

# DYNAMICS IN IDENTITY ISSUES: THE ROLE OF INTERPRETATIONS OF HISTORY

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## ***Abstract***

*Identity is considered a central category of the analysis regarding the difficulties of the transition, the specifics of the political instability and the provocations before the current development of Bulgaria. The question is whether it is too late for identity issues? False interpretations of the past substituted identity pillars. The paper discusses identity in the frame of political culture theory and reflection on three aspects of the experience of belonging in the formation of attitudes. They are the historical memory as a result of the socialisation product of history education; dimensions of identity such as emotional attachment to society and the given country; and modern speculations with the concept of national interest. Through them, the question of the meaning of identity is posed in view of the behavior and results for the environment and the sustainability of the European identity.*

Key words: identity, political culture theory

The theme of identity is an old one. Apart from its recent resurgence, classical authors in political theory have addressed it with their landmark publications. It has not actually stopped reminding of its importance by linking it to various categories in the analysis of the development of societies. It can be said that it is a plural concept and reflects different meanings. If we accept that identity is a strong motivator for behavior, then understanding the processes that lead to its various dimensions is important for delineating social trends based on the expected behavior of citizens.

The limitations of the analysis of this topic in the report are reduced to the meanings of the historical narrative for the formation of memory as one of the

key categories for identity. To the extent that citizens live and realise themselves within their states, the dimensions of identity issues, and in particular those of national identity, are of great importance. Whether or not the reference group to which a person relates has a positive dimension in the face of the larger community nation-state can lead to one behavior or another. If the answer to the question „who am I“ does not have a clear profile, then no other crisis can be solved (in the sense of Verba and Pye). Various anomalies can appear - overexposure, alienation, underestimation of the country's self-image and the vision of its role in the world.

The importance of the affective attitudes of citizens towards their country is particularly indicative in the concept of Simon Anholt, where it is one of the important factors measuring the rank of a given national brand (see Anholt, 2005). According to the way he defines branding, these are those elements which allow a product, company or service to have an identity and be recognised. Long before him and in a completely different subject of his research, Hobsbawm wrote: „the creation of traditions was enthusiastically practiced in numerous countries and for various purposes... It was both practiced officially and unofficially, the former - we may loosely call it ‘political’ - primarily in or by states or organised social and political movements, the latter - we may loosely call it ‘social’ mainly by social groups not formally organised as such, or those whose objects were not specifically or consciously political, such as clubs and fraternities, whether or not these also had political functions. The distinction is one of convenience rather than principle. It is designed to draw attention to two main forms of the creation of tradition in the nineteenth century, both of which reflect the profound and rapid social transformations of the period.“ (Hobsbawm, 1984:263)

Arguably, what Hobsbawm calls „fictional tradition“ describes one of those states of directed identity which, in the sense of everyday life, may have an innocent meaning (for example, the belief that the chorus of drunken men in the icy waters of the river in the morning of January 6 - Jordan's Day, in Kalofer, is a centuries-old tradition, although it dates back to the beginning of the 2000s), but in periods of deep social changes it can be subject to dangerous manipulation. Such, for example, are the perverse narratives of the past that produce distorted memory. The lack of education in the school curriculum about the recent past leaves room for a replacement of the narrative about it. Thus, many modern youths do not know and do not understand basic facts about the features of the era of the totalitarian society of socialism. Polishing the image of such an era in a spontaneous way by old nostalgics or experienced propagandists does not launch restoration policies. The effect of this identity manipulation is to erode the values of a united Europe and the very idea of a society with individual freedom. In Hobsbawm's own words, „The term ‘invented tradition’ is used in a broad, but not imprecise sense. It includes both ‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period - a matter of a few years perhaps - and establishing themselves with great rapidity. (Hobsbawm, 1984: 1)

A feature with a Bulgarian address, referring to issues of identity, are the exercises in public speech on the topic of „national interest“. Certain political forces present themselves as spokespeople for this interest. The content of this „national interest“ is recognized in three forms. 1) Politicians talk about the Bulgarian national interest in the spirit of anti-American rhetoric and anti-EU. 2) The Bulgarian national interest is launched anachronistically as territorial historical retribution. His arguments are in the belonging during certain historical periods of given territories as part of the Bulgarian state, as well as on the basis of historical roots of the ethnic origin of some part of the given population. 3) To the extent that they engage with the topic of national interest, politicians remind that it is in progress and sustainable development. However, these messages are plotless and therefore not well highlighted in the „national interest“ messages.

