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Serbian Identity and the Concept of Europeanness

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Summary: Serbia is considered as "an unfinished state" with a rather "undefined nation" and as such approaching the European Union. This raises the question to what extent these circumstances will influence the success of Serbia's EU-integration process, since nation identity and statehood are in this article seen as constitutional parts of the concept of Europeanness. Thus this paper focuses on Europeanness and the identity behind it. It further gives an overview of the Serbian identity, first by presenting its dichotomy and then by highlighting the main factors, which have primarily shaped the identity of Serbia. Finally this paper shows why a clearly defined national identity would facilitate Serbia's access to the EU.

Key words: Identity, Europeanness, Nation state, Serbian identity

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After October 2000 and the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime the new democratic Serbian government has proclaimed the access to the European Union as one of its highest priorities. The road to Brussels, however, has many tracks and a clear political commitment of the Serbian government and elites towards the EU, structural changes and reforms are among the main preconditions in order to find the fastest one. But, since the European Union is not just an institutional organization, but also a community of values, it remains a question whether historically established norms and values in Serbia can potentially be in conflict with direct and indirect expectations, demands and values of the EU, and consequently make Serbia take the longer path to the EU.

This paper raises the question whether the Serbian identity stands in opposition to the concept of *Europeanness*.[1] Considering the complexity of terms such as identity and Europeanness, in a first step the term of (European) identity and the concept of Europeanness will be briefly discusses. In a second step I will focus on the problems of the construction of a Serbian identity and the roots of these problems. Thereby it will be asked what historical circumstances, devel-

opments and actors have primarily shaped it. In the last part this paper will compare the Serbian identity with Europeanness.

1. European Identity or the Concept of Europeanness

One seems clear: there are not many non-ideological terms within the social sciences, which are as vague as identity. The high number of approaches, definitions and theories related to this term reflex its complexity and ambiguity.[2] Theories focusing on a macro-level understand identity as a conditio sine qua non for social order and stability in every kind of community, while on a micro-level identity is supposed to provide an answer to the question who or what we are.

Identity. A common identity is usually seen as one of the most important preconditions for the progress of one group of people, consequently of a society and a state. This kind of understanding is linked with the assumption that the economical, political and social-cultural diversity and complexity of modern societies and states can be overcome by referring to common values, norms and behavior patterns. In this regard identity is seen as a regulator of social order, which enables individuals to act individually despite their belonging to a collective. Identity in this sense provides of course only a theoretical, moreover an abstract frame, since it is no institution able to regulate. In practice, more is necessary to provide social order, above all the establishment of a (national) state, which is the needed institution and which represents an identification focal point that guarantees the "*identity of identity and difference*".[3] As such the national state promotes an objective "people's spirit" which connects practices and individuals on the base of their common "*national livery*".[4] A national state and identity hence determine each other: collective identity gets its full affirmation and confirmation, within a national state that is defined by territory, borders and a nation/society, and vice versa: without common values and norms, without a common identity of its nation and solidarity build upon it, the national state would not be more than a scaffold. Within this interaction identification with the national state and the values that are represented by it seems unavoidable for the individual.[5]

Nassehi sees both the nation and the national identity as two major inventions of Europe's modernity. The individual is forced to identify himself with the nation, or at least to build his identity upon the national identity, which is closely related to a homogeneous national state. In regard to this, European

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2 Some scientists are even convinced that the strong interest for identity is rather a consequence of a missing identity or the existence of a non-identity. Nassehi, A. (2003). p.2
3 Ibid., p.5
4 Ibid.
5 Lepsius, R. (2004). p.3.

thinking is seen as thinking in terms of national identity and the model of national states only.[6] This has resulted in a Europe consisting of national states, which consequently led to discrimination, expulsions, prosecutions of minorities, further to border-wars and forced assimilation, which are in South East Europe upon today not yet completely overcome.[7]

Identity is hence much more than a subjective or objective attitude. Moreover, an established national identity is – at least within the European discourse - a conditional factor of state and nation building and thus an indirect "soft" precondition for the EU-membership, as a community of predominant nation states.[8] Looking on national identity within this context, many countries in Eastern and Southern Europe expressed that "the road to Europe is the road of national liberation", which used to be one popular slogan in Estonia after 1989.[9] This of course means, that getting an identity compatible with the EU means establishing a typical national state which one major pillar is national identity.

