

In Search of the Balkan Spirit

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Abstract: *Everybody writes about the Balkans adopting different attitudes, from nostalgia and admiration to a complete negation of cultural values. But little of those never ending numbers of article and book really try to understand the complex and beautiful Balkan world and the deepness of the Balkan soul. The research question refers to one of the most important elements conferring to this geographical space a unitary way of thinking and acting – the Balkan spirit. The most important thing to be demonstrated is the fact that despite the differences concerning languages, religion or geographical elements the Balkan countries have in common a certain way of understanding and acting that can be nominated under the name of Balkan spirit.*

Key words: *Balkan Culture, Cultural model, Balkan Spirit.*

LEAD IN

A tourist going to Corfu, the well known Greek island, visiting its east coast is impressed by the massive and beautiful image of the Balkan Mountains. One may have the strange impression of sitting, on a deck, between two East and West, not too far from western Italian coast and facing the mountains. It is place where phrases like Orient meets Occident become real and an old oriental house sits near a neoclassical palace built in the 19th century for the English governor, where crossing are marked by statues of important political personalities or by an old Venetian fountain, a place which makes you thinking to the definition of Balkan spirit.

Looking at this image it is quite clear why the region got the name from the word Balkan, which means a wooden mountain range. At the same time, it is obvious that the name refers less to a specific geographical space, but to a special spirituality, a way of living, thinking and talking. The Balkan spirit is a main characteristic of the region and a complex concept.

Since the end of the 19th century, when the collapse of old Ottoman Empire started to be obvious, to the beginning of 21st one, the Balkans are a zone of conflicts, war, a never-ending subject for journalists, historians, writers or painters. Unfortunately little of them really tried to understand the conflicts that shaped the region or are aware of the complexity of cultural background and patterns. For most of them this is a picturesque, rather dangerous zone, which lately turned into a wonderful and cheap holiday destination. At the same time they have difficulties in designing the borders or in describing the people, their habits or their mentality. Other may relate it to the concept of colonization. Since 2000 we have become witness to a proliferation of events, publications, conferences, exhibitions dedicated to the Balkans, leading to an explosion of interest for the region, but deep, correct analysis of good and bad points are still rare.

The Balkan region represents a place where three cultural strata such as the Greek and Latin Ancient Culture, the Byzantine one as well as the rich folklore of the region manage to reinforce each other in an original kind of culture, different compared to the western one yet, another side of Europe. A place where many languages are spoken at the same time as so wonderful notices Elias Canetti in his autobiographical novel It is due to him and to remarkable researchers such as Maria Todorova, Julia Kristeva, Mircea Eliade, Tzetan Todorov, Lucian Boia or Mircea Muthu and writers such as Ismail Kadare or Orhan Pamuk that Western Europe finally has started to understand that the Balkan region (Eastern Europe) does not only have the merit of continuing remarkable models such as the Byzantine and or Ancient Times, cultural structures beyond the borders of Western spaces, but it achieved its own cultural identity and as a consequence a specific mentality. Some regions were part of Ottoman Empire for almost 600 years, other for a shorter

period¹, all of them adding a cultural stratum induced by Turkish influence, to previous Byzantine and ancient ones. Among young generation there are certain artists, writers, singers or fine arts representatives, who want to rehabilitate a term now sounding pejorative, even in the countries of South-east Europe, who call upon us to review and revise our stereotypes [1]. They really want to share with others the fascinating beauty of the Balkan spirit

The present paper, even if it discuss concepts as Balkan mentality, cultural profile or multilingual aspects it focuses on the concept of Balkan spirit as an important feature determining the evolution of other related concepts, something special that they bring to the multi-faced profile of 21st century Europe.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The working hypothesis which generated the main research question refer to the way in which the analysed concept may be defined and how much it relay on 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 as a result of what we consider the Balkan spirit?. The two main research questions refer to people spirituality, mentality as well as to their way of living. This means that during the analysis, investigation has to be done not only on the so called major cultural aspects, but also one minor cultural elements as the way of cooking, dressing.

The answer may be Yes and express the feeling of those who are looking at the region as a harmonious cultural space, admit that differences lead to diversity but do not brake the whole. The positive answer is a consequence of re-evaluation of a common background. But the answer can be negative as well. One may consider that in a region spoken so many languages, having different religion, and which a long history has faced violent secessions and confrontation, there may be a common spirit?

