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In the middle of the 19th century a British lady – Favell Mortimer, wrote a tourist guide of “the most important countries of the world”. On September 28, 2007 the electronic version of the Independent.ie published parts of it, calling it “the rudest travel book” ever written. According to Mrs. Mortimer the British are not very pleasant company because they do not like strangers, nor looking for trouble. The Spanish, according to the author are haughty, cold and distanced. As to the Portuguese, Mrs. Mortimer concludes “there are no people in Europe as clumsy in the hands as they are”. It turned out, however, that Mortimer herself had never in her life left her native place – Shropshire. Despite that fact the travel book was published and stirred a scandal because of the descriptions of the different nations and countries. Today, they bring out laughter but also lead to serious reflection. Because such stereotypes passed from generation to generation or lingering according to times, often reflect the not-knowing hence – the not-respecting of others. Ethnic origin or religious differences enhance the mutual non-understanding in the relations with people coming from the circles of immigration. That is why dialogue among cultures today is very important in our numerous and diverse communities. That is why Europe has dedicated to it an entire thematic year.

The European year of intercultural dialogue was launched on January 8 in Slovenia’s capital Ljubljana. The aim of the initiative is to help enhance understanding among cultures so that European citizens can live in harmony in the ever-richer cultural environment. That was the reason for choosing as motto of the Year “Together in Diversity”. The best way of fighting prejudices is the exchange under the form of intercultural dialogue. No matter whether we talk of free press, of fighting discrimination and racism, for integrating immigrants or for an education policy, cultural differences are felt in many spheres.

In late June the members of the European Commission would be presented with a Draft for a European Directive for curbing discrimination against people with disabilities. This would be done in answer to the campaign “1million4disability”. Yoanis Vardakastanis is chairman of the European Forum of people of disabilities and the National Confederation of Disabled people in Greece. Here is what he said for Radio Bulgaria. “The European Forum of people of disabilities has been vigorously working from the very beginning of its inauguration 11 years ago, so that diversity in our and in every community finds reflection in inter-cultural ties, in dialogue between civilizations. Our efforts have always been directed so that in Europe there is not only legislature but also a culture that would ascertain diversity and provide a forum to all European citizens regardless of disabilities, age, origin etc. The nice thing with Europe is that it consists of countries of specific culture and a history of their own. Of course, that may make more difficult the formulating of common policies, but on the other hand diversity is something we, Europeans, should be especially proud of. We are of the opinion that the assessment of what is happening in view of disabilities and the approach of a community towards it should be based on the concrete historic tradition of each country. Conditions are, naturally, changing. Globalization leads to

considerable and even drastic changes in the way a given community is organized to function. National borders are gradually falling apart and common views and approaches are ever firmer. The working out and adopting of the European directive against discrimination in all spheres of justice within the European Union related to disabilities is the joint will of dozens of millions of Europeans suffering of various disabilities and I am happy that I, as chairman of the European Forum of people of disabilities in the last 9 years, have been upholding this will. The campaign "1million4disability" that we conducted last year collected about a million and a half of signatures in support of the demand for a Directive. At the European level things are developing positively. As far as we know the European Commission is about to present a suggestion for the endorsement of such a directive. We are expecting to see its content. We want a directive that would fight against discrimination in all spheres of law administration within the EU – welfare, services, education, social insurance, employment-related issues that are already present in Directive 2000, information society, adapted environment, transport – all that guarantees that a citizen with some kind of disability can live equally to others, go wherever and with whomever he wants as he chooses, in the conditions of security and independence, without coming across obstacles at every step of his life.

About two months ago Mrs. Mariela Baeva, Bulgarian Member of the European Parliament in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe /ALDE/ floor organized in Sofia a working meeting on the problems of disabled people and accessible working medium. "Access to the labor market is still unsatisfactory for disabled people in Bulgaria but I would like to point to the fact that this is true not only for this country but for the EU in general, she explains. We should know that unemployment among disabled people is twice as high as for everyone else. In this sense it is a good thing for Bulgaria to carefully think over the initiatives it can undertake on the national and the regional level for integrating people of various disabilities into the labor market. At the working meeting we conducted in Sofia we invited business representatives for the purpose. A good European practice, especially in Italy, is to offer jobs to disabled people in small and medium enterprises as well as in large corporations. Bulgaria should effectuate its own approach on the issue, considering the structure of the labor market, the needs of the country's economy and the necessity to accentuate on the social aspect of the problem;

To what an extent are we capable of communicating, free of prejudices, with different cultures? This is the question in our next poll.

