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# FACTORS OF CHERISHING NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN VOJVODINA

*Introduction: the paradox of the identity politics*

One's history, nation, religion and culture provide one's identity and also represent the long-term outcomes of it. The key elements of ethnic identity are mutual culture, language, customs, law, as well as the way of perceiving and defining reality through beliefs, values and symbols by which individuals conceive their actions and behaviour.

Identity is the sense of belonging to a group and the consciousness that promotes and strengthens the collective assent. Collective reminiscences and historical recollections consolidate collective identity. This serves to strengthen the capacity for consensus and to prevent disintegrative processes ('incapacity for future'). There has been real confusion regarding the issue of identity, mainly due to the efforts to use universal features for legitimating things that represent historical and social structures of reality. This is especially evident when the debate about identity – being an immanent feature of human existence – slides into "making assumptions how ethnic identity is necessarily an incontrovertible and inescapable fact of human behaviour and the expression of human nature… The disputable issue here, however, is the tendency that arguments of a general kind – referring to identity in general – are used as arguments in favour of necessity of some historically constructed, specific and as a rule contingent identity." (Vrcan, 1999: 26)

Evidently, identity becomes increasingly influential when jeopardized, as well as when jeopardizing. Max Weber (Veber, 1976) argued that an ethnic group is based not only on expressed dignity of those who share certain values, but also on contempt towards those who have different customs, while Stuart Hall points out that identities can function as a point of identification and loyalty only for their capacity to exclude, separate, expel and scorn (Hall, 1997: 5). It is the differences that determine and evaluate, while lack of familiarity with them and disrespect for them are the most common causes of conflicts.

The paradox of identity politics was brilliantly identified by Terry Eagleton (Eagleton, 2000). He argues that the only thing worse than having identity is lack of identity. Devoting a lot of effort to prove one's identity is better than the feeling that we have no identity at all, while the most desirable case is avoiding both of the situations. Just like all the radical politics, identity politics is self-destructive: we are free only when we no longer need to bother ourselves about who we are. Accordingly, the least inspiring politics are those that argue that they provide some already fully constituted identity, which is being suppressed by others; on the other hand, the politics far more inspiring are those in which an individual makes requests to become equal to others regarding their freedom to make decisions about who they could become. In this way, every original affirmation of differences assumes universal proportions.

It is perfectly normal and desirable that identity is multiple and that it involves belonging to different groups, starting with regional, national and religious groups, all the way to much broader and global groups. A person can be the Vojvodinian, Serb, Orthodox, a citizen of Serbia, Balkanian, Mediterranean or European… This characteristic of identity is similar to multiplicity of roles we have in our everyday lives, as between them there is also constant tension, even a conflict. However, the roles can be performed within the framework of pluralism without distinguished polarizations and this should be the basis of every – at least somewhat serious – social and cultural democratization and identity politics.

### Factors of cherishing national (ethnic) affiliation

The Province of Vojvodina is a cultural space with definite particularities, which in different ways influence the character and dynamics of the process of transition. One of these particularities is multi-nationality: according to the latest census of 2002 in Vojvodina there are the members of all registered nations and ethnic groups which live in the Republic of Serbia (without Kosovo and Metohija). Furthermore, a considerable number of national minorities (including the most numerous ones) are related almost exclusively to the territory of Vojvodina[1], making this Province an extremely interesting but also a very delicate multiethnic region. Therefore, determining the factors of national/ethnic and cultural identities should be an important segment of every thorough sociological research of the Province.

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1  These are the Hungarians (currently the most numerous national minority in the Republic of Serbia), the Croats and Slovaks. Interestingly, the majority of the Montenegrins living on the territory of the Republic of Serbia are also in Vojvodina; this is the case, as well, with the population still declaring themselves as the Yugoslavs.

Regarding the issue of the most important factors for cherishing national (ethnic) affiliation, almost half of the respondents (44.9%) stated that it is "observing tradition and customs", less than one forth (23%) pointed out "socialization of children in spirit of national culture"; other statistically relevant factors are the possibility "to be educated in one's mother tongue and use it" (15.1%), as well as the importance of "existence of the national state" (13.5%). On the other hand, the research proved that the citizens of Vojvodina do not regard religion and confessional affiliation as a relevant factor of national, i.e. ethnic identification (Chart 1).[2]

