

Vojvodinian Regional Identity: A Social Fact or a Modern Construct?

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Abstract

In certain circumstances, regional identity distinguishes itself as a very important type of social identification which is able to compete with other powerful identities, such as national, ethnic and religious. This thesis analyzes the concept and emergence of regional identity, as well as the features that make it attractive to the inhabitants of regions. Moreover, the thesis focuses on the Vojvodinian identity examining who supports and who opposes the regional identity idea, analyzing the specific socio-historical features of the province that allow for the emergence of the regional identity and discussing political implications as well as motives of different political and public actors in the regional identity building. The empirical part of this thesis includes focus groups and interviews with the youth of Vojvodina, with the purpose to establish whether the young people have developed regional identity feelings and how much their feelings match the current political discourse surrounding the Vojvodinian identity building. It also aimed to establish whether differences in this respect can be observed between the different ethnic groups (Hungarian, Serb, Romanian, Greek), whose members were part of the research. The findings indicate that regional identity does take an important place for most of the participants, but that regional identity feelings do not exclude feelings of other powerful identifications. Also, no striking differences were noticed between the youth from different ethnic groups of Vojvodina.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Many a question has been raised about the existence and substance of the Vojvodinian regional identity. Different views have been given about this topic and intense exchanges of opinions of the political and intellectual elites have taken place shaping the features of the regional identity. At the same time, the Vojvodinian identity has spontaneously been developing as a result of the interaction of the people and as one effect of the media and NGOs¹ which are active in the region. The outcome of specific historic developments, demographic changes and cultural and ethnic diversity, the Vojvodinian identity today is a specific type of social identification distinguishable from ethnic, national and religious identities. At times its integrative character prevails over its disintegrative attributes, and it is due to this dichotomy of functions that the regional identity is interesting to examine.

Another important aspect is finding out how much resonance regional identity talk has for Vojvodinians and what actors are responsible for its diffusion among the people. In other words, it is important to establish if regional identity exists only in the political discourse or is it an actual fact of the Vojvodinian society. Moreover, this is also a significant subject of research because it is closely connected to the topics of decentralization and regionalization of Serbia, both of which are burning issues in the current political debates. Therefore this topic fits into the larger context of regional politics.

1.1. Vojvodinian Identity in the Spotlight

During the population census in Serbia in 2011 Novi Sad, the main administrative center and the capital of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, contained numerous billboards and posters with the following message: “I am Vojvodinian - I am what I am. I do

¹ The current discourse implies that these organizations are now called Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), but I will opt for the term NGO because that term was used during the period that this thesis deals with.

not want a path to Europe, but a return to it.” The authors of these billboards were firstly anonymous, but later identified as the NGO League of Social Equality.² They started the campaign as a Facebook group under the same name as the campaign’s. It was speculated that the political party LSV (League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina) financially supported these billboards, although the party leaders denied being a part of the campaign. Nevertheless, they did approve of the message that the campaign was sending, which caused much debate and pointed to the already existing but recently revisited concept of regional identity in Vojvodina.

Identity is one of the most widely used terms and the ultimate catchphrase in the nationalist discourse and among the scholars of nationalism studies. Its broad scope of meanings has both micro and macro scales, and it covers personal, national, social, ethnic and many other realities. As a theoretical concept, regionalism has also been present in the academic discourse long before its rebirth in the 1980’s.³ In relation to it, regional identity became the one of the key words in identity studies soon after and even more so in the contemporary era of the ‘Europe of the regions’. It is the concept of regional identity that is often employed by scholars in order to better comprehend the connection between political and social actors, institutions and political structures in the region.

As a variant of social identity, regional identity ‘integrates the material phenomena of the regions with the ideas of the regional community formed by the inhabitants, the images of the region and the structures of expectations’.⁴ Furthermore, it is most often expressed in a territorial sense, unrelated to ethnic or national identity. As such, it is a form of non-national

² “Declare Yourself as Vojvodinian! [Izjasni se kao Vojvodjanin ili Vojvodjanka!], *Slobodna Vojvodina portal*, http://www.slobodnavojvodina.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=190:izjasni-se-kao-vojvoanin-ili-vojvoanka&catid=3:akcija&Itemid=16 accessed on 5 May 2012

³ Anssi Paasi, “Region and Place: Regional Identity in Question.” *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 27, No. 4, (2003): pp. 475-485.

⁴ Wolfgang Knapp, “Regional Identity – A Conceptual Framework.” *Sustainable and Accessible Urban Landscapes*, SAUL Symposium No.1 (2003), accessed on 14 Nov 2011
<http://www.saulproject.net/downloads/A%20Sense%20of%20Place/Rhein%20Ruhr%20symposium/W%20Knapp.pdf>

and non-ethnic belonging, which could potentially be useful in diminishing frictions between different ethnic groups. Regional identity in Vojvodina is a particularly interesting example due to the multiethnic composition of its population⁵, cultural pluralism and the long tradition of peaceful ethnic coexistence in the region. Moreover, with nearly 70 percent of arable land⁶ Vojvodina is the richest province in Serbia regarding the natural resources and contributes significantly to the national budget. Consequently, regional financing and economic prosperity of Vojvodina as well as the question of decentralization also represent important elements to be considered in the analysis of the emergence and further development of the regional sentiment.

