

## ETHNICITY, RELIGION, NATIONAL IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** The processes we designate as globalization tend to provoke resistance, which arises ever more often as an effort on the part of various ethno-cultural and religious traditions to preserve their own identity. In this context, ethnic and religious affiliations become centers of meaning in the striving towards a separate identity in the global debate regarding the quality of human development.

Achieving a national community and building new norms of coexistence under the conditions of ethno-religious variety are becoming a strategic goal of contemporary development. Contemporary civilization faces the need to respond to the critique and resistance of various forms of religious fundamentalism, and especially the critique formulated in the tradition of Islamic fundamentalism.

The problems related to national identity have been far more often described and discussed in the context of nationalist fears of difference than in terms of the effort to overcome the crisis of identity amidst the imposed similarities. Under Bulgarian conditions, ethnic and religious diversity continues to be perceived as an established fact that we must take into account, and not as a resource for nation building. Achieving a national identity should be the result of joint effort. The first and most difficult part of this effort is to recognize that this common meaning exists in a diversity of forms. The coming years will be marked by a search for new grounds of one's own identity, a search for the spaces that define parts of ourselves. The great challenge facing Bulgaria is to rediscover the values and meaning of the national community. Only thus will our genuine, full presence in Europe become a fact.

**Keywords:** religion, ethnicity, culture, identity, Islam, nationalism, values

The transformation processes in post-Soviet-type post-totalitarian societies have once again raised interest in the question of identity of social actors and their actual potential for development in the course of on-going changes. The need for a new identity, new dimensions and new measures of personal presence in society, has oriented the efforts

of “societies in transition” towards defining identities in terms of social parameters that differ from those used hitherto. Collective memory and the capacity for non-conflictive integration of the past and present within the framework of the individual biographical perspective has been put to the test.

The problem of identity became recognizable in Bulgarian public space in terms of the question as to the degree in which the different minorities have the right to take part in establishing the general rules. But the real basis of the identity crisis results is a deficit of cultural means for providing a new meaning for the majority. Thus, the problems related to national identity have been described and commented far more frequently in the context of nationalist fears of difference than in relation to the effort to overcome the identity crisis in the imposed similarities. Nationalism is a result of a national inferiority complex. The maniacal fixation of public attention on a nation’s own advantages always involves self-justification by reference to the “bad neighbour”, to external powers hostile towards us, by constant self-pity, which defines the field of our personal self-fulfillment. Nationalism perceives tolerance as weakness; and understanding of difference, as a lack of patriotism. The demonstrative, socially desirable tolerance that most social surveys register actually contains a complex set of limitations and repressed conflictual features. Within the meanings and symbolism of tolerance and toleration, there lies projected a substantial part of the significant transformations of the attitude to the other ethnic group, to the other religion, and to Otherness in general. The negative dynamics of development in the relationship between tolerance vs. toleration (toleration is defined to a much greater degree by reduced possibility of choice than by the culture of tolerance and respect for the difference of others) is characteristic of an unfocussed mass consciousness.

Attempts to substitute patriotism with nationalist slogans are invariably an indicator of deep crisis in the consciousness of national identity. The susceptibility to this type of phraseology usually indicates a significant difference in the way the universal values of human coexistence are perceived and interpreted. In the Bulgarian case, cultural diversity continues to be perceived as something given which we must comply with, and not as a resource for nation building.