"I think we are incapable of freeing ourselves of our prejudices, perhaps because Bulgaria is not a cosmopolitan country like GB, France or the USA, is the opinion of Maria Jelyazkova – International Relations expert. We don't have a constant inflow of people of different cultures, races and ethnic groups. That is why we have no experience in how to treat someone who is different. In some cases we have prejudices as well. In order to overcome that, children should be taught at home and at school more about various cultures because every discrimination is above all due to ignorance. The opening of the doors towards Europe and the world means better mobility for the Bulgarians. In this way we can see what a cosmopolitan community is like and use positive examples;

"The entire Bulgarian culture, the formation of what we call "Bulgarians" today is the product of centuries of living together of different ethnic communities and cultures, historian Andrei Melamed explains. Proto-Bulgarians, Slavs, Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Georgians – this entire

range together with the fundament formed by the former inhabitants – the Thracians - this is us – the Bulgarians of today. We are such a blending that there could hardly be a more tolerant person than the Bulgarian. Another characteristic feature – the Bulgarian is not a stranger to the unknown – he is curious. A certain pseudo-patriotic wind is sensed of late, but I think that it would not find grounds. One of the advantages of Bulgaria's education system is that the Bulgarians have always known about Europe more than Europe has ever known about us. And through entering into the EU we would get to know even more. Now Europe also knows more about us even if it is only through the golden treasures of Bulgarian antiquity.

“I have no prejudices towards people of other cultures, said Ergul Bairaktarova – a journalist. I would treat everyone the same – giving a helping hand or engaging in joint work. When I was a student in Istanbul I had friends from Japan, America, Afghanistan and Sudan. We lived very well in understanding. Everyone brought in a different culture and in the time we spent together we learned more about one another. Istanbul is a cosmopolitan city and there are many foreigners. The Turkish are used to treating them hospitably and with understanding, but there is no particular difference between Turkey and Bulgaria. The opening of borders changes the viewpoint of people. On principle, in order to be tolerant to others, you should first love the people around you and know and cherish your own culture.”

“The ability to communicate is not something constant. It undergoes development and is something you learn, says Silvia Emiryan, sound engineer. It is related to how well you know the culture of the others. In latter years quite a lot has been done to acquaint people with various cultures. Myself as a representative of a minority have not felt any different attitude or serious prejudices. However, there are things that Bulgarians don't understand. If we knew more about the Gypsies for example, we would be able to be more tolerant towards them. I think that the best thing to do so that people can live together, is their cultures to mingle.”

An example of culture dialogue is the European Market in the French town of Saint-Germain-en-Laye on May 17. Attending the forum were representatives of the organization “Maison de L'Europe des Yvelines”, which had its own stand. Two thematic round tables took place: “French-German History Book – first step to a text book on common European history?” and “Sustainable Development – key priority of France's forthcoming presidency of the EU”. Here is what Mrs. Regina Lecointe, Secretary General of “Maison de L'Europe des Yvelines” said for Radio Bulgaria:

“Word is here of the European Market in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Besides being a European town, its international college, which has more than 10 departments, it has become highly cosmopolitan. That is why the Mayor intends to develop this European Market further. It is becoming more significant every year. And that is why we are present here with our information stand. The chief goal of this market is to put forth the cultural aspect of the different countries. The 27 EU member-countries presented their own stands and various cultural events, including folk dances and culinary shows. Bulgaria had such a stand and it was very highly appreciated.”

We asked Mrs. Regina Lecointe to tell us more about the joint project on the French-German history textbook.

“As to the French-German history book, we had here the presentation of the second volume. This was the result of an absolutely successful reconciliation. It is very much used at school because it does not tackle French-German history but the common history written by French and German historians. This textbook was created at the request of young people in 2003. The idea came during the celebrations of the Elysee Treaty. However, French and German historians have been working on such a textbook in the last 30 years. It could not have been written in 3-4 years only. As to the creation of a common textbook, our dream is to have such a volume on the all 27 countries. Naturally, it should be kept in mind that this book came as the result of reconciliation. But the fact of its being written is not enough for reconciliation. Hostile sides should first of all come to peace, and here we have in mind the situation on the Balkans. There is also more to be done in the relations between Germany and Poland. I think that such a textbook cannot be made in less than about 10 years. For sure this would be a work of great value for European citizens.”

Taking the question of whether the reading of the common history of the EU is the first step towards the capability to conduct an intercultural dialogue, Mrs. Lecointe said the following:

“Most probably, yes; because all of us – the 27 member countries, have a very important past and before being able to look to the future, we should be talking about our past. But we should also work out a policy on the future. Both are necessary and the European citizenship should unite over this idea.”

And here is the opinion of Mrs. Lecointe about the project “Now – Interacting with the European Parliament”:

“Oh! That is very, very important because the European Parliament is our voice in Europe and it is there that the European citizen can speak up. And that means it is a guardian to our democracy. That is why the EP is extremely important.”

Dear listeners, this feature is broadcast by Radio Bulgaria, RFI-Romania and Ivelynes Radio – France on the project “Now – Interacting with the European Parliament” carried through by the European Institute.

Your questions, comments and suggestions are most welcome at our station as well as on our e-mail address info@europe.bg. For more details look up the website www.parliament.europe.bg.

Authors: Elly Gekova, Diana Hristakieva, Maya Pelovska, Blagorodna Georgieva

Translated by Iva Letnikova