

INTERCULTURAL MANAGEMENT WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION CONTEXT

Elena Claudia CONSTANTIN

Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania

Abstract: The article focuses on the importance of intercultural management in a European society characterised by cultural diversity. Even if the cultural diversity constitutes a positive element for Europe, our historical period is still marked by interethnic conflicts and identity crises. The cultural identity could become a central problem and there are not too many ways to solve it: dialogue or confrontation. Any EU communication act, which is not in accordance with the culture of the group the individuals belong to, can lead to a change of attitude towards EU. European Union should improve its policy regarding intercultural communication and management.

Keywords: interculturality, cultural diversity, cultural identity, intercultural management, European Union, rural population, traditions

1. Introduction

Cultural diversity is a salient characteristic of our modern society and the cultural identity has become a central issue in the 21st century. It is a well-known fact that the European Union is a space of cultural diversity; some cultures are more or less similar, but never identical. The world we live in is full of interethnic conflicts and identity crises.

The European history is full of examples of major conflicts which led to the clash of civilizations and cultures. There are still zones in Europe where: xenophobia, ethnic and religious intolerance, anti-Semitism, chauvinism, etc. persist.

As far as management is concerned, at a different scale of course, the European Union has to cope with the same difficulties as any other multinational organisation. Like any other multinational company, EU has to improve its strategy and policy as regards intercultural communication and management.

2. Interculturality

Interculturality is not a modern concept; the world history abounds in examples of interculturality.

Herodotus was among the first historians who left us valuable information on the existence of local cultures, on the style of living and the mentality of the people he came in contact with.

People benefited from the discoveries of the Mesopotamian civilization; we owe the beginning of cartography, chemistry, algebra to the Summero – Babylonians. “The Hammurabi Code meant to the people of the Near East what Roman Law meant to the people of the modern Europe” (Ovidiu Drimba, 1985:104; our translation).

Alexander the Great is considered to have started a new type of cultural colonialism. His idea of universalism consisted in unifying the racial and ethical

groups. Many consider the idea similar to the one at the basis of the construction of the European Union.

Alexander the Great, one of Aristotle's disciples, had a unitary vision of the world; mainly due to his Greek philosophical background. It is a well-known fact that the conquerors used to impose their own culture and civilization to the conquered peoples. Alexander the Great tried to apply the Greek traditions and knowledge to the newly conquered territories, but considering first the assimilation of the local culture as a means of avoiding social conflicts and maintaining order.

Generally, the acculturation phenomenon led to changes at all levels: social institutions, customs, culture, etc.; the most known acculturation phenomenon is the encounter with the Greek ancient civilization. From a modern perspective this phenomenon can be regarded as an intercultural phenomenon.

In ancient times interculturality manifested itself mainly when the expansion of an empire favoured the contact of several peoples, of several mentalities or of several cultures. Nowadays this is a frequent phenomenon as people can travel freely and the global policy favours intercultural exchanges.

3. Intercultural management

As far as management is concerned, we cannot have a universal type of management. A universal type of management cannot survive the test of the reality in implementation throughout the continents or even throughout regions of the same geographical area. We can only have a specific type of management function to the objective envisaged. The need to develop methods and techniques able to cope with the present day cultural requirements led to a new type of management, i.e. intercultural management.

Generally, the term intercultural management or cross-cultural management refers to tackling the management issue from the cultural point of view, i.e. the relation between national culture and the organizational culture. Other specialists consider intercultural communication and management as: "an interdisciplinary human resources field concerned with facilitating communication, management and effective interaction of personnel and customers across borders"[11].

Management studies do not ignore the role of culture in the process of decision taking. Experts consider that the cultural heritage of the respective people influences individuals in taking decisions. They also consider that both culture and national identity can lead to cohesion or to segregation.

Culture and cultural identity have formed models, be it for cohesion, disintegration or conflict after the Cold War. The awareness of the role of culture has increased after the publication of the article "The Clash of Civilizations", in 1993, by Samuel Huntington, professor of International Policy at Harvard and the dean of the Institute for Strategic Planning. In his opinion "the main source of conflict in the new world, i.e. after 1989, will not be mainly ideological or economic, the big division among people and the dominant source of conflict will be cultural" (1993:33).