Identity is a consciousness of continuity of the self, an awareness that the individual (or the group) is identical with him/herself across space and time, and awareness of the difference of the individual (group) from “others”, from those who are “different”. Identity is built upon several essential fundamentals, beyond which we cease to be different and distinguishable from others in public space. The identity crisis that marked the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century and continues even now has been accompanied by the painful sense of loss of individuality, of an impaired rhythm of existence, of a “breakdown” of the measure of culture, and ultimately, of a lack of a sufficiently clear connection, within our individual lives, between the past and the present. In our country, the socialization process that was meant to serve a different society, the totalitarian one, has not yet been replaced by a socialization process favourable to recognition of others, those who are different, as partners. It is typical for the generation that once lived in a lie that their public speech is always different from their private way of thinking and personal opinion. The real problem of the Bulgarian transition is that it was carried out by people with an initial moral deficit. At the political level, this is related to the quality of politics and political culture. A change of this quality for the better is possible only through an active construction of new socializing practices that might form individuals who act collectively and within the norms, and who work for the cause of real democracy, in which everyone, regardless of his/her social position, political views, ethnic origin, religion or name, will be equal before the law and will have chances for social realization and attaining a European living standard. In other words, these should be individuals who look upon national identity as a synthetic unity of all ethnic groups, religions and cultures living in Bulgaria and characterizing Bulgarian citizenship. *The national identity is a synthetic unity of the existing ethnic, cultural, religious variety, a unity in which there is full respect for historical facts relevant to the formation of a national identity.*

Achieving identity is a cultural process. It implies preserving certain values, which, regardless of the social environment, continue to define our behaviour and beliefs about the world. Values are a principle of human existence. They are a proto-principle. Human life is lived in a world of values; it is guided and made meaningful by values. The *devaluation* of values leads to a crisis in society, for which the only solution is a reassessment of values. And since values are a matter of choice – given that they are not subject to natural causality – the values that are imposed and imputed coercively do not materialize in goods, so that their devaluation is inevitable. The devalued values damage the immunity of the individual/group/society (Fotev 2009: 11-21). In general, values studies indicate a moral decline and deficit of social and national values in Bulgaria. Sociologists explain this negative trend by referring to the transition period, which has put whole generations of people socialized for one type of society, the socialist one, in new realities requiring a radical elimination of the conflictual areas of a now compromised type of socialization. The process of socialization is compromised both by the idea of a homogeneous Bulgarian nation,

combined with inability (or refusal) to understand the multi-ethnic and poly-religious characteristics of this nation, and by the refusal to achieve the kind of shared reinterpretation of the past that would be oriented to the present. The postponed, disregarded and repressed conflicts cannot provide a reliable basis for reintegration in a changing society – a society in which the social and national competence is formed without an active civic education network. Education comprises learning and moral education. Learning includes mastering the scholastic content, acquiring knowledge about certain facts in the surrounding world, while moral education comprises the assimilation of a certain system of values. When education, for instance, in history is pressed to perform consolidating functions, then systematic problems arise, because normally the school's mission is not to indoctrinate, not to induce and inculcate certain thoughts and feelings, but to build informed people possessing moral competence. The appeals for selecting and presenting scholastic content in a way that is sure to provoke “patriotic” emotions is nothing but a desire to rationalize such emotions, which amounts to ideologization. The past can be presented only in outline, because the details are not all known even by professional historians; yet even this vague outline could be presented truthfully, and not be distorted by heroization and victimization of the Bulgarian people, or by direct or implicit accusations towards other nations. Intervention in, a selective attitude towards, modification of, the scholastic content so as to make it more uniting inevitably leads to a distortion of history, turning it into a half-truth, if not a blatant lie. A history in which the Bulgarian cause is always just, and the cause of others, never; in which Bulgarians are always valiant and heroic, while others are treacherous and underhanded; a history consisting only of brilliant victories and undeserved sufferings, and which ascribes tolerance to the Bulgarians, and intolerance to others, is not an authentic history. A history that is not truthful is not history; it is myth, propaganda, manipulation (Kadrev 2014).

