they hotel and that was that. It has never happened to me before", she ended.

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It sounds, of course, exaggerated, to place these stories at the forefront of an evaluation of European cultural cooperation policies and their successful outcomes. But don't cultural cooperation and cultural relation policies also have to deal with the attitudes of taxi drivers ? And if they do not, perhaps they should, nowadays.

Because both these stories, in their own ways, are symptomatic of a failure in cultural dialogue, in a world where information about other cultures, other people, is at the end of your fingertips any time you want, at least as far as France and Hungary are concerned.

Stories speak to our incapacity to understand that a foreigner is exactly like yourself. He IS yourself - maybe having forgotten to bring the right change, not because he is a Romanian in France, but because he is in a hurry or didn't have the chance; maybe apprehensive about paying too much for a taxi abroad, not because he is British and believes that he is in the orient, but just because he doesn't like to be cheated, or to throw good money away…

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What is it in our behaviour that marks us out as a foreigner coming from the East or West of Europe, and what, by contrast, turns us into simply a normal human being? Are there universal common values we still agree to share? And how far should our democracies go in tolerating more specific individual values? What exactly are these national borderlines that, fortress-like, we are less and less willing to trespass (the more we may, the more intransigently we remain stuck inside our territories)? How do they enable us to muster so much arrogance against the culturally different, in a century when, from Siberia to Beijing, we all listen to Celine Dion?!

Lately, such questions seem to arise from a growing sense of confusion for many European citizens who at one and the same time find themselves part of a

Europe that is increasingly politically united, but culturally, fortunately, still profoundly diverse.

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Cross purposes in European cultural cooperation

A former British State Secretary for the media, sports and cultural affairs[1] was very explicit in his definition of two major difficulties challenging today's post-communist European societies, with particular regard to the south eastern part of the continent, the Balkans: firstly, dealing with the immediate past and secondly, dealing with the immediate environment.

Indeed, in what we today conventionally call South eastern Europe, countries once part of former Yugoslavia, and having therefore shared a common past are now facing extremely diverse destinies. Slovenia is already in the EU, while Serbia and Montenegro are part of a federation within which Kosovo still has an unclear political status. Bosnia, meanwhile, not yet recovered from the trauma of war, is applying, together with Croatia and Macedonia, to enter the EU.

Regionally, Romania balances itself unevenly between the bureaucratic and political pressure of the European *aquis* and the slow, incomplete recovery of a society seriously damaged by its sojourn within the totalitarian ghetto. Bulgaria strives constantly to prove that reform and restructuring are manageable, with immense tenacity and self determination carving its way through the numerous obstacles to EU integration. Albania and Moldavia, as if reconciled to remaining isolated, from time to time offer up signs of their desperate need to break through: an independent journalist here, a visionary politician there or a young emerging artist. Unfortunately, that is as far as it goes.

Time seems to be the secret remedy that collectively, sooner or later, we will have to admit to deploying as our main method of healing, a crucial recovery tool. But time 'is not patient', as Romanian novelist Marin Preda would say. And also the time of bureaucracies (straight, linear and directive) travels at a different speed from that of humans (constantly interacting with their memory and perpetually going over their accumulated experiences in order to move on). Maybe, what we have omitted to do is to really look objectively at what can reasonably be done to help the "time of bureaucracies" meet "human time"? How could this be translated into a policy of cultural relations that hits the right compromise between polished political rhetoric and the diversity of cultural behaviour.

Moreover, if eastern Europe and specifically the Balkans have a general problem coping with their immediate past and their immediate environment, 'former

western Europe' has a corresponding problem coping with its *non-immediate* future and the *non-immediate* environment. Look at the incessant 'breaking news syndrome', daily eager to produce a dazzling image, and the winning ticket in a huge mass media virtual competition. The western political classes seem to be much more preoccupied about who the press will quote tomorrow than the worrying dilemmas relating to rapid deterioration of the atmosphere, imbalance between energy production capacities, risks attendant on building more and more nuclear plants or in abandoning African societies to famine and disease. Worrying about these is now consigned to anti-globalisation movements together with some visionary intellectuals or artists. Even war, nowadays, looks very much like the latest videogame of the Sims series whose 'producers' are 'like dazzled' each time they realise that there are real human beings out there.

There are many nuances to this, but the truth is that the more cosy and successful western developed democracies have become, the more problems they seem to have, both with long-term planning (*non-immediate future)*, or in putting themselves in the position of less privileged societies (*non-immediate environment*). It is as if the comfort acquired is guaranteed to last indefinitely. It may indeed be very hard to imagine, for those born in the middle of a peaceful, economically healthy and prosperous era, that all this was the result of a long and complicated evolution and is still extremely vulnerable.

