

Identity and Subjective Sense of Cohesion and Unity: The Bulgarian Case

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Abstract

The present paper examines the different dimensions of the identity of Bulgarian citizens and its specificities among various ethnic groups. The main implications of identity are the states of cohesion and unity of people, which are also prerequisites for well-being and quality of life. It is on the sense of connectedness and identification that people have with: the 'national', the 'regional', the 'local' or the 'European'/'global' that the current analysis focuses on. The empirical basis of the paper is a nationally representative sociological survey conducted in Bulgaria in 2021, on which a secondary analysis is made within the project "Quality of life and well-being in the context of professional communities and their activity" funded by National Science Fund - 2023. The purpose of the paper is to show how Bulgarian citizens perceive themselves today - more like Bulgarians or more like Europeans, where they look for their identity along the local-national-supranational axis and whether permeability of national borders also means the permeability of identity boundaries, and how this reflects on their quality of life.

Keywords: Identity, Ethnic Communities, Quality of Life

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Introduction

The topic of identity is gaining more and more relevance in the contemporary world of global social changes and polycrises, which increasingly question identities built and affirmed for centuries and necessitate the study of its contemporary dimensions and specificities. Insofar as the contemporary world is a world of increasingly intense interactions between ethnic, national and cultural communities, the formation and assertion of one's own identity, both on an individual and collective level, is becoming a value of the highest rank.

It is the collective identity of contemporary Bulgarian citizens, unfolding along the axis: national - supranational - ethnic - local, that is the focus of this article. The use of the notion of collective identity expresses the fact that in every individual identity there is a collective origin or, more precisely, contents whose origin is not from the individually perceived and assimilated. This distinction has its roots in the differentiation that E. Durkheim makes between individual and collective representations. According to E. Durkheim, "collective representations" are a supraindividual phenomenon having their own content and irreducible to the sum of individual representations (Durkheim, 1937). They reflect the shared nature of social cognition and express what is called "common sense". In this sense collective identity refers to the shared notion of experience lived together by a particular community. It expresses a set of semantic structures that are social structures of meaning insofar as their acquisition and possession are based on participation in social practices and the overall life of the community.

To understand identity, it is necessary to consider the actual social frameworks of existence of individuals and communities as a point of reference. If we use M. Halbwachs' (Halbwachs, 1997) notion of "social framework" (*cadres sociaux*), which reflects Halbwachs' fundamental conception of society as a reservoir of resources of meaning for the individual, and E. Goffman's (Goffman, 1956) notion of 'frames' as organizing the everyday experience of individuals and groups, we can argue that there are 'collective identities' that reflect the dependence of identity on the 'social frame', i.e. that there are social frames of identity and collective identities, such that each individual identity unfolds within these social frames and each individual forms his or her identity along with others in the respective group/community to which he or she belongs.

A person at every moment of his life is in a socially determined situation, i.e. in a certain socio-cultural environment. The world always exists for him as intersubjective, i.e. as a meaning universe, a set of meanings which he must interpret in order to be able to interact with others. Prior experience in the form of available knowledge exists as a schema to which one relates all one's perceptions, notions, beliefs, values. In other words, everyone lives in a common "symbolic meaning space" (Assmann, 2011) with others. This common space of meaning is the precondition for the formation of both individual and collective identity. It makes the processes of interaction and communication possible by delineating the boundaries of a unified 'meaning horizon' (Assmann, 2011), which totality defines the intersubjective meaningfulness of identity. In this connection, P. Berger and T. Luckmann note that regardless of differences, there is always a correspondence between "my meanings and their meanings in this world ... precisely because it refers to a world common to many people" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 37). That is why collective identities are preserved in communication. If it is interrupted, respectively if the frames of the communicated reality are changed, the consequence is a change of identities. This is why all major changes in human society are always accompanied by changes in the identification of communities - in the

understanding of their own identity and the identity of others. It is for this reason that the question "Who am I?" has its enduring significance in all epochs, for all peoples and cultures. And its answer changes depending on the historical time and socio-cultural situation. Identity is both inherited and constantly changing. Some values, meanings, traditions are passed down through generations, while others, especially in the modern world of globalization, increased intercultural contacts and communication, undergo profound changes. Critical social situations stimulate the redefinition of identity not only for individuals but also for entire groups, and are therefore capable of producing, for example, acute inter-ethnic confrontations and even armed clashes and conflicts, examples of which abound in history and in the contemporary world in recent years. This is why the formation of an idea of one's own identity - individual and group - and the identity of others, different from us, turns out to be one of the milestones of contemporary international and inter-state relations and in many cases determines the nature of these relations - of peace or conflict and war. This is because the specificity, the nature of the constructed notions of the identity of others are indicative of the trends in the development of international relations, while in not a few cases they are full of errors and biases, provoking negative attitudes and oppositions. All this explains the need to study the transformations that occur in collective identities under the influence of changing socio-historical conditions and shows why studying the contemporary state of collective group identities is a matter of fundamental importance.