Over the past years, studies on various aspects of the ethnic-cultural situation in Bulgaria, and on the relations between religious communities in the country, have tried to identify trends of growing closeness between ethnic groups and the surmounting of negative stereotypes formed as a result of the model of an ethnically homogeneous Bulgarian nation – the model imposed in the time of the totalitarian regime. Central to these efforts was to define the scope and intensity of social distances, the intensity of negative stereotypes and the effectiveness of the integration process. The results obtained by these studies provided reasons to believe there is growing closeness of the standpoints on national development among different ethnic-religious groups, and that a culture of tolerance is being established as the principles of liberal democracy are being asserted in

Bulgaria. But events in recent years, and especially the new wave of nationalism which is now structuring a significant part of the spheres of politics and everyday life, make it necessary to reassess not only the all-too-optimistic expectations but also the sustainability (respectively, the validity) of the attitudes registered in the past towards ethnic, cultural, and religious difference. The rate of declarative tolerance is much greater than it seemed in past years; or at least, our desire to discern sustainable processes of social integration regarding cultural difference have dulled our critical sense regarding some of the obtained results. The formal recognition of the right to a different opinion does not yet mean that opinion will be accepted on an equal footing or at least as equally significant and valuable for building a shared idea of reality. Respect for difference must grow into willingness to uphold a personal stance within an expanding space of mutually accepted dialogue, considered necessary. Only then can the existence of different ethnic, cultural and religious communities become a guarantee of the viability and integrity of the national community itself. Building a model of integration based on authentic dialogue is yet to be achieved. There is no reason to assume a qualitative change has come about in the level of knowledge about the ethnic and religious beliefs of the Other. Over a comparatively long period of time, spatial proximity has retained its importance in the everyday existence of cultural diversity. The boundaries of authentic dialogue and tolerance remain strongly dependent on the immediate joint social experience of members of different ethnic-religious groups. Spatial proximity in everyday life reduces the open clash of different “world pictures” that define religious self-consciousness. Neighbourly coexistence, as a universal social network of daily practices, is capable of absorbing some of the tensions, but its impact is limited by the contradiction, present in mass consciousness, between a positive attitude to the individual neighbour of different religious confession and suspiciousness towards that religious community as a whole.

Identity tends to be increasingly less often linked to the nation, and the defining traits of national presence do not directly correspond to the personal strategies of people in their daily lives. The nation is not a stable entity but a dynamic process. Once achieved, the nation does not exist as an institution in time and space. Its value lies in the ability of people to accept their shared past and to live with it in present reality, to share the meaning they invest in certain values and to build their future in accordance with those values. It will be an increasingly rare thing for the nation to seek the grounds of its existence in the state. The significant link between the two lies in something else: the state is an instrument for establishing and reproducing a certain order that does not violate the cultural measure

of the national community but ensures its reproduction. Achieving national identity is a joint effort. The first and most difficult part of this effort is to assimilate the variety of forms in which a shared meaning exists. Culture is the creation, dissemination and interpretation of meaning. The sharing of a meaning invested in a certain ritual or monument transcends the limits of a formal attitude to a “cultural monument” and makes of it a shared, common heritage. By changing one’s understanding of the meaning of heritage and of the principles of human coexistence, it is possible to construct a new understanding of community that crosses the boundaries of separate ethnic groups or religions and accepts the traditions and meaning of different cultures as equal in value.

Research has distinctly confirmed the hypothesis that the attitude to ethnic, and especially religious, difference is largely mediated and defined by the issue of power. Concrete cases in the Bulgarian political environment demonstrate the strong connection and mutual dependence between the forms and intensity of ethnic and religious separateness and the available access to resources of power. That is why every attempt at taking a partisan approach to the problem, or using it for current political purposes, essentially intensifies the feeling of difference perceived as unequal status, and hence strengthens the internal cohesion within the community and stimulates the search for new grounds of public differentiation (Bosakov 2010).