The analysis of regional identity is complex because one should not understand a region only as a geographical space, but also as a lived space, a place of memory and a place that represents more to its inhabitants than a mere *locus vivendi*. In the case of Vojvodina this is particularly true because of its diverse ethnic composition, which makes the region unique in Serbia. Moreover, Vojvodina's inhabitants have multiple identities that do not necessarily exist in a hierarchy, but rather gain priority depending on a context. However, while regional identity has the potential to bridge the differences between ethnic and national groups residing in a particular region, or at the very least it has the ability to compete with other powerful social identifications, oftentimes it does not have the appeal of the ethnic and national identities. It is one of the goals of this thesis to determine how much significance Vojvodinians attribute to their regional identity and also what circumstances does it depend on.

The framework of my research is the analysis of regional identity building in Vojvodina. However, I would like to analyze it in a wider context, offering an answer to the

⁵ The Government of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina official web site, accessed on 15 Nov 2011 http://www.vojvodina.gov.rs/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=174&Itemid=83

⁶ Provincial Secretariat for Urban Construction and Environmental Protection, Autonomous Province of Vojvodina official web site, accessed on 15 Nov 2011 <http://www.eko.vojvodina.gov.rs/?q=node/12>

following question: Why is it possible for regional identity to compete with national, ethnic and other important identities in certain contexts? In other words, what makes regional identity attractive to the people inhabiting a certain region, compared to other forms of identity? In answering this question, I will take into account the specificities of Vojvodinians and the region itself, prominence of the regional identity sentiment as well as the influential actors in this process and relations between Vojvodina and Serbia along with the relations of Vojvodina towards Europe.

After having examined this theoretic question and after having analyzed possible answers, I would like to focus on the question that is related specifically to Vojvodina. Namely, in the context of the 2011 population census in Serbia, I will analyze why the Vojvodinian regional identity re-emerged in the political discourse and what are the possible political implications of such a development. Moreover, I will examine whether the Vojvodinians consider this province to be more an administrative unit or a space of identification. Put differently, I am interested to know how strong a connection they feel towards the province and to what extent emotional attachment exists towards Vojvodina.

1.2. Methodology

Regional identity building is a complex process which consists of interaction between political, social and other important actors. In the analysis of the construction of Vojvodinian identity, I will begin by analyzing the terminology of regionalism and point to the ambiguities and inconsistencies in relation to definitions and meanings of region, regionalism and regional identity. More precisely, vagueness and geographical elusiveness exist in the meanings and significance that people residing in a particular region ascribe to it. What people mean when they say these terms does not refer strictly to regions as administrative units and geographical spaces, but it also includes the aspect of human relations and social

circumstances. Furthermore, scholars in the academic literature also offer several definitions and meanings of regions and regional identity that do not necessarily coincide with one another.

In the analysis of the emergence of regional identity, I will focus on the constructivist approach. Regional identity building in Vojvodina does not depend solely on the role of the political leaders and elites, it is also a product of the active participation in the societal change of the people from the region, media, social networks, NGOs and other important actors working ‘from below’. I will thus demonstrate that in order to have a thorough analysis of the regional identity building, one should take into consideration both the ‘top-down’ approach and the influence of the actors ‘from below’. In order to examine the extent to which Vojvodinian regional identity building has been influenced by the latter, one must look closely to the relations between the regional government in Vojvodina and the central government in Serbia, the European aspirations and the claim of ‘Europeaness’ of Vojvodinians and demographic changes in Vojvodina since the Second World War and more recently the Yugoslav wars.

Moreover, I will also argue that the strength and prominence of regional identity in Vojvodina is directly related to the relations between the region and the central government. Consequently, the quest for more autonomy in Vojvodina is also linked with the region’s budget allocation and other state policies regarding the province, such as those regarding infrastructure and culture. In the province’s recent history, these policies varied from quite liberal during the time of Tito’s Yugoslavia to its very opposite under Slobodan Milosevic’s regime. In the last decade the state’s policies included restitution of Vojvodina’s status as an autonomous province, improvement in dealing with the minority rights, a budget increase in 2012 and publication of Vojvodina’s own Statute. Furthermore, the Vojvodina Academy of Sciences and Arts was re-founded in 2003, after having been abolished under Milosevic’s

regime in 1992.⁷ In this framework, I would like to investigate how do regional identity and feeling of attachment to the province of Vojvodina affect and influence the claims for a greater autonomy of the province. Additionally, the question of regional financing and budget should not be disregarded particularly due to the province's natural wealth and considerable economic input into the national budget.⁸ It is in this context that I find useful references for the analysis of the interplay of different political, non-governmental, economic and social actors.