We might observe in conclusion that whereas the western world seems more disposed towards a discourse of diplomacy (less risky and artificial, but highly security-conscious), South eastern Europe is bound to behave from within a cultural relations logic, with all its consequent complications and uncertainties.

In this regard, it is worth questioning if policies of cultural cooperation as they exist today with respect to this region, are honed and sharpened enough to restore trust to where it has been lacking, and to boost vital energies whenever they make an appearance. Also, it is important to relaunch an enquiry into the way the western and the eastern worlds set about engaging in a mutually fulfilling dialogue. If it works, are the processes of cooperation sustainable? In whose benefit are they? Can there be genuine reciprocity in the processes of cultural exchange ?

Illusions of "harmonious" cooperation: the realities of post communist chaos

If we look back to 1954, the 'European cultural convention'[2] defined the five main principles of cultural cooperation as: reconciliation, mutual recognition, reciprocity, respect for diversity and awareness of intercultural challenges. In 1966, UNESCO produced a 'declaration of principles of cultural cooperation'

along the same lines. Later, in 1972, the Arc et Senans declaration [3] insisted on the centrality of the creative individual within the cultural process, a place that has to be regained (already too institutionalised and off the scale at the global level).

This brings us to the 1980's when, despite a symbolic stand-off between the French 'Exception culturelle'('la culture pour tous') and British 'Thatcherism' ('culture has to be economically accountable'), cultural cooperation turns increasingly into a purely political instrument, the software of broader governmental hardcore policies as embarked upon between western Europe and the rest of the world.

It will take until the late nineties, and the publication of the major Council of Europe and UNESCO reports (*In from the margins* and *Our creative diversity*) as well as the establishment of the so-called Stockholm Action Plan for cultural development[4] before cultural dialogue regains its 'humanising' function. But as the fall of communism coincides with various processes induced by globalisation, including an ongoing technological revolution and the emergence of a media society, all traditional cultures come under sustained pressure. Communities are forced to respond. This is the moment that marks the sudden rise of what we might call, cultural civil society, and all sorts of networking energies manifesting themselves not only in new governance models, but in new patterns of cooperation and intercultural dialogue.

However, from this entire fifty-year history, eastern Europe was absent. Can this so easily be recuperated ?!

That multi-track time I already referred to has an intimate relationship with the degree of stability that any given region or country is lucky enough to experience, which in turn relates to the average level of welfare individuals can depend upon. In Aenelia Paeva's film, *Who's this song*[5], a Macedonian taxi driver (hardly a coincidence!) says that what he wants has nothing to do with being part of Europe or not, but to have a decent life, two weeks holiday a year and a salary sufficient to feed his family and live like a normal employee.

The film is a touching demonstration of the increase in cultural complexity, but also the sheer damage that South eastern European societies have undergone in the last one and a half decades. The ideological intoxication that these same societies have tried to cure themselves of, combined with the free market aggressions visited on these newly born democracies seemingly overnight, do not make for ideal environments in which to instil reconciliation, mutuality, respect for diversity and sensitivity to intercultural challenges.

South eastern European cultures needed to reappropriate their own stories and engage in the personal dynamics of internal dialogue before they could reach out to the otherness, prepared to cooperate as full partners. Some of them, as in the case of the newly born states of the former Yugoslavia, were simultaneously having to recalibrate the complex balance between cultural identities and national identities. Obstacles to re-appropriating a more humane culture, let alone launching meaningful cooperation, remain many and complex.

First, funding resources for culture became non existent at the national level, so that cooperation with western partners was swiftly transformed into that totally imbalanced type of relationship that exists not just between one who takes and one who gives, but also between the one who has and the other who, being needy, places himself automatically in a position of inferiority. At the same time, in the Balkans, without cultural cooperation partners like the British Council, the French Institutes or American fellowship programmes, the processes of democratisation would have been a thousand times slower, and the outcomes quite possibly even more damaging than those suffered under the former communist regimes.

Second, there was the sense of failure that set in during the post communist period, when an idyllic image of harmonious European reconciliation seemed to give way very quickly to rumours of the unmanageable nature of East/West cooperation. Cultural exchange rapidly took on the aspect of a finger-wagging exercise. This becomes serious once it reaches the stage where Greece is reluctant to work with Albania or Macedonia, or where it impedes the development of useful cultural programmes in Moldavia or Bosnia, simply because regional organisations want to develop their regional programmes autonomously. You cannot expect it to be straightforward, finding the means, the right focus, the opportunities for mobility within the region, to cope with the still open wounds produced by two Yugoslav wars…

Lastly, in May 2004, when eight former communist countries joined the EU, a question was immediately posed. Does this mean that in coming years, the remaining South eastern European countries will once again be absent from the European development process ? Or should we learn the painful lessons of the past, and turn these newly designed borders into a terrain urgently dedicated to the preservation and stimulation of European cultures, whatever divisions between EU and non EU countries are currently deemed politically requisite ?

