

ETHNIC IDENTITY: THE SERBS IN HUNGARY *

In this paper the author deals with the issue of ethnic identification of the contemporary serbian community / national minority in Hungary. Several aspects of the problem are taken into account: self-identification, symbols of identity and the criteria of belonging to the group, dual identity and the distance “us:them”.

Key words: Ethnic identity, ethnic minority, national minority, Serbs in Hungary

The Serbian community in Hungary, one of the thirteen national minorities recognized by the Hungarian State, is presently an exceptionally innumerous group. It is estimated at about 5000¹, and its members do not live on a compact territory. Though innumerous, this community is not an ‘ethnographic monument’, but a dynamic group, which can be researched from different angles.

The questions arising immediately as interesting in the case of a group living in ethnically different milieus, are the issues related to ethnical identity. In this paper I will limit myself, primarily, to the manners of how the members of the group define themselves, the criteria by which belonging to the community is determined, the issues of dual identity and the distance we – others².

Self-Identification

The existence of the present Serbian community in Hungary is a result of historic circumstances — the migration of the Serbs to the north, provoked by the Turkish

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¹ The number was estimated by Serbian institutions, such as Serbian Democratic Federation or Self-Management of the Serbs in Hungary. These estimates are necessary in developing specific methodology for taking censuses in Hungary, and also because it is officially recognized that the members of national minority there, due to negative historic experiences, reluctantly declare their nationality/ethnicity on such occasions.

² My intention is to present some of the results obtained during my fieldwork in 1996–97 among the Serbs living in Budapest and few surrounding cities (Pomaz, Kalaz, Saint Andre, Chobanac). The investigation was of quality character, but some replies in this paper were quantified, for the sake of clearer exposition. In the settlements I worked in, there were about 1000 people, declaring themselves as Serbs and who are visible and active in the social life of the community. The research involved 60 persons of different gender, age and education.

conquests of the Balkans. Their specific culture was created at the time of their rise during the 18th and even 19th centuries. This culture, the traces of which are still visible today, and which is important for the culture of the Serbian people in totality, represents the foundations of the positive identity and feeling of pride to this group. Due to their long presence, which can be historically documented, the Serbs in Hungary consider themselves almost as an autochthonous community³. On the other hand, the awareness that the Serbs in Hungary are immigrants is also alive. The major migration under the Patriarch Charnojevic in 1690 had left such a deep trace in this group's collective memory, that the Serbs even today call themselves 'The descendents of Charnojevic'. This migration was neither the first nor the only one, but one in a series of lasting migrations of the Serbs into Sub-Danubian area, but it is considered as the most important one. According to the formulation of one of the leaders of this community – the contemporary Serbs in Hungary consider themselves 'biological, spiritual and political descendents' of those Serbs who had come with the Charnojevic migration⁴.

The Serbs in Hungary I had the opportunity to get in touch with in public and private situations, often emphasize that they consider themselves an integral part of the Serbian people, as well as loyal citizens of Hungary, integrated in the society wherein they are living. At the direct question how they declare themselves regarding their ethnic identity, the majority of my collocutors said that they are Serbs; the frequency of this answer exceeded by far all other replies, including "Serb from Hungary". Such replies confirm that my collocutors have a developed awareness of belonging to the Serbian nation as a whole, rather than to a regional, specific sub-group that the formulation Serbs from Hungary would imply. However, in their other replies and stands they also expressed an awareness of a distance from the Serbs from the motherland, primarily in mentality, which will be dealt with here shortly.

The belonging to the ethnic group for a majority of my collocutors implies very positive feelings (pride and love). Less frequent, but also characteristic answer to the question regarding the feeling of pride, is that the belonging to the nation or an ethnic group is not something to be proud of, or earned, but just a fact, something one is born into. All my collocutors emphasized that they have never hidden their identity, not even in 'difficult times'. Apart from that they all exhibit an inability to single out, in the course of their life, a period of self-examination, dilemmas or changes in their feeling of belonging to the Serbian community. All of them describe that these feeling have developed with time, and that gives them the sense that it is something spontaneous, almost natural. If there were some difficulties, for example prejudices or pressures from the milieu, they only additionally strengthened their sense of ethnic identity.

