

Conceptual Reality: National Identity as Part of Ethical History

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of national identity as ‘acceptable reality’ from three different perspectives: individuals, the society as a whole, and the international community. National identity and the process of its formation has been a hot topic in various fields of social science. However, most of the academic researches of national identity usually employ atomistic perspective of a nation-territory-sovereignty axis imposed by a long lasting dominance of rationalist theoretical approaches. In the quest to define what is identity of a nation and how it has been developed, the nation itself was omitted in all its complexity and taken as a self-explanatory notion. The process of admission of a nation in the pantheon of ethical sovereigns precedes the process of conceptualization and historical foundation of national identity. Thus, who, why and how is accepting and being accepted, rather than what is the identity of a nation which will be proudly exposed in the showcase of Oscar winning ethical nations, or dumped in the field of unethical (histories/identities) golden raspberries. The case study analysis of several European countries confirms the main assumption of this study, stated: the national identity is recognized as such only as part of ethical history, which again will determine the scope and concept of nation itself. This implies that national identity does not exist independently before the process of ethicalization.

Keywords: national identity, ethical history, Tabula Rogeriana, poststructuralism

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Introduction

The social sector often blurs the straight lines drawn in the political domain. Once sovereign territory/state, citizens, laws and rights, enter the social jungle of imagined communities they become nation, people, customs and culture; once clear, precise, formal, and after that wide, contextual. Political reality is uniformed, and in the modern neoliberal world it does not differ much from country to country. Yet, as a tedious meal or a monotonous film, this is not something people would like to repeat in order to raise intrinsic awareness of their undeniable significance. Preferable cousin can be found in a local food market with abundance of traditional meals and connotations inherited unclear how and when, yet very delicious and usually full of 'national' flavor. As some food is good or bad so is the national identity as ethically conceptualized culture. In the abundance of different national identities at the international level, some are labeled as good and some as bad, hence some national identities are ethically acceptable or unacceptable.

The recent history witnesses the countless examples of the 'disfigurement' of national identities, where the double-headed eagle was plunged into a unicapitate, 'blondism' promulgated as a surrogate for Caucasian, books, documents and historical writings destroyed, languages re-coined, religions and customs imposed. Although it was previously considered that this was imposed by external factors, say colonial powers, it is now clear that even after the cessation of their influence, the process of exploitation of national identities has been continued by domestic elites, or paradoxically by the entire society, being completely irrational and self-destructive.

This study aims to explore some of the main factors of national identity and the reasons for approving a particular historical perspective as the core of national identity versus the inadequacy of others. Due to the nature and limitation of the text as a conference paper, the case study will include examples of only several European countries, from the Apennine and Balkan Peninsulas.

Definition of National Identity and Factors That Influence Its Formation

Definition of national identity is already restricted by the notion of 'national'. In that sense it is a conceptual reality constrained by the boundaries of the concept of nation-state and a relatively short history of its impact on the structures of the modern state. Therefore, the Henri Tajfel's attempt to define the national identity was through the category of social identity. He states that "the nature and contents of the myths accepted as 'true' or 'valid' by people belonging, or seeing themselves as belonging, to different social categories are strongly affected by the individual's location ('objective' and 'perceived') within the wider social system" (Tajfel, 1984, p. 696).

The national identity of a country depends to a large extent on the way it is understood at the international level, at the level of the society itself and from each individual. According to Pasi Saukkonen "national identity can either refer to the state's political identity, the nation's identity, or the question of how the individual identifies with the nation and/or the state" (Saukkonen, as cited in Pellander, 2013, p. 86). Yet, in order to know how, it is necessary to first define the framework of this identification, that is, to determine the basic factors of national identity. Based on the way in which these factors are interpreted, which mainly depends on the complexity

of the moral codes at all three levels of social structuring, one interpretation of national identity is accepted as morally appropriate, or rejected as morally inadequate. Due to the presence of the 'ethical moment', Benedict Anderson noted that people are willing even to die for their nations, which "came to be imagined, and, once imagined, modelled, adapted and transformed" (Anderson, 2006, p. 141).

