

Concepts of
Nationalism and Patriotism in
Serbian Political Discourse:
Medieval, Modern,
Contemporary

Proceedings of the
Conference held on 30–31 May 2024
at the University of Belgrade,
Faculty of Philosophy

Edited by
Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić
Aleksandar Z. Savić

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BETWEEN SERVING THE HOLY CROWN AND KEEPING SERBIAN TRADITIONS – ON THE IDENTITY OF THE SERBS IN HUNGARY IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 15TH AND THE FIRST HALF OF THE 16TH CENTURIES

Faced with the continuous Ottoman attacks on the southern borders of Hungary after the Ottoman conquest of Serbia (1459), which brought huge destruction and depopulation, King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490) actively encouraged the settlement of the Serbs in his country. Serbian refugees came from all social strata: from members of the Branković despot family and eminent old nobility (such as the Jakšić brothers or, later on, Miloš Belmužević), a number of petty Serbian nobles, many of whom had served the Ottomans as Christian *timar* holders, other members of military and paramilitary ranks, to the inhabitants of urban settlements and villagers. Serbian noblemen, as well as ordinary people, entered the royal military service, most often as light cavalry, or hussars. They got estates in return, or served as paid soldiers, members of the river flotilla troops and of the fortress garrisons. They fought not only against the Ottomans, but also participated in the wars waged by Hungarian kings Matthias Corvinus and Władysław II Jagiełło (1490–1516) against Czechs, Poles and Austrians. The number of the Serbs in the kingdom constantly increased and by the mid-16th century they made up the majority or substantial part of the population in some regions of southern Hungary, primarily in Srem, western regions of Banat and in the Mureș region.

Crossing over to Hungary, the Serbs found themselves in the environment which was foreign to them in linguistic, religious and cultural terms.

As a matter of fact, the related Slavic population – although religiously and culturally different – lived in the territories of Slavonia and Croatia, while in the territory of today's Banat and Transylvania there were many Romanians with the same Orthodox religion as the Serbs. More intense social contacts and marital ties with the members of those nations, as well as with the Hungarians, were established primarily by the Serbian nobles, which gradually led to their assimilation. However, as a whole, the Serbs in Hungary kept their specific features, i.e., their linguistic, religious and cultural identity until the Ottoman conquest of the central parts of Hungary in the middle of the 16th century, and later, under the Ottoman rule. Thus, for example, only on the basis of the onomastics recorded in the censuses of the Ottoman sandjaks in the territory of Pannonia from the second half of the 16th century it is possible, without any difficulty, to establish whether the registered population was Serbian or it belonged to other ethnic and religious groups.

The main elements supported by the sources according to which it is possible to research the identity of the Serbs in Hungary in the second half of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century, as well as later, are the language, Orthodox religion, awareness of belonging to the Serbian people, and preservation of Serbian state traditions. The sources for this topic are scarce and they mainly refer to the members of the nobility, primarily the most distinguished Serbian aristocrats in Hungary.

The most important element in preserving Serbian state traditions in Hungary was the despot title which was, until the beginning of the 16th century, borne by the grandsons of the Serbian ruler, Despot Đurađ Branković (1427–1456). Vuk Grgurević Branković, who had the despot title ever since the struggle for the Serbian throne at the time of the state collapse in 1459, went to Hungary in the second half of 1464. King Matthias Corvinus either recognized or confirmed this title. It was not only a way in which the Hungarian ruler personally awarded his former opponent who had distinguished himself in the service to the Crown, but also part of the broader plan to gather the Serbs and encourage them to leave the Ottoman territory for Hungary. After Vuk's death (1485), King Matthias invited Vuk's relatives, Đurađ and Jovan Branković to Hungary and appointed the former as a Serbian despot. Đurađ had this title from 1485 to his taking monastic vows (1497/9), while his brother Jovan had it 1491 until his death in 1502.

Although the Serbian despots in Hungary were legally and factually Hungarian barons, they persistently preserved and cherished old Serbian state traditions and the ruling ideology formed back in the Nemanjić state, and the legacy of the Branković dynasty. It can be best seen in the charters

issued to the monasteries of Mount Athos – to Chilandar, the endowment of Saint Simeon (Stefan Nemanja) and Saint Sava, which was cared after by all subsequent Serbian rulers, as well as to Saint Paul and Esphigmenou. Helping the last two of them was the continuation of the endowment activities of the previous generations of the Branković family. The same aim of emphasizing the legacy of the holy Nemanjić dynasty and the continuity of the Branković dynasty was also supported by the establishment and cultivation of the cult of Saint Despot Stefan the Blind, father of Đurađ and Jovan Branković. By protecting and helping the church, particularly the monasteries of Mount Athos, in line with their modest means, the Serbian despots in Hungary showed their aspirations to continue the activities of their holy ancestors on the Serbian throne. And even more than that – although they considered themselves “foreigners in the foreign land”, the Serbian despots in Hungary had unambiguous ambitions to become one day, with God’s help, “the successors of their fatherland”. Or, in other words, they hoped God would make them “the rulers of Serbs”. Relying on divine help, the despots were active both in the battlefield and in diplomacy in order to achieve this, as shown by the correspondence in Serbian between Despot Vuk and Sultan Bayezid II from 1482–1483.

