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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective
Identities*

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Mediacommunicative discourse and identity crisis: EU and USA.

Today one of the most discussed questions is the crisis of identity. This problem is popular both among scholars and publicity, which means that there are a lot of approaches to the question. We suppose that one of the key moments in the research of this crisis is connected with media discourse and two types of identity – ‘open and closed’. Our hypothesis is that in the conditions of information society communicative discourse formed by significant media event is a trigger and so called litmus paper for the reveal of the break lines in the collective identity structure (national and supranational). Taking into account the dichotomy of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ identity, we can see that if information streams in the media communicative discourse don’t come into conflict with traditional elements of identity, this discourse becomes effective mechanism of further development of identity. Whereas it enters into controversy with these elements it provokes a conflict between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ types of identity and allow to reveal the key lines of the break.

The invasion in Iraq can be regarded as one of the most remarkable events in the beginning of 21 century that produced communicative discourse in the Western society. The research of the information streams connected with this war is fruitful for the attempt to prove our hypothesis and to model the mechanisms of European and Northern American identities development.

Globalization, informational revolution, triumph of innovation, virtualization of various social practices, flourishing of postmodern sign culture are rapidly forming new social reality. Its potential is enormous, but possible risks are also big. The world of informational over-saturation, eclectic interpretations and “sustainable uncertainty” comes up to take place of habitual, conscious order. J. Hobsbawm colorfully remarked that all these change are usually perceived «as symptoms of social disorientation, of the fraying, and sometimes the snapping, of the threads of what used to be the network that bound people together in society», as the forerunners of «the darkness into which we may fall when the landmarks which seem to provide an objective, a permanent, a positive delimitation of our belonging together, disappear».¹

«Catastrophic» emotional experience of modernity is not a new phenomenon. But in the beginning of XXI century it is connected with really particular reasons. In the conditions of radical renewal of the whole system of social relation all the habitual motives, moral norms and ideological values are losing their significance. As T. Luckmann noticed: «individual grows up in the world, where is no more common values, which determine in different spheres of life, and no single reality identical for everybody».² Thus the sustainable feeling of identity crisis appears in the society. It is the feeling of value disorganization, collapse of social nets, fatal decline of public institutions role, which are urged to preserve succession of cultural traditions and historical experience. One

of the leading British sociologists Z. Bauman claims that: «these days patterns and configurations are no longer ‘given’, let alone ‘self-evident’; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers. And they have changed their nature and have been accordingly reclassified: as items in the inventory of individual tasks. Rather than preceding life-politics and framing its future course, they are to follow it (follow *from* it), to be shaped and reshaped by its twists and turns».³

The crisis of identity is one of the most polemic topics of scientific and social agenda. It has attracted new wave of attention to the factors of identity design and identity nature itself. All diversity of points of view on identity phenomenon can be classified into three major methodological approaches: instrumentalism, constructivism and primordialism. The polemics of their representatives reflects not only scientific aspects, but also the presence of absolutely different public views on the borders of personal existence and nature of interaction between individual and society.

Primordialism regards identity as original and fundamental biogenetic and biosocial unity. All the advocates of this conception (e.g. C. Lévi-Strauss or M. Foucault) suppose that identity is built by historically implanted cultural patterns. Ontological approach to identity means that in the condition of identity crisis primordialism leads to the establishment of so called ‘closed’ type of identity.

Whereas constructivism and instrumentalism are certain alternative to primordialism, as both of the paradigms are much more situational in their appraisal of identity basement. Instrumentalism is some how milder in its esteem of imaginary roots of identity. Identity is first of all a social function that is used as a method of social therapy and a way of constructing stable society. Instrumentalism inherited to managerial revolution (J. Burnham) and the systems theory (T. Parsons, T. Luckmann), but also it is the result of the development of Welfare state and rapid rise of state role. Instrumentalism let government regard identity both as mechanism and object: as the way of ruling and the object of social policy. Taking this into account we can say that instrumentalism is based on the idea of ‘closed’ identity, as it is effective only within this type of identity.

