

NATIONAL IDENTITY – THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to present identity in relation to an individual, territory, nationality and to determine relations between them. The notion of national identity was explained as identification with ones homeland understood as a community of fundamental national values. The elements that link an individual with his or her nation were also described.

Key words: culture, region, national identity, homeland, nation

Individual's identity has recently been one of the most widely analyzed categories of social sciences. Contemporarily, it is recognized by various scientists from different disciplines of social sciences as the most significant term in all the concepts related to the issue of defining human existence. In the era of increasingly stronger cultural diffusion processes, the feeling of continuity in time, either in an individual dimension i.e. the feeling of belonging to cultural groups in the supra-individual dimension, becomes a crucial field of human description [1]. The key element of any human consciousness is self-esteem, the tendency to explore oneself and wonder about oneself. This kind of self-esteem includes reflection upon oneself as an individual, but also upon the community that one is a member of [2]. Individual's identity is a crucial element of a person's proper and harmonious functioning in every dimension. It constitutes a unity that develops and reinforces in the course of a human being's development.

Identity is the category that connects an individual with the oldest collectivity he or she is a member of. An individual always determines his or her importance, uniqueness and distinctiveness by comparing to the community he or she belongs to and relating to its cultural values. According to the research conducted by anthropologists, sociologists and social psychologists, national identity belongs to the most important (due to its axiological significance) and durable forms of collective identity. Leon Dyczewski defines collective identity as „a similar manner of understanding, experiencing, behaving and acting by the group members within the contemporary living generation as well as many previous generations” [3].

Territorial identity is an emotional feeling of human identification on the particular territory with its landscape, population, material and spiritual artifacts of culture. This way of defining territorial identity does not exclude selecti-

vity of the identity objects. It means that an individual can identify oneself only with some human categories or landscape elements. On the other hand, however, every person can identify oneself with many territories of various sizes and shapes. Those territories can overlap each other, have common parts or inseparable parts (often this phenomenon pertains to emigrants) [4]. One identifies oneself with many societies and communities to a variable extent. A human being is placed or alone places oneself within those various social relations, not dedicating oneself completely to only one, but deriving certain elements of one's self-identity from each relation [5]. All those elements derived from various relations, together with different psychological factors, constitute individual's identity [6]. According to sociologists, collective local identity comprises greatly of specific relations and social bonds, the feeling of belonging to a particular community as well as to the designated territory [7].

National identity is a sense of belonging of oneself and others to a wider community called a nation through the awareness, acceptance and implementation of core values that constitute this nation. In other words, it is the identification with one's homeland, which is a community of core values of the particular nation. In most cases, nationality is not a matter of a free choice. Within the nation, the beliefs about the inseparable character of relations linking its members are shaped. Its source is often the view that a nation is a group with common ancestry [8]. The faith in the same blood has for centuries been a very strong factor influencing the stability and durability of social groups. The birth of a person from particular parents predestines him or her to certain social relations within the narrow groups, family and local groups and determines his or her participation in a wider group, i.e. a nation. Those genealogical relations are obviously always determined and designated by culture, however, as long as the group members believe

in and accept them, they are predestinated for them utterly. Most frequently, the factors predestinating a person to participate in a group are blood and land. Such synonyms as „homeland” and „fatherland” relate to both birthplace as well as to future generations [9].

Each individual and every community can be described on the basis of many characteristics (variables). Those characteristics have a different ontological status (complete, relational, individual, collective). Various connections between those characteristics constitute a mosaic with almost unlimited number of combinations. What can be distinguished is the „objective” identity i.e. independent of the consciousness of group members and its cultural features that differentiate this group from any other groups. The group can, but does not have to, be aware of the existence of such an objective difference. The next way of understanding national identity is of a totally different character. The „objective” criteria, which are external in relation to individual consciousness, do not pertain in this case. National identity in this sense is the acceptance of similarities between an individual and the national community. It can take the shape of the following argumentation: „I identify with (I am a member of) the particular group (nation), because I possess characteristics or relevant features of this particular group. The criteria of this kind of self-esteem can vary and they very often depend on the acquired knowledge about own nation and oneself. This kind of knowledge can take different emotional charging. Finally, identity can be understood as an utterly positive knowledge”. Identity, in this sense, is the same as identification with the national community. In this case, the attitude is more important than knowledge [10]. In order for an individual to develop and fulfill identity that is initially shaped by the family, primal groups, small local communities, he or she must rather clearly perceive the broader community, i.e. a nation. Its existence is connected with the presence of tradition, continuity and coherence of internal relations around its core values. The unity of the accepted values, meanings and senses inspires active expressions, organizes cognitive and emotional sphere and combats social dispersion. It is the reality with huge significance for constituting and functioning of individual’s identity. On the basis of this kind of feeling of unity, the communities that can be described as „independent” or „total” are formed, which engage all the spheres of individual’s personality and all the areas of their lives. This kind of community within huge social groups is called a nation [11].