In what sense is it possible to assert once again that religious faith is capable of reintegrating the daily representations of people regarding the extent of their own difference from others? Is it possible for the postmodern situation to create a new need for affiliation to the total identification field of religion? If so, how is the idea of religious difference constructed? To what degree is the attitude towards the Other’s religion articulated in terms of comparability vs. opposition? Survey results indicate that for the larger share of Muslims in our country, religion is an integral scale of value on which other values are positioned and acquire meaning. *Religion, as an integral value system, structures the attitude towards the other spheres of individual or public life.* The religious ethics of Islam affects to a definitive degree the attitudes to other values. At the same time, commitment to secular values remains relatively unstable. While we may say that Bulgarian society in general is rethinking its attitude towards religion, this is true to a much greater degree for Muslims. The set of mediating factors that most probably accelerate certain processes of consolidation of the religious community is linked to its partial social isolation, to the profile of professional, civic, and political activity of its members. The risks arising in this specific situation might be

related to the formation of negative attitudes towards ethnic, religious, and cultural difference and also to the increase of already existing social distances (Bosakov 2015).

The integration of modern Bulgarian society cannot be considered only in terms of coexistence or of attraction of smaller cultural communities to the dominant behaviour model of the majority. In countries like Bulgaria, where religions and ethnic groups have lived together for centuries, dialogue is, now more than ever, the only means of effective integration and consolidation of the national community. The view that integration amounts to unification or assimilation based on acculturation, on partial rejection of the cultural grounds of difference, is more than ever leading to the opposite results.

In certain cases, ethnic and national identity overlap to a great degree, but in today's global world, their overlap is continuously decreasing. This does not refer only to the fact that people are free to choose their citizenship. They increasingly more often choose their national affiliation as well, and if the latter is at odds with their ethnic identity, the latter is pushed to the margin due to its negative meaning for personal identity (negative, for the value orientation of the individual). Unlike ethnic identity, national identity is acquired not only through socialization deriving from the national institutions, but also as a personal choice, due to the importance of national identity for the individual (Bosakov 2019).

At the historical level, there are two European models of construction of the nation. The two paths of forming the nation differ in their orientation: the French model goes from political unity to cultural assimilation (downwards), while the German goes from cultural unity to political unification (upwards). These two paths are reflected in two corresponding definitions of nation. The first type of definition – the modernist one – is philosophically based on the universalist idea of the social contract between reasonable people who have equal “natural” rights. The stress here is on the subjective aspect, i.e., the will of the citizens to establish a political community in the framework of an already existing state. In the second type of definition, the categories stressed as “natural” are common origin, language, religion, culture, perceived as “objective” factors that unite people and legitimate the creation of a national state (Nedina 2011).

The fundamental component of the concept of nation that distinguishes it from the concept of the state is the former's spiritual-cultural foundation, i.e., whether the nation's culture has been formed before or after the appearance of the state. Culture is what mostly creates the rational and emotional ties uniting society, and is the spiritual foundation of social life, including the political sphere. The stereotypical contrasting of the civic-political (Western) model of nation vs. the ethno-cultural (Eastern) model has frequently been

criticized in comparative historical studies. According to the well-known expert on ethno-cultural problems Anthony Smith, every nationalism, even the extremely civic-based and political variety, upon closer scrutiny is seen to refer to ethnicity and language (Smith 1998). Although ethnic affiliation and national cultures are historical phenomena, the laws of their evolution are more complex than Ernest Renan's popular formulation, "The existence of the nation is a daily plebiscite", would suggest. The spiritual aspect of national life is manifest not only through the individuals who represent the nation at a given time but also through the whole legacy of the past, which exists as a relatively autonomous reality subject to reinterpretation, in some cases to oblivion, but which is invariably present and – in its non-material part – indestructible (Sivov 2003). Sivov's view is, in any case, debatable.

To conclude, Bulgarian national identity is incomplete; the Bulgarian finds him/herself somewhere between the ethnic and the national frame of reference, and continues to think of his/her nation in ethnic and cultural terms, not in civic-political; he/she thinks of it mostly as related to a shared past, rather than as a common project for the future and a "daily plebiscite".

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