On an individual level, each person carries multiple group identities depending on the many and varied social communities/groups in which he/she is involved and perceived to be a part of. Some collective identities are relatively independent of each other, while others can be correlated in a certain way, forming a certain hierarchical structure. The set of group identities shared by an individual has a dynamic nature - he or she may adopt a particular group identity at one moment, and lose it at another moment, thus joining or leaving a group. The totality of group identities shared by an individual forms his individual identity, revealing its different facets. The same is true at the collective level. Contemporary Bulgarian citizens share different collective identities depending on the specificities they ascribe to themselves and the social communities they belong to. Bulgaria, as is well known, is a multi-ethnic country where different ethnic communities coexist. Here we will focus on the contemporary identity of only three of the ethnic communities represented in Bulgaria - the Bulgarian, Turkish and Roma ethnic groups. The reason for focusing on them is that these are the three largest ethnic communities in the country and in the specifically Bulgarian configuration of the ethnic structure of the population their joint share represents 90.4%¹ of the total population, therefore it can be considered that the processes of identification taking place among them allow us to understand the nature of identification at the national level. On the other hand, as the three largest ethnic communities in the country, their relations and the specificity of their self-identification, as well as the specificity of the reciprocal processes of identification of the "other ethnicity" and the differentiation from it are determinant for the contemporary social and political situation in Bulgaria, for the maintenance of ethnic peace and tolerant inter-ethnic relations in the country, and to some extent for the country's foreign policy orientation.

The Collective Identity of the Contemporary Bulgarian Citizens

At a time of increased integration processes between countries, particularly characteristic of the countries of Europe, which began their development in the middle of the 20th century, but

¹ According to the data of the last population census of the country from 2021.

have become particularly intense since the beginning of the new millennium, the identity of the citizens of the countries of Europe is undergoing changes. When borders are more and more "open" and huge distances are crossed in a very short time, questions about identity changes become more and more important. Today, Bulgarian national identity is in a period of constant transformation - Bulgarians are beginning to feel and define themselves as European citizens, citizens of the world. It begins processes of formation of a supranational identity, understood more often as a common European identity ("citizen of Europe and the EU") and less often as a global identity ("citizen of the world"). On the other hand, however, when transformation becomes a permanent feature of society and radical changes often occur in extremely short periods of time, all this creates the preconditions for identity dissonance. And sometimes instead of the formation of a supranational identity, the opposite processes of closure, localisation, regionalisation are observed. It can be said that in contemporary Bulgarian society the processes of European integration are accompanied by the opposite processes of "atomization" of society and "closure" of individuals into smaller than national communities. Therefore, the integration of a country into various supranational organizations at the EU level does not always mean a corresponding change at the level of public consciousness and does not always mean a weakening of national identity and the development of a supranational identity. EU integration in itself creates opportunities for such processes to take place, but whether they will start, how deep they will be and how far they will go depends on the interplay of many other factors, both internal and external, part of which are the ongoing migration processes within the EU.

Bulgarian national identity has been built in many different historical periods, with various interruptions, uniting several ethnic communities through common values and goals, together with their own community interpretations. This means that it has one main advantage, formed in the process of historical development, but particularly adequate to the modern era - it creates a space for the coexistence of the different, imposes multiculturalism, sets patterns of integration and differentiation. And one of the reasons for this is that the historically formed notion, understanding of national identity has as a basic principle the compatibility, the coexistence of differences. This is the specificity and vitality of the Bulgarian national identity and the Bulgarian ethnic model. At their core is the ability to live with the other, the combination of different cultural patterns, the integration of specific ethnic rituals and practices. It is the openness of ethnic communities and therefore their identities that allows negative attitudes and relationships to be experienced quickly. As a continuation and extension of these processes are the processes of transformation of ethnic and national identities in Bulgarian society today in the direction of a more universal and adequately situated in relation to current events supranational European identity. To what extent have these elements been formed, what structural changes are occurring in the national identity of Bulgarian citizens and what is the role of ethnic and local identity today we will try to show through the results of a nationally representative study on "National and European Dimensions of the Contemporary Identity of Bulgarians", conducted in 2021 under a project funded by the National Science Fund of Bulgaria. At the same time, these results have been secondary processed and reinterpreted within the project "Quality of life and well-being in the context of professional communities and their activity" funded by National Science Fund - 2023 and linked to quality of life. Traditionally, in the study of quality of life, in addition to objective indicators of quality of life, subjective indicators are also derived, mostly related to life satisfaction, subjective well-being and feelings of security and peacefulness. An important precondition for their achievement is the perception of identity - individual and group identity, the sense of one's place/position in society, as well as the existence of similarity in the self-identification of ethnic communities coexisting in society, which creates

