

Practicing Identity: Personal Reflections on the Democracy & Diversity Institute

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Once upon a time, I traveled from Minsk to Sofia. To get there I had to cross borders at least five times - between Belarus and Poland, Poland and Slovakia, Slovakia and Hungary, Hungary and Romania, and Romania and Bulgaria. Like everyone else, I had to show my passport at each frontier, sometimes even twice at the same border, and answer the question "Where are you from?" Each time I would repeat the same thing: "I am from Belarus."

At first, it was just an answer to a question: but the more I repeated the same words, the more I discovered a ritual sense in such a simple thing as confirming my citizenship. Each subsequent passport checkpoint turned into a micro-performance that allowed me to "experience" my Belarusian identity by demonstrating it to others. While making this gesture (showing a passport bearing the word "Belarus" and pronouncing this phrase), I allowed these Others to identify me with my "point of departure," with the place I had left. In comparison with the first border crossing, by the time I reached the the last checkpoint I was definitely more convinced that "I am from Belarus."

Despite the fact that the summer Democracy & Diversity Institute seemed to be a completely different kind of experience (we stayed in Przegorzaly Castle for almost three weeks, spending our days and nights in the castle), this "secluded life" paradoxically resulted in a very similar identity experience for me. In a way, it also became a kind of adventure, as the apparent immobility there turned out to be full of intense intellectual and communicative experiences, which allowed the participants to "practice" that special sort of knowledge pertaining to who we are, where are we from.

For me, the most valuable aspect of the Summer Institute was in its particular practice of wedding a specific cultural experience with analytical reflection. A space was created at the Summer Institute in which meeting people from faraway countries (how else can Burma be classified for a Belarusian, or Chile for someone from Vietnam?) provided the participants with a special kind of "diversity experience," which was, furthermore, combined with seminars, lectures, roundtables, etc., at which this "experience" became precisely the material for theoretical reflection. Everyone went to Cracow with his or her own cultural, socio-political, and analytical background; and at the Institute, the "practice" of one's own cultural identity was constantly being challenged and nurtured within the context of meeting people from diverse cultures and countries. This configuration of educational space - in which the content of social and human science surpasses the boundaries of knowledge itself in order to become a matter of cultural experience - was, for me, the most valuable part of this summer's Democracy & Diversity Institute.

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