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THE RECENT RECONSTRUCTIONS OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

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Introductory remarks

The intention of this paper is to discuss some aspects of the recent reconstructions of national and regional cultural identities in Southeastern Europe¹ (SEE), as they appear in the perspective of democratization and inclusion of the region in European Union. The view of these processes mainly refers to the situation and developments in the post-Yugoslav states, particularly Croatia. Although specific, the post-Yugoslav experiences reflect key structural changes present all over the SEE region, and may be indicative in this respect.

When the reconstruction of *cultural identities* is discussed, it is important to stress that cultural identity is a social construct² that may function as either societal constraint or societal incentive. Identities reflect the overall social change and establishment of new values. They are also bearers and creators of new cultural settings, meanings, symbols and attitudes. Being the agents of both change and preservation of cultural and wider social memories, they can be analyzed both as a reflection and as a symbolic expression of social and economic transitions in Southeastern Europe.

If the question is: ‘What is the present situation of reconstruction and redefinition of cultural identities?’ the answer requires mentioning of some historical points, some elements of “spiritual geography” and present day efforts to express aspirations to define local positions within the wider European cultural context. The issue of reconstruction of cultural identities in SEE may be seen in the perspective of the ‘question of distinction and demarcation’ within the region itself and of the region in the wider European context. It should be pointed out that

¹The Southeastern Europe (SEE) used to be called 'Balkans' (the Turkish term) until recently. Today the SEE region encompasses 11 independent states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Monte Negro, Serbia, Slovenia and Romania). Four of these countries are the full members of the European Union (Bulgaria, Greece, Slovenia, Romania), while the rest are queuing for the membership with rather realistic expectations to be included.

² Benedict ANDERSON: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Growth of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1983

the local processes of 'distinction and demarcation' have already become transparent. They are a part of the interactive globalization processes that have provided a framework for all recent developments occurring in the region. The discussion of cultural identities encompasses therefore relationships established among different national and ethnic identifications, as well as the need to trace the influences of global trends and developments.

Some elements of spiritual geography and history

The Mediterranean and Mid-European location reflects a peripheral position of SEE in relation to Europe, Asia, and even (North) Africa. Such a position is the source for the creation of a very specific cultural and overall developmental context that represents an open space for experiment and creativity. The Croatian art historian, Ljubo Karaman³, rightly stresses that the peripheries can hardly be standardized. They represent an open space for experiment and creativity that does not always comply with established mainstream trends. Such openness, however, may be dangerous: it is difficult to understand the specific situations and to represent them to others. Influential foreign agents therefore prefer to discard them.

It should be stressed that the perception of SEE as a region has always been developed from the outside, by the foreign hegemony (Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian empires; Germany in the late 30ties of 20th century; EU today). Intra-regional connections were not the result of integrative processes within the region itself. On the contrary, the SEE region has remained characterized by weak communication links, exchange and trade; by substantial intraregional differences, social disruptions, dependent modernization, territorial disorganization and social traditionalism. A possible, internally developed perception of the region would be based on rationalization and tolerance of intraregional differences (interculturalism), on functional intraregional trade and communication, territorially organized regional space, relative social stability and social dynamism based on adapted and fast modernization.

The perceptions of SEE have greatly varied over time. There are still very many misconceptions and misinterpretations related to the region. They all point to one truth: the region called Balkans, and now SEE, is barely known and studied. The area stands for the concept of diversity, not only cultural, but also political and economic. "Balkanization" is a term introduced in political science to express the meaning of disintegrative processes and crumbling structures within states and societies. Indeed, specificities of Balkan histories and geographies show that they are hardly comparable to the European mainstream historical

³ Ljubo KARAMAN: *Problemi periferijske umjetnosti* (The Problems of Periphery Arts), Zagreb, 2001

traditions and developments. A small example may be cited in this respect: in the mainstream European history the establishment of states was the context for development of nations; in the Balkan traditions, the nations have invested efforts to establish the states⁴. On the other side, analysis and understanding of the SEE histories and realities brings problems of de-standardization into mainstream European thinking, and necessitates new ways and methods of analysis⁵. In a major endeavor to come closer to what is perceived as Europe, the SEE societies have been making efforts to join the major European developments, and to integrate into the EU. Notwithstanding all historical and present differences among them and between the 'core' Europe and the SEE region, the integration spaces are widening, which increases tolerance on all sides. This is the result of an overall democratization of political, social and economic life in the region. In the area of cultural studies, democracy can be interpreted as a symbolic concept that has been shared by most European nations and cultures through the long history, from the old Greek societies to the present. It is not just a political practice that may or may not function in reality, but indeed a cultural value and therefore an important element of cultural identification.

