

## **Making friends in Manchukistan**

by Konstantin Nikolov, Capital Weekly, Bulgaria, participant in "Economic and Political reporting from South East Europe"

“So you are not fighting each other”. The words of the tourist guide in Oxford were meant as a joke – the kind of British dry humour that many of us don’t always understand. But they also had an unemotional observation in them – the way many in Western Europe see our region. The region in question is Southeastern Europe where for centuries our countries have fought each other.

The reason for us – fifteen journalists from Southeastern Europe being in Oxford and many other places was the four week training program organized by Robert Bosch Stiftung and Thomson Reuters Foundation. Our trainers - Keith Stafford and his assistant Richard Meares - longtime Reuters correspondents and consummate professionals, prepared a hard but at the same time funny and easygoing writing program putting us in the middle of a fictional newsroom.

The first part of the course was two weeks in London and Brussels. We were based in Canary Wharf - the financial heart of the British capital where is the Reuters building. There every day we wrote about the surreal country of Manchukistan – its economic problems, political instability and corrupt officials. Through this strange country we learnt how a country economy works, what is the difference between GDP and GNP, how the stock market operates, etc.

Slowly but surely under the brilliant tutelage of Keith and Richard we understood more and more about macro and microeconomics and corporate governance. At the same time between the courses we had the chance to meet people from the real world like the head of the Economic Bank for Reconstruction and Development, with whom we discussed the situation in our countries. During this first two weeks we also travelled to Brussels where we visited the European Commission and also talked to different NGOs about the future of the EU. In the evenings we bonded on a glass (or a lot of glasses) of beer and had the time of our lives in this amazing city of London. With their great stories and experience in the field Keith and Richard showed us what it is to be a part of an organization like Reuters.

During this first two weeks we also visited Oxford where we had dinner in one of the oldest colleges there with participants in other Thomson Reuters Foundation programs.

After the first part of the program in April we returned to our countries but always kept in touch with one another and even had a small reunion in the summer in Bucharest where this program alumnis from previous years got together for a weekend.

We returned for the second part of the course in September when we arrived in Frankfurt and continued our endeavors in economic reporting and financial markets. This time Keith and Richard focused their efforts on teaching us how to write about and how to investigate corruption – an everyday topic that never goes away in Southeastern Europe. Again through the lovely Manchukistan we did case studies on political kickbacks and corporate embezzlement.

In Frankfurt we also had the chance to visit the European Central Bank and talk about the future of the euro and our countries' chances of joining the eurozone one day. We also met with people from the banking sector and had a lively discussion when the current financial crisis will end.

After Frankfurt we arrived in Berlin – probably the most colorful capital in Europe shaped by decades of separation but having such great passion for life. During this last part of the training we had the chance to meet different NGOs, members of government and representatives of German business. We also continued exploring the tense situation in Manchukistan.

For me one of the most interesting parts of this program were the country presentations each one of us had to prepare. We had the chance to discuss our past, present and future and to see how close we are in our cultures, emotions and views of the world.

“For me, it was a great experience: both the training sessions and discovering city streets and pubs with my new friends. I’m still amazed how the group got along so well from our first day in London to the very end in Berlin” says Slobodan Petrovic from Serbia. “Both parts: official and unofficial were precious. From the first, I learned a lot about economy journalism, finance, money flow, story structure and interviewing techniques... From the other, unofficial part, I learned about my neighbours, their countries, everyday life. Surprisingly, it appeared that we share almost the same dilemmas and concerns in our day-to-day job, as we share the same problems and joys in our lives. In the end, learning about the others turned out to be learning about myself as well. I’m sure I improved my journalism skills. I’m also sure that next time I’m in Zagreb, Sofia, Sarajevo, Tirana, Bucharest, Ljubljana or Skopje – I won’t be a stranger. I have friends there. And they have a friend in Belgrade, that’s for sure.”, adds Slobodan.

As for me, I can honestly say without any exaggeration that this training program not only taught me new things about the world of economy and finance thanks to the excellent trainers we had in Keith and Richard, but also gave me 14 new friends from Southeastern Europe. And no, we are not fighting each other, dear tourist guide from Oxford.

Thank you for giving us this chance, Keith, Richard, Lisa and all the kind people in Robert Bosch Stiftung and Thomson Reuters Foundation.