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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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COLLECTIVE IDENTITY(IES) IN THE 18TH-CENTURY MILITARY FRONTIER: A STUDY OF THE SERBIAN CASE

Multiple identities and parallel integration tracks

The political nature of collective identities was further strengthened by the fact that the peoples on the periphery of the Habsburg Monarchy lived in various territorial-administrative units (counties, military frontiers, chamber domains, free cities) and, as subjects of different legal systems, gradually became representatives of diverse political interests. Military service represented a source of emancipation for the frontier population compared to serfs under civilian administration. Given that frontier soldiers were personally free individuals with the right to own and enjoy land without being subject to the authority of the nobility, it is clear that this status had not only *de jure* but also significant *de facto* implications. In addition to collective efforts to defend frontier rights, political expressions of solidarity included dynastic patriotism and a localized patriotism tied to their own settlements as their homeland. The factors driving integration were twofold. On one hand, they were intrinsic to frontier society as a distinct socio-economic group. On the other, they transcended administrative borders and the status-based interests of specific groups, grounded instead in shared linguistic and religious identity. For instance, soldiers of the Wallachian-Illyrian Regiment in the Banat Military Frontier voiced two key demands at the National and Church Assembly in Timișoara in 1790, driven by fears of losing their military status: first, to remain within the Frontier and not be placed under county administration, and second, to continue enjoying the protection of privileges granted long ago by Emperor Leopold I.

Dynastic patriotism and the unification policy

Numerous examples demonstrate that dynastic patriotism was almost palpably present within frontier society. Referring to the sworn oath and solemn promise made personally to the ruler upon his accession to the throne, often invoking the Holy Trinity, was a common feature in the frontiersmen communication with representatives of authority. The institution of the oath was grounded in the formal declaration that they understood the obligations read to their collective by an official representative: to protect the ruler, his property, and his lands, even at the cost of their lives (“to the last drop of blood”). The status of frontier soldiers was formalized through this oath and, from a legal standpoint, equated with the status of other state officials. Conversely, evading military duties was automatically classified as the criminal offense of desertion, while acts of resistance or incitement to unrest were deemed treason, punishable by death. The behavior of frontier officers and soldiers was expected to remain strictly confined to their defined roles – loyal service on the battlefield and within the Military Frontier. The frontier population referred to their new homeland as *Ćesarija* (the Emperor’s land) reflecting their direct subordination to the Emperor and the central military authority, the Court War Council, rather than to the landowning nobility. This designation became widely adopted not only by the inhabitants of the Monarchy but also by their neighbors. It consistently underscored the fact that this land was neither Turkish nor Hungarian. Alternatively, due to the origins of the dynasty and its officials, it was also called “Austrian” or “German”. The perception of their homeland in this new environment was more complex than it had been in their place of origin in the Balkans under Ottoman rule. Upon settlement, they also referred to their new homeland as “Christian lands”.

Religious community and political mobilization

A key element of Serbian national integration is considered to have been the institutionalized position of the Orthodox Church within the Habsburg Monarchy after 1690. Rather than the presumed dichotomy between Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, it was the policy of emphasizing similarities rooted in their shared Christian faith that played a far more significant role in rendering Orthodoxy politically acceptable. By focusing on shared faith as the foundation of spiritual and political symbiosis, one can better understand the affirmative nature of the legal-political concept of the *Illyrian nation*, which persisted from the early to the late 18th century. In narratives highlighting contributions to the Austrian dy-