Symbols of Identity and the Criteria of Belonging to the Group

In order for the awareness of the group identity to be maintained over a longer time period, it must be linked to a number of major cultural elements which in a given contexts can symbolize the ethnic particularity and which group members can use to

³ The cooperation between the Serbian minority in Hungary and the Motherland, in: The Serbs in Hungary, World Serbian Community, Beograd, 1994, p. 18.

⁴ Milan Nedeljkov, The Situation of the Serbs in Hungary, in: The Serbs in Hungary, World Serbian Community, Beograd, 1994, p. 31.

recognize themselves as such. Therefore, one of the most important issues is to detect which cultural elements, that is, identity symbols the present day Serbian community in Hungary uses to this end.

Based on their replies and on my personal observations, I singled out as most important the following: the Orthodox religious appurtenance, knowledge and use of the Serbian mother tongue (including the giving and using of Serbian first names), specific history and cultural-historic heritage.

However, these few symbols significant, even crucial for the existence of the group, do not coincide in every particular case with the criteria by which an individual is determined as its member. Nowadays, definite difficulties arise in establishing stable criteria, which irrevocably determine the member of the Serbian community. In reality, the cases vary from an “ideal type”, quite rare nowadays, in which an individual’s both parents are of Serbian origin, he/she was baptized in the Orthodox church, he/she speaks the Serbian language, has attended Serbian school with classes given in his/her mother tongue, and takes an active part in the Serbian community life, to the person of mixed origin, who is neither baptized nor religious, or even baptized in some other church⁵, who speaks a poor Serbian, but still feels personally as a Serb. In the last few years there were even the transfers from a majority community into a minority one (I recorded four such cases of ethnic Hungarians who, getting in touch in different ways with the Serbian community, started feeling and declaring themselves as the Serbs; they converted into Orthodox religion, learned the language, sent their children to the Serbian school...) That is why my next question, which I singled out, was – how are the real, not ideal criterion established in the community to differentiate ‘us’ from ‘them’, — or as usually the Serbs in Hungary say — ‘naše’ (‘ours’) and ‘nji’evo’ (‘theirs’). Also of interest are the criteria used inside the community to differentiate between the ‘conscious’, ‘real’ Serbs, ‘those who still resist’ assimilation, and those who have become ‘Hungarian-like’, who gave up and let themselves be assimilated.

Besides, it should be kept in mind that the ethnic identity in itself is paradoxical in some ways. For example, the duality between the subjective conscience of identity and belonging to a group, and on the one hand, and the need to manifest objectively that identity, i.e. confirm and feed, and even strengthen it by definite visible symbols, on the other.

Another paradox of the ethnic identity is between essentialistic understanding of it, on the basis of the birth criterion, and historic and contextual understanding of it, on the basis of mastering certain cultural models, which are learned and can be freely selected.

When asking the question about the criteria of recognition of the Serbian identity of an individual in everyday life, I had in mind the dualities between the conscience and the symbolic as well as between the belonging by origin and by a free choice.

To the questions what is an indispensable criterion for a person to be regarded as a Serb, I got the following replies:

⁵ For example, out of fourteen secondary school students who attended the third and the fourth grades in the Serbian secondary school in Budapest 1995–96, and who feel as the members of the Serbian minority, three were baptized in the Catholic church.

The criterion of a subjective conscience and declaration
as opposed to the manifestation of symbols (language and religion):

Is a Serb somebody who feels and declares himself as a Serb, although he does not speak Serbian?

- | | |
|------------------|-------|
| a) yes, he is | 60.7% |
| b) no, he is not | 21.4% |
| c) I don't know | 17.9% |

Is a Serb somebody who considers him/herself to be a Serb, although he/she is not an Orthodox, has not been baptized, does not observe customs, and does not attend the church?