opportunities for cohesion and tolerant interethnic communication and interaction, in turn representing indicators of a subjective sense of well-being and security, i.e. for a better quality of life.

Within the framework of the conducted nationally representative survey we have used two different methodological approaches to derive the structure of the contemporary identity of Bulgarian citizens in its ethnic dimensions and specificities. The first one is an application of Kuhn and McPartland's famous "Who am I?" test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), which allows delineation of an individual's overall "self-concept" with all of his or her group affiliations, character traits, kinship relationships, major occupations, hobbies, etc. The second one is a directly asked question with a suggestion to choose the three most important identities for the respondent from a list of pre-formulated different identity types. The specificity of each of these two methods and the differences between them stem from the fact that each of them activates different levels and unlocks different layers of people's consciousness, thus actualizing their different self-concepts. Through the first method, an idea of the overall self-identification of the person is achieved, and among the complex of characteristics mentioned, the presence of those expressing his national, European, ethnic, local identity can be sought. The result is the derivation of the proportion of people who self-identify themselves through characteristics related to national, European, ethnic, local identity, when nothing in the question points them to the fact that this is what the researcher is interested in. The second method is used to rank the types of identities of interest to the research subject, namely: national, supranational (European and global), ethnic, and local identities. Here, any other characteristics, respectively types of identifications, beyond the ones we are interested in are excluded. This specificity of the two methods also determines the differences in the results obtained: in the first case, due to the high variance of the responses, the shares that accumulate the identities of interest are usually not very large, while in the second case they accumulate much larger shares insofar as individuals have a much more limited set of characteristics/types of identities to choose between and hence the accumulations are much larger. This also explains some differences that appear between the results obtained by one method and the other. In such cases, in order to infer the structure of the identity of the respective ethnicity in the perspective of interest (national - supranational - ethnic - local), we have used the results obtained through the second method, insofar as they allow us to infer which of the identities of interest the individuals attach more importance and which less importance, and respectively what share each of these identities occupies in the overall identification matrix set by the relation: national - supranational (European and global) - ethnic - local identity. More specifically, we will show how the two methods work and what results they lead to by analysing the data obtained from the nationally representative survey.

Results and Conclusion

As a primary and most general indicator for inferring the identity structure of Bulgarian citizens, we used the importance attached to different types of group membership in self-identification, following Kuhn and McPartland's "Who am I?" test. In this regard, the questionnaire with which the national representative survey was conducted was specifically designed in such a way that the first question that all respondents had to answer was "How would you define yourself?", requiring them to indicate their three most important, in their own opinion, characteristics with which they would define themselves. To avoid any kind of suggestiveness, they were given the opportunity to choose the characteristics they considered most important for their self-identification. In the table below, all responses are summarised in categories as types of identification: national identity, ethnic identity, supranational

identity (EU citizen and citizen of the world), local identity (identification with the locality or region). In addition to these identifications, respondents indicated others such as: religious identity, identification by name, identification by character traits, by social characteristics, by gender, age, work status, profession and occupation, etc., the data for which are not provided here as this is not the purpose of this paper.

Types of identification	The Bulgarian Ethnos	Types of identification	The Turkish Ethnos	Types of identification	The Roma Ethnos
Bulgarian, Bulgarian citizen	44.2%	Ethnicity (ethnic Turk)	14.8%	Bulgarian (of Roma origin), Bulgarian citizen	24.6%
European, EU citizen	5.9%	Bulgarian (of Turkish origin), Bulgarian citizen	14.1%	Ethnicity (Roma/Gypsy)	23.0%
Regional/local affiliation	4.5%	Regional/local affiliation	6.6%	European, EU citizen	1.6%
World Citizen	2.6%	European, EU citizen	5.8%	Regional/local affiliation	0%
-	-	World Citizen	0.8%	World Citizen	0%

