

Date: February 2001

Title: Ethnic tolerance and the culture of communication

Location: Balkan Media Conference, Sofia

By Univ. Prof. Dr. Thomas A. Bauer

---

The main goal of our work is to show that the dream for ethnic peace in the Balkans is not only feasible, but - after almost ten years - a real and attainable horizon. We mainly rely on freedom of expression, on media legislation and media culture.

Freedom, as a whole, leads to a higher quality standard of living and is based on tolerance. Freedom of expression is also the path to securing peaceful social atmosphere, it is a method for realizing political and cultural morals and in that sense it is a way for overcoming differences and confrontations, even basic contradictions in thinking. Incidentally, this freedom is nothing more than a fundamental human right and has nothing to do with sophisticated arrogance or social opulence.

Public consensus is meaningful today and it is achieved through cultural diversity. There is one factor that gives meaning and new content to the positive ideas for peaceful mutual existence. It is called the FUTURE. Those people who are afraid of 'alienation' search for their welfare and identity in the past. Such a view of life generates feelings of anxiety, anger and depression. Focusing on the past becomes an obstacle to learning. Those people who are searching for their career, identity and place in the world in the future should open their eyes and minds, develop interests in new areas of human knowledge and have no fear of contradictions thus working out their way in life in an emancipated manner.

Let us first establish the place of peace in the multiethnic society, then look for the possibilities of cultivating a peaceful social climate and finally present our ideas in the context of the media and information society.

## **1. The Dialectic Challenge**

The starting point in our search for roads, leading to a solution for ethnic conflicts, has definitely a dialectic nature. The existing ethnic intolerance calls for the establishment of a culture of peace. And this process should take into account the fragility of the existing tolerance. Tolerance towards others has always been connected with one's own stability, with the nature of one's relations with neighboring countries, which we approach at different levels and in a different thematic context, somewhere between the poles of proximity and distance. To gain a closer understanding of 'the other', it is sometimes necessary to be in close proximity to them to realize the need for distance.

The dialectic challenge in the light of the question ‘Which is the road from ethnic intolerance to ethnic peace?’ extends even further: we all know that there *are* ways for overcoming conflicts and this is through communication.

The problem is that what constitutes the ‘goal’ and the ‘solution’ is the same as how to achieve it and how to get there. The goal determines which road to be taken, while the road to its achievement is determined by the truth and quality of the goal. So there is no place for speculation, lies or rhetorical dramas. Clarity, integrity, tolerance, readiness to accept differences and diversities constitute the principles of communicative ethics. These are also the criteria by which we can measure its achievement.

There is also another peculiarity of the interrelationship between the goal and the road to securing peace. As the goal determines the road, so the road determines the goal: the goal is itself the road. The goal determines the road which has no ‘resting places’ and which is practically endless.

These more or less philosophical assumptions of the dialectic nature of peace-making efforts are, if nothing else, the moral conditions for modeling the culture of ethnic understanding. Solutions lie where problems are. And also: problems are an expression of what has never been solved or is about to be solved. Furthermore, there is too much speculation; there are too many cultural lies and rhetorical dramas that have been mixed into the cultural delineation of ethnic features and the definition of ethnic identity.

If we assume that solutions lie where problems are, we also assume that problems can generate difficulties in identifying and developing solutions. Problems and their solutions are two sides of the same coin. The solutions are found by clarifying the problems. The process of finding solutions to problems is related to our ability to make judgments: which problems we can shoulder, and our ability to see in these problems a challenge and a chance, not a burden.

Problems cannot be uprooted but they are a challenge to change our viewpoints: in the case regarding ethnic conflicts, the challenge is to change the way we look at others and ourselves. Problems are also a challenge to our understanding of life conditions in a new paradigm.

## **2. New Paradigms**

The paradigm of ethnic intolerance is power as a means for violent differentiation between one’s own group and that of others, and power as a strategy for survival, powerlessness being the condition for the existence of others. Such a climate encourages the development of destructive conflicts, mutual hatred, arrogance, and intolerance in the social and cultural relations of neighboring peoples. The relations between neighbors, marked by such feelings, can serve as a compensation for low self-esteem in the environment of cultural similarity. Sometimes in the eyes of the stranger, ethnic groups in the Balkans seem culturally very similar, or they have been forced to become as such,

so that the desire to be different, to have ‘a face of one’s own’ and achieve cultural autonomy is far greater than the existing space and resources allow.

The paradigm of peace requires autonomy. Autonomy is not just a political and organizational status, but first of all a way of thinking and a way of cultural self-determination. Autonomy is a psychological condition for partnership. It makes social sensitivity and empathy possible. Being oneself allows you to be generous towards the identity of others. Autonomy stimulates the development of identity, individuality and constructive interest in the surrounding cultural and social milieu, as well as curiosity about the other. In this socio-psychological context, autonomy is not a question of political structures, but of spirituality and a way of thinking; it is an integral part of authenticity.

