

Mirjana Pavlović

Institute of Ethnography SASA, Belgrade
mirjana.pavlovic@ei.sanu.ac.rs

Conceptualization, Strategies and Realization of Ethnic/National Identity in Historical Discourse*

This paper discusses conceptualization of ethnic/national identity among the Serbs in Timisoara and Banat, both on the level of individual and that of collective within historical discourse. In addition, the paper analyzes diverse strategies that were developed by the individuals and the community during many centuries of inhabitation of the multi-ethnic area of Banat, in formation, realization and preservation of ethnicity.

Key words:

ethnic/national identity, minorities, Serbs, Banat, Timisoara

The Serbs in Banat¹, having lived for many centuries² in multi-ethnic environment under various social and political systems and under different cultural influences foremost by Germans, Turks, Hungarians and Romanians, have been ex-

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¹ Banat is a region in southeast Europe; from the Middle Ages until the end of the WW I, it represented a unique historical, political and cultural space, but under political domination of various states: middle age Hungary, Turkish Empire and Habsburg Monarchy. The area's main characteristics were multi-cultural and multi-regional realities as well as co-habitation of diverse ethnic groups such as Romanians, Germans, Hungarians and Serbs. The Trianon agreement divided Banat into three parts, wherein the largest and most significant part, together with Timisoara, came under Romania, and the smaller part to Yugoslavia while the smallest part came under Hungary.

² The Banat territory, and its center Timisoara, was inhabited by Serbs for several centuries before their mass immigration from the territory of the modern Serbia, hence some historians argue that a small portion of the Serbs remained in Banat, Krišna and Erdelj, while the majority of Slavic tribes reached the areas south of the Sava and Danube rivers in the beginning of 7th century (Popović, 1955 17). However, the most important colonization took place in several waves in the long period of 15th–19th centuries, as a result of great changes in the Balkans, in the first period of Turkish expansion into the Balkans states after Marica and Kosovo battles, and then as a consequence of weakening of the Turkish Empire and expulsion of the Turks from Hungary (Ivić 1940, 188).

posed to various means of acculturation and assimilation. At the same time, for the most part of their respective history, the Serbs in this area had a considerable awareness about being a separate entity in ethnic, cultural and even political senses. The Serbs, therefore, in the processes of adaptation and integration into the majority, while at the same time opposing assimilation, were forced to fight for their own minority privileges and some form of religious, cultural and/or political autonomy, that is, they had to organize themselves as a separate community (religious, linguistic, ethnic/national or having different interests). This complex social attitude reflected also onto conceptualization and realization of the ethnic/national identity³ on individual and collective levels but also on diverse strategies used by the individuals and the community in order to form, realize and preserve the identity.

During the middle ages in Hungarian Kingdom, the Serbs from Banat had built awareness about themselves as a special entity based on Orthodox religious affiliation⁴ and in opposition to Catholic affiliation. In this same way, the Serbs were seen by a wider social environment, which resulted in many periodical and forceful tries to convert them into Catholicism. Hence, for instance, Bella III (1173–1196) had brought to Banat and Pomorišje the members of Teutonic order St. John, in order to nolens volens, convert the Orthodox Serbs into Catholicism (Cerović 1992, 10), while in 1366 in areas near Timisoara, there was an organized effort by Franciscans to convert the Serbs into Catholicism. The Orthodox priests who opposed were either arrested or threatened by exile, while glagolitics were brought from Dalmatia to serve rituals to the Serbs in their own language but in accordance with Catholic customs (Popović 1995, 25).

In their long term opposition and fight against conversion to Catholicism, the Serbs had, in effect, strengthened a religious basis for their communion, at least on collective level and publicly. Hence, the action taken by Franciscans had not yield very positive results: according to a document dated from that time period, the Serbs were so firm in their beliefs that even those who had converted to Catholicism did not last for very long, that is, they converted again to Orthodoxy with even more ardour (ibid, 25).

