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DELO

Interview with Dr Miroslav Polzer, director of the Austrian Scientific Institute in Slovenia

Where Is the Dividing Line Between the Local and the Global in Science and Ethics?

The content and background for this interview with Dr Miroslav Polzer, director of the Austrian Scientific Institute in Ljubljana, could, with a little imagination, be expressed by a geometric shape and a mathematical formula. It is “a sort of triangle” symbolising years of efforts to improve scientific and research cooperation between Austria, Slovenia and the Western Balkans, with the latter covering the countries of the former Yugoslavia “minus Slovenia, plus Albania”.

To make understanding easier, this is the simplest way to outline the activities of the Austrian Scientific Institute in Ljubljana which cover this part of the Balkans. This is an area which “on maps and in name” is still where it’s always been, but, as we know, in different historical periods they have experienced dynamic changes and, equally, (non-)identification with the term Balkans, be it south-eastern, western or any part thereof.

Ljubljana, Sofia, Brno ...

There are very diverse forms of cooperation among Vienna, Ljubljana and various Balkan countries or across the wider area. They are presented in more detail in a special publication of the Vienna Centre for Social Innovation



Dr Miroslav Polzer, director of the Austrian Scientific Institute in Ljubljana.

countries, among other activities mentioned by the interviewee. Another point of interest worth mentioning is that the Austrian Scientific Institute in Ljubljana cooperates closely with the institutes of the same name in Sofia in Bulgaria and Brno in the Czech Republic; the basic activities of all three institutes have since 2004 – with emphasis on a partnership approach – been coordinated by the Vienna Centre for Social Innovation, which comes under the umbrella of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

Openness to other cultures

Dr Miroslav Polzer and his colleagues in Ljubljana have been active for over a decade. Extensive publicity activities and other professional symposium-conference documentation confirm that this has been a success. The fact that he knows conditions in the region we are discussing very well is confirmed by several favourable circumstances: personal involvement, excellent education and, last but not least, his origins. He is a Carinthian Slovene, which he is pleased to emphasise whenever our discussion turns to the fact that in his work he is split between Vienna, Ljubljana and Sankt Primus in the municipality of Sankt Kanzian by Klopeiner See, where he was born and where his parents still live, and his home close to Bleiburg, where he goes two or three times a week. “Well, you can get there in less than two hours. My job’s in Ljubljana, but my family’s there ...”. But because since the almost daily travelling his job involves is also part of his nature, openness and interest in the lives of other people, cultures, customs and the possibilities of socio-economic and particularly scientific development in environments that until now have had insufficient opportunities, or that did not pay enough attention, this represents a constant challenge.

Work which is also a hobby and a lifestyle

“If I didn’t have to worry about money and had a little more time,” he says, “I’d do this for pleasure, as a hobby, as it’s so interesting.” Of course, a great deal of enthusiasm is always needed, since his work is tied to a one-year contract with the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, and more specifically the Centre for Social Innovation. He therefore has to continually prove himself, justify his existence with interesting ideas and programmes. Good programmes need to be prepared all the time, financiers must be convinced, and of course those expecting financial support must be helped with advice – young researchers, scientists, representatives of nongovernmental organizations in the region, participants in international scientific meetings ... Individuals or groups reply to tenders or themselves propose different options for scientific cooperation with the Austrian Scientific Institute in Ljubljana, either in the Western Balkans or in the joint European research space.

If you're from the margins, you have to prove yourself twice ...

A fleeting glimpse of his CV and a chat about his early childhood shows that living in a bilingual area, recognising minority problems and later different education streams, as well as involvement in charitable activities, have brought valuable life experience, particularly useful in his current work, although at first sight it doesn't have a great deal in common with varied scientific activities. From his own experience he better understands disadvantaged individuals or groups from environments where it is difficult to escape deep-rooted prejudices and preconceptions of inferiority. Here though, as we can conclude from the conversation below about stereotypes and prejudices linked to the level of science and research in certain underdeveloped regions, an excessively sentimental emphasis on inclinations and understanding the deprived would be of no use if it were not linked to a realistic critical assessment of the situation and mutual involvement ... More specifically: in life, some people – whether they are school pupils, students or young researchers from certain, less developed environments – have to work harder for success and to prove themselves, compared to others from more favourable environments. As there is no suitable infrastructure, understanding, investment in knowledge and innovation, exceptional personal engagement, persistence and courage are required. And such competition – where some have advantages right from the start, or at least appear to – can be painful and can seem unjust. But this is the inevitable reality that must be faced. Even more specifically and topically: that the “mother EU” should take in its arms – as it knows what order is and how to arrange things – the queue of “kids” knocking at the door who will have to prove that they deserve it. That they are capable, have the knowledge, will, ideas, strength. That they will not, in short, be the spanner in their development works ...

