

The Year of Intercultural dialogue - a challenge for Romanian democratic practices

Corina Suteu
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In February 2008, just at the moment when programs of the year of Intercultural dialogue were launched in Romania, one of the national representatives in the EU parliament, Ioan Mircea Pascu, was expressing his indignation about the programming of 'California Dreaming' as part of the Parliament's film festival dedicated to this very issue.

'California Dreamin' (Endless)' by Christian Nemescu, won in 2007 Un Certain Regard award in Cannes Film Festival and many other international and European awards since. The film uses as background the 1999 war in Kosovo. A NATO train transporting military equipment without official documents is stopped in a small Romanian village by the chief of the railway station, a very controversial figure. The encounter between the Romanian young people in the village and the American soldiers, the encounter of the chief of the NATO battalion and the chief of the railway station and the mayor of the village are all engaging a clash between different ways of understanding the world, life and finally the individual's freedom and responsibility to choose one's destiny according to a cultural context, but also according to inherited values. Directed by a 26 year old and very talented Nemescu (who died brutally in a car crash while working on finalizing the film), 'California Dreamin' (Endless)' is a remarkable artistic incarnation of intercultural misunderstanding that drives to unavoidable tensions and eventually to death, whenever mischievously and brutally handled by unprepared communities.

When dismissing the film's right to be presented, the arguments invoked by the parliamentarian were that the film is not **representative** for Romania's attitude towards foreigners and the language used by the characters is not politically correct, being full of 'sexual and aggressive vocabulary'. He compared the Romanian presence in the Film festival with those of other countries and underlined the fact that the choice of those countries was much more adapted, as it focused on the individual character of intercultural dialogue, not on 'macro', geopolitical issues like those raised by 'California'.

One can easily regard this story as a telling example of the fact that intercultural dialogue is understood by a part of Romanian politicians as a way to put forward exclusively peaceful matters and stage 'acceptance' as the key word for the cultural encounter.

However, the very notion of intercultural dialogue opens the door to many unsolved, clashing issues everywhere and even more so in countries where the legacies of totalitarian and over centralized communist regimes are still alive.

It is, also, the case for Romania.

During the last two decades since the fall of communism, public policies in the country were striving to engage a credible dialogue with minorities, to address also globally the Roma community problem and to partially solve the rising unbalance between province and metropolis, between the center and the margins. All these extremely challenging matters were continuously and vigorously addressed by successive governments and by legislators and emerging ngo's alike. In the early 2000, the EU accession process accelerated and encouraged even more such approaches.

However, the measures did not have the necessary time to gain stability and be translated into viable practices. Their success was diminished by constant political instability (government composition changed too often and public servants only gained a stable status five years ago). The weak impact in reality of the positive oriented will to tackle intercultural issues was also due to the former social existence in Romania during communism, an existence dominated by integrative social logics, leveling dynamics and standard-like behaviors. Policies regarding multiculturalism and interculturalism were addressed at the time under the conduct of avoiding to tolerate differences and by a tenacious tendency to do away with real diversity in all components of the day to day life. It was because of this constant construction of an 'ideological identity', unique to all Romanian citizen, that communist behaviors were gradually implemented and also it was how they succeeded so well in taming the creative and irregular aspect of individual persona and obtain the so called mass compound of unique values, indoctrination and common fear against everything considered to be 'different' or 'unusual'.

Identity in communism was not about the choice of individual and collective cultural values, but about the capacity of the individual to prove his ideological, unilateral belonging to an integrative and tamed universe of artificial slogans. This was called 'the new man'.

In international cultural exchange, the only artistic and intellectual values circulating were those agreed by the communist party as representative for a certain type of propaganda, promoting an ideal, bucolic, conservative looking Romania, exclusively.

Bearing it in mind, one understands why the notion of **intercultural dialogue**, so critically related to the notion of 'diversity'¹ was not popular at all in post communist Romania and the

¹ Svob-Docic, Nada and N. Obulien, . Comparative cultural policy issues related to cultural diversity in South eastern Europe(PFC, 2003)

building of policies and implementation of practices regarding it required more than bureaucratic and legislative measures , awareness raising campaigns and empowerment policies after communism collapsed. It really implied starting from scratch.

Within this context , some issues related to intercultural dialogue, as recently defined by the Council of Europe's 'White paper on intercultural dialogue'² are relevant.

Firstly to be considered, intercultural dialogue is, from a European perspective, one of the possible responses to the standardizing effects of globalization.

A question arises: how should a nation in Europe better handle the moving border between preserving one's cultural identity and /or making it an integrative part of the connective culture dominating the world today . For nations like France, or Germany, or Spain, the question of national cultural identity going global is more likely to be translated as a way to accept that some of the long lasting top down domination of a certain national influence over other countries' cultures has to give up important territory in favor of other kinds of cultural icons.

This dynamics results into a more transversal, grass-rooted outcome : accepting at the same level of cultural influence with Moliere, Racine ,Goethe or Cervantes, the existence of Celine Dion and Beyonce, of Louise Bourgeois and Jeff de Koons, of the Japanese mangas and urban graffiti.

It is only with the price of this compromise that the former domination of traditional European cultural identities will survive and impact globally. This is only possible, however, because the cultures we speak about are already embedded in the universally accepted treasury of legitimate cultural values. They are already global.

It is not the case of Romanian artists or intellectuals that have not gained, by living abroad, international recognition. When , in 2006, in MOMa (The Museum of Modern art in New York) an important DADA exhibit featured Tristan Tzara , Marcel Iancu and Victor Brauner, they were all presented as only 'born Romania". Also, Brancusi or Eugene Ionesco are presented worldwide under the same label, while Eminescu, Creanga, Blaga or Grigorescu (some of the major Romanian cultural national emblems) are only known by specialists.

