

## INTRODUCTORY NOTES

**Božidar Cerović<sup>1</sup>**

Dear Madame Rector,  
Dear participants of the 13th International conference of the ASECU,  
Dear friends and colleagues,

It is my great pleasure to speak today in front of you during the opening ceremony of our Conference. I am particularly pleased that we gather for the first time in the lovely city of Durres, in this old human settlement by one of many beautiful shores of the Balkan Peninsula. Let me congratulate and express our true gratefulness for the conference organization to the University Aleksander Moisiu of Durres and to the Programme and Organisation Committees in particular.

Today we gather for the 13<sup>th</sup> time to discuss topics of interest for our science but even more for our societies. Though, the history of our association is – as you probably remember – somewhat longer. I am pleased to recall an important event from November 1996 when the Rector of the University of Macedonia from Thessaloniki, Professor Yannis Tsekouras, a man with a bright vision and firm sense for invaluable importance of cooperation between people, after a long preparatory work, took the initiative to invite Rectors of Economic Universities, Heads of Economic Departments and Deans of Economic Faculties from Southeastern Europe to gather in Thessaloniki and to establish the Association of South Eastern Europe Economic Universities (ASECU). The invitation for this first meeting was sent to the Universities of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Romania and Yugoslavia of that time or indeed, the remaining part of former Yugoslavia that is, Serbia and Montenegro.

At the beginning there were 24 member-universities from above mentioned countries whose leading personalities and delegates adopted the first Statute at the founding meeting confirming the name of the Association as an association of the SEE but also made a visionary decision on the necessity of further membership broadening. In the end, our association after ten years only, by a decision of the General Assembly in 2007 developed into an association of economic schools, institutes and universities, well beyond proper borders of the SEE region namely, into the Association of Economic Universities of South and Eastern Europe and the Black Sea Region. Further on, it was decided to approve the acceptance as associated members, Universities from the Middle East and North-Eastern Africa. It is important to highlight that these decisions were taken in response to the expressed interest from countries of these regions.

We are today an association of 52 members that is, 47 with full membership and five associated members. Our member universities are from Albania, Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Turkey and Ukraine, while another four associated members are from Egypt and Lebanon and from recently, one more from Hungary.

---

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr., President of the ASECU, University of Belgrade, Serbia, [cerovi@ekof.bg.ac.rs](mailto:cerovi@ekof.bg.ac.rs)

However, the vitality of our association cannot be fully described by simple figures. A real content of our engagement could be better expressed by our activities. On this occasion I shall draw your attention at just a few of them.

Firstly, and by no means the most known of our activities are our annual conferences like this one that we are attending here. As already mentioned this is the 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of our scholars while the first one took place in Thessaloniki in the year of 2000 as a tri-annual event taking place in Belgrade in 2003 and in Bankya near Sofia in 2006. After that the conference was once organized bi-annually, in 2008 in Bucharest, and since 2009 each consecutive year changing places from Tirana, then, Podgorica, moving eastward to Rostov on Don and north-westwards to Rzeszow in Poland and then to Skopje, to Cluj-Napoca, to Krakow and last year to Eskisehir in Turkey. After each of these events, a book of proceedings remained and a number of papers were published in journals, while numerous young researches got a new opportunity to present their work. Now, we discuss a possibility to adjust the present schedule and maybe turn again to the bi-annual conferences in order to improve their quality and strengthen their internationalization.

The second important field of our activity and a channel for promoting scientific results of authors from our member schools is our journal – the South-Eastern Europe Journal of Economics (SEEJE), which is open for various topics but primarily interested in contemporary economic themes that occupy public attention in our countries.

