

Influences of Balkan Culture on Communication

Maria Alexe and Constantin Stoica

Abstract: *To write about the Balkans means adopting an attitude, this may vary from pathetic denial or seductive, picturesque images. On the other hand communication is a fashionable and fascinating subject. Writing about the Balkans and communication means to analyse the deep cultural strata and to try to understand how much the tradition of the region influenced the Anglo-Saxon model, that one that seems to be adopted by everybody on all continents and interferes with global society's requirements. Starting from some literary examples, the analysis is based on a case study that of different communication models used by Romanian society at the beginning of the 19th century. The working hypothesis, leading to research questions is generated by the fact that having a common cultural heritage, sheering a communist past, therefore people of the Balkan countries have a similar attitude concerning communication. The question refers to the way in which the above mentioned background influenced the contemporary way of communication and how it was capable to coop with other cultural models.*

Key words: *Balkan culture, Communication, Cultural model, Information Society.*

LEAD IN

Communication turned lately into a fashionable, attractive subject and a key to professional and social success. At the same time it is a very complex structure made of general rules, cultural background and patterns, leading to multicultural understanding. A good communication means facing the differences as well as the international patterns. In our life we all are communicators and receivers and in charge with maintenance of a clear communication channel.

Eastern Europe does not only have the merit of continuing remarkable models of civilization, such as the Byzantine and even Ancient Times ones, it constructs, its own cultural structures beyond the borders of Western spaces. It has its own cultural identity and as a consequence a specific mentality and way of communication. Part of an empire for almost 600 years, sharing a common stratified past, the contemporary countries of the Balkan Peninsula, were struggling since the 19th century to develop their national profile and shaping the identity of national culture and languages, and at the same time they made great efforts to catch up Western European cultures. Nevertheless there are still a lot of differences mirrored in the way they understand the world or they assimilate models. The reality that they suffered similar influences as well as the fact that Greek was the common language for culture and church for at least 200 years¹ were rejected, or forgotten. In the 19th century they have started to fight for westernization of social, politic and cultural life, fight which should have as a consequence a deep change of mentality. As in many other cases the reality is different and officially adopted models/patterns that are not accepted or adopted by all social strata. One has to be aware that people greet each other, apologise or celebrate the great moments of their life (baptise, wedding or funeral) in a different way than in Western Europe. Nobody seems to fight in a real way against globalisation, at least not as in England or France, but some old traditions and customs are preserved under the Western "facade" and despite the fashionable American models.

The present paper is going to analyse some specific features of communication in Balkan countries mainly from the point of view in which some cultural aspects are influencing it. Different scholars and writers² wrote about Balkan culture and agree that there is a Balkan mentality, less of them focused on communicational aspects.

¹ The cultural profile of the Balkan countries was developed using Greek as a common language mainly in the late 17th century, then the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century.

² Nicolae Iorga, Lucian Boia, Neagu Djuvara, Sorin Alexandrescu, Mircea Muthu in Romania, Tzvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva, Maria Todorova in Bulgaria, Vesna Golthorthy in England, to mention just some of those that influenced they present analysis.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The working hypothesis which generates the main research question refers to the common cultural heritage and similar socio-political conditions of development: Having a common cultural heritage, dominated by the Ottoman Empire for centuries, sheering a communist past, have people of the Balkan countries a similar attitude concerning communication? The question refers also to the way in which the above mentioned background influenced the contemporary way of communication at all kinds and level.

In order to answer to the main question it is necessary to answer to some sub-questions:

1. Are the communication models offered by the globalised society used in Balkan countries as well?
2. If they are which is their relationship with the traditions of their cultural aria?
3. Are there any conflicts between the two ways of communication?

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE OF THE FIELD

One may approach communication from semiotic point of view, or locate communication in a specific cultural context. The purpose of this paper is to analyse communication and its implication in a specific cultural context, the Balkan culture. We consider that ignoring the cultural context may be a potential barrier for a proper communication, semantically and psychologically [Raymond, 2004: 41].