Due to their title, origin and the reputation they enjoyed, the despots from the Branković family were seen among Serbs in the second half of the 15th century as legitimate rulers and leaders of their people. For example, the Serbian chronicles record that Despot Vuk “ruled” for 26 years (from 1459 until his death in 1485), while the notes in manuscript books state that they were copied “during the reign of pious and Christ-loving Serbian despots”. Serbian genealogies also show the Brankovići from Srem as legitimate successors of their descendants. It is mentioned that despots Đurađ and Jovan Branković held “whole Srem land”, while one record from 1521 refers to this region as “the glorious and lovely despot’s land”. In fact, despots had no administrative power over the territory of Srem, but only over their own estates and people, including the detachments of predominantly Serbian warriors under their command. The larger part of Srem, although mostly inhabited by the Serbs, was at that time the property of other Hungarian landowners, church institutions and aristocrats.

Considering the perception of the Branković despots as legitimate rulers or at least as leaders of the Serbian people in Hungary and beyond, it should not be forgotten that the sources testifying about it mainly come from the Orthodox Church. The Church undoubtedly supported the idea of the legitimacy of the despots from the Branković lineage who, in turn, were loyal to the Church, its teaching and traditions. Despot Đurađ (latter Metropolitan Maksim), his brother Jovan and their mother Angelina, who, apart from helping the monasteries of Mount Athos, also built new spiritual

centres in Srem (in Kupinik and Krušedol), were canonized as early as the first half of the 16th century. However, recent research of certain cult objects, such as Trsat reliquary, commissioned by Barbara Frankopan, Despot Vuk's widow, show that he was also deeply committed to Orthodox Christianity. Respecting the relics of the new martyrs, killed by the Turks during the conquest of Asia Minor and the Balkan countries, played an important role in the religious-ideological agenda of Despot Vuk who was, together with his warriors, involved in the decades-long fights against the Ottomans. His contemporaries and following generations remember him primarily as a brave warrior (Vuk the Fiery Dragon), but in the local tradition of Srem he is seen as the founder of certain churches and monasteries (e.g., Saint Nicholas Church in Slankamen, definitely built in the 15th century).

Hungarian authorities were aware that the Serbian settlers, so necessary to their state in this period, were strongly committed to Orthodox Christianity. That fact led to the change in the Hungarian restrictive and proselytizing politics towards Orthodox inhabitants, which characterized the 14th and the first half of the 15th centuries. In 1481, at the time of organized resettlement of the population from northern Serbia to Hungary, the Diet adopted legal regulations according to which "Serbs (*Rasciani*) and other schismatics" were temporarily exempted from paying the Catholic Church tithe. It was not only approved at the Diet in 1495, but also the part referring to the temporary nature of this privilege was omitted from the law. From his correspondence with the Archbishop of Kalocsa the following year, it can be seen that Despot Đurađ self-consciously emphasized his own privileges and the religious rights of the Serbs in Hungary.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the appointment of Croatian nobleman Ivaniš Berislavić for the Serbian despot after the death of Jovan Branković caused dissatisfaction among the Serbs, particularly in the clerical circles. The Hungarian court tried to legitimize this change by Ivaniš's marriage to Jovan's widow Jelena Jakšić, while the new despot, although a Catholic, tried to continue the previous traditions. The dissatisfaction of the Serbian inhabitants with the despot was substantially compounded by Ivaniš's attitude towards the former despot, now monk Maksim, and his mother Angelina, who had to leave Srem because of the "foreigner" and temporarily go to Wallachia. During the first half of the 16th century in Hungary, it was well known that the Serbian despots were expected to help and protect the Orthodox Church. This is also proved by Catherine Batthyany, who was married to Despot Stefan Berislavić, the son of Ivaniš and Jelena. Although Hungarian and Catholic, Catherine continued her contacts with the Serbs and the Serbian church even as a widow (*condam despotissa*), after her husband's death in the battlefield in 1535. For example, she embroidered rich ornaments for the mitre for the Metropolitan of Belgrade and Srem (about 1546/1547).

