Understanding the Otherness in the Danube Region

Juliana Popova[1]

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the attitudes towards the Otherness in the Danube region. A monograph dedicated to the notions about the Otherness in Bulgaria. Theoretical clarification of the nature and types of Otherness in general and finding its expression in the public opinion within the Danube region. The general conclusion drawn in the paper is that the citizens of the Danube countries have different attitudes towards the "own", indigenous otherness and external, exogenous otherness due to the complicated political situation, linked with the transnational migration. The paper results can serve as a preliminary basis for various studies in the field of ethnicity, gender equality, problems of disadvantaged people, etc. The study will contribute to better understanding of the Otherness as one of the most sensitive problems of the contemporary societies and will shed light on this matter in the Danube countries.

Keywords: Danube region; othering; Otherness; indigenous Otherness; exogenous Otherness

JEL Classification: Z1 Cultural Economics; Economic Sociology; Economic Anthropology

1. Introduction

The issue about the acceptance, understanding and recognition of the Otherness is topical in the contemporary societies for several reasons. On the one hand, we observe an increase of the ethnic, religious and other cultural conflicts, as well as strengthening of the intolerance towards the Otherness. But on the other hand, we can see some processes of gradual recognition of the diversity as a value, which implies overcoming of the traditional approaches for the exploration of the Otherness in socio-cultural aspect.

The heterogeneity of the contemporary cultural space, the widening of the intercultural contacts, the democratization of the societies and the proclamation of tolerance as a fundamental human value require a profound understanding of the specific relations between Us and the Others.

The aim of the current paper is to interpret some issues, connected with the acceptance of the Otherness within the frames of the Danube region, as well as to discuss the attitudes of the citizens of the Danube countries towards sensitive phenomena like the transnational migration and tolerance towards the different

[1] Professor, PhD, University of Ruse 'Angel Kanchev', Bulgaria, Address: 8 Studentska Street, Ruse, Bulgaria, Tel.: +359-82-888255, Fax: +359-82-845708, Corresponding author: jppopova@uni-ruse.bg.

Others. As a basis for the conclusions drawn serve the results from two representative studies of Eurobarometer from 2015.

2. Theoretical Framework of the Otherness

The issue about the Other is a universal one but the content of the same concept has different interpretations. The classical German philosophy (Descartes, Feuerbach, Hegel) reveals the Other as *alter ego*. According to Heidegger the Other is *every one*. Bakhtin, Buber and Gadamer understand the Other as *You*. J. Mead speaks about the *significant Others*, playing the leading role in the self-identification of the individual. Next can be mentioned the interpretations for the Other as *denial of my I* (J.P. Sartre), as *an opportunity* (G. Deleuze), as *absolute Otherness* (Levinas), etc. On the one hand, these numerous assumptions underline the multi-layer character of the concept, but on the other side – its universal nature. (Popova, 2014)

Most often the following types of Otherness are an object of attention by the side of the researchers: the Other in the structure of my ego (*the significant Other*), the Other as You (*every Other*), the Other as not-me (e.g. *marginal, disadvantaged person, representative of a minority*, etc.), the Other as a representative of a foreign culture (*foreigner*). Each of these perceptions presents different level of interpretation of the Other – the level of the concrete individual in connection with his/her identity, the level of communication, dialogue between Me and You, the level of social relationships and the level of interaction between cultures. (Popova, 2014)

The most topical interpretations of the Otherness in the thematic area of intercultural communication are in the context of individuals' positioning in groups formed by different characteristics: own – alien, in-group – outgroup, similar – different, etc. For the purposes of this paper the attention will be focused on the perception of the Other as *alien* and as *different*.

The oldest system of social categorization – the opposition *own – alien* – is a cultural universals, inherent for the self-consciousness of all communities. In the paradigm of different sciences (sociology, philosophy, linguistics, history, etc.) the concept *alien* has different nuances in its meaning – *foreign*, *strange, bizarre, and unusual*. The perception of the Other as *alien* is a ground for identification of the individuals with the own, natives, i.e. for the construction of the hierarchy of their identities. The identity is a closure in the secure world of the we-groups and isolation from the they-groups. (Popova, 2014)

