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III. Exit from 'Strangeland'



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This is a personal statement, from someone who has been deeply moved by contemporary history in the close and dear neighbourhood, and has been engaged for cultural and educational cooperation with South Eastern Europe and a proper EU cultural policy. This contribution therefore aims at a 'context for the future' of the cultural agenda rather than technical details that will be covered by others in this publication.

The end of the artificial term *Western Balkan Region* is near, it seems, and with its dissolution a chapter of history could be closed that came unexpected for many, and painful.

The process of European integration will, ultimately, move an important step further towards completion, I hope.

Hard politics, power politics, force have put a whole region on halt; cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious differences have been used as weapons and mechanisms of dominance and exclusion. History has been re-written, used and abused in many ways, within the region and in 'the West'. What came out of this era of great confusion and hate,

misled perceptions and ideologies, and killings, was an artificial area of concern, of detention, a waiting room, a zone of exceptions with an exceptionally odd 'name'.



Culture was the container-notion for what could go wrong in relational terms: relations between people and peoples. Culture was a camera 'obscura'. Yet, culture also meant the human sides of belonging and identifications, and the beauty of what people had imagined and done, in villages, on the countryside, in old towns, in vineyards and songbooks, in poetry and machines, epic narratives, bridges and films and in the hearts of children. Abundant richness from valley to valley, from river to river, from mountains to coastlines, culture became the hostage of politics, who managed to blame culture as the agent of hate.

Incredible cultural forgetfulness and ignorance on the part of the 'former West' has not helped. The history of post-imperial divisional thinking and suppression of its own share in the malaise may have been among the most important reason for many severe mistakes. Maria Todorova has pointed at this vicious circle, like many others. Their voices were not strong enough, unfortunately, to engage the 'other Europeans' outside the 'WB region' in the process of convalescence.

Culture and its abuse were among the root causes for the problems; and yet, culture was not really on the agenda of the post-trauma strategies of the EU and its member states. This has been deplored many times, many have tried to change it, lobbied and fought for substantial investment in 'cultural' hope against the legacy and presence of fear and exclusive projections or ignorance. Of course there were laudable exceptions, private and public, European and international initiatives that have helped to reconnect within the region and in Europe. However, one could say, there was no cultural *strategy* for a challenge that was uniquely 'culturalised' – and it took very long to 'open' up, symbolically, and in 'real' mobility.

What seems to change, really, is the growing awareness of the European Union for its cultural face, its strategic deficits on this field, and its lack of cultural policies and resources. This promising strategic move comes in a period when accession processes of SEE countries to the EU are gaining substance, speed in some cases, and potential (in others). A good moment to try it again: to put culture as high on the agenda as it deserves – and rightfully demands in relation to 'integration' and building a shared democratic future.

For developing the new cultural agenda with regards to – and with! – South East Europe I suggest digging deeper; it will be helpful to consider aspects of what has contextually changed since the end of (most of) the crises, and what still needs to change. I just mention a few new realities.

'Ex-Yugoslavia' in all its cultural diversity is – today much more than ever before – present in the middle of EU societies, particularly in Central European countries. Massive migration and streams of refugees, often young people who didn't want to 'serve' in the wars, have changed the face and DNA of many 'Western' cities, the workforce, pubs and clubs, faculties and galleries; the luxury of enjoying talent and creativity from this 'WB region' is evident, and 'creative cities' prosper thanks also (significantly) to these new citizens; in the meantime 'acceptance' has grown – while xenophobic projections, unfortunately still shockingly strong, have changed 'targets'. Crazily, political parties, like in Vienna, are trying to harvest in ethnic ex-Yugoslav camps, with quite bizarre facets of bending again history. The other side of this new presence of 'Ex-YU' in the 'West' is the unfortunate and heavy brain drain the 'WB region' is suffering; this needs to be seriously considered for any future policy. Luckily, at least in perspective, artists and media people, entrepreneurs and managers, skilled workforce are 'commuting' and reconnecting in various ways. Economic recovery will attract some who had left in the past.

Culturally in a more narrow sense, it is remarkable how deep 'Balkan' everyday culture has penetrated 'pop reality'

of cities in Europe. Advanced hybrid forms have emerged as well, and artists are occupying growing market shares. Cultural industries have become impressively 'balkanized' to an extent that, for example, 'serious' writers from 'there' are sometimes complaining about the unbalanced 'economy of attention'.

In all ambivalence it has been long overlooked how this 'integration' has not only succeeded, but also produced a new, rich and widely appreciated cultural climate.

Opinion leaders and shapers of this new 'wave' have changed the patterns, perceptions, stereotypes, and moved public 'imaginaries' from a history of 'victimisation' to a presence and future of self-confidence. Documents of this new generation are climbing the charts; a most recent example is the German Book Prize winner 2010 Melinda Nadj Abonj, born in the Vojvodina/Serbia, living in Switzerland, published by an Austrian publisher.

Will these sociological and demographic changes affect the 'countries of origin' positively? And what will be the economic and cultural future 'down there'?

Or, much more modestly, what does that mean for cultural cooperation programmes in the future, for the coming to life process of the European Cultural Agenda?

Another complex issue remains the [simultaneusness](#) of the non-simultaneous. While several regions of the former Yugoslavia are speedily advancing according to relevant parameters, while cities like Tirana are booming and making respective headlines in the papers all over the world, while progress is evident in terms of reconciliation and democratisation, economy even, and of pre-accession process, other questions remain pertinent, and other parts of the region are still struggling with their future, just to mention the governance and development of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Let us also not forget that the economic realities are depressing in many places, and their auspices are rather somber. This may have an impact on 'frozen' issues of concern and potential dispute, including 'culturalised', ethnic and religious controversies.

Not all conflicts are buried or solved, by no means. Yet, one thing is clear, it is by far easier to find ways out with a clear and substantive accession perspective and tangible mechanisms - than without.

And: Cultural sensitivity, incentives for cultural cooperation and capacity building, democratic cultural policy development, generous programmes to address important issues at stake will be essential for the success of further European integration.

All in all, the direction is clear, despite delays, and the integration train is gaining speed. The Union that is negotiating access of the 'WB countries' will be a Union with a Cultural Agenda. All its three pillars (and hopefully action lines) are of crucial importance for a comprehensive and sustainable integration of the 'West Balkan region' in such a way, that this peculiar name will finally disappear again.

'Interculturality' is one pillar, but – if well done in lived practice – the notion will be transformed: we will no longer speak about different 'islands' of cultures which need bridges, but good and broad and deep projects and programmes will strengthen European *trans-national* normality with regional specificities.

Cultural industries - creativity and innovation in general: the second item on the cultural agenda. In this arena the region has a lot to offer, if supported cleverly through new types of investment.

The third pillar: EU external action and its cultural components: as long as we remain in pre-accession relations, and neighbourhood structures, the so-called western Balkan will be a major testing ground for – finally – recognising the importance of culture and responding adequately to this insight, including finding solutions for highly symbolic and culturalised 'name' issues. Again, if well done, external policies vis-à-vis the WB will be transformed into internal policies. The Union will welcome new citizens, who will enrich our experience with diversity, with troubles and how to overcome them. This will, in the end, also strengthen our capacity to be helpful in other crisis areas of the world.

Exit from 'Strangeland', accompanied by the disappearance of all names of transit, will open a new chapter for Europe, prove its capacity to overcome the legacy of the past, endorse the culture of responsibility and make us all stronger to face the future.