

# Welcome to the Temple of Democracy: Doing Fieldwork in the Council of Europe

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In "Palace Steps", the new film produced in 1998 to present the enlarged Council of Europe to the public, the building is an empty palace, solemn and haunted by the spirits of the past. A little girl full of awe walks up the stairs in the entrance hall growing into a woman as she climbs. She is alone with the spiritual values of the place: humanism, diversity and the state of law, holding in her hand the golden stars from the flag of the Council, twelve of them - the number of perfection. Reminding the horrors of the war, the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the monuments of communism the film states the vocation of the Council to protect "the human being in its uniqueness", defending it against injustice, unemployment and mistreatment, to care for the natural life of the planet and to protect plants and animals. These images of the spiritual role of the Council as the Saviour are underlaid by comments explaining the legal role of the Council as the guardian of 180 conventions signed by some or most of the 40 European member states.

The film evokes stages of an initiation process that a novice to the community of democratic countries has to go through to reach the state of an accomplished democracy - in the film symbolised by the hemicycle. The seventeen former socialist countries that were admitted since 1989 were to go through such a process by putting into practice the legal and institutional frames developed since 1949 by the old Western European member countries, or as some administrators of the Council phrased it: they were to learn how to become democracies.

When administrators and delegates of the Council talk about their activities they try to distinguish them from those of the other "rich" European institutions. They insist that they have no money to offer to the new members but only the "prestige" of becoming a member of a community of democratic states in Europe. An administrator in the political directorate called it, "to deliver a passport of democracy to enter into Europe". This interpretation, however, is not supported by many members of the Council, who refute all attempts at classifying the Council as the entry hall to the European Union.

Compared to the institutions of the European Union, the Commission, the Council of Ministers and the Parliament (Abélès 1992, 1996, Bellier 1996, 1997, Shore 1997), the Council of Europe seems indeed a poor idealist organisation. Its annual budget corresponds to less than the sum spent by the European Union in only half a day. The primary mover of the European Union has been the establishment of a single European market and the economic

integration of the member states. The institutions of the Union evolved through compromise and negotiation among the member countries. The deputies and civil servants of the Union "build Europe" by agreeing on the smallest common denominator of common laws and regulations. The rules and regulations issued by the Commission in Brussels and agreed upon by the ministers of the member states of the Union become effective in the member states, with hardly any public debate arising about the reasons that brought them about. The European commissioners can therefore, as Bellier (1997:101) phrased it, "live by making plans for the future, without looking back". The progress in European unification has facilitated economic exchanges, it has englobed a growing number of countries but it has not integrated their societies politically (Abélès 1996:90) around a common political and social project.

The Council of Europe, on the contrary draws the legitimacy of its existence from a strong codex of values, it claims to defend. The events of 1989 gave the Western European countries and the Council of Europe as their moral representative for a short time the agreeable feeling of clearness and unambiguity, they felt sure to have followed the right path in the development of their societies. The Council of Europe that had become in the 1980s, as some administrators called it, "the diplomatic club of the wealthy and well intentioned" and whose dissolution was evoked time and time again behind closed doors, saw finally a new task in front of it: to introduce the former socialist countries into the community of democratic states and to help them to become democracies.

In Eastern Europe the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights was able to count in the beginning of the 1990s with a certain prestige as a non corruptible moral authority that dared to spell out unpleasant truths to defend the rights of political opponents and minorities. To become member of the Council was regarded as an official recognition that one was becoming part of the democratic states of Europe with all the political and economic advantages that this implied. For those states, who wanted to become members of the European Union it seemed also a necessary first stage to pass through. For others, like Russia the Council was a geopolitical forum, from which it did not want to be excluded. Until the inclusion of Russia to the Council in 1996, it had been a precondition for membership to sign the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights. Admitting Russia without having fulfilled this condition meant to change the orientation of the Council from an assembly of like-minded countries to an institution that was promoting its project towards its own member states. It was striking that those countries that were a long way off from the European Union attributed the highest importance to being a member of the Council of Europe. Russia for instance sent some of its top politicians to the parliamentary assembly of the Council.

