

CULTURAL METAMORPHOSIS OF THE EXPRESSIONS OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

Oana-Antonia ILIE

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
antonia_ilie@yahoo.com

Abstract: *In the recent decades, we have witnessed a change of paradigm, from the national to the European paradigm, one that is not centered on the national culture but on the values of the united Europe. The symbols, values and traditions of EU increase its visibility and contribute to a unifying European identity. However, this identity is not a single entity but a composite of multiple, integrated elements, that are subject to continuous change. For citizens from different countries to assimilate and identify with the European creed, continuous transformations and adjustments are taking place, process in which some elements are enhanced, while others suffer transformations. The third millennium was often described by experts as the era of intercultural communication as intercultural dialogue is the territory in which cultural identity is constantly redefined and negotiated. Now that mass media has pushed further the frontiers of knowledge and that our world has become, as predicted by Marshall McLuhan, a “global village”, the issue that we are confronted with in times of crises is whether the world is really a true village, connected by such principles as solidarity, peace, harmony, love, or rather a jungle where only the fittest and strongest cultures will survive?*

Keywords: identity, cultural identity, cultural symbols, European identity, solidarity

1. Introduction

The issue of national cultural identity has become an increasingly important topic in the recent decades, especially in the European context, due to the need to legitimize the European cultural identity as a common unifying principle of all European peoples and cultural heritages.

At the same time, there is a growing concern in the world about the long term consequences of standardization and the uniformity brought forth by globalization. The unprecedented migration of people, transfer of goods, and information flows have made lifestyle, cultural tastes and interests be shared on a global scale. Thus, the regional identity, the small cultures with their unique languages and cultural traditions, in general, seem threatened. The

new technologies speed up the spread of symbols, fashions and customs that make the world a “global village”. English has become the new *lingua franca*, embraced as an international world-wide communication language. On the other hand, it is estimated that half of the more than 6800 languages currently known will disappear in the coming years and, together with them, many unique human values and knowledge.

“A language does not become a global language because of its intrinsic structural properties, or because of the size of its vocabulary, or because it has been of great literature in the past, or because it was once associated with a great culture or religion ... Language becomes an international language for one main reason: the political power of its people - especially their military

power. The explanation is the same throughout history" [1].

Globalization that is opposed to a current of localization and regionalization values the local identity and considers multilingualism and multiculturalism as a necessary human feeling of belonging to a specific cultural community.

In this context, questions like *Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we headed to?* are vital to raising awareness of our place in the world and are now more appropriate than ever in the struggle against the loss of cultural identity. But, at the same time the answers are eternally related to others. Unity is realized by reference to diversity, just as identity is realized by reference to alterity. Identity and unity are not given once and for all; they are subject to permanent change [2].

2.Cultural Identity. The Symbols of UE

The term *identity* is a generic term used in all social sciences to describe the conception and expression of a person's individuality determined by the person's affiliations to various groups (cultural, national, social identity, etc.). Identity is an abstract, complex, dynamic, and socially constructed concept.

Identity refers, in principle, to the reflective views of ourselves and to other perceptions of our self-images. Regardless of the definitions of the term, it is important to recognize that identity is dynamic and multi-faceted, it is not a single entity but a composite of multiple, integrated identities that operate in combination, based on the social context or situation [3].

The feeling of identity is at the origin of the feeling of unity, security, mental comfort, intimacy of a person, but also of the responsibility related to the need of preservation and protection of the material and spiritual structures of belonging that constitute the identity.

Cultural identity consists of ethnicity, culture, gender, age, beliefs, values, assumptions and the degree to which we

identify with our culture and perceive the world through the cultural lenses. Cultural identity is a social construction [4]. It confers conscience and specificity and unity to groups, it represents the connection between past, present and future and influences the way we think, feel and behave.

An individual owes his dignity, his vocation to be civilized, and the right to be different, to his culture. Thus, the right to cultural identity is an expression of the cultural diversity of the world, of the right to difference.

In the contemporary globalized world, the concept of cultural identity has achieved chameleonic features, being, more than ever, seen as contextual and dependent on temporal and environmental changes.

The political symbols of an EU (flag, emblem, motto, anthem, currency, international day) clearly serve to identify it, to establish the European identity by making it tangible and giving it specificity and uniqueness. Just as a person's identity is not fixed once and for all, the EU identity has followed a life course, thus registering a process of change influenced by the advancements of knowledge and the adaptation to this knowledge. It has thus, adopted the advancements characteristic to the modern era, generated other symbols or imported new ones, reflecting the route of its historical development.

The main symbols of the EU refer to its flag, anthem, motto and currency. The Union flag features a circle of 12 gold stars on a blue background, the anthem is extracted from Ludwig van Beethoven's 9th *Symphony*, the motto is *Unity in diversity* and the currency is the *euro*.

