

Cultural Identities in SEE: a post-transitional perspective

Some introductory observations

Redefinition of cultural identities has been an important constituent of the transition processes in all Southeast European (SEE) countries. The interest in cultural and national identities in the SEE was particularly strong and very openly pronounced during the 1990ties. Dissolution of Yugoslavia and the establishment of the new national states in this region have re-introduced the ethnic and national identification as a leading force in the reconstruction of social, economic and political life. The search for cultural and national identities and their very dynamic changes in the last decade of the 20th century have become crucial for the establishment of the new states.

However, like the transition itself, the identity changes have not been rationalized or explained through some theoretical context. They were influenced by the political (ideological) and legal interpretations of citizenship, political and economic transitions, cultural changes that particularly promoted nationalistic approaches, political clashes, ethnic conflicts and wars, state building procedures and the establishment of national states.

In such a context the notions of national and cultural identities have been intertwined, mixed and marginalized or directly misused in the political discourse and cultural life. It was forgotten that they encompass different values and may have different meanings, and that different nations may share some general cultural identity backgrounds, common histories and memories. It is therefore important to note that the cultural and the national identity are notions that often have different meanings and may have been developed from different backgrounds: anthropological one and political/social one.

The cultural identity: If culture is interpreted as ‘an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior’, but also if it is understood to be a system of ‘customary beliefs, social norms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group’ (www.websters-online-dictionary-org) or as ‘human know how’ (Nedeveen Pieterse, 2007) *the notion of cultural identity* adds to such interpretations contextual elements like historical contexts (based in similar values and collective memories); psychology (both individual and collective), genealogy and other issues that need not be limited to ethnic origins and social or geographical belonging, or to the notion of nation itself. Cultural identity resides in the interpretation of culture as a system of values that is in principle open to communication and exchange. It is therefore flexible and changeable itself. Cultural identities function as general backgrounds and thus provide for a set of values that an individual or a group may choose, establish, develop and reinterpret as their own.

The national identity implies a multilayer identification that is not exclusively designed by the cultural sphere, but encompasses a number of values developed in different areas (biological origin of a human group, race, ethnicity, territory, space, politics, citizenship, economy, education, culture, etc.). The notion of national identity functions in the context of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson: 1983). It is unstable and strongly influenced by political developments and much more dynamic than cultural identity. The dynamic re-interpretation of national identities provides for strong political influences on cultural identity and it

sometimes dictates the choices of values that are contained in cultural identity backgrounds. National identity is therefore a more restrictive and more functional concept than cultural identity.

The differences between (and some similarities of) cultural and national identities are particularly reflected in the de-construction and re-construction of identities, experienced during the transitional period. This period has been hallmarked by an extreme raise of nationalism and ethnicization of cultural identities based in anthropological interpretations of identities, ethnicities and cultures and largely inspired by the 'rediscovery' of cultural past, as well as the cultural and religious traditions (cultural 'personification'). In the post-transitional period (approximately during the first decade of 21st century) the processes of individualization of cultural identities, enabled by the human rights observance, the easier technologically backed cultural communication and medialization of cultures have become visible (cultural 'individualization').

The transitional interplay of cultural and national identities intervenes in the character of both and designs their relationships. After the dominant shock of nationalism and national identifications in the last decade of 20th century, the national identities have been gradually submerged by new cultural values and more open cultural communication that has put cultural identification 'above' the national identification. It may be said that the evolution from national to cultural identities in practical terms parallels the evolution from transitional to post-transitional developments. Such evolution of individual and collective identifications proceeds towards the pro-European standpoints that are trans- and inter-cultural, more tolerant and based in the acceptance of cultural diversities, cultural democratization and professionalisation of cultural production. In the regional frameworks this is reflected as an increased cultural tolerance and the overall democratization of cultural relationships, but also as a proportionally decreased cultural communication that has become almost exclusively oriented to the European cultural settings.