Available historical sources do not permit discussion about individual level and experience of the group membership, but nevertheless, it may be concluded that individual membership was not only under a strong influence of the collective but

³ Ethnic/national identity usually assumes group identity, that is, awareness about belonging to a specific ethnic/national community, designated and expressed by its members through various symbolic representations either objective or subjective, cultural or social about one's own ethnic/national communion and distinctiveness, or a designated group identity by others (Pavlović 1991).

⁴ Serbs, at the time a majority in Banat, got Christianized in 9th century under the influence of Byzantine Empire, while Hungarians got Christianized in 1001 under the Roman influence. The difference gained in significance especially after schism in Christian Church in 1054, leading to many conflicts in succeeding centuries among members of Greek and Latin rituals (Cerović 1992, 8).

also that it was not firmly or clearly shaped. Today, however, it is very difficult if not impossible, to discuss this matter in an adequate way.

Similarly, in the Turkish Timisoara, the collective Serbian identity in Banat was founded on religious basis. Still, a change was noted in power distribution within socio-political sense, which besides changes in collective “they” influenced also shaping of the collective “we”. Namely, the ruling social force had become a population of Islamic affiliation, versus Christian communion (their view on us). This is clearly seen in spatial segregation within urban development of Timisoara: separate Muslim and Christian home blocks residential quarters and areas but also segregation in socio-political sense wherein Christian were not allowed into ruling military positions (Popovici 1933, 22–24). Since at that time, the Hungarians had left Timisoara and Banat, the opposition to Muslim power was taken over by Christian population (a differentiation within framework of “we”). At the same time, a formation of group identity relation “we-they” based on religious affiliation contributed to association, encouragement and empowerment of communion within different ethnic groups. Hence, the inhabitants of the so-called Christian part, along with traders were orthodox Christians belonging to diverse ethnic groups, foremost Serbs, Romanians, Aromanians/Tzintzars and others.

Collective membership was, in the 18th century Austrian Timisoara as in other previous periods, under heavy serious religious influence. Under the impact of various but mostly political circumstances, the Serbian Church was in Habsburg Monarchy⁵ the leading organization of the Serbian people in religious but also in cultural and political sense. This had brought about that the Serbs had maintained preserved their own individuality and national awareness through religion and church organization (Đorđević 1940, 317–318). At the same time, the privileges won by Arsenije Čarnojević from the Austrian Emperor referred mostly to organization of Orthodox church and its hierarchy⁶; the church included, besides Serbs, Romanians, Greeks, and Armenians, that is, all Orthodox Christians. In addition, the term “Illyrian nation” was frequently used in official and public addresses, which also included all Orthodox Christians (a relation “they vs. us”). For instance, in 1745, Illyrian court committee was formed to deal with the Serbian issue, and in 1747 it became Illyrian court deputation, in effect a Ministry for Serbian issues, equal to all other deputations including Hungarian (Cerović 1992, 67–69). Hence, in accordance with the historical circumstances and political situation, the Serbs in Banat, at least from the viewpoint of the majority, were seen as a part of wider Orthodox entity. However, there were occasional appellations such as Rac, Vlah etc., which pointed out, in addition to pejorative attitude, toward certain distinction among two nations in ethnic sense. Still, this kind of social organization had led some historians, for example, Emanuel Turczynski, to discuss joint identity and exist-

⁵ During its history Habsburg Monarchy changed name several times: Habsburg or Austrian Monarchy in 1526–1804/1867, Austrian Empire in 1804–1867 and Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867–1918.

⁶ More on privileges and legal status of Serbs in Habsburg Monarchy in Forišković 1994: 261.

tence of a unique Serbian-Romanian confessional or Illyrian nation (Milin 1995: 708).

Miodrag Milin, however, rightly pointed out that even though religion provided certain solidarity and the Serbian church hierarchy played out a significant role in defense of Romanian Orthodoxy in the period of its endangerment, the national essence of these two peoples is totally different. According to Milin (1995, 7–8), the main difference was that the Serbian nationalism was inspired by the Byzantine model of empire and motif of Kosovo victim, the Romanian nationalism was based on the belief in nativity and awareness of belonging to Latin nation.