**What is the most important for cherishing national (ethnic) affiliation (in %)**

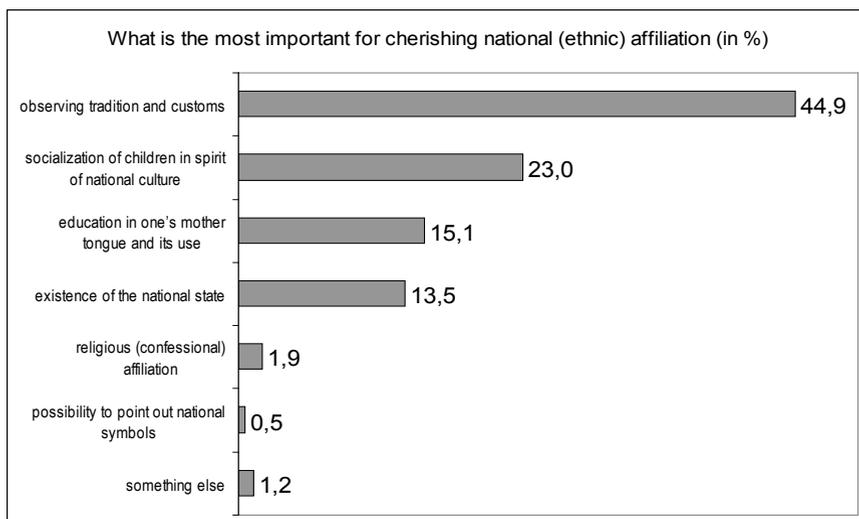| Factor | % |
|---|---|
| observing tradition and customs | 44,9 |
| socialization of children in spirit of national culture | 23,0 |
| education in one's mother tongue and its use | 15,1 |
| existence of the national state | 13,5 |
| religious (confessional) affiliation | 1,9 |
| possibility to point out national symbols | 0,5 |
| something else | 1,2 |

Chart 1

The attitudes of respondents are influenced most by gender and national affiliation, while age exhibits no significant correlation with opting for certain responses.

Regarding the distribution of respondents according to their gender, it is evident that male population to a considerably greater extent opt for the national state as a factor of national (ethnic) identity (60% : 40%), while female population state that observing tradition and customs is more important (46% : 54%).[3] The distribution according to national affiliation, however, is particularly interesting as it points to some important elements of collective identity of certain national and ethnic groups, as well as to the importance of

2   Less than 2% of the respondents were in favour of this option, and the data are supported also by the results related to the statements regarding collective values: only 2.8% of the respondents stated that religion (church) is the most important (and it is 83% of them that opted for family and this category is by far the first on the list of collective values), see Koković, Lazar, 2004.

3   The ratio of the male and female population in the sample is 49.4% : 50.6%.

certain social processes to which such identity is evidently susceptible. The Table 1 presents the most frequent responses distributed according to the national affiliation of the respondents:

| What is the most important for cherishing national/ethnic affiliation (in %)? | Serbs | Mon-tenegrins | Croats | Hungarians | Yugoslavs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Observing tradition and customs | **48.0** | **34.4** | 31.6 | 32.8 | **46.0** |
| Socialization of children in spirit of national culture | 23.3 | 9.4 | **36.8** | 17.2 | 23.0 |
| Education in one's mother tongue and its use | 9.4 | 18.8 | 28.1 | **43.4** | 19.5 |
| Existence of the national state | 15.2 | **34.4** | 1.8 | 4.1 | 9.2 |

Table 1

- Evidently, the factor of observing tradition and customs is the most important to the respondents of the Serbian (48%) and Yugoslav (46%) nationality, while the others also regard it as relevant;

- Socialization of children in spirit of national culture is the most significant to the members of the Croatian national minority in Vojvodina (36.8%), and to a certain extent it is relevant also to the population of the Serbian (23.3%), and Yugoslav (23%) nationality; on the other hand, this is the factor least relevant to the Vojvodinian Montenegrins (only 9.4% of them regard it as the most important for cherishing national affiliation);

- The possibility to have education in one's mother tongue is by far the most important to the respondents of the Hungarian national minority (43.4%), while it is least important to the Vojvodinian Serbs (9.4%), which is reasonable;

- For the respondents, the existence of the national state is considerably the most significant to the Montenegrins in Vojvodina (34.4%) and within this stated national corpus this factor is regarded equally relevant as observing tradition and customs (34.4%); among the Croats and Hungarians, however, this factor is practically irrelevant (1.8 and 4.1% respectively).

