

WESTERN EUROPEAN “IDENTITY” VERSUS EASTERN EUROPEAN “IDENTITY”?

Ph.D. Laura Herta Gongola

INTRODUCTION: Are there a Western European identity and an Eastern European one? Does the EU inclusion and therefore obtaining this Western European “identity” affect the Eastern European identity of the people from the state that is due to (or wishes to) become an EU member state? Or are these two concepts parallel, without impinging upon each other?

The paper intends to approach and maybe find possible answers to the following questions:

1. How does the history and the social structure from Eastern European countries affect their inclusion in the EU? Is there a social East European pattern?
2. Is there a conflict between the cultural identity (customs, religion, oral tradition etc.) of a people from the state that is due to (or wishes to) become an EU member state and its future European identity?
3. How does 45 years of communism in Eastern European countries impinge upon their future EU inclusion?

The paper consists of two parts. The first one intends to define Eastern Europe and the Balkans: their limits, their characteristics, their definition. The second part insists upon the differences between Eastern and Western Europe and to what extent they exclude each other based on their different evolution.

DEFINING EASTERN EUROPE AND THE BALKANS

The society, culture, history and evolution of Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria or Hungary differ from those of France, Italy or any other Western European countries.

Discussions about the limits of Eastern Europe are various. In terms of geography, we can say that Eastern Europe is the land extending from Greece in the south to Finland in the north, bounded on the west by central European Italy and Germany, and on the east by Russia. This is a definition by negation, which delimits Eastern Europe as the area, which is neither Western European, nor Russian. At a closer look, questions are raised from this delimitation: what do all the countries that this perimeter includes have in common? Are Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria part of Eastern Europe, or part of Central Europe? Should Hungary be analyzed with Austria, when we think of the Austro-Hungarian Empire or with the Balkan states, when we think of the Soviet influence and domination over this country?

What about the Balkans then? Georgios Prevelakis made an accurate analysis on the Balkans¹. He says that the eastern, southern and northern delimitation is rather easy, because the shores represent a separation line between the land and the surrounding seas (The Adriatic Sea, The Ionic Sea, The Marmara Sea and The Black Sea). Therefore, in the author's opinion, The Balkanic Peninsula is framed within the Dinaric Alps in the west, the Pind Mountains in the south and the Carpathians and Balkan Mountains in the east. The northern boundary is not clear. Can the Danube be a separation line? Probably not, considering the fact that the Romanian and the Bulgarian shores of this river are not very different from each other. Therefore, questions are raised again: is Romania as a whole a Balkan state (since the Carpathian Mountains divide the country).

Throughout the Cold War period, the geographers included the Balkan countries into two separate areas: Southern or Mediterranean Europe (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy) and Eastern Europe (Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia). During this time, the geographic terms of Central Europe and of Balkan Peninsula were not used.

An analysis on the history of Eastern Europe may shed some light upon our attempt to define this area.

After the Second World War, Eastern Europe was identified with communism and Soviet Union's domination. The U.R.S.S.'s satellites were the countries, which formed this area. Since Greece was not a communist country under the Soviet influence, can we say that it is not a Balkan state? Does Greece have a double vocation, as Prevelakis said:

a Balkan one (at the historical level) and a Mediterranean one (at geographic level)ⁱⁱ? On the other hand, from this perspective, can we consider East Democratic Germany a Balkan state until 1989 and a Central European one after? If we take a look at the evolution of the Communist Yugoslavia, Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, we can easily identify more differences. (Yugoslavia was the greatest opponent to the idea of copying the Soviet political and economical model exactly as Stalin wanted, ever since the Belgrade-Moscow conflict in 1948, Bulgaria was the most loyal friend of Moscow, Albania got nearer communist China in the early 70's, Romania started its communist period faithfully to the Kremlin's leader and later manifested a certain independent attitude in the 60's.ⁱⁱⁱ)

In terms of population, the Balkans like the rest of Europe, are basically Indo-European: ethnic differences are present, but racial differences are minimal. East Central European areas, as well as the Balkans, are tied to Greco-Roman heritage.

