

## PRIMORDIALISTIC CONCEPT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SERBIA<sup>1</sup>

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*Usually, two rivaling concepts of national identity are taken into consideration: primordialism, stemming from the principle that national identity is an unchangeable, unyielding and basic human category, given by birth and colored with irrational feelings; and instrumentalism, claiming that national identity is changeable, fluid and gain producing. This study investigated the dominant concept of national identity in Serbia and was based on two surveys conducted in August 2003 (n = 1004) and August 2006 (n = 1005) on representative samples of eligible voters.*

*Both studies confirmed dominance of the primordial concept of national identity in contemporary Serbia. Data from the 2006 survey point an even more homogenized primordial concept (defined by a single factor) of national identity relative to the data from the 2003 survey. Primordial concept of national identity suppresses the importance of the state, culture and politics. In times of strong social turbulences, individual is moving away from the socially-dependent concept of national identity towards an individualistic, familial concept of national identity.*

**Key words:** national identity, primordialism, instrumentalism

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## INTRODUCTION

When we think of ourselves and when we try to define ourselves as distinct personalities, we describe our personal and social identities. Nation is one among social and group identities that we use in this process of defining ourselves. The importance of nation in defining one's identity, varies from person to person. Belonging to a nation determines our everyday life at school, at work and in politics. It is one of the central constructs of modern civilization.

Apart from everyday concern with the topic, various scientific disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science have dealt with issues of national belonging and national identity. Scientific interest in the topic was enhanced after the World War I, following the creation of numerous nation-states in Europe (Veler, 2001). Since then, there have been numerous increasingly differentiated studies, offering diverse approaches and theoretical frameworks. It seems that notions of nation, nationalism and national identity, regardless of what exactly is defined by them, will accompany us well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Recent worldwide political developments indicate that simultaneous and contrary to the leveling of nations through globalization, there is a process of further differentiation among the nations, characterized by an ever increasing number of ethnic groups looking for their political and territorial independence and by progressively stronger statements of obvious national interests of the world's most powerful nations.

There is an apparent confusion in the literature, when it comes to defining national identity (Connor, 1994). Several intersecting and not clearly delineated definitions and terms are in use: nation, race, ethnicity, national bonding, national identity, nationalism, national attitude, ethnocentrism, patriotism; even such notions as authoritarianism and patriarchalism.

One of the key dilemmas in the literature relates to the origins of national identity: whether national identity is something that we secure at birth or something that we arrive at during maturation and therefore is a subject of an individual choice. Although extreme positions of both primordialism and instrumentalism are today mostly outdated, every thorough review of the literature contains this dilemma (Waters, 1990; Connor 1994; Banks, 1996; Šnaper, 1996; Putinja & Stref-Fenar, 1997; Smit, 1998; Cornell & Hartman, 1998).

Primordialism states that national identity is fixed and durable, remaining unchanged during the lifetime. According to this view, national identity is hard and essential, a basic human category given by birth (Cornell & Hartman, 1998), connecting people with shared ancestral origin (Putinja & Žoslin-Fenar, 1997), colored with irrational and unutterable feelings. National sentiments are not related to concrete and rational facts; instead, they are quite independent from real social relationships and individual needs. As an extreme perspective, primordialism is easily criticized. Basic shortcomings of this approach are highlighted by common findings such as: individuals with dual national identity (Waters, 1990), individual differ-

ences in importance given to national identity, and changes of national identity over a lifetime of an individual.

As a theoretical reaction to primordialism there has been a whole string of theoretical concepts rivaling this account of national identity. According to instrumentalism, national identity is fluid and changeable. People emphasize their national belonging functionally: only in those situations where they can make a certain gain by professing it. As situation changes, so will the identification with one's nation or, at least, the level of its intensity. National groups are based on interest, set up for pragmatic reasons and maintained by man-made means. Needless to say, instrumentalism has its own problems explaining the phenomenon of national identity. It postulates existence of national identity outside of an individual, and it has problems explaining the strong mobilizing nature of national identities.

