STANDING IN - BETWEEN: ELEMENTS OF BALKAN IDENTITY UNDERLYING ROMANIA'S POSITION IN THE EU

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examines the decisive impact of Romania's Balkan heritage on its current position in the EU. Our study aims at proving that Romania's present status among the EU countries is not only a matter of perception from the outside, but also a matter of self – perception, both being shaped by the stereotypes pertaining to the concept of 'Balkanism'. Historically torn between the East and the West, the central and the liminal, the local and the global, the Balkan area has fostered a unique awareness of national identity, supported by a suspicious and defensive attitude towards the 'outside' and totally incongruent with the idea of integration. During the past years, the tension between its Balkan heritage and the integrative EU policies has generated a sense of identity crisis, due to which the Romanians find themselves "concomitantly inside and outside, actors in and audience at a play; owing to this ambiguity, they neither perform, nor watch very well"[1]*

KEY – WORDS: *national identity, Balkanism, the Balkan area, East, West, the EU, integration, identity crisis*

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1. BALKAN "OTHERNESS" – HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL PREMISES

The distinctiveness of the Balkan peoples lies in a permanent identity crisis whose source can be traced back to the period of Ottoman colonization. Thus, the successive repopulations, religious conversions and military campaigns of the Ottoman Empire determined the Balkan peoples to perceive themselves as colonists and subjects at the same time, suspended "at the interstices between worlds, histories and continents" (Fleming, 2000, p. 19).

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[1] *Cioroianu, A., The Impossible Escape: Romanians and the Balkans, p. 3*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, this ambiguous identity is further enhanced, as Rastko Mocnik shows, by two major structures of domination – subordination, namely the horizontal antagonism between Balkan states and ethnic groups, which polarizes the communities into aggressors and victims, and the vertical cooperation between each of the conflicting parties and the EU (Mocnik, 2005, p. 3). From this antithetical structure emerge the stereotypes of Balkan identity, perpetuated by virtue of the oscillation between the defensive attitude, isolationist tendencies and exacerbated nationalism on the one hand, and the fascination of *the outside* on the other. These contradictions establish the Balkan region as a bridge between the East and the West (cf. Todorova, 1997, p. 33) and turn it into "…the center of a deep contemporary cultural, political and identity rupture between the 'global' and the 'local'…" (Bjelic,2005, p. 17).

The power relations between the center and the periphery have been constantly endorsed by what is known as 'the Balkan discourse' of the West, which automatically associates Eastern and central European countries with such concepts as savagery, backwardness and disorganization. This justified, in the nineteenth century, the British assistance for the Ottoman Empire against the threat of Russian expansion and, in the twentieth century, the interference of the EU into the Eastern economic and political structures.

Actually, such Balkan countries as Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and the countries of former Yugoslavia are perceived by Western Europe as quasi European, or even non – European. Torn between Catholicism and Byzantium, Christendom and Islam, the Western powers and Russia, the Balkan Peninsula is seen as "an unruly borderland where the structured identity of the imperial center dissolves" (Hammond, 2006, p. 10).

Since the Ottoman incursions into Europe, the Great Powers – France, Great Britain, Germany and Austria – have considered the Western control of the periphery countries essential for the preservation of peace and stability on the continent, as well as for their strategic and economic value. The pressure exerted by the Great powers generated not only a nationalist, defensive attitude on the part of the Eastern and Central European countries, but also such international crises as the Crimean War (1853 – 1856), the Russo – Ottoman War (1877 – 1878) and World War I (1914 – 1918). The conflict state escalated in the early twentieth century and resulted in the expulsion of the Ottoman and the Austrian Empires from the peninsula in the aftermath of the First Balkan War of 1912 and World War I.

Expansionism and interference persist well into the twentieth century, reinforced by the enlargement of the EU. This results in a form of well – defined, though rather insidious, form of political and economic colonization of Central and Eastern Europe, justified by the Western perception of this area as a frontier zone, a land of chaos, savagery and unruliness, which needs to be 'civilized' and controlled from without. After the recession of 1920 – 1930, Southeastern Europe became economically vulnerable when Germany took over the European agrarian and industrial market, controlling prices and imposing the purchase of its products. The fragile balance of the Balkan region was to be entirely obliterated during World War II, with the strengthening of German political and military control of such countries as

Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Croatia and Albania. The process of colonization culminated in October 1944 with the sphere of interest agreement signed by Churchill and Stalin, which divided the region into satellite states of either the Soviet Union, as in the case of Bulgaria and Romania, or the Western powers, as in the case of Greece.