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

1. Which are the main characteristics of Balkan spirit?
2. Are those characteristic a consequence of people mentality?
3. Does a general concept as Balkan spirit influence national identity of different countries (multi lingual and multi religious communities)?

The methodological approach implies critical analysis, comparative studies and examples of best practices.

DEFINING THE BALKAN SPIRIT AND MENTALITY

What we call toady Balkan spirit is the result of a specific mentality. The concept of Balkan mentality, itself is relatively new, as the term was used for the first time by the Croatian Jovan Cvijic in a geographical work [2], in 1918. It started to be debated and defined in the 80. It was at a conference in Sofia that scholars asked themselves: "Is there a Balkan mentality?" The discussions over its definition have not reached a conclusion, most of the specialists agree that there is a specific Balkan mentality due to a similar cultural background, to the fact that most of the population belongs to Orthodox Church and they have to struggle against Turkish domination and communist regime. The Bulgarian Simeon Simeonov in the article *Bulgarian Orthodox spirituality*, published by Romanian magazine Gandirea wrote "What created by centuries deep affinity between the Romanian soul and that of the Bulgarians is the religious idea, embodied by the Orthodox Church" He considers that the Orthodox allows national communities to develop feely,

¹ There are Greek islands, part of Montenegro and Croatia which were ruled by Venice for almost 400 years, then they were conquered by the Turks. The Greek islands in the Ionian Sea were governed by British for almost a century.

there for is a perfect common frame for both Bulgarians and Romanians and at the same time it gives the glamour of the imperial Byzantine culture [3].

Romanian writer Mircea Cartarescu considers that a common frame of different aspects leading to Balkan mentality and finally to Balkan spirit are a consequence of a strange and complex feeling due to a dichotomy of love and hate which is felt by many people of the region. They hate the image of *the powder keg*, at the same time they love the beauty of the scenery and the richness of traditions.

When one starts a research it has to define the concepts and ideas involved. Is there a definition of the Balkan spirit? Search for it in the literature of the domain we discovered a movie with the same title. In 2013 two creators from the ex-Yugoslavian cultural space, filmmaker Hermann Vaske and philosopher Slavoj Žižek take us along a rollercoaster ride through the creative world of the Balkans in their movie "Balkan Spirit". It is an exploration of the various facets of creativity: cultural, philosophical, political and artistic. The purpose of quoting that film relays not only in its title, *Balkan Spirit*, but mainly in the way in which it shows that after decades of war and destruction, a new creative renaissance is happening. The young creators are eager to destroy west Europeans views, stereotypes and prejudices and show a new fresh creativity, based on a solid native background. As interesting as the movie is, it helped us to define the frame of what we consider to be the Balkan spirit.

In order to describe the concept it is necessary to list its main characteristics. First of all the Balkan spirit is an attitude, a special way of dealing with life, a consequence of multi-strata culture. Starting as a strong urban civilization during ancient Greece and Byzantine Empire, the region turned into a rural one up to the end of the second millennium. As a consequence a large part of population is illiterate; therefore the whole culture is shaped by an important element of orality [4]. As many people underlined tradition and collective memory are ways of preserving messages from one generation to another.

A certain way of thinking is always illustrated by myths even if at first sight the Balkans are a very differentiated mosaic, differentiated by diversity. The same myths and themes exist in the ballads and fairy tales of all the countries. For example the myth of the mason that sacrifice himself and his wife for building a marvelous constriction², or that of the dead brother keeping his promises and bringing his sister to their old mother, are very important myth in Romanian folklore but also in Bulgaria, Albania, Serbia.

People's attitude in all countries of the region, due to so many years of different types of oppression (Othman, communism), violence and all sort of dictatorship is shaped by feeling leading to anguish and fear. In strange way this aspect does not have as a consequence a climate of sadness and pain, but a light irony, maybe a kind of special melancholy and nostalgia. They like the paradox and they make jokes about almost everything, fact that in some cases was considered to be a sign of superficiality. The irony as well as the paradox conducted to a devious way of telling the truth, a natural defence in a totalitarian society.

