Event Report

Regional Cooperation and Regional Identity in the Western Balkans: Similarities and Differences

The CEU Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) and the Andrassy University hosted an international conference on May 23, 2016 entitled “Regional Cooperation and Regional Identity in the Western Balkans: Similarities and Differences” to address the issues of regional cooperation and regional identity in the Western Balkan countries.

After the 1990s, the Western Balkans has not created a joint understanding or image of the region, has not agreed on what defines the region and where it belongs to, despite maintaining good neighborly relations and participating in regional cooperation. The general conclusion of the conference was that the countries’ own perception and image is rather diverging, which drives the region apart instead of bringing it closer together.

The conference was divided into three parts. In the first panel, the speakers examined the image construction and belonging issues, while the second panel will focus on specific events in the region which shape the identity. The final round-table discussion gathered all the speakers for a more informal discussion with a high participation of the audience.

In his opening remarks CEU’s President and Rector John Shattuck, former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor deployed to the Western Balkans when the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed and then implemented, emphasized his huge interest in the region. He recalled working with U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke and being confronted with the case of Srebrenica. By that time, the region, which had been exposed to multi-layered historical pressures, developed through inter-marriages into a melting pot. Sarajevo was the best example, he noted. Shattuck remembered the diverse groups of students from Dubrovnik University who at one point fought on different sides, some even shelling Dubrovnik, but then returned to the university apologizing for what they had done. “Identity and regional cooperation are very important for this region”, Shattuck said, “especially when it comes to the existence or development of a European identity.”

“Internal and external image of the Western Balkans” is one of the most important topics for the region, said Peter Balazs, director of CENS, who chaired the first panel.
Jelena Dzankic, research fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, addressed the issue of regional versus state identity in the region, which is shaped by its mixture of cultures, its economic transition and was the forum of EU and NATO cooperation. The countries followed the idea of a ‘return to Europe’ as many other post-socialist countries did in the early 1990s. She discussed the areas of identity, the difference between contested and consolidated countries, and the narratives of state building. “These concepts are abstract and fluent,” Dzankic said. The strategy of symbolic state building created a contestation between groups in the region and the setting of group boundaries established ‘the other’. Dzankic argued that consolidated identities are progressing faster towards EU membership. For instance, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have fragmented identities, which resulted in an institutionalized conflict. The Dayton Peace Agreement translated this conflict into state structures. She concluded by saying that external contestation becomes defensive and, as a result, the countries are backsliding in terms of democracy.

Andelko Milardovic, professor and senior research scientist at the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies and president of the Institute for European Studies and Globalization in Zagreb, focused on the value of culture and image of the region. He stated that the Western Balkans is a product of social constructions. The image of the region is a negative stereotype and defined as a place of conflict and trouble. “These pictures are created by others,” Milardovic noted. He referred to it as ‘European Orientalism,’ as the term ‘Western Balkans’ does not even include a reference to Europe in its name. The geographical prefix ‘Western’ was added to the ‘Balkans,’ and the term was assigned to the region externally. The region could also be referred to as the ‘Western Balcony’ of the EU, he added. Due to the dynamics of social identification and imagination, the image is positioning itself in a relation to other regions (e.g. EU, USA, Russia and Turkey). The main question that remains is how the Balkan states are perceived by the outside. The image might change due to the transformation of the countries in the region and the role of Croatia within the EU, he concluded.

Creating a region depends on external and internal drivers, said Cvete Koneska, senior Europe analyst for Control Risks Group in London. Regional interaction, a precondition for EU membership, is based on the functional approach and the issues of interdependence of the region. Furthermore, the development of regional identity should be the product of
regional cooperation, she argued. The region shares a lot of common history, so there are valid reasons to discuss the Western Balkan area as a region. The common goal and purpose of the countries “constitute the pre-conditions to talk about a regional identity,” Koneska noted. However, there is not much evidence that much regional cooperation is taking place. Europeanization seems to be even counter-productive, she explained the case study of Macedonia. Once Bulgaria became an EU member state, the relations with Macedonia became complicated. Instead of acting in accordance with the values of the EU, Bulgaria used power asymmetries to define its neighborly relations with Macedonia. Hence, the Europeanization argument does not work. Although the EU urges the Western Balkan states to adopt a European identity, the countries seem to be less European when compared to EU member states. Even though this process achieves the opposite of what had been intended, it can still create a community of solidarity.