Analysing the Balkan mentality influence was considered as a case study; therefore the methodological approach was appropriate to such an investigation.

Dealing with Balkans and their culture refers to European notion of east and west, in other words to Orient and Occident and their opposite position. According to Eduard Said this are words that were coined in a European geographical context and clearly indicate the position of the observer and the fact that Europe is considered to be the centre of universe [Said, 2004: 227].

Lucian Boia's³ studies about the relationship between east and west and about the way in which those two halves of Europe managed to live together, influencing each other are considered as a main theoretical background. His contemporary perspective concerning some fashionable topics, among which the Balkan influence in contemporary Romanian society are very interesting, yet controversial.

As for the communication aspect which represents the new perspective suggested by the present paper, the main literature of the domain refers to Anglo-Saxon models which turned into globalised ones.

ABOUT BALKAN MENTALITY

It is obvious that the common past, mainly the Byzantine heritage and the Othman imperial dominance created a cultural background which, with unnoticeable differences may be found in all countries in the Balkans. It is a background made of traditions, symbols, life style, literature, a particular cuisine⁴, which mirrors a specific way of communication. Unity is given also by the fact that a large majority of population belongs to the Orthodox Church. Generally the language is considered to be the main expression of mentality, but in the Balkans despite the differences of language the cultural background created the mentality. The existence of national culture does not exclude an articulated global cultural vision that allows analyzing the whole Balkan mentality.

³ Lucian Boia is professor of history at the University of Bucharest who wrote books on history of civilization. His previous books include *Romania: Borderland of Europe*, *Why Romania Is Different*.

⁴ Antoaneta Olteanu in her book *Homo Balkanicus* underlines the role of the cuisine in shaping the Balkan mentality. She considers that the fact that for centuries in all countries the aristocracy followed models launched in Istanbul contributed to create a Balkan mentality.

Considered as a mark of identity or as a negative aspect, the particular mentality of the people in the region has started to be considered as an important issue therefore, analysed since the beginning of the 20th century, but became a concept only in the 80⁵. Nevertheless the language as a particular way of speaking mirrors the characteristic of Balkan mentality.

Starting with the well-known I. L. Caragiale⁶ and going up to postmodern writers as Ismail Kadare, Julia Kristeva or Orhan Pamuk, the specific Balkan mentality is analysed in an ironic way or as a source for assuming national identity. The Bosnian writer Mesa Selimovic describes it in a few poetic words: "what has to come, will come" so there is no reason to fight against faith or to struggle for certain ideas, or to hurry up to catch something. Things will happen in their own way as fatalism is the main way of acting.

The Balkan people is characterized by the pleasure for small talk, gossip, a nice cup of coffee drunk with friends in a friendly café, contemplation and improvisation. No matter how fantastic the technology evolves, oral communication is still offering the main patterns of communication. Social platforms like Twitter or Facebook are very popular in the region as they offer a large possibility for gossip and small talk.

SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF BALKAN COMMUNICATION

According to Robinson and Wuebber people communicate for different reasons and in different circumstances. Germans at work, communicate to demonstrate their knowledge and to get respect, Americans to be liked, Chinese on people relationship. [3]. How can people in the Balkans be characterised? My opinion is that they communicate because they like to tell stories, to spread rumours, to gossip. When working in multinational enterprises they change their attitude and try to be efficient, but they act like that in official circumstances.

The Balkan civilization is considered to be a rural one using mainly oral forms of communication. Before the 19th century written communication was used by a small number of people and literature was mainly historical or religious. Only Greece had a real and developed written communication. The folklore is still a living phenomenon in that part of the world, having communication means which haven't changed for centuries, despite the fact that modern mass-media means are reality there. What changed is the relationship between oral and written communication. Along centuries they had a parallel life, but now they have a complex relationship influencing each other.