Therefore, it is difficult to speak about full and stable individual’s identity without relating it to the values that constitute a nation. Nationality is still the basic or one of the most important identifying categories [12, 13]. Core values of the particular community are axes of crystalization

of its members’ national identity. It is therefore connected with the creation of this community in its basic, internal and conscious aspect by implementing common values of culture, where a nation is a subject, collective creator and transmitter. National identity is connected with the potential aspect of this community. National culture is the basis for the proper functioning of its social system, which is the field where the sense of „solidarity” is being institutionalized.

Core values, which support national identity, have a general character. Every generation of the national community’s members, and most of all its cultural and social elites, must pass, disseminate, reinterpret their sense and meaning in the current national situation. National identity can vary in the course of historical processes [13, 14]. In the periods of low national identity or its crisis, core values can be viewed more as potential ones, embedded in cultural contents, passed by a few, aware members of the national community. The values can be known, accepted and realized in small and narrow groups. They often revive and proliferate in situations which are difficult to anticipate, integrating the nation from the inside, which enables it to conduct supportive, collective activities. National identity of the national community’s members can be at some point placed within the continuum. One of its poles indicates full national identity characterized by the knowledge of all the nation’s core values, their inner experience, acceptance, recognition of them as one’s own and their implementation in all the spheres of an individual life. This kind of national identity is an ideal type. On the other pole, there are individuals for whom their homeland, nation and patriotism are of no value, they do not have or do not accept and implement the core, canonic values of national community within which they formally exist [15].

A nation is a group constituted by a social bond understood as the dependence between identification and cooperation. Due to its size, it is to a greater extent an „imagined” community. It is created by imagination, beliefs, attitudes of its members, whose correlates are the values attributed to their nation [16]. Those values relate to a widely understood cultural heritage, which is imagined, realized and experienced and is constantly shaping the way of thinking, experiencing and behaving of its members. Certain elements of cultural heritage, events, national heroes, items etc. have a great opportunity to become such values, which can become the subject of common images, feelings and attitudes [17]. The category of those values can be different for various nations. The fact that links them is the appreciation and respect of communities that are the subject of individual’s identification. Their catalogue depends on the cultural characteristics of the community, which shape and consolidate certain patterns of emotional reactions and attitudes. They form the image of a nation in the eyes of its

members. They are connected with the patterns that are officially presented for an individual by the group. Those values enable an individual to imagine and experience a nation as an actual completeness constituting „[...] a crystallization axis, which decides upon the existence of the community and changes a group of individuals, a social group or at least introduces to the existing community a new bond, which can utterly change its character [...]. The community, in its internal aspect, exists as a community only through images it takes in the consciousness of individuals that create it. In those images, a significant linking factor can be those external values attributed to a group. The background of those values is also shaped by a group” [18].

A nation is composed of individuals possessing a common homeland. The notion of a homeland is composed of „a complex and rich set of values playing a significant role in national culture and certain attitude towards one’s native territory is an inseparable element of this culture: inseparable in a sense that there would not be a reason to call a culture deprived of this element the national culture and the community of such a culture a nation. The image of a homeland is shaped by the content of psychological attitudes attributed to members of a nation in relation to its certain values. Among them, a universal element is a territory designated to the nation. The essence of this designation is ideological and convictional. The geographical designation does not have to match with an ideological one. Due to that, an essential element of a homeland is a territory possessed by a nation, not necessarily in a geographical sense, but definitely in an ideological sense” [16]. The terms „country” and „nation” bring similar associations because they relate to the social way of perceiving a relation between a community and the territory designated to it. Having a homeland means having the feeling of belonging to a nation, which has a certain territory. Therefore, belonging to a nation means that one feels the bond with one’s homeland. The land as a value has, therefore, a special significance in social beliefs, imaginations and attitudes, which are shaped by the nation’s cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage may consist of various elements. Their list can be different for every nation. Various elements of cultural heritage can be somehow „ideologised”, what makes them the components of national values’ canon [9]. This kind of ideologisation is possible with such elements of heritage that possess a special individual value and significance for the existence and development of a nation. They can then become the subjects of certain experiences and attitudes. In relation to them, the members of a nation reserve a special ownership and exclusiveness right as well as a specific attitude including the inheritance right and a moral obligation to pass it to the next generations. A nation can really exist only in human consciousness, in group beliefs. So cal-

led objective, moral foundations of a nation can constitute its ontological status only when they become the correlates of group beliefs, attitudes, moral obligations. Nations are usually permanent groups, resistant to the pressure from the foreign – often stronger politically and economically as well as more expansive culturally – nations and countries.

The ways of perceiving, assessing and behaving adopted in a particular environment define ultimately and completely the social situation of a person in some respect. In this particular case, they define the adherence to the nation. They are backed by moral imperatives with appropriate sanctions. However, if an individual identifies oneself with a nation, one treats them as obligatory. Of course, this common attitude to different values constituting the nation is only a postulate, the ideal model [6]. In reality, these attitudes are more varied, which causes that the assumed criterion of a bond cannot be easily translated into empirical indices. However, the very manner of visualizing a nation, the feeling of connection with its members, the impact of those beliefs on attitudes and behavior seem to have a significant relevance for individual’s national identity and so for the opportunities for further existence and development of a nation.

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