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Peoples of the Balkans: In Search of Identity

The very term "Balkans" is widely associated with fragmentation, violent conflict, backwardness and misery. "Balkanization" is our collective contribution to the English language. Mobutu Sese Seko once stated emphatically: "I would never let Congo be Balkanized!" Balkan wars marked both the beginning and the end of the twentieth century. We also managed to add a new contribution to the English language: ethnic cleansing. The breakdown of the Berlin Wall erased the East-West dividing line, but eventually created a new division, between Europe and the Balkans. The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, including the subsequent crises in Kosovo and Macedonia has only confirmed the imaginary of the Balkans as the land of perpetual instability, ethnic divisions and state fragmentation.

After the disappearance of the big black hole in the center of the Balkans, with new democratic governments in Croatia and Serbia, all the countries of the European South East started, for the first time in history, to generate a common vision and share the same basic foreign policy strategy - to become a part of the European integration. By itself, this is the most important and most promising common feature of the region with all its diversity and unhealed wounds. The EU perspective is emerging "as the Archimedean point of the entire process of stabilization and development for the region, providing both the peoples in the Balkans and the international community with a real prospect for a breakthrough that would lead the region *away* from the divisions and the conflicts of the past *towards* stability, co-operation and prosperity". The attainment of identical goals limits or diminishes the chances for new conflicts, territorial or other pretensions among the countries of the region.

The other important fact is that, also for the first time in history, no nation in today's Europe has any special interests in and designs on individual countries of the Balkans – the integrated Europe has an objective that fully agrees with the orientation of Balkan countries, having adopted the strategic decision to enlarge in

the South East of Europe. This is in a striking contrast with a situation of more than a decade ago when Europe, engrossed with final stages of the negotiations of the Maastricht Treaty and highly impressed by the reunification of Germany, grossly underestimated and neglected the dangerous potential of the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia and was far too slow to react, often adding fuel to the flames rather than fighting the fire.

If one can say that the road towards European integration for the countries of the region has been clearly marked, it is certainly not a path strewn with roses. On the contrary - it is bumpy, full of potholes and rather long. However, the very journey towards Europe is even more important than the final destination itself. Indeed, traveling towards Europe we have to pass through profound changes of ourselves and try to compensate the decade "eaten by locusts", rather than just to change clothes.

Some old identities have disappeared and new ones have not developed. I was born in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, then lived in the quisling state of Serbia, then, most of my life lived in the country which was known as Tito's Yugoslavia, then more than a decade in Milosevic's creation, a self-styled, rump Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Now I am a citizen of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, which is neither fish nor fowl, another original creation brokered by the European Union, in order to halt, for the time being, further disintegration and, possibly, further instability in the Balkans. So, what about my identity? Well, my ethnicity is Serbian, but my country, my state was for most of my adult life Yugoslavia, which collapsed like a house of cards. Who killed Yugoslavia? To my opinion (and I know that many in my country would not agree) this was a clear case of suicide: it was nationalism that put an arrow in the heart of Yugoslavia. But there were also many in Europe and the world who turned a blind eye to something which was visibly inevitable and made only lukewarm efforts of appeasement, as a part of alibi diplomacy. The tragedy of course was not the disintegration of Yugoslavia itself, but the way it fell apart - through bloody and senseless wars, with hundreds thousands killed, with millions displaced, with hatred instilled, with heavy consequences on lives of people and their perceptions. I still strongly feel about the

peoples, towns, lands, and cultures of former Yugoslavia, but bloody past cannot be rubbed out with an eraser and it is difficult and too early to speak about cultural identity of the Balkans or Western Balkans, if you prefer. The Balkan peoples have rarely perceived themselves as a region and have seldom felt a sense of unity and awareness of belonging to it. Some of them, like Slovenes and Croats would rather see themselves as a part of a Mittel Europa than of the Balkans. Therefore, both the new term "Western Balkans" that was coined by the 1998 Vienna European Council (the countries that have emerged after the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia plus Albania) and a wider term "South East Europe" (Western Balkans countries plus Bulgaria and Romania) apparently correspond to external perceptions and political needs rather than to a local sense of belonging. It is not therefore easy to answer the question who I am today. Ex-Yugoslav? Serbo-Montenegrin? Western Balkanite? South East European? European-To-Be?

