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BALKAN CULTURAL CONFEDERATION

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БАЛКАНСКА КУЛТУРНА КОНФЕДЕРАЦИЈА

Having in mind the history of the unrealistic political ideas of the Balkan Con/federation, the author tries to investigate an idea of “a Balkan cultural confederation”, according to the following theses, which reflect on the possibilities of its establishment: low-institutionalized cooperation in Balkan cultural projects; mid-institutionalized cooperation in Balkan scientific projects; high-institutionalized projects in Balkan studies.

The main goal of the Confederation should be to preserve and improve not only factual but also meaningful survival of the Balkans, as a real contribution of the Region to the European Cultural Commonwealth.

Key words: the Balkans, confederation, culture, meaning, the Balkan studies.

1. The world in which we live is tentatively grounded in technological growth, on which contradictory judgments are made; it is complex, full of differences, oppositions, inequalities and unequal opportunities, of famine, disease and poverty, tensions and conflicts, global uncertainty and threatening tendencies. A discussion on the problem of the world’s human survival and development requires that one understands the following global processes: (A) *technological globalization*, which is already in progress, yet it is very uneven so that a more just distribution of its civilizational achievements is needed, with the goal to ensure the survival and dignified life of all people and nations; (B) *economic and legislative integration*, which is also occurring, although in a regional rather than a global sense; in its further expansion it would need to acknowledge the unequal starting positions, unequal opportunities and needs of specific regions and countries; (C) *cultural communication*, which is taking place under internal constraints (different traditions, languages, ways of life...) but also under external difficulties (economic and political obstacles), which hinder the very important preservation of cultural diversity, of communication among the different, and the survival of the multitude of cultural identities in the process in which a new “world culture” is emerging.

Therefore, the world is in a deep social cleft, where the number of local wars is increasing and the uncertainty and insecurity of life grow, followed by a growing and nearly unpredictable waves of migration, through which the desperate look for havens providing peace and elementary survival.

Given their exact methods and research techniques, the social sciences have largely gained a proper insight into the condition of the global society, of individual societies and cultures, as suggested above. We know how things stand on the level of *facts* and their explanation. It is an overall state of crisis, often also that of social anomie. There is, however, less understanding of the *meaning* of current events and trends, which is why our task remains to look for an answer to the questions: Where to? How? To what purpose? This is so because a criterion for the advancement of humankind cannot be based on technological growth alone, but rather on the advancement in gaining freedom and dignity for the human being.

2. In the Balkans, one can keep records of the same constellation of relations and processes, with added risk of uneven development, a history of conflict, and uncertain prospects. Our real and “imaginary” Balkans are not defined only geographically, geopolitically, or in a series of self-determinations, but rather also through negative, stereotypical definitions and negative construction of identity within the discourse of “Balkanism”. The Balkans are indeed divided in terms of administration, politics, tradition, confession, culture, but the area simultaneously teems in similarities and relations, old and new connections, closeness of individuals and communities. As in other undeveloped and restless regions of the world, the spirit of the Balkans today is marked by inhumane effects of accelerated, yet reckless technological growth, by the radical evil coming from oligarchic plutocracy and by the suffering of the innocent. Here live nations and societies, which are pauperized, historically and politically feuding, and which have mutually conflicting interests.

Although part of Europe, the Balkans are today far from the top of technological development, so needed in our time. Euro-Atlantic integrations are in progress here, yet the politics behind such integrations treads the paths, which the Balkan countries can influence little, except by fulfilling the dictated conditions. We crave the achievements of technological globalization, we want to enter economic and legislative integrations and take part in cultural communication. However, global conflicts of interests, the clashes of the great powers, leave open the possibility that the economic and legislative integration of the Balkan countries should continue in different directions, which in effect means that a Balkan disintegration is equally possible. Naturally, we, the people of the Balkans, should not remain deaf and blind to our own responsibility for the condition described here.

3. The only domain not under a direct and full control of the interests of the great global subjects is *culture*.

The IT revolution has indeed opened up new possibilities for scientific, academic and cultural communication. At the same time, however, it has also caused numerous problems such as the difficulty of meaningful orientation in the multitude of information sources (and in the bits of information themselves), the construction of one’s own position and autonomous opinion, the promotion of this opinion, and the still unchanged

situation regarding the capacity to attract and retain the educated, i.e. the “brain drain” process.