So, even though the same religious confession and joint church organization did not lead to merging of Serbs and Romanians, they caused the assimilation of other Orthodox groups. In the 18th century, at the time of empowerment of their community, the Serbs in Romania, although under the influence of forceful, sometimes quiet assimilation processes, appear as an entity capable of assimilating other communities. Hence, at the time when Banat was left without Military border and placed under jurisdiction of Hungarian counties, Greeks and Aromanians were already under heavy influence of the Serbs.

Nevertheless, at the end of 18th century, Dositej Obradović (1742–1811), a Serbian advocate against Church domination and church-Slavic language, introduced into the Serbian community a new understanding of nation and ethnic/national identity (Jovanović 1949). He stated that religion is a too narrow concept to define national sentiment, and instead argued, in a letter to Mamula, in favor of a newer and much broader principle based on language and origin: considering that both law and religion are changeable while lineage and language are not, the latter should provide unreasonable masses with reasonable sense of solidarity. Furthermore, he considered a victory of active folk language over dead church-Slavic language to be the main and key prerequisite of democracy in culture and nation building (Kostić 1952, 171). Similarly, Sava Tekelija (1761–1842), one of the most eminent representatives of the Serbian community at that time, viewed Serbs and Romanians as two different ethnic-linguistic-spiritual essences (Milin 1990).

Despite these, the national awareness remained for a long time under the significant influence of religion, while the Serbian national declaration kept the ancient confessional character (Kostić 1952), hence resulting that religion, even today, is taken as one of the main signifiers of the ethnic/national identity among Serbs, including the Serbs in Timisoara and Banat.

Well aware of their distinctiveness in ethnic and political sense, the Serbs in Hungary at Timisoara assembly in 1790 presented their first national program, demanding at the same time distinctive territorial (administrative) autonomy (ibid: 233). Albeit these requests were not granted they actually represented a foundation of a new group identity based on nationalism with distinctive territorial, political and autonomous requests. The next year, Romanians too, presented their own national program.

The establishment of these two programs in the same (time) period points out to a clear delimitation in collective “we” of the Serbs and Romanians in sense of both identity (if such communion ever existed) and even more politics. At the same time, Hungarians became frequently positioned on the other end of the relational “we-they” axis. Namely, while Vienna was inclined toward a creation of cosmopolitan Man, Hungarians often used means of aggressive assimilation. At the same time, this leads us into the period when conceptualization of national identity could be traced also at the level of individual. In the Serbian community, numerous national advocates for Serbian rights appeared.

Hungarian national movement development, led by Kossuth, founded on the historically acknowledged statesmanship and political rights of Hungarians, influenced strengthening of the national awareness among Serbs too. Vienna, at the same time, being threatened more and more in political sense, turned to smaller peoples, encouraging to an extent, their national attributes. Education in native language, building and organization of churches, for instance, which Vienna regulated by laws, contributed not only to the enlightenment of the subjects but also to their nation building and delimitation. Following their own separate respective interests, the Serbs and Romanians, during the Hungarian revolution, found themselves on two opposing sides. While the Serbs fought against the revolution with Vienna, the Romanians supported the Hungarians.

For Romanians, in these socio-political circumstances, existence of a separate church organization represented a form of guarantee in preserving their own national identity. Their requests, hence, for separation from the Serbian Orthodox church, and foundation of independent Romanian church, became ever so recurring in time. They were not satisfied that Karlovac archbishopric within Romanian counties had Romanian priests or at least persons who spoke Romanian language well. The Serbs, on the other hand, strived toward political power and separate territory, considering it as a bastion against rising Hungarian nationalism. Therefore, in order to oppose the Hungarian nationalism, the Serbs announced Serbian dukedom with center in Timisoara. The administrative autonomy was short lived and the Serbs found themselves under even heavier influence of Hungarians.

In the newly formed political situation, fighting ardently for preservation of distinctiveness, the Serbian community in Timisoara embraced the church again, which represented, according to Crnjanski (1990, 459), a center of everything. They also turned to other organizations, customs and cultural particulars. In fact, in the middle of 19th century, in addition to serving as centers of social life and cultural heritage, the Serbian organization in Timisoara had also become influential in fighting against Hungarian impact, striving to raise national awareness at the same time.