Constructivism can be considered as more radical in this opposition. Identity in constructivism is a designing of particular image and variety of cultural symbols which can become the basis of society unification. Identity is similar to ‘imaginary community’, limited by myths, ideas and believes. So we can say that constructivists (E. Hobsbawm, F. Barth) define identity as the process of social self-

categorization within the common borders of cultural codes. Methodologically constructivism is connected to the symbolic interactionism (G. H. Mead) and the theory of social interchange (A. Giddens, J. Habermas). Unlike primordialism and instrumentalism constructivism is directed to 'open' type of identity.

Two types of identity, mentioned above, are primarily connected with personal identity, but lead to appropriate aspects of national and supranational identities. Concepts of 'closed' and 'open' identity can be defined by their designing mechanism and attitude to the 'Other'. The 'closed' type of identity means traditional type of thinking. It is not able to intensive participation in communicative processes and to revision of preconceived ideas. It is obvious that people of such identity regard the 'Other' as the 'Stranger' and as a result they form 'closed social space'. The 'open' type is the type of dialogue, which is formed in the process of interaction within the information space. This identity type doesn't reject or seize the 'Other'; people of 'open' identity include the 'Other' in their communication discourse and form 'open social space' consequently.

It shows us that the problem of identity is caused by the innovative nature of informational society, which continuously makes both person and society to lose and reconstruct one's identity. 'Closed' type is unable to do this, which leads to critical situation within nation and makes designing of supranational space at least artificial or even impossible. These two types of identity assume two different ways of reaction to the various triggers. In the conditions of 'open society' this 'irritant' can become the basis for the communicative action and sense-constitutive element of the development of national and supranational identity systems. In case of 'closed society' its reaction on trigger directly depends on the actual political state of affairs and the will of the political establishment. In the context of the informational society media-content appears to be one of the most efficient triggers.

This year is 10-year anniversary of the American invasion into Iraq and the beginning of the 'shock and awe' operation devoted to overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime. The formal ground for this incident was the threat of the weapons of mass destruction creation. 10-year period separating us from this event let us, on the one hand, look back at the invasion agenda in historical retrospective review, on the other hand, extend the thread of meaningful correlation with nowadays. In other words we are continuing to live in the conditions of socio-cultural and political consequences of this event, but at the same time we have possibility to regard it as the historical fact.

The invasion of the American troops into Iraq and media wars, displayed around the event, became the basement for the formation of particular socio-communicative environment. This environment

actualized the crisis of American national and All-European supranational systems of identity, which revealed itself in the middle of the 1990s. The invasion also became the filter, 'litmus paper' for the checking of the adequacy of the political establishment's perception of the identity system basis and its ability for the effective self-reproduction.

The consensus foundation of the media-message for both American and European society became universally recognized theme of the defense of 'the fundamental liberal values' and the menace to 'the western democracy'. In the American variant this cocktail was amplified with the idea of 'rescue of the oppressed' and 'messianic providentialism'.

The collapse of twin towers and the following declaration of war to the world terrorism roused American society and caused the rise of patriotic sentiments. The majority of the Americans supported the President's announcement of the 'war on terrorism'. The country was in the splash of patriotic feelings. As S. Huntington remembered: «[national] flags were seen far and wide – on the houses, in the offices, in the cars, in the windows, on the fronts, on the lampposts and the phone antennas, even on the furniture and on the clothes».⁴

However the patriotic euphoria didn't last for long. Paul Krugman wrote that «Terrorism brought Mr. Bush immense personal popularity, as the public rallied around the flag; but the helium has been steadily leaking out of that balloon».⁵ The loss of George W. Bush's personal popularity and the elections of 2004 proved that.

As a result, in spite of the public-political rhetoric (messianism, democratic values, freedom, providentialism), Iraq media-cause contributed to the polarization of the American society. The reason of this situation is implanted in the contradictory character of the American national identity and socio-cultural dynamics of the previous decade.

Over several decades American society was in the condition of growing sociocultural differentiation. And this process was connected with both intense immigration waves, and speed up transformation of the whole industrial social system. Inevitable in such conditions crisis of national self-consciousness was significantly compensated by the 'liberal consensus'. This consensus meant intentional devotion to 'true values' of the American life style, the feeling of own historical chosenness, the presence of appropriate image of enemy (these were the categories that were appealed by American political establishment and mass media in the events of the beginning of 2000s).

