

„To amaze, inspire, and excite“
A conversation about *Return to Europe* with ESI

Before we start: what exactly is ESI?

We are a think tank focusing on Southeast Europe. Our team comprises 17 colleagues who work on the region between the Adriatic and the Caspian Sea. They live in London, Brussels, Berlin and Vienna, in Belgrade, Tirana, Pristina and Istanbul and in Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Baku. In addition there are our constant partners in Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. You could say we are a pretty European Organisation.

So you write reports, hoping that someone will read then them?

Well, not exactly. The research for one of our reports takes, on average, eight months. That sort of effort only pays off if the report is read by tens of thousands not by a few hundred. That's why we send every report to more than 25, 000 recipients through our newsletter. We accept many invitations from universities and ministries, which gives us the chance to present our research. Media from around the world now report regularly about our work. In this way people, whom we don't know, hear about us. They then visit our website – www.esiweb.org which attracts an average of 2000 visitors per day.

Who writes your reports? It is unusual that you name no authors.

Not really. Just like at *The Economist* or in the *International Crisis Group*, teamwork is easier when everyone identifies with the result. Every good idea is the creation of a team. In this way we have been able to publish 59 reports, about very different topics, since 1999. We debate every piece of analysis internally; rewrite every report, every paragraph, many times. Those who join ESI are always amazed at how seriously we take this approach to teamwork. We are not a group of individualists.

How does one finance extensive research, when the reports are distributed free of charge?

That question is often asked, particularly in the Balkans or Turkey. We are not a consultancy but a non-profit organization registered in Berlin. We live off support for an idea: to make empirical research available to a wider audience at no cost. Public and private donors help us towards realizing this goal. Since 1999 we have had the benefit of financial assistance from 13 different countries, from Ireland to Slovenia. Our largest donors during this time were two Scandinavian governments, Norway and Sweden. Private funds come from foundations: the Rockefeller Foundation, Open Society Institute, Mott Foundation and others. Since 2005 the ERSTE Foundation, from Austria, has been the most important benefactor of our work in the Balkans.

What do these donors want?

They want to stimulate discussion: about conditions in Serbian villages in Kosovo, about failed privatization in southern Serbia, about the UN's mistakes in Bosnia, about the situation of women in eastern Turkey, about the future of the EU Enlargement. Those who believe in the utility of such discussions, support us.

How independent are you? Is there a “hidden agenda”?

At the end of the day, journalists and decision makers cite our work, because they recognize the quality of our research even when they do not agree with every conclusion. Our independence is the foundation of our work. What is written in our reports is based on the research and discussions of the ESI team. We stand behind everything which bears our logo. Of course we have opinions, frequently contentious ones. These are not however, hidden but are out in the open for all to see. This was the case in 2001, when we criticized the stability pact for the Balkans that existed at the time, in 2003, when we called for the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia to be closed, and in 2004 in Serbia, when we proved the manipulation of figures of displaced persons from Kosovo. Researchers should not be reluctant to take part in controversial discussions, as long as they reveal what their arguments are based on. Only then can they be credible.

That sounds nice, but do people really believe you?

Well no, not everyone. When we published our report on *Islamic Calvinists* in Turkey, a *Hürriyet* columnist accused us, in eight separate columns, of being CIA agents. Islamists on the other hand, accused us of promoting the Christianization of Turkey. The report was discussed in many television programs, including *Komplo teorisi* (Conspiracy Theories). When my Turkish research colleagues saw this, they were stunned. But that sort of thing happens when one really influences discussions; in Southeast Europe more so than elsewhere. Many in this region are convinced that “independent research” cannot actually exist. Nevertheless, our analyses about the region are frequently reported on by much of the media; more and more people read our reports. We appreciate debates, even when the tone is critical.

So how did you come to make Films?

That was an initiative of the ERSTE Foundation. We told Knut Neumayer that a number of ESI reports, about Bosnia, Kosovo and Turkey, had already served as the basis for documentaries: PBS and ARD used our Turkey reports as a foundation and we ourselves had made films on Central Bosnia and Mitrovica. Subsequently, Knut put us into contact with Martin Traxl, who is currently head of culture at the ORF. That was in the spring of 2006. In order to expand this basic idea into a scheme for a whole documentary series, Martin and Knut visited us in Istanbul in the summer of 2006. We sat in the garden of the Bosphorus University and developed the concept of *Return to Europe*. After two days a plan was settled on: a journey with 10 stops, from the Adriatic to the Bosphorus, across Southeastern Europe. A series that should “amaze, inspire and inform”. Knut urged us, not to think only of 3Sat and ORF’s audience, but also to consider showing the series in the whole region which it describes. And ERSTE Foundation, Boris Marte, Erhard Busek, Andreas Treichl supported this conception throughout.

How are we to imagine this cooperation between researchers and filmmakers?

It is exciting and demanding. On the one hand, we were under enormous pressure time wise, and at the same time we were also governed by the necessity to find a common approach. There are, of course, many people involved in such a large project and everyone has their own ideas and experiences: the producer from Pre-tv, Nikolaus Wisiak, who chose the camera teams and directors and who drove the project forwards; Wolfgang Stickler, the scriptwriter from Pre-tv; the five directors. A concept, a report, an analysis: these are a starting point, but not a film. In order to make that, we first sat down with Wolfgang. For the first scripts, Wolfgang either came to Istanbul for a brainstorming with Gerald or met ESI’s Kristof Bender in Vienna.

Once a script had been written, we explored each of the countries with Wolfgang and the respective director, sharing our experiences as we went. When it came to the research, the whole ESI-team was involved. Gerald and Alexandra had conversations with Olli Rehn and Javier Solana in Brussels. Kristof and Gerald were involved throughout, from the rough cut to the inspection of the narrators' texts. Not all the episodes have been completed yet. We are currently still in the midst of work for Bulgaria, for Greece and for Turkey.

In one of the films, ESI is itself part of the story? How did this come about?

That is correct, in the hands of director Robert Neumüller, the film on Bosnia went from being a film based on ESI research, to a film on ESI research in Bosnia. Robert, who in this case only worked with Wolfgang on the script, came up with this idea. As we explained the situation in Bosnia to him, he kept asking us how we had reached these conclusions which were so dramatically at odds with the typical foreign perception of Bosnia. We therefore explained in detail, how we work and research, whom we talk to, and how we have been able to initiate discussions in Bosnia with our reports. He was of the opinion that this would make a good central theme for the film. So now every one of the series' viewers can form their own impression of how ESI works. In all the other films we are, however, invisible.

And what is the documentary series meant to achieve?

It should amaze, inspire, inform. It should challenge conventional wisdom about the Balkans. Make people curious. Stimulate discussions. Prompt people who want to know more, to go to the series' website - www.balkanexpress.org (currently still under construction, to be completed by the end of April). A project of this scale and ambition requires considerable effort from all concerned. We hope that everyone who sees our 10-part series will feel that this effort was worthwhile.

The ESI – Research team for Return to Europe consists of Kristof Bender, Nigar Göksel, Ekrem Güzeldere, Eggert Hardten, Gerald Knaus, Verena Knaus, Alexandra Stiglmayer, Erion Veliqj. Chris Langdon, Christian Altfuldisch und Jonathan Lehne are responsible for Return to Europe's website. Sandra Bienaime is in charge of logistics.