The flag was adopted in 1985 by all the block's leaders, as the official emblem of the European Community, later to become the European Union, and represents the ideals of unity, solidarity and harmony among the countries of Europe.

The European anthem both musically and through the connection with Friedrich von

Schiller's lyrical verse, symbolizes the aspiration towards the higher ideal of unity and non-violent twinning.

The motto of the European Union, *Unity in diversity* first came into use in 2000, initially as *United in diversity*. The motto refers to the spirit of tolerance and acceptance of diversity.

The *Europe Day* is held on 9 May every year, marking the anniversary of the historical Schuman Declaration, who first promoted the idea for a new form of political cooperation between European countries that will bring peace and well-being in Europe.

The *euro*, the official currency of EU, adopted by 19 of the 27 member countries, symbolizes the malleability-sustainability bivalence.

These symbols are now emblems of a shared European identity. The idea of unity in diversity is not anymore seen today as a construct or a puzzle, in which all nations are placed together, but as a unity where, because of accepting the differences, different cultures will merge into a multicultural unit and form a multicultural identity.

The identity of EU is constantly represented, negotiated, preserved and celebrated through communication. Thus, intercultural dialogue is essential in building it, as it supports individuals in acknowledging and accepting similarities and differences between cultures and in defining who they are. Intercultural exchange is the territory in which cultural identity is constantly redefined and negotiated by reinforcing a feeling of belonging to the community, a sense of solidarity between members and the internalization of the common features.

3. Europe: The Metamorphosis of a Mythological Representation

The interpretation of the mythological theme lying at the core of the European identity is one example of metamorphosis of a cultural sign. The theme of abduction

of Europe has acquired different meanings over time. The story says that Europe, the beautiful daughter of the king of Tyros was seduced by Zeus, metamorphosed into a white bull, on the beach of Sidon, giving birth to Minos, the first Cretan king. The theme of the abduction of Europe has acquired different connotations over time, aligning itself with the ideals of unity and diversity expressed by the EU. In certain representations Europe and the bull form a team, go in tandem, animated by common ideals. The first representation as such was one discovered in southern Italy, dating back 2000 years and exhibited in the Louvre Museum. Here, Zeus reveres the seductive Europe. From here, the image of the modern Europe that rides the bull was only one step. In the modern sculpture *Europe riding the bull*, Europe is no longer represented as an innocent victim but in a position of strength and domination.

In some interpretations this is envisaged as an inverted abduction. The rapture of Europe founds Europe, the community, but Europe takes on the attributes of the god, becoming mother of heroes and kings. At the same time, the beast has been tamed and controlled. The victim is no longer the victim anymore, as it is all part of the seduction game. Current images show Europe in a dominant position towards the bull, who is represented as a good friend or a servant of hope, or makes a constructive pair with the apparent aggressor [5]. The metamorphosis of this mythological representation can be seen as a reflection of the process of creation and transformation of the European identity.

4. Myths, Global Signs, Heroes, Institutions

The idea of culture, intelligence, and great works has for us a very ancient connection with the idea of Europe, as stated by Paul Valéry in 1999. Stephen Zweig considered Europe the supernatural realm of Realism, defined by non-materialistic values. The ideal of Europe, based on Goethe's tradition

is cosmopolitan and sophisticated, curious and creative, committed to the highest Christian and humanistic values[6].

Modern Europe is often associated with the freedom of expression, peaceful cohabitation, economic prosperity, scientific advancement, refinement, fine arts, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, social cohesion, respect for human rights, and openness towards the new.

Europe has been the first to import the new signs and inventions of the global order and promote the transnational way of life. Values like happiness, success, youth, beauty, status, luxury, together with the prescribed attitudes towards work, consumption, leisure time, as advertised by the global companies, are part of a consumerist ideal that sells a way of life together with the product. The subtle message behind it is *“neither you nor what you create worth very much but we will sell you a civilization”*[7].

People from Europe (and from all over the world) are more likely to adopt the transnational way of life and to associate the consumption of these goods to happiness than the locally made ones.

“A few monopolies dominate nowadays the global village: the Rupert-Murdoch group, the Disney Company, Bill Gates’ Microsoft, Hachette. They control real empires by spreading a hegemonic world culture”[8].

Along the centuries, in each of the countries that now form the United Europe there were pioneers that had fought for the European creed: clerics from the Middle Ages, business people, humanists, philosophers, intellectuals, they were the anonymous forces that first alimented the transnational exchanges, and the United Europe’s ideal. Victor Hugo’s call for the formation of Europe in 1848 was answered by visionary leaders such as Konrad Adenauer, Joseph Bech, Johan Willem Beyen, Winston Churchill, Alcide De Gasperi, Walter Hallstein, Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand, Sicco Mansholt, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Paul-Henri Spaak, who

have inspired and contributed to the creation of the European Union we live in today.