Although one cannot claim with certainty what is the nature of the link between regional identity and autonomy, it should be indicated that the link does exist and that it is dependent on the multiple factors and influential actors mentioned above. However, what will be suggested is that the promotion of Vojvodinian regional identity can and should be perceived as a possibility for an increase in the levels of ethnic tolerance in the region, which is especially important due to Vojvodina's cultural, ethnic and religious pluralism. Namely, Vojvodina is a region inhabited by people of more than twenty five different ethnicities. Vojvodinians belong to different ethnic, national, religious and language groups, to name just a few. Consequently, one can infer that they have many different and possibly overlapping identities.

In order to assess how important is regional identity to Vojvodinians and to determine if it is dependent on a certain context, my methodology consists of a small-scale research which will be included in the thesis. Specifically, I am conducting interviews and several focus groups with young people from the province (university students and graduating high school students). I found that interviewing and focus groups are the most useful and time-

⁷ Danica Radovic, "How Was the First Vojvodina Academy of Sciences Founded? [Kako je osnovana prva Vojvodjanska akademija nauka]", *Politika Online*, 15 Jan 2009 accessed on 20 Apr 2012
<http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Kultura/Kako-je-osnovana-prva-Vojvodjanska-akademija-nauka.lt.html>

⁸ Vojvodina's budget in 2012 had been increased for over 27 million euros, constituting approximately 9 percent of the national budget; Vojvodina's Budget in 2012. Larger for Three Billion Dinars [Budzet Vojvodine u 2012. veci za tri milijarde dinara], *Radio Televizija Vojvodine* 15 Dec 2011 Accessed on 19 Apr 2012
http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/vojvodina/budzet-vojvodine-u-2012.-veci-za-tri-milijarde-dinara_289761.html

efficient means to conduct a research for my thesis and that young people are the most responsive and approachable. Hence, I opted for students of different nationalities from Vojvodina who also come from several different towns in order to be able to come to some general and unbiased conclusions.

The general idea is to determine how young people feel about the Vojvodinian identity and what role does it play in their everyday lives. My questions essentially focus on determining the prominence of Vojvodinian regional identity in their social identification and on the extent to which they feel that this particular identity defines them. They also aim to establish the nature of the relationship between ethnic, national, local and regional identity, and I aspire to find out which comes first for the Vojvodinian youth. Moreover, I introduce the topic of Vojvodinian identity with the questions about the 2011 campaign “I am Vojvodinian – I am who I am.” To be precise, I am interested to know how much the interviewees heard about the campaign and to infer from their answers and reactions how influential the campaign was.

The purpose of this research is to portray general feelings and opinions of the Vojvodinian younger generations about their regional identity and to understand how much importance it has in their everyday lives. It also seeks to examine how informed the youth is about the campaign that was intended to promote the idea of Vojvodinian regional identity in 2011 and to establish if compelling differences exist between the answers of participants from different ethnic groups.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

A vast literature exists on the topic of identity, and considerable part of it is focused on regional identity. Furthermore, articles and other publications about regionalism and its reemergence in the discourse which occurred not so long ago, have been quite useful for the overall perception of the topic of regionalism in Vojvodina and its relation to the ‘Europeanness’ of the region. These and many other relevant topics will be discussed in the following pages.

2.1. Terms Defined

Although it had been present for quite some time in the academic circles and political discourse, regional identity has become the subject of much interest in the past few decades. According to the Finish geographer Anssi Paasi, an eminent scholar of geography and regionalism, the rebirth of regionalism in literature and discourse dates back to the 1980’s⁹. He asserts that this is an old idea, but that in the modern context regions refer to ‘new states spaces’.¹⁰

The difference between the two is that the ‘old’ regionalism refers to the steps taken in the aftermath of the Second World War as attempts of integration, and the ‘new’ regionalism that is analyzed in the contemporary literature has a much broader, complex and fluid character. In Paasi’s words “new regionalism is both the context and result of the ongoing re-scaling of the state.”¹¹ Due to the multiethnic composition of Vojvodina, its cultural pluralism, inclination to decentralize and the complexity of the socio-politic relations

⁹ Anssi Paasi, “Region and Place: Regional Identity in Question.” *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 27, No. 4, (2003): pp.475-485.

¹⁰ Anssi Paasi, “The Resurgence of the ‘Region’ and ‘Regional Identity’: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Observations on Regional Dynamics in Europe.” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, (2009): pp. 121-146.

¹¹ Ibid.

with the central government, it is precisely in this context that regional identity in Vojvodina will be analyzed in my research.