The Concept of Europeanness. Given that the single national identities of the national states – members of the EU – are crucial for the existing or yet undergoing creation of Europeanness, we should have a look on specific characteristics and/or values of these states and societies.

Defining, selecting and appraising specific characteristics, which are European, depend of course on one's perspective. Some powerful parts of the British elites, for example, see "European values" with constraints, since for them the states on the other side of the Channel are "the undisciplined other".[10] At the same time English writers see the Balkans forever condemned to stay "Europe that yet has to become Europe" or to be "what Europe has once been"[11], expressing at the same time a part of their definition of "Europeanness". Rebecca West, on the other side, stated in her book *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, that while, German bombs were falling on London, she has discovered the truly and essential Europeanness of the Balkans.[12] In Serbia today being "European" mostly means being modern, and if something is „European", it has a high quality or it is "well done".[13] In Serbian radical conservative circles however, "European" has a pejorative connotation, meaning soft, decadent or hypocritical.[14]

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6 Ibid., p.7.

7 Ibid., p.3.

8 It is of course questionable to what extent national states hinder the process of European integration, in terms of establishing an European identity and European national state, but that is not subject of this paper.

9 Pollack, D. (2004). p.30.

10 Goldsworthy, V. (1998), p.11 (Serbian edition 2005).

11 Ibid., p. X.

12 cited after ibid., p. 16.

13 In his first public speech the first democratic Yugoslav president Vojislav Koštunica said: "Today it is clear, just like Serbia cannot without Europe, since it has always been its part, since this is the most European part of Europe (...) – in the same way Europe cannot without Serbia." Ibid., p. X.

14 Vukomanović, D. (1998), p.331.

These different understandings of "European" are, of course, nothing unusual, since they only mirror the different specific perspectives on what is seen as "European". However, it might be possible to derive universal values, upon which the EU has been built until today. These values are above all reflected in a self-consciousness of every national state within the EU, and in the simultaneous existence of a consciousness of common tradition and culture.[15] The importance of the national state and the identification of citizens with their national state, and further with a region they border with, and finally with Europe can be seen as crucial European values, from which we can derive the principles of self-determination, voluntariness, religious tolerance, openness, political pluralism and federalism, free trade and a awareness of a common identity based on shared values and cutting across different cultures.[16]

This consequently means that European values are not linked to a specific ethnic, linguistic, socio-cultural, institutional, historical or geographical mutuality, but to abstract values, which exist despite all these, mentioned determinations, which are different in every state. This also means that these European values are to some extent post national. The national state hence is seen as a precondition for a postnational acting and a commitment to Europe. In this regard Sylke Nissen sees two dimensions of being European: the affective dimension, which stands for an emotional solidarity with Europe, and an utilitarian dimension, which mirror a cost-benefit calculation of national states within the EU[17], and which eventually is supportive for the idea of Europe for purely national interests. Hence there is an awareness that if national states within the EU are based upon solidarity they will all become stronger and thus strengthen the EU and vice versa.

2. Serbian Identity

Identity seen on a macro-level, as it has been described in the previous passage, stands for an objective frame necessary for the establishment of a nation state. Hence the missing of this frame in Serbia is seen as one of the main reason why Serbia is considered as an unfinished state. In order to try to offer a possible explanation why Serbia has a yet not defined national identity, first an external and internal perception of the Serbian national identity will be given, followed by the roots of such perceptions.

"The Barbarous Balkans" – Foreign perceptions of Serbian Identity. National identities are often determined not only from inside, but also from

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15 Lepsius, R. (2004). p. 4.

16 Europäische Identität heute und morgen, Council of Europe documents, http://www.coe.int, http://www.coe.int/T/d/Com/Dossiers/Themen/Identitat/ These values have some established institutional frames such as the parliamentary democracy, separation of power, separation of church and state, market economy etc.

