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The Blooming of Balkan Public Debate. (Forum Article). *Gordon R. Mitchell.*

In February 2002 Albanian journalist Blendi Fevziu hosted a televised public debate between Socialist presidential aspirant Fatos Nano and Democratic candidate Sali Berisha. The event was notable because it was the first time in recent memory that Nano and Berisha had exchanged views directly in a public forum, and also because the debate itself attracted one of the largest viewing audiences in the history of Albanian television. Fevziu's dialectical, back-and-forth discussion format enabled Albanian voters and interested parties viewing via satellite from neighboring Kosovo to witness, for one of the first times since the decline of Communism, a lively and informative presidential debate between candidates.

Other sites of public debate are flowering in the Balkans, where the emergence of deliberative exchange has begun to revivify a social landscape darkened by a decade of internecine warfare and ethnic cleansing. For example, in recent years university students from former Yugoslav ("ex-Yu") communities - Ljubljana, Maribor, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Skopje, Podgorica, Nis, Subotica, Novi Sad and Belgrade - have gathered in Serbia to exchange critical viewpoints in a parliamentary debate tournament called the Belgrade Open. The first installment of this tournament was planned carefully in 2000 when Slobodan Milosevic was still in power. In the autocratic political climate, a limited number of debates were held at a small alternative school. It was a modest but promising start. As the tournament organizers noted, "In these few days debaters proved that it is possible to have civilized discussion about the region's problems in an atmosphere of tolerance."

In a sign of how the political winds have shifted since Milosevic's exit from the Balkan political scene, the 2002 Belgrade Open involved some 70 participants representing all South Eastern European countries. More controversial topics were added, higher-profile venues were used for debates, and the arguments were amplified far and wide to public audiences. The final round of competition was convened as part of a public forum in the chambers of the Federal Parliament building. There, teams from Belgrade and Skopje debated the motion: "This House doesn't believe these politicians." The affirmative team's interpretation of the motion - that politicians' trustworthiness should be monitored in annual psychiatric examinations - was a refreshing dose of playful irreverence, one made more remarkable by the fact that the President of the Yugoslav Parliament, Dr. Dragoljub Micunovic, sat in the audience as chair of the proceedings.

The students' arguments were covered in all major Belgrade daily and weekly magazines (including Danas, Politika, Politika ekspres, Vecernje novosti, Vijesti,

Pobjeda, Glas javnosti, Blic, Blic News, Vreme, NIN, Nedeljni telegraf, Mreza), while debaters were interviewed on many radio and television talk shows (including RTS, RTV Studio B, RTV BK, RTV Politika, Radio B92, and Radio Index).

In a region wracked perennially by social turmoil and destructive conflict, the stereotype of "Balkanization" hangs over the "ex-Yu" like a dark cloud. Yet these fresh examples of constructive deliberation simultaneously discredit the shopworn Balkanization metaphor and inspire hope for the future. A new sense of publicness is taking root in this corner of the world as fledgling institutions struggle to bridge ethnic, social, and political difference, often using the ideas and energy of youth as threads to weave together the fragile fabric of a nascent civil society.

The U.S. Department of State is banking on the potential of this bottom-up approach to rebuild the social infrastructure of the war-torn region, funding initiatives such as the South Eastern European Youth Leadership Initiative (SEEYLI). This summer, the SEEYLI program brought 95 high school students, teachers, and community leaders from Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia to the Washington, D.C. area for an intensive four-week program of studies in civic culture.

For the first three weeks of the program, students stayed with local families in the Baltimore, Maryland area, commuting daily to the campus of Towson University for seminars in content areas such as legislative politics, the judiciary, drug policy, minority rights, youth culture, media, globalization, and the environment. In the final week of the program, students moved into dormitories on the Towson campus and pursued a common curriculum oriented around debate

The vast majority of American summer debate institutes are designed to prepare high school students for tournament competition, but SEEYLI took a different tack, emphasizing cooperative public debate activities designed to reach general audiences. Students learned many of the basic elements of argumentation practice taught in standard debate institutes, but then supplemented that knowledge with study of the public debate method as a political strategy for building civil society.

Sessions on choosing lively topics, refining the wording of debate propositions, and designing innovative debate formats challenged students to reflect on the purposes of organizing public debates and how best to direct discussion in pursuit of those objectives. Skill-based instruction pegged to the different roles played by participants in public debates (advocates, moderators, questioners, audience members) encouraged students to find modes of participation that matched their interests and talents. Strategies and techniques for media outreach and promotion of public debate events were studied. The ethics and politics of public debate practice were explored.

During a visit to Washington, D.C., SEEYLI students and teaching staff met with attorney Robert Barnett, the renowned debate coach of Democratic political candidates. In recent years, Barnett helped prepare Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, Bill Clinton, Hilary Rodham Clinton, Joe Lieberman, and Geraldine Ferraro for their various campaign debates. The wizened veteran of high stakes debates titillated the Balkan students with insider tales of debate strategy and lore, including Barnett's

successful attempt to fashion the stools in a 1992 presidential debate to make independent candidate Ross Perot look like a Leprechaun. Barnett advised the students on the importance of sound bite debating, explaining that in American presidential debates, "the first ten seconds of each answer is key," because after that audiences tend to zone out. He dissected how small facial gestures and posture adjustments can have major effects on the television audience's perceptions of candidates. He even identified his wife, journalist Rita Braver, as the source of the "peas and carrots" debating strategy he recommends: "When all you have is peas and they want carrots, give them peas and tell them they are getting carrots."

While Barnett also preached the virtues of hard work and practice, the message of his presentation was clear: in American presidential debates, style trumps substance. What about criticisms that such a neo-sophist approach might hollow out the heart and soul of political debate by sacrificing content at the altar of the all-powerful television image? In response to this audience question, Barnett, a former high school debater himself, lamented the current state of affairs but resigned himself to working within the system in order to get good people elected.

Barnett's stylistic pyrotechnics struck a nerve for some teachers who had been cajoling the SEEYLI students for over a week to refine and improve the content of their own debate speeches. After all, if you can disguise peas as carrots, why spend so long in the research garden trying to dig up new facts? Herein lies a dilemma embedded in American "democracy promotion" initiatives designed to cultivate nascent civil societies abroad by molding them in the image of American political traditions and practices. On the one hand, the rich American history of political dissent and popular sovereignty presents inspiring examples of democratic principles in action. But on the other hand, American political culture has evolved in ways that should give pause to those who contemplate the wholesale export of that culture as a strategy of democracy promotion.

The SEEYLI debate program culminated in the Baltimore Public Debate Festival on July 29, 2002, a one-day event that provided a showcase for the students to share their research and advocacy with public audiences. The festival presented 21 different public debates, each bearing a unique stamp of creativity imprinted by their student organizers. Some debates addressed specific policy controversies in the Balkan region. For example, a debate on the motion, "Southeast European governments should encourage the establishment of private schools," featured student advocates and questioners from Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia, with the debating action hosted by a Bulgarian moderator. Other debates focused on broader social issues that cut across national boundaries. For example, a group of three Kosovar studentsdebated the question "Should the production of energy be greatly reduced?" using a unique three-sided format that provided space for the advocates to compare competing positions from outside the binary framework (affirmative/negative, government/opposition) of competitive debating.

The participants of the 2002 SEEYLI workshop have now completed the long trek back to their native lands, taking with them new friendships and fresh blueprints for follow-on projects designed to be carried out in their home communities. How these

projects will leave make their mark on Balkan society remains to be seen. Yet the energy, creativity and resourcefulness of this group of students brings to mind one of Margaret Mead1s hopeful aphorisms: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

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