Moreover, Paasi stresses that the role of regions became particularly important in the discourse encompassing the idea of the 'Europe of the regions' that epitomizes the re-scaling of the state spaces as well as shifts of power to smaller territorial units.¹² Namely, after the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe and with the emergence of decentralization and globalization around the world, transfer of responsibilities and duties to smaller territorial units occurred. This is undoubtedly the case in Vojvodina as well, which as an autonomous province of Serbia demanded and acquired significant levels of autonomy and regional governance. Moreover, as a country that strives to become an EU member for many years now, Serbia is also disposed to follow the European Union's trends and regulations and subsequently to implement the changes in the power distribution inside the state.

Furthermore, in the case of countries of Eastern and Central Europe the EU integration has provided substantial incentives to the regional developments. Batt and Wolczuk point to the fact that 'Europeaness' and multiculturalism are traits often stressed as unique features by the leaders and inhabitants of the regions of Central and Eastern Europe that distinguish them from their respective nation states. Furthermore, "these regions' inherent connection with Europe is emphasized, bypassing the nation state."¹³ Vojvodina is a sub-state unit that exemplifies well the trend represented in the framework mentioned above, because the European character of the province along with the phrase 'return to Europe' is a frequent element of political discourse in Vojvodina aimed mostly at establishing the specific character of the province that differentiates it from other regions of the country. It is an oft-

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Judy Batt and Kataryna Wolczuk (eds.) Region, State and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe. Frank Cass Publishers, 2002.

employed tool of the political and public actors active in the building of Vojvodinian identity that seems to have most recipient audience among the older generations in the province.¹⁴

Although Vojvodina was not discussed in the previously mentioned book, one can find many analogies with the regions of Central and Eastern Europe that Batt and Wolczuk did analyze. The European identity of Vojvodinians is frequently highlighted by the regional politicians as one of their most important traits and at times it is put in opposition to the identity of people inhabiting the rest of the country. In so doing, conditions are created for regional identity to be able to compete with other important types of social identification, in the first place national and ethnic. Circumstances under which such a competition happens are likely to include a frequent and influential regional identity discourse. However, in most recent times, it seems that such a discourse in Vojvodina has been losing popularity to the one surrounding the problems of economic prosperity and financial crisis.

Another important concept that will be analyzed in my thesis is the region itself. Namely, not only does region mean different things to different people, but one can also find numerous definitions of this concept that do not necessarily coincide with one another. For the purpose of my research, I find the definition given by Marco Antonsich to be the most suitable one. To be exact, he recognizes that the region is defined as an administrative space, but geographical character of the region is also oftentimes elusive.¹⁵ His main argument is that in the discourse any geographical space can be articulated as an imagined community and a lived space. In other words, any place can be seen as an abstract administrative unit, but it can also be defined through personal experiences and relationships. In this sense, what

¹⁴ The research in this thesis showed that the Vojvodinian youth expresses a level of ambiguity related to the European character of the province. While some felt and still feel European, others are uncertain how 'European' was the past of the region which points to the inconsistencies between the discourse of the actors (NGOs, several regional parties and other influential individuals) in the regional identity building and feelings of the region's young citizens.

¹⁵ Marco Antonsich, "Exploring the Correspondence between Regional Forms of Governance and Regional Identity: The Case of Western Europe." *European Urban and Regional Studies*, Vol. 17, No.3, (2010): pp. 261 – 276.

people mean when they say regional identity is also ambiguous, just as the geographical space that they consider as a particular region is ambiguous itself.

In a similar vein, Wolfgang Knapp's framework of regional identity allows the reader to conceptualize the region not only as a geographical space, but also as an institutionally mediated sphere of society. The author decomposes the concept of region, combining societal, cultural and political attributes so that its historical and geographical components are better understood.¹⁶ Additionally, in the book "The Crossroads of Serbia", Milan Tripkovic defines a region as a natural entity, which has spontaneously and naturally come to existence.¹⁷ According to him, a region is a relatively homogenous geographic, historical, economic and socio-cultural entity that allows for its inhabitants to successfully and fully manifest their specific regional identity and to best fulfill their common needs, values and interests. Tripkovic, thus, distinguishes between a 'static' understanding of the region, according to which the region is a clearly demarcated and distinguishable unit with specific rights and obligations, and a 'dynamic' region that is a flexible, functional and potentially changing entity, constituted according to rational choice and actual needs.¹⁸

On the other hand, Paasi defines regions as 'historically contingent processes',¹⁹ which gain their boundaries, institutions and symbols in the process of institutionalization. He makes an interesting distinction between a territory and a region, pointing to borders as the main instruments of territoriality. According to him "A territory differs from a region in that its boundaries and the resources therein are under the control of people."²⁰ However, through

¹⁶ Wolfgang Knapp, "Regional Identity – A Conceptual Framework." *Sustainable and Accessible Urban Landscapes*, SAUL Symposium No.1 (2003)

¹⁷ Milan Tripkovic, Ljubinko Pusic and Srdjan Sljukic *Crossroads of Serbia [Raskrsca Srbije]*, Filozofski fakultet Novi Sad, Odsek za sociologiju, 2007. p.62

¹⁸ Ibid. p.63

¹⁹ Anssi Paasi, "Region and Place: Regional Identity in Question." *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 27, No. 4, (2003): pp. 475-485.

