

Regional

Ireland trip exposes students to turbulent history

Ireland has been at the center of political struggle for centuries, remaining a land of violent conflict until relatively recently. For anyone interested in studying the history and politics of turbulent places, Ireland provides the perfect vantage point. To this end, 12 Southern Illinois University Edwardsville students traveled to the Emerald Isle between May 7 and 18 for a study abroad program titled, "Ireland – The Politics of Transformation." This program provided students with first-hand experiences regarding the period known as "The Troubles," the ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland. Among those students participating was Gabriela Zamfir, a native from Bucharest, Romania, and a political science major at SIUE. Like any long-standing conflict, the problems in Ireland, Zamfir said, are not always black and white.

"We definitely struggled with that," said Zamfir. "It is really overwhelming when you're trying to learn so much about a country in two weeks. Even being there on the ground looking around it is still so much to process. A lot of us struggled with not referring to the two sides by their religions because it is so entangled in their politics and their political divisions. So we had to sit down and realize just because they are republican doesn't mean they're Catholic, and you can be a loyalist Catholic or a Protestant republican."

Students traveled to Dublin, Belfast and Derry to see for themselves the political, social and cultural dynamics of the Republic



Demmose DeGamo

A group of SIUE students who went to Ireland over this summer. Ms. Gabriela Zamfir is first from the left on the first row.

of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

"We talked about the economics of it," Zamfir added. "How in poorer neighborhoods that religious split is much more obvious than in richer neighborhoods where it is not a big deal at all."

Some of the sites they visited included Kilmainham Jail and a trip to Trinity College to see the Book of Kells, manuscripts of the Gospels created by Celtic monks around the

year 800. They met with several members of the Northern Irish Assembly in Belfast and met with representatives of the Peace and Reconciliation Group. Despite the last few years being peaceful, tension is still in the air.

"We actually had to write an essay when we got back about the transformation of Ireland and what we thought transformation meant," said Zamfir. "We had to discuss the

different transformations we thought they had and then we had to predict what we thought the next one would be." And she is not optimistic.

"I think they will make a step backwards," she said. "I think there are signs like what they have with the flags right now, with those going up marking territories. More flags were popping up and I think that is not a good sign for them." But, she added, that there are agents trying to avoid a collapse of the tenuous peace.

"They have a political party called the Alliance Party which tries to bring the two sides together to find more peace," Zamfir explained. "And the reason they started putting up more flags was because that party had a movement to have the Union Jack taken down over city hall in Belfast except on British holidays and that made a lot of people very angry so they started putting up their own flags. So I think that things are probably going to get worse for a while before they get better." For these students this brief experience provided them with a deeper understanding of a complex situation.

"Even while we were there I would say I was expecting to see happy leprechauns and a much lighter atmosphere," Zamfir said. "But there is a lot of tension there. Even knowing things about their past, you don't expect it to be like that because it's not in the news. But there is this tension." She recalled an anecdote that epitomizes the complexity of the place.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

"We met with a tour guide at Stormont, the Northern Ireland parliament building, and he said to us, 'It's such a great sign that you are here. Things are getting so much better and we're so optimistic,' but then you would see that there was graffiti and these little graffiti stickers they would use," she said. "Things that the teachers would point out for us to notice, things that a normal tourist wouldn't notice." When asked what were the most important things she learned through this experience, Zamfir was very thoughtful.

"The biggest thing that I took away is that things are not always as they seem," she said. "We had one tour guide at the very end and maybe one other that were more straight with what we were learning, but most would tell us that things were great and there was so much promise and things were better. Officially they have peace, but the country is not at peace and a lot of people would lead you to believe that it is because I think that is what they want to believe."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.