“Nothing can be achieved without people, nothing endures without institutions”, wrote the founder of the EU Jean Monnet in his *Memoires* [9]. The 3 main components of the institutional triangle involved in the EU legislation are:

- *the European Parliament*, which represents the EU’s citizens and is directly elected by them;

- *the Council of the European Union*, created in 1974, which represents the governments of the individual member countries. The Presidency of the Council is shared by the member states on a rotating basis.

- *the European Commission*, which represents the interests of the Union as a whole [9].

These institutions are subject to constant reforms and adjustments in order to respond to the imperatives of a continuously changing political environment.

5. European Identity as a Response to Crisis

“World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it”, stated French foreign minister Robert Schuman on 9 May 1950, in the *Declaration* that has later become the founding text of European integration [10]. Ever since, although Europe has overcome crisis such as the economic crisis, the refugee crisis, the Brexit, Schuman’s words have been proven to be the solution to European construction and preservation.

Today the united efforts must be pointed towards the reconstruction of Europe and of the whole world after a devastating epidemic. Euro pessimistic voices predict that due to the current crisis the eurozone and the European Union could collapse, as we confront with the most severe global crisis since World War II, and the European countries do not prove solidarity. The economic crisis, instead of stopping the

differences between countries, deepen them, since, in time of pandemic, each country tends to act on its own.

The more pressing the calls for solidarity come from poorer countries, the more radical the reaction of defense and isolation of the richer member states is. The frontiers have been closed, the distribution of goods interrupted, the fundamental human rights restricted, and the world economy has entered a phase of coma.

As a defense reaction, each country seems to fight instinctively and randomly against the invisible enemy, following its own interests. Some voices state that now, more than ever, we need a united Europe, while other voices plead for "less Europe"[11]. In these unstable times the members of the community block must pass the test and show they are capable of the *solidarity in act* as stated by Robert Schumann seven decades ago.

Solidarity may be indeed the most important aspect that must be proven today. Euro optimistic voices claim that solidarity between EU countries is being put into practice every day, in the COVID19 pandemic context.

"Today, I see no greater tribute to Schuman's words than the solidarity between EU countries. The Romanian and Norwegian doctors and nurses going to Bergamo to tend to the sick, Germany offering its intensive care capacities to patients from Italy, France, the Netherlands and the Czechia is delivering masks to Spain... We can only overcome major crises, conflicts and reforms together. That also applies to the recovery plan or our

European Union."(Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission)[12]

In what the future is concerned, the optimistic points of view assert that, eventually, we are heading towards a cleaner, greener, and stronger Europe that values digital technology, cooperation, interconnectedness and is more prepared to protect its citizens and respond to any potential crisis.

"We could rethink our way of life and go towards a greener and more sustainable future. We are not at the end, nor at the beginning of the end [...]. Comparing to other states we can notice that EU is a giant in humanitarian aid, and in being close to the people"[13].

Conclusion

As a conclusion, European integration is a continuous process of adjustment to the values, symbols and life standards promoted by the Union. National cultures constantly import and produce new elements in this synthesis, or as a respond to crisis, with the risk that in time, some of the former identity marks can disappear. Nowadays mass media is playing a major role in the sharing of information and unifying the world as a global village. The signs are ever changing, creating trends, fashions, and competing to attract potential customers' attention. The spread of transnational symbols however does not necessarily imply homogenization of people's values or preferences. Instead of homogenization, the new cultural signs could lead to an increased solidarity and a revival of the local cultural identities.

References

- [1] David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge, Publishing House, 1997, p.7.
- [2] Stefan Viorel and M. Ghenea, *Identitate europeana, diferență cultural și imaginar colectiv*, City, Publishing House, p. 17.
- [3] Fred Jandt, *An introduction to Intercultural communication*, City, Publishing House, p. 245.
- [4] M. Fong, Identity and Speech Community, in *Communicating Ethnic and Cultural identity* (edited by M. Fong and R. Chuang, Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), p.6.

- [5] Stefan Viorel and M. Ghenea, *Identitate europeana, diferență cultural și imaginar colectiv*, City, Publishing House, pp.17-25.
- [6] <https://qz.com/895131/european-culture-is-an-invented-tradition/>
- [7] <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/advertising-and-global-culture>
- [8] Marc Nouschi, *Mic atlas istoric al sec XX*, Iasi, Editura Polirom, 2002 p. 170.
- [9] https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/institutions-bodies_en
- [10] https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/europe-day/schuman-declaration_en
- [11] <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/03/21/more-europe-or-less>
- [12] <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2020-05/von-der-leyen-strong-europe-day-united-solidary-schuman-union.html>
- [13] <https://www.dw.com/ro/nicu-ștefănuță-europa-este-un-gigant-în-ajutorul-umanitar/a-53421835>