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Monoculturalism as prevailing culture

Bulgaria continues to resist notions of multiculturalism and acknowledge the diverse cultural heritage of its ethnic minorities. Ivaylo Ditchev wonders why their presence is barely noted in public life.

Here is a paradox: while buzz words of globalization are very well received in Bulgaria, multiculturalism that usually goes along with it, does not grow on Bulgarian soil.

As far as the first clause of the above assertion goes, there are practically no anti-globalist protests and movements corresponding to those in countries, similar to us in one way or another, such as comparable places like Greece and the Czech Republic. The demonstrations against the war in Iraq this year attracted more journalists than protestors, whereas the mastermind behind the Bulgarian involvement in the war, Foreign Minister Solomon Pasi, remains one of the most popular political figures. Even the painful regulations imposed by the EU accession process are perceived as indisputable fate.¹ Given the economic situation, Bulgarians are surprisingly quick to adapt to the new global network. According to Alpha Research, Internet users increased from 7 percent in August 2000 to 14 percent in January 2002, the country thus reaching half the EU average; and 21 percent surf the web on a daily basis. Around 2–3 million people travel abroad every year, the majority of them as seasonal workers. With the completion of the , so-called privatization or rather looting, that used to call for protecting the "national capital," it is only marginal politicians today who take a fervent sovereignist stand, often smelling of State Security. Take the McDonalds restaurants, for instance, a symbol of global culture, these are prestigious relatively high-priced establishments where instead of having a fast-food meal, families triumphantly indulge themselves for hours.

Multiculturalism, however, does arouse considerable opposition. What I refer to with this term is the ability to explicitly base identity on difference, to push difference from the periphery into the center of culture (Dunn, 1998). In this sense multiculturalism is a modern, urban phenomenon implying reflexivity: it is not or not only about the fact of being mixed with otherness, but rather about letting the image of mixitude surface in the dominant discourse sanctioned by the intellectual, the politician, and the ideologist.

It is well known that in each society the other is at the core of the same, transgression – of prohibition, incest – of taboo. Multiculturalism declines to push this circumstance into the cultural unconscious, and proudly puts it at the forefront of official culture instead. The other becomes the emblem of the same. From the end of the 19th century onwards, the cultural hybrid made its appearance on the forestage with a growing confidence: the capitals of Europe

started working hard on integrating the exotic – from Black art and Japanism, to the Jewish (in spirit and participants) psychoanalytic movement and Russian bolshevism. Transatlantic thinkers of the 1990s such as Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, and Yael Tamir, transformed this eroticism of the exotic into a political program legitimizing action.

In the words of Apadurai, Bulgarians take part in the global stages of politics, technology, economy, life–style, etc., but not on the stage of ethnic identities (of "ethnoscapes", Apadurai, 1996): minority identities are still viewed as leftovers that globalization has not yet swallowed up. Such a viewpoint makes the multicultural stand in Bulgaria rather different than any of its equivalents in the metropolises of the global world. I will outline some observations in this regard, confining myself to the ethnical aspect of the problem.²

Multicultural identification in Bulgaria, if thinkable at all, is a clear indication of belonging to what I refer to as "project culture" (Ditchev, 2003) – culture that depends on Western donors with their criteria and keywords. The world of projects is made of up fairly young people, with a good command of foreign languages, often from the humanities, who earn their living by working for non–governmental organizations and thus remain relatively independent of both state administration and media – the two pillars of national propaganda. Any time you hear that a minority culture is being supported here or there, it means that there is project money behind it, with the backing of a Western donor. Take the initiative to write an all–Balkan history textbook, take the trans–border cooperation, take the deliberate enrolling of Bulgarian and Roma kids together in school...

As for the media, depending on the domestic market, as well as for the politicians, counting on electoral votes, the dominant discourse remains a hard national monotheism that begins to sound fascist when it comes to attacking the (Turkish dominated) Movement for Rights and Liberties, or taking stands on the Roma issues. Upon coming into office, the very same politicians, no longer directly dependent on their vote–casters in the next couple of years, enter the game of winning political support from abroad: this is the time when they are most diligent in reciting international keywords. The balancing between external and internal pressure can be seen in the way our country ratified the Council of Europe Framework Convention on minority issues towards the end of the 1990s – all soft–spoken principles were adopted, there was but one minute detail, unambiguously stipulated in the document: minorities do not exist in Bulgaria.