Although it is considered that language and history are those that primarily determine the affiliation of an individual or group to a wider community, this study highlights the importance of some other factors as key determinants of national identity, namely: common symbols, folklore, religion, and physical appearance. When the language of a particular ethnic group is accepted as the official language of the nation and a certain historical narrative as the official history of the nation, national identity is automatically placed in a wider historical and civilization context, although the other four determinants indicate that this can be wrong.

Nations, together with their national identities, belong to a certain historical epoch; they "are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end" (Renan 1990, p. 20), in the same way in which the legacy of their common symbols, folklore, religion, language, history, even physical appearance is born and disappears. The selection of one interpretation of national identity does not imply the disappearance of others. Different interpretations of national identity are elements that give dynamics to a particular nation, its constantly present friction and as such a basis of development, whether it is progressive or regressive.

The next section will explore certain historical perspectives regarding the nations of the Apennine and the Balkan Peninsula and the reasons for their acceptance or rejection. The following analysis is limited to only a few nations from these regions and to one of the basic factors of national identity, in this case the name of the nation as a common symbol, and as such only a part of the extensive research that is already under way.

Tabula Rogeriana in the Context of National Identities of the Countries of the Apennine and Balkan Peninsulas

The starting point of understanding the national identity of a country is undoubtedly its name as one of the common symbols shared by a certain social group. Surprisingly, that is precisely what is least known. Not knowing the correct denotation and connotation of the subject, the meaning of the sentence becomes ambiguous similar to the cry of Polyphemus, saying 'Nobody hurt me'. Today, following the latest research in the field of genetic genealogy, it is obvious that every nation, as an ethnic category, contains several elements. However, in most countries no one can say with certainty what ethnic element constitutionally stands behind the name of the country and why.

One of the most important old maps dating from the twelfth century is Mohammed al-Idrisi's *Tabula Rogeriana* (Idrisi & Miller, 1928). Its romanized version had been created in the 1920s by the German naturalist, historian and cartographer Konrad Miller (Miller, 1926-27). The Miller's edition was published before the first romanization of Arabic by Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft in 1936. His style of romanization is very similar to the one used by Spanish Arabists School of the nineteenth-century. The way in which Miller converts Arabic characters into Latin,

using some letters that are not typical or do not exist in romanized Arabic [e.g. *š*, *e*], was very similar to the romanized Akkadian. Additionally, some of the toponyms look like a mix of Arabic and Akkadian [e.g. *ard al bab ua* (ak. – *babu* ~ gate) *al abuab* (ar. – *abwab* ~ door/gate)]. The geographers of the Muslim caliphates, and later those who followed the Balkhi school, drew on the works of their Greek and Roman predecessors, but incorporated, Persian, Akkadian (Rattenborg, 2018, p. 153; Karamustafa, 1992), Ugaritic, and perhaps direct source material as well. This is an important remark which together with historical assertion on the migration of Cimmerians and Goths (Jordanes, 1908, para. 47-48, p. 14; Herodotus, 2007, book 1, 4) emphasizes the importance of Akkadian as a necessary linguistic reference for the interpretation of this map.

The map dates back to the twelfth century, but it is indisputable that what it shows is not in line with the assumptions of modern historiography. However, al-Idrisi designated the southernmost Lombard territory – the duchy, and later principality, of Benevento (which existed during his life), as *bilad Ankbarda*. Accordingly, the inscriptions on the map, though perhaps not entirely, were still made on the basis of the geopolitical situation in the twelfth century.