- | | |
|------------------|-------|
| a) yes, he is | 62.9% |
| b) no, he is not | 22.2% |
| c) I don't know | 14.9% |

The criterion of subjective conscience and free choice, as opposed to objective origin:

Is a Serb somebody who is not of Serbian origin, but who was baptized in the Orthodox church, learned to speak the Serbian language and declares him/herself as a Serb:

- | | |
|----------------------|-------|
| a) yes, he/she is | 66.7% |
| b) no, he/she is not | 7.4% |
| c) I don't know | 25.9% |

If a person is of mixed origin and declares him/herself as a Serb, in your opinion

- | | |
|---|-------|
| a) yes, he/she is Serbian | 88.9% |
| b) he/she cannot be a Serb like somebody whose both parents are the Serbs | 7.4% |
| c) I don't know | 3.7% |

Although there are still those among the members of the community who believe that the Serb is only 'a man/woman of Serbian blood'⁶ and contempt for those who have changed their "natural" identity ('I think, in general, that it is not nice if I am a Serb to make myself a Hungarian' (w.1958, BP), full membership in the community is granted even to those who are not of the Serbian origin, but who were, for example, baptized in the Orthodox church, who have learned Serbian, who take and active part in the community life and declare themselves as Serbs. As one of my collocutors said: 'There is no other rule, the Serb is the one who feels and considers himself a Serb' (m.1929, BP). Naturally, prior to the recognition of the personal choice of those entering into the community from the "outside", there is a trial period during which a person is tested and asked to prove his/her how serious their intentions are. The most important proof is to see whether those people, Serbs by choice and not by origin, bring up their children as Serbs, whether they do something useful for the community, or if they are active in

⁶ Such statements were not given as answers to a direct question from the questionnaire, but they appeared several times in unofficial conversations.

social life. The smallness of the group and fear that it might become extinct is certainly the reason why it is so open to outsiders becoming its members. The community is far less tolerant towards the Serbs who 'got hungarized'.

However, even within the community a certain division with respect to already mentioned similar criteria can be observed. Those who 'consider themselves always as Serbs', who are active in social and religious life, who always speak Serbian at home and with others, and especially who educate their children 'in the spirit of ours' are 'conscious', 'real' Serbs. For those who still belong to the community, but perhaps not ascribing the primary importance to their own (Serbian) identity and who accept without much negative emotions the possibility that their children and grandchildren will be assimilated into the majority community, sometimes a pejorative name 'Mađaroni'(Hungarianlike) is given.

Dual Identity

Contrary to the community's predominant openness and flexibility in respect to who can be its member, my collocutors, especially of the older generation, mainly rejected the possibility of the existence of a dual identity. According to this concept, the boundary between 'us' and 'them' cannot exist within the same the individual, a person is either Serb or Hungarian. If he/she is of dual origin, he/she must, according to this notion, respect both sides, but emotionally he can be linked only to one of them, that is, he/she must declare himself/herself. Even when declaring that they would not be opposed to the dual identity of their children from mixed marriages, my collocutors mentioned that the dual identity on an equal footing is not possible:

Theoretically – the dual identity can exist, but practically it is difficult. I am not exclusive, I would not oppose. But a person is always more inclined to one side. (m.1929, Budapest).

According to the same way of thinking, widespread also among the older generation, dual origin can be even the source of confusion and difficulty for a child. ('Children /from mixed marriages/ are in the worst situation. They do not know what and who they are'). However, among the middle and young generations it is accepted as something normal. With the young generation, in which dual origin is very prominent, I have encountered two cases of descendants of mixed marriages who were reluctant about their identity. I have also come across five young persons who declared themselves as 'Hungarian Serbs' (which meant, according to their interpretation – the Serbs who, being from mixed marriages, also have and stress the Hungarian origin)⁷.

Viewed in its entirety, it could be said that the predominating stand in the community is that the dual origin entails a danger, which can be overcome and resolved only if the child is encouraged to choose one (desirably 'our') side. However, double or multicultural competence (being bilingual, familiar with two or more cultures...) is extremely highly valued.