²⁰ Anssi Paasi, "The Resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity': Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Observations on Regional Dynamics in Europe." *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, (2009): pp. 121-146.

institutionalization a region can emerge as a part of the territorial structure and social consciousness of the society.

Paasi's well-developed framework is very useful because it explains the relationship between territory and region and demonstrates the ways in which this relationship can further develop. If one is to look at Vojvodina through this lens, one is to conclude that it is a region because it does not have internationally recognized borders and because it is a sub-state unit in an internationally recognized state. Vojvodina's status as an autonomous province is undisputed, but what this thesis will also deal with is the aspect discussed by Antonsich. Namely, one aim of my research is to analyze whether emotional attachment and feeling of belonging exists in the minds and hearts of Vojvodina's inhabitants.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Having given a concise overview of the key geographical terms, I will situate regional identity in a theoretical framework. A vast literature and different theoretic approaches exist on the topic of identity and this research focuses on the constructivist approach, which I find to be the most useful in the analysis of social identities. Namely, according to the constructivist school of thought and as stated by Frederik Barth, collective identity is constructed by the people themselves; it is a social construct and not a cultural given.²¹ However, one cannot but recognize the fact that constructivist approach is somewhat elitist, and that it implies that it is primarily the political and cultural elites that construct collective identities of the people. To some extent, this is a limiting perspective that does not take into consideration that those who the collective identity is intended for may as well be participants in its creation and not only recipients. It is this dual role of the people in Vojvodina that I am also interested to look at.

²¹ Frederik Barth (ed.) Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference. Little, Brown and Company, 1969.

Moreover, the work of Batt and Wolczuk is a good analysis of the above mentioned topic. To be exact, they stress the fact that the drive to ‘Europeanize’ the newly created post-communist states coincided with the ‘bottom-up’ rebirth of regional identities and minority claims.²² John Ashbrook dates the same development in Eastern and Central Europe back to the 1990’s, which is when regional actors started to become aware that international organizations could be potential allies in the struggle against the centralizing cores²³, so the regional elites combined regionalism with the Europeanization with the goal of decentralizing the state. The interplay of the regional and central governments, as well as the role of the inhabitants of Vojvodina in the regional identity building follow the similar pattern discussed in the previously mentioned works.

In addition, the constructivist approach is also scrutinized by Rogers Brubaker, who points to a flaw in the identity studies in general. To be exact, in the chapter “Beyond Identity” which he co-authored with Frederick Cooper, they reconstruct the very term ‘identity’ because its meanings have been so proliferated that the term eventually lost its analytical weight.²⁴ In so doing, Brubaker groups the terms with which to replace ‘identity’ in three different categories or clusters: 1. Identification and categorization 2. Self-understanding and social location 3. Commonality, connectedness, ‘groupness’. All these terms represent a particular meaning and aspect of identity, aiming at a specific function of the term and describing it more precisely. Although they are all applicable to the concept of regional identity, the third cluster of terms and particularly ‘groupness’ will be mostly referred to in this thesis, due to their descriptive attributes which best represent the meaning of this collective identity.

²² Judy Batt and Kataryna Wolczuk (eds.) Region, State and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe. Frank Cass Publishers, 2002.

²³ John Ashbrook, “Politicization of Identity in a European Borderland: Istria, Croatia, and Authenticity, 1990 – 2003.” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, Vol. 39, No. 6 (2011): pp.871 – 897.

²⁴ Rogers Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups. Harvard University Press, 2004.

As a variant of social and collective identity, regional identity is also adequately set in the framework of the socio-psychological school of thought. According to Henry Tajfel and his social identity theory, aside from acquiring a personal identity as unique persons, individuals also have a social identity, which is the expression of their membership in different groups they belong to.²⁵ Apart from the knowledge that they belong to a specific group, individuals also attach emotional significance to that particular membership, which further results in the tendency to view one's own group favorably and to evaluate other individuals based on one simple criterion: whether they are in-group or out-group.

Tajfel's work set the basis for the social identity theory and Daniel Bar-Tal took it one step further, introducing the concept of 'group beliefs'.²⁶ Bar-Tal's argument is that group beliefs are the most important factor in the group formation, because they unite members of the group and make them different from the out-groups. In his words, "Group members are aware that they share the same unique beliefs that define their 'groupness' and thus become aware of the similarity."²⁷ I find this argument to be important for the case study of Vojvodina, because he considers group beliefs to be the most significant factors in the group formation, not the ethnic, racial or national belonging. It is precisely this premise that is the basis for arguments of the proponents of the Vojvodinian regional identity. According to them, when cultural and ethnic pluralism of the province are taken into consideration, it is clear that the core of Vojvodina's regional identity lies in the common values and beliefs of the people. Such statements are quite bold, because they are more often than not unsupported by analytic or comparable data.