All SEE countries except Greece belonged to the socialist part of Europe. However, these socialist systems were of different brands. Core socialist countries (Romania, Bulgaria) shared the Soviet type of socialism; ex-Yugoslavia (and the six countries that emerged out of it) developed the so-called socialist self-management; Albania followed the Chinese type of socialism. Different types of socialism were reflected in different foreign policies of the countries involved: hard block policies of Romania and Bulgaria; full dependency on the Chinese foreign policies of Albania, and a rather original policy of non-alignment that linked ex-Yugoslavia to developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

These socialist systems broke down in 1990, but with different results. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia (at the very beginning) and Serbia were involved in the wars of dissolution of Yugoslavia that erupted in 1990 and ended in 1995 by the Dayton arrangement and the Peace Treaty signed in Paris on December 14th 1995. The wars influenced the whole SEE region so that it remained for almost two decades characterized by the worse examples of territorial problems and the problems of political and economic co-existence among the neighboring states.

⁴ Paul GARDE: «Različita poimanja nacije» (Different Understandings of Nation), in: *Europa*, Zagreb, 1994, p.9

⁵ It is indicative in this respect that the Southeastern Europe can still be studied under the methodological and conceptual approaches developed within the 'area studies', which clearly points out that it is not just one European region, but the area still clearly representing cultural traits oscillating between South and North, East and West.

In all SEE countries⁶ the influence of EU was translated as an effort to democratize and modernize. Electoral democracy was introduced rather successfully, as well as official democratic institutions. Although this widened the scope of democracy, democratic practices remained rather formal and shallow. The full development of democratic institutions is still ahead of most of the SEE countries, notwithstanding their official position to the EU.

The elements of spiritual geography and some mentioned historical developments contribute today to the region's rather atypical position in Europe. They reflect the long transit from the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires to the European Union, which may be symbolically presented as the way from the Balkans to the modernized and Europeanized SEE region.

Reconstruction of cultural identities

The fall of socialism and the introduction of democracy have greatly contributed to the deconstruction of the existing (socialist) cultural identities. These used to be structured as corporate identities that shared various cultural layers, from ethnic cultures to the state-promoted integrative (socialist) culture. In an effort to integrate all social classes, socialist cultures tended to deny cultural differences and turn them into less problematic "specificities". Such integrative efforts were based on the acceptance of certain esthetic, linguistic and general cultural standards that were followed notwithstanding the really existing cultural traditions, preferences and values. This modernizing approach to cultural development stressed cultural similarities as much as possible, and dismissed dissimilarities also as much as possible.

For the republics integrated in ex-Yugoslavia, this integrative identification was clearly reflected as Yugoslav ('South Slavs') cultural identification. It has a long history. The Yugoslav cultural identity initially evolved from the pan-Slavic, romantic ideas on South Slavs' unification by the end of 19th century. The Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts was established in Zagreb in 1866, to promote the idea of cultural closeness, common origins, some historical memories and mutually understandable languages of South Slav populations. The Yugoslav cultural identification oscillated over time and developed in line with historical conditions: the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after the First World War; the establishment of the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia after the Second

⁶ Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU (in 2004 and 2007). Croatia and Macedonia become the EU candidate countries, while the status of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Monte Negro and Serbia has not been cleared yet, although the initial steps to formalize their position have been taken. The integration with the EU is unanimously declared to be the aim of all SEE states.

World War, and the inner dynamics of nation building reflected in Yugoslav national and cultural identification. Building up, establishing and promoting of the South Slavs' (Yugoslav) common cultural identification took around a century. Its relevance subsisted within different socio-political systems and different states and promoted ideas of South Slavs' integrative culture. Nevertheless it broke down in a few years only with the end of the socialist system.