17 Nissen, S. (2004). p. 26.

outside. External observers construct images, which are based on their experiences and perceptions. Within the discourse theory this is also know as "mental mapping". In the case of Serbia, and in a wider sense of the Balkans, Marija Todorova has dealt with this phenomenon in her book "Imagining the Balkans".[18] She focused primarily on the image of the Balkans that has been created during the last decade of the 20th century within the Western world. In doing so Todorova deplored the notedly stereotypicalization of the Balkans and its reduction to elements of primordial societies. She found that these images represent an (un)intentional construction made by western decision-makers, which has very little in common with the self-perception of the people living on the Balkans. Nevertheless, this construct of a „Balkan identity" in the media and public space was dominant and had doubtlessly a certain influence on the self-perception of the people living on the Balkans.

Another author analyses foreign constructions of the Balkans based upon other sources. In her book "Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination"[19] Vesna Goldsworthy is dealing with perceptions of the Balkans, its culture and its inhabitants, based upon Anglo-American literature and newspapers from the 19th century. In doing so she shows that English literature in that time played a significant role in the creation of stereotypes related to the "wild Balkan". In regard to that Goldsworthy introduces the new theoretical term "Imperialism of Imagination", describing a cultural colonization of a region. The people of the Balkans, mainly the Serbs, are thereby pictured with a constructed image of a child, of whom it needs to be taken care of, but then often has to be given up. The fact that this image is even today still present Goldsworthy illustrates with a quote of an anonymous employee of the UN-mission in Kosovo who was cited by *The Guardian*: "That is like dressing a child: you pass him the economic pants, the education shirt, the democratic jacket etc. The child however wants to run away all the time and to play in its underwear. If we let it go, it will harm itself."[20] This picture of childishness of the people of the Balkans/Serbs and of their wild character is the one Goldsworthy has found in the English literature from the 19th century.[21] Thereby the West gets the role of an adult and responsible parent of children, who would – without the supervision of parents – only fight.

External observers hence, see Serbia and the Serbian identity as primordial and not self-determined. These external perceptions go to some extent along with the internal perceptions.

Internal Perceptions of Serbian Identity. Neutrally said, identity is build upon three essential interdependent elements: 1. birth, which creates ties to family, nation and to a concrete geographical space; 2. culture, which forms in-

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18 Todorova, M. (1997).
19 Goldsworthy, V. (1998).
20 Goldsworthy, V. (2005)
21 Goldsworthy, V. (1998), p. 191 (Serbian edition 2005).

dividuals and groups spiritually and emotionally; 3. acceptance of common values which help creating communities of values. Hence identity can be determined on the basis of the following categories: place of living (town or district of town, country, continent etc), religion, family, profession, nation, age-class, ideology etc.[22] By taking only these categories in order to find the main identification patterns (and hence the national identity) of the Serbian society, several studies have shown that people in Serbia identify themselves utmost with their own age group. The next common affiliation is with their place of living, and then to their nation. But based upon these results only, no national identity can be drawn, since for the most part national identity depends on values and ideologies.

Defining national identity upon values and ideology leads in Serbia to two relatively opposite understandings of national identity and the values and norms each of them is based upon:

1. Serbia as a western European country, respectively a country that belongs to the western culture. This identity is closely linked to liberal values, it has a strong urban identification and does not see the nation in the foreground, but the citizen.
2. Serbia as a traditional state that geographically belongs to Europe but does not necessarily share all values considered as European. This identity is also related to an orientation towards Russia. It sets collectivism before individual responsibility and underlines the orthodox/Slavic heritage. It further has a rather distance attitude towards the West and liberal values, and finds its primarily identification in the Serbian nation.

This strong dichotomy of identities, which as such in one or another way exist in every individual and society, is for Serbia insofar problematic, as it does not leave room for even a minimal comprehensive identity. Consequently, these two (national) identities exist in parallel and hinder the establishment and definition of a common Serbian national identity, which is needed in order to support a national state and its progress.[23] Hence there is not one consistent, but two discontiguous national identities in Serbia. As a consequence there are dichotomies throughout the whole society and its institutions.