Theoretical compromise between these opposing concepts is possible only if we treat them as the two poles of the same continuum. Primordialism and instrumentalism are the extremes at each end of this *«birth – choice continuum»* (Horowitz, 2000). Modern studies of national identity do not advocate either of these excessive viewpoints. Mostly, they are inspired by critique of the primordial approach, emphasizing dynamic nature of relationships among ethnic groups. The nature of national identity of contemporary ethnic and national groups can be defined by different positions occupied along this continuum. Among other things, national groups also differ with respect to their flexibility, a degree to which they tolerate changes of national identity among their individual members. Contemporary theoretical approaches define national identity by taking into account interaction with other nations, as well. As many other modern forms of identity, national identity can not be reduced to only one characteristic or one indicator.

Instead of primordialism - instrumentalism dichotomy, some authors discuss the difference between objective and subjective designations of national identity. Thus, Smit (1998) differentiates between Western and non-Western model of national identity. These two concepts of national identity somewhat correspond to primordialism - instrumentalism dualism. The Western concept of national identity is based on a definition of a nation untied in a political community on a given territory, sharing of common political institutions and equality of all citizens. Thus, territory and formal citizenship define national belonging and consequently the very national identity. Non-Western concept of national identity is primarily based on subjective feeling relating to genetic lineage and common ancestors. Nation is defined as a collective identity transmitted through myths, archetypes, shared history, culture and language.

Diversity of theoretical concepts is reflected through diversity of indicators of national identity. As already mentioned, national identity can be specified through: language (Benedikt, 1998), visible physical indicators such as height, facial appearance, color of the skin..... and behavioral signs - clothing, general appearance; but also by invisible indicators of culture (Horowitz, 2000; Kecmanović, 1996); existence of the state, shared historical development and religion.

The objective of this study was to investigate national identity in contemporary Serbia. What is the relationship between theoretically defined concepts of national identity (primordialism and instrumentalism) and the actual national identity among the Serbian people; and whether it changes with time?

## METHOD

The concept of national identity was studied in two consecutive quantitative surveys.

The first survey was performed between July 26 and August 1, 2003. A direct, face to face, interview was conducted on a representative sample of 1005 citizens of Serbia who were older than 18 at the time of the interview. Among them, 80.2% respondents (806) claimed to be Serbian.

The second survey was performed between August 17 and August 22, 2006 on a random sample of 1004 citizens of Serbia who were older than 18 at the time of the interview. This time, 81% of all respondents claimed to be Serbian. Multi-stage stratified random sample was used in both surveys.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data from the two surveys indicated that Serbian people were most attached to their families, their nation and their religion. This finding is in line with previous empirical studies dealing with this issue. In 2006 there was a slight increase in the level of importance that was credited to faith/religion relative to 2003.

*Table 1. Relative importance of belonging to a social group in Serbia self-assessed on a 5-point scale (1-it is not important at all; 5-it is very important).*

	Serbs 2003	Serbs 2006
Belonging to my family	4.35	4.48
Being a man/woman	3.45	3.47
Belonging to my faith/religion	4.06	4.12
Belonging to my generation	3.41	3.28
Belonging to my nation	4.07	4.06
Belonging to the social stratum	3.19	3.11
Belonging to my profes- sion/occupation	3.25	3.15
Belonging to my city/region	3.46	3.44

So far, empirical studies of nation, nationalism and national identity in Serbia have predominately dealt with analyses of intensity, distribution and the effect on the day-to-day politics. Only recently, there have been studies comparing European and national identity. It has been shown that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by dominant attachment to Yugoslav nation. Attachment to Serbian nation emerged during 80's and early 90's. Its intensity strengthened during multiethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia, and it remains dominant today.

