Alexander Vukolov

Lomonosov Moscow State University

Faculty of Political Science

[sandro.vukol@gmail.com](mailto:sandro.vukol@gmail.com)

**The Issue of National Identity in Modern Portugal**

**Abstract**

The article analyzes the transformation of the Portuguese national identity, which started since the Carnation Revolution (1974), and the influence of the previous historical experience of Portugal as the great colonial empire on this process. The research reveals that in the contemporary world Portugal is characterized by post-imperial national identity. In terms of international affairs, it is expressed in the tight political, economic and cultural cooperation with Lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) countries. As for the Portuguese society, nowadays one of the most topical and controversial issues concerning national identity is the issue of dealing with the imperial past, especially with negative aspects of the colonial system.

**Keywords:** Portugal, national identity, historical memory, colonial empire, democratization.

According to Professor Onésimo Teotónio Almeida, the participants of public discussions on Portuguese national identity can be relatively divided into three general clusters:

1) *the* *traditionalists* who tend to comprehend the Portuguese culture in an essentialist manner emphasizing absoluteness of cultural values and immutability of the national character, spirit, and destiny;

2) *the* *social scientists* (sociologists, anthropologists, historians, etc.) who appeal to rigorous scientific methodology, deny the appropriateness of the word “national” and, following the intellectual fashion, study how globalization combats the nationalist-oriented worldview;

3) *the* “*moderate” specialists* who acknowledge the changeability of cultural elements, responsible for the national community cohesion, and the influence of historical traditions as very important identity-forming factors. (Almeida, 2002)

Sharing the approach of the third group as the most applicable for this research, the following objectives are set in this article:

1) to trace the evolution of the national identity of Portugal until 1974 when the country had the status of colonial power,

2) to reveal the challenges to the national identity which the Portuguese society had to face against the background of the democratization processes. There are three interrelated aspects here: the attitude of Portugal towards its colonial past; the integration into the European Union and active participation in resolving the international issues; the international activity within the Community of Portuguese Language Countries.

The relevance of the topic is connected with the uniqueness of Portugal’s historical experience. Being the great colonial empire at the extreme western point of Europe, this country had rarely played a significant part in the grand affairs of the continent it belonged to till the last quarter of the 20th century. This historical peculiarity has been affecting the Portuguese national identity up to date.

In April 1974 the group of left-oriented officers of the Portuguese Armed Forces carried out the Carnation Revolution, the last revolution in Western Europe so far, which put an end to the Estado Novo regime that existed in the country for almost half a century. The subversion of the authoritarian rule marked a new chapter in the history of Portugal. The gradual formation of a new democratic political system and subsequent accession to the European Economic Community in 1986 dramatically transformed the priorities of the Portuguese society. Naturally, tremendous socio-economic and political modernization touched the intellectual elites of the country impelling them to give new answers to the “eternal” questions: who we are and what our “mission” on this Earth is. In the language of science, it meant an evident necessity to come up with a new conception of national identity[[1]](#footnote-1).

As history showed, the specificity of the Portuguese national identity construction is primarily determined by the fact that during several centuries Portugal was the great colonial empire, one of the most powerful states of that period. Prince Henry the Navigator, Bartolomeu Dias, Vasco da Gama, and Pedro Cabral comprised the pantheon of imperial history giving the Portuguese an honorable title of the “nation of navigators and explorers” blessed by God for their Christian civilizing mission. (Portugaliya…, 2014)

During the 15th and 16th centuries, the Portuguese discovered new territories in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and started settling them. The building of the colonial empire became the common business for representatives of all estates headed by the royal family. Soon the emigration from continental Portugal became immense: fellow citizens left their homes forever in search of a better life, preserving their spiritual attachment to the Motherland and for this reason reproducing cultural and religious traditions and social institutions in colonies. Thus, the Portuguese developed the habit to identify themselves not with a country at the West of the Iberian Peninsula but with the giant Empire celebrated by Luís Vaz de Camões (1524–1580) in his famous poem “The Lusiads”. That was the “time of heroes”, the “golden age” of the Portuguese when they proclaimed their glory on the world scale. Since then the taste for navigation and duty of civilizing have been perceived by the Portuguese as the unalienable traits of the national character, morally legitimating the Portuguese governance in dependent territories. (Hatton, 2014)

However, the death of King Sebastian I in 1578 and the consequent inclusion of Portugal into Spain predefined the sunset of the Portuguese glory. Having restored its independence in 1668, Portugal was not able to rival with other great empires anymore. In the 19th century, the Napoleon invasion and loss of the main colony — Brazil — significantly damaged the Portuguese economy. The Crown had to switch its attention to the African possessions with the desire to unite Angola and Mozambique into the important imperial bridgehead on the continent but met robust resistance from the British Empire in 1890. The British Ultimatum was a fatal blow to the traditional Portuguese ambitions towards global leadership. (Hatton, 2014) The traditional identification of the Portuguese with their monarchy and the house of Braganza was rapidly “melting”. The Republican Party acting in the vanguard of the nationalist movement suggested a brand new variant of national identity — without a monarchial principle. This conception implied that the Portuguese nation is much older than the kingdom, stemming from the race of Luso who inhabited the western part of the peninsula in ancient times and was famous for its courageous sailors. This mythological lineage explained the successes of the Portuguese in the “golden age” and unambiguously pointed at the unjust position of the “nation of explorers” under the contemporary royal power. In the end, such political ideas led to the assassination of King Carlos I and his son Luís Filipe by the terrorists-republicans in 1908. Two years later the revolution toppled the Portuguese monarchy itself. (Rivero, 2013)

