

The role of higher education in building a well-balanced civil society

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The Dynamics of Tempus in Higher Education

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The following discussion is based on my conviction that the TEMPUS programme has proved to be one of the most daring ideas of this decade. International cooperation between universities and other higher education institutions is, so to say, a matter of tradition and it is based on the nature of higher education itself. During the "cold war" period contacts between academicians often contributed to the maintenance of peace and relations between various countries as well as to the conviction that mutual cooperation presented far greater advantages than situations of conflict. As a result, such non-governmental cooperation was sooner or later frequently realised also at the bilateral and multilateral interstate level.

During the late 80s, European universities outside the EU member States watched (to be frank, with some measure of envy too) the integration processes within the framework of which, for example, the ERASMUS project was introduced. A little later during the period that fundamentally marked our modern history and future, we came into contact with a programme, which systematically linked universities and other higher education institutions over the most extensive geographical area to date. This was the TEMPUS. In it, governmental strategies for European approximation and cooperation, as determined by the new circumstances, intertwined with non-governmental initiatives based on traditional personal or institutional academic links and on the natural needs of the academic environment in its attempt to overcome the limitations of the universal nature of research and human activity.

It is in these very initiatives that we may find those moments during which higher education probably most decisively plays a role in the building of a well-balanced civil society. The basic ideas and today's indisputable values such as human rights, the rule of law, pluralistic democracy, tolerance and solidarity which, in addition to pacifying potential war conflicts between sovereign countries, have also even more determinedly stood up against dangerous outbreaks of animosity which may be born in the bosoms of a civil society, have been born and are nurtured in a direct or indirect environment of European universities and represent our common European heritage. The big question of the modern time is how higher education performs this duty and what may contribute to its better performance.

The specific circumstances that arose in Central and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 90s introduced a certain measure of *simplification into the complex relations* into which

higher education is treading together with the state as well as with the civil society. The major political changes that took place in these countries at the turn of the decade, or even earlier in some cases, were in most respects based on the demands of the civil society. During the social movements of the time, university environments, that is, students and professors, played a very important role. When talking about simplification, I have in mind the situation in which we found ourselves after the democratic changes whereby the main preoccupation of the university has become its relationship with the state, while the relationship with the civil society has become subordinated or even ignored.

I am, of course, talking about my own personal experiences and observations and I wish to point out to *the context*, which allows such articulation of this complex relationship. It is, primarily, a question of *understanding the state - as well as the university - in transition*. The broad civil society movement, which led to democratic changes was based on the experience of a certain historical form of the state, and the clashes with it created the impression of a state as an intrinsically totalitarian entity, and an internally homogeneous civil society as an intrinsically democratic and liberal entity. The impression, however, quickly disappeared with the elimination of the one-party state. On the other hand, a gradual segmentation of civil society and an experience of potential conflicts within it (e.g., ethnic intolerance) were important contributions to the understanding of the concept of the legal state. When talking about the process of *the transition of society*, the question of the introduction of *democratic institutions* should be put at the forefront. The introduction of these institutions is not possible without conducting, sometimes, radical reform of some of the major relationships. Among these is the relationship between the university, state, and civil society.

Within the new legislative framework, higher education's major problem was experiencing, for the first time, the concept of autonomy. While I have no intention of discussing all the complexities of this problem, I wish to point out, however, that with the creation of a legal state, this problem was also put into a different context. The "heroic period" of protests by civil society against the totalitarian state, which also included demands for freedom of research, teaching and the management of the universities, is now history. The creation of new institutions, which was once a privilege for intellectual imagination has become an activity for the public political sphere and the polemics it involves. Higher education, in this sense, is no longer a »privileged« platform.

At the same time and on the other hand, the painful processes of social transition have also affected higher education. Many national systems of higher education have been faced with serious budget restrictions, so serious that they have, in some cases, posed a threat to the level of standards achieved in the previous system. Major changes in industry and employment have led to considerable reductions in the numbers of students in particular higher education institutions, while these numbers have increased in other institutions, which do not have sufficient capacities. The question of autonomy has thus transformed into the question of financing.

Such circumstances lead to the already mentioned *simplification*, if and whenever the development problems of higher education become a matter of *exclusive dialogue between the state and universities*. Such simplification is, at least partly also the result of specific circumstances in which these universities, as *state universities* were kept for long, and in which they were not offered any special encouragement to establish alternative relationships. These problems and their solutions demand that due consideration is given to all the potential

relationships and, certainly, to *the establishment of tight relations with various actors in civil society*: with regional or local authorities, industry and its chambers, NGOs, professional associations, etc. The simplification of the complexity of these relationships to the relationship between the state and the (state) university becomes all the more evident, if we take into account also the introduction and operation of *private universities* and other higher education institutions, which are the next important innovation of the new legislative framework of societies in transition.

When discussing how to encourage higher education today, in its active role in the relationship with civil society, *in structural terms*, I would like to direct attention to two main aspects:

- 1) Higher education must, during this continuing turbulent period, be guaranteed *the highest possible level of stability*, through available mechanisms at the national level as well as through mechanisms offered at the multilateral level. The guaranteeing of such stability must not mean the maintenance of a *status quo*, but rather the offering of support to active development initiatives, particularly to effective university strategic management.
- 2) This support must be directed at strengthening different forms of direct cooperation between higher education institutions and firms, cultural institutions, the media, NGOs, professional associations, etc. We are probably all aware of the projects, which included this dimension of cooperation, within the framework of TEMPUS. Efforts must, however, be made to ensure that such cooperation plays a more important role in future projects. Young graduates or concrete research projects are, indeed, important but not the only occasions during which such synergy may be brought about. It is necessary to emphasise the growing need for in-service training, for linking study and work and for long-life learning. These are the aspects, which give higher education, in new structural terms, new perspective and also new stability in the process of their realisation.

We must not forget, also during our discussions *in educational terms*, the positive experiences with the projects that, within the TEMPUS framework, have so far been related to the needs of a particular social environment. The inclusion and development, into education programmes, of some previously undeveloped or neglected activities (e.g., SME-training) and similar projects are, certainly, part of this context. After all, such are the projects that have been, and continue to be demanded by the economic reality of modern times. I wish to particularly make reference, at this point, to those projects, which could greatly contribute to *the direct role of higher education in forming a society's values and traditions*. This is, especially, the area of humanities and social sciences which, given the pragmatic needs of every day life, is frequently granted very little attention. Many of the problems of modern time, such as cultural and ethnic diversity, different forms of intolerance, communications, civic education and, particularly, education for active citizenship, etc., may be offered precious support through these projects.

Nor can these dimensions of values and traditions be reduced merely to the responsibility of those specialised disciplines dealing with them. My position is, as such, that more emphasis should be put on *artes liberales* or »liberal education« in various higher education studies in order to *help students realise that they can reshape themselves*, in terms of tradition as well as in terms of multicultural and international understanding. Personal self-realisation as one of the aims of higher education is, within the context of this plenary session, probably even the

most important. It may, at least indirectly, contribute to direct cooperation between institutions and higher education and culture, and to cooperation between higher education and professional associations, for example during debates on the standards of professional activities or on ethical matters in the field of individual professions.

TEMPUS has so far offered great incentive for cooperation between universities and has also contributed to the convergence of this cooperation with national development strategies and multilateral cooperation. Among the questions to be asked regarding future developments in this area is how to encourage higher education institutions take root in their own environment and how to stimulate their cooperation with non-state agencies both at the national and trans-European levels.