Table 1: Types of self-identification in the three ethnic groups - Bulgarian, Turkish and Roma

As can be seen from the presented data, for the representatives of the Bulgarian ethnic group the most important is the national identity represented by the identifications "Bulgarian" and "Bulgarian citizen". Here a specificity of the identification of the Bulgarian ethnic group is manifested - as this is the largest and leading ethnic group in the country, its representatives usually identify their ethnicity with the national one, which is why the identification "Bulgarian", which is generally an ethnic identification, is used as identical to "Bulgarian citizen" or "citizen of Bulgaria". To some extent, this also affects the representatives of minority ethnic groups - Turks and Roma - some of whom also self-identify as "Bulgarians", but with the qualifier "of Turkish origin" or "of Roma origin", and for them this self-identification is also identical to "Bulgarian citizen".

The structure of the identity of the Bulgarian ethnos shows that the leading place in it is occupied by the national identity, followed by the European and the local, which have much lower shares, and the global identity "citizen of the world" is even below the statistical error, which is why it is insignificant for the Bulgarian ethnos. But the fact that European and local identities are represented with almost equal shares shows that the processes of globalization and localization that are taking place in the world today are equally represented in Bulgarian ethnic group. At the same time, however, if we sum up the shares of European (5.9%) and global identity ("citizen of the world" - 2.6%) we get a share of 8.5%, which represents the emerging supranational identity and which is almost twice as large as the local identity.

The identity structure of the Turkish ethnic group shows a leading position of ethnic identification with a share of 14.8% and this is understandable insofar as the Turkish ethnic group as a minority ethnic group emphasizes its ethnic identity in an effort to underline its specificity as an ethnic group and at the same time to assert its place in Bulgarian society. Very close to the ethnic identity with an almost equal share of 14.1% is the national identity,

which shows that for the Turkish ethnos, like the Bulgarian one, national identification is very important. The lower shares of national and ethnic identity in the Turkish ethnic group (14.1% and 14.8%) compared to the Bulgarian ethnic group (44.2%) are explained by the fact that the representatives of the Turkish ethnic group put more emphasis in answering this question on such characteristics as their position and role in the home and family - husband, wife, mother, father, brother, sister, daughter, son, etc., which, however, we do not consider and analyze here. At the same time, for the Turkish ethnic group, the local identity is of greater importance than the European one, but the sum of the shares of the European (5.8%) and the global ("citizen of the world" - 0.8%, which in itself, as in the case of the Bulgarian ethnic group, is statistically insignificant) forms a share of 6.6%, which is equivalent to the local identity (6.6%) and shows that in the case of the Turkish ethnic group, too, the processes of localization and globalization that are taking place in the world today are running in parallel.

The Roma ethnic group shows similarities with the Bulgarian ethnic group, insofar as national identification takes a leading place with a share of 24.6%. At the same time, however, like the Turkish ethnic group, the Roma ethnic group gives great importance to ethnic identity, which occupies the second place with a share of 23.0%. On the one hand, for the Roma ethnic group, as also a minority ethnic group, ethnic self-identification has its significance because it is a way of asserting their place in society precisely as an ethnic group with its own specificities. On the other hand, however, insofar as the Roma ethnic group is the most vulnerable and the lowest-status ethnic group in Bulgarian society, it always seeks to prove that it is part of the Bulgarian nation, which is why the phenomenon of preferred identity is typical for it and most of the representatives of this ethnic group identify themselves as Bulgarians. Because of this, the proportion of national identity is also high in the Roma ethnic group. However, it is characteristic of the Roma ethnic group that local identification is not significant, just like global identification, and European identity is the least represented in its identity structure.

In summary, it can be said that the three ethnic groups show similarities in identification as well as differences arising from the position of each of them in society, but more importantly, they are all aware of themselves as members of Bulgarian society and for them national identity is one of the most important, which determines the possibility of tolerant interethnic coexistence and makes Bulgarian society consistent.

However, when the identity question is posed in a different way and the respondents are asked directly to choose from several proposed identities (including national/Bulgarian citizen, ethnic, European/EU citizen, global/world citizen, regional/region of the Balkans, local/settlement, religious, professional, belonging to a certain friendship circle), ranking them by the degree of importance for them, then the identification with the national community reached impressive results for all three ethnic groups - 90.8% for the Bulgarian ethnic group, 74.3% for the Turkish ethnic group and 86.9% for the Roma ethnic group. These results as a ratio repeat the results from the previous question, i.e. the highest identification with the national community is for the Bulgarian ethnic group, followed by the Roma and the last one is the Turkish ethnic group.