The First Portuguese Republic corresponded to basic political values of the Modernity, however, the Portuguese society par excellence appeared not to be ready for such a radical liberal shift. In 1926 the military coup happened in the country suffering from many social and economic problems such as corruption, high crime rate, etc. In 1933 the “Estado Novo” was set by António de Oliveira Salazar to restore the traditional society in Portugal based on the principle of personal authority according, in his opinion, to the *popular will*. Colonies were perceived as an integral part of Portugal; therefore, their cultural affinity with the mainland was only reinforced. Thus, Salazar managed to adapt the political language worked out by the Modernity to the goals of the “traditional world”. To a certain extent, it became possible because of a new structure of the Portuguese national identity with its accent on wellbeing for the nation (nationalism) and tradition of imperial statehood even with a dictator instead of a king (strong links with possessions on other continents which were disrupted only by the colonial war in the 1960s). (Rivero, 2013)

It can be seen that for many centuries Portugal due to its imperial organization had been closer to its overseas possessions and local population rather than to the European neighbors. Nevertheless, one of the results of the Carnation revolution was the granting of independence to all the Portuguese colonies. The Portuguese national identity lost its traditional, century-old cornerstone. The new challenges of building a democratic nation came to the fore in the political agenda after 1974. (Hatton, 2014)

Many people in Portugal started to realize that probably the troubles of the present day are deeply rooted in the imperial past of their Motherland. One way or another, many national heroes of those legendary times became hallowed because of their great deeds *outside* *of* Portugal. Meanwhile, here, on the continent, affairs were in extremely poor condition. It looked like the Portuguese of the Empire had been conducting self-alienation century by century, passively waiting for a wonder which was about to happen (or not) in their homeland. The establishing of democracy changed the views of the Portuguese on themselves, European countries and former colonies. The governments were striving to avoid the scary scenery of isolationism and extend the participation of Portugal in coping with international issues within the global governance despite the modest economic potential of the new EU member. Of course, Euro-Atlantic interests of modern Portugal resembled “flashbacks” from the distant past exacerbated by the steps to enhance the relations with Lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) countries.

In this respect, the Community of Portuguese Language Countries should be mentioned. This intergovernmental organization was founded in 1996 to resume and maintain the post-imperial dialogue within the Lusophone cultural community. Nowadays it has 9 members (Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, São Tomé and Príncipe and Timor-Leste) and 19 associate observers (Argentina, Italy, Japan, etc.) from different parts of the world. The main goals of the Community are the coordination of political actions of the members on the world arena, cooperation in social services development and strengthening the positions of the Portuguese language on the Earth. Portugal often plays the role of a mediator between the former colonies and Europe thereby increasing its international authority. Besides, Portugal contributes significant sums of money to the infrastructural development of the Portuguese-speaking nations. Thus, the political elites of modern Portugal share the post-imperial model of national identity feeling the responsibility for further social progress of the former possessions. (Portugaliya…, 2014)

As for the life of ordinary people, the case of the Portuguese village named Montes Juntos, which is situated in the south-east of the country near the frontier with Spain, is quite illustrative in the context of the national identity. Despite the European integration at the international level and various formats of local cooperation with the Spanish village of Cheles, the so-called “communal transnational identity” has not been formed in the villagers’ minds. The majority of Montes Juntos residents continue to identify themselves with the whole Portuguese nation perceiving the Spanish people from the contiguous municipality as “aliens” with *another mentality*: they speak *another* language, they like *another* cuisine and they celebrate holidays in *another* way. (Silva, 2018)

A bright example of appealing to the historical memory as a very important component of national identity in public discourse is the latest heated debate over the creation of the “Museum of the Discoveries” in Lisbon. Its principal idea is to demonstrate not only positive aspects but also the dark side of the Portuguese expansion. The public reaction was quick to follow. More than a hundred Portuguese and foreign academics wrote an open letter in which they argued that the colonial system established during the Portuguese “golden age” was tarnished by cruel abuses towards the local population and, therefore, any exhibition of artifacts of that epoch is unacceptable. In the opinion of Joacine Katar-Moreira, a scientist from the University Institute of Lisbon, such an action would “only reinforce Portuguese colonial ideology”. In his turn, Prime Minister António Costa claimed that this period of history was the national pride for all the Portuguese when the “biggest contribution to the world” was made. The highly complicated discussion is going on and the future of the already notorious museum is still uncertain. (Barchfield, 2018)

Thus, the issue of national identity in Portugal has a complex character. The Age of Discovery, when Portuguese caravels were the owners of oceans and Portuguese “sword and cross” were the owners of continents, became its heroic foundation for many centuries. However, the new political reality, which formed in the last quarter of the 20th century, did not assume the conservation of the colonial system anymore. In the post-colonial world, Portugal had to elaborate another type of national identity. The orientations of Portuguese elites, who succeeded in making Portugal relatively *European*, indicate that this identity is post-imperial in many respects. At the external level, it was reflected in the establishing of the institutional framework for political, financial and cultural interactions with Lusophone countries. At the internal level, it has managed to exceed any other possible integral identity (common European, regional Iberian and even local ones) in general, but faces difficult challenges connected with the post-colonial discourse and the question of collective historical guilt in particular.

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1. In this article the notion “identity” is used in the meaning of a system of certain ideas, values, and attitudes underpinning the motivation for a social group behavior through the association of individuals with this group, its role models and institutions. (Semenenko, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)