Culture is also in a state of crisis. Science is a vassal and servant of the capital; philosophy is largely “citation based”, i.e. technically and academically neat, yet sterile; art is in a state of confusion – between commercialization, on the one hand, and justified critical attitude, on the other. However, and in the midst of the crisis, culture in the narrower sense, as spiritual culture, art in particular, is creative, and thus in principle able to distance itself from this ground, to take the position of the “observer”, and point to the dark sides of the current reality. Compared with technology, and along it science, it is least ruled by the market, and compared with some other symbolical forms and institutions, it is least corruptible.

Since the strings of economic and legislative, thus also political integrations are out of our hands (unfortunately, economic, legislative and political integration keep escaping some of us), we are left to deal with the possibilities of cultural communication and desirable cultural integration. In other words, the assumption is that for a realistic project of more intensive non-political integration in the Balkans, we are left with the least controlled and least corrupt, thus most free domain – the domain of culture. This domain rests on (a) authentic creative activity and created values, which, if they are values, have a principally though not manifestly, global importance, and (b) communication with different cultures and their values as values.

4. Hence the idea of a “*Balkan Cultural Confederation*”! Among many potential approaches to this topic, I find the following most important: a historiographic approach; a politological approach; a culturological approach, i.e. a cultural-philosophical approach.

4.1. The idea of the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” has no official history. However, we have at hand the idea of the “Balkan political federation” (or confederation), which has a rich history, spanning more than one century. This is usually taken to be a left-wing (although there are conceptions coming from the right), social democratic idea of doing away with backwardness, antagonism and conflicts among the newly-formed 19th-century Balkan states; the idea is considered to have had a variable degree of communist-Comintern support; although the prevalent opinion today is that this idea, as a political project, definitely belongs to the past, some proposals for cooperation and networking among the “transition” Balkan societies reminiscing the idea of a “Balkan con/federation” have been observed, and it has also been noted that the European Union views such test cases with moderate benevolence, foremost as a token of the maturity and capacity of the people of the Balkans to establish good relations and cooperation with their neighbours.

4.2. The politological approach should examine how realistic this tentative and preliminary list of proposals is in contemporary political constellations.

4.3. As to the philosophy of culture, it should deal with the concept of the “Balkan Cultural Confederation”, its relationship to different levels of reality, the sense and meaning of this idea and entities derived, projected therefrom.

(a) The “Balkan Cultural Confederation” is, therefore, an idea. And my attitude to an idea, even when it is utopistic, is always the same as that taken by Kant with regard to Plato’s idea of an “unrealistic” State – that “we should do better to follow up this thought and [...] employ new efforts to place it in clearer light, rather than carelessly fling it aside as useless, under the very miserable and pernicious pretext of impracticability”.

(b) This idea, like others, can be set up as an ideal without fear. For, who would consider the ideal of intensive cultural communication, a landmark in complex cultural and historical practice, undesirable and “dangerous”? Only obsessive claimants of the right to “truth” and “orthodoxy”, i.e. xenophobic advocates of various kinds of self-isolation.

(c) The very possibility of institutionalizing such an ideal belongs to the domain of this approach,

(d) whereas the concretum of implementation should take the form of a project, compiled by the social sciences, which have an insight into the program and realistic circumstances of various Balkan cultural policies, and their institutional and non-institutional stakeholders.

The idea of the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” gets inevitably confronted with the history of the political idea of the “Balkan federation”, which served as a fact precisely on the level of the ideal, project and program, and not on the level of historical and political implementation, i.e. of a social and historical reality.

4.4. What is the meaning of the idea and ideal of the “Balkan Cultural Confederation”?

“Balkan Cultural Confederation” is the idea-ideal-project of cooperation and moderate institutionalization of cooperation in the domain of culture among the societies and states of the Balkans. More particularly, the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” is a network of freely linked cultural institutions and non-institutional cultural stakeholders, which: conceives of Balkan cultural policies, respecting universal values and specifics of regional and local cultures; prepares transnational projects in culture and implements them; organizes various cultural events and activities, supports various forms of creativity and performance; cultivates tastes, audiences and criticism of global and local, finally its own contemporary and future programs; organizes and supports media promotion of its programs and actions; organizes various forms and levels of Balkan studies, cultural studies and art education.

I use the concept “confederation” because it is less intimidating for the conservative opponents of Balkan “syntheses”, “unions” and “cooperations” than is the concept of “federation”, which may form an association to left-wing and Comintern projects.

