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Balkan Identity in the Perspective of the Phenomenon of Migration – An Attempt at Analysis

Introduction

The migration crisis and the ways of dealing with it has been attracting the attention of public opinion and political leaders since 2015 and arousing social emotions. One of the main migration routes runs through the Balkans, hence the interest in this area in terms of threats that may be caused by illegal immigration. In the existing literature on the subject, much space is devoted to institutional solutions to the problem, however, there are no studies devoted strictly to the impact of migration on changes in the identity of the region. This analysis aims to examine the possible impact of migration on the identity of the Balkans. Research questions that serve this purpose are: What kind of identity characterises the Balkan region? What elements constitute this identity and how strong is their stability? The research methods used are primarily the comparative method and the macrosystem method.

The Balkan route and the clash of civilizations

The migration crisis that the European Union has been facing for several years prompts us to ask questions not only about the effectiveness of the current policy in this area, but also about issues that are more fundamental for the

future of Europe, and especially about the identity of the areas most affected by the problem of migration. Huntington's vision of the clash of civilizations, or Feliks Koneczny's theory of civilization, emphasise the features that differentiate civilizations and lead to conflicts. According to Koneczny, there is only one law of history – every civilization, while it is strong, tends to expand¹. The Arab Spring and its consequences justify asking questions not only about the socio-economic aspects of migration, but also about cultural challenges.

As it is commonly known, immigrants coming to the European Union mainly use two routes, i.e., the Mediterranean and the Balkan². Marek Podraza reminds that after 2014 thousands of illegal immigrants entered the Balkan route, which led “through Turkey, and then to the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, through Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary, or through the Turkish-Greek or Turkish-Bulgarian land border. and further into Europe”³. The theoretical solutions developed by the European Union were not tailored to such a large scale of the phenomenon, all the more the policy pursued by the Hungarian government should be emphasised. Actions on the 175 km of the Serbian-Hungarian border (one of the most besieged by migrants in the entire EU) and the tightening of legal provisions (2015) sparked an international discussion on how to effectively control the movement of people and led to a dispute between Hungary, Germany and Austria. “In the face of the increasing immigration wave, the Hungarian authorities have decided to demonstrate their determination to enforce EU regulations by putting themselves in the role of a defender of the Schengen area”⁴.

At the same time, the problem of migrants coming to the European continent has become deeply politicised and has been used in the narrative of various political environments, including nationalist ones, pointing to the threat posed by refugees to the identity of specific countries, regions or European identity. Although building the figure of the “enemy” is characteristic of persuasive political communication, an attempt was made to analyse the alleged threat in relation to the identity of the area through which the migration route runs, for example the Balkans.

¹ J. Zieliński, *Teoria cywilizacji według Feliksa Konecznego*, “Studia Koszalińsko-Kołobrzeskie”, 2019, No. 26/2019, p. 297.

² Biuletyn Migracyjny, *Balkański szlak*, <http://biuletynmigracyjny.uw.edu.pl/52-wrzesien-2015/balkanski-szlak> [accessed: December 11, 2021].

³ M. Podraza, *Nielegalna imigracja w Unii Europejskiej a szlak bałkański*, “Studia Prawnoustrojowe”, 2020, No. 48.

⁴ M. Gniazdowski, M. Jaroszewicz, *Węgierska odslona kryzysu migracyjnego*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2015-09-09/wegierska-odslona-kryzysu-migracyjnego> [accessed: December 12, 2021].

Identity and its types – the complexity of the problem

The considerations undertaken are theoretical and analytical, because their aim is to investigate what constitutes the Balkan identity, and then to verify the thesis about a possible threat to this identity. The research problem defined in this way required referring to the concept of multi-layer identity, determining the strength or dispersion of this identity, and, above all, specifying the elements that have built it. The present text is therefore an attempt to synthetically indicate those determinants that make up the identity of the contemporary Balkans, and on this basis to formulate a diagnosis of possible changes in this identity.

The very concept of identity is both very fundamental (present in research since the 1950s) and extremely complex and ambiguous in definition. The broad spectrum of sociological approaches does not run out of the emerging challenges related to identity, such as its politicisation or the existence of a multi-layer identity. It is hard to disagree with the remark by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper that today identity means “too much” or “too little” or “it means nothing at all” (because of its ambiguity)⁵. The situation gets more complicated when the identity goes beyond the individual dimension and relates to a large social group. The so-called group identity is most often a certain projection of the sum of the examined individual behaviours, because the social group does not have “its own perception”. With regard to the identity of ethnic groups, identity traits are usually expressed by opinion leaders (the elite) and extrapolated to the entire community.

