

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND MEDIA COVERAGE

КУЛТУРНА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ И МЕДИЙНО ОТРАЗЯВАНЕ

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Abstract. The various aspects of cultural heritage and their media coverage are analysed in a case study, based on material excerpted from 9 dailies and 3 weeklies covering the last five years and thematically classified in four groups. The present paper focuses on only one of these groups, namely the cases revealing the deficit in communication concerning the barbarous destruction of valuable archeological findings, due to the lack of adequate policy on the part of the corresponding institutions, particularly in the cases of obvious conflicts of interests (the investors' interests in particular) on the one hand, and on the other, the passivity of the media with regards to the discussion of these problems (for example, the "slippery" cases of private collections and museums, the difficulties the respective institutions have concerning the preservation of the old Black Sea settlements of Sozopol and Nesseber, included in the UNESCO list of places of important cultural heritage, the ancient Roman amphitheatre and the Yablanski house in Sofia, and many others.).

On this basis the thesis of media civilization anomie is developed. The major conclusion is that the remarkable historical heritage is not as yet properly used as a tool for enhancing the national and regional self-confidence, with a view to improving the image of the Balkans as an attractive tourist destination and its role in European civilization.

Key words: cultural heritage, institutional and media passivity, media civilization anomie, deficit of national self-consciousness.

Introduction

The issue of cultural identity and globalization and of communication between various civilizations can be discussed from a different and rather non-traditional – at first glance – point of view, namely, in the perspective of our cultural memory and the parameters of its media coverage. The opening of frontiers, the unprecedented mobility and the inevitable interpenetration of a great variety of cultures raise a number of questions related to the local, regional and national identity. There are many scholars as for example Roland Robertson, professor in Sociology and History of Religion at the University of Pittsburg, who are against the polarization of the global and the local: according to him "the universal and the particular" must be combined (Robertson, 2004:81). The idea of wholeness, of undividedness, contained in the construct of globality is understood by some of the critics of globalization as a systematic demolition of the foundations of a society. However, there is also the notion of "glocal" – a combination of the notions of "global" and "local", which interpenetrate one another and merge and intermix, says Robertson (2004:48).

The major hypothesis of the present study is that the preservation of the national identity can lead to the development of the respective society and of globalization in general to a higher, to a more dynamic level. The object of the empirical part of the study is to analyze the way in which the institutions and the media fatefully underestimate the gravity of the problem. There are often ostentatious statements about the necessity of a dialogue between the cultures and their self-specificity. But what we see in practice is an

alarming replacement of problems, all done in the name of “europeization” or “globalization”, leading to the annihilation of basic foundations and obliteration of important parameters of our cultural heritage, to the ruining of valuable historical monuments, all this often due to institutional disinterest – the result of a ‘Why should I care’ attitude, or to investors’ appetites or conflict of interests. There is also a tendency on the part of the media to reduce cultural identity to regional mentality (in our case – to Balkan mentality) .The institutions and the media significantly underestimate the role of cultural specificity as a guiding force in the process of European and global communication. What is simulated is Eurointegration, the actual result of which is loss of national identity, due most of all to the lack of national self-confidence and underestimation of the economic dimensions and of cultural identity (unlike some of our neighbouring countries which manage to make use of all this to their benefit). It was only 0.6 per cent - and from this year – only 0.5 per cent of the Gross National Product (GNP) that is allotted for the preservation, development and popularization of customs and traditions. This problem, however, is not on the agenda of either governmental institutions or the media, although there are many examples of cultural policies to be followed in this respect (there are countries in which every excavated stone is transformed into a tourist destination).

“It is only the nations that manage to preserve their national, popular and ethnical physiognomy, in spite of the toll of globalization, that have all the chances to survive as individual states in the globalized world”, is what popular psychologists suggest (Semov, 2004:62). Those that do not manage to do that, will simply dissolve, will dilute and disappear in the vast sea of similarities, they underline. Therefore, the problem of cultural identity, of the necessity to pay greater attention to the local on the part of the state and the media, is a particularly important national strategy, because a well-preserved cultural specificity can contribute to the formation of a more variegated global image. Viewed in such a perspective, the topic – it seems to me – has many common perspectives relevant to both the Balkans and the Baltic region, in spite of the distance of 1580 kilometers between them.

