

# Intercultural. Balance and perspectives International meeting on interculturality.

november 2001

(Article)

Interculturalism and national identities in the balkans

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The twentieth century was the century of rapid historical changes in Southeastern Europe and the Balkans<sup>1</sup>. The beginning of the century was marked by the fall of two great empires: that of the Ottoman Empire, from which a number of nation-states emerged in the Southeastern European region; and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which also liberated a number of peoples and nations who lived on its peripheries. The recent history of the Balkans and Southeastern Europe appears to be the history of national emancipation that has been taking place in a space populated by many nations, none of which could play a hegemonic role.

### **A Curious History of the Region**

The history of the Balkans is largely the result of the fact that from its very beginnings this region was conceptualized and understood as the border area between East and West, Asia and Europe. Even before the term "Balkans"<sup>2</sup> was invented, this part of the world had witnessed the split between the Eastern and the Western Roman Empire. In this border context, small peoples and small cultures of different origins, languages, religions and civilizations over the centuries created different types of relationships that, in a contemporary interpretation, might, perhaps, be called *intercultural*. Of course, they were not intercultural in the present-day meaning of the term, because there were no economic, political and communicative interactions that would make them such. Mutual exchange was limited, and the survival of cultural diversity in the region is more the result of isolation of cultures than of the interaction among them. The presence of external hegemonic forces and their pronounced interests in the region substituted for the lack of internal links. The region has traditionally been seen as an entity viewed from the outside, but the perspective from within was quite the opposite. There were processes of cultural assimilation, acculturation and cultural colonialism, or simply a flat denial of the original cultural values and identities. However, as the region remained split between East and West in different ways and manners, and through different political and systemic modes, and particularly because of the late and inadequate modernization and industrialization, many diverse cultures and cultural identities were able to survive, even when they were blended with similar or completely different outside influences. In a

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relatively small geographic area, the influences of two civilizations (Western and Ottoman Eastern), three religions (Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam) and many European, Asian and even African cultures have been felt and allowed to co-exist.

This is why understanding the Balkans remains a challenge. Even after the history of the term and a good deal of the history of the region have been thoroughly documented<sup>3</sup>, many misconceptions and misinterpretations linger. They all point to one truth: the Balkans are hardly known and not much studied. The region is associated with East and West, North and South; with the Mediterranean world, with Central and Eastern Europe; it represents the core of Southeastern Europe. The Balkans stand for the concept of diversity, not only in its cultural, but also in its political and economic forms. This concept introduces the challenge of de-standardization into the mainstream European thinking. The Balkan history reminds us that “*relative chronology*” should be observed in the case of this region: almost nothing here happens in the same way and at the same time as in Western Europe. It is not the formation of the state that makes up the nation (as in the West), but the nations who make up states for themselves<sup>4</sup>; it is not cultural differences that produce political conflicts; it is politics using cultures that produces conflicts. *Relative chronology* leads to the questioning of social, cultural, and even aesthetic values.

The Balkans may also be understood as a space reflecting the complexity of Europe and reminding us that the different cultural and intellectual traditions of Europe may also be very differently interpreted on its peripheries. The peripheries are not standardized. They represent an open space for experiments and creativity that does not always follow with established standards<sup>5</sup>. If it is true that cultural diversity holds the key to the evolution of civilizations, the Southeastern European region can be said to hold the key to innovation that has long been suppressed and even longer ignored in the West.

There is also a developmental perspective on this periphery. Dominated by the Turkish feudalism until the beginning of the twentieth century, it emerged from the Ottoman Empire as a poor, underdeveloped region. Its modernization was strongly influenced by Germans and Hungarians (Austro-Hungarian Empire), and was often strongly resisted by the local peoples. After the Second World War the hopes of most Balkan countries were focused on the development and building up of the socialist system. It was the fall of socialism that unleashed another cruel war in the region in the wake of the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation, which was also clearly marked by the revival of nationalisms and ethnic identities.

