Intercultural and Interreligious Communication in the Balkan

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Abstract

The desire to belong in a individual culture means to possess a clear vision for the world, a road map that guides its followers towards the proper understanding of the planet's past present and future.

An established mythology of apparent national identities in the Balkans is somewhat unnaturally reinforced to justify conflicts between religious and ethnic groups, caused as a result of the national identities intertwined among themselves, an element essentially more influential than existence of national identities.

For centuries Christians and Muslims in the Balkans have been living in peace, however a few Balkan Societies continue to use violence, national extremism, xenophobia as well as a contemporary practice to solve their problems.

A legitimate question can be raised in relation to how common is religious influence used to cause violent and armed conflicts as compared to violence originating from ethnic cleansing, control over territory, political ideology and regional hegemony?

Communications, intercultural legacy and identity in present day Balkans

Before the inauguration of the bilingual elementary school in Prejlubiste, Macedonia (FYROM) in 2008, there was not a single Albanian student who spoke and wrote Macedonian language and the same case was true for Macedonian kids who never studied Albanian language before. Later, another bilingual school has been opened thanks to the support of the Norwegian government in fostering bilingual communication.

Unfortunately opening such institutions is not enough. The history of bilingual education is troubling, particularly very sensitive in areas with a high ethnically diverse population, a quality found to be present throughout the Balkans.

In 2010, FYROM minister of education demonstrated again his government's centuries old policy towards the use of the Macedonian Language as a primary tongue for the Albanian kids attending their first year in school, an action that violated the Macedonian constitutional provisions and above all did not guarantee the European Union Standards pertaining to the teaching practices of the native language in this case, Albanian language. In fact Albanian elementary schools were pressured to teach Albanian language begging in the fourth grade whereas the Macedonian Constitution guarantees that the language teachings be made in Albanian on every community inhabited by Albanian nationals, which control more than 45 percent of Macedonia's territory.

According to the Macedonian constitution Macedonian nationals who make up 20 percent of the population, "in the entire the country, their students should begin learning the Macedonian language in the fourth grade."

The conflict was inevitable, and due to the pressure of Albanian NGO and Political Parties, the Macedonian Constitutional Court argued that the provision was un-constitutional.

A similar scenario and concern was the one caused by the Macedonian Encyclopedia volumes that were ridiculing the ancient origins of Albanian population in FYROM, it claims that Albanians were mountain farmers who entered the country only four centuries ago.

This encyclopedia received a similar destiny; it obliged Macedonian authorities to establish a new group for the preparation of a new encyclopedia.

Cases on lack of attention towards minorities have been reported also on Albania, referring the resolution of July 2010 by the European Parliament mainly concerning the fulfillment of bilingual right in the education of minorities.

Similar reports, but this time on an opposite sense, come from Macedonian and Greek minority groups living in Albania.

The arguments by the Greek minority reached their zenith when in 2007 the mayor of Himara took off all road signals, arguing that his city is inhabited also by Greeks.

Whereas in Greece the European Union standards towards the treatment of Macedonian ethnic groups are rarely respected and continuously Macedonian associations are violated and persecuted.

The issue of language and communication in the Balkans can never be defined while considering a specific historical or political context. It has been inherited by the centuries old historic ironies and the unstable cultural equilibriums that inevitably affect the actual situation, including inter-cultural and inter religious coexistence.

Linguistic and communicational issues have continuously marked the lives of the people in the area since they were first connected with the continuous and never ending process of identity assessment pertaining to every ethnic group in the region.

Historical background, ethnic origin, present and future, all these concepts are connected with national identity the union among Balkan nations has been always affected by language differentiations as well as religious communication throughout many centuries has been acting as a vehicle to launch and maintain a solid national identity.

A substantial evidence that illustrates a solid connection between national identity and language differentiation is the breakup of Yugoslavia in the decade of 1990s, the creation of seven independent republics was influenced by Serbo-Croatian language characteristics as well as religious influence. The declaration and the recognition of the Republic of Kosova's Independence by most of the Balkan Countries (with the Exception of Romania and Greece), did not only change the politics of the area, but it also gave official pride to the languages that were considered to be "second hand" indicators of culture and national identity in the previous government administrations in the Balkans.[1]

Communications, culture, media and its meaning

At the same time, cultural and religious communications were rekindled and reshaped, the region began to emerge a new set of media strategies, channels as well as leverage tools.

Taking as evidence the violent situation in Kosova where 175 libraries and over 1.7 million volumes have been completely destroyed by the Serbian forces for nine years, 1990-1999. As of today the National Library in Prishtina, capital city of Kosovo has been fully restored. In many schools it is being taught Albanian, Turkish and Bosnian; While Serbian language is being taught by an educational system established by the Serbian ministry of Education in a parallel fashion with Albanian language.