After the Cold War, ideology seems less important as a leading principle of the foreign policy (Huntington, 1993: 28) and "culture seems to be the plausible candidate to fill the empty space". Therefore, Samuel Huntington considers that "the future wars will be between nations and groups with different civilization: Western, Confucian,

Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Orthodox and Latin–American. They will dominate the global politics and the battle lines will follow the separating lines between these cultures”. The tragic events of 11 September 2001 were a reminder of this reality.

Regrettably, his prediction proved to be true and culture, religion included, proved to become a source of conflict. Unfortunately the examples are numerous: the conflict in Iraq, the conflict between Israelites and Palestinians, Serbians and Albanese, Catholics and Protestants, etc.

Gabriel Andreescu underlines the fact that the danger is even bigger as:

“...globalization also allowed the access of certain cultural representatives to technologies that only a few cultures were able to produce. [...] After the collapse of the world bipolar system, mankind lives, within a process of globalization, the effects of the contradiction between political integration based on the solidarity of interests and the disintegration of the state based on identity criteria, between the economic homogeneity and cultural dissipation.” (2007:12)

4. Intercultural management and the European Union

Why the same EU management methods are successful in some EU countries and inefficient in other EU countries?

According to experts, there are several factors that can lead to the success of these methods and the “national culture” is among the most important ones.

We conducted a three-year PhD research on the impact of the European norms on the rural population of Romania. Part of the research was focused on identifying the extent to which the EU really takes into consideration the national traditions in its policy.

Romania joined EU in January 2007 and the process was mainly a political integration.

As far as agriculture is concerned, since Romania joined EU it has continuously changed its policy regarding animal welfare and public health to be able to meet European norms. Since animal breeding is a tradition for the Romanian people we are going to focus our attention on this issue.

The European norms and normatives stipulate, among other things that in urban areas people are not allowed to raise pigs in their courtyard. In rural areas people cannot raise pigs free-range (a Romanian tradition in Transylvania since the 18th century). However they can raise pigs only for personal consumption, but the number is limited to four. They also are allowed to sell animals, but only live animals and only within the village area. The traditional way of sacrificing animals should be replaced by assomation.

Within the format of the present paper, we do not intend to argue over the rightness and the logic of all the norms. They are perfectly reasonable and extremely useful, but they totally disregard the Romanian daily life and social customs. The newly imposed EU norms do not just disregard the secular traditions, but they affect directly the people who are at the limit of subsistence.

It is worth mentioning that the contemporary European village model is completely different from the traditional rural space. According to Eurostat data, in most EU countries, industry and especially service industry have replaced animal breeding or agriculture as dominant activities in the rural areas [9].

The situation of the Romanian village is completely different. In Romania the number of people employed in agriculture is double in comparison with Poland and at a very big distance from the other European states. In Romania, animal breeding is mainly a way of surviving not an organized industry. Even today the majority of the Romanian population lives in the countryside and agriculture is their primary source of income.

The Romanian peasant is not only a producer but also the consumer of the products. Statistics indicate that 81% of agricultural exploitations of Romania use more than half of the products for self-consumption. The paradox consists in the fact that in Romania there is the largest rural population in Europe and the largest number of economic non-viable farms. According to Luca and Ghinea (2012) this is caused by "the social structure of the Romanian rural environment where the subsistence agriculture hides lack of chances, hidden unemployment and poverty".

We think that there should be made a distinction between industrial farming and subsistence farming. There are two agricultures in Romania, but unfortunately none is really viable.

Most Romanians are guided by religious traditions and participate in elaborate customs and ceremonies during Easter and Christmas. Most of the EU provisions cannot be understood by ordinary farmers. It is unlikely that the Romanian farmers, living in mountainous areas, in monocelular houses understand terms or concepts like these: animals have to be held, at least, 8 hours per day at a 40 lux light and have to have visual contact, etc.

How efficient is EU intercultural management? We cannot say that as far as Romanian rural space is concerned is very efficient since basic rules have been overlooked. It is unlikely that in a few years after a country joined the European Union the people changed their mentality as far as their ethnicity is concerned. It is not advisable to overlook that the collective memory does not forget the past events and that personal judgment cannot be changed easily.

How do Romanian farmers respond to the newly imposed rules? They simply ignore them. First they choose to survive, and that is why they continue to raise animals. And their raise animals in the way they learnt from their parents. Then they choose to sacrifice them according to secular traditions; even if they are considered barbarians by outsiders.