The concept of corporate or integrative socialist culture supported by the socialist system of production and social organization broke down under the pressure of the resurgent national identities and nationalistic approaches to the society, economy and state. The cultural, ethnic and national differentiations erupted in the post-socialist period, and thus marked the raise of the primordial interpretation of cultures and cultural identities. These were turned towards strengthening traditionalistic aspects of social and cultural identities, and ultimately linking them with cultural heritage and religions. Transitional crisis particularly emphasized the identification of people as members of national groups who share a common name, common origin, common culture and common historical memory. National myths and memories were almost directly transferred into the political sphere, thus supporting populist regimes that were able to “convert myths and emotions into socio-political engineering”⁷. National and ethnic political mobilization was oriented to redefine cultural identities by producing closed systems of intolerance and lack of communication. Populist social engineering has indeed exploited ethnic and national myths very extensively, which produced extremely poor results in overall social development of the post-socialist Southeastern European countries.

Distinction and demarcation became leading orientations in cultural development. However, the introduction and slow acceptance of democratic political practices have functioned as an integrative background for cultural developments and interactions. Although the process of democratization was initially strongly associated with ideas of reconstruction of national identities, which in many ways was largely conservative, in the long run it did provide for the partial revival of common cultural backgrounds enabling re-establishment of some cultural links now based on tolerance and the observance of particular national identities of Albanians, Bosnians, Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Slovenes, Serbs and various cultural minorities.

The new states established in the region relied initially on the concept of national state, fully based on the national identity interpreted mostly as ethnic identity (and closer to the German

⁷ Valery A. TISHKOV, «Nationalities in post-Soviet global changes», in: Lourdes Arizpe, Ed. *The Cultural Dimensions of Global Change*, UNESCO, Paris, 1996, p.158

concept of “blood and soil” than to the French understanding of nationhood as a political and state-centered concept). When established, these new states discovered that they are all multicultural, i.e. that at least 5%, and sometimes about 30% of their populations are not members of the largest ethnic group in a state. The processes of ethnic cleansing appeared to be not only shameful and disgraceful, but also ultimately inefficient. Therefore the shift from the “Volk-centered” community became imminent. Understanding of multiculturalism, intercultural relationships and the concept of “political nation” and citizenship became crucial for all political developments. The European influences have been translated as a pressure to democratize, fully acknowledge all national (and ethnic) identities, and tolerate the others.

Indeed, the exclusive nationalistic approach is now being radically put in question in the perspective of development of the region and its integration into the EU, which appears to be ever more realistic. The gap between the global, dynamic and communicative context on one side, and the local ethnic and nationalistic cultural orientations on the other, is widening. While the revived national identities may consolidate social groups, they cannot prepare them for the open-type European or global communication and exchange. The transitional developments and the formation of new states in the region have clearly shown that the Southeastern European states remain composed of different nationalities and different ethnicities. The share of minorities in their total population remains very visible.

The awareness of the multicultural character of most states in the region has now increased considerably, and it has become present in both inner and foreign politics. Although they may be just declarative, multicultural policies and intercultural relations are ever more accepted as an unavoidable reality. "Politics of recognition" are slowly pushing aside politics of exclusive national identity affirmation expressed through “politics of representation”. Although all modern state building involves nation building⁸, processes of nation building may opt for standpoints of tolerance, understanding and solidarity, instead of those of national exclusiveness. This is supported by a long history of successful co-existence of different ethnic groups in the Balkans that matches the equally long history of intolerance and wars, which clearly proves that cultural identities may indeed function as both, societal constraints or societal incentives.

Principles of human rights and equal individual citizenship have been introduced into the post-socialist SEE countries through the EU influences on local politics. These are perhaps the most important aspect of democratization. Although the present practices of intercultural

⁸ Rainer BAUBÖCK, "If you say multiculturalism is the wrong answer, then what was the question you asked?", *Canadian Diversity*, Vol.4:1, Winter 2005, p.91

co-existence, prompted by the local political parties, remain vulnerable, the politics of recognition of minorities, and of full affirmation of all cultural identities, starts now to counter-balance and foster shared public cultures and civic identities that fully embrace cultural differences. The rather condensed and quickly replayed nation building process in post-socialist transition context has in most Southeastern European countries imposed one nation interests and identities, expressed through the politics of representation. However, this process now slowly gives way to efforts invested in affirmation of minority and individual citizenship rights. Intercultural communication is becoming crucial for the redefinition of cultural identities, as well as for the full modernization of societies. In this respect cultural differences and cultural similarities are more openly discussed now. Such discussions largely coincide with the European ones. The European integration model that combines “economic and political integration with the maintenance and encouragement of cultural diversity”⁹ prompts tolerance and analysis of multicultural and intercultural relationships in the Southeastern European region. Identity formation or reconstruction of identities is a constantly evolving process that serves to express the expectations of each and every social group for acceptable cultural relations and tolerant intercultural communication within any state.