Preponderance of studies conducted during the last 15 years reported nation's foremost importance relative to all other group memberships. The relative proportion of respondents who rank nation as the most important group that they belong to is in the 30% to 50% range, depending on the time when the study was conducted. Prior to the 90's and the outbreak of ethnic hostilities, majority of former Yugoslavia's populace did not rank nation among their top priorities (Pantić, cf. Vasović, 1995). Importance of national and regional belonging was actually ranked behind importance of professional, friendly, generation, family, class, gender and religious belonging. However, studies of Yugoslav youth performed in 1989 pointed at differences within different constituent nations of former Yugoslavia. Another study conducted in the early 90's looked at importance of different group-related identifications (Vasović, 1995). Respondents were asked to name what they considered to be the most important large social group that they belonged to. The list contained the following options: ethnic- (national), confessional-, socio-economic-, professional- or age-related group. Most respondents chose nation as the most important social category (49.7%). Professional grouping was ranked as second; followed by age, class and confessional belonging. As a part of World values survey, Pantić reported that in 2000 citizens of Serbia were mostly identified with their nation (30%), generation (29%), profession (14%) and religious community (12%). Only 2% reported identification with a political party (Pantić, 2002). A year later, in 2001, the same trend continued (Pantić 2002; p. 112). Serbs were identified with their nation (38%) generation (27%), profession (12%) and with their confession (11%). Political orientation was most important for only 2% of the interviewed. Thus, the data reported here were in line with the earlier findings reported in the literature.

In a questionnaire, respondents were asked to evaluate 23 different meanings of national identity. Potential overlapping and/or mutual independence of different meanings were not a concern since factor analysis of all individual meanings was used in order to determine their latent statistical groupings. The data were analyzed with Principal Component Analysis, followed by a Varimax rotation. Only data from respondents claiming to belong to Serbian nationality were analyzed in both surveys. Some earlier analyses (Milošević, 2006) indicated that there are no differences in meaning of national identity among different ethnic groups in Serbia.

**Table 2. Please tell us which of the following is important for your personal sense of national belonging. For instance, to what extent is the fact that you were born on a given territory important for your national identity? (Serbs, 2003)**

	I factor	II factor	III factor	IV factor
Birth on a given territory	0.250	0.569	0.420	-0.040
Same historic origin	0.273	0.768	0.102	0.214
Common family	0.240	0.757	0.303	0.007
Mother's origin	0.273	0.803	0.060	0.258
Father's origin	0.266	0.821	0.058	0.250
Feeling of belonging	0.452	0.684	0.085	0.108
Shared fate	0.482	0.351	0.372	0.276
Shared history	0.613	0.384	0.275	0.283
Same language	0.772	0.320	0.177	0.185
Alphabet	0.779	0.322	0.158	0.194
Religion	0.711	0.445	0.067	0.154
Adherence to same religious and traditional customs	0.713	0.325	0.146	0.169
Shared coexistence	0.546	0.256	0.518	0.064
Citizenship	0.622	0.187	0.473	0.093
Shared political interests	0.155	0.076	0.680	0.323
Shared state symbols	0.527	0.120	0.440	0.374
Shared public culture	0.383	0.132	0.351	0.652
Shared folk culture	0.277	0.245	0.288	0.797
Shared myths and legends	0.173	0.236	0.339	0.780
Same personality characteristics	0.007	0.156	0.684	0.413
Same rapport towards other nations	0.151	0.113	0.745	0.334
Awareness of other nations that are different	0.205	0.136	0.786	0.082
Perception of other people that you belong to a given nation	0.245	0.106	0.758	0.110

\*Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis;  
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

**Table 3. Percentage of the variance explained by the factors (Serbs, 2003)**

	Eigenvalue	% of explained variance	% of cumulative explained variance
I factor	10.039	43.647	43.647
II factor	2.827	12.290	55.937
III factor	1.212	5.270	61.207
IV factor	1.151	5.005	66.211

Four factors were extracted, as follows:

- First factor - language, alphabet, religion
- Second factor – ancestry
- Third factor – state related, psychological characteristics
- Fourth factor – cultural characteristics

There were two factors grouped within the primordial (organic) concept of national identity: language, alphabet, religion and ancestry. Two other factors: state and culture, defined instrumental concept of national identity. The percentage of the variance explained by the first two (primordial) factors substantially exceeds the percentage of the variance explained by the other two (instrumental) factors. Table 4 summarizes inter factor correlations. The only statistically significant correlation was obtained between factors 3 and 4, indicating orthogonal relationship between primordial and instrumental concepts of national identity and orthogonal relationship between factors constituting the primordial concept.