Research links the question of identity to that of individuality and social capital. It says that according to research data, the thinner the identity, the louder it is proclaimed. (Jens Eklinder-Frick, Lars Torsten Eriksson, and Lars Hallén, 2015:3). However, as far as the purposefully constructed identity as a basis for further political behavior and a prerequisite for choice is concerned, the question turns from domestic political to geopolitical. A complex and old society like that of the United Kingdom was tricked and manipulated into changing its status from an EU member state to an independent one with all the negatives that come with it. The activation of the Eurasian axis in supranational politics has its own interests and activity, which seeks niches for useful action based on impact on reference groups among different local audiences. In this context, questions of identity and the actively produced lines of formed identity in a situation of chronic political instability highlight possible threats to the meanings of European identity. The European identity is not an alternative that seeks to replace the national one, but in fact builds on it by enhancing the potential of the latter, while guaranteeing the synergy between the member states to the larger scale of this supranational union.

Playing with questions of identity, sought in a historical perspective, is a distinct feature of the years of transition, when a sustainable change from a totalitarian to a democratic political system is assumed. Let us recall that in the early years of the transition, when the participants had their own memories of the previous era, the warped narrative was not really possible. The memories of the time of socialism were not in the historical past, but in the past perfect tense. While then, however, the passion of the participants in the processes of change was directed towards institutional and normative change, the adherents of the party that began to lose ground to the communist ideology and its infrastructure and subjectivity structures of the secret services of the communist state security found their transformed forms of the messages, through which to command the imagination and attitudes of the public. It can be said that the infrastructure was preserved by getting rid of the already discredited ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The slogans of material equality and class equalisation were replaced by the until then pursued idea of respect for the national,

gradually pushed to provincial nationalism along the lines of the anti-Western rhetoric of Eastern Orthodox Christianity (in both cases favoring modern pro-Russian rhetoric).

It needs clarification that the main ideologeme of the socialist society, derived and legitimised by the statements in Marxism-Leninism was about the class essence of society as a source of misfortune and injustice due to the different position of individuals and groups in relation to the means of production and participation in the distribution of profit from the production process and trade. Justice in the categories of this ideology is derived from the launched thesis of society's movement towards material equality, which is achieved through violence by the proletariat as the subject of wage labor over the owners and their depersonalisation through their physical removal or taking away the result of their labor (in terms of Locke). According to the concept of Karl Marx, the highest democracy is the dictatorship of the proletariat. The definition seems to be an oxymoron, as it introduces the rule of the people on the basis of a declaration of will replacing it as a dictatorship. The failure of this economic and social model led to its natural collapse. The bankruptcy of the state itself and a severe prolonged crisis made this ideologeme practically irretrievable in its authentic sense. However, the subjects of this status quo and their supranational structure in the form of the network of communist state security services controlling large financial resources preserved their positions by reviving them in new ideologies in the field of identity. In this way, the ideology of proletarian internationalism, zealously supported by those in power during the time of socialism, was replaced by the folklorisation of Eastern Orthodox rituals and the deformation of history through heroisation and fragmentation. The reflection of these phenomena in the different types of identity seeks a manifestation on the orientation of the modern Bulgarian society towards the global collisions between the European value framework and the renewed provocations of Eurasian imperialism.

In the context of this analysis, let's focus on the results of a pilot sociological survey that we conducted in the early 1990s. The changes that had just taken place led to a great euphoria not only in the behavior of the people through the public manifestation of desires for changes in the rallies in the squares, but also in the immediately sought-after opportunity for free scientific research. As very young sociologists, we were excited and had no obstacles to deal with survey in its full sense. We had read, we knew modern methodologies and we wanted to try how they work in our environment based on their adaptation by our scientific teams. So, a team with colleagues Cv. Markov and M. Stefanova from the Research Laboratory of Political Life at Sofia University, we decided to conduct a pilot study of just such an adapted methodology. It dealt with the topic of adolescent political socialisation. This survey was the result of our own research curiosity.

On this basis, a specific tool was formed - a questionnaire for a direct group survey. We conducted the pilot study as a direct group survey with

students from Sofia University and Sofia Technical University. These survey cards were duly processed and the results obtained prompted us to call attention to them and the possibility of a comprehensive study. The reason for referring to this long-ago episode, although these were just results of a pilot study among the specific group of student youth, is the content of the results obtained. All the questions that were supposed to measure the sense of national identity had extremely low scores. Even those that measured emotional attachment to country based on friendship, kinship, and other emotional categories that imply an individual's attachment to one's environment – the reference community in all matters – occupation, life prospects, education, friendship, future, etc. – all questions had less than 10% positive identity with their country. Some of the questions showed even less than 5% positive attitudes towards the country in the respective categories. Our analysis of these data was that they are basis for the formulation of a hypothesis of a powerful wave of alienation that has the potential for large-scale emigration. It is also a sign of disinterest in ongoing processes.