The consolidation of Soviet control over Central and Eastern Europe determined a shift from the 'Balkan discourse' to the 'Cold War discourse', equally demagogic, which largely relied on the expression of Western sympathy for the Eastern populations oppressed by the communist regime and deprived by the freedom and prosperity of democratic, 'civilized' countries.

2. POWER RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND THE BALKAN AREA

The shallowness of the 'Cold War discourse' was to become more evident in the late 1980's when, the euphoria of Eastern liberation (the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, shortly followed by the December 'revolution' in Romania) made way for the evident Western reluctance to abandon its condescending position and accept the newly freed countries as genuinely European, entitled to equal rights and chances. In order to support and justify this attitude, there was a second shift, from the 'Cold War discourse' back to the 'Balkan discourse', constructed around the image of post – communist countries as barbaric, corrupt, uncontrollable masses that threaten to invade the West and endanger its stability.

Such a discourse was obviously meant to justify the necessity for the control of Eastern borders, which became the responsibility of the EU. The threat of 'Eastern expansion' had to be eradicated, hence the reluctance of the EU towards the admission of former communist countries paradoxically based precisely on their communist legacy. Thus, the Eastern countries that joined the EU in two successive waves, in 2004 and 2007, were forced to meet so drastic pre – accession criteria that by virtue of sad historic irony, they "…found themselves with less sovereignty than they had had as members of the Eastern bloc" (Hammond, 2006, p. 13). According to the 1993 European Council in Copenhagen and the Agenda 2000 (1997), the admission criteria imposed the adoption of Western forms of government and the immediate transition from planned to free market economy. This involved dramatic changes in the Eastern monetary and fiscal policy, as well as in the political and institutional framework. As the countries in question were obviously not prepared culturally, economically, socially, morally and logistically for such sudden and major changes, their so – called 'progress' remained a matter of form without substance, with no beneficial consequences. In other words, admission in the EU meant no genuine improvement in what constitutes the basis of a society's progress, namely the field of civil rights, welfare, institutional efficiency and transparency. Moreover, entrance into the EU involves a total surrender of national independence, as the so – called 'core members' are the ones who choose the candidate nations, monitor their progress, and take charge of their domestic affairs. In the same context, candidate countries and the new members are never consulted about the realism and applicability of the EU requirements in each individual country; they are just informed that failure to observe what is mechanically imposed on them results in non – admission or sanctions. Under

the circumstances, the pressure exerted from the center makes the admission to the EU be "…less a genuine merger than a wholesale take – over" (Hammond, 2006, p. 14).

As Barrell shows, there are four basic mechanisms of Western European domination:

1. The Single Market Program, which regulates continental trade according to the principle of the integrated market economy, where the capital, goods, services and work force move freely across borders. This program also involves the privatization of industry and the liberalization of prices. One of the most damaging stipulations in this program is the so – called 'regional specialization', which caused the gradual extinction of certain industries in each new EU member country, shattered local labor markets and increased their reliance on imports from long – term members. Consequently, it becomes obvious that this apparently generous program actually conceals protectionist measures that limit drastically the competitiveness of Central and Eastern European countries on the EU markets;

2. The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), according to which the budgetary behavior of member countries is closely monitored and penalties are applied for excessive deficits. Among the negative effects of this pact on transitional economies are the reduction of borrowing for investments in education and health, and the encouragement of cuts in public spending and infrastructure;

3. The European Monetary Union, which admits only the countries that comply with the imposed inflation and exchange rates;

4. The Labor Market Program, which consists of a package of educational and training schemes meant to regulate employment and to develop entrepreneurial spirit on the continent. In reality, the free movement of labor force also had a negative impact on the new EU members, as the educated and skilled personnel migrated massively to the West in search of a prosperous life;

As it emerges from the above, although apparently reasonable in theory, these mechanisms had devastating effects when put into practice in national economies. Not only did the 'shock therapy' fail to bring about the expected progress, but it resulted in "…unemployment, falls in output levels, high inflation rates, social unrest consequent to recession, crippling price adjustments and the influx of unaffordable Western goods" (Barrell, 2004, p.2). In their turn, these destructive long – term consequences ultimately foster a feeling of helplessness and frustration on the part of Eastern populations, which feel there is no hope for the better in the near future.