*Table 4. Inter factor correlation (Serbs, 2003)*

<b>Rho correlation</b>	<b>I factor</b>	<b>II factor</b>	<b>III factor</b>	<b>IV factor</b>
I FACTOR	1.00	0.04	-0.02	0.07
II FACTOR		1.00	-0.02	0.01
III FACTOR			1.00	0.09**
IV FACTOR				1.00

It seems that subjective feelings of belonging to a given nation and common ancestry is quite independent from shared features that are visible to the outsiders: same language, alphabet and religion. Extraction of these factors points at the local context of this study. Members of the Serbian nation are united by the same language, use of Cyrillic alphabet and very homogenous religious orientation (almost all Serbs participating in this study declared as Orthodox Christians). In social environments that are characterized by such overlap of language, alphabet and religion it is quite logical that these features constitute the essence of national identity because they unambiguously point at national membership. Common ancestry is perceived as somewhat different from visible national characteristics constituting the first factor since it designates subjective sentiment of each individual. The state that is supposed to formulate and watch over common national interests is singled out as a special feature of national identity, together with clear delineation towards other nations. It is quite interesting that state symbols were grouped together with the common rapport towards other nations and with awareness of other nations that are different from ours. This confirms a widespread personal experience that it is very hard to distance oneself from a person simply because it belongs to another nation. However, the state and the common national interest constitute a foundation on which clear distinctions among the nations are defined, superseding any personal relationship. Nevertheless, the importance of this factor should not be overrated, as illustrated by the low percentage of variance explained by this factor.

The data from the 2006 survey indicated a disparity in the meaning of national identity relative to 2003. Table 5 summarizes the factor analysis of the 2006 survey.

**Table 5. Please tell us which of the following is important for your personal sense of national belonging. For instance, to what extent is the fact that you were born on a given territory important for your national identity? (Serbs, 2006)**

	<b>I factor</b>	<b>II factor</b>	<b>III factor</b>
Birth on a given territory	0.456	0.039	0.223
Same historic origin	0.778	0.112	0.136
Common family	0.554	0.023	0.288
Mother's origin	0.841	0.086	0.224
Father's origin	0.840	0.116	0.218
Feeling of belonging	0.724	0.328	0.191
Shared fate	0.554	0.464	0.293
Shared history	0.562	0.592	0.179
Same language	0.722	0.451	0.136
Alphabet	0.702	0.469	0.118
Religion	0.708	0.325	0.105
Adherence to same religious and traditional customs	0.621	0.459	0.145
Shared coexistence	0.145	0.412	0.223
Citizenship	0.131	0.450	0.253
Shared political interests	0.017	0.544	0.465
Shared state symbols	0.293	0.703	0.251
Shared public culture	0.256	0.796	0.197
Shared folk culture	0.279	0.792	0.201
Shared myths and legends	0.311	0.727	0.298
Same personality characteristics	0.235	0.216	0.733
Same rapport towards other nations	0.141	0.287	0.788
Awareness of other nations that are different	0.195	0.161	0.806
Perception of other people that you belong to a given nation	0.270	0.231	0.710

**Table6. Percentage of the variance explained by the three factors (Serbs, 2006)**

	<b>Eigenvalue</b>	<b>% of explained variance</b>	<b>% of cumulative explained variance</b>
First factor	12.019	52.254	52.254
Second factor	2.188	9.512	61.766
Third factor	1.561	6.789	68.554

Three factors were extracted in 2006, as follows:

- First factor- language, alphabet, religion, ancestry
- Second factor – state related and cultural (socio-cultural)
- Third factor – psychological characteristics

The factors extracted from 2006 data were quite similar to the factors extracted from the 2003 data. This time, only three factors were extracted, but their interpretation remained relatively unchanged. The only important difference had to do with homogenization of primordial concept of national identity with all of its different meanings grouped within a single factor.