Furthermore, Bar-Tal classifies group beliefs in several categories based on their content. As far as the content of group beliefs is considered, Vojvodinians can be said to have

²⁵ Henry Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

²⁶ Daniel Bar-Tal, "Group Beliefs as an Expression of Social Identity." in Stephen Worchel (ed.) *Social Identity: International Perspectives*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998.

²⁷ Ibid.

shared values: interethnic coexistence, tolerance, respect for different religions, languages etc. This is the view largely supported by NGOs working on the promotion and diffusion of the Vojvodinian regional identity. The NGO that has been and still is very active in this enterprise is the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. This NGO has been active in the promotion of the idea of regional identity, but also in organizing conferences and seminars related to this topic.

Moreover, many important publications were issued as products of these conferences. Among these, HCHRS published a book which is a collection of articles written by historians, economists, political figures and it is edited by Pavel Domonji. The main argument of this publication, which has been influential among the supporters of Vojvodinianism, is that Vojvodinian identity is very particular, based largely on common values and not ethnic belonging and that as such it should be further promoted and affirmed. The authors claim that the affirmation of Vojvodinian identity will bring about a more widespread ethnic tolerance in the region and that it will also provide the grounds for a broader understanding and scope of identity than the one offered by different ethnic groups.²⁸

While the ideas that are in this context being promoted are indeed positive and have the potential to bridge the differences of various ethnic groups that inhabit Vojvodina, it should not be forgotten that many factors are at play in the regional identity discourse. Namely, both the opponents and the proponents of the Vojvodinian identity at times use a harsh language to discredit groups of dissimilar views and the political implications of regional identity should not be disregarded either, as they are an inseparable element in the regional identity discourse. In other words, the motives behind both the support and

²⁸ Pavel Domonji (ed.) Vojvodinian Identity [Vojvodjanski Identitet]. The Library of the Helsinki Notebook, No. 24 [Biblioteka Helsinske Sveske, Br. 24]. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia [Helsinki odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji], 2006.

opposition to regional identity building should be considered and this is the topic of the chapter four of this thesis.

2.3. Cultural Pluralism as a Heritage

One of the features that is most emphasized by the chroniclers of Vojvodina is its history of cultural pluralism. According to John Lauer, Vojvodina is the model of interethnic coexistence, unique among the republics of former Yugoslavia.²⁹ He takes this argument one step further claiming that even during the regime of Milosevic, when Vojvodina's autonomy was revoked along with many minority rights, it still remained the place of multiethnic coexistence. He believes that it is due to Vojvodina's historical heritage as a place of collaboration between different ethnic groups that different ethnicities were able to coexist peacefully during those difficult times. Even though this article contains occasional overstatements and at times biased conclusions, it does provide a succinct historical overview about the persistence of Vojvodinian cultural pluralism and generally good ethnic relations. Also, while a consensus exists about the ethnic and cultural pluralism, one should point to the historical circumstances that led to this development.

In her article "Multiculturalism in Vojvodina and Demographic Development of National Minorities", Nada Raduski indicates that constant migrations are the main cause of such a diverse ethnic composition of Vojvodina.³⁰ The great colonization of Vojvodina after the Second World War and especially the wars that led to disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1990's brought about a significant change in the demographics of the region in the sense that the number of the Serb population increased and minority populations decreased, except for the Roma. This is mainly due to the influx of Serbian refugees from Bosnia, Croatia and

²⁹ John Lauer, "Vojvodina, Serbia: Cornerstone of Democratization and Multi-ethnic Collaboration." *Case Western University Reserve*, EDMP 615, (2002).

³⁰ Nada Raduski, "Multiculturalism in Vojvodina and Demographic Development of National Minorities. [Multikulturalizam Vojvodine i demografski razvitak nacionalnih manjina]" *Zbornik Matice srpske za društvene nauke*, Vol. 131, (2010): pp.339-347.

Kosovo. The ethnic composition of Vojvodina has thus been fluctuating over time and should not be seen as an invariable feature of the region.

Cultural pluralism and ethnic heterogeneity are the two main features of this province that the proponents of Vojvodinian identity stress as features that make the region unique and something that its inhabitants are genuinely proud of. Yet, the effects that these features had on the cohabitation in the region still remain to be discussed.