3. The Historical Origins of the Dichotomy within the Serbian National Identity

Many historical circumstances have shaped today's dichotomy within the Serbian national identity. The development of the Serbian society was not only

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22 See also: Pollack, D. (2004). p.31.
23 In this regard one can at the most talk of a cleaved Serbian national identity.

over-directed for a long period, but was also marked by discontinuity. This passage will deal with some of the influences and try to interrelate them.

The Ottoman Heritage. Under the Ottoman rule from the 15th to the 19th century, Serbia disappeared as a state with own territories and own power stakeholders. With a non-existing state the survival of the Serbian nation was endangered as well. While the medieval Serbian state did have connections to Western Europe and the Western church, it has lost them during the period of the Ottoman rule, because at one side there was no Serbian state anymore, and on the other because the Ottoman power has set its own patterns of politics, economy and culture, which stood in opposition to the western patterns, and which hence, during the centuries of occupation, became dominant in Serbia. In order to resist the Turkish authority the nation in Serbia has developed a strong ethnical homogeneity with strong solidarity and a high degree of isolation. And, since there was no institutional possibility to act on a national level, the people in Serbia had to rely on their closest circle (family) which is one of the reasons why a national identity and consciousness could not be hold up over four centuries. Hence they built upon close ties within their families (distinctive clan structures), while partitioning themselves from all that is foreign. In correlation to this overproportional significance and approval of primary groups (family), there was a less significance, moreover a resisting attitude towards the state as such (state institutions, political organizations and the differentiation of people according to their profession).[24] As a result, individuals in Serbia have developed values, which are not in favor of a state and/or of state institutions; they lived in closed circles and accepted the pater familias as the highest authority.[25] Hence during that time the nation or national identity was very ambivalent and lacking in self-confidence.[26] The only national institution that to some extent had an influence at that time was the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The Serbian Orthodox Church. The impact of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the dichotomy within the Serbian national identity cannot be overseen. During the century long occupation by the Ottoman Empire the church has been the only pillar of a somehow national identity and hence it has had a significant influence as far as culture, customs and religious beliefs, which, according to Max Weber, play a certain role when it comes to the creation of national identity.[27] This influence was smaller during the 20th century and the communist regime, but has again strongly increased at the end of the last century.

In this regard it can be observed that the philosophy of the Serbian orthodox church does not support liberal values, it is further more in favor of collectivism than individualism, and believes that an organic unity („symphony")

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24 Golubović, Z. (1995). p.58-59.
25 Ibid.
26 Subotić, M. (2006). P. 220.
27 More about the impact of Orthodoxy on the Serbian identity and economic development: Ristić, I. (2006).

between state, church and nation is the most suitable solution for progress. This of course does not accord with liberal aspects and hence it splits the Serbian nation, since those who support the church and its ideology, can hardly support a Serbian national identity that is directed towards Western Europe values and the EU.

The Influence of Great Powers and the Period After 1945. The dichotomy in Serbia's national identity was partially shaped by international relations and the great powers as well. Although Serbia became independent in 1878, it was in the years before and after exposed to different influences, mainly to those of Russia and the Habsburg Empire, which have by turns placed different values. Their influence depended on the affiliation of the Serbian kings and ruling political elites, which have changed often, since the rulers have switched between East and West according to short-term interests, and due to the position of the young and undeveloped Serbian state, which had to seek for partners on both sides. That is an additional reason why until 1941 the Serbian identity was still marked by a dichotomy, which means that it was sometimes closer to the East, and sometimes to the West, but never clearly committed to one of it.

Under the communist regime Yugoslavia and Serbia were first primarily orientated towards the Soviet Union, building upon the common anti-fascist movement and communist ideology. After Tito's break with Stalin in 1948 Yugoslavia turned again more towards the West, but still was not clearly committed to Western values and a capitalistic system.[28] After 1945 and until the Berlin wall was torn down, Yugoslavia, which was often described as "the country sitting on the fence", tried to establish one national identity that would overcome the dichotomy which was characteristic for the Serbian identity. This attempt, however, has failed for many reasons and Yugoslavia and the communist regime fell apart in 1991, leaving or reestablishing the dichotomy within the Serbian national identity.