The specific feature of the Balkans remains its polymorphous structure and the concentration of diversities (geographical, historical, ethnic, civilizational and cultural) in a comparatively small space. The long history of strong influences of non-Balkan hegemony in the region creates the impression that the Balkans had been put together by outside pressures rather than as a result of indigenous regional development. In this transitional and borderline area, the internal links are difficult to preserve. Reactions to attempts at homogenization have so far produced deep and painful disruptions. Oscillations between

closer cooperation and deeper disruptions indicate that there is no need to impose any kind of hard, institutionalized cooperative schemes upon the societies undergoing rather fast changes of their proper identities.

## The Twentieth Century

In the Balkans, the twentieth century started with the national emancipation of the states and peoples previously dominated by the Ottoman Empire. The Balkan wars (1912 and 1913) were initially fought against the Turks, but later turned into a conflict among the Balkan states. Through the involvement of Austria, these wars were followed by the First World War, which ended with the Treaty of Versailles bringing new political arrangements to the area. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established, in parallel with the Romanian and Bulgarian Kingdoms. The Yugoslav Kingdom earned itself the name of a "dungeon of nations". It was disintegrated during the Second World War. The new Yugoslav republic was founded in November 1943, and established in 1945 as a socialist state, in which the national and minority rights were guaranteed on paper, but not always implemented. The disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia at the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century again led to wars among the ex-Yugoslav nations. Five new states emerged from the latest conflicts. Although constituted as *nation-states*, they all emerged from the conflicts as states with considerable numbers of minorities. Some of them (e.g., Slovenia, Croatia) made an effort to remain, or become, pure national states. The others (Bosnia, Macedonia, Yugoslavia) accepted the fact that they were multinational and multicultural. In Romania, Bulgaria and Greece the issue of multiculturalism has scarcely been dealt with, although there is a growing need to approach it rationally. Albania claims that it is uninational, and has so far paid attention only to Albanian minorities in the surrounding countries.

New, rapidly-changing conceptual frameworks were introduced, not only in politics, but also in the general understanding of the region. It was through wars that most nations established kingdoms; then it was through wars that they turned themselves into republics and federations and implemented radical systemic changes in moving from late feudalism and peripheral capitalism into socialism. Finally, in the last decade of the twentieth century, they saw the fall of the socialist system, the violent dissolution of the federation, and transition to capitalism, democracy, and, hopefully, to the observance of human rights.

The twentieth century was extremely dynamic in the Balkans and for all the peoples living in the region. It was extremely painful, as well. The Balkan wars opened the century. They stand at the beginning of modernization and liberation of the region. The First and Second World Wars resulted in the emergence of newly shaped states and a new, socialist system. The end of the century was marked by the fall down of socialism and attempts at an internal territorial and political reshaping of the region. This was again done through wars. The state of war appears to be an almost permanent hallmark of the Balkan processes of modernization, national emancipation, and the formation of modern national states and an overall modeling of the region in the European context. The last century was for the Balkans the century of national

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emancipation, building up of national states, introduction of modernization through both capitalist and socialist systems, and of integration of the region into the civilizational, cultural, economic and political contexts of Europe. It could simply be said that Europe has won the Balkans back from the East, and that this transition to Europe has now lasted for about one whole century.

### The Tradition of Nationalism

The above-mentioned developments indicate that twentieth-century Balkan history may indeed be called a history of nationalisms. These have partly developed as a form of resistance to imposed foreign values and rules, and partly as internal fighting for hegemonic positions or attempts to dominate neighboring nations. From the resistance perspective, they stood for the concept of national emancipation and the formation of national states. From the perspective of fighting for a hegemonic position, they turned from the ideology of national emancipation to the practice of intolerance and oppression of other nations and ethnic groups. In the first case, the term *national* has positive connotations of patriotism, group solidarity, affirmative cultural identity, etc. In the second case, *nationalistic* stands for the practice of social and cultural exclusion that culminated in the practice of ethnic cleansing of territories, and the hatred of others.

The cultural diversity of the region, tolerated as cultural heritage in socialism, has been constantly challenged by the parallel formation of ethnic and national identities, and by their restructuring during the twentieth century. In this experience of almost constant change, nationalism may have also reflected an effort to establish clear group identities and to define social relations in compliance with them.