A visual variant of the perception of the Other as *alien* is presented in the figure 1 below. As can be seen in the figure, the opposition *own – alien* is visualized by concentric circles. The inner circle presents the space of the own, natives and the

outer – the space of the aliens. This means that the Otherness in the opposition *own – alien* has a territorial character. The natives have a preserved territory which is separated by a border from the territory of the aliens. The identification of the individuals with different groups – ethic, religious, etc. serves as such border and it can hardly be crossed.
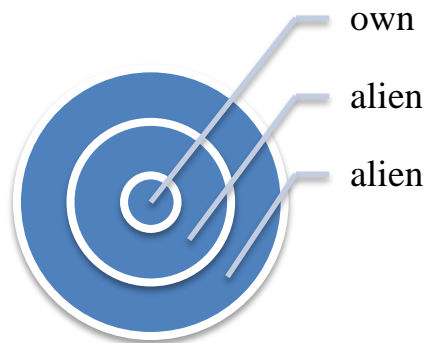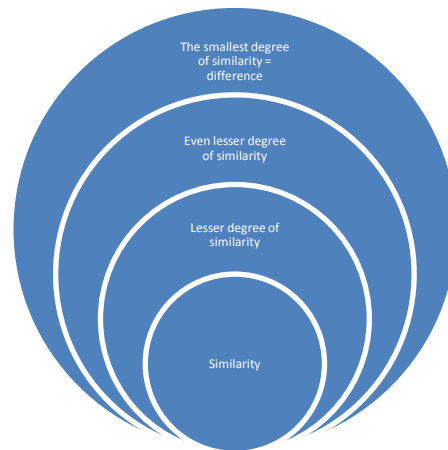

Figure 1. Othering, based on the opposition *own - alien*

Unlike the opposition *own - alien*, the other significant opposition in the light of intercultural communication - *similar – different* is broader, because it can include also an avoidance of individuals and groups within the frames of the own, natives. (Popova, 2014)

The interpretation of the Other as *different* is connected with the identification of some markers of difference, relating to phenomena with universal codification in the human societies – ethnicity, race, language, religion, gender, age, social class, physical ability, etc.

The visualization of the opposition *similar – different* is presented in the figure 2 below:

Figure 2. Othering, based on the opposition similar - different

The above figure is reminiscent of the tidal waves that crash ashore. The individual (who is on the shore) covers at a glance the whole space of Others (the waves that are coming to him) but he/she experiences less fear, uncertainty and distrust towards those who are close to him (the waves crashing in his feet). In our opinion, this metaphor adequately presents the othering within the frames of the opposition *similarity – difference*. The different individuals or groups are qualified as Others but they are not necessarily aliens. They can belong to the group of natives and, at the same time, to be perceived as Others for a shorter or longer period of time. In the previous research (Popova, 2014) is indicated that among the above- mentioned markers of difference, the biggest potential for deleting the line of the othering have the differences in age, ability/disability, gender and sexual orientation as the societies increasingly manifest a rejection of the exclusionary practices and generate anti-discrimination policies. It is more difficult to overcome or minimize the othering by the characteristics ethnicity and religion as they are stronger identification criteria, in whose frames the othering is done simultaneously within the oppositions *own – alien* and *similar – different*. It is important to underline that in the othering within the opposition *own – alien* we speak for putting a border which can hardly be crossed, while within the spatial dimensions of the opposition *similar – different* we have a distance which can be increased, decreased and it can also be temporary or permanent. The othering within the opposition *own – alien* is an immanent constant for the individuals and is more primary in its nature. In contrast, the othering within the opposition *similar – different* is a socio-conditioned characteristic and has situational character. Moreover, it is more dynamic and is influenced by the socio-cultural environment.

In figure 3 below, an attempt is made to present the mechanism of othering, which combines the links and interactions within the oppositions *own – alien* and *similar – different.*
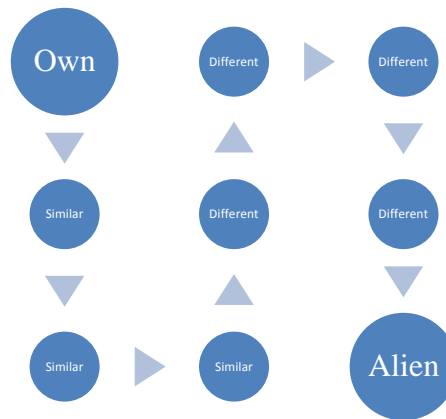
Figure 3. Mechanism of othering

As it can be seen in the figure, the space of the natives is marked in advance and is a starting point of the social ties and interactions of the individuals. Each of them has the necessary space to satisfy his/her natural needs of belonging, love, attention and communication. (see Maslow's hierarchy of needs) In the different cultures the size of the natives' space is different – it is bigger and diffuse (with a greater influence of the social status on the relationships) in the collectivist cultures, and smaller and specific (with a smaller influence of the social status on the relationships) in the individualist cultures. (Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars, 1995)

Protected in the space of natives, the individual creates a network of social interactions in which he/she faces and gets to know the similarity with and the difference from Other individuals until reaching the identification of the territory of the alien Others. As it can be seen in the figure, the path to the space of the alien is long and always passes through the interaction of the individual with other similar and different individuals. If we can conclude the mechanism of othering, we would say that:

- The othering is a process, based on social interaction;

- The othering is based on the inner feeling of the individuals for social/cultural distance;