It was our common interest in the mechanisms of the transfer of institutional frames, rules and regulations to the former socialist countries and more importantly the transmission of values and practices that brought thirteen anthropologists from ten, mostly Central and Eastern European countries, (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Poland, Rumania, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine) to the Council of Europe. We wanted to explore in the daily life of the institution how the members of different origin of the secular but "spiritual

institution" were producing normative discourses about democratic forms of political life, the so-called European Values, and how the transmission of these norms and values to the new member countries was done in practice through programmes, workshops and information politics. How did they bring the normative discourse in accordance with claims of tolerance and plurality and with the pragmatic geopolitical interests of the member states? Seven research-teams were observing and interviewing in different parts of the Council, covering the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Clerk of the Assembly, the Section for Education in Democratic Citizenship, the European Youth Centre, the Roma Network, the Image Politics of the Council and the position of administrators and delegates from new member countries in the institution.

The researchers from mostly new member states observed the practices as outsiders of the institution, but also as citizens of member states affected by the politics of the institution. In the research team we were attempting to reflect on this double role, which in a sense accentuated the methodological tool of the anthropologist who observes while participating, trying to achieve close familiarity with the actors as well as analytical distance. More than in any other social science, in social anthropology the subjectivity of the researcher as a medium of research has to be taken into account and made transparent in the analysis of the data. In our team-research in the Council of Europe subjective interests, political convictions and methodological approaches of the team members met without forming a coherent harmonious whole. Communication and collaboration between the team members and among different research teams was difficult, which gave us a measure of the difficulties encountered by the members of the Council themselves who were trying to establish coherent practices inside the multicultural institution and normative discourses towards the outside.

While we were trying to reflect about our methods and approaches, the people we were interested in in the institution were doing it as well. There was a lot of soul-searching going on in the Council of Europe. Not only were the administrators, delegates and diplomats thinking about the aims of the institution, they were also measuring the daily practices and practical outcomes of decision-making with their own values and convictions. In fact throughout the five weeks of our fieldwork in June and July 1998 a constant questioning took place about the objectives of the Council, its structure, the impact it was making and the place it takes in the landscape of European institutions.

Not infrequently we were asked whether we were sent by the Committee of Wise Persons, a group of twelve illustrious politicians and diplomats who had the task to set the agenda for the Council of Europe for the coming years. It took some of our interviewees by surprise and sometimes caused suspicion that we were independent researchers without any institutional or financial link to the Council.

Our request to allow a team of thirteen anthropologists from Central and Eastern Europe to carry out research in the Council of Europe for five weeks travelled through the institution for three months from December 1997 to March 1998, from the directorate of culture to the private office, from the private office to the patronage office, from the patronage office back

to the private office, from the private office to the director of administration, to the private office ..... Each time I called to ask about the progress the decision-making process was making, friendly female voices answered regretting that their (male) superiors were in urgent meetings due to last for hours. I started to call after five o'clock, when the secretaries had left and their superiors were answering the phone directly. I ended up talking to a high placed official who took on our case and the next day the research permit was delivered by fax.

This permit opened all the doors. On a preparatory visit in May I was able in only three days to come to a agreement with the Deputy Clerk of the Assembly, the Deputy Director of the Directorate education, culture and sport, the Deputy Clerk of the Committee of Ministers and the Principal Administrator of the Youth directorate to allow a group of researchers to do fieldwork in their section of the Council. The status of *Stagière* was attributed to us, which gave us - as one of the administrators said - a status as inoffensive and invisible as wallpaper. A *Stagière* could sit in virtually all the meetings without being remarked.

The image, the researchers had of the Council of Europe before coming there obviously depended on the position of their own country with respect to the institution. The more their country was far from Strasbourg the more importance seem to have been attributed to being a member of the Council of Europe. All researchers but one thought of the Council as a "Western Institution", transmitting "Western" values and ideas, only Dimitri Tchepel from Novosibirsk regarded it as a place where geopolitical interests are negotiated. He was surprised about the "spiritual" aspect of the place. For Enikö Demeny a member of the Hungarian minority in Romania the Council had been important as a defender of her minority rights in Romania. Whereas for Hanus Beran from Prague and Juraj Podoba from Bratislava the attitude of the Council towards minorities did not correspond to the problems and concerns of their states with minorities. They saw membership to the Council of Europe as a ticket for entry into the European Union, a necessary passage point which would loose importance for their countries once they joined the European Union. This image corresponded rather well to the one of Chiara Zanetti, the Italian member of the team, who did not see the Council as a distinctive element in the network of European institutions. Ivaylo Dichev from Bulgaria and Agnieszka Dzierzbicka from Austria, on the contrary, expected the Council to be much bigger and much more powerful than it actually proved to be. Ivaylo Dichev had met representatives of the Council in Bulgaria and had been pleased about the outspoken critical stance they took towards Bulgarian politics.

