A Research Project, New Europe College.

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Focus Group: Identity, Legitimacy and Civil Society

1. A possible theoretical motivation:

The collapse of communism and the long vigil that followed it created a series of political problems that were actually technical ones. A whole panoply of institutions had to be created overnight to regulate the complex economic and social arrangements generated by private property. The construction of political institutions is not the same as the process of establishing a nation. The stake is different: in the first case, the emphasis is on the norms and standards that regulate the complicated relationships between individuals, in the second, on the valorization of a common belonging. And the political discourse is different: one is about rights, the other about identity.

The attempt to reconstruct the public space as an area of intersection between religion and politics, the temptation to demythologize old habits of thought and the articulation of a new type of discourse about identity and collectivity, have put Romanian society in front of new and conflicting situations. The discourse of identity provided a convenient pretext for defending the interests of the old regime. The reaction was inevitable in the context created by the huge gap between expectations and achievements.

The role of reformist intellectuals was to impose the concept of civil society and individual rights in front of the tendency to reaffirm collectivist values. The plea in favor of individualism, often formulated in abstract terms, imposed the discourse of "good", pro-European identity. The "bad" identities (nostalgic autochthonism) vs. "good" identities (pan-Europeans). The real contrast is between individualism and collectivism, not between good and bad identities. The concept of identity cannot legitimize a reasonable political strategy or agreement because different perspectives on the idea of good or "good life" are at stake.

The essential problem of Romanian society is the correct setting of the relationship between *good and right*. The rule of law is, fundamentally, an *instrument* that must ensure, through a system of fair rules and procedures, the accommodation of different private interests, without establishing a consensus on the common good. The so often invoked "dominion" or "supremacy of the law" means, in fact, the effective achievement of a normative priority of law in relation to the good (individual or collective).

The transition was, in general, seen as a *process* towards democracy. I propose analyzing it as a *normative commitment* for a certain procedural framework. Without accepting the regulative idea of the minimum conditions for a civil association, the project of an inclusive policy remains a utopia.

Civil society, far from being an "ideal" or the creation of intellectuals, is a regulatory framework that allows individuals to pursue their goals in a mutually beneficial manner. It does not fix a common goal and, even less, the means by which it can be achieved. All social utopias were based on such an abstract collective project.

If we are to speak in terms of the founding principles, it is the civil society that legitimizes the national culture and not vice versa (Vaclav Havel, *Summer Meditations)*. It is not the legitimacy of the concept of national identity that is being discussed, but the way in which it can legitimize (in the name of an "imagined" belonging) a political strategy.

To recognize the importance of mutual trust does not mean adhering to a certain value among many others but accepting the necessary conditions of civil association.

2. Some objectives and questions

A crucial issue will be the analysis of the ways through which a paradigmatic change of the discourse of the Romanian political culture can be proposed: from identity to rights. In general, I believe that research will have to be focused on answering a set of questions and challenges. I am going to propose a few that can obviously be reformulated and improved:

1. How can the discourse about the individual and the collective be reconstructed from the perspective of the regulative idea of the minimum conditions for the association between individuals?

2. What are the theoretical and practical difficulties of identity politics?

3. What relations exist between identity, citizenship and democracy in the process of European integration and disintegration?

4. How can civil society generate the capital of social trust necessary for a liberal policy?

5. Is "liberal neutralism" incompatible with the values embedded in the different historical traditions?

6. Can we ignore the fact that we are placed in certain historical and social contexts when we invoke normative criteria in our practical relationships?

7. Can the exercise of practical reason generate consensus between different cultural groups?

8. What are the necessary logical assumptions of political agreement?

3. **Research Dissemination**
- Organization of workshops and international conferences with the participation of professors: Bruce Haddock Robert Bideleux (Swansea University), Alan Montefiore (Balliol College, Oxford), Catherine Audard (LSE), Onora OI'Neil (Cambridge), Judy Batt (Birmingham), Rex Martin (Kansas), Thomas Pogge (Yale).
- Publication of studies in specialized journals and in collective volumes.
- The organization of colloquiums, seminars and conferences at the relevant academic institutions.

This is the project under the auspices of which we met dozens of times, between 2000-2003, at the New Europe College, challenging "our everyday collectivism."