Nowadays, the revived nationalism in some societies of the Southeastern European region should be seen in the perspective of opposition between the global liberal ideologies and the systemic crisis in the ex-socialist societies. The nationalistic approach stands for the closure of countries and societies, for strong links with the same nation living in other states (e.g., in Bosnia), and for decreasing participation in active international trade and exchange and open communication and cooperation among nations. This is why it has been opposed by democratic political and civil society organizations in all the Balkan countries, and no less so by the international community. The opposition to nationalistic regimes has tried to make a clear distinction between *national* and *nationalistic*, in an effort to rationalize the processes of national emancipation and to avoid oppressing other nations, particularly national minorities, in the process.

The political mobilization of resistance to the established socialist regimes was largely based on ethnic and national identification. Such identification was primarily oriented to the strengthening of the hard traditionalistic dimensions of ethnic and national identities, and it was linked with cultural and religious heritage. The emerging nationalisms demanded political change, but their demands did not include faster, more functional social change, economic development or democratization of societies. On the

contrary, the new nationalisms insisted on traditional values, on 'inherited' rights, and on the redistribution of common wealth rather than on the creation of new values and new wealth. Instead of developing global relationships that would enable the global spread of authentic cultural values and increase tolerance through communication, ethnic and nationalistic political mobilization often manipulated cultural values so as to recreate mythic perceptions of societies and peoples and to close the social and cultural system as much as possible<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, the revived ethnic and national identities supported national group consolidation, which was politically very important in the short period of systemic change and dissolution of the ex-Yugoslav Federation. However, such identification could not prepare groups and individuals for open global communication, economic exchange and political integration (in the European Union, but also with the neighboring countries). The nationalistic period of resistance did help with the establishment of the new national states, but it could not open the processes of democratic social change and development perspective for the nation itself. On the contrary, it reinstated authoritarian regimes (e.g., Tadjman's in Croatia and Milosevic's in Yugoslavia). They were formally democratically elected, but in fact functioned as neo-Stalinist regimes.

The hard-line nationalistic period lasted for about ten years. The international community opposed rather than supported the nationalistic authorities and their policies. These regimes were under the pressure of many international actors, particularly the European Union. Although it did not last long, the political, economic and cultural consequences of the nationalistic rule were disastrous. The Balkan nationalisms almost destroyed the nations themselves. The peoples living in ex-Yugoslavia were victims of their nationalistic governments, which provided the ideological framework for wars, conflicts and, above all, for the shameful 'ethnic cleansing' of territories belonging to neighboring states. Intolerance and hatred were introduced as national values and were present in daily life: in the media, in schools, and in professional organizations. However, nationalistic pressure, reflected in the economic and demographic destruction of nations and ethnicities, never really achieved their goal of forming "pure" national states. After destructive wars and shameful ethnic cleansing, all the newly established independent post-socialist states still have minorities, although, perhaps, not as numerous as before the wars.

### **Cultural Diversity, Multiculturality and Interculturality in the Twenty-First Century**

It has been said that the most typical heritage of all the Balkan states and peoples is their cultural, religious and even political diversity. Whether called the Balkans or Southeastern Europe, the region has never been unified and never standardized. Its diversity may have prevented faster economic development, better internal links, exchanges and communications, but it has not been erased either by powerful empires or socialist-type industrialization, and even less by post-socialist transitional processes.

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The cultural and political diversity of the Balkans has been approached in quite different theoretical and practical ways. The typical socialist approach to cultural differences was, in essence, to deny them. Cultural differences were seen as part of the historical heritage and the historical past. Most of the peoples that joined the Yugoslav Federation (established 29 November 1943) had lived under different conditions and different social and political systems. The socialist system, based on the rapid industrialization and modernization of societies at all cost, preferred to view and treat differences as "specificities". In an effort to integrate all the peoples into a new, Yugoslav federation and a new system of social justice and fast economic and social development, the ruling elites tended to marginalize even the previously tolerated specificities. This process was not much different from the other processes of "nation building" that appeared in the post-World War II world. Unfortunately it appeared to be as unsuccessful in the Balkans as in almost all underdeveloped areas.