The close relationship mentioned above, has as a consequence the fact that in the Balkans, no matter which environment there is a strong preference for stories. There are stories for everything, for a monument, for a public person, for an invention or for a natural catastrophe, even official business international contracts have their story among people⁷. People are always more confident in a popular oral source than in written and official sources, suspected to be manipulated or used to manipulate them. Like in 1001 Nights, one story starts then it generates another one, then another one, just for the pleasure of telling stories.

Due to the restricted space of the present communication the main characteristic of communication in the Balkan countries is listed briefly.

1. **Oral communication** – largely used and the most efficient. Development in that type of frame influenced the characteristics of communication in the Balkans. Their main forms are gossip and rumours. Caragiale describe oral communication in the Balkans like that "Till night, everybody in the house, in

⁵ The concept of Balkan mentality was suggested by the Romanian Institute for South-Eastern Studies and 1984, the well Known scientific journal *Southeastern Europe*. published a series of articles on the subject. The articles focused mainly on the role of the language in mirroring mentality.

⁶ Representative Romanian prose and drama writer of the 19th. century.

⁷ Those stories are made of stereotypes and completed by each sender imagination. Even after so many years the Russians are considered a source of evil no matter if they are not officially mentioned.

- two days the whole neighbourhood, in a week the whole city, everybody knew the story of Kir lanulea⁸, even better than himself. All enterprises, following the model offered by multinational companies require cvs and letters of intention, but when a person is hired he is accompanied by rumours and gossips which designs his place in the company.
2. **Fatalism** – a main characteristic of Balkan mentality, considered by western culture a negative aspect. It has influenced the way of communication. People are taking about the past (they are proud of their old history) and about the future (everybody has fantastic plans), but they are afraid of the present. During the last 200 years there were so many changes that they learned to accept impossible things with a smile and to wait for a possible, better future. Living between big empires like the Ottoman, Habsburg and Russian Empire they have learned to watch and to wait.
 3. **Indirect and aphoristic** – people prefer to express themselves in an indirect way, sometimes aphoristically, sometimes even fantastic. This particularity was reinforced by the communist regime and was used in literary work as well as in everyday life. Even today inside Anglo-Saxons pattern the typical indirect way of speaking can be noticed⁹. There is not a special concern for accuracy details and precision.
 4. **Ironic and ambiguous speech**. In typical Balkan communication we rarely find a straight negative answer. Negative aspects are presented in ironic way, sometimes as a parody. If a refuse has to be express, this is generally done in an ambiguous way.
 5. **Rich language (all sort of registers)** sometimes, especially in literary work, one may found a language rich in metaphors, allegories and poetic language, a sort of baroque way of speaking. In others aggression slum language, translate linguistic features of a world adrift in a damaged and desecrated reality are used to depict reality.
 6. **Diversity** – in all Balkan countries beside the local population, live a lot of other nationalities. The diversity is obvious mainly in capital cities¹⁰. Managing diversity is a main task of a good manager [Gibson, 2001:4].

These are only the most important aspects which are characteristic for communication process in the Balkan countries. There are many other details which makes the difference. There can be quoted the way of greeting, the way of addressing in the family, offering or apologising.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER WORK

It is obvious that the local background influenced the contemporary way of communication of kinds at any level. Even in multinational companies the local patterns cannot be completely ignored.

Like all countries in the world, Balkan countries have imported the Anglo-Saxon patterns and introduced in universities a large variety of communication courses based on those models which contributes to create a global society. The imported models have to take into consideration the local patterns, still used by a large part of population, almost by everybody in casual circumstances. The two ways are influencing each other and they may generate a conflict only if they try to ignored.

⁸ Main character of a short story, he is devil punished to live on Earth, married to a woman he turns to be afraid of.

⁹ Official letters of cultural exchanges between universities mirror sometimes the old fashion way of expressing indirectly certain things.

¹⁰ In Bucharest there are a lot of national communities: Albanian, Bulgarian, Greeks, Armenian, German, Hungarian, Jewish, recently Arabian and Chinese.

The global village is a dream, but it would be a nightmare if everything is similar and local differences are going to disappearing. This wonderful concept can be alive if cultural differences are not ignored and each country or region can express their particularities.

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