A general characteristic of Balkan spirit is the grotesque, the way in which they interpret it and they use it to mirror reality. The Balkan grotesque emerged from people's capacity to live through a tragedy (different types of occupations, wars, religious conflicts, communism) with a smile on their face. The representative image for such a way of living is Nastratin Hogeia, a character that can be found in all popular cultures of South-east European area. Similar to Shakespeare's buffoon, Nastratin is more than a character; he is a way of speaking, of interpreting the local gossip, to make a fool of himself, of interpreting reality. He is the image of the wise man, a person whose wisdom turned into tolerance and melancholy. Contemplating and moralising, melancholic and ironic, sometimes nostalgic

² It is not really significant if it is a monastery (Romania), a bridge (Bulgaria, Serbia), a citadel (Albania), the mythical significations are the same.

he watches the members of the community, judge them, punish them by his ironic stories or help them. Living in monastic solitude, he wears different masks, looking sometimes ridiculous, even grotesque; Hogeia is the oriental wise man, a mirror of society. He inherited the satiric vision of ancient Greek comedy, as well as the oriental (Turkish) ambiguous way of speaking [5].

Reading the fairy tales, novels or short stories, one may discover that there is a prototype of the average Balkan character, a representative of ordinary people. Beside the heroes, people looked at themselves and created an ironic image, not a positive character, but rather charismatic like the Romanian Mitica or the Bulgarian Bai Ganiu. Maria Todorova mentioned that Bai Ganiu, a representative for the realistic Bulgarian literature has much in common with Caragiale's hero Mitica. They are both representative for Balkan atmosphere, with almost the same way of speaking and irony versus society trying to survive under very unfriendly conditions [6].

Research made on postmodern writers established their way of writing is even more similar in their case, if compared to previous periods. Not only because they belong to a certain orientation in their case postmodernism, but because they have common background and they become aware of their heritage. One of the aspect, which leads to similarities is the fact that postmodern writer from Balkan countries are inspired by the specific way of narration, a type of story which has as a pattern Scheherazade's stories. The Albanian Ismail Kadare, Romanian Constantin Toiu and Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk are linked to the same rhythm and imaginary background. They are all using the old stories of the region, relaying on the same imaginary, inside the old frame of oriental way of constructing stories

An outstanding characteristic of Balkan postmodern novel is its preference for historical evocation, because they come from countries fighting for independence and national identity. The melancholic and nostalgic approach of Romanticism is replaced by irony, satire and magic perspective, not only due to postmodern literature patterns, but also because it mirrors the Balkan spirit. Kadare's and Pamuk's works or those of Julia Kristeva are based on historical facts, but the evocation is made through a lot of stories told by different characters, mirroring different perspectives. It is a particular vision upon history due to the absorption of myths and legends. History is considered a mythical refuge in front of an unfriendly reality. The fact the all those countries experienced the communist regime and all kind of interdictions concerning the way of writing and the developed plots, represents a major cause of the original aspect taken by historical evocations [7].

During the analysis, investigation has been done not only on the so called major cultural aspects, but also minor cultural elements as the way of cooking, dressing, communication. All the counties of the region have similar names for dishes which are alike, yet a little bit different, according to each countries pattern³. During the 17th and 18th century fashion for cooking came down from Istanbul and each chef adapted it. In the 19th the model of the French cuisine was dominant, therefore the old Turkish dishes were abandoned, but not completely forgotten, they just descended on the social scale. They were aristocratic dishes and turned into popular one.

In a contemporary society, an epoch characterised by a lifestyle where leisure activities and enjoyment lead to a new canons of cultural life [8], the Balkan spirit finally has found a place to develop, as parody and irony has turned into leading aspects of postmodern society.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Having a common cultural heritage, the Balkan countries are mirrored in most of west European countries as a zone of never ending conflict, therefore of an ungovernable and

³ For example the dish called *sarmale* (word of Turkish origin) is in Romania or Moldavia made of pork, not of mutton or beef as in Turkey.

without any unity. Dominated by the Ottoman Empire for centuries, sheering a communist past, people of the Balkan countries developed a similar attitude and as a result the concept considered to be the Balkan spirit. After a serious analysis the answer proved to be positive and refers to people spirituality, mentality as well as to their way of living, major or minor culture as well. The countries of the Balkans are united by their experience of living through a catastrophe and their communist experience, their capacity of smiling even in the middle of a deserter.

The fact that we accept the common cultural and historical heritage as well as certain common concepts does not diminish the national profile of each country. The Balkan spirit is something that we share but the multi lingual and multi religious communities, living in each country make it richer, adding specific aspects. It is a triumph over death, destruction, war, exile and separation, a spirit of a tragic comedy and a triumph of life itself.

Further research has to investigate the way in which common aspects as the Balkan spirit influences or contribute to shape national identities of each country of the region.

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