When traveling around the country, one discovers that what is thought and presented as cultural heritage is in fact without exception ethnically Bulgarian. There are no Pomak, Turkish, Gypsy and Karakachan equivalents of Zheravna, Kovatchevitza, and Bozhentzi; there is no Armenian old Plovdiv, there is not one Greek tavern in Nessebar. The most sensitive issue is folklore, regional as a rule, and as such contradicting by definition the proud national integrity. It is namely for that reason that folklore had been brought to an enviable uniformity in communist times. From 1989 on, through externally–funded projects, the National Ethnographic Museum set up a series of exhibitions which would have been impossible to even think of in communist years, and which represented the culture of the Roma, the Karakachans, the Armenians, and the Jews in our country (a taboo topic under the old regime). The institution's own funds and activities, however, were put into other undertakings: take, for example, the "Backyard Divided" exhibition (1966) featuring the Bulgarian minority in Serbia. The intention was to show that "utterly identical customs,

rituals, and traditional costumes are found on both sides of the Bulgarian–Serbian border" (Ditchev, 2001: 332).

Project culture runs into even bigger difficulties in the countryside where the communist ethno–national project has outlived the regime, although the state has long ago given up the monopoly on legitimate cultural violence, to paraphrase here. Take the museum in Gotze Deltchev, for instance. It is certainly rather difficult to observe the national canon, when exhibiting the traditional costumes of a region largely populated by Pomaks³. "Foreign" costumes in a Bulgarian museum – how come? There is a simple solution to it. The interpretation sign reads the village where the costume comes from, not specifying the particular ethno–religious group it belongs to. So, if a foreigner or a project–culture representative who knows that Ribново and Breznitza are Pomak villages, brings up the question, they are told that these are Pomak traditional costumes; the patriotic visitor, however, may rest content with the idea of national homogeneity. I am not an expert on traditional costumes myself, but just in terms of cuts they differ considerably from what you find today in the villages mentioned above: for instance, the women's dress is made of fawn–colored homespun, you do not see the brightly–colored *shalwars* (women's Turkish trousers), and the only element that speaks of any ethnical difference is the somewhat more colorful *shamiya* (head–cloth). There are presumably some (historical?) grounds behind this selection but surely one of the desired effects is to retouch contemporary variations. Whereas featuring customs that are completely different such as funerals, for example, is out of the question. The situation was rather similar in the Kurdzhaly museum in 1999, where one could see a great variety of painted Easter eggs and round loaves decorated with the Christian cross, but not a mention of essential Moslem rituals as *kurban* (offering of boiled mutton) or *syunet* (circumcision). Upon a straight inquiry, you were to be shown a Turkish traditional costume, hardly distinguishable from the Bulgarian ones.

As I mentioned, the monolithic ethno–national iconography, if not an invention of communism, was imposed by communism by way of money and force. In 1955, a year marked by the easing up and beginning of the Khrushchev era, Tirnovo was designated a museum reserve. It was followed by a great number of towns and villages, picked not for their preservation of authentic, and fascinating culture, but for the place they held in national mythology. For example, Kotel couldn't have escaped musification (it took place in 1969) being a "stronghold of Bulgarianness" and a "cradle of National Revival", whereas the prominent in Ottoman times town of Vidin, where one of the few fortresses of the Empire is preserved, was doomed to be left out of the focus of national culture and tourist itineraries.

In sensitive areas such as Blagoevgrad (Bulgarian Macedonia) and Smolyan (the Rhodopes) the adoration of the ethno–national heritage had political implications: the aim was to prove beyond reasonable doubt that those places belonged to the national territory. The apotheosis of patriotic self–invention was 1981 when with the 1300–anniversary of the Bulgarian state⁴ the heritage was centralized and nationalized once and for all, and the national myth was finalized. This myth is still alive today even if it is in a ridiculous disagreement with the tendencies in the global world: the National Palace of Culture is a bazaar, the Pleven Panorama Museum of the Liberation war looks more and more Disneyland–like, the Kotel Pantheon is a place where pigeons nest, and the monstrous monuments of our national heroes arouse smiles.

