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Cultural Identities in Southeastern Europe: A post-transitional perspective

This text discusses some aspects of cultural identification in Southeastern Europe in a post-transitional perspective. Post-transition provides for the context that may be roughly described as a context of multiculturality, cultural diversity, human rights observance and political and economic liberalism. The present analysis is concentrated on the structural elements of cultural spaces, aspects of the regional cultural communication and the establishment of a new cultural context that coincides with the cultural diversity framework largely influenced by the globalization and europeanization processes. In this respect the Southeastern European societies and cultures appear to be ever closer to cultural identifications that are diverse and individualized, while the nationally and ethnically structured cultures experience processes of reconstruction and re-identification.

1. The structure of cultural space

The concept of space, in the sense of location or geographical place, has been largely re-interpreted in discussions on cultures and cultural globalization. Arjun Appadurai argues that "the processes of globalization have radically altered the relations between subjectivity, location, political identification and the social imagination" (Baldauf and Hoeller, 2008). However, these changes have by now contributed to the production of new content and symbols that influence the interpretation of cultures and their role in wider social and political frameworks, be they global or local. New cultural spaces have emerged. They are defined by flexible borders (linguistic, artistic, creative) that provide for cultural (re)identification and that may be subjected to the (re)established ethnic, national or professional delimitations.

Different cultural spaces have become accessible and present in the daily life of many through deterritorialization that makes globality or locality irrelevant and through ever easier technological mediation that enables entrance into the virtual world. Being omnipresent, they are subjected to various interpretations which may turn spaces into "territories, flows, hierarchies" (Storper, 1997:19-44), or into intellectual concepts open to creative efforts and to imagination. The meaning of cultural spaces becomes linked to interpretative communities, such as Anderson's 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2008). Cultural spaces represent a context in which cultural content is produced and expressed through symbolic signs.

David Harvey (1990: 205,306) argues that: "The social theory privileges time over space", assuming that "temporal processes" operate within "some pre-existing spatial order". Thus the space may be interpreted as a kind of general background for any human activity, including the establishment of cultures and cultural identification. According to Harvey, "time is always a memory of the experienced space" (Harvey, 1990:216), and therefore aesthetic theories are primarily concerned with time, although space provides a general basis for all experiences, subsummed in a concentrated and rationalized "collapsed sense of time and space" (Harvey, 1990:61). This would be the situation that we are facing in the present day globalized world: a collapsed sense of space and time that has already allowed for the changes in the experiences of both space and time, for their compression and for new interpretations of such experiences. Perhaps this is what we are talking about when we discuss cultural identities in Southeastern Europe today.

Cultural spaces in Southeastern Europe have been usually structured as national (or ethnic) (national language, cultural values, memories, etc.) and territorially defined (containing a majority national culture and in most cases a number of minority ethnic cultures). Such a structure of cultural space has been rather typical of all countries in Southeastern Europe, and as all of them except Greece entered the systemic transition from socialism to capitalism, this structural characteristic became the starting point for the changes that occurred. The same structure provided the context for cultural policies that have been thought of as national and strongly culture specific.

With the influences of globalization the (imagined) borders between Southeastern European cultures and their cultural spaces have been blurred, particularly within the ex-Yugoslavia where the intercultural contacts were encouraged and sometimes even enforced (e.g. through language policies, mediatization of cultures, common projects, etc.). The systemic transition, clearly marked by the dissolution of Yugoslavia, oriented all cultures to memories and prompted cultural ethnicisation. At the same time, the internal cultural differentiations within the national cultures and national states have been rising. The relationships between majority and minority cultures have been gradually re-interpreted (not to say problematized) so as to incite conflicts or, on the contrary, support acceptance of others and enhance tolerance of cultural diversity and multiculturalism.

Cultures have never correlated completely with the sovereign states, but cultural spaces have been divided following the visible differences among cultures: languages, customs and traditions, geographical settings, ethnic roots, etc. However, as the globalized, de-territorialized and a-territorial contents gradually enter all cultures and cultural spaces, the

existing cultural spaces imbued by cultural communication and mediatization of cultures open up to some common values, common cultural behavior and common traditions. In a way, the concept of cultural space has been gradually substituted by the concept of (de-territorialized) culture itself[1]. However, as we still speak different languages (even at the age of technologically defined communication), and live in different cultural settings defined by different cultural values, the need to define and re-define cultural identities has been ever more accepted as a justified request.