According to the data presented above, for the Serbs, Yugoslavs and Croats there is a dominant pre-modern consciousness of treating national identity, as in all the three cases it is around two thirds of the respondents that were in favour of the traditional (traditionalistic?) means of cherishing national (ethnic) identity – such as observing tradition and customs and socialization of children in spirit of national culture[4]. Although the majority of the respon-

4   Although the question about cherishing national affiliation was a half-open question (i.e. providing the possibility to write an alternative response under "something else…"), none of the respondents used the opportunity to state some of the factors from the corpus of human (individual or collective) rights or legal system.

dents of the Hungarian nationality opted for the possibility to have education in their mother tongue and its use, the above stated factors were favoured also by the half of the total number of respondents of the Hungarian nationality who responded to this question (32.8 and 17.2% respectively).

The exemption is the Montenegrins, who ascribe the same importance to existence of the national state and to observing tradition and customs (34.4%). Such preferences should evidently be perceived in the context of broader social and current political events, primarily regarding the increasing demands of Montenegro for independence and proclaiming sovereignty at the time the survey was conducted. These findings are substantiated also by other data on the priorities of this ethnic group: namely, the Montenegrins in Vojvodina regard the possibility to be educated in their mother tongue (!) and to use it (18.8%) far more important than socialization of children in spirit of national culture (9.4%).

On the other hand, the Vojvodinian Croats assess the importance of the national state for cherishing national affiliation differently – less than 2% of the respondents consider this factor to be relevant. This attitude is probably due to the historically burdened and mainly negative connotation considering the possibility of constituting their national state in the environment of Serbian majority, as well as to the fact that the Republic of Croatia still has not managed to make some substantial influence regarding preserving and developing the national identity of its national minority in the Republic of Serbia. Similarly, the Vojvodinian Hungarians did not assess the position of Hungary more favourably although this neighbouring country has settled and developed relations both with the Republic of Serbia and the very Province of Vojvodina much more successfully. The fact that only 4% of the respondents of the Hungarian nationality in Vojvodina consider the existence of the national state as the most relevant factor for cherishing national affiliation is an important indicator of the true capacity of the politics of the Republic of Hungary towards its minority communities in (certain) neighbouring countries.

The most surprising fact, however, is that even the majority nation (i.e. the Serbs) does not recognize the importance of the national state for cherishing national affiliation, although the state could, for example – if having balanced culture and educational politics – observe tradition and customs, and provide socialization of children in spirit of national culture.

*Factors of preserving culture of nations and ethnic groups*

In the question about preserving the culture of a nation / ethnic group, the majority of respondents opted for "education" (34.1%), and "appropriate socialization of children in families" (29.3%). The respondents also regard economic conditions as relatively important (16.7%), while "administrative and legal measures" (7.3%), individual and collective rights (5.7%), as well as "concern of the very members of a certain nation (ethnic group)" (5.7%) are also statistically relevant.

In which ways should one preserve the culture of a national (ethnic) group (in %)?

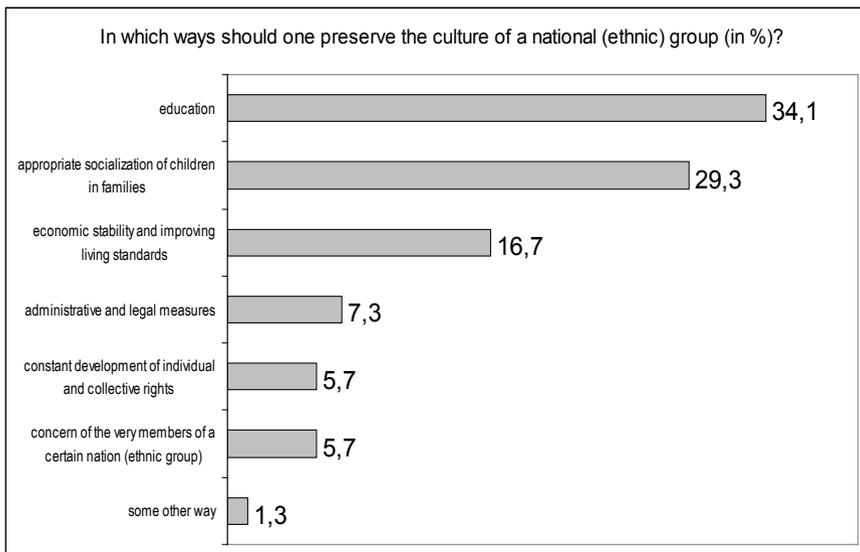| | |
|---|---|
| education | 34,1 |
| appropriate socialization of children in families | 29,3 |
| economic stability and improving living standards | 16,7 |
| administrative and legal measures | 7,3 |
| constant development of individual and collective rights | 5,7 |
| concern of the very members of a certain nation (ethnic group) | 5,7 |
| some other way | 1,3 |

Chart 2

Although the distribution of the stated frequencies in this case shows no substantial statistical dependency on gender and national affiliation of respondents, certain tendencies in answers should still be marked. Thus, for instance, the males considerably dominate in opting for "developing individual and collective rights" (63.4% : 36.6%), while the females are more in favour of preserving national (ethnic) culture through "appropriate socialization of children in families" (44% : 56%).