Regarding this map and most of the ancient texts the two most common mistakes in romanization or translation into Latin and Greek, that somehow contribute to the present misperceptions and ethnicization of languages / language groups, can be seen in the following examples:

First, the Greek and Latin words were not in any way related to the words of a similar or identical form from non-Greek / Latin sources, such as Latin *alba* / *albus* [genitive *alban*] ‘white’ (Lewis & Short, 1858, pp. 80-81), and Gothic *alþan*, ‘old / archaic / ancient’ (Gabelentz & Loebe, 1843, p. 10). Even there is no consensus on the translation of the letter *þ*, still it is generally considered that it is similar to the Greek letter *φ* and its romanized form *ph*, which again in Greek and Latin texts could easily converge to *b*.

Second, Greek and Latin names were often derived from non-Greek / Latin sources, having same or similar form but different meaning due to the linguistic omission reflected in phonetic discrepancy between the alphabets, where letters were replaced with their closest match, and in that way the original meaning completely changed. This was the case with the word *got* / *goth* which is a Latin translation of the original word *zodb* (the archaic Slavic form) ‘elder / ancient’ (“Book of Veles,” 1994, p. 171). In Latin, the closest match for *ðb* is *t* / *th*.

Here, the only problem is that *zodb* being transcribed as ‘got / goth’ links the meaning behind the of that word directly to Jordanes’ ‘Scandza’ – a great island in the north from which his tale of Goths took its beginning, that “even to-day it is said to be called Gothiscandza” (Jordanes, 1908, para. 9, 25, pp. 3-8), and to the Swedish island of Gotland. At present, any alternative etiological analysis of the word ‘got / goth’ is at its very beginning averted by its widely accepted denotative meaning. This is exactly what constitutes the essence of ethnicized history, i.e. the misconception and moral dogmatism based on false premises, in this case linguistic omissions.

Apennines.

After the initial observation of the Apennine and Balkan peninsulas, one can immediately notice the absence of a larger geographical unit marked as *bilad* ‘country’ or *ard* ‘land, region, area’ (Wehr, 1976, pp. 13, 72; Badawi et al., 2004) pointing to the existence of the Western, Eastern (Byzantine), or Holy Roman Empire. The reason why al-Idrisi omitted this information is completely unfathomable given that the map was made for Roger II, the King of Sicily, in the twelfth century when the Holy Roman Empire was already established and the Eastern Roman Empire still existed. From the entire Roman Empire, only Rome is designated as *Ruma* (how it was actually called), and Constantinople as *al Kostantina*; Bosphorus is named as *halig al Kostantina* [the Bay of Constantinople – *halig/kalig* in Arabic means ‘bay’ (Wolf, 1990, p. 27)].

When it comes to the name of Italy, the standard interpretation of its meaning as *vitellus, vitulus, vitlu* (Lewis & Short, 1858, pp. 1999-2000; Buck, 1904, p. 351) ‘the land of young cattle’, is simply implausible given that the country with one of the most important historical legacies would rather choose a name that is related to the tradition of the Romans, Etruscan, or even Trojans (related to Aeneas). On the map the southern part of Italy (today’s Calabria), where the name of Italy as ‘the land of young cattle’ supposedly originated, is marked as *bilad Kalauria*. This name extends over the entire territory of the peninsula, and most probably is of the Akkadian origin due to the presence of word *uru* in ‘kalauria’. The literal translation of *kalauria* is *kala* ‘the whole, everyone of, all totally’ and *uru* ‘stallion’ (Black et al., 2000, pp. 143, 427); thus, ‘the land of stallion(s)’, and not of cattle. The horse was a frequent motive in the architecture of Goths and Lombards in Italy (e.g. Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Basilica of Santa Giulia in Bonate Sotto, etc.). This symbol has a special place in the religion of ancient Germanic (Tacitus, 1914, para. 10, p. 279) and Slavic tribes, which was in the twelfth century on the Rugen Peninsula associated with the supreme deity *Vid* the god of light and war. The name of Italy as a derivation from the Umbrian word *vitlu* ‘calf’, could in fact be a coined word containing the name of the supreme deity *Vid* and Akkadian word *ilu* ‘god, deity’ (Black et al., 2000, p. 127); thus, *Vidlu*, with the letter *d* later converged into *t*. However, it is unlikely that the letter *v* had disappeared over time, which makes this explanation interesting, but as in the case of ‘the land of young cattle’, less plausible.