2.4. Aspects of Regional Identity

These two authors have greatly contributed to the discourse on the topic of the importance of regional identity for the formation of regions as working administrative units: Anssi Paasi and Marco Antonsich. While Paasi considers regional identity to be the most important element that makes regions into economic, social and political actors, Antonsich does not quite agree with this argument. In his opinion, regions can exist as spaces of the previously mentioned governance even if there is no sentiment of identification with the region among its inhabitants. Put differently, collective identity does not seem to transfer from the state to the region, even though regions as administrative units have acquired many political, economic and social roles of the state.³¹ The research that Antonsich conducted in Lombardia (Italy), Pirkanmaa (Finland), North East England (UK) and Languedoc-Rousillon (France) prove his hypothesis, because the interviewees identified with the regions as lived spaces, not so much as administrative units, pointing to the fact that a sentiment of regional identity is not an element *sine qua non* for regions to be efficient and capable territorial actors.

Nevertheless, both authors attach significance to the existence of regional identity and point out that it has been a ‘soft’ tool in regional politics. Hence, it is necessary to analyze

³¹ Marco Antonsich, “Exploring the Correspondence between Regional Forms of Governance and Regional Identity: The Case of Western Europe.” *European Urban and Regional Studies*, Vol. 17, No.3, (2010): pp.261 – 276.

important actors in the creation of regional identity. Considerable literature can be found on the specificities of Vojvodina, its regional identity, common traits that people in the province consider they share and connectedness they feel with Europe. However, what has not been analyzed thoroughly is whether regional identity building in Vojvodina is entirely a construct of the elites and political actors, otherwise called the ‘top-down’ approach, or were there a substantial support and need from the part of the people themselves for such a collective identity.

Many authors agree about the importance of the political leaders in the construction of regional identity, and I will distinguish but a few. In their innovative study of individuals’ national attitudes, their conceptualization and operationalization, Dekker et al. came to some already anticipated but still valuable conclusions. Namely, one of their findings was that the political leaders have a very important role in the strengthening of national feelings³², and their charisma and rhetoric play an important role in the national socialization of the people. Another author who strongly agrees with this argument is Michael Keating, who states that regional leaders politicize identity to their own benefit so that a movement is created to compete against the central governments and nationalists.³³

In addition, another important emphasis on the role of the political leaders comes from Iver Neumann: “regions are invented by political actors as a political programme, they are not simply waiting to be discovered [...] Regional identity, therefore, is what people, politicians, and states make out of it; it is what meaning they inject into history and culture.”³⁴ Bill McSweeney gives a similar theory in his oft-quoted statement that “collective identity does not wait to be discovered”, but that it is rather the identity discourse reproduced by the political leaders, intellectuals and many other persons of influence who negotiate and

³² Henk Dekker et al. “Nationalism and its Explanations.” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2003).

³³ Michael Keating, “Is there a Regional Level of Government in Europe?” in Patrick Le Gales and Christian Lequesne (eds.) *Regions in Europe*. Routledge, 1998.

³⁴ Iver Neumann, “Regionalism and Democratisation.” in Jan Zielonka and Alex Pravda (eds.) *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe*. Oxford UP, 2001.

manipulate the process of the creation of a collective image.³⁵ It may be inferred from these several accounts that the role of the political leaders is very important in the building of collective identity. Nevertheless, one should also not forget that identity is most efficiently built if a fertile ground and a good reception of it already exist in the region. It is thus important to analyze the development of the relations between the local leaders and the central government setting it in a historical context.

One other finding of Dekker et al. that is particularly relevant for this research is that the hierarchies of positive and negative regional-national attitudes are the same as the national attitudes. In other words, regional feelings follow the same pattern of construction and dispersion as the national ones. Dekker et al. included the Basque Autonomous Community of Spain in their research, along with the already recognized and established states, the Netherlands and Slovakia, in order to be able to compare the findings of their research and analyze if their model is applicable in the regional context as well. An important conclusion that the authors came to was that in the context of Basques, “the attitude toward Spain best explained the variance in Basque regional nationalism.”³⁶ This is an important point of reference for my analysis of the fluctuations of the relations between Vojvodina and Serbia.

However, while in the Basque case the ethnic composition of the population is different than the one from the majority national group in Spain as a whole, it is not the case in Vojvodina. The relationship between ethnicity and regionalism is another relevant factor for the prominence of regional identity, according to Mila Dragojevic. Using the constructivist approach, she dealt with this issue and concluded that although the majority population in Vojvodina is of the same ethnic belonging as the one from the central state (i.e.

³⁵ Bill McSweeney, Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

³⁶ Henk Dekker et al. “Nationalism and its Explanations.” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2003).

Serbian), regionalism still arises in the province.³⁷ One may thus infer that regional identity is a relevant matter for Vojvodina's inhabitants, but also that it is situational and that its importance depends on the context.