Methodology

The problem of cultural identity and eurointegration through the eyes of the media is analyzed on the basis of 2450 journalistic materials discussing the fate of a variety of cultural values and the attitude of the institutions and the public to the Bulgarian cultural heritage with regards to its identity, on the one hand, and as part of the dialogue between civilizations, on the other. The discussion is based on the “case studies” approach, and the content analysis makes use of twelve quantitative and qualitative indices that can be described as follows: the six quantitative indices are frequency of occurrence, location on the page, nature of headline, genre, author, illustrations. The qualitative parameters cover thematic accent, object of

criticism, media stylistics, media stereotypes, institutional stereotypes, and effect on the audiences. The empirical material is extracted from publications in 9 dailies and 3 weeklies for a five-year period (covering 2007-2011). The case studies are classified thematically and the following four major types of institutional and communicative deficits can be delineated:

The first one consists of shocking encroachments on archeological findings and territories as a result of investors' interests and media passivity. The second is connected with the media model of representation of the success of Bulgarian artists, musicians, scholars and scientists in international projects, as for example the achievement of Antony Christov (whose film studio won the Oscar for animation in 2009 for "Wall-E"), the Bulgarian expedition to the Antarctic region, or the participation of Bulgarian physicists in the building of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC). The third one refers to the public debate about the atrophy of the cultural traditions as a specific manifestation of the lack of dialogue between civilizations. While the fourth is related to the scanty funds allocated for the preservation of our cultural memory and the lack of adequate institutional and media policies in this sphere. I shall dwell in greater detail on the first aspect, since the volume of its coverage is the most impressive. In quantitative terms the other three have an almost symbolic presence in the Bulgarian press because they account for only about one third of the case studies and their discussion of the topic of community togetherness and of a Bulgarian identity is almost only hinted.

Institutional and media lack of responsibility concerning our cultural heritage

The empirical evidence related to this group of case studies consists of 1060 publications discussing the institutional inertness in the case of a number of absurd scandals related to: /a/ the new plan of the town of Sozopol, which in fact changes the ancient town; /b/ the danger for the town of Nesseber to lose its status of a UNESCO cultural monument; /c/ the ruining of the remains of the Roman amphitheatre and a number of other important buildings in the capital city of Sofia, the demolition of which deprives us of the right to proclaim the city centre as a complex archeological monument, and /d/ the fate of a number of other archeological sites and the ineffectiveness of our national policy concerning our cultural heritage. This segment comprises two thirds of the material under study, but the quantitative parameter does not compensate the uncritical, insipid comment of one or another scandal. The analysis of the material reveals the specificity of the media coverage of these events, namely, that the journalists are in the grip of a certain inertia that leads to the underestimation of these problems.

The topic about the architectural mutilation of historically authentic towns – such as the town of Sozopol, for example, has a very low incidence of coverage by the media, and that only under titles such as "A new plan re-tailors Sozopol". The problem about the illegal construction of buildings not only in

Sozopol but in other historically important settlements such as the old town of Nesseber (with about 90 illegally erected buildings), the Arbanassi hamlet, the town of Koprivshitzza and many other, is simply avoided. On top of all, there has been an attempt to represent the problem about the danger of deleting the old town of Nesseber from UNESCO's list of places of the world's cultural heritage as a local intrigue, a fact which reveals an attempt – on the part of both state institutions and media - to soothe their conscience. Texts about protected territories appear rather sporadically, usually at the beginning of the summer tourist season, otherwise their fate seems to be beyond the critical eyes of the journalists.

The same passive media attitude can be observed with regards to the cases of destruction of valuable archeological findings such as the Roman amphitheatre in Sofia, uncovered in 2005. The public discussion of this fact is reduced only to titles such as “Another hotel on top of a Sofia amphitheatre”. The problem deserves a more critical discussion because, to my knowledge, few are the capital cities in the world that can boast of ruins of a Roman amphitheatre in their very centre, ruins which can be transformed into a tourist attraction. There is also very little discussion of the architectural monstrosities committed in the last few years, a problem that is highly relevant to the issue of cultural heritage.