nasty during wars against the Ottoman army, the Serbian Orthodox hierarchy consistently affirmed its political (and not merely religious) status. This was achieved through a persistent emphasis on the theme of unity in Christ and the shared struggle against a common enemy of non-Christian faith, *the infidels*. At the same time, the hierarchy also underscored the distinctiveness of the Orthodox religion, which was guaranteed by the Privileges. These Privileges gave rise to a broader social framework that included all Orthodox Christians in the Monarchy as the *Illyrische nicht unirte Nation*, often referred to as *Illyrische Nationalisten*. It is evident that the wars and territorial expansions into the deep Balkans and Wallachia, which occurred successively between 1683 and 1739, contributed to elevating the status of Orthodox Christians regardless of their ethnicity. These developments also supported the emergence of the broader concept of the *Illyrian nation*. From Vienna's perspective, the political significance of the Orthodox population was ensured not only by their demographic strength but also by the existence of institutions that acted as intermediaries with the authorities. These institutions operated through the Orthodox Church hierarchy and the national-ecclesiastical assembly. Protective charters addressed the *corpus Illyricae Nationis* as an exclusive *patrimonium Domus Austriae* (heritage of the House of Austria). They defined the special status and rights to religious self-governance of the Orthodox population based on a personal principle, rather than a territorial one. Identification of individuals and groups by religious affiliation was standard in the Military Frontier, where censuses were conducted solely based on confessional identity. The population was categorized as *Catholisch* and *Graeci ritus non uniti* (Greek Orthodox, non-united with Rome).

Ethnic and political *Nation*

The affirmation of the term *Nation*, along with its associated term *Nationalisten*, in the sense of "peoples" residing in the newly conquered Habsburg territories, is believed to have emerged in the context of German colonization. This process highlighted the differences in language, religion, and culture between the German settlers and the native populations. Examples of the synonymous use of ethnonyms are found in contemporary sources, including the Privileges, which reference *Rasciani seu Serviani Populi* (1695). Although the term *Illyrische Nation* primarily referred to *Graeci ritus non uniti* (Greek-rite non-Uniates), the dominance of Serbs within the Orthodox Church hierarchy led to the Illyrian designation being used as a synonym for Serbian ethnicity. For instance, in the 1781 census of the German-Banat Regiment near Pančevo, inhabitants

were recorded as either Illyrians or Germans, depending on whether they belonged to the community of native Serbs or German colonists. Similarly, settlements in the region were named accordingly, with examples like *Razisch Opova* and *Razisch Sakule* for Serbian communities, and *Deutsch Opova* and *Deutsch Sakule* for German ones. The numerically dominant and autochthonous ethno-linguistic communities found in the region after the Habsburg conquests – *Raizen* (Serbs) and *Wallachen* (Vlachs) – were privileged in terms of religious and professional rights for two primary reasons. They were recognized both as communities instrumental in the expulsion of the Ottoman enemy and as subjects and elites essential for constructing the new order. Certain ethnic communities, due to the dominant professional roles of their members, attained legal status modeled on exclusive groups defined by the “degree” of their utility. In this context, one can speak of a professional community of the *Razische National Miliz* (Serbian National Militia). The “political” aspects of the term *nation* are most clearly reflected in the existence of political municipalities for native populations, which were granted the right to participate in governance on the principle of parity with the newly settled and politically favored Germans. *Razische* and *Deutsche* municipalities coexisted in cities across the periphery, including Belgrade, Zemun, Timișoara, Pančevo, Bela Crkva, and others.

The Illyrian Nation and the estate order

The *Illyrische Nation*, whose representatives had been assembling at national-church assemblies since 1708, included Orthodox members of the spiritual, provincial, and military estates, and from 1790, the noble estate as well. Orthodox deputies from various Military Frontier regiments advocated for the interests of the military estate, which primarily revolved around preserving their military status and resisting integration into the less desirable provincial administration in Hungarian counties. The social order to which the frontier population (*Militärgrenzer*) belonged was distinctly separate from civilian subjugation, and this dichotomy was the cornerstone of their “political identity”. A significant precedent occurred on two occasions when segments of the frontier population consciously opted for civilian status. It happened with the establishment of two privileged *cameral districts* or *dominiums*, first of Tisza in Bačka (in 1751) and the second of Kikinda in Banat (in 1774). By making this choice, the former frontier population – now district residents – prioritized private landownership over their military status. This decision disrupted the idealized notions of the advantages tied to the frontiersmen’s status, particularly concerning land-