*Table 7. Inter factor correlation matrix (Serbs, 2006)*

<b>Rho correlation</b>	<b>I factor</b>	<b>II factor</b>	<b>III factor</b>
I FACTOR	1.00	0.09	0.10
II FACTOR		1.00	0.06
III FACTOR			1.00
IV FACTOR			

The findings reported above support the conclusion that national identity in Serbia is best described as primordial or pre-political. Such concept of national identity limits importance of the state, culture and politics and may indeed result from their lack of power. The old social identities have waned and were deserted (due to decay of the middle class and pauperization of the most), and new social identities have not emerged yet. Under such circumstances, national identity is primarily tied to ethnic and personal characteristics.

There have been several empirical studies of national identity reported in the literature. A decade ago, Janjić has studied the elements tying people into a nation or ethnicity (Janjić, 1996). He reported descending ranks of elements determining national identity among citizens of Serbia: birth in a given nation (37.7%), shared history and tradition (23.1%), common territory (13.7%), religion (8.9%), language (5.7%), national political program (2.4%), culture (1.8%), business and economy (0.5%). Thus, Janjić's data support the conclusion that national identity in Serbia is dominantly determined by primordial elements (birth, history, tradition, territory; with religion being a distant fourth). His data are in agreement with more recent studies summarized below.

Mihić et al., 2005 and Janičić et al., 2005 examined European identity among citizens of Serbia, its intensity and its relationship to national identity, and also its relationship to certain personality traits such as locus of control and rigidity. Their data indicate that European identity is, to a degree, at variance with the Serbian national identity. Respondents with intense European identity were characterized by inner locus of control and lower achievement level.

This study is best summarized with the following statement: Serbian national identity is dominantly primordial, organic, and then instrumental. Conservative understanding of nation hinders redefining national identity towards primacy of state symbols and citizen interests over sentiment and ancestry. There are probably many reasons for the prevalence of the primordial concept and they can be broadly classified as social and personal.

Possible *social reasons* are: general distrust in the state and its institutions; recently and frequently redefined state symbols such as the flag, the coat of arms, the national anthem and the like; recently and frequently redefined Serbian statehood, and general negative perception of the state. In a nut shell, Serbia of the day is still not a civil society, a country that serves the best interests of its citizens. Consequently, it is not a suitable place for dominance of instrumentalistic and functional concepts of national identity. When and whether at all it will happen here, remains to be seen.

Historical discontinuity and proven short life expectancy of states has been a regional rule rather than an exception for quite some time. Under these circumstances, it was difficult to conceive thorough social strategies of education and to develop continuous positive esteem of one's own nation for a longer period of time. If national identity is not formed early enough, then knowledge and sentiments related to the nation fail to get fully integrated into personality. An individual is left wandering in search of the true meaning of her/his national identity. This is especially obvious among the young. Almost by definition, the concept of national identity remains dominantly primordial, personal. For some 40-50 years following World War II, Serbian population was led to think in terms of belonging primarily to Yugoslav rather than belonging to Serbian nation. Attachment to Yugoslav identity and the accompanying emotions are still strong and prevailing in some. For many citizens of Serbia, identification with Yugoslav nation was one among many social identities that were lost and have not been adequately replaced, so far. During the last decades names of states and national symbols changed frequently. Not well defined and not deeply rooted national symbols lead to confusion about national identity by making it harder to identify with the state, favoring primordial concept of national identity.

One should underestimate the *personal reasons* contributing to the dominance of primordial concept of national identity in Serbia. Many empirical studies report dominant traditional values of the Serbian society. Primordial concept of national identity fits well in the overall picture. Resistance and rejection of Western achievements is widespread and becomes obvious through a general anti-Western political and social orientation. This in turn is accompanied with rejection of definition of national identity and the state, as defined in modern Western societies.