Out of the five nations and national minorities analyzed here the Hungarian are above (38.8%), and Croats below (29.8%) the average concerning education as a means of preserving national identity. On the other hand, the Croats are in favour of administrative and legal measures more than others

(10.5%), as well as of developing individual and collective rights (8.8%). The Montenegrins, however, have the least confidence in administrative and legal measures (only 3.1%), and together with the Yugoslavs they to a much less degree than others believe that appropriate socialization of children in families is the best way to preserve culture of a nation.

What should be pointed out as especially important is that there is a complete correlation both at the quantitative and qualitative level between statements on the most significant factors for cherishing national affiliation and the ways of preserving the culture of a nation (ethnic groups).

| In which ways should one preserve the culture of a nation (ethnic group)? | What is the most important for cherishing national affiliation? | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | existence of the national state | education in one's mother tongue and its use | observing tradition and customs | socialization of children in spirit of national culture | average |
| Administrative and legal measures | **13.1%** | 8.5% | 6.3% | 4.2% | 7.3% |
| Education | **38.1%** | **39.4%** | 35.2% | 26.5% | 34.1% |
| Economic stability and improving living standards | **22.0%** | **22.3%** | 16.5% | 11.1% | 16.7% |
| Developing individual and collective rights | 4.2% | **11.2%** | 5.7% | 3.5% | 5.7% |
| Concern of the very members of a certain nation (ethnic group) | 4.2% | 3.2% | **7.9%** | 4.2% | 5.7% |
| Appropriate socialization of children in families | 16.1% | 13.8% | 27.5% | **49.8%** | 29.3% |

Table 2[5]

- As presented in Table 2, the proportionally highest number of respondents who regard the existence of the national state as the most important factor of cherishing national affiliation opted also for administrative and legal measures, i.e. "etatistic" way of preserving culture of their nation (ethnic groups); furthermore, they opted above average for other factors which are entirely or substantially under the authority of the state (education, economic stability and improving living standards); on the other hand, this category of respondents is considerably less than average prepared to let cherishing national / ethnic affiliation develop uncontrolled (appropriate socialization

5  The average values refer to the totals per variables within valid percentage, while in the columns there are only previously considered variables which are statistically relevant. Therefor, Σ*f* < 100 refers also to the columns.

of children in families).

- The respondents who believe that the possibility to be educated in their mother tongue and to use it is the most important factor for cherishing national / ethnic affiliation (mainly the members of national minorities and Yugoslavs from mixed marriages), are also – above average – in favour of education, economic stability and improving living standards; however, the proportionally highest number of them identifies the conditions for that in developing individual and collective rights. On the other hand, this category of respondents is least inclined to let cherishing national identity exclusively to the members of national / ethnic communities, i.e. to relate it merely to appropriate socialization in families.

- Unlike the previous category, the most numerous category of respondents – those who are in favour of observing traditions and customs – proportionally more than others believe that cherishing national identity is supposed to be primarily a concern of the very members of particular national / ethnic communities; that is, at the same time, the only significant deviation within this group of the respondents – which mainly determines average frequencies of certain variables – but it is necessary to state that such deviation is expected and, within the stated values framework, logical, as well;

- The results of the survey, however, prove that the hardest core of traditionalism is not in the previous category, but among the respondents who perceive the main factor of cherishing national affiliation in socialization of children in spirit of national culture; first of all, in this group there is by far the highest percentage of correspondence of related variables from the two questions: almost half (49.8%) of the respondents who opted for cherishing national identity by socializing children in spirit of national culture believe that culture of a nation / ethnic group is best preserved by appropriate socialization of children in families; furthermore, lack of trust (being a significant feature of traditionalism) in other means and factors is the most evident exactly in this category of respondents: even four ways of preserving culture of national and ethnic communities are extremely undermined, and it is those ways that are in the closest relation with the state, formal education, economy and the rule of law!

The results examined here point to the conclusion that the respondents relatively consistently opted for certain factors, in accordance with their basic attitudes. However, these results consequently prove that the problem of traditionalism is an important issue again, requiring further examinations and new theoretical explanations.

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