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WHEN EAST MEETS WEST

Questioning the European identity

During the lectures, we have been talking a lot about identities, especially about a certain European identity. Taking in account the multiculturalism existing actually in the whole world, the different historical and geographical contexts, we could support the idea of diverse identities. Some are similar; of course, because a common historical or geographical context could also mean a common development and relationships between nations may lead to common features in different cultures. So, at least we could speak about a European identity, whose main characteristic would be its diversity.

My main concept (in the context of the EU enlargement) is that the inclusion/exclusion is based especially on the differences existing between the Western and Eastern countries.

- As I explained before, I don't want to state that there are only two identities-W/E, but, talking about EU and also, because the new candidates are coming from the Eastern part, it was easier to focus only on the differences or similarities between these sides.

In the rather new context of the enlargement, it is obvious that every European becomes aware of his origin, of the common features with his fellow-citizens, but especially, of the differences existing among countries. Implicitly, he will try to relate himself to something different, in order to "identify" himself, to prove that he is at least, special. That is why, together with the

enlargement process, new questions are being asked and every side has its own doubts. Candidate countries want to know what conditions they should fulfill, how are they going to be “welcomed”, will they have to suffer from the “poor-relative” label? And the EU members, in a true western way, are asking about costs and side-effects. After all, the union is a select club where only rich people enjoy the atmosphere, reluctant to invite poor guests at their games.

First of all, the main discourse, at least in the Eastern countries, is always about the economic situation. That is because we kind of think about the EU in terms of prosperity, wealth and so on. This is our image of the Western countries. Romanians, for example, have high expectations about what will happen the moment we are accepted. We only consider the benefits, we forget about the costs. Or that is, maybe, an identity characteristic.

As far as the economic criteria, there are some very “not abstract” conditions. (I’m going to present them briefly and focus on Romania- my country)

First of all, there has to be a functional market economy, namely:

- a powerful and dominant private sector
- free competition
- economical stability
- the capacity to face the EU competition

together with an efficient educational system, good infrastructure, the adoption of the European *acquis* and so on.

Romania, unfortunately, has a fragile market economy, inefficient competition, high inflation, an instable business climate. For example, if the Union had a constant economic growth of 2%/year and the candidate countries- 5%, it would take Romania 45 years to catch up (Slovakia-13 years; Hungary-24 years; Bulgaria- 50 years).

We will be accepted, eventually, in the Union but our real inclusion will be slowed down for economic reason. It seems like this when looking at the

numbers, but I consider the “exclusion” in terms of different identities, different mental structures (between Western & Eastern Europe)

Even the economical behavior is related to tradition, mentality, way of thinking etc.

For example:- the property in the western culture is well determined ,delimitated, while, in the eastern part it continues to be used in a community, unprotected, given back or taken away depending on the different ideologies the ruling parties are embracing.

- Social life: the western society is based on a small family, opposed to the large eastern family made of brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, nephews etc. So there are two different evolutions for the public relations in the two societies. For the western people, blood-relations are not that important when compared to “citizenship”. In the eastern countries there are complicated spiritual and symbolical relations. (Institutions like “godfather”, “brotherhood”) In a word, quality, efficiency, competition versus blood-relations and solidarity even if this loyalty does not have positive effects.

Also the Western Church supported human as an individual, as a singular person, while the Eastern Church supported centralization.

So, the western culture is a culture of contract, of negotiation with its positive results-efficiency and responsibility and the eastern culture is a “gift-giving” culture.

We are similar to the Oriental states here. We have imported technology, but we haven’t changed our way of being. So, industrialization can coexist with a traditional mentality.

Romania has proved its European wish, but it still has a chaotic internal life. There are two Romanians: a traditional, rural one, attached to communist values, and a modern Romania, attached to values like liberalism or individualism. But we still are a “society of survival” where people have

resigned themselves, proud of their past, but with no future. The people capacity to aspire to something better has lost from its power.

We have a “surface democracy”. The purpose is obtaining power not guiding a country on the right path. There are free elections, but we choose between different leaders, not different programs.

We could be excluded for this “identity” issue because, you identify yourself when you relate to something different, so, in this case the “other” Europe becomes obvious.

So, how can we adopt the western way? No matter how perfect we would imitate it at a high level (the elite), for the ordinary people it would remain a strange pattern. An alignment to the western standards through imitation is not real.

In spite of all these differences, this doesn't mean that the expansion is a mistake. Europe is not only a geographical term, but a community of experiences. What is characteristic to the European culture is its power of expansion, its wish to know more, to discover more. (That is why we can find European values in America, South Africa etc). The unique feature of EU is “mixing”.

The European civilization has three pillars: the Greek culture, the Roman law, and Christianity. Whoever participated at the Roman experience, feudalism system, capitalism, Renaissance, etc belongs to the European Community.

It is true that the union started in the West: “the Small Europe”. (“the Great Europe” includes historically and geographically Central and Eastern Europe). But the West neglects the eastern efforts to unite.

I wanted to show here some proofs that there existed Eastern “unity projects”, too. So Eastern Europe shares the features of unity, multiculturalism, expansion (but as a positive term, namely accepting diversity) etc with the Western countries.

Naumann's "Mitteleuropa" was a vision of a happier future. He spoke of a union between Germany and Austria-Hungary where he welcomed Balkan states, for smaller nations cannot survive without an alliance with the great powers.

Masaryk's "New Europe" was a zone of small nations; states between Germany and Russia. He introduced a distinction between nations and nationalities, which would be protected because it is impossible to create ethnically pure nation states.

There were also some Romanian attempts for unity, which prove that even if we don't share a single identity there is, at least, a common European goal: strengthening our continent, and a common feeling of European pride.

- In Romania, in 1925, Octavian Taslauanu (a Romanian writer and journalist) wanted a union between the Central and the Eastern Europe, which, in the future, would integrate western states as well.
- I.C. Duca (liberal prime-minister), spoke about the United States of Europe. It was mostly a political movement because an economical union would be harder to achieve due to great competition between countries.
- Dimitrie Gusti (a famous Romanian sociologist), in 1930, had a similar idea to Duca. He said that if European states don't cooperate, Europe will lose its "cozy" place ahead of the three united blocks: USA, GB, and the Russian Union. After these economical and political losses, its civilization will go down too.

Also two great united Europes were born in the East: Alexandru Macedon's adventure and the experience of Byzantium. While two other imperialistic and aggressive Europes appeared in the West: Napoleon's France and Hitler's Germany. (So we are not that different, after all)

Also, we are not alone on this globe. And we are in the middle of a globalization process. And this process evolves only while we add identities and

learn from the experience. A man can overcome the linguistic and cultural differences making a true ideology out of the multicultural system.

In a very mathematical thinking, Europe has to expend to keep pace with SUA and the developed Asian countries. It is obviously, not easy to accept new members, but to hold still, to stop evolving is lethal, because stoppage precedes nothing else but disappearance.

EU will enlarge. This is a fact. So, if we want this process to work, we should better focus on the common features and accept all differences as a positive thing- namely, adding new experiences and learning from the “other”. You don’t have to change your identity in order to be included, because, after all, one of the most liberal statements is that we are different and that is a good thing! Europe has, definitely, a certain unity in its diversity!