

# Papeles del Este

*Transiciones  
poscomunistas*

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## **THE NEW SOUTHEASTERN EUROPEAN IDENTITIES AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE**

**Ana  
Dionescu\***

The end of the bipolar world, after the fall of communism and, shortly after, the breaking-up of Yugoslavia paved the way for the re-creation of the system of international relations. Most of the newly created Eastern European states expressed the wish to join the EU and NATO; alliances strongly affected by the end of the Cold War and trying to re-define themselves. As a result of that they were very careful to evaluate the risks and advantages of any further enlargement. On the other hand, the wars and their devastating effect on the economic, social and political life, as was the case for the former Yugoslav countries, or the problems faced after almost 50 years of communism, as in Romania and Bulgaria, for instance, make that process of enlargement very doubtful and sometimes hard to imagine for the next ten years. In that case, what will be the future of the region? That issue was at the agenda of the almost 50 participants, coming from different fields, from Western and Southeastern Europe, to the course "Redefining cultural identities. Southeastern Europe", held in Dubrovnik between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> May. The course was organized by the Inter-University Center for Post-Graduate Studies from Dubrovnik and the Institute for International Relations (IMO) from Zagreb and it was the continuation of the course on "Redefining Identities: the Multicultural Contexts of the Central European and Mediterranean Regions", held in Dubrovnik last year.

Most of the speeches outlined the need of regional cooperation, first of all at the level of the neighboring countries, as a way to improve the precarious economic situation, but also for a better cultural understanding. Another way to (re)build trust in the area, some of the participants stated, concerns the work of the non- governmental organizations from the region who can

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promote common projects in various fields related to common problems faced in the region, as is the case, for example, in producing history or literature textbooks in countries with a recent conflictual past.

But, in reality, the chances of cooperation, especially in the case of former Yugoslav states, are very low. Croatia, for example, said Nina Obuljen, representative of the IMO, focuses especially on the relations with the countries with "significant Croatian diaspora" and want to develop its relations with the EU countries, but "hesitates" to cooperate with Serbia, with which there are still a lot of unsolved problems (such as the "interpretation of some recent historical events" like the case of "stolen art heritage").

Slovenia, pointed out Marjutka Hafner, undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Culture, is interested in being part of the regional processes of cooperation in Central-Europe. In addition, that country, following some Austrian advice, considered that, the countries from the region could have closer ties on the basis of a kind of "Hanseatic League", because, stated Hafner, they have "almost the same size", the languages are "very similar" and the countries generally share the same problems.

Another problem, which was dealt with, was that of the Southeastern countries, in terms of (re)identification and concerning the bad image the region has in Western media. Dona Kolar-Panov, from the Skopje University, showed how, in the time of the Croatian-Serbian wars and after, the Western media returned to the 19<sup>th</sup> century stereotypes in describing the Balkans in terms of the Europe's "power-keg", a "backwarded area", where "conspiracy is normal and murdering one's neighbour is not anything special".

From the Western point of view, the "European identity" that many Countries from the region want to assume as soon as possible, is a process not achieved yet, it puts into question most of the old structures of the times of the Cold War building. Thierry Verhelst, from the Brussels based organization "Culture Network" considered that the EU must be not only a free trade area, but also a political, social and economic alternative for the Western, Eastern and Central-European countries. In his opinion, the market economy must be controlled and oriented by a "European political authority" who need also a "well informed civil society, who considered the European identity as a constitutive element of his identity". One of the forms of that identity is also the common language, English imposes itself more and more as a *lingua franca*, but it is not without symbolical tensions with the other European languages, as Sue Wright, from the Aston University in the United Kingdom explained. The tensions between global and local cultures can be manifested in terms of development of extreme-right movements, promoted especially by young people, confronted with a deeper loss of identity and a lower level of social integration. In the Hungarian case, presented by Laszlo Kurti, from Miskolc University, the members of such organizations plea for the preservation of national traditions and considering themselves also as sharing the Western culture in a society where the re-evaluation of the value system after the fall of communism is a process still taking place.

After five days of discussions, from different and sometimes, opposite, points of view and perspectives, concerning the future of the Southeastern Europe, what remains to be said? It is hard to forget the conflictual past but it is more difficult to live isolated. Trust can be re-built at the interpersonal level, more open to the dialogue and to face the differences than the official, governmental level. In that way, the abstract term of "mutual understanding" could get life and become a key to further developments.