In my opinion, some obvious differences between the Western European countries and the Eastern ones can be pointed out at this point. Eastern European countries, and especially the Balkan ones, remain less urban and less industrialized than Western countries. The Romance and Germanic languages characterize Western Europe whereas in the East we can find Slavic languages. Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism are present, but so are Islam and Eastern Orthodox Christianity throughout Europe.

In terms of religion and culture, we encounter even more difficulties in establishing which exactly are the Balkan states nowadays. If we take, as a start point, the Orthodoxism as specific to this area, can we consider Catholic Croatia as a Balkan state? What about Slovenia, with its geographic and cultural closeness to the Austria?

As far the political history is concerned, we can trace other differences between Western Europe and Eastern Europe. By the time the concept of nation-states was already common within the Western political thinking and experienced, in Eastern Europe the great multi-national and multi-lingual were still dominating the map.

Some political and historical aspects, regarding the differences between the two parts of Europe, were underlined in this section of my paper. Therefore, my first conclusions make me wonder if it is appropriate and advisable to apply Western models

to the Balkans, without deeply analyzing the social, political, economical and cultural realities.

The fact remains that Eastern Europe and the Balkans played a major role in Europe's history which should not be overlooked (after all, both World Wars began in Eastern Europe).

WESTERN EUROPE VS. EASTERN EUROPE (ASPECTS REGARDING LIFE, ECONOMY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE BALKANS)

I believe that there is a commonly shared history in Europe. Nevertheless, the history, culture, religion, economic and social development and, mainly, traditions in Eastern Europe (and especially in the Balkans) have obviously had a different course from the evolution of the Western European countries. There are certain customs, certain ways in which people relate to the state, to the church that, all together, in my opinion, create an *Eastern pattern*. As far as the EU enlargement process is concerned, people always talk about adopting the EU model in Eastern countries. My believe is that the method of just implementing that EU model, without seriously taking the local realities into consideration, is not a viable one.

My paper tries to underline differences between East and West at three levels, comparing their evolution.

1. family;
2. lifestyle;
3. 45 years of communism in the East and its consequences.

1. FAMILY: *Zadruga* represents the basis of the social structure in Eastern Europe (ever since the southern Slavs were present here). This type of rural social organization consisted of a large family, which was usually enlarged with new members by marriage liaisons. Within the *zadruga*, all the members, according to their age, physical capacity or status in the family undertook the daily works^{iv}. This type of rural

patriarchal family organization, for which the land was collective property, reunited dozens of members who lived together and shared the common patrimony.

By contrast, the Western European family was small and mono-nucleic, usually constituted of parents and children; the Western social life generated the highlight of public and citizen relations, diminishing the role of family liaison. Plus, the Western family owned the land where they built their house. All these aspects led to a form of economic competition and emphasized on quality and efficiency in Western Europe, while in Eastern Europe a form of social solidarity and a sense of collective ownership were created.^y

2. LIFESTYLE: The traditional type of life in the Balkan Peninsula was the pastoral one. This type of life involves permanent migrations in search of pastures and favorable climate conditions. In addition, it depends on very rigorous and tight family relations and social values, in order to keep the unity of the group. Later, the sedentary villages appeared in the Balkans. At this time, life, economy and culture in the Balkans were greatly influenced by the Empires that conquered this area (The Byzantine one, the Ottoman, the Habsburg and the Austro-Hungarian one). After the Second World War, the Balkans faced a period of rural modernization and urban industrialization. In Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, the communist governments created the collective farms, expropriating the rural society and moving great part of it to the urban areas, in attempts of better organization of the industrial, productive activities.

In the meantime, the Western type of life was based on individual activities of handcraft and trade; almost every individual was specialized in one economic activity and was pursuing it with benefits for himself and not for the state. Moreover, it settled its ownership and social-economic relations by laws and contracts.

3. COMMUNISM IN EASTERN COUNTRIES: The 45 years of communism regimes in Eastern Europe left strong negative aspects upon the evolution of these states, in comparison to the evolution of economic collaboration in Western countries.