Paralleling a genuine effort to integrate all classes of society and erase differences, the tendency of producing one nation out of many ethnicities and nations was over-emphasized and ended in the, perhaps unintentional, cultural oppression exercised by the larger, dominant, cultures or nations over the smaller ones. Such integrative efforts were not based on the acceptance and interlinking of differences (or specificities), but rather on an elaboration of a certain cultural and linguistic standard that was to be accepted notwithstanding the existing cultural preferences and values. The main aim of socialist cultural development was the creation of the new man and a new culture. This kind of constructivist approach stressed cultural similarities and existing cultural links as much as possible, and likewise dismissed dissimilarities as much as possible.

Of course, the collapse of the socialist cultural policy was primarily caused by the collapse of the socialist system, and not by the way that cultural differences, similarities or dissimilarities were treated and understood. Cultural nationalism triumphed over the integrative efforts, and turned "specificities" into open cultural differences. In the first wave of its dominance, it discovered many previously neglected original cultural values and stood openly for cultural authenticity. Unfortunately, it thus introduced an intolerance for neighboring cultural values, and all other cultural values that were not completely compatible with the ideas of a closed, "pure" national cultural space. The nationalistic cultural wave tended to exclude national cultures from open cultural communication and exchange. It divided the space of cultural development and cultural communication into "ours" and "theirs", and the war over the common cultural heritage started in parallel with the war over territories.

An example to illustrate the point: Literary critics re-evaluated the work of the only Nobel Prize winner from ex-Yugoslavia, the great prose writer Ivo Andric. He could not belong to Serbian, or Bosnian or Croatian literature only, since his work is indeed a beautiful synthesis of the common literary sensibility and heritage of almost the whole region. He was simultaneously claimed and rejected by critics from all three nations, because his work could not be a part of only one literature, and in this period of pronounced cultural differences nobody wanted to share his work. This perfectly reflects an almost hysterical nationalistic drive in all the cultures involved

and at the same time points to the impossibility of promoting or observing nationalistic standards of evaluation.

The cultural diversity of the Balkans is becoming ever more manifest in the post-socialist transition. The main incentive to this process comes from the fact that the idea of cultural diversity is gradually taking the place of the integrative nation-building concepts. Unfortunately, it is still present in the overwhelming concept of national homogenization and of a nation-state.

The newly established states did indeed promote ideas of national homogenization. Reality, however, reminded the political elites that almost all the newly established states were multinational, and in this sense practically the same as the ex-federation. The internal national/ethnic split of the population was seriously influenced by the wars that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The countries that emerged as the new states of the European post-socialist transition all have national minorities. They all face the issue of multiculturalism and interculturalism as a new challenge in their development in the twenty-first century.

Intercultural relationships are being radically changed. The largest nation of ex-Yugoslavia, the Serbian nation, includes national minorities in Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia. The population of the present-day Yugoslav Federation includes about 30% national minorities. Macedonia's population over 35% Albanian. The absolute national concentration and formation of pure-national states has proved to be impossible, even after the carrying out of ethnic cleansing. Bosnia-Herzegovina remains a tri-national state (Serbs, Bosnians and Croats). The demographic losses are supposedly enormous (but never clearly stated). In all the states that emerged from ex-Yugoslavia the number of inhabitants has decreased.

In other Balkan states (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania) the minority nations are being "discovered" and their existence is ever more manifest. The reality of multiculturalism is being accepted, and the need to face the issue of intercultural relationships is becoming evident.

The relationships among ethnicities and nations are now defined in an international context. Everything that applies to the minorities and nations in Europe should also apply to the Southeastern Europe and, more precisely, to the Balkan region.

However, the Balkan states have not always been able to regulate and organize inter-ethnic and inter-national relationships following the official European standards. Some of these states have made serious efforts to do so (Slovenia, Croatia). In others, such an attempt has triggered political crises and conflicts (Macedonia, Serbia). The third group includes the states that formally have no open problems, but where inter-ethnic and inter-national relationships are far from being well regulated and problem-free (Greece, Bulgaria; even Romania and Hungary).