The name of Italy is indeed of Akkadian origin, derived from two words *ita / itu* ‘adjacent to, boundary, border, neighbor’ (Black et al., 2000, pp. 136, 137) and *ilu* ‘god, deity’; thus, *italu* ‘in the neighborhood of the gods’, which later Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Aristotle and Thucydides inweaved in the myth of legendary Oenotrian king Italus, after whom Italy was allegedly named. If in fact Italy means ‘in the neighborhood of the gods’, which territory is then called the land of the gods? Perhaps, the right answer is Illyria / Illyricum / Illyrium, named after Akkadian words *Illil* ‘of the supreme deity / of the gods’ and *re ' u / re ' ium* ‘shepherd’ [epitaph of goddesses/gods] (Black et al., 2000, pp. 70, 301); thus, ‘the God’s shepherds’, which is very similar, if not denotatively identical, to the name of the foreign rulers of Egypt *Hyksos* ‘shepherd kings’.

Which explanation would be ethically more appropriate / more acceptable as an integral part of the Italian national identity: the name with an irrelevant, or trivial

historical connotation; or the name that indirectly signifies the identity of this country, as a neighborhood of the God's shepherds, is difficult to say. Nevertheless, the latter directly diminishes the importance of the Apennines in relation to the Balkans, the Western Roman Empire in relation to the Eastern Roman Empire, and additionally confronts the current international position and perception of the Balkan countries and Italy – and through it the entire Western world. In the event that it is accepted and recognized as ethically appropriate, this interpretation can create an avalanche of claims about primacy and historical significance that have been intensified among the peoples of the Balkans in recent years.

Balkans.

The territory of the Balkans is divided into only three parts designated as *ard Getulia*; *ard Makedunia* 'the pillar of power – the powerful stronghold' [*makku / maqiu / makkutu* 'pole, post, pillar', *dunnu* 'power, strength' (Black et al., 2000, pp. 62, 192)]; *ard Labluna* (Acarmania or Aeolia) 'the land of the lion(s)' [*labu* 'lion', *unnatu* 'land' (Black et al., 2000, pp. 175, 426)]; *bilad Germania* [*geru / garu* 'opponent, enemy', *manu / mani* 'countless, many' (Black et al., 2000, pp. 92, 196)]; and *ard Brugan* [*wabrum / bru* 'stranger, foreign resident, immigrant', *gananu* 'to encircle' (Black et al., 2000, pp. 90, 432)].

The territory of the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and partly Romani, i.e. Illyria, Thrace and Dacia (Getae), was designated as *Getulia*. These tribes were already identified by some ancient writers, such as Herodotus (2007) and Strabo (Strabo, as cited in Szulc, 1856, p. 16), as similar, or as members of the same genus; besides, Jordanes (1908) identified Goths with Getae. Later, some other sources, such as Mavro Orbini (1601), Vincentius Priboevius (1532), presbyter Diocleas ("Chronicle of the Priest of Dioclea," 1748), identified Slavs with Goths. Additionally, "The Chronicle of the Priest of Dioclea," identified both Slavs and Bulgarians with Goths. Therefore, if all of this is taken into account and link with the time when the map was created, that somehow coincided with the fall of the First Bulgarian Empire and the Serbian pre-Nemanjic medieval states, *ard Getulia* as 'the land of Getae / Goths', makes sense.