Finally, we cannot overlook the main Western anxiety about the integration of Central and Eastern European countries, which is not so much of economic nature as it is immigration – related. As we have already shown, the end of the Cold War resuscitated the Western congenital fear of the invasion of the periphery nations in search of refuge from economic crisis. Therefore, in flagrant contradiction with the concept of free movement promoted by the Schengen Convention, the accession countries on the Eastern border of the continent are turned into a buffer zone, being forced to implement drastic anti – immigration measures meant to limit the influx of asylum seekers and cross – border trade. In this context, the EU considered that Central and Eastern European countries, due to their corrupt administration and justice systems, are incapable to deal with these issues without its assistance. This led to

further limitation of these countries' institutional autonomy, as long term – members, such as France, Germany and Great Britain provided modern technology and police officers to train and supervise local forces. In this subtle way, the 'iron curtain' was replaced by the 'hard border', whose basic form of manifestation was the restriction of westward labor movement for a period of up to seven years after admission, depending on the work force needs of long – term members (cf. Barrell, 2004, pp.74-75). In the 1990's these restrictions turned the westward migration of South – eastern Europeans into a time – consuming process that involved visa applications endorsed by letters of invitation from citizens of the destination countries. From here emerges the sense of frustration and humiliation pertaining to being considered 'second – hand citizens' (cf. Barrell) and denied basic human rights which were ostentatiously promoted on paper.

Corroborating the above, it is not far-fetched to conclude that, in spite of some positive aspects, such as the structural funds made available for regional development, equal opportunities and a gradual rise of productivity, (Kaminski, 2000, p.311), the power relations between the EU and the Central and Eastern European countries are characteristic of a colonization process. The control emanating from the center towards the margin, the protectionist measures to the detriment of the latter and the huge gap between formal statement and reality make the so – called integration a counterfeit process that excludes genuine understanding and acceptance of the other and obstructs any form of interaction from equal positions.

To conclude, the Western world will acquire genuine understanding and acceptance of the East only when it is ready to renounce the comfortable stereotype and condescension in favor of the willingness to learn from the latter's experience and maybe even reassess its own self – perception in relation with it. In this sense, E. Balibar urged Western Europe to "recognize in the Balkan situation not a pathological 'aftereffect' of communism, but rather an image and effect of its own history, one that it should put itself into question and transform itself" (Balibar, 2004, p. 6).

3. ROMANIA BETWEEN THE BALKAN AND THE EUROPEAN MYTH. CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL PREMISES

As we have already suggested, Romania's historic evolution is largely the result of its position at the interference of contradictory political trends, as well as of its own identity rupture between its Balkan heritage and its European aspirations.

As Adrian Marino observes, Romania's destiny is determined by a deeply rooted anti – European reflex, which dates as far back as the Roman conquest. Periodically reinforced by historic events, the fear of colonization shaped a specific national pattern of thought and behavior that involves the following:

The idealization of our Thracian – Dacian origins by going as far as to misquote or partly quote historical sources. For instance, before 1989, history textbooks used to inflate national pride by quoting from Herodotus only the passage where the Dacians were praised and conveniently leaving out the less favorable remarks.

The exacerbation of nationalism and of the local spirit that exalts the village as the unique source of spiritual values and promotes the rural origins of our

culture, is not correct. This perspective reached its climax during the 19th century, when urban culture was considered anti – Romanian. Paradoxically, the myth of the Romanian village as the center of our national identity was revived in the aftermath of the destructive collectivization process in the communist period, due to the people's nostalgic yearning for better times.

In the interwar period, nationalist ideology is consolidated under such extreme forms as chauvinism, anti-Semitism and racism, which culminate with fascist and totalitarian repression.

Beginning with the 80's of the 20th century, as Ceausescu's totalitarian regime felt more and more threatened, the communist doctrine exploited the sense of national pride in an abusive way, turning it into a slogan of political interests. The resulting doctrine, defined as national – communism or Ceausism, aggressively promoted the thesis of capitalist invasion and international plot against Romania. Unfortunately, the echoes of this isolationist policy persisted well after 1989 and had far – reaching consequences on Romania's position in Europe and in the world.

The exacerbation of Romania's Balkan heritage during the Cold War, doubled by the dissolution of the middle class, the only social category animated by European aspirations, created a cultural and ideological background that could not accommodate such progressive ideas as Europeanization or globalization. Actually, at the moment of the official integration in 2007, European forms crashed against the 'Iron Curtain' of our cultural background, made up of such Byzantine concepts as *bribery*, *connection* and *to get by*, being immediately rendered inefficient.