And as for what future EU members will have to do in order to achieve faster development, primarily through investment in human resources, science and research, and how the more developed EU members can help them achieve this, that will

come a little later. The conversation on his education and early life experience is interesting as it confirms what we already mentioned – great personal engagement in order to make the breakthrough, prove himself, find himself and succeed.

From distinction in the baccalaureate to a world of varied experiences ...

His education included four years at the Slovenian grammar school in Klagenfurt, a baccalaureate with distinction at Klagenfurt College of Telecommunications and Electronics, a degree in economics and business with an emphasis on information sciences and banking, a doctorate at Graz University on environmental problems in Calcutta, postgraduate study in technical environmental protection ... also, partly in relation to the doctorate, and partly due to civilian service with the Red Cross in Völkermarkt, some volunteering experience in India and Nepal and work with Caritas, all of this has helped expand his life horizons. Even as a student as well as later he worked with the Austrian bishops' conference, the umbrella organization for other organizations dealing with aid for developing countries, serving as coordinator for activities and know-how transfer to the countries of central and eastern Europe. Afterwards, he worked in the Prosveta house in Tainach, which is an educational institution for Carinthian Slovenes, as a teacher in the areas of

environmental protection, cooperation with developing countries and European integration. Then in January 1996 he came to the post he currently holds at the Austrian Scientific Institute in Ljubljana. But here he didn't start from scratch, he inherited the good start developed over six years by his predecessor and founder, Feliks J Bister, also a Carinthian Slovene, the first director of the institution, which was initially named the Ljubljana branch of the Austrian Institute for Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

At first, this involved more support for bilateral cooperation between Slovenia and Austria, but the focus has for some time now been on connecting scientific capacities in Austria and Slovenia – involved as partners – with scientific potential in south-eastern Europe, and particularly those countries defined by the European Union as the western Balkans, that is the countries of former Yugoslavia and Albania.

Continuing the good inheritance from his predecessor

As Dr Polzer says, his predecessor had already undertaken important work, when in the early years of the institute, with the cooperation of Austrian historians and other scientists from the humanities, he managed to illuminate certain problematic themes, such as Germanisation, German dominance of the Slovenian nation and the like, as multilaterally as possible and to shift



the debate from the emotional to the scientific level, which is important for a realistic image and in looking to the future.

In the last decade or so and since Slovenia joined the EU, the institute – in the manner described above, i.e. partnership of two neighbours – has strived to transfer know-how regarding European integration and numerous related issues. The Austrian Scientific Institute has among other things been heavily engaged in the organization of various professional meetings, one of the most prominent of which was Science and Society in an Expanded EU, held in the Slovenian Parliament; through this international conference, they wanted – in conjunction with the Slovenian Science Foundation and the National Council – as the title suggests to establish the significance of science for the development and stability of Slovenia and the European Union. As tolerant inter-ethnic relations and an inclusive multicultural society are important preconditions for the success of the “United Europe” project, the conference also presented the ethnic project, the aim of which is to inform members of national minorities of the possibilities in the area of science and technology and to support them in their equal participation in society.

