

Round table discussion: Migration as a Theme in History Teaching
Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Krakow.
6.30-7.30pm, 16th October, 2009.

EVENT REPORT
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1. Basic Information

The venue of the event was the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland.

Taking part in the discussion were Dr Paul Flather, Secretary General of the Europaeum; Mr Andrzej Gorniak, a history teacher from Krakow; Dr Grzegorz Pożarlik, Deputy Director of the Institute of European Studies in the Jagiellonian University; Alain Servantie, Adviser from the DG Enlargement of the European Commission and participants of the Europaeum's workshop "Europeanisation in Central and Eastern Europe: How have the new member states changed?" (see the list of participants).

Main themes of the discussion were migration as part of the curriculum in Polish schools, experiences from different countries concerning the same matter and the Jewish question in Polish schools' history teaching.

2. Speaker Details

Hence this particular event was a round table discussion, there were not really speakers, but Dr. Flather, as the Chair of the talk, did give a short opening speech and a Power Point Presentation about this Euroclio's project and its aims and target groups. He also introduced the organisations of the project (Euroclio, Europaeum, ISHA) and gave some outcomes of the previous events. During the presentation a question was asked about whether the project is aiming at implementing changes to national curriculums, to which Frerik Kampman, the President of ISHA replied that he cannot speak on behalf of the Euroclio (not represented), but according to him the project indeed aims at helping the teachers to improve their teaching about this topic. Alain Servantie also commented that there are a lot of problems within national curriculums that should be corrected, for example in Greece where the church was opposing the idea of the Ottoman empire not being bad (as it was suggested in the curriculum).

3. Debates and discussion

Dr Flather opened the discussion by asking Mr Gorniak to what extent has migration been integrated into the national curriculum. According to Mr Gorniak, the pupils have sometimes some difficulties in understanding immigration due to the fact that schools have two different subjects, history and civic education, which both deal with immigration, but in different ways. It is hard for the pupils to realise that different types of migration have existed also before this day (like 20 000 Poles emigrating during the 19th century), and that the modern phenomena of immigration, which are part of the curriculum in civic education, are not the only ones. As most of the pupils in his class are ethnically Polish, they also have a very limited knowledge about the migration movements of other nationalities. Some of the pupils have, however, some Jewish links via their family, and this helps to understand the past in this respect. Mr Gorniak's school is, nevertheless, located at the suburb of Nova Huta in Krakow, and therefore none of the pupils have long family history in that area, as the whole suburb was artificially created during the communist period, but it is still interesting to see how the pupils and their families have adopted themselves to living in the new area and where they have come from.

One participant also raised the question of the Polish immigrants in the UK, which are a hot topic there. She was interested in knowing how the Polish pupils returning from the UK can adopt themselves to the Polish educational system and curriculum, whether they have a lot of problems. According to Mr Gorniak, this totally depends on when the children who are returning. The later they come back, the harder it will be to assimilate them into the Polish system.

Jan Vaska, a graduate student of International Area Studies from Prague, was interested to know if the teachers are able to choose which “version” of history they are teaching, and whether they are affected by nationalistic or politically coloured versions of the past. Mr Gorniak replied that this also totally depends both on the topic (whether it is a very delicate one or not) and on the teacher (whether he or she has the will and the time to remain neutral in spite of the difficulties.) To this Agnieszka Sadecka, from the Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, commented that according to her experience, the history teaching at schools changed so dramatically after the fall of communism, that it went too far, becoming too nationalistic and too “anti-communist.” Nowadays things are, however, heading for a better direction, giving more alternatives to history teaching. Frerik Kampman, the president of ISHA, was also interested in knowing how “half-Polish” figures, like Chopin, are dealt with in the national curriculum, and according to Mr Gorniak, this has changed during the last 30 years from considering Chopin as only Polish to considering him as being both Polish and French. Alain Servantie also raised the issue of religious schools in Poland, and wanted to know if they use different books in education than state schools. According to Mr Gorniak, however, all the schools in Poland have external exams, so the knowledge level should be the same in all schools, regardless of their ownership. The point was also raised that the Westphalia ideas about a nation state still dominate the Polish history teaching and this also leads to the separation of general and Polish history. A Polish grad student also wanted to know whether 17th, 19th and 20th century immigrations are all dealt with in the national curriculum and whether the pupils understand the difference between voluntary and forced migration, and according to Mr Gorniak this is indeed the case.

Dr Flather now directed the conversation towards different perspectives on the topic in other countries than Poland. To this Jan Vaska from Prague replied that according to his opinion at school the teachers give you a perspective that you must adopt, whereas at University you are encouraged to find the truth yourself. However, according to Jan the four years of history teaching at school is too short a time for a pupil to really understand what a delicate topic migration is. He also pointed out that the most recent history is only included in the curriculum of those who specialise in history. He thus thinks that there is a gap in teaching at secondary school in this respect. A participant from Ukraine said that she can’t remember migration mentioned at school teaching, except for the migration of the Ukrainians. Dr Flather also gave the example of teaching about the Empire at UK schools and how that has changed from the strong feeling of guilt felt by left-wing teachers during the 60’s to the more varied view of the 21st century (including the civilising effect of the British rule, and the promotion of local nationalism inspired by the British rule.)

Dr Flather also introduced one final topic, the teaching of the Jewish issue in Polish schools. Mr Gorniak’s school happens to be in a good position by having links with schools in Israel, and thus they have been having workshops and exchanging information about the Jewish heritage in Poland quite extensively. The government is also nowadays paying more attention to this issue in the curriculum and also universities have included courses about the topic, thus enabling the teachers to share their information to the pupils at school.

4. Academic Results

Concerning history teaching in Poland about migration, the main problem seem to be nationalistic and old-fashioned views that still exist within the Polish understanding of history. The view of the pupils is also often limited only to Poland and only to the migration movements of today. Similar problems seems to be quite common in many other European countries as well. In the future there should be more training for the teachers, so that their view would no longer be limited because of their nationality and the old versions of history. There should also be more space in the curriculum for teaching about migration, and the curricula should be more similar in different European countries in order to avoid nationalistic aspects in teaching.

5. Practical Results

The venue for the event was rather small, the room was a bit crowded. People also kept coming and going during the entire session, which made updating the participants' list very hard for the organisers. During the discussion people did not always mention their name, field of study or nationality, and so it was hard for the rapporteur to take notes. Only one Polish history teacher was present, which meant that the perspective was a bit one-sided.

There could have been a presentation about Polish history teaching's curriculum etc., in order to give the participants more background information.

For future rapporteurs, it might be a good idea to record the discussion in order to make the report fuller, since keeping notes was difficult due to the circumstances.

6. Final Impressions

The discussion was vivid and well chaired. It was also good that all of the participants could easily take part in the discussion and that the atmosphere was quite relaxed. Due to this, several examples from various European countries were heard, giving a good general picture about the situation of teaching about migration at school in the countries mentioned. The range of problems is wide, but quite surprisingly the problems seem to be similar in many countries. More participants from different countries would have given even more perspective into the event. For the several MA students who were present, the event was certainly a very good exercise for their future academic career.