The citizens of this country still obstinately observe the rituals of ethno–national integrity. For example, Macedonians feel obliged to introduce themselves as the most genuine Bulgarians of all, and if someone dares to pronounce something Macedonian about himself, he is to be dismissed as one of those separatist betrayers of the "Ilinden" organization. There is no drama, however, once it has been explicitly made clear that being Macedonian could be a question of regional, not national identity. What this means is that there are no a priori divisions within the national identity. Identity is integral and indivisible; therefore, a Bulgarian saying that s/he is Macedonian to some extent is the same as a man saying that he is partly a woman. Taking part in several cultural groups undermines the authenticity of each one of them. You may easily verify this hypothesis based on the monologue–like approach to cooking: the average housewife tells you how one meal or another *is* prepared (in general, from time immemorial) and hardly ever makes up her mind to cook a specific Walachian, Turkish, or Chinese meal.

In this connection, there is a remarkable discrepancy between the internal and the external gaze. What one expects from the Balkans is cultural mixing; Plovdiv became the venue of a number of international initiatives (ranging from a conference center to a seat of Balkan regional military initiative) for the very reason that it is a symbol of multiculturalism. However, this definition is not the first that comes to the mind of the natives of Plovdiv, their town being first and foremost busy competing with the capital Sofia. When you talk to representatives of the municipality cultural affairs office, you are left with the impression that Armenian, Roma, and Turkish communities might well exist in the town, nevertheless they are outside their competence: they don't stand in the way, but aren't part of the identity potential of the town. The problem is probably partially related to the fact that culture is only perceived in its "high" version. In this sense, multiculturalism would imply promoting Gypsy poets or Armenian artists, and if there are none or if they are not good enough, the idea is simply dropped. Furthermore, old Plovdiv where wealthy Greeks, Armenians, and Turks once used to co–exist, is nowadays an emblem of Bulgarianess. An ethno–themed folklore festival is held there, as at almost every other place in the country (the program of the "Plovdiv – European Cultural Capital of 1999" festival was surely multi–ethnic, but this is just another case of what I referred to as "project culture"). The pattern of Bulgarian tolerance that is "sold" abroad by the Bulgarian politicians does not mean "we are diverse", but rather "we tolerate their presence" (or, in the wording of the Framework Convention on Minorities: we would have tolerated them, had they only existed...).

Opposition to multicultural self–identification is probably related to the past of the Bulgarian towns that had been discharged from the official historiography. Populated mostly by non–Bulgarians, these towns suffered ethnic cleansing (may we use that macabre Serbian term of the 1990s) and assimilation after the Liberation, and were populated by refugees during World War I and the population transfers. All this occurring within the framework of a national project shaped from outside, that the nation urgently had to think up its own subject for (cf. Lory, 1966). This powerful ethno–national fiction was the screen that covered the underlying trauma.

Here and there, under the influence of the new post–nationalist processes, the monolith cracks up. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization that you surprisingly find at places such as Nessebar, is an indication of the return of the repressed: immigrant roots are easier to trace back than local ones implying ethnic difference. The instrumentalization of minority identities is

another matter. Being Turkish besides means that you have access to the Turkish suitcase trade: you leave part of your family (the elder generation) in the Kurdzhaly area, settle down with the rest (women and kids) near Bursa, and set to traveling back and forth, loaded down with tableware, towels, china and Turkish delight. In 1998, I was astonished to find that the Bulgarian immigrants in Bursa do not get married to local people "because who knows what sort of people they are". They marry within their own community instead, which results in forming of some endogamous quasi-ethnic group that straddles the two communities (and has no image yet).

