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Construction of identity in living together with “others”. Case study in Tushovica village

Abstract:

This study examines construction and subsequent operation of personal identity in a situation of transition, considering understanding of the “Other”. The presented case study displays how everyday communication and common problems change inherited negative cultural stereotypes in the image of Turkish neighbors without leading to problems in identity and in ethnicity in particular.

Key words:

ethnicity, Bulgarian Turks, case study, Otherness

Ethnology and Anthropology are the disciplines par excellence that are immersed in the study of difference of “the other”. Nevertheless, we do in practice make distinctions among cultures and ethnicities, and this brings us back to the dialectics of sameness and difference. In many cases any division into "us" and "them" leads to hostility and sometimes this hostility may be unavoidable. It seems to be true that we are more inclined to focus on differences (Sax: 292-299). But some differences fade with time and don't create any problems in communication with “Others”.

In this study I investigate construction and subsequent operation of personal identity (cultural and ethnic) in a situation of transition (or transitions) considering understanding of the “Other” (Turks, in this case). It comes to a small rural community. My aim is to show how in the present case study everyday communication and common problems change inherited negative cultural stereotypes in the image of Turkish neighbors. However, this doesn't lead to problems in identity but rather to the phenomenon of “mobile identity” (Bochkov 2009: 126). It is remarkable that a substantial part of identity like ethnicity does not tolerate change.

Ethnicity is an integral part of cultural identity which defines the values, attitudes and general perception of the environment. Undoubtedly ethnicity is perceived as one with religion (Elchinova 1994 : 25-26). In this sense, ethnic identity is even more sustainable and important feature when it comes to regions with mixed population especially if one of all ethnic groups is more numerous. Only through solid examples we can show how value systems are synchronized and in what direction and how they change.

It should be noted that ethnicity is fluid, dynamic and dependent on historical context. Historical condition defines ethnic identity. Investiga-

tion of ethnicity should be grounded in history and based on the lived experiences of those who are being studied (Davis: 535-536). It is remarkable that despite changes ethnic identity has capacity for auto-maintenance as well as incorporation of change without always destroying basic characteristics. (Goulbourne: 331).

Assuming that "the ethnic is a form of inheritance, transformation and transmission of heritage in social and anthropological reality" (Zhivkov 2001: 166), I will try to illustrate how the categories language, religion, origin, customs, traditional clothing, food are interpreted from the perspective of personality. The basic information is Elena's story – one of only three Bulgarians who live in already Turkish village Tushovica. The other two are her son and the newly appointed director of the school.

Methods

When we use the term "case study" we understand a "detailed examination of a single example", a real-life situation with multiple details. It's true that the case study method can't be treated like a pilot method in preparing the larger surveys and theory building but is proper for presenting a nuanced view of reality. On the other hand case study is important for researchers who want to develop their own ability to investigate the specific context-dependent problem. This helps to reduce the distance to the object of study and avoid "ritual academic blind alleys, where the effect and usefulness of research becomes unclear and untested" (Flyvbjerg 2006: 220-223). In other words "case study offers understanding presented from another's horizon of meaning but understood from one's own" (Thomas 2010: 579).

Especially effective from a methodological point of view is exploring the nuances of lived experiences by entering and documenting concrete details of a particular life. Thus we can understand better this way of life. Presenting a life story or autobiographical narratives by displaying real human experience and connecting the personal to the cultural provide a way of understanding ethnicity (Davis: 531-533).

Autobiographical narratives, which usually present the most important events of a narrator's life, contain valuable information about their culture (Elchinova 1994: 17-18). When our goal is to understand the real human situation, enumeration of particular facts is insufficient. In this case the autobiographical narrative gives greater opportunities with interpretation of certain sociocultural environment by its representative, i.e. by an informant (Bokova 1994: 12).

In this case study I apply mainly autobiographical narrative of the key informant Elenka. The material is enriched by the views of other informants and from my own observations, which are presented as a narrative. Presenting the empirical material as a narrative contributes to further un-

derstanding of the values and norms in a particular environment and how they change over the time.

Case study

The Village of Tushovitsa is located in northeastern Bulgaria, 10 km from Varbitsa, the central town of the district. The population consists mainly of Roma, Turkish and Bulgarian-Moslem origin. The capital of the region – Shumen is located 50 km to the north.



Agriculture and woodcutting are the main form of livelihood. Some of the villagers work in Shumen in tailoring and construction firms. The population is around 850 people, most of them Turks, 4 Roma families and one Bulgarian.

Nobody knows when the village was founded. According to most of the villagers with whom I spoke, and according to Elena, the village is (was) Bulgarian. But the fact is that there is no church. At the same time cultural and historic landmark is the wooden mosque which is about 400 years old.



