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# ETHNICITY, RELIGION AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN THE EUROPEAN BORDER SPACE

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**Abstract.** *Ethnicity and religious confession are concepts around which discussion and controversy arise, generating emotions and feelings of extreme intensity. Each of us belongs to such communities. By default, there is a strong pressure on us to be subjective. Intercultural dialogue can be successfully provided where a community that is aware of the others comes to communicate, to cooperate, and to build the structure of a multicultural society. Studies have shown that ethnic and religious diversity is poor when missing openness to other communities. On the other hand, this diversity, as it is the case throughout Central and South-Eastern Europe, reveals the less desirable realities. Today we are talking about discrimination, marginalization, low-status minorities, peripheral societies, inequitable distribution of resources; therefore, we can conclude that the majority-minority relations management highlights the demographic aspect (quantity) and the sociological aspect, i.e. the distribution of authority and power.*

**Keywords:** *ethnicity, religion, intercultural dialogue, European border space.*

Ethnicity and religious confession are concepts around which discussion and controversy arise, generating emotions and feelings of extreme intensity. Each of us belongs to such communities. By default, there is a strong pressure on us to be subjective. Intercultural dialogue can be successfully provided where a community that is aware of the others comes to communicate, to cooperate, and to build the structure of a multicultural society. Studies have shown that ethnic and religious diversity is poor when missing openness to other communities. On the other hand, this diversity, as it is the case throughout Central and South-Eastern Europe, reveals the less desirable realities. Today we are talking about discrimination, marginalization, low-status

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minorities, peripheral societies, inequitable distribution of resources; therefore, we can conclude that the majority-minority relations management highlights the demographic aspect (quantity) and the sociological aspect, i.e. the distribution of authority and power.

The current context of crisis, which is not only a financial and economic crisis, but also a political, social, mental, and even ideological crisis, shows a throw at the forefront of discussions, on the one hand, of the need to strengthen the dialogue and on the other hand, the trends to return to certain forms of nationalism and cultural cleavage. Without advocating for one or other of these trends we see that Europe is at a crossroads. The old forms of social-political and economic life are redefined. Even relations between people and between communities resettle on new organization and relational forms. In a Europe without borders, more and more types of borders appear; on another occasion we called them "*symbolic and ideological frontiers*" (Brie and Horga, 2009: 15-31, Brie, 2010: 79-92; Horga and Brie, 2010 [2]: 63-86). We refer to them as symbolic and ideological frontiers as they, most often, are not tangible. From Europeanism to nationalism, from ethno-religious identity to cultural identity, and to social cleavages, the wide range of approaches of these borders could continue in the context of implementation of an effective European Neighbourhood Policy. The physical border of the European Union's external limit can "open" in time, but new types of frontiers can occur between people and communities. Immigrants, for instance, live in the European Union maintaining their own identity, thus creating a world that "refuses integration" by the specificity that it develops; we are able to identify a cleavage between this kind of community and the majority, a cleavage that can take the form of symbolic cultural borders that sometimes turns into an "external" border.

In the current context, many European societies develop a strong sense of "self-protection", which takes not only a form of economic nature, but also one of preservation of their identity and culture. Moments of crisis or excitement can easily lead to the emergence of nationalist sentiments that dilute the "Europeanist" perception of the border. Such a dilution occurs in parallel with the strengthening of identity-community cohesion, of the spirit of ethno-cultural belonging to nation. It is a time when many European nations reaffirmed, "they regain identity" by returning to the national, that despite the "unity" and solidarity affirmed at the level of European institutions through officials of Member States. National borders, created in different periods and historical and political contexts have contributed to national economic integration and cultural periphery. In the current context, with the EU accession of the Central and Eastern Europe states, there was a reverse phenomenon: the disintegration of the national market and the administrative decentralization have led to integration of peripheries in the national systems, including the cultural one. Powerful currents are currently channeled in the direction of cross-border cooperation, eroding the idea of the national bloc,

compact and relatively isolated (Muller and Schultz, 2002: 205). In terms of cultural relations it is obvious that we are dealing nowadays with a streamlining of trades, without being able to talk about a loss of national, regional or local specificity. The cultural specificity brings into question the cultural border. It separates the areas of own cultural identity, building what we call the European cultural space of the cultures.

The cultural diversity records the plurality of ideas, images, values and expressions. All this is possible through a great variety of expression and through the presence of a large number of parallel national, ethnic, regional, local, etc. cultures. Moreover, in this context, some authors talk about the "revenge identity" and the "feeling of return to historical, national and cultural identity" especially in an area such as the Central and Eastern Europe, and a historical time in which the specificity and the national identity are bound to redefine themselves through opening to new geo-political, historical, cultural configurations (David and Florea, 2007: 645-646).