 In this respect, some structural elements of the particular (national) cultural space have been re-invented and are surviving. These are not evident in the established cultural values but rather in the fragmented cultural contexts. In Croatia, for instance, such fragmentation is clearly visible: the Croatian national culture has acquired a new structural shape within which the three elements are clearly discernible:

- the state supported 'institutional' culture that is very close to the concept of 'national culture' and tends to preserve a kind of national identification;
- the 'independent' culture clearly opened to the regional and global cultural communication and following multiple cultural trends and values, that inclines to what may be called individualized identification; and,
- the 'market oriented' culture, with a number of combined sub-structures, very close to the pop-cultural consumerism.[2]

In almost all SEE countries, particularly those issuing from ex-Yugoslavia, very similar cultural structures can be observed. The structural fragmentations of national cultures also indicate the introduction of different types of cultural production and the gradual evolution towards the cultural industrialization, which is strongly influenced by globalization processes and global cultural trends.

Such an evolution implies unavoidable differentiations between urban and rural cultural areas, local and global aspects of cultural productions, differentiation in types of cultural consumption, communication and mediatization of cultures. The final result of such processes is the transformation of cultural identities. After being personalized as 'national' (or 'ethnic')

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[1] Terry Eagleton (2005:31) thinks that the development of cultural theory might be the response to the realities of the 1960ties. The name of theory has been given to 'the critical self-reflection', which has widened the concept of culture: comfort, passion, arts, language, media, body, gender, ethnicity: all this is expressed in one word - the culture (2005:40).

[2] This part of the text comes from my chapter „Neki strukturni aspekti razvoja hrvatske kulture" (Some striuctural aspects of the developemnt of Croatian culture) in: Švob-Đokić,N.(2010) Ed. *Kultura/multikultura*, Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, pp.31-46

at the beginning of the transition period (when it was very important to personalize own national or ethnic choice), they end up now shaped as 'individual' and formatted through individual choices. The processes of cultural (re)identification reflect the transitional dynamics of cultural spaces and pursue a never ending search for liberties, for freedom of expression and creativity. In a certain structural sense, the search for cultural identification in Southeastern Europe approaches transnational identification that is ever more typical of the European countries and societies. It partly springs from some common histories and memories, but is mostly defined by the post-transitional developments that have introduced some kind of liberal and 'wild' capitalism, strengthened exchanges and communication with European countries, promoted mediatization of cultures and cultural values and radically changed the cultural production through the gradual cultural industrialization.

2. The regional cultural communication

The transitional changes and issuing problems of cultural reconstruction (not to mention conflicts and wars) have substantially diminished the mutual knowledge of cultures and societies in Southeastern Europe. Even the common cultural memories have often been wiped out. The established cultural values have been problematized and often put in question. Such processes have reflected the need to promote some own (perhaps marginalized for years) memories and values and to use the possibility to express the long sustained hatred of values that might have been consensually established as common in ex-Yugoslavia. Good examples of such attitudes are the questioning of „*Gorski vijenac*"[3] as a universal literary value by some Muslim intellectuals and its exclusion from secondary schools' programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina; criticizing of the Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić literary achievements and the fight over the belonging of his works to either Croatian, Serbian or Bosnian cultural heritage; glorification of works of Mile Budak, quite minor Croatian author who was the minister of culture in the quisling ustasha regime during the Second World War in Croatia, etc. Such examples illustrate problems of cultural personification (Bourdieu) where the set of cultural values is rearranged to suit a generally defined idea of what may be the culture to which a person belongs.

The systemic transition orientated all Southeastern European cultures to their own redesign of memories and values. Intellectuals were largely concentrated on the revival of what was clearly defined as 'Slovenian', 'Croatian', 'Macedonian', 'Serbian', etc. cultural values and

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[3] The epic written by Petar Petrović Njegoš, Prince-Bishop of Monte Negro, first published in Vienna, 1847)

memories. This was again particularly seen in the areas of languages and linguistics[4], but also in pop-cultures (pop music in particular, film and audiovisual productions) and occasionally in all other cultural works and productions.

Such trends have oriented cultural communication to the European and global spaces where certain cultures tried to identify their proper positions, while the interest in regional cultural exchange has been diminished and even suppressed. It was evident that the orientation to exclusively Western cultures has dominated local cultural orientations and productions, and interpreted to be a typical transitional cultural asset. Moreover, an interest in African, Latin American or Asian cultures diminished considerably, or has been completely excluded from any cultural communication and exchange.

Now, in the post-transitional perspective, the orientation to global and particularly to the European communication is being diversified. A revived interest in Asian or Latin American cultures may be noticed, although it is not strong and mainly follows the Western interest in numerous cultures of the world. The context of national cultures is often seen as limited and hardly adequate in the European and global surroundings where only individual talents and achievements can be properly evaluated. This kind of individualization of achievements is reflected on the regional level as well. The works by artists, writers and intellectuals transfer over the borders among (the newly established) states. Although scrutinized from different 'national' points of view, cultural contents are again circulating among the cultures of the Southeastern European region. Such circulation is supported by the growing usage of new communication technologies and the fact that ever larger number of users is able to make their own choices in cultural and media consumption, and that such choices are no longer overlooked through ideological interpretations of the political positions taken within the states.