Under the circumstances, the opening of physical borders after 1989 was not enough for the Romania to become a genuinely European country. The events in 1989 found the Romanian society totally unprepared, lacking the elementary cultural, ideological and political structures capable of assimilating such concepts as democracy and civil rights and articulate them into a coherent discourse.

Moreover, it appears that the 50 years of communism failed to create the bond specific to collective suffering. On the contrary, we may say that 1989 left behind a disjointed, chaotic society, predominated by clan relations, and driven by personal interests According to A. Zub, the absence of "an ethics of solidarity meant to define a common civic project" (p. 87) is one of the fundamental reasons for our perpetual state of transition.

The context outlined above was further aggravated by the Romanians' shattered hopes for Western institutional assistance in rebuilding their society after communism. The support from the West was very prompt, but very often reduced to such condescending gestures as sending food and second hand clothes, distributed under the surveillance of foreign representatives. Unfortunately, this support was unable had no consequences on the genuine European integration, and actually strengthened the sense of separation. The immediate reaction to this attitude was Romania's attempt to create institutions inspired from Western models, often misunderstood or misused. Given the lack of the elementary cultural, social and political structures to support such models, the result was an apparent integration defined by empty forms, completely inefficient in the specific Romanian context. In this sense, after 1989, "we found ourselves in a world without landmarks and, […] to

this day, we haven't been able to create our own landmarks by reflecting on our own traumatic experiences" (Antohi, 2001, p. 86). A glance at Romania's present position in the EU stands proof that the situation has not changed much even now, 25 years later, and 5 years after its official 'integration' in the EU.

4. CONCLUSIONS. PREMISES OF SUSTAINABLE INTEGRATION

This study has identified a number of historical, political and cultural variables that define Romania's ambiguous status in the EU. The main reason for the country's endless state of transition between the East and the West is the absence of valid integration models, able to reconcile the two divergent cultures.

In order to be sustainable, integration should start from the premise that national identity, Europeanization, and globalization do not exclude one another. On the contrary, approached from a balanced perspective, the national and the European spirit should support and reinforce each other by reciprocal assimilation. Therefore, this section sets forth the **cultural and political premises** of sustainable integration, based on the assertion of national identity against the European and the global background.

Thus, the isolationist tendency can be overcome by the revival of the rural and urban middle class, whose social and cultural ambitions can become the motor of openness to diversity. As long as the 'European idea' is currently assimilated only by the minority of urban intellectuals, most of the population being still tributary to rural, insular patterns of thinking and behavior, integration remains a form without content. Therefore, a genuine openness towards European models is made possible only by the demystification of the 'myth of European invasion' from the perspective of national assertion.

As it follows from, the above sustainable integration is ultimately a matter of mentality shift form narrow nationalism to the open – minded assimilation of diversity. According to A. Marino, this shift is supported by the following:

- the Romanians should start perceiving themselves as citizens rather than individuals, which involves a change of their relation with the state and the civil society. Actually, this means a significant transition in compliance with the basic principles of democracy, which turn people from obeying victims into active beneficiaries of the state institutions.
- the critical selection in the adoption of European cultural models, which means that we should absorb just what is truly useful and compatible with our national background, excluding mechanical imitation, improvisation and servility.

What emerges most clearly from these two aspects is that sustainable integration in not a matter of transplanting foreign models in the national cultural space, but a matter of gradual assimilation and cultivation of diversity against our national background, and in harmony with our own experience and values (Marino, 2005, p. 34).

Having in view that the nation is not an abstract concept, but a community of individuals with real material and spiritual needs, sustainable integration is impossible

in the absence of efficient social change by stimulating such fields as public health, education and research.

This is because only an educated, healthy and economically comfortable population is capable of assimilating an authentic system of national and European values and of asserting its creativity and originality beyond geographic borders.

Ultimately, Romania will become a genuinely European country when it is ready to perceive its status as a bridge between the East and the West from a unifying rather than a separating perspective. This involves an equilibrium in the national conscience between exacerbated nationalism, and undiscriminating cosmopolitanism. In other words, we will be able to use our in – between position to our benefit by achieving a mature conscience that reconciles national and European identity, and ensures the fundamental shift of our status from clueless 'watchers' to efficient 'performers' within the European space.

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[2] The excerpts quoted from Romanian authors Sorin Antohi, Adrian Marino and Andrei Zub are presented in our translation from the original.