Reasons to be happy to be an Illyrian [7]

I strongly believe, nevertheless, that there are some reasons to be happy as an Illyrian. You have only to take it as a stimulating challenge. There is so much

room for invention in these countries, when you have priceless tools such as cooperation programmes and cooperation laboratories to pilot. Take 'Branding Bulgaria' started in 2001 at the initiative of the British Council, the interdisciplinary group of British, Bulgarian and other foreign cultural centre representatives. These came together to improve the image of Bulgaria by assisting in the international presentation of diverse national economic initiatives, culminating in a range of startlingly modern projects, very far from the prevailing stereotypes. Or go back to the day in 1998, when the conference centre in Skopje organised an international pool of expertise around emerging contemporary art forms and their attendant artistic debates, since material means for the contemporary arts were so scarce in Macedonia. Equally, we could point to the new European College, created in Bucharest/ Romania in the late nineties (thanks to the uniting of American, Swiss and German support). Here, the idea was to invite as many academics as possible worldwide to come and give lectures that would nourish the gathering hunger for high level intellectual refreshment after decades of ideological and spiritual pollution. And who could forget the first Serbian Masters Degree in intercultural mediation, launched at the University of Arts in Belgrade, with French and regional support. The first generation of students who have graduated already contain Serbs, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Romanians, Croats, Bosnians, Albanians, Austrians, the French…Where, in other parts of Europe would such a rich, multinational cultural participation, be possible? Not many!

'Illyrians', as compared to other Europeans accept that they can be ignorant when it comes to cultural cooperation. They are therefore very happy to learn what others do, and eager to try new ways to deal with old problems. Not being bound to one European culture, being at the crossroad of many, they are equally admiring and knowledgeable about all of them. These then are genuinely multilateral actors. In cultural spheres, as in the arts in general, almost all Romanians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Croats and Albanians speak at least two languages. This is an asset!

Last but not least, it could be argued that they are the true pioneers of European identity. Books about Eastern Europe and the Balkans have symbolic titles: *Imagining Eastern Europe*(Larry Wolf), *Imagining the Balkans*(Maria Todorova), *Inventing Ruritania* (Vesna Galsworthy), *Subjective Transylvania* (Alina Mungiu Pippidi)…These titles and the content of the books speak to the persistent difference between 'the image' of the Balkans or of eastern Europe and its reality.

But 'Europe' has the same problem. The 'Europe' we constantly invoke is far more mental than real, and Illyrians are best placed to know well what can be

the consequences of such a mix-up. Therefore, they are less impressed by stereotypical judgements, and less inclined to simplify diversity.

Most of all, after fifteen years of post communist transition, Illyrians are pretty immune to the nice fairytale blandishments about cultural cooperation and intercultural dialogue, as practiced by some European cultural agencies installed in the region. They know that the issue of diversity can in many ways be a painful challenge within their society, as between newly born states. They have grasped the complexity and variety of management styles in European cooperation, and are, moreover ready to reconsider their position on the map of cultural dialogue. But there will have to be a mutual exchange here, with European partners ready to listen.

A French student who travelled to Serbia lately was surprised to note that there is a great divergence between the 'Europeanised' discourse in the academies and the reality of Serbian students engaging with the French in Belgrade bars of an evening. But he had to go to Serbia to really listen to them. Another student, this time Romanian, involved in a recent collaboration with Polish and German students, was taken aback at the way the young Germans imposed their views on eastern Europeans without a hint of self-consciousness. For the time being, cultural cooperation exists more as a wish than as a reality at the grass root level, and we may deny the evidence if we wish, but it will lead to unsuccessful results and artificial conclusions. Listening is therefore essential.

Some rules of thumb for further consideration

When all has been said, perhaps we can draw a few provisional lessons, such as:

Concentrate on the future

During the 1993 conference of European cultural cooperation[8], 'Harmony or confusion for culture in Europe ?', a well known scholar drew attention to the way that EU measures taken in the cultural field are always hampered by a certain protectionist logic. Driven by an almost obsessive need to protect the acquisitions and values of the past, they are less attuned to the task of engaging in the future. This 'state of mind' is very present still in the logic of cultural cooperation with 'outsider' countries, leading to a fearful burden of traditionalism. As long as this persists, so that policies will be organised with an eye to preservation rather than innovation, the new dynamics of cultural cooperation dynamics will be dead in the water.

Accept that the cultural challenges EU countries face are common to east, west, north and south

The idea that the political borders of Europe mark the borders of cultural difference is false. Today, the following challenges - the relationship between our collective (Enlightenment) culture and our connective culture (the one of Bill Gates); the tension between consumer Europe and 'social Europe'; the overwhelming effect of the mass media on traditional cultures, communication and mutual understanding; or complexity around the whole issue of the interaction between "the *network* and the *self*", as Manuel Castels would say, - these are no longer a question of western or eastern Europe. These problems are common to all of us in modern times.