We in the Balkans are in the process of redefining our identities. If we understand identity as a set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group, an *identity crisis*, as a state of disorientation, confusion and insecurity, may occur as a result of personal crisis or conflicting outside pressures. The condition of becoming uncertain of one's feelings about oneself grows particularly often under disruptive, fast-changing conditions and in times of erosion of (till then) more or less generally accepted values. In this completely different ambiance, an individual feels lost and frustrated and becomes an easy prey to the aggressive influence of a dominant ideology supported by a powerful brainwashing propaganda. Therefore, the process of dissolution of Yugoslavia was not only territorial break-up. It was also a process of redefining identities by imposition rather than by free choice. A powerless and disoriented individual tries to find refuge and sanctuary in some powerful identity first and foremost the nation, both as ethnicity and ideological concept. True, his ethnicity was an important part of his identity before, but never so dominant and exclusive. All other identities were taken away of him: belonging to his native place or to a wider community (Yugoslavia), commitment to the pervasive ideology which had lost any sense, loyalty to his work, vocation or profession, attachment to a circle of

the like-minded, affection for his football club or adherence to his favorite café - all that had lost meaning, appeal and fascination. This has been the process of reduction of a rich and diverse identity to a single one that serves the function of a dominant mission (Greater Serbia, Greater Croatia, Greater Albania, etc.). All others, yesterday's compatriots, neighbors, fellow creatures, kindred souls - suddenly appeared in a completely different light - they became aliens, enemies of "your" nation and yourself, objects of suspicion or hatred. Many myths and forgeries of history have served the same task - to prove that "we" were entirely different from "them": we (Serbs, Croats, etc.) are superior, we have always been just and noble, we have never waged conquering but only self-defending wars, we have been the victims of international conspiracy, we have been the objects of crafty schemes concocted by our neighbors, the perfidious Vatican, and/or the treacherous and rotten West.

Conscious, honest and bold efforts are needed to overcome the negative legacies of the recent past. One of them is to confront the truth about our past. Those who define the past, control the future. The process of national introspection is long and painful. The culture of silence and denial is widespread. Facing the truth about ourselves is not an easy task: you'll recognize it easily because you will not like it. Full cooperation with the Hague Tribunal is one of the most important ways to do that. But we also have right to expect others to make an effort to objectively reassess their own role in the Yugoslav crisis: Europe in failing us at the outset of the crisis and the USA and other NATO nations in "finding" solution for Kosovo problem by bombing Yugoslavia. We need reconciliation, first with ourselves, then with our neighbors and finally with the international community.

Partaking in the European integration is the best way of overcoming the ugly past and finding a common European future. However, if our future is definitely "The Balkans in Europe", we could realize it only if we as soon as possible build "Europe on the Balkans" – a region that respects and implements European legal, civilization and cultural standards, a region without visas, a region of vibrant human, cultural, economic and other communication and cooperation, a region of mutual

trust and reconciliation. There is no direct train to Brussels – it must pass via Zagreb, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tirana, Pristina and Belgrade.

For the first time in the Balkans, there is a chance that a new, common myth is being born: *myth of Europe*. In contrast to the dominant myths based on the false interpretation of our national histories, which have served the nationalist concepts and practices and played retrograde role, the new myth of Europe is positive and future-oriented.

A key factor in this process is permeation of cultures within the region and with Europe. We need a culture of permeation, an open culture, a culture without frontiers, with mentalities and ideas that easily transgress borders, cultures and languages.

Easier said than done. The whole cultural space in our region has been polluted for years - militant aggressivity of nationalism has been deliberately compounded with the aggressiveness of trash, kitsch and bad taste, leading to the decay of criteria and value systems, which were replaced by populist, neopatriarchal and xenophobic ingredients. Kings of demagoguery became controllers of kitsch, using it as a powerful political weapon in transforming a citizen into an uncritical voter.

The question is: whether the concept of open culture is possible in our present conditions? Can we reach the state of mind that would be able to take every difference, otherness and diversity as an advantage and richness? Instead of being proud of using alternatively two alphabets - Latin and Cyrillic, there have been constant efforts to banish Latin script as alien and imported. A former minister of education even tried to expel English from first grades of elementary schools, with an explanation that it would be too early for kids of that age to be exposed to foreign languages.

However, there have been some very encouraging events as well. Each and every instance of guest performances from other cultural centers turned everywhere to be a great success both in terms of attendance and of a very warm reception by the audience. Several projects of cross-cultural happenings have been

realized. Drama festivals always include productions from other countries of the region together with best performances from other countries of Europe. Round tables and meetings of historians, writers, teatrologists and others are more and more frequent. Psychological barrier has been broken and mutual contacts and very open-minded dialogues have become quite normal. The most potent and vital activities have proved to be business and culture, which have made breakthrough in regional cooperation and exchange. This gives reason for hope that the region can become a common cultural arena. Our common European future is the most important foothold of this process.