ownership, and challenged the belief that a desirable legal-political system was intrinsically linked to the territory of the Military Frontier. Between 1740 and 1780, significant territorial and administrative changes took place on the periphery. Hungarian counties were reestablished in Slavonia, Srem, Bačka, and Banat, compelling many frontier communities to either relocate to retain their status or abandon their status to remain in their homes. Simultaneously, a process of acculturation was underway. Membership in a specific territorial-administrative unit and adherence to its order – or to its status, which was based on the exclusive rights of certain social groups – contributed to the emergence of differing interests even within the same ethno-linguistic and religious communities.

Territorial demands at the Timișoara Assembly

By 1790, social divisions along horizontal lines had become more pronounced, and for the first time, they were manifested at the Timișoara Assembly. The central demand at the time concerned securing Orthodox landowners' rights to Hungarian nobility. The debate focused on the modalities for addressing this issue, with two distinct positions: one advocating for the integration of religious and land rights for Orthodox population into Hungarian legislation, and the other supporting Vienna's stance, which was "favorable to the Monarch and the Nation" (without further specification). It is hard to ignore the impression that Vienna supported a strict separation between the political interests of the Illyrian nation and the Hungarian state. Amid these circumstances, the idea of territorial autonomy for the Illyrian nation emerged. Since the assembly's representatives did not seek changes to the territorial status of the Military Frontier, it is clear that the demand was not aimed at uniting all members of the Illyrian nation on a single territory, but rather at those deemed to be under threat in terms of their religious and political rights. The political model and legal framework for this demand for territorialisation appear to have been inspired by the central areas of the region: the Tisza cameral district and the Kikinda cameral district, former frontier regions that had managed to retain a privileged status in comparison to the Hungarian counties by being placed under the supervision of the Court Chamber. The loss of military status for their inhabitants was compensated by territorial-administrative autonomy, while officers were granted noble status and landholdings. Although the idea of territorial autonomy presented at the Assembly in 1790 was framed in terms of the religious rights of the Illyrian nation, there is no doubt that its political substance was rooted in the tradition of the *de facto* independence of the Military Frontier and Cam-

eral districts in relation to the Kingdom of Hungary, along with the idea of representing the interests of new landowners and the bourgeoisie outside the system of Hungarian counties.

Conclusion

The proposal for territorialisation represented the culmination of the political affirmation of the religious concept of the Illyrian nation, but the conditions for its legalization were lacking. The ruler did not disregard existing laws in favor of the Hungarian estates and certain privileged groups. He explicitly confirmed that none of this applied to the territory and inhabitants of the Military Frontier, whose status and identity were not called into question. In this way, the foundations for the existence of multiple identities were preserved: the “Orthodox nation” (protected by privileges, though with varying ethnolinguistic elements within its framework), as well as the “estate” and “professional” associations (with their own interests within the territorial-administrative frameworks of the Frontier regions, Hungarian counties, and free cities). Sources indicate that ethnolinguistic identity did not, by itself, carry political significance. Status could be clarified through ethnonyms, as members of the same linguistic community often dominated professional associations or social estates. However, their political character did not stem from ethnicity, but from a legal definition of a collective based on territorial, religious, and/or professional standing. Nonetheless, these identities frequently overlapped and contributed to the formation of an amalgamated nation, understood simultaneously as an ethnic, religious, and political community. The identity of the Serbian frontiersmen provides a clear example of the amalgamated nature of collective identity, combining ethnolinguistic, religious-political, professional-estate, and territorial-status aspects. The identified elements are paradigmatic because they were equally involved in constructing the identity of the “other” in provincial society.

Keywords: collective identity, nation, ethnicity, Illyrian nation, Military Frontier, Habsburg Monarchy, 18th century