

DEVELOPING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE BALKANS: Convergence vs. Divergence

Centre for Southeast European Studies (Ghent)

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This international conference seeks to connect scholars and researchers working in multiple disciplines on two essential aspects of identity in the Balkans: cultural (and linguistic) identity as an anthropological concept on the one hand and as an ideological construct on the other.

If something like a Balkan cultural identity does exist, it must have resulted from a long and intensive process of ethnocultural interaction, consisting in the exchange of material, spiritual and cultural goods between different ethnic communities – very much in the same way the Balkan *Sprachbund* took shape through the extensive exchange of language materials. This process, characterised by contamination and hybridisation, may be termed ›convergence‹. The common historical fate of the Balkan peoples, their coexistence within the borders of the same empires (Byzantine, Ottoman) and exposure to similar cultural influences (Orthodox Christianity, Islam) have also contributed considerably to the emergence of this shared cultural identity – with a major, though probably overestimated divide along religious lines.

From the beginning of the 19th century onwards, a reverse development seems to take place, viz. the ideological construction of national cultural identities, aimed to be unique, undiluted, and as different as possible from the (perceived) identities of other, neighbouring communities. Here again, language appears both as an apt illustration and manifest exponent of what occurs: through the pursuit of a radically purist language policy, most Balkan languages were/are ›cleansed‹ of ›foreign‹ elements – for the purpose of creating ›pure‹ national languages. This process, centred around cultural homogeneity within specific state borders, may be characterised as ›divergence‹.

Undoubtedly, both developments are of a quite different nature. Whereas ›convergence‹ (as a more or less spontaneous process) mainly concerns popular culture, ›divergence‹ (which is largely a matter of social engineering) is usually situated at the level of *Hochkultur*. Also, ›convergencies‹ tend to be studied by linguists and cultural anthropologists, while ›divergencies‹ rather represent the object of historical, literary-imagological, and discourse analyses. Whatever the case may be, the fundamental contrast between – partly simultaneous – convergent and divergent tendencies in the development of Balkan cultural/linguistic identity, as indicated above, is an important determinative, not only in the markedly contradictory self-image of people in the Balkans, but also in the biased perceptions of Balkan society (societies) often held by external observers. In bringing together heterogeneous disciplines and lines of research (which, of course, fits the actual state of scholarly interest in the rich field of Balkan studies), this conference aims at elucidating the intriguing paradox which characterises the cultural situation in the Balkans and which, moreover, is of undeniable relevance for our understanding of recent political developments.

Papers are invited on any aspect of cultural identity in the Balkans, building on contrastive or comparative research from anthropological, linguistic, literary, historical, sociological or other perspectives. Papers on interdisciplinary topics are particularly welcome. Abstracts of no more than 500 words should be sent by e-mail or regular mail to Raymond Detrez.

Conference languages: English, French.

Keynote speakers:

Prof. Dr. Paschalis Kitromilidis (KNE, Athens)
Prof. Dr. Ger Duijzings (SSEES/UCL, London)
Prof. Dr. Bernard Lory (INALCO, Paris)