Afterwards, Banat came to be divided into three parts, the largest including Timisoara acceded to Romania. The Serbs from Banat so became a national minority, their status regulated within borderline of the so-called cultural autonomy- an underlying principle in Europe regulating minority rights (a change in collective “they”). Even though the social status of the Serbian minority in Banat became drastically changed again, this time coming under the power of the Romanian

Kingdom established as a national, unitary state, in the world view of the Serbian community, Hungarian influence was just replaced with Romanian, the pressure being quiet at times or forceful (how we view them). The Serbs were granted all the rights they had gained during the Hungarian rule (independent church organization, a right for minority associations), the Serbian institutions so remained as centers for development of national awareness and opposition against Romanian influence (Pavlović 2006, 316–318).

After WW II, the general climate of atheism and suppression of minority forced the Serbian community to again change national strategy; in addition to education in Serbian and declining minority organizations, the post war changes influenced individual and collective levels of national awareness, resulting in new ways of collective public actions. Most of the time, this has found its way out in written documents, literature, poetry and prose. In the socialist period, the Serbs actively participated in the separate department of Society of Romanian writers; many present day minority activists and authors originated within this department.

In an analysis of conceptualization of contemporary understanding of ethnic identity of the Serbs in Timisoara, we start from self-determination of an individual. In censuses, the Serbs from Timisoara declare either as Serbs or Romanians. Their sense of national belonging has many more shades though. Most of the time, my informants⁷ emphasized they are Serbs by nationality, but also that they are citizens of Romania. Their accounts show certain regularities, that is, their sense of national awareness is frequently determined by generational membership and marriage homogeneity. The oldest generations of the Serbs in Timisoara often emphasized their Serbian origin, with frequent sayings: “Great Serb, 100% Serb, pure Serb, Serb to the core”. Actually, they do accept being Romanian citizens but only citizens, refusing hence the possible Romanian influence on their national declaration. They get offended if someone defines them as “Serbs from Romania”, especially if that someone is from Serbia, or even worse if they are called “Romanian Serbs”. Their own belief conviction is that they are only loyal citizens of Romania.

Among persons of the middle generation, especially those from mixed marriages, a sense of belonging is shared – they feel equally Serbs as much as Romanians. Some claim both nations have influenced their understanding and experience of culture and nationality. “I’m half-half”. Others, even though they accept Romanian cultural influences, resolutely refuse its possible impact on national awareness. “This cannot be – to belong either to one or to other nation. We are Serbs, not like others, proud to be Serbs”.

⁷ The researches were conducted in Timisoara from 2002–2005. The interviews, questionnaires, open dialogues were held with the members of the community of different age, sex, social status, political and religious convictions.

Based on these examples, it is clear that the informants, regarding their own nationality, have essential understanding of identity in which the origin is the most important category.⁸

So, ethnic/national identity is constructed around characteristics that the community and/or individuals estimate as significant in establishment of communion and diversity. These same characteristics are used to mark and express an identity of both individuals and groups. Hence, expression and formation of ethnic/national identity are determined by ethnic/national symbols. In the previous, past times, for the Serbian community in Timisoara, those were the religion and language. Today, albeit the majority of my informants consider several elements as very important in preservation of national identity – such as native language, religion, tradition, customs, folklore, etc. – they consider Serbian language as the most important. Usually, assimilation into Romanian community happens when an individual loses his/hers mother tongue. So, native, or mother tongue appears as one of the most important symbols of identity of the minority community, as well as on accounts of the informants themselves. “The language is very important, we are Serbs, we have to know Serbian language, because if we don’t, we will lose it. Language is a determining point. The main characteristics of Serbian-ship are language and religion. Without religion you could be a Serb, I tolerate that, but without language – no way. For Serbian membership, the most important things are sentiment and language”.

Several informants even argued that a person who does not speak Serbian language is totally assimilated, and cannot be considered as a member of the Serbian minority. “If a person who does not speak Serbian language, he/she is not a Serb anymore. Such a person cannot be a Serb without knowing the language. That’s tragic. I would say, such person is a half-Serb”.