Meanwhile, there are numerous Televisions and mass media corporations run by Serbian minorities in Kosovo covering almost 80% of the territory and the desired audiences.

Even though, there are different reports issued by international and national NGO-s, such as the case of the Minority Rights Group which claimed that there is a restriction of free movement as well as limited access into the education of native langue for Serbian minority residing in Kosovo.

This new situation experienced in the Balkan territories is changing and reshaping all multi-dimensional exchanges between the Balkan countries. There is an increasingly smooth progress towards mobility and constant communications in the area, and this situation is in someway similar to the kind of commercial and cultural exchanges taking place when the Ottoman Empire was controlling these areas.

Culture and faith, mixed and in many cases used to maintain and over time redefine national identity, by creating in some occasions an artificial dispute and argument, trying to attribute tangible elements such as songs, folk tales or legends to different national cultures. All this is to pursue in most cases one typical Balkanic objective when it comes to national identity: that of pretending to be the most ancient nation that populated the area.

[1] Del Re Emanuela, Balcani, lingue come armi, QS di Limes, Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica, issue 3-2010, pg 137-144.

And in most scenarios, in terms of cultural creations, the division is very hard to pin point, as it happens in the case of similar musical motives and rhythms, which are claimed to be national products in all Balkan countries, a perfect example is the cultural experiment of Adela Peeva.[2]

Indeed, today's Balkan people's trend is to communicate with each other by using English language rather than by learning their neighbor's language.

And when it comes to national identities, history seems to be more incisive than language, culture or even faith. Daily interests, as well as the agendas on the near future for the Balkan people, reasons why they exchange or communicate with each other, are not aimed to articulate national identity. Rather, they communicate with national identities that are created throughout an extensively long span of history. And it is precisely historical roots, where they seek to find this identity instead of focusing in cultural, faith or linguistic differentiations.

Balkan integration in EU; inclusion, exclusion and faith

A major factor affecting all communications in the Balkans region is the EU integration process. Which is currently perceived as the future settlement in a space where administrative and political divisions are no more significant neither have substantial influence, above all communications and exchanges give a totally different meaning to all differences including the cultural aspect.

The past ten years of multifaceted developments in the area related with EU integration process are valid accomplishments to be recognized.[3] This is due to the different cause - effect connections that have developed and the various Balkan countries engulfed by diverse shapes of developments; once again these are genuine indicators that demonstrate the effects played by cultural and religious differences towards a positive or negative impact destined to the inclusion or exclusion of each Balkan country in their respective integration aspirations.

Generally speaking, referring to overall processes and stability, the fact is that in 2009 EU Commission abolished the entry visa to Schengen agreement countries for the citizens of Montenegro, Serbia and FYROM (Macedonia), a testimony that shows a clear attention of the European Union towards the Region by qualifying the afore mentioned counties with a "satisfying level of stability" contrary to their previous status of "Settling down," in early 1990s.

[2] A. Peeva, Chia e tazi pesen? (Whose is This Song?), Adela Media Film and TV Production Company, Belgium/Bulgaria 2003. http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/5/song.shtml

[3] www.ipsnews.net

At this initial visa liberalization process, Albania and Bosnia where not included by the European Union, a discriminatory action taken against these two countries that were theoretically considered as fragile democracies and unstable. Other European public officials went further and consider EU's action as a kind of exclusion and excessive prudence from EU towards two countries characterized by a Muslim majority in their population.

The situation was over in 2010 and EU authorities stressed a lot to the fact that all this came due to a satisfactory level of fulfillments of required standards to achieve such status from those countries.

But the situation and sentiments towards EU integration is not homogeneous in all Balkan area.

The unresolved conflicts among countries brought into evidence the fact that national issues often distort the common future vision as well as bring into stage old patterns of communication characterized by underlined cultural and religious differences such as the cases of Slovenia vs. Croatia and Greece vs. FYROM. And there are populations waiting to see their dreams and aspirations come true due to such situations, and the more affected are those who are considered to be minorities in relation to the predominant population in the respective countries.

In all cases the risk of marginalization brings extremism in these countries, in some cases as a reaction, as well as it can create a fertile environment fostering conflict.

The fact is that most of communities characterized and affected by such conflicts and disputes is of Muslim religion, from one side incense some asleep religious issues by increasing the risk of going back to attach national identity with religion, and in the other side it can contribute to the creation of a wrong perception that Islam and extremism can be connected to the area.

In some cases, different from other European countries, in the Balkan countries, religious groups evolved in creating their political parties. Geopolitics as well as political games are always present in the area by making the Balkans be always a king of endurance test or passing the obstacles. It seems in many cases that the enforced EU standards to be fulfilled by these countries in order to fully integrate themselves in the European Family are not the problem; instead it is a continuous effort for all Balkan countries to set up and maintain such an integration perception for their future.