Not only the despots, but also other aristocrats and noblemen of Serbian origin were strongly committed to the Orthodox Church and the traditions of the former Serbian state although, on the other hand, they were quite well integrated in the Hungarian noble environment. An illustrative example of this is the charter issued by “Christ-loving lady Milica, with God-blessed and beloved sons and lords, Voivode Stefan and Voivode Marko Jakšić” to the Chilandar Monastery in 1506. Emphasizing that the monastery had been built by Saint Simeon and Saint Sava “with great efforts and feats”, in this charter the Jakšićs announce their intention of becoming new founders of Chilandar. Traditionally they are also attributed the foundation of several Orthodox monasteries in the territory of Hungary, in Banat, the Mureş region and Bačka. According to the hagiography of Saint Maksim Branković, Stefan and Marko Jakšić gave their land in which the Monastery of Krušedol in Srem was built. The Jakšićs’ merits for Krušedol were remembered because many members of this family are registered in the oldest *pomenik* (commemorative book) of this monastery. They are mentioned on the introductory pages of the *pomenik* which record “holy archbishops, divines, emperors, kings and sainted despots, and other Orthodox lords of all the Serbian land”. A list of 64 names of “Serbian lords” begins with Saint Simeon and Saint Sava and includes numerous members of the Branković family and their relatives, as well as the rulers of Wallachia and Moldova who are praised for helping this monastery and the Serbian Church.

The devotion of the Serbian nobility in Hungary to the Orthodox Church is also proved by the last wish of another outstanding aristocrat, Voivode Miloš Belmužević (1500). The voivode left 100 ducats to his spiritual father, monk Timotej, asking him to take them to Mount Athos for his soul. Belmužević’s will shows the image of the nobleman completely loyal to the Hungarian king and the service to the “Holy Crown”, who had the guarantees of King Matthias and the Hungarian nobility to leave “the pagans” (i.e., the Ottomans) and come to Hungary. Thanks to his loyal service to King Matthias, he was given numerous estates which are listed in his will. It should be considered that the voivode’s last will was mainly aimed at dividing Belmužević’s estates, most of which he left to his daughter and wife. For such a decision, since he had lost his male successors in the battles against the Ottomans, he needed the approval of King Władysław II, which he actually received. That is why it comes as no surprise that the will is focused on emphasizing Belmužević’s loyalty to the Hungarian crown, his loyal service and military merits for the Hungarian king, and the acquired land.

After the Battle of Mohács (1526), the Ottomans occupied Srem, while Hungary was divided between two kings – Ferdinand Habsburg and John

Zápoly. In the following turbulent years, filled with struggles between the two sides and the increased pressure by the Ottomans, the Serbs assumed an important role in the Kingdom of Hungary. They were counted on both by the Ottomans and by Zápoly and Ferdinand, not only as individuals but also as a community. This is proved by the facts that both Hungarian kings appointed their Serbian despots. In June 1527, John Zápoly gave the despot title to Radič Božić, a distinguished warrior and commander of the river flotilla troops. During the Ottoman conquest of Slavonia in 1537, Ferdinand I appointed another prominent Serb leader, the captain of husars Pavle Bakić the Serbian despot. However, since Bakić lost his life in the battle of Gorjani only three weeks later, this last attempt of reestablishing the most important Serbian secular title in Hungary failed.

King Ferdinand I continued granting privileges to eminent Serbian leaders who recognized his rule and to groups of Serbian inhabitants, guaranteeing them certain collective rights. In summer 1551, he issued two charters in an attempt to keep the Serbs in Banat on his side during the Ottoman conquest of this region. The king confirmed all the privileges and rights of the Serbian noblemen, communities and entire Serbian people living “around the fortress of Timisoara and the surrounding areas”. Serbian warriors engaged in the Hungary military service turned to Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, Governor-General of Rumelia, who addressed them in Serbian and offered them certain privileges. Nevertheless, the old Serbian state traditions continued to exist among the Serbs under the Ottoman rule as well. During the anti-Ottoman uprising in Banat (1594), its organizers led by Bishop Teodor turned to the authorities of Transylvania “on behalf of all *sipahis*, *knezes* and entire Serbdom and Christianity”, offering to accept Prince Sigismund Báthory as the Serbian king or despot.

Keywords: Serbs in Hungary, Serbian despots in Hungary, Brankovićs, Jakšićs, Orthodox Church, cults of saints, national identity, late Middle Ages, old Serbian genealogies