Types of identification	The Bulgarian Ethnos	Types of identification	The Turkish Ethnos	Types of identification	The Roma Ethnos
I am a Bulgarian citizen	90.8%	I am a Bulgarian citizen	74.3%	I am a Bulgarian citizen	86.9%
I feel connected to my place of residence (where I live, study, work)	53.4%	I feel connected to my place of residence (where I live, study, work)	58.7%	I feel connected to my ethnic community	42.6%
I feel connected to my friendship circle	42.2%	I'm an EU citizen	31.4%	I'm an EU citizen	37.7%
I'm an EU citizen	31.5%	I feel connected to my friendship circle	29.8%	I feel connected to my place of residence (where I live, study, work)	31.2%
I feel myself a citizen of the world	20.3%	I feel connected to my ethnic community	28.9%	I feel connected to my friendship circle	29.5%
I feel connected to the Balkans region	15.6%	I feel myself a citizen of the world	24.8%	I feel myself a citizen of the world	19.7%
I feel connected to my professional community	14.6%	I feel connected to my professional community	19.0%	I feel connected to my religious community	19.7%
I feel connected to my religious community	12.6%	I feel connected to my religious community	16.5%	I feel connected to the Balkans region	13.1%
I feel connected to my ethnic community	9.3% ²	I feel connected to the Balkans region	4.1%	I feel connected to my professional community	11.5%

Table 2: Types of identification in the three ethnic groups - Bulgarian, Turkish and Roma

In this case, the structure of the identity of the Bulgarian ethnos shows a leading national identity (90.8%), followed by the local identity (the sum of responses "I feel connected to my place of residence (where I live, study, work)" - 53.4% and "I feel connected to the Balkans region" - 15.6%) with a total share of 69.0%. In third place is the supranational identity with a share of 51.8% (the sum of answers "I'm an EU citizen" and "I feel myself a citizen of the world"). Ethnic identity ranks last with the lowest share (9.3%), since, as already noted, the identification of ethnic and national identity is characteristic of Bulgarian ethnos, which is why there is no special emphasis on ethnic identity.

As for the identity structure of the Turkish ethnic group, national identity is the leading one with a share of 74.3%, followed by local identity (the sum of responses "I feel connected to my place of residence" - 58.7% and "I feel connected to the Balkans region" - 4.1%) with a total share of 62.8%. In third place is supranational identity with a total share of 56.2% (the sum of responses "I'm an EU citizen" and "I feel myself a citizen of the world"). And for the Turkish ethnic group, ethnic identity is in last place with a share of 28.9%. The similarity in the structures of the identity of the Bulgarian and Turkish ethnic groups is obvious.

² The sum of the percentages exceeds 100% as respondents indicated more than one answer.

For the Roma ethnic group, national identity is the leading one with a share of 86.9%, followed by supranational identity with a total share of 57.4% (the sum of answers " I'm an EU citizen " and "I feel myself a citizen of the world"). In third place is local identity (the sum of responses "I feel connected to my place of residence" - 31.2% and "I feel connected to the Balkans region" - 13.1%) with a total share of 44.3%. And in this case, ethnic identity is in last place with a share of 42.6%, i.e. the specifics of Roma identification established in the previous question are manifested, namely, for them, local identity has less importance, which is why in this case it takes third place after supranational identity, and also ethnic identity has greater importance for the Roma ethnic group as a minority ethnic group compared to the significance that ethnic identity has for the Turkish ethnic group as a minority ethnic group as well, which is related to the position of the Roma ethnic group as the lowest-status ethnic community in the country, which is why it strives to assert its equality with the rest ethnic communities in the country.

As can be seen, the identity structures of the three ethnic communities derived with the use of two different methods show both differences and similarities, which is understandable, as each of the two methods activates different levels of consciousness and hence different ways of self-identification. But still, it is obvious that the similarities are more. Similar dependencies in the self-identification of the ethnic groups are confirmed and the leading role of the national identity in all three ethnic groups is confirmed. And this, in turn, means affirming the self-perception of each of the ethnic groups as part of the Bulgarian nation and of each of its representatives as a citizen of the Bulgarian state. This creates conditions for tolerant inter-ethnic coexistence, builds the coherence and unity of Bulgarian society, and creates a sense of security and well-being in each of the ethnic groups, which is directly related to a better quality of life.

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