In times of globalisation and social mobility, more and more is being said about “layers” of identity. It is a constructivist approach in which more important than constancy is the strength of the interaction both within the studied group and in its relations with the environment. The Balkan identity is a great example of the above thesis, because changes within it have taken place mainly due to the interaction with the environment. The greater the influence of the environment on a given ethnic group or community, the smaller the strength of the identity and its dispersion increases. The Balkans are a phenomenon in this respect, due to the extraordinary complexity (internal dispersion) of the region’s identity. The sociology of identity takes into account very different classifications (including Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens, Max Weber, Zygmunt Bauman and others). However, the types of identities that appear most often in studies include:

⁵ M. Wichłacz, *Tożsamość i terytorium w perspektywie transnacionalizmu i postnacionalizmu*, [in:] *Nowoczesne formy patriotyzmu i nacjonalizmu w kontekście przemian współczesnych systemów społeczno-politycznych*, eds. D. Drałuż, M. Wichłacz, Atla2, Wrocław 2013, pp. 121–150.

- individual identity (self-knowledge and awareness of “I”, self-identification),
- group identity (relating to an ethnic, national, religious group, etc.),
- social identity
- cultural identity
- national identity
- ethnic identity
- regional identity (a type of social and cultural identity relating to a territorially defined region).

Identity determinants – the Balkan case

The preliminary analysis of the above classification already shows that it has mainly ordering value in theoretical terms, and the term “regional identity” (in the understanding of the macro-region) is the closest to the accepted research issues. Due to the research field established, the determinants most frequently quoted in the sociological literature were adopted, i.e.:

- the territory inhabited,
- language,
- religions,
- tradition (cultural patterns, rituals).

With regard to the identity of the Balkans, the very first distinguishing feature, i.e. territorial separateness, is controversial. The very name of the area comes from the Turkish word *balkan* which is translated differently. Existing etymological hypotheses usually point to a peninsula or a specific mountain range. Apart from the name and its historical origin, controversy is aroused by the extent of the Balkans, i.e. the number of countries that are part of it. Researchers argue whether the Balkan states are those historically belonging to the region (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Macedonia, Greece and European Turkey) or only the republics of the former Yugoslavia. A significant part of specialists is inclined to say that the geographical borders do not coincide with the physical ones, and hence also include the whole of Romania in the Balkan countries. The complex history of the Balkan Peninsula, changes in the course of the borders, and above all the fact of the strong influence of three huge civilizations, i.e. Byzantine, West Roman and Ottoman, are responsible for its identity. The cultural diversity of the region is a distinctive feature of the Balkans, but on the other hand, a highly destructive factor, which is reflected in the number and scale of conflicts that affected the Balkans (the Balkan wars). It is worth recalling that the term “Balkanization” in social sciences means the fragmentation of large

geographical units and the emergence of new state entities with varying degrees of independence and survival. Originally, this concept was neutral (the formation of new states), but with time it became synonymous with the aforementioned nationalist fragmentation, and – in a broader sense – the meddling of powers in the politics of small states in order to maintain their influence. After World War II, Balkanization became synonymous with decolonization and was used as a term to describe changes also outside Europe (e.g. in Africa).

The term “pejorativeness” / “pejorative” refers not only to the processes of Balkanization, but also to terms such as “the Balkan pot”, “Balkan powder keg” or calling this area “Turkish Europe” or “Wild Europe”. Magdalena Koch writes about the “Imagined Balkans”⁶ and their stereotypical vision created in the West – “In the West, the Balkans have become a metaphor of conflicting multiculturalism, a region of age-old and constantly renewing hatred, an epicentre of boiling, a region of destabilisation, threat, lack of civilization and political fragmentation that generates cyclical disputes. The stereotypes and the whole Balkan imaginary imposed on common thinking functioned on the basis of figurative and metaphorical language. In addition, most of it is not of Balkan origin and bears the hallmarks of mental and conceptual colonisation”⁷.

Another element that builds regional identity, i.e. language, is a determinant as problematic as the geographical conditions described above. Researchers agree that, apart from the languages spoken in the past on the Balkan Peninsula (Palaeobalkan), the Balkan language group (Balkan League) includes three languages that exhibit common features, i.e. Albanian, Bulgarian and Romanian. Additionally, despite the existence of certain different features, Modern Greek is included in this group, as well as some dialects of the Serbian language. Linguists are highly controversial about the classification of Macedonian as Balkan, while Turkish is not included in the league of Balkan languages, but due to the strength of its influence, it is sometimes called “the language of the Balkans”.