- The process of othering has cultural specificity. It is realized more easily and more often in the cultures where the space of the natives has greater importance for the individuals, e.g. in the collectivist cultures; (Hofstede, 1991)

- The othering has different directions and dimensions. The qualification of somebody as Other can be realized in the space of the similar individuals, of different ones and especially in the space of the alien. (Popova, 2014)

3. The Attitudes Towards the Otherness Among the Citizens of 7 Danube Countries – EU Member States

In the space along the biggest European river – Danube – the issue about the acceptance of the Otherness is especially important in connection with the purposes of the European Strategy for Danube Macro-region, namely to unify the efforts of the Danube countries for the development of a prosperous region on the basis of shared values and common actions for preserving the natural and cultural heritage. A number of projects with European funding have been implemented within the frames of the strategy. They have successfully achieved synergistic effects for the Danube region focusing the attention on its advantages in economic, social and cultural aspect. One of these projects is Danube: Future, which unites representatives from all countries in the Danube basin and aims at creation of a large-scale data base about the heritage of the region. Through the interdisciplinary "knowledge society", formed within the project, a scientific contribution is realized to the sustainable development of the region. The White Paper, created as a result of the project, is a programming document analyzing the problematic zones in the functioning of the Danube region and formulating some recommendations about adequate actions on European, regional and national level. (Danube: Future. White Paper on Integrated Sustainable Development of the Danube River Basin. www.danubefuture.eu/sites/default/ files/ DanubeFuture_WhitePaper.pdf).

One of the issues, interpreted in the White paper, is about the ethnic and cultural diversity in the Danube region, as well as about the lessons from the history, which have left negative examples for ethnic wars and conflicts. As it is recommended in the document, "prejudices, ethnocentricity and a general attitude of "othering" national problems have to be actively tackled. Sometimes, building cultural bridges can be a question of building them materially". (White paper, 2015, p. 29)

The topic for the acceptance of the "own", inner Otherness in the contemporary multiethnic societies is complicated by the need of the European societies to "get used" to the so called "inbound", external Otherness, especially in the context of the mass migration and refugee waves to Western and Central Europe in the recent years. These significant questions of our contemporary world have provoked in the current work the research interest in an exploration of the attitudes towards the Otherness in the Danube region as a small model of what is happening on the territory of the whole European Union.

The results in the last edition of Eurobarometer – spring 2015 are used as a basis of the research analysis in the work. (Standard Eurobarometer 83. Public opinion in

the EU. Spring 2015 – THS opinion & social. ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83_first_en.pdf)

From the total dataset in the edition are excerpted some data about the 7 Danube countries – EU members - Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.

The first question from the edition of Eurobarometer, related to the topic of Otherness, is connected with the reaction of the respondents to the statement: *People in my country have a lot of things in common.* The percent of agreement among the participants in the survey is very high and shows that the citizens of the Danube countries do not feel separated culturally or ethnically in relation to important issues of their coexistence within the frames of the national states. The percent of agreement with the statement mentioned above is, as follows: Austria – 71 %, Bulgaria – 77 %, Czech Republic – 70 %, Germany – 74 %, Hungary – 57 %, Romania – 82 %, Slovakia – 79 %. The percent of agreement for the EU-28 is similar– 71 %.

If we accept these results as a preliminary orientation in the attitudes of the Danube societies towards coexistence based on consensus and tolerance, we would say that the citizens do not react negatively towards the inner, indigenous Otherness – this Otherness which is welded and although it is different, it can be associated with the community of natives in terms of the national identity.

The results demonstrate the opposite attitudes towards the inbound, exogenous Otherness – the Otherness of the migrants and refugees in the Danube region. The data about the next question *What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment,* presented in Table 1 below, give the evidences for this assumption:

Table 1. **What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment**

No	Country	1st issue	2nd issue
1	Austria (AT)	Immigration – 38 %	The state of the member states public finances – 36 %
2	Bulgaria (BG)	Immigration – 37 %	Terrorism – 25 %
3	Czech Republic (CZ)	Immigration – 44 %	Terrorism – 30 %
4	EU 28	Immigration – 38 %	Economic situation – 27 %
5	Germany (DE)	Immigration – 55 %	The state of the member states public finances – 34 %

6	Hungary (HU)	Immigration – 43 %	Economic situation – 26 %
7	Romania (RO)	Terrorism – 28 %	Immigration – 21 %
8	Slovakia (SK)	Immigration – 35 %	The state of the member states public finances – 25 %

As we can see, with only one exception, the respondents indicate the immigration as the most important problem, faced by the EU at the moment. We should not forget the fact that the period of the Eurobarometer study coincides with the refugee wave in Europe, caused by the crisis in the Middle East – it is logical that the public opinion is directed to the problem mentioned. Similarly, if the study was realized in the spring and summer of 2016, the respondents for sure would have highlighted the terrorism as the most significant problem. Irrespective of the link between the characteristics of the socio-political situation and the public opinion, we can argue that there is a differentiation of the societal attitudes in relation to the type of Otherness – the inner one is accepted because the people are familiar with it, while the inbound, exogenous Otherness (the immigration) is qualified as a threat.