In the approach, surely an important element of reference is given: sub- or multinational, local or diaspora, not least by the European and international context (Bennett, 2001: 29-32). Beyond any approach, the image of European culture has been given by associating concepts of people-culture-history and territory that give a certain local specificity. Under this report, we identify, beyond a European culture, a cultural space with national, regional and local specificities. Therefore we identify at least two European cultural identity constructions: a culture of cultures, namely a cultural space with a strong identity at individual, local, regional, and national levels, or a cultural archipelago, namely a common cultural space interrupted by discontinuities. Whatever the perspective, the existence of a European cultural area is not denied, even if it is either the diversity or the "continuity interrupted" (Horga and Brie, 2010 [1]: 157).

But we increasingly find that Europe is at a turning point, in terms of more than ideology. The association of state-nation-territory-border involves some nuances. In the current geopolitical context, we could say that the era of nation states, as known to date, is redefined, reshaping it in a different sense. "Borders" between communities have been increasingly occurring within states. Unintegrated immigrants (unwanted by the majority!) are increasingly numerous. Discrimination and marginalization are forcing them to isolate and to respond sometimes as parallel "existential forms" to the state in which they live.

Our approach could be too simplistic if we remain only to debate about classic immigrants or national minorities. Introducing the concept of *extraterritoriality* in the approach of ethnicity and intercultural dialogue seems mandatory for a proper understanding of European realities in this field. A subject that has been intensively debated at European level is the Roma, the Gypsies. Comments relating to the expulsion of Roma from France and their

forced repatriation to Romania and Bulgaria have filled the pages of the European newspapers. Events in mid September 2011 in Bulgaria relating to the "revolt" brought against the Roma in many cities of the country south of the Danube have exposed a cruel reality that needs to be on the agenda of all institutions of Europe. Extremist groups in Bulgaria gathered important masses of people who were not limited to racial chanting, but they also became violent and destroyed Roma properties. Shocking was the extremist calling for chasing the Roma from Bulgaria. France repatriates them in Bulgaria and Bulgarians banishes them from the country. Where? Roma are members of a great people living in many European countries, but a people without its own a territory and without its own state. Tackling the Roma in Europe is therefore a problem of Europe and not of a certain state, not even of the South Central-Eastern Europe, as it is the very wrong impression of the West. Etra-territoriality, both as a concept and as a starting point in managing the problems of an ethnic minority (but not national!), becomes therefore a reality that invokes new clarifications and rethinking of European policies.

Another example, which falls somewhat in the same category of discussions on "non-traditional minority" is in Central and Eastern Europe; there are issues related to granting dual citizenship to members of ethnic groups. The most present in the mass-media were the granting of dual citizenship for the Romanian ethnics in Moldova and granting the dual citizenship for the Hungarian ethnics from countries around Hungary (during public debates, a strong emphasis has been put on the pros and cons in the disputes from Slovakia and Romania, where Hungarian communities are more numerous) . The topic has gained special importance by the fact that this dual citizenship, even if individually granted, peaked so high that is sent the message that dual citizenship was granted in mass to a group, to a community. Hence the hope or the fear for the possible creation of "Little Hungaries" in southern Slovakia and in central Romania.

Cultural diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism are specific elements of the European space. European integration is complex and it does not require, nor is it conditioned by the idea of cultural unity, or by the existence of a common culture to include all Europeans. Specificity and diversity belong to the realm of *intercultural dialogue*, prerogatives of the European peoples. Each of the European societies must find its own integrated solutions, depending on the specific traditions and its institutions. European societies and cultures do not repel each other in the European construction equation. It is time that everyone learns from the experience and the expertise of others. Central and Eastern European countries issued by the communist authoritarian regimes have experimented in the post-1990 a transition to a democratic model. This democratic model assumes, however, the acceptance of diversity, including those claims that had acknowledged the minorities. In some cases, the opportunities for cultural expression and political responses to these claims

were not really the desired ones and thus, unfortunately, military settlements were sought.

Over a long period of time, the minorities in Western Europe have gradually won self-recognition and equity in distribution of national resources (sudden changes were recorded in the central-eastern continent that manifested with a much higher intensity, both through the minority claims and the resistance of the majority). Not the same situation can be found in minority rights from the old European colonies. Their proposals raised issues related to the question of social status, financial resources and, finally, the relations between European cultures and those from the world where these populations originate (La culture au cœur, 1998: 69).