Possibilities to 'reconnect' are being opened now in the post-transitional phase. They are particularly supported by evolvement of the new types of cultural production: cultural industrialization and mediatization of cultures, which are developing under the global influences. Exchanges of cultural goods, information and cultural products are facilitated by new technologies, individualization of cultural identification and general rise of consumerism.

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[4] The recently published book *Language and Nationalism* by Snježana Kordić (*Jezik i nacionalizam*, Zagreb, Durieux, 2010) has triggered extreme nationalistic reactions to the thesis that the four nations (Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks and Montenegrins) share the common standard language. The author, professor and linguist Snježana Kordić says that the language spoken by the four nations is 'a common polycentric standard language', and she goes on to declare: 'This book shows that culture transcends the national borders and that within the same nation there are a few different cultural zones.' Cf. Matijanić, Vladimir „Bura oko knjige *Jezik i nacionalizam*", *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 6.11.2010.

Cultural exchanges are ever more ample and strong in the areas of music, particularly pop-music; in printing industries and the book market; in audio-visual productions, but also in the participation in different events and festivals.

The regional cultural exchange practices generally follow the global influences. The prominent areas of exchange are those that are also preferred in the European and global frameworks (i.e., media and particularly television programs, films and audiovisuals, music, etc.). They are organizationally facilitated through the same companies and organizations that are active globally and that invest in the development and formatting of the local cultural markets. These are also easily adapted to the needs and interests of local cultures.

It can be said that the over-all post-transitional cultural change has led the local (either nationally or ethnic oriented) cultures towards a more open and flexible exchange and communication. The quality of the exchanged contents is however not tested or compared to the value standards of particular cultures. The markets ever more promote totally uncontrolled contents and other cultural products while the choice is individualized.

 It is important to mention that the regional concept of Southeastern Europe is ever more reflected in the frameworks of cultural communication. The Bulgarian[5], Albanian or Romanian authors who were not present in the book or film markets in Croatia are now 'consumed' by the Croatian public ever more. There are no constraints imposed by either ideological or political approaches. It may however be mentioned that the works translated or shown in Croatia are mostly those that have been already presented in other European countries, or even those that have already attracted attention by winning some international awards (which is particularly the case of films, in recent times mostly Romanian films).

Whether such an exchange and communication refers to any common cultural values or standards remains to be seen. At the moment an increased liberalization is underway and the consumers seem to be impressed by the increased cultural offer and the possibilities of individual choice regarding the offer.

3. European Union as a framework for cultural diversity

The concept of culture and cultural communication within the EU has been the driving force of its integration. Ideas of cultural diversity and multiculturality have been generally accepted as a basis for the European type of integration (Bekemans, 1994:15) and ever more connected

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[5] The novel „Mission: London" by the Bulgarian writer Alek Popov has been translated and published in Zagreb in 2010 by Meandar; the same author was published in Serbia in 2004 already.

to human rights issues. The European integration model has not been reduced to the common market only, and the discussions on the maintenance and encouragement of cultural diversity have been a part of all European integrative ideas and practices.

Since culture tends to be interpreted as an integrative factor, it also becomes evident that different cultural elements, such as cultural identity, cultural transformation and development or cultural traditionalism are not some given 'bits of reality' (Poncelet, 1994) but parts of dynamic social realities that influence and change cultural and wider social relationships. Culture is an expression of values and references which are varied and contradictory, endogenous and exogenous, and therefore open to social forces that change social orders. At the same time, the best of tradition and creativity that survives such changes makes cultures different, not identical (Švob-Đokić, 1997:87). The difference between 'culture' and 'cultures' should be shortly introduced to illustrate this point and indicate that the multicultural context developed through cultural diversity and multiculturality defines today the overall view of cultural development and cultural identities.

According to Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2007:195) contemporary cultural trends reflect a clear distinction between a universal concept of 'culture' and multiculturality reflected in 'cultures'. "*Culture* in a general sense is human software and know-how…." It encompasses both "culture in the specific sense of '*a culture'* and '*cultures'*, or forms of emotional and cognitive learning that occur in social settings such as nations, ethnic groups, localities and cities, which are usually embedded in civilizations and religions. *Cultures* interact, clash, or harmonize and are mediated through *culture*". Jan Nederveen Pieterse reaches this conclusion after an extensive discussion of ethnicity, multiethnicity and multiculturality in a globalized world where the new architecture of cultural relations is expressed through the concept of 'global multiculture'. Thus cultural globalization is reflected in the term 'multiculture', which stands for universality that has already accepted and implanted cultural diversity and multiple meanings of particular, specific cultures.