All researchers were surprised about the fact, that the institution that seemed closed and inaccessible from the outside, opened up for us once we were introduced and were carrying a badge. In spite of all the warnings about confidentiality access was easy to delegates, administrators and diplomats. We were admitted to almost all committee meetings, including the meeting of the Committee of Ministers, could observe the proceedings of the Parliamentary Assembly and had access to documents marked confidential. As almost all working documents in the Council are marked "confidential" this last feature was maybe not surprising. The omnipresence of confidentiality in the institution produced something like an overkill and made the idea of confidentiality itself ineffective.

The research group divided into teams choosing their field inside the Council. Justyna Giezyńska who had worked for some time for the former Polish ambassador to the Council and Olga Filippova from Kharkov were introduced through the Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers to the ambassadors themselves. Sitting every day in the Committee of Ministers, the centre of power of the Council and drinking cocktails at diplomatic receptions they seemed to have the most interesting and pleasurable field of all. They had the difficulty however to overcome the barriers of diplomatic etiquette and make the ambassadors talk. They tried to meet their interviewees several times in order to find out not only what the people had to say but also why and how they were saying it.

Justyna Giezyńska and Olga Filippova prepared the interviews together and discussed their findings. However, Giezyńska who was perfectly fluent in English did most of the talking. Through interviews and observations they tried to find out about the strategies that ambassadors from new member countries used to establish a firm position in the diplomatic circle. Filippova thought of her stay in the Council of Europe like a mission. She wanted to understand what the values of the Council of Europe actually meant, to be able to explain them, once she returned to Ukraine, a country - as she sees it far away from Europe and from ideas of democracy.

Agnieszka Dzierzbicka from Austria and of Polish origin and Tatiana Beliaeva from Russia formed a harmonious team working on the Parliamentary Assembly and concentrating on Austrian, Polish and Russian delegates. They tried to play with their different origins and language proficiencies interviewing the delegates in their mother tongue and showing sympathy for their political and national preoccupations. This however, not always worked. The Polish delegates grew suspicious of Dzierzbicka's double national identity and were reluctant to tell her more than obvious facts. In the interviews in English that they were doing together they played with their different approaches to the field. Beliaeva asked the interviewees about their personal ideas whereas Dzierzbicka inquired about concrete aspects of their work. They tried to ask carefully and respect boundaries, ready to allow the research partner to come in when the interview seemed to come to a standstill. The observations they could make during the Parliamentary Assembly were the material with which they could work later in the interviews. In the end however, Beliaeva was left alone to analyse the functioning of parliamentary diplomacy in and around the assembly and Agnieszka Dzierzbicka withdrew from the project taking her interview material with her. Beliaeva was struck by the level of misunderstandings in the Council. She remarked, while Russian delegates came to the Council to establish political contacts with Western and Eastern colleagues, their Western colleagues interpreted their presence in the Council as them "learning Democracy".

A reversal of interests took place in the research group Hanus Beran from Prague and Dimitri Tchepel from Novosibirsk formed, working on a small section dealing with "Education in Democratic Citizenship". The two researchers worked - as they called it - "apart together". Not much communication was going on between them. Beran was at first interested in the forms of cooperation in the section whereas Tchepel wanted to find out about the contents of

what was transmitted in the educational programmes. After two weeks they changed the emphasis and changed their roles. In the few interviews they were doing together Tchepele remarked a difference in principle in their attitude towards the interviewees. Whereas Tchepele tended to believe what people told him and made the interview follow up from there, Beran tried to find the dark spots the things that were not spoken about and follow what seemed prohibited and hidden.

For Tchepele getting to know the Civic Education Section was a discovery. He was impressed by the personal involvement of the people working there. "They act along the lines of their heart, not along the lines of the council", he said about them. He was convinced that the support they wanted to give to his country, that was - as he saw it - sick in every way, would not do any harm. For Beran the work the administrators in the section did, was mainly serving an ideology.