Taking in consideration the recent past of these countries, which in many cases have been jumping into different phases of the western civilized societies' development, coming out from long periods of economic under development and having little experiences of living in democracy, they definitely need a tangible flavor and real

benefits in order to maintain and strengthen their EU integration posture; they will, overcoming national divisions, by trying to reach the best benefit possible from collaboration, exchange and communication in the Euro zone as well as in the Intermarium.

A valid question is that how much the Balkan countries are willing to do so. The South East European Countries' picture today is totally different from that of 20 years ago. It is definitely different from what it was fifty or a hundred years ago. But these time period have charged a heavy heritage in the Balkan population which demonstrated themselves in the creation and proclamation of national identities of those countries. Actually, these national values will be the driving force in creating and maintaining an identity. The vision of a common future in EU integration and generating an added value under EU's shelter is a strong drive, as it is a strong argument in the expression of a national identity under the frame of a common system of values.

Albania and religious tolerance: values or only a pragmatic vision?

Albania has always been considered a unique example of co-existence in terms of religion and culture.

Past records show that independently from historic and political settings, Albanians showed a friendly behavior towards each other's religious tendency. The relation of Albanian's with religion has not been a constant one.

There are some valid questions to answer in today's Albanian society in order to further understand on what's happening in a region with a variety of religion and religious communications such as the Balkans.

These matters mainly focus in the risks of the Albanian society to enliven religious conflict due to radicalization; the tendency of religion to integrate itself and the risk of clashes between democratic institutions and religious rule.

Analyzing behavior towards religion and religious behavior in today's Albania, there are some main features coming out of the Albanian society and its relation to religion.

First, generally Albanians show a pragmatic behavior which is also related to religion. Their ultimate values are more materially oriented then spiritually oriented.

This mainly affects attitudes toward religion, as they influence attitudes of acceptance or rejection based on religious preferences, tendencies or spiritual attraction.

In the second place, it is necessary to emphasize Albanians' tendency towards homogeneity which is reflected in their main core values as a society. Taking in consideration the variety of norms and values depending on social groups or sub-groups

the individual is an essential part of it, when it comes to make generalizations, they tend to act unvaryingly towards religion, faith and diversity.[4] The salient characteristic of Albania's long period of the communist regime was the establishment of an equal society in all aspects, including expectations and an equal social class for all, causing tremendous consequences in the burgeoning of social standards and attitude to reinforce "the power of the people" which it turned out be "a responsibility of all."

In trying to differentiate between instrumental and religious values as well cultural influences on them, even in historic arguments, there has been a distinction between Muslim believers and orthodox or catholic worshipers in their attitudes towards intellectual accomplishments and professional choices. The last two groups have historically been focused on their education and their scholarly work clearly testifies willingness for a greater flexibility and greater engagement in urbanization processes, an attitude which is entirely different from the firmness of Muslim population in the country in relation to the afore mentioned life aspects of Albanian society.

The religious heritage to the majority of Albanian society is less influential in differentiating alternatives and attitudes than the social status' role. The social groups or subgroups belong to culture, age and profession, etc., represent variables which create a greater homogeneity in core values and cause differences in secondary values and related attitudes. This is a possible explanation of this greater tolerance Albanians show towards diverse cultural, religious and ethnical stereotypes.

There are two important elements ought to be mentioned in order to have a better understanding of the intercultural and inter religious communication in the country:

The fact is that religions do not interfere with their influence in relation to Albanians' attitude and behavior towards legislation, respect for the civil and criminal law, and secondly, the lastly the fact that religions do not have different positions in their incidence on attitudes and behavior to morality and cultural indicators.

The social model of Albania, whose main characteristics refer to religion is that economic and political groupings have little occurrence or affiliation with a particular religious group, therefore these components have less chances to influence the social and economic reforms in the country.

In conclusion we may argue that understanding and establishing scenarios of cultural and religious communication in the Balkans is a continuous process, as it is the prospected future from the Adriatic to the Black Sea. If it is true that history and the past can help predict the future, when it comes to the Balkans, the paradigm must change into "creating an integrated vision for the future". And for this, cultural and

[4] Fuga Artan, Sjellja e shqiptarëve të sotëm ndaj fesë, International Conference: Religion and civilisation in the new millenium, Albania, November 2003.

religious bases of communication and cultural exchanges in the area, there is a strong precedent upon the good will and efforts to foresee and build a future under the benchmarks recognized by the EU integration institutions, which will add value to the efforts and struggles to see further progress in the last European *left-alone* countries.

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