The analysis so far shows that geographical conditions translate into difficulties in linguistic typologies, and another distinguishing feature of identity, i.e. religion, intensifies it even more differently. Some researchers see religion as the main factor of conflicts in this region, which can be agreed, given the phenomenon of politicisation of religion⁸. The aforementioned influences of

⁶ Reference to the ground-breaking work by M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, New York 1997.

⁷ M. Koch, „My” i „Oni”, „Swój” i „Obcy”. *Balkany XX wieku z perspektywy kolonialnej i postkolonialnej*, “Porównania”, 2009, No. VI/2009, p. 78.

⁸ See: *Politization of religion, the power of symbolism: the case of former Yugoslavia and its successor states*, eds. G. Ognjenovi, J. Jozeli, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014.

the three great civilizations correspond to the three dominant religions in the Balkans: Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam. This division corresponds in practice to national divisions, but in the variant of religious fundamentalism it is also the cause of Christianity-Islam disputes. As noted by Magdalena Ickiewicz-Sawicka, the greatest religious diversity is recorded in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Islam (40% of believers), Christian Orthodox (31%) and Catholics (15%). 90% of Bosnians are followers of Islam, and the majority of them are Hanafian Sunnis⁹. The same researcher recalls the extraordinary religious syncretism that distinguished the Balkans in the period before the birth of the modern idea of the nation-state, and thus the expression of nationalisms, the apotheosis of fear and anxiety towards their current neighbours. It can therefore be argued that religion in the Balkan Peninsula in the past was an important bond-forming factor, and the coexistence of great religions (Christianity and Islam) and denominations (Catholicism and Orthodoxy) had a real dimension.

The fourth of the adopted determinants of identity is tradition as understood in the broad sense, *lensu largo*. Referring to the Latin root words (*traditio* – giving, devotion), it means both habits, social norms, behaviours and attitudes passed on between generations. The above approach is consistent with the already classic model proposed by Jerzy Szacki, according to which tradition can have a functional (message), objective (heritage) and subjective dimension (the attitude of a given social group towards tradition – affirmative or negative)¹⁰. At this point, it is also worth referring to the concept of Eric Hobsbawm, who emphasises the ritual and symbolic nature of tradition, and from this we can draw an observation about the possible use of tradition for pragmatic purposes¹¹. Tradition, properly exposed, cultivated and supported by centres of power, can strengthen and legitimise the activities of political forces, as well as build a narrative expected by the rulers. In the case of the Balkans, it is not possible to speak of one tradition *per se*, because – as has already been emphasised many times – there is a mosaic of cultures, languages and religions there. The so-called the Yugoslav idea which, according to Zuzanna Sielska, is one of the main determinants of Balkan identity. “After World War II, a unique political entity was created on the territory of the Balkan Peninsula, which was a reflection

⁹ M. Ickiewicz-Sawicka, *Religie na Bałkanach ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem islamu – szkic historyczny*, Nurt SVD, 2014, No. 48/2 (136), pp. 7–19.

¹⁰ J. Szacki, *Tradycja. Przegląd problematyki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2011.

¹¹ *The invention of tradition*, eds. E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014.

of the nineteenth-century idea of Pan-Slavism”¹². Another author recalls that “Yugoslavia was said to be a state with seven borders, six republics, five nations, four languages, three religions, two alphabets and one leader”¹³. The so-called Yugoslavism has translated into a traditional identity trait, i.e. the region’s conflicting nature. After the death of Josip Broz Tito (1980), processes began that eventually led to the disintegration of the federal state and the reconstruction of the identity of the new states.

Balkans – Multiple Identity

The described identities are sometimes referred to in the literature as multi-layered, multiple or hybrid. Balkan researchers also draw attention to the fact that living in such a diverse region leads to self-identification with an identity reduced to the local framework (e.g. Dalmatian) or – on the contrary – to going beyond the level of the region and referring directly to the European identity. The Balkan tradition is difficult to recognize and distinguish because it is covered by many layers of ethnic, linguistic and religious differences. Only at the level of folk culture is it possible to identify elements common to the entire Balkans and rooted in the local mentality. These elements, however, are not fully explored, and if at the ethnographic level, which, in turn, was not translated into a broader socio-political reflection.