In order to fully understand the meaning of the above mentioned transitions, that is, from Illyrians, Thracians, and Dacians (Gethae) to Goths, and later to Slavs, we must first understand the very name of *Getulia*. The absence of the vowel *e* in the romanized Arabic ("Romanization of Arabic," 2018; "Romanization System," 2017), leads to the assumption that *getulia* is Akkadian name, or its Greek-Latin form. Accordingly, it is necessary to take into account the possible convergence of vowels *e*, *a*, *u*, and consonants *h*, *g*, *k*, *p*, *b*, *v*. Following these guidelines, it can be noticed that words with a similar form such as: *hatanu / hetennu / hutnu* 'to protect, shelter, guardian' (Black et al., 2000, pp. 112, 123) and *kata 'um / katu / kattu* 'slave, corroborator, security' (Black et al., 2000, pp. 153- 171), all have meanings that gravitate around two concepts, which are: The concept of protector – the guardian; and the concept of oppressed – the slave. In this way the significance of Herodotus' *Masagetai*, *Getai* (Herodotus, 2007, books 1, 4), and the Swedish *Geats* (known for their hero Beowulf), as guardians of the frontiers, becomes clearer. The name related to the concept of oppressed – the slave [Latin *sclavus* 'slave'], first appeared in the works of Jordanes (1908), Procopius (1919), Maurice (1984) as *Sclaveni / Sclavi* /

Sklavenoi. According to Jordanes the name refers to the people who lived in the territory that “extends from the city of Noviodunum and the lake called Mursianus to the Danaster, and northward as far as the Vistula” (Jordanes, 1908, para. 35, p. 10); a territory that was at the border of the German-Slavic and Scythian-Sarmatian worlds.

The old territorial and administrative division of the Roman Empire lasted until the Late Antiquity. It disappeared after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the introduction of new military-administrative divisions of the Byzantine Empire in the seventh century. The absence of Illyria and Thrace on the map is therefore transmitted to the presence of *Getulia*, as a marker of *plurimae gentes* (Springer, 2003, p. 26) of that part of the Balkans. The extent of the Ostrogothic influence in the sixth century during the time of the Ostrogothic kingdom, if the Gepids in Pannonia, and the remaining Visigoths in Moesia and Thrace are taken into account, in a way coincides with what is shown on the map and perhaps what remained of the Goths in this part of Europe after the fall of their kingdom.

In ancient texts there is no agreement on clear division into ethnic groups, at least not as we understand it today in the context of the nation-state. Often, for example, there is the identification of Celts and Germans (Appian, 1972; 1961); Illyrians and Celts (Strabo, 1923, book 4, para. 6. 9-10; as cited in Dzino, 2008, p. 374); Thracians and Scythians (Herodotus, 2007, book 4, para. 104); Germans and ‘Slavic’ Venedi (Tacitus, 1914, para. 46, p. 331), etc. The reason for this was the relative inaccessibility of a direct source of information, and perhaps the reliance on earlier Assyrian-Babylonian sources, once existed in the great libraries of the ancient world in Alexandria and Constantinople, that referred to the time of La Tène culture (450 – 1 BCE) when most of Europe expressed a certain cultural cohesion.

The inaccessibility of direct sources of information and the centralization of knowledge is something that still creates similar problems that contribute to the prejudices of the distant past being even more ingrained. Some historically significant regions, such as the Balkans, have been largely expunged from modern research, due to the legacy of communist isolationism, or as a “gray zone” that does not belong either to the West or the East. The Balkans is represented in modern scientific research as much as it is necessary. For the West it is still the territory of aggressive barbarians, a reservation of European “First Nations”. For the East, it is the cradle of proto Indo-Europeans, the true Aryans, but as long as the people of the Balkans are the true Slavs, i.e. Russians (Klyosov & Rozhanskii, 2012). Torn between two ethnically acceptable international models and in schizoid agony triggered by a multitude of domestic national identities, the Balkan nations usually find a solution in conflicts and wars.