The next thematic accent in this group of case studies is related to the impotence of the municipal leading bodies to make it an obligation of all owners of old buildings recognized as architectural monuments, to keep them in good repair, in spite of the sanctions envisaged in the law (The Cultural Monuments Act). The media stylistics in these cases boils down to headlines such as “A Ghost House Gives the Creeps to Sofiotes”, “Fingov's house is on the demolition list”, etc. What is actually happening to old architectural monuments remains outside the scope of vision of both the institutions, the media and the public eye. Rather timid is also the public discussion of the problems related to the construction of business buildings, which deprives the historical centre of the city of Sofia of the chance to be proclaimed as a collective UNESCO cultural monument.

We can use the label of “archeological summer” to identify the fourth thematic line in this group of case studies. It is usually in the summer that digging is going on at more than 300 archeological sites: but you will never find that many materials in the media, irrespective of the fact that work is going on at a number of interesting places such as for example the Kozarnika Cave. And the results of the archeologists' findings are really impressive, for they change our views concerning the route traversed by the first human beings in Africa towards Europe, namely, that it went across the Balkans. At “The Younatzite” settlement mound there have been uncovered structures that can be considered as witnessing the process of the formation of city life in Europe. Unfortunately, however, very little is done for their popularization, as is also the case with the rich undersea heritage found on the bottom of the Black Sea. Neglected is also the fact that American scholars are now trying to explore the Black Sea in their search for Atlantida, following

the traces of the world deluge described in the Bible. The aim of the expedition is to find support to a hypothesis that the most ancient civilization on our lands provided the beginnings of the Sumer civilization, and later on – of the Egyptian civilization. Such a perspective in the discussion of the work of the archeologists does not seem to provoke the interest of the respective institutions or the media; nobody comments, for example on the fact that –due to the crisis – the initially planned means allotted for such work have been cut by a third.

The problem of the scanty financing of archeological work, of the fact that archeologists try to find funding for their projects from abroad (projects which are usually buried into oblivion after the digging is over) does not seem to enjoy the attention of the media. It is probably due to lack of experience in provoking a public discussion about, for example, the fact that Macedonia allots 32 million euros for the preservation of its cultural heritage, while the sum Bulgaria has provided is only 4 million leva (that is 2 million euros). Incidentally there appears the problem of what should be done to protect our cultural heritage from the encroachments of treasure-hunters. Now and then some of the media timidly raise the problem about the necessity, on the part of the relevant institutions, to examine the origin of the private collections of antique objects, icons and pictures. Journalists often play the role of passive observers to what is happening to the Bulgarian cultural heritage, plundered in many and unknown ways. There is lack of institutional and public intolerance to such phenomena.

The systematization of the material extracted from the case studies makes it possible to suggest that we are witnessing the phenomenon of INSTITUTIONAL AND MEDIA CIVILIZATIONAL APATHY. The extremely rich and varied cultural heritage from various historical periods does not seem to be appropriately valued as an important element of the formation of our national identity, for provoking an enhancement of our national and regional self-confidence and for promoting Bulgaria and the Balkans as the cradle of European civilization. What we are witnessing instead is a dull and unperceiving professional insensitivity. What strikes the analyst is the rather even and monotonous way of writing, which is difficult to explain when compared to the otherwise sharp aggressiveness found in the discussion of other problems.

What we deem as imperatively necessary is a more sensitive professional reflex and a deeper understanding of our socio-cultural identity; there is the need of new institutional and media models of public speaking about our cultural heritage. Such a conclusion seems to be applicable with regards to another aspect of cultural identity, namely, the problem of running the tourist business as part of the understanding of globalization. A significant institutional and media deficit can be also observed with regards to the popularization of interesting tourist targets and destinations, such as for example the museum of the rose, that of yoghurt, etc. Both state institutions and media seem to consider this topic as out of fashion; there are, for example, journalistic materials that contain hints about museums as institutes that

smell of mothballs, that is, of naphthalene; it is true that there have been organized a number of polls concerning visiting museums, but the major questions raised in them are of the sort “Why visiting museums is so boring and tedious?”, or “Why people don’t go to museums?”, that is, with a major question that may contribute to the formation of a negative attitude to such pastimes. The attacks of the journalists remain on the level of conclusions and inferences. There are no genuine professional attempts to formulate these issues as part of the problem of the sustenance and safeguarding of our national memory and specific culture within a global society.