"Transition"⁵ as a rule does ethnicize populations: the new inequalities are somehow to be legitimized, and as Wallerstein puts it (Wallerstein, 1995; Balibar, Wallerstein, 1997), one of the major means to that end is to focus on cultural otherness. If you see a traditionally dressed Pomak woman in Gotze Deltchev today, it is most likely that she be either a cleaning woman or a house-maid. Cultural identity is strongly related to the social role you are assigned. The term "Gypsy"⁶ may have a cultural meaning attached to it, even if Bulgarians may not be quite clear as to what that is; still the obvious connotation is a social one: Gypsies are those at the very bottom. Three distinctive socio-cultural groups used to work in the mines of Madan only until recently: Turks who used to do the hard labor underground but were well paid; Bulgarians who did easier aboveground work and were well paid; and Pomaks who had soft jobs aboveground but were poorly paid.⁷ To talk about multiculturalism in this case seems indecent.

Recent changes in the geopolitical situation call forth a deep reshuffling of ethnic hierarchies. Those who manage to unearth some ethnic relations to our most prosperous neighboring country, Greece, thus happen to lay their hands on a particularly valuable resource. For example, the period of transition in the Kotel 'stronghold' brought about a curious upturn: the (Greek-speaking) Karakachans all of a sudden turned out to be wealthier and more influential than Bulgarians (the mayor and few of the big businessmen today are Karakachans). The Greeks simply granted them access to the labor market, where the Karakachans managed to make some good money fast. But if you expect to see the Karakachan heritage in Kotel (tourist-oriented at least) such as cuisine, customs, museums, mythology, etc., you will be disappointed. This minority simply substitutes the monolithic Bulgarian identity for the monolithic Greek one: they study standard Greek language, they invite Greek teachers over, they commit themselves to Greek governmental and non-governmental organizations, etc.

The interpretation of this phenomenon calls for hindsight. Communist modernization used to chase after minority cultures in its efforts to homogenize society: a Pomak becoming a Bulgarian meant that s/he was to get rid of his backwardness, and get closer to the modern urban culture, the way communists understood it. To the outrage of many, the fiasco of this project put the ethnic issues again on the social agenda after 1989 (whereas the international project culture of the 1990s persistently struggled to have it officially recognized as an item on the human rights agenda.⁸) This effort has not yet yielded any substantial results, apart from a lean Roma NGO elite that was created with exceptionally generous funding from sponsors such as Soros and EU. The Movement of Rights and Liberties' case is particularly indicative, for regardless of the remarkably pre-modern electoral discipline of this establishment, it does not communicate any cultural messages in the public sphere. Anything that is identity-related seems to be a private affair of the party; whenever featured in the media, Mr. Dogan (who defines himself as a

liberal) stands up for the civil society idea nearly by the French tradition.

One might say that ethno-cultural identity in Bulgaria is not (yet) "thin", in the words of Kymlicka, there is too much substance to it. "Thin" identity is one that has evolved from a sense of belonging to a particular community and the moral norms that go along with it, to the realm of possession, consumption, self-indulgence, and aesthetics of the imagined social status (Ditchev, 2002). Being *Breton* in France, after your forefathers had once been assimilated in the 19th century, giving your children names with three W's in each, studying the obsolete language of the Celts – that is a question of (aesthetic) choice. Being Pomak in Bulgaria, however, is still fate.

To Wallerstein's thesis on the social – segregating, justifying inequality – meaning of the ethno-cultural differences, an entirely civilizational dimension should be added in the context of Bulgaria. Urban culture in the country has no connotation other than the nationally patriotic one; towns were built virtually afresh, and in great haste.⁹ For lack of alternatives, the ethno-national dimension fabricated after the Liberation, became the main content of urban civilization: being "civilized" meant to be able to reproduce correctly all national clichés and emblems. The ethno-national identity is a "thick" one, because there are no other ways to legitimize the elite¹⁰, replaced repeatedly in the course of 125 years, and usually coming out of nowhere.