After the Iron Curtain divided Europe into two, the Western democratic countries establish the basis for a stronger economic community and create viable and functional European institutions. On the other hand, the Eastern Europe countries were politically and economically undermined by the U.R.S.S. and their condition as Moscow's satellites

kept them in a state of economic isolation and backwardness. There was a certain sense of stability from the state (since every individual had a job and was included on the labor market) but there was a total lack of competition.

Barbara Jelavich^{vi} identified two flaws within communism doctrine, which were in conflict to the old Balkan traditions: first of all, it was atheist ignoring the role that Church played (for the national development) throughout Balkan history. The communist teaching denies the Christian idea and considers the Church just another instrument, by which the bourgeois enslaves the working class. Therefore communism overlooked the tight connection between the religious institutions and the state ones in the Balkans. Secondly, it tried to destroy the private propriety. The rural Balkan society considered private propriety as a sacred institution.

These characteristics prove once again that the Eastern European countries are facing the following difficulty: they are still trying to deal with unfortunate events from their recent past, which left serious consequences in their attempt to join EU nowadays. They can hardly just adopt the EU model, without adapting it first to local realities.

In order to show even more clearer to what extant certain customs from Eastern European countries affect their EU inclusion process, I will try to exemplify it. There is a tradition in Romania: the farmers, even nowadays, use to eat their own pork (they raise the pigs, then kill them, slice them into pieces and conserve them in the fridge). Of course this type of self-sufficiency activity is based on very strong economic reasons. In the countryside, it is cheaper to raise your own hens, pigs, turkeys etc. and to harvest your own garden and have fresh vegetables than to buy all these in the supermarket.

But, apart from the economic characteristic, this tradition also has an even stronger and more important feature: the butchering of the pig is an important event in the countryside family; the males gather, they have a drink and they work side by side all day, until the pig is sliced. At the end of the day the whole family has a fresh pork dinner and the following days the neighbours are told about how large the pig was and they receive some pork products (like sausages and ham).

As we know, the EU regulations have specific amendments regarding the provenience of meat. This is where a type of exclusion, or better said delayed inclusion based on traditions, appears in the EU enlargement process.

ⁱ **Georgios Prevelakis**, “*Balcanii. Cultura si geopolitica*” (“*The Balkans. Culture and Geopolitics*”), Editura Corint, Bucuresti, 2001.

In his book, the author presents a short history of the term “Balkans”: “*In 1775, the German geographer, Gatterer, grouped within a geographic, distinct unity the regions south to the Pirinei Mountains, which he named The Pirineic Peninsula. He did the same with the regions south to the Alps and with the regions south to the Haemus, a mountain chain less known at the time. In 1808, another German geographer, Zeune, gave these two peninsulas names, which were similar to The Pirineic Peninsula. He named the first one The Alpine Peninsula and the second one The Balkanic Peninsula, changing the ancient name Haemus with the Turkish name Balkan, which means mountain. Today, we no longer name neither The Iberic Peninsula as The Pirineic Peninsula, nor Italy as The Alpine Peninsula. But the name of The Balkanic Peninsula survived.*”(personal translation from Romanian)

ⁱⁱ **Georgios Prevelakis**, *op. cit.*, p. 23

ⁱⁱⁱ **Barbara Jelavich**, “*Istoria Balcanilor*” (“*History of the Balkans*”), 2nd volume, Institutul European, Iasi, 2000, p. 302

^{iv} Therefore, the men were harvesting the fields and were taking care of the wood supplies; the women and the elderly were busy with the hemp manufacturing and certain less exhausting agricultural activities and the children with the shepherd; see **E. M. Jukov**, “*Istoria universala*” (“*Universal History*”), vol. III, Editura Stiintifica, Bucuresti, 1960, p. 52-53; Stefano Bianchini, “*Problema iugoslava*” (“*La questione iugoslava*”), Editura All, Bucuresti, 2003, p. 12.

^v **Ovidiu Pecican**, “*Romania si Uniunea Europeana*” (“*Romania and the European Union*”), Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p. 75-77.

^{vi} **Barbara Jelavich**, “*Istoria Balcanilor*” (“*The History of the Balkans*”), vol. II, Institutul European, Iasi 2000, p. 303-363