Authenticity is an expression of, but also a condition for constructing and shaping identity. Identity consists of what I think of myself (“I” - identity) and of what the others think of me (“me” - identity). So the attitude of others is an important determining factor in the formation of subjectivity and individuality, especially when there are relations of similarity, neighborhood and rivalry. When this sense of identity and uniqueness is absent, lost over time or threatened by lies, stereotypes and masks, the ability to communicate is destroyed and suffocated to such an extent that one is unable to escape from the vicious circle of self-deception, self-harm, lies and violence towards others. In this case, one needs help from outside, one needs mediation in order to find a position for meta-communication and realize that destruction of others means self-destruction.

And so, in our search for roads to peace, we can all recall this decisive and consolidating factor, which is called communication. Empathy and authenticity, respect for oneself and others are the two sides of the same coin: identity - consciousness. Identity is one of the conditions and at the same time one of the consequences, which determine the quality of communication.

### **3. Communication for what?**

But what is communication and what is it for? What do we mean by communication and understanding and what do we mythologize with these terms? Without taking a critical stance, we usually adopt a communication model, which assumes that communication has achieved its goal when we reach a stage of mutual understanding. And normally we think everything is in order when both partners in communication come to the decision to look at things from the same point of view.

We learn - living in societies, which organize and arrange the problem of power through hierarchies of competence - which communication has to succeed as a model of congruence. This model works only with a classification of regulated and accepted distribution of power. As far as communication is a model for constructing reality and meaning, we have learned through it to adopt as a model for constructing this reality the one that seeks congruence and correspondence. We have learned to accept this situation

as the natural order of the universe. But what happens when relations are broken, when there is no interest in regulating and constructing such classifications of competence or when our desire to understand the other has disappeared, when it is not the paradigm of love but that of hatred?

Then the model of correspondence and sensitivity in communication reaches its theoretical and practical limits. Facing the reality where communication can always take place or fall through, we can always assume that communication has the power to create correspondences and interrelations along with differences and confrontations, to establish clear, purified and purifying structures along with chaos, disorder and mayhem.

If we attempt to theorize this contradictory nature in order to establish a functional model for the analysis of ethnic communication, and also taking into account that social reality is a result of communication, where failure can lead to success and success to failure, we should view communication as a resource of surprise, probably the only one left in this highly organized world around us.

The dynamic power of communication is based on non-linear, even chaotic energy, due to its biotic structure. It contains both the teleology of success and the potential for failure, but in principle there is no determination. This hampers all attempts to mechanize communication in the name of specific goals, but creates the challenge of creative and conscious control of communication. Communication as an agent of social change promotes public life, creating differences and unexpected viewpoints.

There is certain teleology of peace in communication but it lacks determination. Peace can be secured by seeking congruence and correspondences, but also by finding and protecting differences.

#### **4. Unity through difference**

So, what can we learn from this theoretical analysis of the question: How can the Balkan region overcome ethnic intolerance and secure ethnic peace? And what is the role of communication in this process?

##### First: Peace creates difference

Constructing differences in social signification of reality, and the modeling of a peaceful world can be as important as establishing consensus and correspondences. Under the conditions of multi-ethnicity, multi-culturality and multi-religiosity dissent and difference are not a catastrophe, but a source for enriching cultural creativity and a challenge for promoting cultural discussion.

When the desire to be different, as in the case of the Balkans, has been repressed for a long time by excessive insistence on equality and even uniformity, or by the tensions between the hopeless poverty of the individual citizen and a powerful and exploiting aristocracy, or by struggles for hegemony between leading oligarchies, then in the

democratic framework, it should be assumed that differentiation and difference have more appeal to the formation of new ethnic and cultural identity than similarity.

So the process of defining the notion of ethnic difference requires a lot of sensitivity. It is simply a social construct made up of cultural, religious, and even national and political peculiarities.

That is why the first stage of the long-term and consistent peace-making work should provide enough 'breathing space' for differences. National self-evaluation has a 'therapeutic' value. It helps nations regain their dignity and be accepted by others.

### Second: Peace needs Mediation

The road from confrontation of cultures to unity of cultures is through accepting diversity. This road is trans-cultural communication. To become aware of the need for mutual trans-cultural attention, the Balkans need help. They do not need the help of people who know better, but the help of people who have gone through the same experience. On the one hand, helping means to give enough support to provide space for structural development. On the other hand, there is the need of mediation.

Mediation is a strategy for providing space for the expression of views, which expose conflicts, but do not impose solutions, aiming to make indoctrination and narrow positions visible.

Mediation also attempts to empower the motivation for cultural and social interrelations to build platforms for exchange of different views in the name of finding joint solutions.

Mediation is an idea to provide conditions for ethnic and cultural groups to find their way to intercultural respect. Ethnic peace means also to live with differences and learn from them, to become aware that this world of cultural diversity is protected better by communication and mutual exchange than by isolation and separation.

There is a debate over the role of media in the democratic society. It is often said that the journalists' obligation is simply to inform and give opinions, and not to educate according to their own views.

### Third: Multi-discourse understanding

In this context, the crucial role of the media should be stressed once again. The media have assumed more or less consciously an important role in public mediation, maybe even more than politicians are able to.