We sought a public presentation. It is interesting to mention that in the then early period of change all communications were easy and direct. Thus, it became possible to contact the stars of the news show Team 2 – Asen Agov and Neri Terzieva – with one phone call through the BNT headquarters without any protections. Asen Agov answered and accepted us for a conversation. So, we were invited to report on the data and look for sponsors for a nationally representative study. In any case, sponsors were not found, but the data are indicative.

The reason we return to this episode is because of the significance of this data on questions of identity. They are indicative of the upcoming behavior of citizens in the political process – large-scale emigration. Events unfolded in this way. We believe that one of the main reasons is due to the alienation with which the Bulgarian citizens came out of socialism, transposed to an attitude towards their own country regardless of its changed political system and failed transition. The lack of interest of the members of a society is part of the characteristics of its transition to the desired changes. In fact, this phenomenon is highly adaptive and is an important constant in the characteristics of citizens in the post-social Bulgarian society. This is individual salvation and a sign of difficult-to-reverse segmentation and disintegration of Bulgarian society. The consolidation sought today according to a nationalistic benchmark does not represent an alternative, but is rather an expression of the same crisis, but manifested in a new way. Nationalism is also not integrative, but disintegrative and encapsulating a society. Such conditions are usually associated with subsequent difficulties in economic indicators and the transfer of the identity crisis into the economic and again into the political.

As Fukuyama says in his essay on identity, „Human societies cannot escape identity or identity politics... This moral idea tells people that they have an authentic inner self that is not recognised and suggests that the outer society may be false and oppressive. It focuses people's natural demand for recognition

of their dignity and provides a language for expressing the resentment that arises when such recognition is not forthcoming.“ (Fukuyama, 2019:22) Although the passion in his analysis is more towards overview of intellectual history and to be a kind of belated attention to the importance of the category for identity, which has not ceased to be a focus of analysis by many other thinkers, is nevertheless a large-scale attempt to highlight the heuristic value of the concept of identity in analysis of the political process.

Why am I going so far back with data from a pilot study at the dawn of transition. Obviously because of its relation to the topic of this article. I think it is eloquent and indicative of the potential of identity data. It corresponds to the importance of the sense of national identity in the processes of change and solving crisis issues in a given society. Ignoring this question from the perspective of the distance of time highlights the short-sightedness of underestimating the concrete states of identity in a given society. Something more. Misunderstanding, underestimating the attitudes of the public and treating it as a constant in the political process is part of the crises that developed further. They are the basis for apathy and subsequent processes of social disintegration. The catch-up of identity deficits (socio-political due to the regime of socialism, transposed as national alienation) occurs as a spontaneous or purposeful process of socialisation in the categories of national memory. One of the parameters building identity is the way in which these attitudes are formed based on memory.

Memory as a collective product is not a spontaneous process. If contemporaries' memory of past processes can be assumed to have a relative objectivity, then narrative-based memory is a completely different phenomenon. Insofar as the systemic institutional approach to this issue stems from the educational programs, the most important in this regard are the programs of literature and history, which treat values, attitudes and direct the attention of each succeeding generation to the past through a specific type of narrative. Every story in every country tells of heroic moments from its past. The question is whether this narrative is reduced to only this, or whether the effect of selective reading and selective narrative is obtained, and whether, above all, this narrative is not fragmentary, selective in such a way as to form a distorted view (intentionally or not) of the past, of causal - the investigative connections and the perception of the importance of a given country in the region, historically and at the given moment. On the other hand, the lack of a story about problematic periods and unfavorable decisions and events has the same result - it deforms the memory and hence the ideas and values formed.

It is possible that this narrative is self-reflexive in isolation from general processes and thus distorts memory in yet another way. As is well known, history rests on gradual development. The behavior of each country in each historical period is part of the general picture with contributions in art, science, in relations. But it is also reflected in the destruction - conflicts and all other elements of historical interactions. The notion of self without relation to others disrupts knowledge of general processes. Narrating through events in black

and white strokes like our victories are our positive memory and our losses are a source of hatred and prejudice towards others is the point I will focus on.