Conclusion

Creating a narrative towards regional (macro-regional) identity is not confirmed in the case of the Balkan Peninsula, mainly due to its ethnic and cultural diversity. Over the years, the inhabitants of the Balkans have experienced the effects of “colonial” thinking about this part of Europe from the perspective of Western democracies, and now we can observe not so much changes in identity self-identification, but the process of changing the perception of the Balkans and their identity from the perspective of Western Europe. Jens Woelk, referring to the transformation of the former Yugoslavia states, that the diverse ethnic, linguistic, religious and historical heritage requires the implementation of various legal instruments in these countries that will guarantee the development of social and cultural pluralism, and the greatest challenge is the “correction” of

¹² Z. Sielska, *Albanian Minority questions in Macedonia: Selected Issues*, “Political Preferences”, 2018, No. 19, pp. 77–90.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

liberal democracy, which will respect this complexity¹⁴. The influence of Western politics on the shaping of the Balkan identity (including the political one) was also aptly described by Katerina Limenopoulou, noting: In fact, western politics have always been present in the Balkans, contributing to the creation of the circumstances for ethnic tension¹⁵.

Since the accession of several Balkan states to the European Union (and the aspirations of a few others), the “wild Europe” narrative is slowly changing, and the real problem of the Balkan route as a transmission belt for refugees from Africa has been directing attention to the south of Europe in order to find constructive solutions free of prejudices. The peripheral nature of the Balkans and the lack of a homogeneous identity can be read as conditions conducive to a strategic migration policy. It is obvious that the phenomenon of migration cannot be completely eliminated, but it can be limited, and above all, it is possible to ensure the effectiveness of international law regulations in this area. In the case of the Balkans, the problem is not the identity threatened, but the fact that the migration crisis is benefiting from national forces not from countries threatened by hostilities. As noted by Marek Podraza, already quoted, “it is difficult to compare Syria to Kosovo, a country located in Europe; it is the citizens of this country who, to some extent, ‘joined’ illegal immigrants and set off along the Balkan route to the European Union”¹⁶. The direct relationship between immigration and terrorism, the rise in unemployment and crime, and the threat to European identity, suggested by some political leaders, cannot be confirmed by the example of the Balkan states. For most refugees, they constitute only a transit area, and therefore there is no real fear of a long-lasting collision of civilization and displacement or marginalisation of local identity.

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¹⁴ J. Woelk, *Identity-Diversity and the Territorial Dimension in the Western Balkans*, “Dans L’Europe en Formation”, 2012, No. 1, pp. 189–204.

¹⁵ K. Limenopoulou, *The politics of ethnic identity in the Balkans in a post-communist power vacuum*, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/26507/PN04.04.pdf>, p. 17 [accessed: December 10, 2021].

¹⁶ M. Podraza, *Nielegalna imigracja w Unii Europejskiej a szlak bałkański*, “Studia Prawno-ustrojowe”, 2020, No. 48, p 175.

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Summary: The identity of the Balkans is a phenomenon difficult to diagnose due to its hybrid nature conditioned by many factors (history, tradition, language, religion, geographical location). In the context of migration movements and their intensification after 2015, the so-called the Balkan route has become an area of interest for both scientists and political actors seeking to increase the effectiveness of the migration policy. In the narrative of some political actors (especially neonational ones), an argument appeared about the civilization threat that migration movements pose to destination and transit countries. Therefore, an attempt was made to analyse this threat, starting with determining the features of the Balkan identity, and above all its strength or dispersion. The obtained answers to the research questions make it possible to formulate a thesis about a slight degree of changes that may occur in the identity of the region under the influence of migration. High cultural diversity minimizes the influence of the environment on the multi-layer identity.

Keywords: Balkans, identity, migration, dangers

Tożsamość bałkańska w perspektywie zjawiska migracji – próba analizy

Streszczenie: Tożsamość Bałkanów jest zjawiskiem trudnym do zdiagnozowania ze względu na swój hybrydyczny charakter uwarunkowany wieloma czynnikami (historia, tradycja,

język, religia, położenie geograficzne). W kontekście ruchów migracyjnych i ich nasilenia po 2015 roku tzw. szlak bałkański stał się obszarem zainteresowania zarówno naukowców jak i aktorów politycznych dążących do zwiększenia efektywności polityki migracyjnej. W narracji niektórych podmiotów politycznych (zwłaszcza neonacjonalistycznych) pojawił się argument o cywilizacyjnym zagrożeniu, które ruchy migracyjne stwarzają dla krajów docelowych i tranzytowych. Dlatego podjęto próbę analizy tego zagrożenia, zaczynając od określenia cech tożsamości bałkańskiej, a przede wszystkim jej siły lub rozproszenia. Uzyskane odpowiedzi na pytania badawcze pozwalają na sformułowanie tezy o niewielkim stopniu zmian, które mogą zachodzić w tożsamości regionu pod wpływem migracji. Duża różnorodność kulturowa minimalizuje wpływ środowiska na wielowarstwową tożsamość.

Słowa kluczowe: Bałkany, tożsamość, migracje, zagrożenia