It is the task of the Romanian politicians to make the EU legislators aware of the Romanian traditions or customs. It is the task of the Romanian politicians to plead the peasants' cause in European forums and to try to get the EU approval for cultural traditions.

We consider that besides the political or financial considerations EU has also to consider the human and the cultural issues involved; and preferably not in this order.

The attitude of the rural population of Romania confirms that nonprofessional communication of the European directives can lead to the rejection of all the ideas connected with European Union, no matter how good they are. "Communication cannot be successful without comprehension", professor Boboc states (2009:10; our translation), and "this depends on what the person receives from what you sent in communication and if he does not have all the necessary elements to understand what you said, communication did not take place".

Cultural diversity is a permanent characteristic of modern life and “cultural pluralism implies the acceptance of the other, tolerance, plural coexistence, but with the possibility to sustain your own opinion” (Cucoş, 2000:160; our translation).

Individuals reflect the opinions, concepts and attitudes of the groups they belong to because the concept of culture “relates to us at much deeper levels which are more difficult to change: levels to do with structures, values and beliefs, allegedly making up the “hard core” of our culture” [10]. Cultural characteristics and differences “are less mutable and hence less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones” (Huntington, 1993).

Any EU communication act which is not in accordance with the culture of the group the individuals belong to can lead to a change of attitude towards EU, and generally not to a positive one.

More and more people refer to the paradox regarding lack of communication in a world which reached the peak of technical communication.

A good intercultural management should not just record the behaviour of a people it should try to find solutions which do not contravene to the culture of the EU countries. It is a truism that function to the country “the same behaviour can have different significance or different behaviour can have the same significance” (Geertz, 1973:132).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion we can say that even if the cultural diversity is beneficial for European Union, it is important to pay more attention to the cultural factors.

The findings of a three year research in the rural areas of Romania indicate that the national traditions are considered to a very limited extent.

An improved EU intercultural management will be able to identify efficient solutions which do not contravene to the culture of the EU countries. Besides the political or financial considerations EU has to consider the human and the cultural issues involved, too. European Union should consider the big economic difference between the state members and allow a longer transition period. People should not be forced to choose between survival and obeying EU norms or between EU norms and traditions.

Unfortunately, there are not too many ways to solve the cultural issues. The choice is rather simple: one has to choose between the dialogue and the confrontation of cultures. We can only express the hope that any reasonable human mind would choose the first variant.

References

1. Andreescu, G., 2007. Multiculturalismul normativ, în *Interculturalitate, cercetări si perspective româneşti*, coord. R. Poledna, F. Ruegg, C. Rus, 2007, pg. 12, available at http://www.intercultural.ro/carti/interculturalitate_detaliu.html [accessed April 2012].
2. Boboc, A. 2009. *Cultură și comunicare* (fragment din prelegerea susținută la Conferința Integrarea Europeană – Realități și Perspective, Galați, mai, 2009), *Acta Universitatis Danubius*, No. 1/2009, available at journals.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/communicatio/article/download/343, [accessed April 2011].
3. Cucoş, C., 2000, *Educația: dimensiuni culturale si interculturale*, Editura Polirom, Iași.
4. Drimba, O. 1985. *Istoria culturii și civilizației*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București.
5. Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*, New York, Basic Books, pp. 132.

6. Huntington, S., 1993. The Clash of Civilisations, in „Foreign Affairs”, vol. 72, no. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22–49.
7. Luca, L.; Ghinea, C. 2012. O țară și două agriculturi. România și reforma Politicii Agricole Comune a UE, available at http://www.crpe.ro/library/files/CRPE_Policy_Memo_no.4_RO.Pdf, 21 [accessed May 2012].
8. *** Eurostat, Your key to European Statistics, available at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/nuts_nomenclature/introduction [accessed August 2012].
9. *** Interculturality, available at, http://www.lmg.ulg.ac.be/articles/intercult_en.html [accessed June 2012]
10. *** Satul romanesc si maghiar in contextul integrarii in Uniunea Europeana, available at: http://www.idcult.ro/pages_ro/06_legi.htm [accessed April 2013].
11. *** What is Intercultural Management?, available at: http://www.synergy-associates.com/cultural/i_mgmt.htm [accessed April 2013]