In 2005, a seminar was held at the Institute of History of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, entitled „Historians for History“. For the purposes of my participation, I conducted a small survey by asking, in a three-question blitz survey, freshman post-secondary students questions that went like this: What ten events shape feelings of national pride, shame, and anger. This was an open question with a requirement to rank them. The overall picture reflected, in my analysis, the outcome of how students learned history in their secondary education. The sense of national pride is strongly brought back, with most of the episodes being from the post-modern Bulgarian state. The sense of national anger is towards neighbors - wars, losing battles and loss of sovereignty. The sense of national shame was brought into modern times by the current news flow - the ills in politics, sports and the whole list of negative-nihilistic talk and narrative about modern processes. This is also subject to selective reading. Everything good is back in the past. Bad is in the present and evil is outside of us all around. This is not to say that everyone responded this way, but the dominant responses painted such a picture. This is not a representative survey and not indicative of the general population of learners. But it is indicative, a symptom of a problem that is subject to study and constant attention to its dimensions.

References to these two old studies have the same meaning for this text. They say that the lack of a systematic relation to the past leaves room for deliberate or simply ill-considered referencing of the past to new generations who construct a deformed image of themselves. The collective memory turns out to be manipulated and attitudes are built on its basis, on the basis of which various political actors can address the public in its capacity as voters.

If the first two processes were spontaneous and did not rest on a deliberate narrative, the third final aspect is precisely that. This is what I started with and this is what I will end with - this is the replacement of the ideology of proletarian internationalism, annoying with its imposition in the years of socialism, and replacement with what these structures prohibited at the time of the socialist system they served. The subject of such prohibitions were the knowledge of certain historical episodes and their suppression at the expense of socialist ideologues as the only characteristics of identity. The other object of prohibition by those in power under socialism is religion, declared the opium of the peoples. In turn, after the end of the social, namely, religion, and more precisely only Eastern Orthodoxy, was launched as the new all-encompassing ideology, according to which alignment is assumed. The meaning of identity is the reference made to Russian Orthodoxy, pan-Slavism as a counterpoint to Euro-Atlantism and the European value identity of Bulgarian society.

In 2011, the author Gaspare Nevola titled the very first point of the introduction to his book about the concept of identity and more precisely about the

flourishing politics of identity (The flourishing of identity politics today). (Nevola, 2011: 3) If we look back, we will recall that at the dawn of the concept of political culture in the analyses of their comparative studies, the authors draw conclusions in the sense that if there is a crisis of the sense of national identity in a society, then no other crises can be successfully resolved. The context of such a conclusion is the research they conducted in the 1960s, when they were looking for benchmarks of stability of democracies in countries with very different history, culture and current state of affairs. Although issues of identity are not literally brought up as an independent category in the analysis, they can meaningfully be recognised in the concept of the theory of political culture both in its initial period (Almond and Verba, 1963; Elazar, 1966), through its reassessment in the 1980s in *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Almond, Verba et al, 1980), as well as through subsequent developments in independent concepts by political scientists such as Ron Inglehart on post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1990), Aaron Wildavski on cultural rationality (Wildavski, 1990; Tanev, 2001.), as well as in the very idea of social capital of Robert Putnam (Putnam). The notion of identity is increasing its presence in public discourse and in scholarly analysis. It became the subject of attention as an independent field of study by established classics such as Fukuyama. (Fukuyama, 2018). The framework of these 60 or so years of active development of middle-level theories in the social sciences, resting on precise methodology and positive application, managed to elevate comparative research based on data with validity at the level of national samples and uniform methodology succeeded to move political science and political sociology to a high level of explanatory analysis, yet practical politics was not greatly influenced by it. In fact, tensions based on identities, ways of life and traditional cultures are everywhere. In the same place, Nevola says that „There are many types of collective identity...Crucial in our argument are the concept of „political identity“ and its „territorial“ dimension.“ (Nevola, 2011: p. 5)

The modern world is troubled and caused by the coincidence of many different crises. Loss of quality of life and complexities in every person's everyday life create conditions for tension and easy explanations of complex processes. There is a rise in populist politics and an increasingly fierce battle for political supporters in the field of identity. These will probably be lengthy processes and defending the integrity of the European value environment as a consolidated community living in peace and cooperation requires efforts and systematic care. Questions of identity and dynamics in its metamorphoses imply a systematic concern for the state of the national historical memory as content and meaning in the motives of behavior. It is unlikely that our future will be a construction of poorly interpreted Middle Ages and 19th century battles pushed as a national interest. It is likely to remain the peaceful space, in which there is a place to deploy the bright identities of all participating European peoples, who understand that the common European identity does not come at the expense of the loss of national profiles. This is the immediate concern of all interested parties, because it is this community of European integration that has been the greatest source of prosperity and future for all.



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