This means Romania can only go global today with the arts of today. Film maker Cristian Mungiu(Palme d'Or in Cannes), visual artists Mircea Cantor and Parjovschi (both presented by Palais de Tokyo in 2004 and MoMa in 2007-2008) , writers Mircea Cartarescu and Norman Manea are Romanian voices integrated in the global chorus. But not as a response to globalization, but as a direct result of it. They are successful in the global culture . Hence, their representative status as Romanians.

² White paper on intercultural dialogue, Strasbourg, CoE, 2008, May

In conclusion, challenging globalization through European national cultures has, on the one hand, a different meaning for culturally 'iconic' nations, like France or Germany, as compared to culturally 'confined' countries, like Romania. On the other hand, the globalization effect finally allows the democratization of the culturally legitimating process, of which the first to benefit are smaller European nations. Painters, musicians and writers coming from 'confined' cultures can finally reach audiences at the same level with the ones coming from 'iconic' ones. Of course, the only thing sacrificed in the process is what one normally calls **representative** national specificity, otherwise said, the very notion of culture closed inside its past, legitimate, acquisitions and non willing to confront the global, open, arena. From this perspective, the way in which intercultural dialogue can be perceived is similar to a way to artificially keep alive a long gone idea of national culture, able to prolong the resistance to the natural process of democratized dissemination of cultures engendered by globalization.

This, again, might be an argument in favor of better understanding why, in a country like Romania, intercultural dialogue as such is vividly supported more by the conservative layers of cultural intelligentsia than by the cosmopolite, young, very much 'go global' generation of artists and intellectuals, who are naturally intercultural.

Thus, in the Romanian case, the intercultural existence is legitimizing in itself. It is, in fact, the key to being culturally legitimate. In the French or German or Spanish case, the intercultural existence is only valued as long as national specificity is still recognized and respected. For smaller European cultures, challenging the global environment means becoming as much as possible part of it. For traditionally representative European cultures it means resisting as much as possible to be fully integrated, in order to remain unique.

One could conclude over the paradox that smaller cultures are, hence, more adapted to the multiple identity matrix, so typical for the modern, connective, cultural paradigm. And also, that there are, as formerly pointed out, two different ways in which European countries position themselves toward intercultural dialogue as a way to resist or/and reinforce globalization.

This brings us to a second issue to be tackled: defining intercultural dialogue as a means to reinforce European identity. Or, what is European identity in the case of a country like Romania?

How much of the values integrated and practiced in the day to day life by the western European societies are part of today's Romanian way of life?

The rash and irregular privatization process, the difficult rebuilding of the education and medical systems after their collapse in the 90's and their transformation into more and more

private practices, the weakening sense of confidence regarding the state's capacity to regulate the soft sectors of the social fabric and to be an important balancing stakeholder for individual and collective welfare are indicators that Romania is today more of a mixed socio political landscape than one would want to accept, closer to a savage liberal pattern than to what traditional democracies are in Europe.

This misfit between a given cultural historic background and a juxtaposed , ad-hoc economic system that emerged after the fall of communism had developed into redefining the Romanian social and cultural identity according to external and internal indicators that are rarely similar with the ones shared by older EU members.

What kind of reinforcement of European identity can result from a contradictory and often deeply unsettling differences of views regarding what is Europe and what kind of Europe one desires to build from the Romanian or German or Finnish perspective? How do the years of communist propaganda, briskly followed by years of over consumerism play inside the same ground with the prosperous reality of the post second ww years as lived by European Western societies? Can intercultural dialogue alone fill in the gap of the important decalage between so different existential and economic, social and political practices of the last 50 years in an ideologically split Europe? Of course, the answer is no.

However, intercultural dialogue does gain an important dimension for Romania as soon as we address a third element related to this broad topic. This is the process and actors implied by democracy building itself. Living in diversity means accepting to cohabitate within a very special tension provided and entertained by difference . It means accepting to engage dialogue without compromising this difference. For nation-states living under systems that had dismissed any critical approach to the social norm, the exercise of intercultural dialogue becomes an important practice of democratic behaviors. Learning how to live inside a society and inside relations that only can exist in a logic of perpetual renegotiation of the freedom of choice of each of the partners means learning to live democratically. Or, this is the very critical, underdeveloped , domain of all post communist societies. How to accept to live within a social system where the choices of the other might not be yours, but you still have to share with him the same cultural space, in a broad sense .

From this point of view, the National program launched by Romania in 2008³ tries to reflect (at least on paper) some action lines that are supposed to address this issue more than others and participate as broadly as possible in the self reflexive effort needed in order to continue developing awareness regarding the matter. Called **Puzzle**, the Romanian National program dedicated to the year of intercultural dialogue covers areas as : public debate in different

³ <http://www.dialog2008.ro/puzzle>

Romanian cities, intercultural projects developed between different ethnic urban communities of Bucharest, a platform of reflection regarding the historical dimensions of intercultural dialogue, a musical compound realized in collaboration with Jeunesse Musicales Roumanie, etc. However, in a country where the information and impact of it consists of internet, television and has no longer the regional cultural life that used to exist, for propaganda reasons, in provinces, the program, even though correctly focused, risks to be less effective than needed. Also, the eclectic character of events , venues and cities involved does not help a coherent and sustainable outcome.

Technically responding to the requirements of the EU broad policy line in the direction of reinforcing intercultural dialogue, the Romanian national program is one of the many worthy , but scarcely productive initiatives in the direction of keeping the issue alive, more than making it work.

But can and should one expect more?

Probably yes, but only after several years of organic appropriation of intercultural practice, understood , as formerly demonstrated, more as a democratic must than a EU formal imposition.