When we talk about the survival of the Balkans, we have in mind the survival of individuals as individuals, but also the survival of cultural communities. Likewise, we are talking not about the survival of fact, but about the survival of meaning. We would have to care about preserving the meaning of survival, rather than cultural curiosities or ethnographic reservations. For this reason, I am saying that the main

goal of this Confederation could be the preservation and promotion not only of factual but also of meaningful survival of the Balkans, which could only in such a form represent an authentic part of and contribution to the European cultural commonwealth.

4.5. The program and project of the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” is realistic in so far as it can rely on already existing, numerous forms of cooperation in the domain of culture: festivals, reviews, art colonies, exhibitions, publications, concerts, projects... Our conception entails significant intensification of such cooperation and permanent joint actions in culture, which probably require a higher, indispensable degree of institutionalization. The first step in this direction would be to make a comprehensive database of all forms of previous and current Balkan cultural cooperation and networking; this should be a project of several non-governmental organizations, which could – why not? – receive financing also from governmental sources, i.e. the budget.

This project is also realistic, first, because potential Balkan political confederations – if possible at all – would today run parallel to Euro-Atlantic integrations, so that, just like the mentioned communist-Comintern episode, they would receive only variable and temporary support, depending on the political circumstances in Europe and the world; second, because economic integrations, which many believe transcend political barriers, in their form of “markets without frontiers”, still work under the pressures of politics; third, because desirable legislative integrations often end up with coerced solutions, inappropriate to the condition and development of some countries.

4.6. Yet why would solely culture, and culture in the narrower sense, i.e. spiritual culture, and, particularly, art, be called upon to support the survival of the Balkans as the Balkans, in a virtual confederation of values, detached from the “Balkanism” stereotype?

This is so because technological globalization and economic and legislative integration no longer occur under the auspices of science and philosophy, even less of religion and morality, except as a subject of post-hoc thinking, of considering the consequences. Only art is left to deal with the very essence of these processes, as it is exempt from the corruptive grip of politics and the market.

This is so because the networking of religions goes hand in hand with difficulties in the institutional interpretation of ecumenical ideas on dialogue and reconciliation, and with “sustainable” mutual distrust.

This is so because the networking of universities is already in progress, however under the constraints of economic and political ideologies and practices, and under the disastrous wave of new academic “quantophrenia”. Thereby, it would be indeed desirable to institutionalize several (new) Balkan universities, although this is far from realistic. A more likely implementable option would be to initiate a program of joint activities on research projects. Yet here one must keep in mind, on the one hand, the need to network with rich universities and institutes outside of the Balkans, and, on the other, work conditions corresponding to a “scienza povera”, which does not

require major investment, but rather employment of local wisdom, of those scholars who have still not “drained”, or even those who have.

This is so because athletic confederations, Balkan leagues in competitive sports, are already a reality, yet this is still a project covering the most popular sports only, where there is serious concern over the escalation of nationalistic sentiments among the fans, which might result in interethnic conflicts. Namely, according to the laws of the market and popularity, such leagues could be profitable when based on the games between national teams, which is a reality, but also results in a realistic possibility of conflicts.

Cultural confederations may also serve ideologies (for instance, national ones), but works of culture simultaneously criticize ideology; they provide self-insight, unveil the meaning, if not of history itself, than of certain historical events and periods, and also the meaning of quotidian politics and of our small lives within it. In times of crisis and poverty, culture is pushed to the back burner. Therein lies its chance – when neglected and “unnoticed”, it can easily cross borders and pull down stereotypes and prejudices.

Art is the most suitable experimental terrain for devising and constructing the “Balkan Cultural Confederation”, because it is the least in the jaws of politics, and can remain outside those jaws, or even stand against them. Apart from this, the institutionalization of art cooperation does not stand against European integrations, i.e. against the European Union, any other form of European community or any other European, Euro-Atlantic, Euro-Asian, Danubian, etc. form of networking. Finally, if it is true art indeed, the nature of art is always creative and subversive (this nature is typically boasted by “new art practices”, too, although the question remains to what extent they belong to art); art uses its transnational aesthetic languages, it is always a vigilant indicator, a seismograph, a testimony to the meaning and meaninglessness of the past, present, and future.

When I talk about networking in the domain of art, I primarily have in mind the networking of art projects, rather than that of institutions, which are, as a rule, poor and have to rely on internationally-funded projects themselves. In the Balkans, art is “arte povera”, not only in a historical and artistic, but also in a quite literal sense.

