

AEGEE in Southeast Europe, an overview.

(A white paper on AEGEE's involvement in the student world in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Yugoslavia and Macedonia, seen in the framework of the geopolitical developments in the Balkans during the last decade of the twentieth century.)

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Времето не умира ни кругот не е тркалезенⁱ
-Before the Rain, 1994

The twentieth century has become the bloodiest of all times. While we think that this was the century of the big technological revolution, at the same time during the last century more people have died due to war and armed conflicts than in any other century before. As far as Europe is concerned, the century started and ended with conflicts in the Balkans.

The beginning of the century is marked by the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the resulting Balkan wars, and the assault in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, which led to the First World War. That Great War resulted in a new geopolitical division of Southeast Europe, as defined in the so-called suburb treaties, named after the different suburbs of Paris in which they were concluded. These treaties and other tendencies in South East Europe led to the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – which would be the foundation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslaviaⁱⁱ (Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija, SFRJ), which emerged from the shreds of the Second World War.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the decline of communism and yet another geopolitical division of Southeast Europe mark the end of the century. In most countries that had belonged to the Eastern bloc the conversion from a planned economy to different kinds of market economy went without bloodshed, however in Yugoslavia it invoked many latent feelings of revenge, hatred and nationalism.

This article will focus on AEGEE's activities and the network development in the region as seen in the general framework of the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Both memory and history play an important role in the minds of people in the Balkans. Where some parts of the conflict have their root in the defeat of the Serbs by the Ottomans on 28 June 1389 on the Field of the Blackbirds (Kosovo Polje) and others result from the other wars ever since, for example the Second World War, I choose to take the death of Tito as a starting point for this overview.

Josip Broz Tito, liberator and statesman for life of Yugoslavia, died on 4 May 1980, leaving behind a country without a clearly defined leadership. Every constituent republic of the SFRJ would take the country's leadership in turns. By that time the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consisted of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia – with the two autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo i Metohija, Montenegro and Macedoniaⁱⁱⁱ.

The different rulers over the area since the middle ages and the more than 70 years that the South Slavic peoples had lived together in one state had left a patchwork of ethnic minorities and majorities in the different republics. Several

wars had underscored the differences between the peoples living in Yugoslavia, as much as it had invoked hatred between them. The lack of a binding force like Tito almost naturally led to a rise of tension and outbursts of nationalism in Yugoslavia in the 1980s.

In all this turmoil Slobodan Milošević became president of Serbia in 1990. One year earlier a rally in Kosovo Polje on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the lost battle against 'the Turks' had turned into a revival of Serb nationalism. The combination of this revival and the unrest caused by the ethnic Albanian 'minority' in Kosovo^{IV} ultimately led to the abolishment of the autonomous status held by the ethnically diverse provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo and Metohija within Serbia. Protests among the Albanians in Kosovo that had been lingering before got more intense, which ultimately led to the (unrecognised) declaration of independence of Kosovo in 1990 – de facto meaning a deepening of the division of Kosovo into a Serb society and a Kosovar Albanian society.

The wish for more economic and religious freedom of the prosperous republics of Slovenia and Croatia led to plebiscites in which large majorities of the population demanded independence of the two republics from the SFRJ. The declarations of independence that followed in June 1991 led to an intervention by the Yugoslav National Army (Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija, JNA). The war had started.

In the mean time AEGEE, which until 1990 focused on the European Community and its associated states, had voted for opening up towards Central and Eastern Europe. The first AEGEE locals, in Ljubljana and Zagreb were founded in 1990 and 1991. According to an AEGEE legend a Western European AEGEE member who got stuck in Croatia on his way back from Greece, during the first days of the conflict founded AEGEE-Zagreb in an air-raid shelter.

The war in Slovenia lasted for only 10 days, whereas Croatia had to wait almost 4 years before a final peace settlement was concluded. A referendum on independence organised in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, was the spark that led to the ignition of full-flared war in this country populated by mainly Croats, Serbs and (Bosnian) Muslims. This was to be one of the dirtiest of all Balkan wars. The fast recognition of the three segregated states by the European Union and the United States could not save Bosnia and Herzegovina from its awful fate.

It was the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in all its filthiness, which focused the attention of the international community in the Balkans. Especially Sarajevo, an Olympic city, became a worldwide symbol of the insanity of war. Soon after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina started JNA and local Serb militia surrounded the city and it was literally cut-off from the outside world. Yet student life in Sarajevo continued. A group of French students committed itself to helping the students in the isolated city. They organised themselves into "Etudiants pour Sarajevo" (EpS, Students for Sarajevo). EpS organised various activities, ranging from

lectures and slide-shows to inform people about the situation in the besieged city to organising collections and visiting students inside the town. It was at one of the lectures organised in Aachen, January 1994 that AEGEE came into contact with EpS. Contacts were intensified and by the spring 1994 Agora in München, AEGEE-Europe decided to become a supporting association of EpS. EpS provided the framework and AEGEE-Europe organised several events.