A general attitude among the Serbs in Timisoara is that religious affiliation, as an identity marker, is not enough, since the same affiliation is shared with Romanians; furthermore, they perceive knowledge of the language as declining due to numerous mixed marriages. Hence, the preservation of the language depends a lot upon conscious and hard work of individuals and community, and therefore, the Serbs in Timisoara rely more on new forms which allow them to construct their respective identity in easier ways. Today, the new forms are finding their expression in minority organization and manifestations, especially folklore. A sense of communion and participation in its formations hence is allowed to the persons who speak poorly the native language or do not speak it at all, as well as to those who are atheists or on the doorstep of joining the Romanian church under assumption “That’s all the same, we are all orthodox Christians”.

It is thus obvious that the Serbs in Romania and Timisoara, during their long inhabitation and life in a multi-ethnic environment, have changed their ethnic strategies in order to adjust better to novel socio-political circumstances.

⁸ Compare with the results of research of M. Prelić conducted 1995–1997, in Budapest and its surroundings (Prelić 2008, 185–256).

At any given moment, usage of particular ethnic identity symbol by individuals and community depends not only on current circumstances but also on characteristics of individuals. This reflects identity of any given individual where sentiments and attitudes play a key role. And while the members of the Serbian Orthodox church and believers express their ethnic identity in free and visible participation in church services and practices such as processions around the central city square, Christmas and Easter celebrations, and so on, another group of Serbs in Timisoara, especially the ones who due to the long period of atheism have lost their connection to the church and related rituals if not the personal religiousness, choose unreligious ways to manifest their ethnic identity. This latter group express their ethnicity in social gatherings and celebrations of profane character, such as graduations, jubilee of various minority organizations and folklore groups. Similarly, more educated individuals express their identity on various cultural levels, in literature by not only writing in Serbian language but also discussing themes from the Serbian past, Serbian rural life etc. The identity is also expressed in the battle field of various pressures, in the struggle for preservation of education in Serbian language, and in opposition to growing number of mixed marriages in Serbian community. Another means is opposition to globalization, then, furthermore foundation of minority organizations, political parties etc. These are all different spheres of ethnic identity expression but also strategies put forward to its preservation.

Since the Serbs in Romania are constantly refreshing culture, renewing old rituals but also inventing new forms, history and tradition so become very important within the community and individuals. Both represent thus a reservoir of forgotten elements and features of the past, easily extracted to be polished and reinvented again with new meanings. That is how they acquire new strength and serve to bring together communion and diversity.

In addition, in the contemporary social circumstances, celebrations of traditional and religious holidays, language learning and other ways of heritage preserving are becoming more and more incorporated into church and other minority organization spheres. At the same time, these same institutions appear as leading factors in foundation of new customs and renewal of the old ones, especially so in their advertising and rethinking of new meanings. Hence, the church represents a source for rethinking religious tradition, while minority organizations rethink segments of social life – community life of the Serbs in Timisoara. Within these processes, employees of the minority organizations, as well as their most active members play a key role. In this way, leaders of ethnicity are being formed created. So, in addition to the organizations, individuals so acquire function to educate and direct other community members towards preserving tradition and ethnicity and their manifestations within the wider society. The role of the family remains significant even today, while organizations, schools, church, media and various cultural associations appear as carriers of the ethnicity.

These examples point out not only to the change of ethnic strategies of the Serbian community in novel times but also to the fact that a sense of belonging to the community as well as various expressions of ethnic/national identity of the

Serbs in Timișoara, get more and more transferred from everyday life into leisure times, that is, into festive and institutionalized forms.

Finally, the Serbs in Timișoara and Banat, during centuries and even today, have constructed in continuity, with more or less success, their own communion and distinctiveness. This was achieved through various cultural particulars (religion, language, traditional customs, minority institutions and activities), in a process of alteration of various strategies and adjustments to complex and variable socio-political conditions. Today, these conditions include transition, globalization and integration of the Romanian society into European Union, continuously establishing and maintaining boundaries between “we–them”.

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