Identify the broad priorities that cultural relations and cultural diplomacy must tackle

Creativity, today, seems the only remaining bulwark against a standardised European culture. But creativity must be understood as the capacity to invent, as the highest expression of individual affective potential, as the free choice made by an artist who creates because he is compelled to do so, not simply in order to please either politicians or consumers. Creating in Bosnia or in London is the same, because for both Bosnians and British, Shakespeare is a writer of 'national' renown. European ownership starts inside this sharing. Creating in Tirana and in Paris is equally important, even if in one case this involves learning how to be independent, and free yourself from the burden of the past; while in the latter, it is in order to free yourself from the stereotypes of the present.

Then there is the challenge of cultural citizenship – and the issue of the role of culture and the arts in developing a 'social capital', that Helen Gould defines as 'the glue that keeps institutions together' ensuring development [9]. This no longer revolves around the question of whether or not we want to be part of Europe, but has shifted increasingly in the direction of asking, 'what kind of Europe it is that we want to build'[10] ? Cultural cooperation policies will play a crucial role in the design of the answer to that question.

How do we do it?

To be sure, identifying and mapping the former is easier than suggesting how to deal with them. But here goes:

> ➢ by encouraging a networking approach to cultural diplomacy
> (South eastern Europe can never quite understand why western cultural

institutes don't work together more, why their programmes are sometimes overlapping, why there is so much talk about cooperation and such meagre results.)

➢ by finding the means to allow South eastern European cultural operators to participate in wider European networks, to learn about all the varieties of democracy around the world

➢ by building cooperation programmes that explicitly tackle the problem that bureaucratic and managerial know-how can be useless and even damaging if the right values are not promoted (as quoted from 'EU criteria' in *CULTURE 2000*);

➢ by giving young artists the possibility to work in stimulating European environments and giving them the means, not to produce, but to create; not to be in service, but to discover; not to be artisans, but artists.

➢ by offering long term learning programmes of cultural exchange and mentoring, adapted to the personality and the profile of each artist or cultural operator(reinvesting the role of the individual in the cultural cooperation process)

➢ by launching programmes of cultural stereotype decontamination, addressed to western cultural diplomats and to all willing western cultural operators; regardless of status and borders, since so many questions bring us together

➢ by building adult relationships of cooperation with SEEuropean partners, based on shared and equal decision making power, but also on shared responsibilities. This is the only way to stop the seemingly never-ending complaints and victim mentality on one side, together with the sometimes arrogant and narrow approach on the other.

The list could be longer and the number of imagined instruments to implement suggestions very long indeed. This bears witness to the fact that we Illyrians, have begun to identify and express our needs; that European experts have shared their expertise; that cultural civil society in Europe looks ready and willing to cooperate from East to West and back.

Cultural relations, indeed, seem to be hovering in the waiting room of a new golden age. But maybe we need more than a velvet revolution of cultural diplomacy. We need courage. Because the real achievement would be to move all this on, from intelligent discourse, reports and texts, into intelligent practice.

[1] Chris Smith, Salzburg seminar, March, 2004, www.salzburgseminar.org

[2] Council of Europe-look for exact note

[3] Arc et Senans –explanation plus reference/ with quote

[4] UNESCO conference on development(exact title)

[5] Exact quote and indicate the ECF site

[7] The term Illyrian is borrowed from the British literature for the balkanic region. In her book « Inventing Ruritania », Vesna Galsworthy shows that that" Balkan settings make their first, rare appearances in British literature to signify all purpose semi-mythical remoteness, an imaginative "end of the known world", an area distant but still recognisable in many aspects, as in Shakespeare's use of Illyria in Twelfth "(Galsworthy, Vesna, "Inventing Ruritania, the Imperialism of imagination", 1997, Yale, Yale University Press
The ambiguity of both terms: balkan and South eastern Europe made me use this metaphoric term , defining both a virtual and a spiritual space and a distant , but still close geographical one and its inhabitants.

[8] "It is often thought that Europe is highly cultural by virtue of its past. But the Europe to be built from now on will have no cultural direction unless its cultural policy is turned radicalklytowards the future", Girard, Augustin, "The European Comunity and culture:extending the debate", in "proceedings conference"Harmony or confusion for culture in Europe, The impact of the single market on te Maastrict traty, venice, february 1993

[9] In Mercer Colin, Towards Cultural Citizenship : Tools for cultural policy and development, 2002, The bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, Sida & Colin Mercer, pg 33

[10] Rupnik, Jaques, entretien ITELE, 2004