Art too in the Balkans today is in a state of crisis. However, even when it is in a crisis, art is alive and creative. Even when large-scale creative projects are not possible, it always provides room for small creative steps, and it is well known that unpretentious creations may provide important, far-reaching results. Namely, art often represents a location for interpreting creatively transposed events of this world, realization of aesthetic ideas to the senses, a location for suggesting meaning in communicable languages of the aesthetic, and thus a location for a possible understanding of the meaning of the part of the world historically “ascribed” and “adjudicated” to us, an area, which we have taken over and which we are still “conquering”, which we have held on to, in spite of all instances in which we have got lost or kept on roaming; art makes this possible for us through decoding the meaning of creative efforts undertaken by the best of us – so that, in this process, we could better understand the meaning of our own struggle, our own borders, our own

potentials and limits, and all this with the purpose of ensuring a good life together, which we should no longer view as something given, but rather build it as something we have chosen ourselves.

I no longer believe that “beauty will save the world” (Dostoyevsky), but it is certain that art always opens our eyes, blurred by the veils of politics, ideology, partial interests, partial “values”, and intolerance.

Quite certainly, a “Balkan Cultural Confederation” would ensure the cultural promotion of the Balkans, a changed perception and better acceptance of this region, for such a confederation would provide a framework for authentic contributions to the European cultural heritage, as the most important condition for and the only road to permanent survival in history. The “Balkan Cultural Confederation” is thus a non-political project, which might have even important political implications.

5. The idea and project of the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” are a possibility, yet in no way unquestionable.

5.1. It is quite certain that the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” faces a formidable cultural and historical opportunity, which is often, in the feebleness of mind, interpreted as a difficulty, obstacle, even a grounds for conflict, while it is actually an advantage: namely, this is the constantly available opportunity for a dialogue on all neuralgic questions from the common past, present, and future of the peoples of the Balkans, based on more or less related, or different, yet necessarily coexisting languages, religions, art traditions, daily lifestyles. From these dialogues, and from a joint appreciation of artistically transposed experiences, ideas pertaining to economic ethics and political projects could emerge, as well.

5.2. Naturally, the idea of the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” faces a series of challenges, open questions – even though their nature is rhetorical:

Is linguistic diversity only an obstacle to mutual understanding, or is it indeed a desirable cultural fortune? Is the area of the Balkans on “the fringes” of Europe and is it, in spite of declarations, still being systematically marginalized? Can selective membership in the European Union convince us otherwise, i.e. provide a negative answer to that question? Can and should those who are “marginal” organize themselves, should they cooperate and unite, especially when this is not “at the expense” of “cardinal” leagues and unions? Can “the marginalized” have a “privileged” worldview, especially the possibility to sense meaning? That is, could this situation be interpreted as a variation of Hegel’s dialectical parable of “master and slave” (Lordship and Bondage; Herrschaft und Knechtschaft)? Do the marginalized Balkans have a “power”, which could recommend them to the world? Is it perhaps a “power” that cannot be taken away, forbidden, or demolished – the power of creative imagination? Is imagination an important condition for survival and for devising survival, which can last only as the survival in culture? Should the region of the Balkans renounce the “big stories” from its unrestrained imagination, its utopias, metaphors, and even some myths, and limit itself to “small stories”, restrained imaginations, and

allowed “rationalities”? Can art, which realizes aesthetic ideas, i.e. undefeatable games of imagination to sense, be an integrative force of the Balkans, and yet remain subversive, particularly to pseudo-values? In developing the thesis on the subversive nature of culture and art, does one here need to differentiate between the high, popular, mass, and folk culture and art, or can one expect some kind of subversiveness from all these forms of culture? Are kitsch and trash definitely conformist, and thus by no means potentially subversive? Since cultural projects, actions and institutions can interlink through the media and social networks, is the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” possible in a virtual form, or is a more “solid” form of networking needed?

6. I originally thought that the idea presented here, that of the “Balkan Cultural Confederation” should represent a loosely institutionalized cooperation of Balkan projects in the domain of culture, a bit stronger institutionalization in the form of scientific research projects dealing with culture, but also the highly-institutionalized projects, much needed Balkan studies. However, now I hold the opinion that a different scale of institutionalization would not be erroneous¹.

¹ Before any researcher there lies an all too rich body of literature covering numerous variants of the idea of the “Balkan Con/federation”, “Balkan Alliance”, finding a solution to the “Eastern Question”, etc. Such texts have been written by quite diversified political and scholarly authors, not only from the Balkans, and they considerably vary in terms of genre, politics, ideology, and theoretical and methodological background.