Thus the fundamental contradiction was in the compensatory character of American national identity system. Multicultural 'openness' of social structure, its pluralistic, mobile and reflective character

coexisted with 'mythologicalized' ideas about environment and this structure was oriented to 'close' type of identity.

The effect of patriotic nation unity caused by the agenda of the beginning of the 2000s and the following media war turned to be soon spent. As a result Iraq media trigger became the very 'litmus paper' to mark that 'mythologicalized' messianism is unsteady foundation for the designing the strategy of national consolidation and that the future of American project generally depends on the new strategy searching.

Europe appeared to be in the epicenter of the media agenda connected with the pre-invasion discussions and American invasion itself. This media trigger called the multilevel reaction: official All-European, official national and public responses. The European Parliament released a resolution opposing unilateral military aggression of the United States against Iraq.⁶ So the official position of the European Union was to defend peace, democracy and respect for human rights and international law. On the national level recently united Europe split up into Great Britain, Spain, Italy, along with Poland and the other states of 'New Europe' and those from 'Old Europe' who refused to support the USA in Iraq war (France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg). We can't deny that it has deepened the gap between Anglo-Saxon and the continental countries of Western Europe as well as the gap between Western Europe and the new members in Middle and Eastern Europe. This gap on the national level was not caused by Iraq media trigger, but was a reflection of the deeper conflicts on institutional issues, financial questions and following enlargement.

While official position towards Iraq situation was controversial, public opinion was much more united. Protest level against the United States foreign policy was unexampled and obviously specified by the development of informational society. A series of protests and political events that had begun in 2002 reached its climax on the February 15 in 2003. According to the BBC News from 6 to 10 million people in sixty countries took part in this protest action. The largest protest movement was fixed in Europe, where millions of citizens came outside to oppose American invasion into Iraq.⁷ It is important to note that protest actions were held also in those European countries that supported the USA.

This rise of anti-war public movement caused not less unique event. On the initiative of German philosopher and European intellectual Jürgen Habermas leading European newspapers published a 'Manifesto' – series of the articles written by major European and American intellectuals and calling for the 'Renaissance of Europe'. The project included articles of J. Habermas and J. Derrida⁸, U. Eco⁹, A. Muschg¹⁰, R. Rorty¹¹, F. Savater¹², G. Vattimo¹³. Common idea of the 'Manifesto' was that the Europeans reaction towards Iraq event

contributed to the 'birth of European public' and raised the issue of the 'European identity'.

Somehow we can say that within communicative discourse formed by Iraq war event instrumental approach to identity on the supranational official level coincided with unconscious constructivism approach on the All-European public level. It can be explained by the fact that European citizens found themselves in the situation then they had to define their fundamental values and they appeared to be identical to the principles fixed in key EU document (Treaties, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and etc.) Even the survey of Eurobarometer showed the change in the rate of European identity feeling in 2003 Spring: 4% feel only European (+1), 8% feel European first and citizens of their own country second (+1) and, finally, 44% feel citizens of their own country first and European second (-5) (figures in brackets show the difference with the previous year).¹⁴ The change is not great, but significant.

Nevertheless the conflict appeared between national and supranational levels of reaction proved the doubts about the degree of designing of the European supranational identity. Several years later even J. Habermas wrote that: "on the question about the existence of something like European identity we have to answer negatively. But the question itself is formulated wrongly. The issue is about the conditions that are necessary to be kept so that citizens could expand their state-civil solidarity beyond the bounds of their national border for the expansion of mutual involving".¹⁵

Consequently we can conclude that for the United States the communicative discourse formed around the Iraq campaign of 2003 became in a sense of verification of the national model effectiveness, while for Europa it became the occasion to revise over the nature and possibilities of the supranational identity design. Despite the external differences in primary results, the existing discourse showed the deep and system character of the contradictions in the mechanisms of forming and functioning of both American and All-European identities. The nature of pointed contradictions is connected with the confrontation of 'open' and 'closed' types of identities. Pretending to own and in a way having the structure of open multicultural society both the USA and the EU are inwardly oriented to the 'closed' type of identity (sensitive to institutional ways of influence). Any export of democratic values asks for 'open' type of collective identity. Exporting their own values, both the USA and the EU create the ground for communicative interaction with the 'Other', but appear not ready for it.

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