The war in the former Yugoslavia led to a search for new and old identities within all its nations. During the last decade of the 20th century Serbian political elites turned again to Russia and against the western countries, they introduced traditional values again ("retraditionalism"),[29] rejected the liberal system and stuck to the ideology of collectivism, which was common during communism. Finally in 2000, as mentioned above, the new Serbian government has declared its commitment to Western Europe again, but the period since then is too short in order to overcome the dichotomy.

Concluding it can be said that for the period of more than a century Serbia has apparently switched many times between two ideological system and values, and hence identities. Neither one struck roots, while the antagonism between these two identities did not decrease during the time. As a consequence

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28 In order to underline its distance to the western states Tito was one of the founders of the Non-Aligned movement.
29 Kuzmanović, B. (1998). p. 257-285.

Serbia today still has no national identity build upon consensus and hence its chances to define a nation and a national state decrease as well, confirming the thesis that Serbia still is a "unfinished state of an belated nation".[30]

4. Serbian Identity and the Concept of Europeanness – How Compatible Are They?

This paper posted the question whether Serbian national identity is an obstacle for Serbia's EU-accession process. It approached identity on a macro level and found that identity as such is a precondition for the state- and nation-building process, which was crucial for all European states within the current EU. It then briefly presented the Serbian identity on a micro level. In order to identify a national identity that is as close to reality as possible, we need objective perceptions of individuals from one state/nation, which are related to many variables, especially to values. In doing so for Serbia, it has been shown, that Serbia has a split identity. A strong dichotomy of the identity still disables Serbia to find an identificational common denominator through its nation in order to define one universal identity that would be carried and supported by the majority of the people. A closer look on the causes of this dichotomy showed that Serbia's history was marked by discontinuity and a changing influence of great powers from East and West, and that it consequently disabled Serbia in defining its own identity.

On the other side the short overview on the concept of Europeaness showed, that the unity of the EU is primarily based upon strong national states and self-consciousness nations, which are as such open and willing for mutual cooperation, partially because they have a solidarity for each other, and partially because a cooperation brings economic and other benefits for them. Nationalism as such is in this matter not at odds with Europeanness and European values, since it is not constricted to exclusive particular and local interest.[31]

This concluding means that Serbia will only then take the fastest track to EU if it overcomes the dichotomy within the Serbian nation and act as a unified state and nation open for cooperation. This also means that, once the national identity is defined and supported by a majority, the Serbian state will have a higher stability and hence provide a frame for the deeper determination of its identity. This identity of course has to be open for European values as well, which seems clear since joining the EU should not be possible without a clear commitment to Europe. On the other side, as long as Serbia has a divided national identity, and as long as it has no "identity of identity and difference" it will have difficulties in finding the shortest way to Brussels.

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30 Đinđić, Z. (1996). p. 174. Dimitrijević, N.(2004).
31 Pollack, D (2004). p.34.

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Srpski identitet i koncept evropejstva

Rezime: Srbija se smatra "nedovršenom državom zakasnele nacije" i kao takva je na putu kao Evropskoj Uniji. Rad postavlja pitanje do koje mere će ove okolnosti uticati na uspeh evropskih intergracijskih procesa Srbije, pošto se nacionalni identitet i državnost u ovom članku smatraju konstitucionalnim delovima evropskog koncepta. Članak se bavi "evropejstvom" i identitetom koji se nalazi iza toga pojma. Članak osim toga daje prikaz srpskog identiteta, prvo predstavljajući njegovu dihotomiju, a zatim ukazujući na glavne činioce, koji su sprečili nastanak konsenzusa u pogledu na identitet. Konačno, rad pokazuje zašto bi jasno definisan nacionalni identitet olakšao integraciju Srbije u EU.

Ključe reči: Identitet, Evropejstvo, Nacionalna država, Srpski identitet

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