It could be said that the concept of 'multiculture' has been inspired by the previously developed concept of 'world culture'. According to Ulf Hannerz (1996:106) world culture would be "…an organization of diversity, an increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory. And to this interconnected diversity people can relate in different ways". Notwithstanding the obvious stress on diversity that Hannerz clearly puts forward, there are still openly expressed doubts about the term 'world culture*'*, particularly when it comes to the homogeneity and universality of its meaning. The universality and homogeneity of the notion of world culture

would be tested through cultural practices and cultural life which are carried on in different places and at different cultural times, notwithstanding their possible interconnections or the possible multiplicity of their meanings.

It has been accepted now that the cultural phenomena are transgressing all cultural borders, including those of virtual cultures that are said to belong to all cultures (Castells, 1996) and to reflect cultural creativity in the virtual space. We cannot be sure yet that the (mediated) cultural values and cultural creativity will not lead to the establishment of some integrated 'European culture'. At the moment it is clearly visible that such cultural phenomena are diversifying the European (and global) cultural horizon. When perceived as *global culture* (Hannerz) they are embedded in the development of new technologies and may follow a universal concept of culture rather than of global multicultural diversity.

The tendency to stress the transnational character of contemporary cultures and cultural identities is also very much present in the analyses of particular cultures and world culture. Thus Nederveen Pieterse states that: "Transnational culture exists in global technology, industrial standards (ISOs), world products, global brands, and forms of popular culture as a broad, but thin slice of global multiculture" (Nederveen Pieterse, 2007:198). The transnational (or global) culture is a "cultural layer of widest generality" (ibid., 200), and "…it blurs the boundaries among units; the compartments separating them (i.e. cultures) become increasingly porous because transnational culture borrows from them indiscriminately and produces novel and irregular combinations" (ibid., 201). The keynotes of global multiculture are "increasing glocalization and interplay across cultural strata". Since the transnational (or global) culture is not an even field, multiculture best expresses the global nature of cultures.

The transnational character of cultures and cultural identities is particularly analyzed in the European Union where the migration trends suggest that a number of national cultures (e.g. Turkish, Macedonian, Croatian, etc.) exist and function surrounded by a 'majority' culture, i.e. the national culture of the host country. The "emergent reality of transnational spaces" gradually eliminates "the old and assumed isomorphism between culture, polity and territory" (Robins, 2006: 30). Thus a kind of 'transnational cultural identity' develops, and the number of transnational cultures increases following the migratory trends all over the world. The 'overlapping cultures' (Novak Lukanovič, 1995) have, however, always been typical of many regions of the world, and in the history they have not been linked exclusively to migration, but rather are a product of the changes of political borders and power influences. The kind of cultural transnationalism that has developed in line with transnational production, trade and corporations, particularly in the media and cultural industries, differs from the phenomena of

overlapping cultures in that it reflects contemporary globalization trends and developments. However, transnational cultures appear to reflect more dynamic changes (in cultural and overall development) and to be a kind of transitional phenomenon rather than an established culture.

Cultural globalization strongly influences cultural identification and all present day cultural relationships within the integrations such as EU and on local and national levels. The global multiculture refers to the interconnected diversity of cultures, and therefore offers possibilities to define particular cultural identities in a wider, global or European context. It directly addresses individuals and their social status, enabling each person to choose a type of cultural identification according to own understanding of a cultural context and cultural values that create it.

In the post-transitional perspective the Southeastern European cultures follow such European and global trends. They are ever more open to intercultural communication that enables their faster inclusion in the European trends and at the same time their more functional internal restructuration. In this respect the EU provides for a framework and a context that enable introduction of the new cultural practices and new types of cultural development on local levels, supporting at the same time cultural exchange and communication on the European and global levels.

A concluding remark

In the case of Southeastern Europe interpreted as a particular cultural space, or as a region, the cultural identification is formatted through the structure of cultural space, specific cultural memories, cultural behaviour and exogeneous influences pervading the cultural space. Cultural identification interpreted as a confluence between the economic, the cultural and the political trends has put a strong stress on individual cultural choices, through both the interpretation of cultures and through the cultural consumption. It is supported by changes in cultural production that is ever more industrialized, commodified and mediatized through either global or local markets. Such developments indicate that processes of cultural transitions are getting more defined and that they show a development line connecting the departure from national and ethnic identifications (which are legitimized through acceptance and affirmation of particular national and cultural collective identities) towards European and global open choices of values and standpoints (largely enabled by technological advances and new technologies).

To summarize, it may be said that in the Southeastern European cultural space different cultures and cultural identities have been affirmed and confirmed through the ethnic and national (re)identifications, to open presently to global influences that have now provided for individualization of cultural identification. Both trends remain interconnected and submitted to individual choices and individual possibilities. This situation may be interpreted as 'open', and such openness will probably support 'inner' (regional) and 'outer' (global) cultural communication.

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