Partnership cooperation with the Balkan countries

One important event that should certainly be mentioned is the conference last year in the European Parliament, also on the theme of participation by Western Balkans countries in current and future European Research and Technological Development Framework Programmes (EU RTD-Framework Programmes). This forum was jointly organised by the Slovenian Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, and the Greek Ministry of Development together with the European Parliament, and also involved representatives of the Austrian Scientific Institute. The meeting was supported with active participation by science and research commissioner Dr Janez Potočnik and brought together representatives of ministries of the countries of Southeastern Europe. Similarly, we should mention last year’s symposium on the questions of religion and European integration, while this year we have the scientific meeting in Vienna entitled “Slovenia and Austria as Partners in Relation to the Western Balkans,”



Dr Miroslav Polzer, director of the Austrian Scientific Institute in Ljubljana.

and in cooperation with UNESCO the recent conference in Ljubljana on the theme “Why invest in science in South-eastern Europe?” In addition they also prepared a number of other meetings, and made particular efforts to acquire and translate interesting professional literature so that a number of current issues, particularly popularisation of science, should reach not just the professional but also the general public.

Tolerant in dialogue with the help of science, including on “hot” topics

As Dr Polzer explains, they are not afraid to “pull someone else’s chestnuts out of the fire”, that is, they do not avoid problematic themes which actually call for a scientific approach so as to find in a tolerant and cultured dialogue suitable practical solutions for better solutions to, for instance, minority issues, cultural heritage, modern migration, the status of the Roma. In connection with the last of these, Dr Polzer recalls that in cooperation with the Institute of Nationality Issues and others, they significantly contributed to raising awareness of their status in various countries. It seemed that the Roma question is one of the central minority issues in the European Union; in the expanded EU, the Roma are one of the largest ethnic groups, and are very heterogeneous practically everywhere. It is therefore very important that countries cooperate with each other and of course with the Roma in regulating their status. In some places, Roma communities have greater opportunities for active participation and suitable integration into their environments, but in many places they remain trapped in a vicious circle of marginalisation, always on the edge. Sometimes, though, all that is needed is to look around and exploit the opportunities that exist. Thus, for instance, experts from the University of Graz, together with Slovenian colleagues specialising in Roma issues, found that the autochthonous Roma population in Burgenland used

a language very similar to the Romani spoken in Prekmurje. This meant that teaching aids developed in Burgenland could to a large extent also be suitable for Roma in Prekmurje.

How to achieve a better atmosphere for investment in science?

There are still many similar opportunities to exchange professional experiences. This is fully confirmed by the previously mentioned international meeting on the theme of investing in science in Southeastern Europe. Representatives of countries from the region who presented scientific research work, achievements, difficulties and plans had interesting opportunities for mutual comparison and, particularly in the light of what is achieved in the most developed environments, finding possibilities for achieving an atmosphere more conducive to investment in science in their own individual countries. In scientific and professional circles in all environments, it is self-evident that they know how important science and investment in science are. We therefore have to move beyond “preaching to the converted” to a discussion of how to attract decision-makers, i.e. politicians and the wider public. We must all understand the rules of today’s globalised world and knowledge-based economic development, and must be aware of the importance of investing development aid and our own funds in knowledge and development.

Who gains and who loses?

As mentioned at the outset, sooner or later the countries of SE Europe will also be members of the EU. If they are weak in the areas of science and research, this would be bad for the other European countries, too. It would hinder common efforts to realise the Barcelona objectives, the Lisbon Strategy and various other development projects. Such weak links must be strengthened to make the whole chain strong ... In this sense we must modernise science “systems” in SE European countries, adjusting them to modern standards, through effective investment in human resources and infrastructure, effective acquisition of jobs and products with high added value, competitive goods and services so that – after they have made great efforts to join the large European family – they do not remain losers.

Over the last three years, the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has supported such efforts and awareness-raising of the importance of science and research through tenders for joint research projects with researchers from Austria, Slovenia and the countries of SE Europe and Bulgaria.

Plans for Slovenia's presidency of the EU

The Austrian Scientific Institute – in cooperation with outside consultants – is already actively preparing for the period of Slovenia's presidency of the EU in the first half of 2008. This period will be particularly appropriate for selected topical discussions and preparation of plans and strategies, not just Slovenian and European, but also global strategies. Thus, for instance, Dr Polzer has worked with Slovenian and other partners in designing a draft EU programme for international scientific research on the theme of Global Research Initiatives for the Implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals (www.global-goals.eu)...This involves realisation of the objectives of the United Nations programme to reduce poverty and for more balanced development, to which international scientific cooperation can, as mentioned, make an important contribution.

