

## Conference Report

### “Self-Positioning of Eastern European Societies in Global Relations – Conceptions of Space and Self-Presentations in School Textbooks”

06 – 07 November 2017, Leipzig

Dorota Kusiak

The focus of the interdisciplinary conference “Self-Positioning of Eastern European Societies in Global Relations – Conceptions of Space and Self-Presentations in School Textbooks” lies on empirical findings in the field of textbooks as well as school curricula/ syllabi analysis. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, not only political and economic but also a social reorientation was connected for the successor states and countries from the Soviet sphere of influence. This process was and is affected by various aspects and is different in each state. The textbooks play an important role in communicating the reinterpretation of one's own history: as a source of information for the younger generation. They play a major role in the formation of identity as well and are therefore very well suited as a subject of investigation for the question of how societies (re) position themselves. The objective to raise awareness for the autonomy of Eastern European countries and societies with regard to processes of globalization through this kind of research is a part of the mission of both organizers. But how do national interests and global conditions manifest and correlate in text books?

In 2013, Russia introduced unified textbooks for the subject of history. This is part of the idea to consolidate national sovereignty, so Nikolaus Katzer (Moscow). He associates the project with dangers of manipulation, falsification and reinterpretation of history. The leitmotifs of the new historiography in Russia are the lack of interest in the West and the pursuit of economic cooperation with global players such as China. According to Katzer, the imperialist self-image of Russia becomes clear during the reading. The differences in the interpretation of historical events in the development of the German-Russian history book, a project of the "Joint Commission for the Investigation of the Recent History of German-Russian Relations", are striking. Controversial topics are for instance, the Battle of Stalingrad or the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

As a special indicator for self-positioning in the global context, Stephanie Zloch (Braunschweig) presents the aspect of migration in textbooks. She mentions Poland, the Czech Republic and Russia as examples of countries that have lost a younger and more entrepreneurial part of society in the recent past. Polish geography textbooks focus on

economic and family reasons for migration. Regarding immigration, Poland is portrayed as a transit country for migrants from the East. In the textbooks discussed by Zloch, the integration of migrants is not an issue. She finds similar results in the Czech textbooks: Also this country understands itself as a transit country. In contrast, Russia presents itself as a multi-ethnic state and as a stabilizing anchor, or as a haven for refugees from the conflict and war zones in the post-Soviet space. The diaspora plays an important role in Polish and Russian textbooks. The Russian diaspora is still strongly associated with Russian values, as is the Polonia, which has ties to its homeland, Polish traditions and language.

Tamás Hardi and Andrea Miklosné-Zadar (Budapest) presented the results of a survey on self and external perception of societies. They see three typical positioning options: first, the tendency to locate one's own macro-region in the west. This is the exclusive or so-called go-west method, which goes hand in hand with a demarcation from the eastern neighbors. In the second approach, the escape from the East. In this case, respondents denied that they belonged to Eastern Europe and / or the Balkans. According to Hardi and Miklosné-Zadar, the third type of positioning was characterized by rejection and disillusionment, respondents felt that they belonged to a smaller region. Examples include the Hungarian "Carpathian Basin" as a place of positioning or the renaissance of the Balkan identity in Serbia. As a general trend, it can be observed that after the regime change, states attempted to define themselves as non-Eastern in the international context.

These countries included also Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and Lithuania, according to Rune Brandt-Larsen (Lund). Unlike Hardi and Miklosné-Zadar, Larsen defines the process of nation building and the establishment of a national community image through a feeling of togetherness. As an indication, he cites a large number of terms such as "we" or utterances such as "our love of native soil." As a rule, these are local focusing, but sometimes also imperial aspects. All four countries positioned themselves as part of Europe, but their understanding of it differs. For example, Larsen contrasts the Belarusian image of Europe as a geographical location without mention of European values in contrast to the Lithuanian image of Europe, in which since the change of regime he recognizes a shift from "power and conquest" to "peace and tolerance".

Péter Bagoly Simo (Berlin) dealt with the case study of Romania. In Romanian schools, national identity is an integral part of teaching: cultural artefacts are discussed, teaching takes place only in Romanian, there are no teachers who are members of a minority. According to Bagoly Simo, Romanians increasingly developed a Central European identity. For example, mathematical geography should prove that the land is at the center of the

continent. Lack of argumentation, emphasis on factual knowledge, neo-nationalistic discourses as well as reproduction of knowledge as a goal are characteristic of the lessons. Interesting is the shift in attention that Russia is experiencing in Romanian textbooks: in the 1980s, Russia and Asia accounted for a third of the content of the books, and in the 1990s their share increased as a result of unclear structures after the regime change. The 2000s have brought a new positioning according to Simo's analysis: Russia has lost attention, Europe is now the most important spatial unit.