The *problem of immigrants*, their access and integration, is another sensitive and important issue from the perspective of inter-ethnic or inter-religious relations. Diversity is not only ethno-religious, it is also cultural and mental. The attitudes of Europeans towards immigrants have not remained constant over time. If in the '70s the European countries were favourable to immigration, and in some cases such as West Germany and Switzerland, immigration was encouraged, as it addressed employment, then things have changed. In the late '80s, because of the overwhelming number of immigrants and their "non-European" character, the old continent proved to be less welcoming. Yet Europe has tried to cultivate a climate of openness and generosity." It is fundamental to create a welcoming society and to recognize that immigration is a two-way process involving both immigrants being adapted to the society, and the society that assimilates them. Europe is by nature a pluralist society, rich in cultural and social traditions that will further diversify"(Tandonnet, 2007: 50). Is it just a utopia this European optimism that Maxime Tandonnet identified? The presence of Islam in Europe is a certainty, but its Europeanization remains a contentious issue. As the French academician Gilles Kepel noted "neither the bloodshed of the Muslims in North Africa, fighting in French uniforms during both world wars, nor the toil of the immigrant workers, living in deplorable conditions, who rebuilt France (and Europe) for nothing after 1945, did not transform their children in ... European citizens in the true sense of the word" (Leiken, 2005: 1). If Europeans are able to assimilate Muslim immigrants, or if there will be a conflict of values remains an open issue. Stanley Hoffman observed that more and more Westerners are afraid of "being invaded not by armies and tanks, but by the immigrants who speak other languages and worship other gods from other cultures and will take their jobs, will occupy their land, will live far from the prosperity system and will threaten their way of life" (Stanley, 1991: 30, Huntington, 1998: 292).

Alternating negotiation and conflict, communication and doubt, the Muslims are building step by step an individual and collective identity "that is likely to be both pure and hybrid, local and transnational" (Saint-Blanc, 2008: 42). The multiplication of identity vectors contributes to a fluidity of symbolic

borders and to an individuality of communities from diaspora. A cleavage is identified around the Islamic community, by comparison to the wider community. This cleavage sometimes takes the form of internal and external borders, all at the same time. Such a reality is amplified by the creation of community models in which identity features are transferred from the sphere of ethnic or national (Turkey, Maghreb, Arabs) to the religion, i.e. Muslim, Islamic (Saint-Blanc, 2008: 44). In this model of behavior we can observe the numerous behavioral reactions of Islamic communities that achieve a solidarity going slightly beyond ethnic or national differences. Such a reality is determined by the discriminatory attitude of the majority. Many stereotypes not only lead to a generalized stereotyped image, but also to a solidarity around Islamic values even of those who are not into religious practices, maybe even atheists. The phenomenon can be reversed: leaving from Islamic solidarity can lead to ethnic solidarity. This is the case of the Pakistani Muslim community in the UK (approximately 750,000 people) who have regrouped ethnically (ethnic border) on the basis of religious support (Peđziwiatr, 2002: 159).

Here we are, the difficulties of integration are obvious. Between different ethnic groups or cultures there are often communication barriers that not infrequently lead to cleavages, engaging discriminatory reactions and conflictual situations. On the other hand, these cleavages are only expressions of the elitist political current, being difficult to spot in everyday life. Under this report, the ethnic boundaries are from one point of view mutual spaces of understanding and inclusion, and from another point of view spaces of divergence and exclusion (Tătar, 2003: 159).

The political events of 1989 particularly marked by the fall of communism outlined the possibility of building the new Europe soon. The border imposed by the Iron Curtain fell and therefore, the gap between Eastern and Western Europe began to fill. Under the strong influence of globalization, which has made the world a small global village, the European Union came into being, a body which in the future will include all European countries.

The new Europe brings together a multitude of ethnicities, beliefs, traditions, cultures and religions. The European integration process has profound implications not only of political, economic and social natures, but also of religious nature. A political structure "cannot live without religious consensus" (Moşoiu, 2006: 312). But what kind of religious consensus is required today? And what kind of religious identity will be there in the New Europe? These questions must be seen in the context of postmodernism and secularization. The Europeans have been showing a decreasing interest in the Church and in religion, in general. René Rémond talks about an abandonment of Christianity in Europe. In England and the Scandinavian countries, the proportion of believers who regularly attend services is 1-2% (Rémond, 2003: 10).

On the other hand, one can observe an ideological and religious division between Western Europe and Eastern Europe. The West

accommodates the Catholic and Protestant populations, while the East accommodates mainly the Orthodox. Moreover, if Europe was once considered a Christian continent, today we cannot say the same. On the European continent live alongside Christians, millions of Muslims, only in Britain, Germany and France there are more than twelve million Muslims (Rémond, 2003: 217). To this a substantial segment Jewish population and eastern religions are added.

In this context, the construction of the new Europe requires a consistent and coherent intercultural dialogue. Moreover, the issue of the importance of Christianity in the formation of the "European identity" has been highlighted, being even put in relation with the pressing institutional crisis, and with the much debated European Constitution rejected by the French and Dutch referendums (Kalinowski, 2008: 297-298). The continuation of the process of European construction itself requires significant progress towards achieving intercultural dialogue, involving also the realization of a bridge between religions and religious movements at European level.

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