All these facts reveal serious deformations in the institutional and media understanding of the notion of identity. This problem is intimately related to the next one, namely, that of the phenomenon of an ANEMIC NATIONAL SELF-CONFIDENCE.

The systematization of the empirical material makes it possible to draw the conclusion that there is the imposition of two media socio-models: the first can be described as a substitution of identity and the second, as the stereotype of castigation.

This leads us to another communicational problem, namely, to the interpretation of the conflicts and their media framing, that is, about what is it that the media write about and how. If we take Goffman’s thesis about the framing of the conflict repertoire, what strikes as a specific feature of the Bulgarian media now is the strong tendency towards an unprincipled selection, as a result of which in fact they create another, a second “reality”. We have been often witnesses of the way the media keep silence about important problems concerning our cultural heritage, for example, and a re-focussing on less significant events, which distorts the real picture. As a result what we see is a deformation of the functions of journalism, due to either economic censorship or to auto-censorship, as a result of professional deficits.

What sounds most alarming in the analysis of the materials is that the media do not seem to notice the following three extremely important aspects: the first is related to the crisis in the field of intellectuality and the results from it. The second problem which the media do not seem to understand correctly is that the preservation and development of cultural diversity makes the achievement of our national goals more easily attainable. And the third one refers to the fact that serious shortages of financial means need alternative financial mechanisms.

One can delineate a few more negative tendencies, for example, the passivity of the journalists and the campaign sort of style of working by fits and starts, and the frequent cases of serious substitutions and surrogate thinking concerning media resonance and the dynamics of cultural heritage as a kind of social thinking and as the most essential aspect of the functions of journalism. But these will be discussed in a more detailed version of the present paper.

Major conclusions

May we therefore suggest that there is the necessity to adopt a different media approach, an approach that will result in a more civilized social dialogue, a dialogue that may lead to a social change which will improve the ability of society to improve the management of our cultural heritage, to work out its cultural policies and media effect as part of our strategy to affiliate ourselves with the rest of the world. A positive social change in the direction discussed above can be attained if we take into account the following major conclusions to be drawn from the analysis of our material:

1. The problem of the interconnection between globalization and our national cultural specificity should be part of our daily programme, a constant concern of both the institutions and the media.
2. The solution of these problems should become a constant point on the agenda of the relevant institutions, the media and society as a whole; it should be in the centre of the public debate, where different points of view can be expressed, irrespective of the clashes that may emerge between irreconcilable, at first glance, views and tendencies.
3. All this requires an elaborate institutional and media policy concerning the preservation of our cultural specificity as an element in the formation of a national and regional self-consciousness with a view to the role it can play in the process of globalization.
4. The theoretical tradition, known as a culture-based approach to the explanation of social changes, lays stress on the important role that cultural factors play in social development. We can quote at least some of them here, for example Max Weber's theory about the importance of cultural tradition and its role in modernization and economic growth (Weber, 2004); the theories about the type of civilization to which a society belongs (Huntington, 2006); about the effect of political culture (Almond, Verba, 1998), the theories about the social capital and confidence, etc., etc. A comparison of the societies going through a transitional period during the last twenty years **PROVES THE VALIDITY** of these theories. The countries from the Eastern bloc started reforming their systems – which were more or less the same – or at least very similar in terms of their economic systems, political structure and ideological framework, but after two decades of democracy their achievements **are not the same**. A fact which may – to a certain extent – be explained with the mentality and the cultural identity of the people and the media coverage of these dimensions. The narrower they are, the more difficult is the European and global adaptation. Nations with a clearly proclaimed national identity and self-confidence can more easily globalize and become part of our common home – our planet Earth. Nations that have problems with their cultural identification and national self-consciousness will feel more isolated in the process of European and global integration.

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