The village of Tushovitsa is very clean and quiet. On the day of our last interview Elenka was terribly disturbed by the fact that they had stolen her ax, even though it happens for the first time. She and all her fellow villagers do not lock their houses – there is no theft and they all trust each other. If someone needs to take a tool for use there is no need to ask permission. Just take a tool from the neighbor's yard then return it to its place.

All are used to doing so. The theft for which I mentioned above is made by a man from the nearby village of Rish where they can *rob you in broad daylight*. Therefore it is not surprising that the villagers viewed with suspicion and curiosity every outsider.

Born in 1941 in Tushovitsa Elena lovingly talks about the simple and difficult rural life without the comforts of civilization. Young and old have gathered each night, out in summer and winter in some house. Although it was terribly muddy, dirty, smoke from fireplaces in the winter all people lived very happy and cohesive. Unlike now, when despite all the amenities people are dissatisfied and frustrated.



It is noteworthy that the informant describes in the same way both very important **historical moments** in her life – after 1944 and after 1989. In both cases, she says *people ran away, fled out. All were desperate. Many people have become sick and “left just like that”. I often receive news that someone has died*. According to her, these two transitional periods have affected people badly. Her family also decided to move and to live with relatives in a village near Veliko Tarnovo. For that period of her life she repeatedly said that *these people were very strange for me... in a house at*

the end of the village ... I could not resist, the people were foreign for me ... the only thing I wanted was to go home in my village and to have no trouble. Here she features her relatives and Bulgarians in the new village as a "foreign" and Turks in her old village as "own". Perhaps this is the first moment that breaks her stereotypes about Turks.

Until then, **before 1944**, there were not many Turks in Tushovitsa. They lived quite poor in the houses at the end of the village – three or four families together. Turkish women were not leaving their houses, something incomprehensible and unacceptable; that way of life immediately labeled each of them as "simple". Old Turks had a cafe in the village center, where they gathered. At that time in the pub walked only Bulgarians. Turkish children were educated separately in the Turkish school. After the Nationalization of land and animals **around the end of the 1940's**, many Bulgarians left the village and sold their houses. The Turks began to buy cheaply the houses in the village center. *In the past it was impossible to see a Turkish house in the center.*

The new conditions required all people (whether Bulgarians or Turks) to work together in the cooperative. Since then they began to know each other, there was a lot of work for all. In the 70's many of the Bulgarians who had higher education moved to the nearby cities of Shumen and Veliki Preslav. **After 1989** everything started to burst, *nothing remained*. For the second time many people, mostly Bulgarians were leaving the village. Now most of the young people are trying to settle in Shumen, or to go to work abroad – in Western Europe or Turkey. *People are scattered, so there are no children left.* In recent years young families have one to two children at the most.

Everything that does not fit into Elena's understanding is defined as unacceptable, abnormal. She often used the term "simple" when talking about the Turks in the past. Turkish women are stupid, "simple" because they don't want to work outside the home, because they wear *shalvari* (baggy pants), because they don't want to learn well Bulgarian and continue to study outside the village. When it comes to this she always tells the story of her neighbor, Emine, about her short stay in Turkey during the so-called Great trip¹. The Turkish administrative officer constantly repeated *Are you crazy just because some names and shalvari to come in*

¹ During the Communist period of Bulgarian history, the Turkish minority (mainly in the south-east and north-east) of the country was forced to change their names from Turkish or Arabic to Bulgarian in 1984, during the Todor Zhivkov regime. Turkish culture, language and Islamic beliefs (as well as any other beliefs) were also suppressed. **Great trip** is the popular name of the process of voluntary or involuntary emigration from the Republic of Bulgaria in Turkey.

Turkey ... It's no big deal! Why do you want to go with shalvari? You are really crazy! You must follow the rules of the state where you live! For Elenka the prohibition of wearing shalvari, speaking in Turkish in a public place, and changing the one's name is not a particular threat to personal ethnic identity. She emphasizes the fact that her view is supported by the Turkish administrative officer who thinks the same way. After all only three or four Turks stayed in Turkey. Others have returned *at home*, in Tushovitsa.

Today, however, none of the young Turkish women wear shalvari. Eventually they wear shalvari only during holidays and weddings. Undoubtedly in recent years Turkish weddings have changed a lot. Turks themselves say: *We started to get married as you (Bulgarians)*. The traditional Turkish costume is worn during the ritual *kansovane* at the day before the wedding. Increasingly rarely are brides wearing shalvari in the morning after the wedding, when traditionally guests are welcomed. The explanation is totally practical – it is not convenient and none of them feel compelled to do so.

