

Cartoon Rights Network

Robert Russell

The human spirit is so resilient. Nobody embodies this more than editorial and social cartoonists in the midst of hardship.

I just returned from a four day week workshop in Romania hosted by the Cartoonists Rights Network/Romania and sponsored by the Soros Foundation, Romania. Nicolae Ionita, the founder and Director of CRN/Romania did an excellent job running CRN/Romania's first community service project. The workshop hosted about 15 Yugoslavian and 15 Romanian cartoonists and was held in a small resort town of Sinaia about 200 miles from Bucharest.

The Yugoslavian delegation was led by Zemun International Salon of Cartooning, Director, Julijana Zivkovic from Zemun, just outside of Belgrade. One of the live wires in Eastern European cartooning and a great dancer by the way.

The workshop's outstanding lessons:

1. Across language and cultural barriers these cartoonists consistently broke down communications barriers in order to be understood and affected by each other. As at every cartooning conference or gathering, cartoonists spent uncounted hours over coffee, wine, beer and spirits, drawing each other endlessly and sharing their published works. We also conducted some serious analysis of cartooning sessions.

2. Under the communist and socialist regimes, cartoonists had it good: central governments sponsored cartooning associations, symposia, cartoon anthologies, competitions, trips abroad to conferences, and included them in the general cultural sponsorship common to most socialist regimes. This has all dried up under the transition to a capitalist economy. Cartoon associations have faltered and disappeared, and cartoonists, like everyone else, don't quite understand how their cross cultural and intracultural roles should be played in an economy where everything has to pay for itself. They have become isolated, cut off from the broader world, and they feel this alienation strongly. Mostly, they feel their own societies have become less valuable and viable because of their lack of access.

3. Both the Romanians and the Yugoslavs were strongly committed to building new domestic and cross border institutions that will help break down the NeoBalkanization of the Balkans that is occurring right now. They see a need not for old style professional organizations that sponsor domestic gatherings and annual conventions or just competitions, but for the development of new trade organizations that will not only promote the individual cartoonist member, but importantly, sensitize the public and the economy about the value of social and editorial cartooning. They see their entire industry slipping behind the rest of journalism.

4. Associated with (3) above, they feel the need for cartooning organizations that will serve as syndicates, promoting Eastern European cartoons in markets that are not now well exposed to their excellent world class work.

5. My own reactions to their work was a "WOW!". It may be because of the language barriers between societies that are fairly similar, but most of the cartoons were drawn in mime, just images to make their points, no dialogue or monologue to help the message. This allows their cartoons to cross cultures, languages and borders more easily than the cartoon based in local politics and language. The impression I got was that these people are experts on crossing cultures with complex ideas rendered into simple images. Probably a definition of a good cartoon in any event.

Conclusions:

There is a real hunger in these cartoonists to rebuild the institutions lost and not replaced by the transition from socialism to a market economy.

There is a need to do this as cartooning is losing ground within journalism.

The cartoonists themselves realize this has to be based on their own financial support, but they don't really know where to start.

There is little experience on running associations or organizations within their ranks as organizing was previously the responsibility of the State.

There is great risk of a growing loss of talent and energy. This is unacceptable in societies that need to be building bridges, cementing bonds, and communicating complex messages, not opening fire on rebel groups.

This workshop was a living example of the natural tendency of these expert communicators to reconcile, bond and communicate across language, culture and ethnicity.

Policy makers in community development, journalism and democracy building would be wise to inform themselves about cartoonists with these kinds of tools and skills, now going to some degree of waste.

Some anecdotes:

When the cartoonists were encouraged to draw some caricatures on the wall of the dining room, the Yugoslavs refused. They said they will draw on no wall unless it was illegal. We assured them that the police were on the way and they happily joined in. In one of the workshop sessions a group of Yugoslav participants refused to write responses to the workshop exercise. I thought they were being difficult. Later, I found out that they had decided to draw their responses. A great lesson for me. You can't herd cats (or Yugoslavs).

One further comment. Many workshop participants told me that they have been to literally dozens of workshops, symposia, and other gatherings of cartoonists, but they have never been to a workshop where they actually analyzed their situation and made definite plans of action. One cartoonist said that this was the first time his opinion had even been asked for in such a gathering.

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