



“Leadership and Decision-making in Democratic Communities” *(CESR Winter Seminar, 18-22 February, 2007, Sopron, Hungary)*

The Central European Subregion’s annual winter seminar was held in Sopron, Hungary, with the purpose of gathering students to discuss and evaluate and decision-making models of the past, present, and future in Central European (Visegrad) society. Thirty-nine participants gathered from across Central Europe, from the countries of Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Austria, and Hungary. To add special input relating to their experiences, participants from Belarus and the Ukraine also joined the event.

Sunday opened with a meal and ecumenical worship, followed by ice-breaker games prepared by Pavel POKORNY, from the Czech Republic, and by Kristin NICKEL, from the United States. In one game, with closed eyes, participants were to arrange each other by height in a joined circle, breaking cold feet, requiring cooperation to reach a goal, and presenting one of the first challenges of the week. Following the games, a time of intercultural sharing began. Participants from each country presented food and drink from their cultures, explained its significance within their local context, and opened a time of fellowship and interaction.



Monday began with a brisk walk through Sopron to the parsonage of the Evangelical Lutheran congregation, where morning activities were held. Following breakfast, prepared by the hosting Hungarian Ecumenical Student Christian Movement (KÖD), the Orthodox participants from Poland and Belarus led morning worship. Rachael WEBER, the Central European Coordinator, briefly introduced the World Student Christian Federation, before Nikolaus KUNRATH, who works for the Green Party in Austria, gave the opening lecture addressing topics of leadership and decision-making. He emphasised that decisions are identified with leaders, but leaders are not always those who make the decisions (as they too are influenced). In addition, democracy requires that education, leadership and decision-making processes be understood and differentiated, while also addressing and understanding their conflicts. Discussion groups followed, examining questions of leadership roles both within church and secular environments, and setting foundations for the week’s discussions. Are decisions best made from the top down or bottom up? What are the roles and powers of leaders when changes begin at the grass roots level?



Hajnal Lekený, from Hungary, then led an interactive role-play, requiring participants to identify with specific life situations drawn at random. Each participant received a new identity, and was required to identify with and make decisions based on their new role in society. Some, because of privileged situations, found themselves at an advantage, while others found themselves to be caught and could not advance in the game. Discussions following the activity allowed participants to analyse and compare the situations of their given identities, and helped to reveal the effects of social roles on leadership and decision-making.

Following lunch at a local university cafeteria, Anna SKIEPKO, a CESR board member and student from Poland, gave a lecture on “Cooperation and Competition.” Discussion groups focused on the decision-making processes in society. Which groups usually use consensus building models and which work through competition?

After coffee break, Juraj MAČURA, from Slovakia, led a workshop on ecumenism

and the processes of dialogue. Kristin NICKEL led an interactive discussion about movement building for participants seeking to grow and establish their own youth bodies in their local contexts. Hajnal LEKENÝ led a workshop on decision-making role-plays. Three of the Polish participants, Marlena RYSIO, Karolina TOPØR, and Tomasz WOZNIAK, from Poland, led an interactive workshop involving the formation of political systems within nation states. Each participant created their own country and political system, and then studied how these political systems were revealed in their societies’ cultures.



In the evening, after ecumenical worship, the delegations from each country presented skits representing decision-making processes both within their countries and within their SCMs (Student Christian Movements). These skits allowed participants to share about their home contexts, but also to laugh (loudly) and interact together.

After breakfast and Protestant worship on the second full day of the conference, Peter ŠAJDA, a Roman Catholic philosophy doctoral student from Slovakia, gave a lecture on “Leadership, Concepts of Unity, Limits of Diversity,” focusing on models of plurality and unity, ecumenical dialogue, and the qualities needed for parties to truly learn from and about each other. Discussion groups focused on these topics and their presence or absence within various situations, both within religious and secular environments, in Central Europe.

In societies and in decision-making, the situations and opinions of minorities must enter into discussions, and their voices often raise important issues about democratic processes. Sopron contains a large German minority, as it is only miles from the border with Austria. After lunch, we met with a local



German Evangelical-Lutheran pastor. He spoke to us about the position of both the church (as a minority in a largely Catholic country) and the German population. Following dialogue with members of his German congregation, including local students who attended a bilingual Hungarian-German school, participants went on a two hour tour of Sopron to learn more about the local context. Sopron, uniquely, chose through a decision-making process, a referendum and voted to remain a part of Hungary following World War I.

In the evening, participants watched “Butterfly Effect,” focusing on the decisions made by Evan Treborn, the main character. Following the film, a lively discussion extended into the night, focussing on the motivations and results of Evan’s choices. How were his choices shaped by his childhood experiences and surroundings (were they only influenced or were they pre-scripted)? How could he best step away from a spiralling of consequences?

The last full day of the conference began with Catholic worship, including an Ash Wednesday service. Dick OTTERNESS, a Reformed pastor who works with missions to the Roma in Central Europe, gave



a lecture on decision-making in real life situations and examined church decision-making structures and leadership training methods. Discussion groups looked at case studies of specific situations in order to search for resolutions. The emphasis of the case studies was not only to solve the problem, but to focus on the decision-making process and not only on the result. These discussions continued into a workshop and role-play also led by Dick. In addition, Yulia MAMEDOVA, from Ukraine, led a workshop on

“Women and Leadership in Democratic Societies.” Zoya FRANCHUK, also from the Ukraine, led a workshop on “Leadership Crisis in Post-Soviet Countries.” Natallia VASILEVICH, from Belarus, led a role-play and discussion on the current situation in Belarus.

Following lunch, participants gathered to watch “Sex Mission,” a Polish film from 1984. In the movie, two men participate in a hibernation experiment, only to wake up a half-century later in a world only occupied by women. While humorous, the film also revealed decision-making strategies and motivations as the men learn to cope and as the women decide how to handle the “new” gender.

After conference evaluations and dinner, the farewell party began. The Polish participants gave a musical presentation, emphasising the theme that “though we all have different instruments, together we make music.” Pictures of the past week were collected and also shown in a slide show. Participants left on Thursday morning after goodbyes at breakfast. In totality, the week provided a time of sharing, discussion, learning, and created safe and stimulating environment for examining leadership and decision-making styles within local levels, as well as at international and Central European levels. A great community was formed in which dialogue about our similarities and differences began in discussion groups but continued over meals and into the evenings. Leadership and successful decision-making requires dialogue, appreciation of differences, cooperation and flexibility, as emphasised in the musical skit and seen throughout the week.



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