In this respect, democracy enters Southeastern Europe through reinterpretation and reconstruction of cultural identities, as well as through the overall economic, political and institutional change. It could be even said that the democratization in Southeastern European countries is much more felt in cultural field, and particularly in the field of redefinition of cultural identities, then in other domains of public and political life, which often lag behind the EU imposed democratic principles.

Cultural fields have quickly opened to diverse global and particularly European influences, and also to new technologies. Developments in cultural areas have been strongly influenced by civil society organizations. Although quite ready to serve their states in the initial periods of transition, intellectuals, artists and educated people generally developed critical positions to both states and political elites running them. The gap between cultural and national identification has thus been widening quickly and substantially, supported by the open critique of state functioning (e.g., critique of privatization policies and processes; of the judiciary, police, military, etc.). The space for independent functioning of individuals (intellectuals, artists, etc.), as well as for various non-governmental and professional

⁹ Leonce BEKEMANS, Ed., *Culture: Building Stone for Europe 2002. Reflections and perspectives*, Brussels, European Interuniversity Press, 1994, p.15

organizations has also widened. Thus the international and global communication of all non-governmental organizations and their activities was gradually enlarged. This new type of openness has introduced other problems, but it prompted new approaches to both the society and culture.

In this respect, the attraction of the European Union is based on the principles it proclaims and promotes: liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. Cultural transformation implies a redefinition of cultural values, particularly those preserved within national cultures and supporting national cultural identities. Cultural integration in a wider, global and European cultural context, which is always a context of multiculturalism and intercultural communication, needs to be balanced and supportive of the original achievements that led to differentiation among cultures. Preservation of cultural differences is essential in the establishment of new cultural identities.

A concluding remark

The recent reconstruction and redefinition of cultural identities in the Southeastern European societies has been dynamic and fast. It started with the deconstruction of socialist integrative identities and marginalization of Yugoslav (South Slavs') identity. These processes opened up the space for the raise of ethnic and national identifications, often conservative and oriented to the past cultural values. In the context of newly incited democratization processes the deconstruction and marginalization of socialist and Yugoslav cultural identities as well as the raise of ethnic and national identifications have been tolerated, if not always fully accepted. In the final shape, under the growing global and European influences, the present cultural identities are ever more (re)constructed through the acceptance of multicultural realities, intercultural tolerance and an increased opening to the global and European influences. They are simultaneously following some values created by a number of inherited historical developments, but also the values transferred by global and European influences, particularly the technological and media ones.

Cultural developments in the region and reconstruction and redefinition of cultural identities have been moving from policies of representation of national identities to policies of recognition of different cultural identities, and to intercultural communication. Such processes might be slow, but they reflect essential social transitional changes. It could be said that transition has started by the affirmation of national identities and national states, but also that the transitional processes are introducing multicultural realities and global influences, which incites intercultural communication and cooperation among SEE cultures and countries.

All national states in the region have discovered that they are multinational, and that their identities need to reflect social and cultural realities, not just abstract concepts of 'nationness'. Cultural identities in all Southeastern European countries remain therefore strong point in democratization processes and in social reforms.

The move from the policies of national representation to the policies of full observance of human rights might be connected to the slowly developing regional cooperation. Although Southeastern Europe does not represent an interconnected and clearly defined region, the change in the cultural approach to the region is a relevant issue in the further regional development. It may provide for balanced multicultural relationships and tolerance, which also reflects an increased democratization of societies. Reconstructed cultural identities remain the strong point of intercultural relationships. If the relationships among cultures are based on an interactive tolerance, the overall communication is facilitated and based on mutual respect. This introduces local cultures to dynamic global cultural exchange.