

Event report

“The Western Balkan’s Diversity of Identities: Religion, Language and Education”

On 21 November 2017, the CEU **Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS)** and **Andrássy University (AUB)** jointly hosted an international conference entitled “The Western Balkan’s Diversity of Identities: Religion, Language, and Education”.

Ellen Bos, Vice-Rector of the AUB, was welcoming the speakers and guests to the joint conference. She stressed that the cooperation between the two universities is of importance and that the Andrassy University expresses its solidarity with the Central European University, which is facing some difficult times in Hungary at the moment.



Péter Balázs, Director of the Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) at CEU, addressed the importance of religion, language and education in the context of identity formation and nation-building in the region of former Yugoslavia. Differences exist between regions, where national identities are considered to be more important than religion, but in other regions religion seems to be the dominating factor of identity construction. Education can amplify the importance given to religion or language in the process of creating a

national identity and in nation building. He closes with the remark that Germany implemented a wise policy, which triggered a fundamental change and consequently has settled its relationship with the past.

The first panel on the topic of religion was chaired by **Christopher Walsch** (Corvinus University Budapest), who referred to Habermas’ concept of the “derailing modernity”, arguing that religion can bring an added value to modern societies.

The first speaker **Bogdan Mihai Radu** (Babeş-Bolyai University) presented comparative data on religion from Central Europe and the Western Balkans. He makes a clear distinction between religious affiliation and the feeling of belonging and states that religion and churches are two different aspects of religion. How people practice their religion is of a particular importance. Furthermore Radu differentiates between spirituality, religiosity and active followers of the respective religious institution of the believer. He tried to find correlations



between these descriptive characteristics with political values. He argues that people engaged with religious institutions are more likely to accept the state and its institutions than people without any contact to religious institutions. He also attributes a greater understanding of democracy to non-religious people. However, whether an institutional-believing person is more inclined to pluralism or not depends on the conditions the state provides to the various religious institutions.

Zorica Kuburić (Center for Empirical Religious Studies at the University of Novi Sad) presented a paper on the relationship between religion and reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She presented research findings of a poll conducted in 2013 that confirmed that the higher the status of religion for a respondent, the higher the likelihood that he or she would reaffirm the importance of reconciliation. Teachers were considered to be the most highly rated potential participants in a reconciliation process. Politicians were negatively perceived in this context and religious leaders were considered to play a role, if they would not exclude other groups from the process. She also attaches great importance to the group of victims in reconciliation. Kuburić emphasised that societies can learn from religion, but also warned that religion was too quickly exploited by politics.

Ešref Kenan Rašidagić (University of Sarajevo) spoke about the role of religion in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He argued that during the war in the 1990s religious institutions did not occupy such an important position in society, as compared to today. Parties try to remain in power and enter an “unholy alliance” with religious institutions, business partners and war veterans. Religious institutions nowadays play a subservient actor to political parties and act as “hands on the streets” for their parties. In the 2000s an optimistic outlook prevailed and religion was not considered to be a dominating factor in the Bosnian life, but this changed from the 2010s, when there was a comeback of religion with a vengeance. Hence, religious institutions have gained in importance due to their political connections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Religion is used by political leaders who wish to remain in power.

The second panel, which was chaired by research fellow **Andra-Octavia Drăghiciu** (AUB/University Graz) addressed the question of the impact of language on identity formation in the Balkans.



Goran Bandov (Dag Hammarskjöld University College of International Relations and Diplomacy, Zagreb) asked the question of the political dimension of a common language. He starts off with the statement that identity is socially constructed by the political elites. A nation needs boundaries to allow for a distinct identity to be developed, which is based on elements such as language and religion. Bandov gave an overview of the various dialects spoken in Croatian, which are influenced by the neighbouring regions. He argues that it is

necessary for the nation-building process to create a Croatian language. The formation of the

Croatian language was driven by the will of the political elites. In Croatia the language is a large part of the national identity.

Nikola Zečević (Donja Gorica University, Montenegro) spoke of the historical development of language in Montenegro and how the breakup with the Serbo-Croat language led to the creation of another official language. However, identity did not adapt to this shift. He emphasised that the survival of a language is much more than just changing the name. Since 1997 the interest in Montenegro to separate itself from Serbia grew. After the separation in 2006 a new constitution was adopted in 2007, which states that Montenegrin is the official language of the state, although Serbian is widely used in Montenegro. He argues that it creates unnatural divisions in society and is misused for political purposes.

In the ensuing discussion with the participants of the meeting, it was repeatedly emphasised that language has the ability to overcome religion and ethnic diversity.

The third panel discussed the impact of the education on people's identity in the Western Balkan region. The panel was chaired by **Christina Griessler** (netPOL/AUB).

The first speaker **Tamara Pavasović Trošt** (University of Ljubljana) analysed the context of textbooks in the Western Balkan region since the end of communism regarding identity construction. She distinguishes between “hot nationalism” and “banal nationalism”, when looking at textbooks. Textbooks are provided by the states and in general only a few per subject are allowed for being used in class. Trošt found that, especially in the socialist era textbooks were used to communicate a specific picture of certain events to shape the identity of the people. This was for example done by changing the labelling of victims and perpetrators or changing the number of victims or even through inventing completely new events. Currently used textbooks support the interpretation and construction of a distinct form of identity in the class, hence underpin the national ideas of the state. Although, a change can be seen in some countries, such as Slovenia, others states in the region are restricting the use of textbooks to a certain selected edition and do not provide alternatives.



The second speaker **Norbert Šabić** (Strategic Planning Office, Central European University and Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education) spoke about national minorities and higher education policies in Serbia. There are 21 different ethnic identities in Serbia. The Serbian minority protection law allows minority groups to set up national minority councils, which have the competencies of implementing policy in the field of education and decide on the use of their own language in schools and even in courts. In Vojvodina every third person belongs to a national minority. The majority of pupils with Hungarian and Slovak backgrounds are educated in their mother tongue, half of the pupils with Ruthenian background and less than half of pupils with Romanian background are educated in their language. Šabić claims that it is unfortunate that less than 10% of students in Higher Education in Serbia are from a national minority. The separate

education of minorities results in separation of pupils and a lower likelihood for minorities to pursue higher education in Serbia.

Hana Semanić (Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) of the Central European University), gave an insight into the education system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Due to the states structure which is divided into two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, and the additional division of the Federation into ten cantons the education system is divided up between multiple institutions responsible for education. Furthermore, no common curricula exists. Apart from the complex state structure with unclear responsibilities for education, the government recognises three “constituent peoples” and 17 minorities, hence there are three official languages (Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian) and two scripts. In Bosnia and Herzegovina there are still “two schools under one roof” which initial goal was to offer children of different ethnicities to get education in their language, effectively separating these children. The number of those schools is decreasing, but there are still around 34 such schools, where children are taught in different shifts using different materials by different teachers. Recently the pupils in these schools became active to change the situation.