

How the friendships from Manchukistan can serve the Balkans

By Stefan Antonov, Dnevnik Daily, Bulgaria, participant in “Economic and political reporting from South East Europe” 2011

The Bartender was just polishing the pints when two familiar faces showed up at the door. Keith Stafford and Richard Meares were bringing group of fifteen journalists. For decades Mr Stafford takes his trainees for Ice breaking in the 160 years old pub called “The North Pole”. Situated in London, nearby the financial district Canary Wharf where the Thomson Reuters headquarters is located as well, this place has remained undiscovered for the tourists but is very famous for generations of journalists.

And this group is a different one. All trainees come from different countries in the Balkans working for various media companies. They are united by the training program “Economical and Political Reporting from Southeast Europe” organized by Thomson Reuters Foundation and Robert Bosch Stiftung. In 2011 the program accepted its fifth group since the start in 2007.

The whole course lasts four weeks and is separated in two parts each of them two weeks long.

Only the first part is in London and includes the theoretical part explaining macroeconomics and the theory of the capital markets. Questions such as what equity, bonds and commodities are and what moves their prices up and down were discussed. The trainers also showed how to read and understand financial reports and how to evaluate public companies. Nevertheless we were learning how to interpret this information in well-structured stories that send clear messages to the audience.

Mr. Stafford and Mr. Meares soon became just Keith and Richard for the participants including me and the training continued in informal spirit.

Before our arrival each of us received 10 pages description of Manchukistan. It is a fictional country – an emerging market and country in transition which has oil fields to exploit, state owned enterprises for privatization, stock exchange, corrupted government and regulators. The country is also affected from the global financial crisis.

During the practices the trainers provided every trainee information about the news in Manchukistan and everyone wrote his own articles. Later Keith and Richard edited every single story and showed the specific mistakes of every journalist.

After the writing exercise and the feedback a joint discussion took place where everybody could ask why something has been assessed as wrong or just not good enough and how it could be improved.

Old professionals know that there is a dilemma in financial journalism which is more difficult – should economists be taught to write about the forces of markets or should journalists be taught to understand these mechanism. This course was instructive for both. It helped the economists to improve their style and gave the writers decoding tools to understand the economic processes.

There were many other benefits as well. During the first part in April we visited Brussels for 3 days and we met Members of the European Parliament, spokespersons from the European Commission and NATO, lobbyists and journalists. We had useful meetings in London too. All of them helped us to see how the Western Europeans see our region or just to understand the trends in media market.

Many of us found interesting topics to write for and established working contacts for the future.

Two meetings proved to be too short to address our big interest and the time was far not enough for all the questions we wanted to ask. Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, Member of the European Parliament, was talking about our region, the challenges for the Euro zone and the challenges for our region and its European integration.

Peter Sanfey, senior economist for Southeast Europe in the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, didn't have enough time to answer all the questions we wanted to ask.

But we didn't learn one of the most important things in the training room. During these first two weeks we were visiting pubs together, we used to go shopping together or helped each other with medications when some of us got cold. So we established friendships in April and strengthened them later.

Valuable lectures and writing exercises followed in September during the second part in Germany which was separated in two parts - one in Frankfurt to meet officials from the financial sector and the European Central Bank and the second in Berlin where we met government officials, business representatives and people from Transparency International.

But in my opinion, one of the key roles of this course was very well illustrated by the architecture of the government district in Berlin. Once separated in East and West by a wall, there are still remains of it when following the bank of the Spree River. Today, on the two banks there are government buildings connected by bridges over the river as symbol of the German unification.

We too were connected like the bridges in Berlin. We came from different countries with political and cultural differences and even disagreements about our cultural heritage. At the beginning we were trying to leave all that aside but later we just forgot all the barriers and became friends. "I would need whole year to meet as many great people as I did in those two weeks", said Rok Pikon participant from Slovenia who works for the newspaper Finance.

What each one of us means for the rest we could see at the final dinner and the after party in Metzger Eck – 98 years old pub in East Berlin that has survived two world wars, one cold war, and one wall and still receives people happy to share their time with the friends.

But there is no doubt that this training program proved to be a cornerstone for many new bridges that we have to build in the future. Some of us may become David through their jobs and defeat their Goliaths but at least we are opinion makers and we have to participate in the rebuilding of our region.

Many of us shared the common pain from bringing news to societies. Societies which have seen so much in the last years so that they just don't care for the last corruption scandal.

It made us even stronger by understanding that we all face the same difficulties and however still stand to protect the public interest.

During the course, Keith used to say that we should raise questions and blow the whistle when there is something wrong. "It is not the regulators, it is you, and you should be like the policemen" he used to say many times.

And later on, during the final dinner he also sent one important message: "One thing Robert Bosch Stiftung and Thomson Reuters Foundation want from you in return is to stay close".

The generation of Keith couldn't see the upcoming disaster of Enron and many others. Will we see the storms coming and help our societies to get prepared?

Our colleague from the Kosovo Afet Bela who works for the newspaper Epoka E Re once said "We serve to the Balkans".

Thomson Reuters and Robert Bosch did their job, now it's up to us.