The painful history of nationalistic practices in the post-socialist Southeastern European states remains, unfortunately, difficult to overcome. Legal and state involvement in the building up of new types of intercultural relations has so far been rather poor. States react to

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pressures from the international community, particularly from the European Union, but this reaction is administrative and formal. As the post-socialist states of the region have generally not functioned very well, such formal commitments can hardly solve the problem and they may sometimes even discourage any citizens' initiatives. The societies do show signs of inter-ethnic and inter-national tolerance. However, such signs are still far from any organized actions or commitments.

This situation clearly indicates that intercultural relationships are largely left to develop spontaneously. They are not recognized as a part of the social development that needs to be particularly cultivated in the Balkan region. However, it is not an inherited intolerance of others that prevents the acceptance of multiculturalism, inter-cultural tolerance and interculturalism in general. On the contrary; a strong tradition of multi- and interculturalism has been established in the region and is its hallmark as much as the fact that ethnic conflicts have been an inevitable ingredient of all the twentieth-century wars in this region. History does not prevent positive changes, and it cannot be blamed for the present events that stem from economic, political and social disturbances of mismanaged transitions. It is the developmental view of modernization and change that needs to be broadened and enriched by the establishment of good intercultural relationships. This aim should be clearly stated and should be present in all strategies and practical policies. It should be built into the process of education and all aspects of daily life. Clear, strong individual and group identities, that change dynamically, are the essential background to healthy intercultural relationships and mutual interest in building good intercultural relationships.

The general concepts of social change, transformation and transition have not been adequately adapted to local conditions. They are mostly "offered" and imposed by international organizations and other actors who rarely possess a good knowledge of the local situations and ways of life. It was relatively easy to stop the conflicts, but the presence of external military control, particularly in Bosnia, but also in Kosovo and Macedonia, has frozen all developments. In such a situation, new cultural and social values cannot develop. The growing complexity of intercultural relationships makes them hard to comprehend and prevents any kind of social or political management. Processes of ethnic and national exclusion are still under way among ethnic and national groups. The discourse on specificities and differences masks and, at times, eliminates the existing similarities. It is extremely difficult to talk about the possible integration of different or separate cultural identities into a single democratic social framework.

Is there a way out? Distinctive cultural identities should definitely be clearly established and acknowledged. Only strong individual and group identities can communicate and stay in contact. New national identities should be openly promoted and externalized as a sign of recognition and respect for each nation and each individual. This is the only sane basis for new types of intercultural relationships in the region, and it is in compliance with its cultural diversity. If their populations accept the fact that all states in the Balkans are multicultural, the respect for differences may grow and become an incentive for the promotion of interculturality.

## Notes

1. Although widely used as terms of the same meanings, "Balkans" and "Southeastern Europe" differ somewhat in geographical and developmental sense. See, RISTOVIĆ, M. "The Birth of Southeastern Europe" and "The Death of the Balkans", Association for Social History, <http://www.udi.org.yu/Founders/Ristovic/Birth.html>; ŠVOB-DOKIĆ, N. "Balkans Versus Southeastern Europe", In: *Redefining Cultural Identities: Southeastern Europe*. Zagreb: Institute for International Relations, 2001, p. 35-41.
2. Meaning "stones, stony mountain" in Turkish.
3. See: Todorova, M. *Imagining the Balkans*, OUP, 1997.
4. See: Garde, P. "Različita poimanja nacije" (Different understandings of nation), *Europa*, Zagreb, 1994, p. 9.
5. See: Karaman, Lj. *Problemi periferijske umjetnosti* (The Problems of Periphery Arts), Zagreb, 1963 2001.
6. See. ŠVOB-DOKIĆ, N. "Cultural Identity in the Perspective of Transformation and Democracy". In: ŠVOB-DOKIĆ, N. (ed.) *The Cultural Identity of Central Europe*, Zagreb, 1997, p.79.