The team of Chiara Zanetti and Ivaylo Ditchchev was working on the image the institution was producing of itself. They tried to follow guided tours around the building, speak to the producers of information materials and to the administrators preparing the fiftieth birthday of the Council in 1999. This meant that their team did not have a section of the Council where they could carry out observations and establish relationships of confidence. They had to rely on the analysis of propaganda materials and interviews. This absence of close links to the people they were interested in created tensions in the group. Zanetti tried to win the confidence of the interviewees and find out about their opinions and ideas. She saw that the enlargement of the institution was done "in a colonial way" that gave little voice to the new members but which might profit them nevertheless. She felt uncomfortable with Ditchchev's style of interviewing accusing him of trying to shock or surprise, whereas Ditchchev could not see in which direction Zanetti was going and what she actually wanted to find out. Ditchchev saw the Council as no centre of power neither colonial or otherwise, but - as he phrased it - "as a diplomatic salon and not as a political actor".

Following up the links of the Roma Network inside the Council Zdenek Uherek felt happy to explore "Kafkas Schloss", as he called the Council. Having done research on Roma communities in the Czech Republic he engaged in expert discussions with the administrators he was talking to. Instead of inquiring he tried to establish a dialogue with the people he was interested in. He was interested in the images of Roma among administrators in different parts of the Roma Network and their methods of cooperation.

In the European Youth Centre Zdenka Machalkova from the Czech Republic and Enikő Demeny were following training seminars giving to youth leaders from Eastern Europe. They watched the training sessions with group dynamic games and interviewed trainers, participants and administrators. For Demeny the atmosphere and discourses in the centre were familiar, as she had followed a training session organised by the Council of Europe in Budapest. For her the fact that her country was able to join the Council made her feel less excluded from Europe and somewhat more European. Machalkova did not share this positive feeling. She felt very clearly that people from the East were made to feel that they were from "Non-Civil-Society-Countries" and she was, rather in spite and because of this

discrimination, suddenly proud to be from the Czech Republic.

In place of the modernist paradigm of institutions as rational and replete with objective facts, an interpretative approach has been used to understand the complex process of the transfer of values and practices from the Council of Europe to its members and from the citizens of Europe to the Council. We tried to understand the institution of the Council of Europe as a site for constructing and transmitting meaning in daily practice. The papers assembled in this volume take up reflections that go on among the members of the Council themselves: about the nature of the normative European model that tries to be coherent and universally valid while being inextricably linked to political processes set in national and international contexts. They problematize the tension between the political mission of the transfer of values and practices to the post-socialist countries that the Council of Europe set itself and the claim of equality between old and new members that is one of the guiding principles of the institution. As social anthropologists studying the daily practice of the institution in observable settings we were constantly confronted with the question the actors themselves in the institution posed: Are the structures of the Council adequate to respond to the profound changes in European societies?

The obsession with institutional perfection, expressed in the Council in the numerous debates about reforming the institution, obscures that more and more fields of social life fall outside of institutional formalism and that a perfect formal structure does not necessarily create a corresponding practice. Inside and beyond institutional boundaries individuals and groups construct meaning and create sets of relationships that go largely beyond and sometimes against the values and norms transported through the institutional setting. In order to communicate with and have an influence on citizens in the new member states, sections of the Council attempted to find non-institutional ways of communicating. Members of the Council established direct personal links with members of Non-Governmental Organisations or individual critical and active citizens and encouraged them to organise themselves. The work of the sections for Education in Democratic Citizenship, the section for Confidence Building Measures and also the Youth Centre functions on the basis of such contacts. Also conflict solution as attempted by the political directorate relies on it.

Observing ambassadors, delegates and bureaucrats at work the researchers read the normative discourses of the institution against its political practices. They asked questions about Europe not only in terms of identity but also in terms of political practice and institutional know-how. The research on the section for democratic citizenship, the youth centre and the parliamentary assembly problematized the tensions that arise when European institutions try to encourage initiatives „from below“ and at the same time actively promoting a normative model of „European Citizen“ in training courses for young leaders and parliamentarians from post-socialist countries. One of the effects of the moral politics of the Council of Europe on the new member states is the priority given to the creation of „Civil societies“ and the effort to relate to the „European citizens“ beyond the relations that are established through governmental structures. However, the concerns of the citizens who become active to defend their values, rights and interests in the Eastern and Central European societies, have

sometimes little in common with the normative discourses of the European institutions. What rules and norms and what kinds of diversity are suppressed and which are encouraged through the Council's activities?

What are the ideas and ideals about Europe we are heading at?

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