The third important and particularly prospective channel of cooperation promoted by the ASECU is the so-called ASECU youth movement. Under this name we encounter an annual meeting of our students in summer schools that include student conferences where our students can present and discuss their first analytical and scientific attempts and results. This year, after Rostov on Don and also after Iasi in Romania, a Montenegrin sea resort, after Rzeszow and Avala aside Belgrade, we shall already have the 7<sup>th</sup> ASECU gathering of the kind, which will be organized by the Aristotle University from Thessaloniki yet in an attractive summer camp on Khalkidhiki peninsula. From this year and onwards we shall have an extraordinary support – the Tsekouras Prize for the best paper in ASECU youth conferences – a prize which is based on a generous offer and donation of our honorary president professor Tsekouras and his wife, introducing a special fund for this award. I use this opportunity to express on behalf of you all, a sincere gratitude to professor Tsekouras for his noble gesture.

Finally, I shall mention a new activity that is still developing and is found in its pilot phase. Recently, the ASECU has appointed the Committee for Educational Cooperation with a task to organize series of web-lectures provided by lecturers from our Association and followed by students from member-universities. The pilot action showed that the quality of the provided lectures was indeed impressive. Also, the technical abilities of participants proved to be quite sufficient, giving the opportunity to the students to connect from their own personal computers, which gave the base for more regular future events of that kind.

As you can see our association is permanently advancing and I hope that you also could get that impression through another new channel of our internal communication which is the ASECU newsletter intended to reach every member of teaching staff from our member universities. As you probably know, the newsletter entered the distribution quite recently and I hope that it will remain as a regular way of communicating important information among all professors and other researchers and teachers from our member universities.

At the end, let me add a few words regarding this particular conference. By no means, the topic of the conference although looking pretty broad at a first sight is extremely inspiring. What challenges our continent is facing after or – should I be more precise if I state – during the crisis that still lasts almost a full decade up to now? What responses we as economists are eager to offer? Are we somewhat petrified within once promoted theories that are not capable to react at newer events? In my view, as researchers, as professionals, we are obliged to sincerely face some of these – not always very pleasant dilemmas.

For instance, are we really sure that efficiency in our countries and their surroundings could be achieved by sharp diminishing of social care and/or less controlled yet more flexible labour market rules. Are we really sure that it could be an effective policy particularly in the world of growing inequalities? Why then, we witness less turbulent situation in countries like Sweden where social care is significantly better than elsewhere? Whether fighting budget deficits by means of diminishing salaries and pensions will really secure a sustainable growth and progress? And why then – as recently remarked Joseph Stiglitz – countries like Spain and Ireland that had budget balances and low debt to GDP ratios were struck by the crisis that severely? Aren't eventually, all these above mentioned general recipes for alleged efficiency, just simple instruments for satisfying foreign creditors regardless of local circumstances, living standard and people's contentment?

All of these questions deserve proper answers, moreover, answers that can be checked and approved by a broader public. If this won't be the case a tremendous public discontent and frustration could raise up shortly, making our societies fragile and vulnerable for all kind of "easy" solutions that is, for all kind of regressive ideologies, predominantly populist and nationalist that are always "at hand" in confused times. Such ideologies and political options already threaten Europe and European idea of cooperation. This is primarily due to very much delayed reaction to growing social controversies developed under the crisis; and also to some simplified quasi liberal doctrines popularized in the preceding period of say, good times.

But who else, or who can testify better about the disastrous consequences of populism and nationalism than people and nations of our southeast European region, and particularly of the Western Balkans, who suffered until recently from such politics and probably still do not feel fully safe. For that reason our professional responsibilities are even bigger than under some different circumstances. Not only in finding correct economic solutions and policies but also in promoting cooperation since this can only guarantee some economic strength and prospect to each of relatively small nations in this part of the world.

This brings me back to the main mission of our association and that is cooperation and joint efforts in improving our scientific and research results "for the benefit of the economy, the society, peace and the cultural development" of our countries, as it is stipulated in the Statute of the ASECU. I sincerely hope that we shall fulfill this aim during the coming days. In this hope I wish you a successful work and conference and a useful book of contributions that will be printed after the event.