Soon we discovered that the AEGEE network is not fit for Europe-wide collections. Lacking logistics support, collections of goods or books only proved successful on a local level. AEGEE's role appeared much bigger in the process of creating awareness amongst young Europeans of a horrible war in their own continent. Among the activities organised to create awareness, the AEGEE-Tilburg conference "Ex Yugoslavia, Causes and Consequences", organised in co-operation with "Tilburg ZaMir" (October 1994), was the most important one.

One of the main projects initiated by EpS was a pen pal project. EpS members travelling to Sarajevo would carry letters from and to the city, thus opening a window for the Sarajlije to the outside world. The idea was adopted by AEGEE. Since a young American had started a Bulletin Board (computer) System in former Yugoslavia connecting the main cities (Zagreb, Beograd, Ljubljana, Tuzla, Priština, and Sarajevo) at almost the same time as e-mail started to get widely accepted inside AEGEE, it was almost logical to combine the pen-pal idea with the possibilities of communication by e-mail. The AEGEE e-mail pen-pal project was born. Towards the end of 1994 AEGEE's activities for EpS and the AEGEE committee that had helped to prepare the Strasbourg Conference "Vigilant for Democracy & Freedom", stood at the cradle of the AEGEE Human Rights Working Group (HRWG).

In the mean time the Amsterdam based NGO "Youth Solidarity with former Yugoslavia" (YSY) had established itself. One of their projects focuses on Tuzla, the second largest university town in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By 1994 YSY had an almost permanent delegation inside the town. The delegation mainly dealt with youth and students in Tuzla. AEGEE-Europe, not wanting to limit itself to helping Sarajevo alone, also established contacts with YSY. These contacts lead to the first AEGEE visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina in summer 1995 by Gunnar Erth and Egens van Iterson Scholten. During the visit the ideas of YSY, AEGEE, and some Bosnian students to found AEGEE in Tuzla were put into practise.

As a result of the e-mail communications project, AEGEE was in contact with students in Sarajevo already before the end of the war. As soon as the war was over and it was safe to travel to Sarajevo, Alex Ootes went to the Bosnian capital, followed by Gunnar Erth and later myself, to develop AEGEE there at the beginning of 1996.

In the mean-time, a few months before the Bosnian war ended and a peace-treaty was signed in Dayton, Ohio (November 1995), the international community

had partly lifted the embargo which was in effect to force rump Yugoslavia to end its involvement in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Attempts to create AEGEE in Beograd had failed until then, because cultural exchange was one of the prohibitions laid down in the embargo. Still in April 1995 students from Novi Sad and Beograd had managed to visit the "European Week Eindhoven" despite the embargo, and during the AEGEE-Eindhoven counter visit to the two towns, preparations were made to found AEGEE there as soon as the embargo would be lifted.

Now the city was open for visitors, YSY actions in Tuzla were extended: AEGEE contributed to a teacher's project, involving the subjects "English language" and "computer skills", which were taught in Tuzla by Zuzana Malejčiková and by several AEGEE members from Delft.

In April 1996 the HRWG and AEGEE-Udine organised the conference "Former Yugoslavia: a better future?" – a conference visited by AEGEE members from Bosnia, Slovenia, Croatia and other European countries. For most of the Bosnians this was the first time to meet Europeans outside their own country. In the autumn of the same year the HRWG was the initiator of the "Case Study Trip to former Yugoslavia" (CST). This CST called on Maribor, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Novi Sad, and Skopje in an attempt to create a map of the state of mind of the youth in the countries of former Yugoslavia. The research was conducted by 20 young Europeans, both from the area and from outside. In total 500 people were interviewed, and the results were presented to the AEGEE network, to other European NGOs and to several European institutions.

Shortly after the first CST, AEGEE was confronted with the difficulties that students in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina face. Most Bosnian AEGEE students being unable to finance trips abroad, combined with the inability of the AEGEE network to financially support its less affluent members, lead to a decline in the membership of our Bosnian locals.

The results of the municipal elections in Serbia and Montenegro organised in autumn 1996 were the prelude to the next episode in the history of former Yugoslavia. Milošević' refusal to accept the outcome of the elections, brought the students and other citizens of Beograd onto the streets in protest. Independent radio stations, like Radio B-92 and the student radio "Indeks", both from the capital, gained respect and international attention for their way of reporting about the events during the protests. This international awareness also caught the attention of the regime in Serbia, and anything was done to jam the frequencies of both stations. By November 1996 the organisers of the student protest got into contact with AEGEE. They were given the opportunity to present themselves during the final conference of "Find Your Way..." which was organised in Budapest December 1996. This occasion was very appropriate because the "Find your Way..." cycle mainly dealt with democratisation of Central and Eastern Europe. An AEGEE delegation consisting of Linda Baan, Egens van Iterson

Scholten, Heino van Houwelingen and Erwin de Bruin joined the students on the streets of Beograd.