The media are not just a means for exchanging ideas, information or views. They are a platform for sharing opinions and for constructing social reality. They observe different parts of the world and so they are closely interconnected. They are linked in a global market that anybody can visit, regardless of their cultural, ethnic or social affiliation.

The media generate intercultural communication; intercultural communication promotes a multi-discourse understanding of the world and one's own position in it. The power of the media lies in their mediating role. They teach us that conflicts and crises are solved through communication. They focus the attention of others on us, especially when these others constitute a threat to our interests.

Differences, failures, crises, surprises and conflicts are just 'the other side of the coin' of mutual communication, which should be included in the development of the communication society.

The chance for peace lies with the communication society. And the chance for peace in the Balkans is to integrate all ethnic and cultural groups along with their need for self-presentation. A democratic communication society must allow for crises, conflicts and failures in its self-presentation and interaction; otherwise it will be organized technically just as a technology-society would be.

The aim of technology is to achieve perfection by eliminating all sources of failure. The aim of communication is to create a world where people can live and where imperfection also has its place.

To put it more clearly: I believe in the power of the media as long as the media are the source and the means for constructing reality, just as science, arts and politics are. The reality created by the media is both a means for examining one's own identity and for understanding others. The discourse, which excludes the media, also called the everyday discourse, is to a great extent a supplement to media culture and is equally related to politics, economy and other sectors.

So my hope is that the media discourse is turning ethnic discourse into a forum of conflicting viewpoints and thus provides the premises for creating cultural differences, but also mutual understanding. Intercultural communication is the challenge for creating a multi-phrenic world. The search for peace and how it is linked to the media calls for the development of a media infrastructure, and even something more: to rethink the role of the media in the process of transposing every-day discourses into their media counterparts.

#### Fourth: Initiatives for Emancipation

Societies are in general self-referential systems. They possess internal dynamics. They possess competence even when they are short of resources for rational development. In times of totalitarian regimes, the know-how of emancipation was growing. In times of freedom, this know-how has to be developed. There are several institutions and organizations in the sector of culture, communications and the media in the Balkans that work according to this strategy.

In this context, it is a remarkable fact that, for ten years now, one institution has been working for the culture of peace, utilizing its experience in the field of media and communications. This is the Balkan Media Association, which has founded and now runs the Balkan Media Academy. This organization has established its own competence, its own critical perspective and has attracted international support, analyzing media culture in the Balkans and providing education to professionals who work in the media and media organizations in the whole Balkan region, including various ethnic, cultural and social groups. The Balkan Media Academy sets an example of cooperation between professionals and international institutions aimed to establish peace-making structures. Training of journalists and PR-experts who learn to use the media as a means of mediation which brings people together, especially in the context of conflicts, intolerance and hatred, is a very important investment in democracy and peace.

I would like to use this occasion to thank all the people who worked with a tremendous personal commitment and faith in transforming this idea into an important international project. I would also like to express my gratitude to the people and the representatives of international, European and national institutions who provided encouragement and support to the BMA, and at the same time showed understanding of the different ways in

which the Balkans work. Let us hope that other institutions will lay the foundations of a whole new school of thought in the Balkans.

#### Last but not least: the Balkans as a synonym for the Future

The culture of interior peace in the Balkan region is related to and somehow dependent on the attitude and even stereotypes, which Europeans still have about the Balkan people. To Europeans, the identity of the Balkans is related, on the one hand, to the way they affirm and construct their own identity and, on the other hand, it is a strategy to keep the Balkans at a distance. To shorten this distance, organizations are sometimes inclined to substitute the name of the Balkans with a new mask, called 'Southeastern Europe' or at least with a name which is free of stereotypes and does not invoke a problematic image. The history of the Balkans gives many opportunities to equate this name with unpredictability, fickleness, internal strife and impenetrability. This image makes it difficult to make friends and form alliances. And of course, this is very important in the present state of transition when the Balkans need support. Still, with regard to what I tried to emphasize in my analysis, I cannot find a psychological nor sensible reason in renouncing the term 'the Balkans'. History is a part of our present and future. The authenticity of the future depends on mastering the past. Besides, 'Southeastern Europe' is a purely technical and economic term, while 'the Balkans' is a cultural symbol. If it is important for other European countries to place trust in the Balkans, then Europe needs to be given the chance to change its understanding of the name rather than replace one label with another. But first, it is necessary for the Balkans to appreciate the importance of this name for the future. Perhaps, the Balkans should place an emphasis on their creativity and their strength of mind. The decision to use this name as the name of the future is a challenge to openness, clarity, fraternity and good neighboring relations. It is also a chance to show that the Balkans do not conform to the stereotypes, which will increase Europe's interest towards this region more than ever, an interest towards a region with its own unique destiny and identity. Such growth in Europe's interest towards the Balkans will contribute to the feedback, which can be reinvested in the search for intercultural interaction in this multiethnic region. There is no reason to be ashamed of the Balkan identity, even if it is burdened with history, when we intend to rebuild it from inside out. If we renounce our identity by putting on a new mask, there is no guarantee that it will undergo real purification. Exactly because Europeans have such a strong stereotype of unpredictability of the Balkans, convince by confusing them. As John Tucker says: "If you can't convince them, confuse them."