Milena Dragicevic Sesic, professor of Cultural Policy, Cultural Management, Cultural and Media studies at the University of Arts in Belgrade, analyzed the role of contemporary cultural production, heritage interpretation and artistic expressions in the recent national identity constructions and representations in the countries in the Western Balkans. “The politics of oblivion and how it is dealt with in arts address the legacies of the conflict;” she said, “the victims or perpetrator and the issue of ‘othering’ are part of the cultural production.” ‘Murderous Identities’ by Armin Maalouf and the film ‘Eleni’, starring Croat descendant John Malkovich, are two examples Dragicevic Sesic mentioned to illustrate her point. It seems that the Western Balkans is not “Europe”, but is seen as a sphere of Russian influence, she added.

Speakers in the second panel, “Self-assessment about where the Western Balkans belongs: Case studies,” focused on specific events in the region which shape regional and national identities. The panel was chaired by Melani Barlai, research fellow for netPOL (Network for Political Communication) at Andrassy University.

Ilir Kalemaj, assistant professor of International Relations, Political Science and European Studies at the University of New York in Tirana, discussed the case of Albania “in the crossroads of regionalization and European integration.” The rule of transitocracy, moving neither forward nor backward on democratic consolidation, prevents the Western Balkans countries from becoming consolidated democracies, he said. Albania did not successfully democratize in the aftermath of Communism, even though it did not face similar nation-
building and identity challenges as others in the region. He sees a “continuous political strife that has neither principles nor ideology” in the background of Albania’s difficulty with democratization. Although there seems to be a consensus on such foreign policy issues as the EU integration and regional approach, they are not part of the mainstream political debate and public discourse, he added.

Christina Griessler, research fellow for netPOL (Network for Political Communication) at Andrassy University discussed the power of identity in conflicts through historical case studies. “Our identity is what makes us, therefore it is important to examine the question of identity when looking at conflicts.” The urge to be individually identified and recognized is a basic human right and need; collective identity is based on shared characteristics, and decides relations with “others”; and national identity never corresponds with territory in real life, she explained identity constructs. While competition, or a conflict of interest within a group can be negotiated and reach a compromise, confrontation and counteraction (us vs them) can lead to the devaluation of the other, justified discrimination, and genocide, Griessler argued. Regional cooperation is crucial for creating stability in the region, in helping overcome nationalism and promoting understanding and recognizing different identities, she added.

Anastas Vangeli, researcher at the Graduate School for Social Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences and CEU alumnus (NATI ‘09) gave a presentation on how anti-government protests (re)shape political identification in Macedonia. There’s a huge social movement in the country that has “stuck with an authoritarian government for over 10 years.” #Protestiram is sustained, innovative and confrontational, becoming not only a new form of political entity, but of a new identity as well, he said. It is in sharp contrast to predominant political culture - keep your head low so it won’t be cut off - in Macedonia, it is supported by approximately one third of the population, it “has the ability to draw the contours of the new, but is unable to bury the old yet,” Vangeli noted. The rhetoric of the
movement is beyond ethnic; Albanian and Macedonian flags appeared together for the first time at the protest on May 5, 2015. The key faces of the movement are women, due to their number and importance, #protestiram is often referred to as “women’s revolution,” he added. However, the movement has a tense relationship with major opposition party SDSM, using different methods, aiming for different goals. “Perhaps a new party is the solution for Macedonia,” he noted.

“There is no common identity in the country, let alone in the region,” said Hana Semanic, research fellow at the Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) at CEU, discussing the education system in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH). The Dayton Agreement divided BiH into two constitutional entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, and recognized three ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. The subsequent education system is not horizontal, it doesn’t offer a standard, unified curriculum, and it does not promote a united Bosnia Herzegovina. Instead, it is highly decentralized, strengthens stereotypes, and promotes competition. Beyond the “two schools under one roof” system, which still exists in over 30 schools segregating Bosniak and Croat children, Semanic mentioned as the main obstacles to unified education the language and literature policy and the group of subject, including history, religious instruction, mother tongue, nature and society, that present only one culture without tackling the multicultural society in Bosnia and Herzegovina at all.

In his closing remarks, Kalemaj called simultaneous integration negotiations with the EU and the region. A regional cooperation makes economic sense for the EU, Griessler noted, and the region has to learn to work together towards EU integration. “To create a more welcoming environment, the political framework needs urgent rendition,” Semanic added.

The two panels were followed by a round-table discussion chaired by Sanja Tepavcevic, program manager of the Frontiers of Democracy Initiative at CEU.