Cultural life of the countryside elite in particular, has been centered on ethno-national rituals for decades. The very idea behind literature, the arts, and folklore was first and above all to instill love for the homeland. The latter is not seen as a place of living together, but rather as a form of kinship, based upon pure and direct (imagined, of course) filiation. That this pattern has been recently undermined by the more and more powerful consumption trends, is due to the fact that TV, *chalga* (all-Balkan, low taste, folk music) concerts, and the like, are simply not considered culture; "culture is not about pleasure" one school teacher told me. Therefore, the advent of the consumption society is by definition perceived as aculturalization. In 2003, for example, we asked the participants of a focus group in Pleven to list the names of prominent people related to the town. Without fail the first name they came up with was Svetlin Roussev whose pictures, it turned out, they had seen once or twice if ever, but the name of Slavi Trifonov whose TV show they followed every evening didn't even cross their mind. The former is viewed as "culture", while the latter – not. It is impossible to look at cuisine, everyday life, bodily practices, holidays, etc. as culture, i.e. as subject of choice, striving, and upbringing. The "high" definition of the cultural phenomena implies one-sided hierarchy, which leaves no room for multiculturalism related to equal value and bordering on relativism. Besides, the conventional Western modernity likewise continues to confront the multicultural in the name of a universal hierarchy of values: where the difference lies in is that at the top of this hierarchy we have placed not the Christian, the progressive, the authentic, the beautiful but... what is ours.

Being Turkish under these circumstances is not considered a cultural fact; a member of this ethnic group coming to sight within the society is either to be assimilated or to immigrate. As a rule, gaudiness, variety, and mixing are not proper to be shown off; neither at home, nor in public. The synonym for "beautiful" in our language is "proper". Citizens of Plovdiv would recall that in the mid-80s the communists got rid of the marketplace that once had stood at the site of the present-day Monument of the Reunion, so that it wouldn't create a "bad image of the city". Basically, this aesthetic act does not differ much

from the so-called "Revival Process" (the forceful Bulgarization of Moslems 1962–1989).

The only culture tolerated in the public sphere of the 1950s was deliberately distilled, and aseptitized. Folklore underwent an authentication operation to have gross words removed, traditional costumes ironed out, the singers made up with rouge. Experts of the Bulgarian Academy of Science were busy editing folklore in socialist times not only to suppress Christian elements in it but also to make it seem "decent". Not to forget the ethnographic city quarters, the granite *haidouk* monuments, the standardized souvenirs, and the folk taverns decorated with strings of sun-dried peppers. In the rural mentality, decoration (i.e. culture) is not a matter of originality and differentiation: the household furnishings, the Persian carpet, the wall rug have aesthetic value only if they look exactly like those of the neighbors (what differs too much is simply ugly). Now, imagine the crisis this mentality was struck by under the influence of the new global keywords of "multiculturalism". What sort of culture is that, and how are we to tell the members of the elite who would serve as its priests?

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¹ The requirement of closing down reactors of the Nuclear Power Station is but an exception so far.

² My observations are based on preliminary findings of the "City in Transition" research project carried out under my direction, and funded by the Open Society Foundation, Sofia (2003–2004).

³ I deliberately use this word here for it has no negative connotations on a national level; there might be such in certain regions, but these are worthy of anthropological interpretation rather than political reaction.

⁴ Thus the recognized date of founding of the Bulgarian state strengthens the ethnic aspect again: most European countries recognize the date of converting to Christianity as their founding date, not the date of a certain tribe (in this case the Proto-Bulgarians) settling down on a certain territory.

⁵ Since the word is an ideologem I have it in quotation marks.

- ⁶ There is a difference of around 500 000 between the numbers of those who identify themselves as Gypsies and those who are identified as such by their neighbors.
- ⁷ This observation was made by Petya Kabakchieva.
- ⁸ The 9/11/2001 events shattered the new global ideology profoundly: the discourse on collective rights was shifted to the left, and, who knows, it may very well be on its way to get further marginalized.
- ⁹ I already mentioned that the population of the towns was practically displaced after the Liberation. The majority of the townspeople were village migrants; the population of Sofia, for example, increased 100 times in 125 years (from 12 000 up to about 1 200 000). Moreover, social equalization imposed by the communists directed national envy towards the old families, the rich, and the educated. Not to mention the fact there was practically no cultural continuity between the Second and the Third Bulgarian states.
- ¹⁰ The other face of this legitimization is based on the "Kulturträger" approach: "that is how they do it in the civilized/developed/normal countries".

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