The current situation in the Western Balkans is marked by a crisis over the status of Kosovo and the expansion of Albanian interests to all territories inhabited by the Albanian population – a piecemeal approach similar to that used by Germany before the Second World War. The Albanian claims to these territories are based on the primogeniture of their Illyrian / Dardanian origin. Nevertheless, Albania as a land *ard* or a country *bilad* is not present on the *Tabula Rogeriana* neither in the Balkans nor in the neighborhood of Armenia. Indeed, Albania at that time did not exist in the Caucasus, and based on the map in the Balkans as well. Therefore, Michael Attaleiates’ accounts in *The History* (1079) on the Albanian migration to the Balkans

from Sicily in the eleventh century as part of the defeated army of George Maniakes (Attaleiates, 2012) will surely gain in importance in the future.

The word *alban*, as previously stated, is found in both Latin and Gothic, with a completely different meaning. It is most likely that the appearance of this name in various regions of Europe and Asia Minor had been associated with people who are now classified into categories of Germans, Goths, Celts and Slavs. The editors of the Attaleiates' *History* agree with this, and state in the notes to the translation that the name 'Alban/Albanian' is "an antiquarian term referring probably to the Normans (from ancient Alba, near Rome), not modern Albanians" (Attaleiates, 2012, pp. 13, 595). Another confirmation that behind the name *alban* are the "Ancient Europeans" is the al-Idrisi's map that marks the central part of the former Ostrogothic kingdom around Ravenna as *bilad Albana*. Therefore, the appearance of the name of Albania in the Balkans was not related to the settlers from the Caucasus as stated in some recent historical reinterpretations, nor to indigenous people of the Balkans, but to the old/ancient Europeans, in this case Goths which is also indicated by the meaning of the word *alban* in their language.

In the light of the foregoing considerations, it seems that the two main symbols of Albanian national identity, the double-headed eagle and the name Alban / Albania belong to the historical heritage of the Serbs who were identified both as Suebi and Goths, which is by no means in line with the current aspirations the Albanians. Nevertheless, for Serbs, who are barely mentioned in the Russian chronicles ("Book of Veles," 1994; "Russian Primary Chronicle," 1990); whose name was directly identified by Jordanes with the German plurimae gentes 'Suebi' (Jordanes 1908, para. 274, p. 87), and indirectly by R. G. Latham (1851); whose kings married to the Frankish nobility and had German royal guards, identification with Germans, the people they fought in the First and Second World War, would be completely morally inappropriate. On the other hand, for Croats, who are quite present in Russian chronicles, and in comparison with Serbs linguistically and genetically closer to the East Slavs, identification with the 'Orthodox' Russians would be equally morally unacceptable. Yet, both of them together with the rest of the northern Balkans were designated on al-Idrisi's Tabula Rogeriana as *Getulia*, bearing the name of the Getae / Goths.

Conclusion

Once upon a time fearless guardians, and then for ever after, due to the deceit of linguistic abuse, remembered as slaves. Unfortunately, similar deliberate or unintended linguistic oversights, has left a deep trace to the self-perception of many nations and their national identities. They are thorn between the superiority complex founded in the local folklore, and the inferiority complex created through centuries of pejorative labeling by the representatives of hegemonic structures.

The long-standing paradox in relation to what is claimed internationally and throughout history and what 'we have known' can create a bipolarized nation, inducing the self-destructiveness that comes out of being ethically unsuitable / inadequate. The level of destructive charge in society can reach such limits that it can cause autoimmune shutdown of the entire nation, regardless of the relations between the national majority and minorities. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously carry

out a historical revision of the firmly established factors of national identity which can lead to intellectual transparency and progress, otherwise to hatred and destruction.

However, the question is whether the interpretation of this study would contribute to illuminating the national identities of the nations from the Apennine and Balkan peninsulas, as it directly violates the ethics of the 'modern appropriate' resulting from the long struggle between East and West. In the expectation of further research on the subject of ethical history, we hope that the contribution of this paper, apart from clarifying some historical and linguistic concepts, will also enable a better understanding of the "old Europe" that once stretched along the vertical axis from Scandinavia and the Baltic to Peloponnese and Crete.

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