At the end, it should be emphasized that there are neither right or wrong answers, nor good or bad concepts of national identity. Primordialism should not be rejected as retrograde, and instrumentalism should not be accepted as progressive. The geographical region that we live in, and the value systems that we grew up with, are frequently quite remote from Western ideals. Therefore, it seems safe to assume that there will be some time before an empirical study reports dominant instrumentalistic concept of national identity among the Serbs.

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REZIME

**PRIMORDIJALISTIČKO ZNAČENJE  
NACIONALNOG IDENTITETA U SRBIJI**

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Kada razmišljamo o sebi i kada pokušavamo sebe da definišemo kao ličnost, opisujemo lične i socijalne identitete. Nacija ima svoje mesto u ovom procesu definisanja, među socijalnim, grupnim identitetima. U literaturi preovlađuju istraživanja stepena vezanosti za naciju, a ređe ispitivanje značenja nacionalnog identiteta. Gruba podela teorijskih shvatanja nacionalnog identiteta može se sažeti u sledeća dva suprotstavljena značenja: primordijalizam koji polazi od načela da je nacionalni identitet trajna, čvrsta i osnovna, bazična ljudska kategorija, data rođenjem, obojena iracionalnim osećanjima i instrumentalizam, po kome je nacionalni identitet promenljiv, fluidan, donosi korist.

U ovom radu ispitujemo dominantno shvatanje nacionalnog identiteta među Srbima, koristeći rezultate dva kvantitativna istraživanja na reprezentativnim uzorcima građana Srbije starijih od 18 godina koji su se izjasnili kao Srbi (prvo istraživanje izvedeno avgusta 2003. godine, a drugo avgusta 2006. godine). Polazne osnove za formiranje upitnika zasnovane su na brojnim indikatorima koje smo pokušali da definišemo iz raznolikih teorijskih koncepata. To su: jezik, ćirilično pismo, istorija, zajednička sudbina, religija, kultura, običaji, način života, umetnost, zajednička predanja, mitovi, kolektivna svest, specifičan nacionalni karakter, zajedničke osobine ličnosti i vrednosti, poreklo, rođenje u datom narodu, loza, državljanstvo, državna obeležja, kategorisanje – svrstavanje u određenu etničku grupu. Rezultati pokazuju da stepen vezanosti za naciju nije u velikoj meri različit od dosadašnjih nalaza u Srbiji. Građani su posle porodice najviše vezani za naciju i za veru u oba istraživanja. Za ispitivanje značenja nacionalnog identiteta korišćena je Analiza glavnih komponenti, sa Varimax modelom rotacije. Najprisutnija shvatanja nacionalnog identiteta među Srbima su primordijalistička, u oba istraživanja. Unutar primordijalističkog shvatanja 2003. godine grupišu se dva faktora i to: jezik, pismo, vera i poreklo. Instrumentalističko shvatanje objašnjeno je državnim i kulturnim indikatorima. Procenat objašnjene varijanse na osnovu prva dva (primordijalistička) faktora je zadovoljavajući, dok druga dva (instrumentalistička) faktora u manjem procentu doprinose objašnjenju varijanse. Dobijeni rezultati u drugom istraživanju 2006 godine ukazuju na još homogenije primordijalističko značenje - svi su indikatori grupisani u jednom faktoru.

Shvatanje nacionalnog identiteta je među Srbima dominantno primordijalističko, a potom instrumentalističko. Prisutno je takozvano konzervativno shvatanje nacije, nije došlo do redefinisavanja shvatanja nacionalnog identiteta kojim bi državna obeležja i građanski interes imali primat nad poreklom i osećanjem. Za dominaciju primordijalističkog shvatanja verovatno ima više razloga: jedna grupa razloga se može okarakterisati kao društvena, a druga kao personalna. U jakim društvenim turbulencijama, pojedinac nastoji da nađe smisao nacionalne pripadnosti koji će biti nezavisan od društva, tako što će nacionalnom identitetu dati individualno, porodično značenje.

***Ključne reči:*** nacionalni identitet, primordijalizam, instrumentalizam