There is change in their diet too, another sign of an alien identity. In the past *we, the Bulgarians, have always bred pigs and none of the Turks eat pork. Now they eat and grow the pigs themselves*, except some of the older Turks. A century ago only Bulgarians drank alcohol and the Turks have had their cafeteria and none of them drank brandy. Today, all Turks drink and produce brandy and wine at home. In recent years, it is not impossible for a woman to enter the pub. On the other hand, Bulgarians have learned to drink coffee by the old Turks.

However, the language use had changed in a different direction. Elenka speaks only Turkish in recent years. According to her memories there were many children in the village most of them were Bulgarian but they were educated in a separate school from the Turks. In 1958 the two schools were merged and teaching was conducted only in Bulgarian. Turkish language was taught separately with the imam of the village. Recently, Turkish villagers have tried to find a teacher of Turkish language, but still nobody has remained more than a year.

The fact is that in Tushovitsa all talk to each other in Turkish. This applies not only at home and in public places but to kindergarten and school too. The current director of the kindergarten is Bulgarian and when she is at work everyone speaks Bulgarian, but the moment when she leaves work, all begin to speak again in Turkish. The situation in the school is similar – teachers are Turks, and until recently the director was also Turk. Accordingly, training was done in Turkish. This year began with a new school director, Bulgarian. By his order, and constantly reminding classes are held in Bulgarian. His attempts to get children to speak in Bulgarian, while playing in the yard for now are unsuccessful. Children would simply stop talking when he comes and continue to speak Turkish when he leaves.

Elenka also speaks Turkish in her daily life – with neighbors, at the market. This fact did not impress her. During the period of socialism when it was forbidden to speak Turkish in public places she and her husband were fined 60 leva for unwittingly using Turkish words in their desire to be understood well from their fellow Turks.

Old people do not understand Bulgarian language. However, the young are keen to learn it well. But there are no Bulgarian children to play and to talk Bulgarian at the same time. Many children go to Elenka specifically to practice speaking in Bulgarian. The need for perfect knowledge of Bulgarian language is clearly understood. However, this is quite difficult to be done in a homogeneous Turkish speaking environment.

Religion and the holidays are especially important for Elenka. Particularly strongly she emphasizes that *religion is not nonsense*. She is not pleased by the fact that one of her granddaughters is not yet baptized in the Church. *Bulgarians not baptizing at all is not good*, she says.

At the same time Elena respects the religion and festivals of the Turkish neighbors. With great indignation she tells how during the time of socialism all dead villagers (whether Bulgarian or Turks) had to be buried in same cemetery. *Moreover Turks were forced to bury the dead in coffins. And they did it. This is absolutely wrong!* One of her relatives was also buried in this common cemetery. His remains were moved as soon as it was allowed. So religion and the tradition are something holly and nobody has the right to change them by force.

It is clear that for the informant most important and sacred character of its own identity is the religion. Her attitude towards the traditions and customs is similar. Clothes and food (especially daily) are unifying with time. Daily communication with "own other" requires the use of the "foreign" to her Turkish to such extent that she perceives it as "own".

It is obvious that the socio-cultural environment in Tushovitsa for nearly a century had changed totally - from predominantly Bulgarian to Turkish. Some of the symbols of cultural identity (clothing, food, the place of women in the family and outside of it) of Turks also are subject to change. Religion, language and traditions remain stable as a whole.

How does Elenka's personal identity fit in this as "foreign" as well as "own" environment? "Others" for the informant have changed in ways that bring them closer to "own" in everyday life. They share and discuss their problems, celebrate together, enjoy their success. A few years ago Elenka had to undergo surgery in Varna (a big city about 200 km from Tushovitsa). Her neighbors decided to raise money to help her cover the costs for the operation. When she came home everyone, without exception, went to see how she is, contrary to her own brother, who did not even phone her although he lives in a nearby village.

From the story described above it becomes clear that "other" may become even closer than "own" in certain situations. The inherited image of

the "other" is changing as fast as the specific situations change, in addition to the flexibility and tendency to change. This does not lead to a crisis of identity in itself. I think here we can talk about the phenomenon "*mobile identity*" (Bochkov 2009: 126). This means that a person could have a mobile identity whenever he or she is consciously and voluntarily granted the "other" and their "different" cultural stereotypes.

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Ивелина Ефтимова

Конструкција идентитета у суживоту са „другима“. Студија случаја у селу Тушовица

У раду се разматра конструкција, а затим и операционализација личног идентитета у условима транзиције и то с обзиром на разумевање „Другог“. Презентована студија случаја открива како свакодневна комуникација и заједнички проблеми утичу на промене наслеђених негативних културних стереотипа о турским суседима, остављајући по страни проблеме идентитета и етничитета.

Кључне речи: етничитет, Бугари, Турци, студија случаја, Другост