On 9 May 1997 the radio stations involved in the student protest were awarded the first AEGEE Award for their independent coverage of the events taking place in Beograd. The award was handed over in Aachen on the Journée de l'Europe. On the occasion of this first AEGEE Award, a seminar was organised on the subject "freedom of press".

The last chapter in the disintegration of Yugoslavia – until now – started with peaceful protests in Kosovo during the autumn of 1997. It lasted until spring 1998 before the Yugoslav forces intervened. A conference organised by AEGEE-Novi Sad in March 1998 – though dealing with the complex situation of national and ethnic minorities in Yugoslavia's most Northern province Vojvodina – was used as a discussion platform for AEGEE to define its position towards the Kosovo issue. The discussion that followed Europe-wide was one of the starting points of the "Bridges to Kosov@" project.

The situation in Kosovo worsened and the call by the international community to bring Yugoslavia to a halt and to restore the autonomy of Kosovo as it had existed before 1989 grew stronger. In October 1998 NATO threatened to intervene in order to stop Yugoslavia. At the same time AEGEE was struggling with a nomination for the AEGEE Award. The "Independent Student Union of the University of Priština" would be awarded for its role in the non-violent student protest in Kosovo during the autumn of 1997, but many questions arising around the nomination could not easily be answered, and the actual award ceremony was postponed. Tension in Yugoslavia still rose. A huge discussion started about whether or not AEGEE should organise its Spring Presidents Meeting (PM) in Novi Sad. While the discussion was still continuing, the second CST to former Yugoslavia – this time organised by different AEGEE locals from the region themselves – took place. In the end the Comité Directeur decided to organise the PM as planned, and Novi Sad welcomed 250 AEGEE members from all over Europe on 5 March 1999.

NATO started a bombing campaign on 24 March after diplomacy failed in the conflict between Yugoslavia and the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK). Novi Sad – which only two weeks before had been the scene of the PM – was one of the first towns to be attacked. It suffered great damage. The AEGEE network was shocked and reacted strongly. On 9 June NATO, the UÇK and the Yugoslav forces reached a peace agreement. In August 1999 a round table was organised in Ljubljana with the aim of finding out what role AEGEE can play in the reconstruction of the region.

The last decade of the twentieth century yielded a horrible bloodshed in former Yugoslavia, an estimated more than 2 Million displaced persons, tens of thousands of casualties, continuously changing borders between countries and

between ethnic groups within countries, hatred between peoples who used to be neighbours, ethnic cleansing, concentration camps – in short everything our (grand) parents vowed would never happen again in Europe after the Second World War. Still not all underlying grounds for conflict in the Balkans have been removed. As said above, people in the Balkans have a long memory.

AEGEE's work in Southeast Europe is by no means complete. A particularly important aspect is the continuous development and improvement of our network. The network serves a vital role in bringing together AEGEE members in the Balkans of different ethnicities and helping them to co-operate and learn to understand each other. The co-operation between AEGEE antennae in Southeast Europe has been proven to be especially successful (e.g. Skopje, İstanbul, and Thessaloníkí during the Travelling Summer University 1996 "Via Egnatia" and Beograd, Ljubljana, Skopje, and Zagreb during the "CST II", February 1999).

Let's hope that the efforts by different groups active in the Balkans – among which AEGEE – will ultimately create an atmosphere of understanding needed by the people to break the circle of hatred and revenge and to make the Balkans a place for all people and all ethnicities to live together in respect and understanding.

John Stienen, January 2000.

Notes:

ⁱ Time does not die, nor is the circle round, said by a wise monk from Ohrid in "Before the Rain", a film by the Macedonian filmmaker Milcho Manchevski, 1994.

ⁱⁱ The term 'Yugoslavia' refers to the Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija (SFRJ) until 1992. The area of the SFRJ is now commonly referred to as former Yugoslavia. After roughly 1992 the term Yugoslavia gradually came to mean Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) or Savezna Republika Jugoslavija (SRJ), that consists of Serbia and Montenegro, and is also referred to as 'rump Yugoslavia'.

ⁱⁱⁱ The terms 'Kosovo' and 'Kosovo and Metohija' though having different meanings, are used in an interchangeable way in this article, in conformation with the use of these terms in the international media. The same goes for 'Bosnia' and 'Bosnia and Herzegovina'.

^{iv} In a somewhat strange way the Albanians are commonly referred to as a minority, although the last census held in SFRJ indicates that they represented as much as 90% of the population of the autonomous republic of Kosovo i Metohija by the end of the 1980s.