For the same reason the respondents from the Danube countries do not agree with the statement *Immigrants contribute a lot to my country*, as it can be seen in the Table 2 below: (Standard Eurobarometer 83. European Citizenship. Spring 2015 – THS opinion & social.[1]

Table 2. Immigrants contribute a lot to my country

No	Country	Total disagree
1	Austria	52 %
2	Bulgaria	63 %
3	Czech Republic	84 %
4	EU 28	44 %
5	Germany	37 %
6	Hungary	67 %
7	Romania	30 %
8	Slovakia	73 %

The proponents of the idea of multiculturalism would support the claim that the immigration is a positive process for the economies in Western Europe as it provides labour for the unskilled work at low cost. However the ordinary citizens share a different opinion. That's why we can think that the problems with the integration of the immigrants, indicated by a number of politicians as reason for the

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[1] ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83_citizen_en.pdf.

failure of multiculturalism, cannot be interpreted unilaterally. It is true, that despite the efforts, the majority of the immigrants do not fit easily into the European societies because of cultural and religious reasons. But it is also true that a significant percent from the population of Europe, including the citizens of the Danube countries, do not accept the inbound Otherness. If we look for the reason for this, we would find it in the answers to another question from the Eurobarometer study, indicated in Table 3 below:

Table 3. In your opinion, among the following issues, which are those that most create a feeling of community among the EU citizens (%)

Country	Culture	Economy	History	Values	Sports	Geography	The rule of law	Solidarity with poorer regions
AT	27	25	24	28	24	24	16	11
BG	22	22	19	21	9	24	15	18
CZ	30	19	33	21	24	18	14	17
DE	30	24	19	20	19	14	25	19
EU 28	27	22	21	19	19	18	18	15
HU	27	26	23	12	22	15	16	15
RO	17	20	14	16	18	17	18	18
SK	26	16	28	18	18	37	13	13

From the results in the table it is clear that the majority of the respondents from the Danube countries have declared that the shared culture, the material and spiritual values are in the basis of the sense of community, experienced by the citizens of the EU. This value link builds the ground of the European identity and explains at the same time the negative reactions towards the representatives of the non-European cultures and unacceptance of their Otherness.

Although supported by the public opinion, the position about unacceptance of the alien or different Other cannot be justified because it leads to intolerance, prejudices, xenophobia and discrimination. In Table 4 below, presenting the three most important values for the respondents in Eurobarometer study, we can see that the respect for other cultures as a value has collected very few votes among the participants in the survey. The European citizens are right in their opinion that the most important universal values are the peace, the protection of human rights and the respect for human life. These values increase their significance in the context of the bloody terrorist attacks from the summer of 2016, generating fear and willingness to stand against the evil face of the Otherness. However, Europe and particularly the Danube area is our home and we can preserve it not through confrontation, but through solidarity and attraction of the alien and different Others to our common cause.

Table 4. In the following list, which are the three most important values for you (%)

Country	Peace	Human rights	Respect for human life	Individual freedom	Democracy	Equality	Tolerance	Respect for other cultures	Religion
AT	52	39	28	50	26	16	13	7	5
BG	33	40	35	36	16	14	14	8	3
CZ	47	35	29	45	23	9	16	5	5
DE	60	43	24	31	34	8	21	7	3
EU 28	45	40	35	27	26	21	17	9	5
HU	42	33	40	34	28	22	15	5	8
RO	30	44	42	27	23	18	7	4	12
SK	46	36	28	27	23	17	15	6	5

4. Conclusions

The current paper reviews the attitudes towards the Otherness in the Danube region on the basis of a theoretical model of othering, constructed within the frames of the oppositions *own – alien* and *similar – different*. As a result of the analysis of data in the last edition of Eurobarometer – spring 2015, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The citizens of 7 Danube countries – members of the EU believe that in their societies there are more things that unite but not divide people, i.e. the Otherness on the basis of different ethnicity or religion within a concrete society is not a ground for such a division. This means that the citizens accept the inner, indigenous Otherness.

- As the most important problem, faced by the EU at the moment, the respondents indicate the immigration. They do not agree with the statement that the immigrants contribute to the development of the economies in their countries. This fact can be explained with unacceptance of the inbound, exogenous Otherness, by which the societies feel threatened.

- Regardless of the problems registered with the integration of the Others in the multicultural societies, it is needed to assert the value of the respect for other cultures because in the globalized world the coexistence with the alien and different Others is without alternative.

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