From utopia to reality

Although it might seem somewhat utopian, it would be right at least to start more seriously discussing certain coordination on the global level. A specific proposal has been prepared to develop – similarly to the system in the European Research Area – global research fields and to coordinate international scientific cooperation. This on the one hand would be important for the rational use of resources, effective cooperation with important institutions such as UNESCO, the World Bank, international research organizations and research institutions such as JRC and others in the EU, for better use of infrastructure, the design of relevant fields and other reasons. On the other hand, such an approach would also be important to attempts in the global arena to achieve respect for modern research standards, relevant legislation and ethical recommendations in scientific and research work. In connection with this second issue, Dr Polzer has already contributed to the design of some starting points for discussion

on ethical limits of research (Ethical Limits of Research – The European Voice(s) in the Global Quest for Consensus/Standards).

These are in any event broad, important themes, where it is important to achieve a consensus, since it is not enough for issues to be appropriately regulated in only certain areas; where there is disorder and a lack of transparency, there is great risk for contentious research, dirty business and an unacceptable image of science. Examples of such unacceptable behaviour, for instance in medicine and pharmacology, are not restricted to history – modern biotechnology and biomedicine are not immune to such dangers as reproduction cloning in human medicine, or other attempts, and so it is right to form global standards and to attempt to ensure global respect for them. For such global issues, cooperation with UNESCO would be particularly important and has to date also proven to be very suitable.

Dr Miroslav Polzer expects before the end of the year – and of course particularly in future plans – the parent organizations, that is, the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, the Centre for Social Innovation and the Slovenian Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, to continue to support their scientific and other activities of importance for development in Slovenia and in the wider European area.

Centre for Social Innovation Vienna (ZSI) – www.zsi.at

The Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI) – the parent institution of the Austrian Science and Research Liaison Office (ASO) Ljubljana – is a multifunctional social-scientific research institute which aims to reduce the gap between the needs and potentials of modern information and knowledge societies by systematically linking the knowledge generation with the application of knowledge.

Social innovation is directed towards the initiation, adoption, improvement and extended implementation of new forms of social interaction and social conduct, all of which affect development processes in public administration, political institutions, social partners, the business sector and civil society.

In its various capacities, the ZSI contributes to socio-economic goals in support of:

- the social, ecological and economical sustainable development of our society;
- European integration processes by enhancing scientific competencies and by implementing knowledge-based projects;
- the upgrading of scientific infrastructure as well as the efficiency and efficacy of social scientific research in the European Research Area (ERA).

The top priority of our projects is to develop applicable innovative solutions to socially important questions. Our projects are rooted in sound scientific principles and based on interdisciplinary and international cooperation.

Within the two competence areas “Work and Equal Opportunities” and “Technology and Knowledge”, social innovation is both practically and scientifically supported by interdisciplinary and international cooperation.

Analysis and shaping of social innovation are dealt with in a multitude of projects covering a continuum of fundamental research, applied research and policy advice.

Examples of SEE related projects:

- IS2WEB – Extending Information Society Networks to the Western Balkan Region – (<http://www.is2web.org>) concentrates on focused training and mentoring of a limited number of promising research institutions which are identified in a first step through a thorough mapping of Western Balkan research organisations operating in the IST area. Complementary activities to facilitate networking will allow these organisations to exchange ideas and pursue joint research collaboration with their EU counterparts.
- SEE-SCIENCE.EU – Information Office of the Steering Platform on Research for the Western Balkan Countries (<http://www.see-science.eu>) is a support action for the Steering Platform on Research for the Western Balkan Countries. The Steering Platform was implemented under the Austrian EU Presidency in the spring of 2006 and will be continued by subsequent presidencies (Finland, Germany, Portugal, Slovenia). Its aim is (a) to structure S&T policy dialogue between the EC, the Member States, Associated States and third Western Balkan countries and (b) to monitor the progress of co-operation between the EU and the Western Balkans in the field of S&T and related foreign policies (e.g. development co-operation).
- SEE-ERA.NET – (<http://www.see-era.net>) is a networking project aimed at integrating EU Member States and Southeast European countries in the European Research Area by linking research activities within existing national, bilateral and regional RTD programmes.