⁷ However, when two years later I spoke again with two of these 'Hungarian Serbs', they had changed their attitude and declared themselves as Serbs, i.e. Serbs from Hungary. My other interviewees evaluated the formulation a 'Hungarian Serb' as something entirely strange to them; they would never use it as a determination of their identity.

I do not feel here as a subordinate to the Hungarian . Moreover, I feel higher than many due to my knowledge of two cultures and two languages (m. 1924, Kalaz).

Thus, it is interesting that dual or multicultural competence is appreciated as a virtue, providing that the person strictly differentiates ‘his own’ from ‘foreign’ (the criterion is the emotional link), even when, for example, he/she is more comfortable and successful with ‘foreign’ cultural patterns than ‘his own.’

The Distance : Us — Them

Since the identity is a relational category formed through the meeting with the ‘other’, an interesting question is the issue of closeness and distance felt towards the two selected groups – the surrounding Hungarian majority and the Serbian people in the Motherland.

The replies to the question about how similar are the mentality and temperament of the Serbs in Hungary and that of the Serbs in the Motherland on the one side, and the Hungarians on the other, showed that my collocutors predominantly see themselves as closer to the Hungarian people with whom they live, than to the Serbian people in their motherland. It is also interesting that approximately the same number of the interviewed expressed distance towards both groups (the reply under — d).

Do you think that mentality of the	Serbs in H: Serbs in Y	Serbs in H: Hungarians is
a) very similar	0.0%	15.4%
b) mainly similar	16.7%	30.8%
c) similar in something different in other things	29.2%	15.4%
d) mainly different	33.3%	30.8%
e) entirely different	8.3%	3.8%
f) I am unable to say	12.5%	3.8%

Viewed as a whole, my collocutors placed themselves in respect to mentality between the Hungarians and the Serbs from the motherland, however closer to the Hungarians. They received from the majority people balance and rationality, but they have, however, in comparison to the ‘genuine Hungarians’ retained something ‘ours’ (emotionality, spontaneity), which however, in some replies is interpreted as a consequence of the innumerousness of the Serbian community, and not as a Balkans’ heritage’.

We are very similar to the Hungarians . We are living here, there are a lot of things to which we adapted ourselves. By our temperament we are not, maybe, any more the Balkan type, we are more reserved, we are not so aloof in words... But unlike the Hungarians we are more respectful of one another, there is more respect in the community than among the Hungarians . Perhaps because we are innumerous, we are closer one to the other, we know each other better. There is more family atmosphere among us, we are closer (f.1929, Chobanac).

The Serbs from Serbia Proper are often negatively described (more aggressive, irrational, even arrogant). However, this difference is viewed in some replies with the opposite value sign:

The Hungarian mentality affects us a lot. We are much more introvert. That is why Yugoslav children are hardly accepted in schools. Here – they are more rigid, introvert, cold, they are not so hospitable, interests are more taken care of than the friendship... While, in the South (in Serbia) when you are received in a home ...(*f.1957, Kalaz*).

Although generally my interviewees defined their mentality as closer to the Hungarian one, some of their replies, on the contrary, point out the existence of a distance towards the majority group. It is interesting that more than half of them declared that they have never found themselves in a position to feel closer to any Hungarian than to a Serb. In spite of the fact that most of them said that they keep company with people of other ethnic backgrounds, a very small number actually declared to have a Hungarian as his/her best friend.

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In this brief report only few basic characteristics of the ethnic identity among the Serbs in Hungary were presented. Much more space would be required to show all the hues and possible meanings of this complex phenomenon.

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Младена ПРЕЛИЋ

ЕТНИЧКИ ИДЕНТИТЕТ: СРБИ У МАЂАРСКОЈ

У овом раду ауторка се бави проблемом етничке идентификације савремене српске заједнице, односно националне мањине у Мађарској. Узето је уобзир неколико аспеката проблема: самоидентификација, избор симбола идентитета, критеријуми припадности групи, двојни идентитет и дистанца *ми:други*.