An example of the common self-portrayal of several countries is the macro-region "Lower Danube", a promising link for cross-border relations, according to Volodymyr Poltorak (Odessa). The culture and history of this space are presented in the national programs on the history of Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria and Russia. However, the region is mentioned only episodically and people from countries in the region often do not receive information about their neighbors. According to Poltorak, the prevailing dominance of national historiography leads to tensions between neighboring countries. Thus, for example, the "Lower Danube Region" is shown in Romanian textbooks as the heartland of Greater Romania. In the spirit of the European integration process, Poltorak called for the use of cross-border materials and a shift from ethnic to general civilization aspects of history.

Svitlana Potapenko (Kiev) spoke of the presentation of historical events and people from the 16th until the 18th century. This part of Ukrainian history, in which Cossacks are portrayed to Ukrainian pupils as historical protagonists, and which is Potapenko's field of research, is depicted in the textbooks as rich in heroes and important events - an example of unselfish love of homeland, valor, and respect for deserving warriors. The biographies of the personalities presented are idealized and romanticized. The aim, according to Potapenko, is that the disciples worship the Cossacks as heroes and are proud of the past of their homeland. The constant focus on national identity serves as a protective mechanism of the Ukrainian nation in the globalized world.

Hungary has developed many different spatial concepts in recent decades. Péter Balogh (Budapest) showed examples of an active repositioning of the country in a European and global context. The images of the country in numerous textbooks sometimes conflict, according to Balogh. He mentioned sources which use the concept of Turanism, an ideology according to which Hungary is on the one hand the gate to the east and a country with Asian roots, to describe Hungary. Others, in turn, portray the country as a border between Western and Eastern Christianity. At the same time, terms such as ferry country ("Fährland") are used, a self-image of a land travelling endlessly between the East and the West. Balogh illustrates

the fact that the national aspects still play a role with a geography book from the year 2002 where only the names of Hungarian ethnographic regions are listed. Hungary underlines its position as a micro-region: it is mainly located in the Carpathian Basin, secondarily in Central Europe.

How problematic the idea of space can be in the context of nation building was presented by Oleksandr Zabirko (Münster) who used the example of Ukraine. Until the independence in 1991, it was a blank spot on the map of European legal history and its law has been established beyond its present borders. The authors had to design the legal history of a country that did not exist as a nation state until the 1990's. The readjustment of state and law from a national-historical perspective was carried out with the aid of the sometimes metaphorical concepts of statehood, people and struggle. Statehood means not the state itself, but the representation of the state. In this concept, legal history becomes the history of power structures. The people are the protagonist of history, nation is presented as a romanticized image of a personified entity with feelings and goals, characterized by tragic beliefs and predetermined victory. According to Zabirko, the category of struggle is synonymous with the reduction of social life as a whole to a chain of confrontations and conflicts. The main discrepancy is the conflict between Ukraine's own law and foreign law. The discursive shift to the topic of Europe, which is no longer portrayed as a promised land but as a place of legal order, shows how important legal history is for the establishment of Ukraine's own position. Emphasizing the European nature of Ukrainian national law places the country on the one hand as European. However, on the other hand, Zabirko points to a history of mistrust of the West. Again, the authors of the law books resorted to a metaphor to resolve this discrepancy: they represented Ukraine as a bridge between the East and the West.

The understanding of space and position does not have to refer exclusively to one's own state. Using the example of the bilateral textbooks and their preparation, Jörg Stadelbauer (Freiburg) showed that the presentation in textbooks in the past was understood as a spatial production intended to serve the imaginative power of the students. However, the external constraints of school education limited this function. An incomplete picture of the other country is drawn and, according to Stadelbauer, distorted by a specific self-conception of one's own country, as well as by the maxim nihil nisi bene: students should only learn about the positive aspects of the other countries.

A more distanced perspective on the topic has been presented in the concluding words by Sebastian Lentz (Leipzig) and Gabriele Freitag (Berlin), who pointed out that the hermeneutic

approach needs to be complemented by questions about who produced the objects and under which circumstances. In case of countries like Poland and Ukraine which had to recreate themselves and their national identity the textbooks reduce the content to what is useful for this goal and it's a usual approach. According to Freitag portrayals in history books are reduced pictures and that they do not reflect the state of research in the disciplines.