As far as the relationship that different political parties have regarding demands for autonomy, Dragojevic's findings showed that the main supporters of autonomy in Vojvodina are parties which are either regional, or center-based and civic-oriented. Conversely, center-based nationalist parties are the main opposition to the demands for autonomy in the region. Additionally, several legal documents and changes in the political status of Vojvodina largely influenced the development of the minority rights and people's support for autonomy. According to Leonas Tolvaissis, these are the 1974 socialist constitution, the 1989 reduction of autonomy, the 1990 constitutional reform and the 2000 regime change.³⁸

In addition to these documents, I would also add the 2011 population census in Serbia during which one of the leading regional parties in Vojvodina (LSV) is considered to have invited the people to declare themselves as Vojvodinians, influencing the development of regional identity and also making reference to the European origins of Vojvodinians. Their measures, described in the introductory part of this research, included billboards in Novi Sad, media campaigning and specifically the use of social networks. This event is considered to have brought the Vojvodinian regional identity into the spotlight for some time and it also strengthened the support for regional parties in the province.

The reviewed literature represents a good basis for the research and critical analysis of the region both as a geographical concept and a topic of identity studies. It provides a solid theoretical background, empirical examinations and case studies that will serve as useful analogies for the study of Vojvodina. Moreover, literature which has Vojvodina as the main

³⁷ Mila Dragojevic, "Contesting Ethnicity: Emerging Regional Identity in Vojvodina." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2008): pp.290 – 316.

³⁸ Leonas Tolvaissis, "Hungarian Cultural Autonomy in Vojvodina from the 1974 Socialist Constitution to the 2009 Statute of Autonomy: Path Dependence Dynamics against the Reversal of Minority Policies". *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2012): pp.63 – 83.

focus of research offers significant information about its history, culture, demographics, diversity and other elements that affect regional identity building and strength.

Chapter 3 – Vojvodina

Many reasons exist that qualify Vojvodina as an interesting place for research and as a topic where several questions still remain unanswered. Its specific character lies in its historical, cultural, economic and political features. From the historical perspective, since the 16th century Vojvodina experienced the rule of several different administrations: Hungarian, Habsburg, Ottoman, Yugoslav and Serbian, all of which left their specificities to the territory and contributed to the ever changing composition of the region's population. Even the architecture in the province differs from the rest of the country.

From the demographic perspective, it is its ethnic diversity and constant population shifts that distinguish the province from the rest of Serbia, but also from the neighboring territories. As far as religion is concerned, Vojvodina is home to a diverse population that adheres to Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Protestantism and several other confessional groups. Hence, cultural and ethnic pluralism, along with the changing political conditions and the population structure, contributed to the emergence of the specific regional identity of Vojvodinians. Furthermore, these socio-historical factors made it possible for regional identity to become an important type of identification of Vojvodinians, competitive to national, ethnic and religious identifications.

3.1. Demographics of Vojvodina

Various features of Vojvodina depict its unique character and its demographic composition is certainly one of them. Over the years, its ethnic and religious components have constantly been changing as a consequence of multiple wars, frequent migrations of the people, changes in state and provincial borders, various economic changes, urbanization and

industrialization.³⁹ These events have eventually resulted in an ethnically diverse population in Vojvodina that we know today. During the colonization periods of 18th and 19th century, the region's territory was inhabited by a population that consisted of, but not limited to, Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks, Czechs, Ruthenians, Croats, Bulgarians, Armenians, Poles, Italians, French and Spaniards.⁴⁰ An important event in the history of the province was the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (*Ausgleich*), which transferred Vojvodina to the Hungarian administration, which naturally resulted in the demographic changes in the region. To be exact, the percentage of the Hungarian population increased drastically. The period of the Austro-Hungarian rule is still emphasized by the proponents of the Vojvodinian identity as one of the main historical events that distinguish Vojvodina as a specific region in the country.

Nevertheless, as significant as the above mentioned developments were, the changes have never been felt more than in the twentieth century. Particularly difficult consequences can be related to the Second World War. Firstly, in the aftermath of the war the German population was largely expelled from the whole territory of Yugoslavia, and their settlements were subsequently inhabited by the Yugoslav population. Second, the percentage of Hungarians increased, partly as a consequence of the conversion of some 15,000 Germans. Jews virtually disappeared from Vojvodina and Serbs, who have never been an absolute ethnic majority in the region, became one after the wars.⁴¹

It is important to highlight that some of the issues that emerged as a consequence of the Second World War have not been fully resolved to this very day. To be precise, the mentioned issues are the property restitution of the populations that were expelled from Vojvodina as well as conflicting memories of that period. These are very complex topics

³⁹ Sasa Kicosev and Drago Njegovan, Development of the Ethnic and Religious Structure of Vojvodina [Razvoj etnicke i verske strukture Vojvodine], IK Prometej , 2010. p.6

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.16

⁴¹ Ibid. p.23

which have in recent times spurred many debates and also resulted in the last year's adoption of the Law on Restitution⁴². What they also suggest are inconsistencies in the discourse of the political and public actors who emphasize the values of cultural diversity while at the same time neglecting the effects of these very important events in the Vojvodinian history that have to some extent influenced the nature of the interethnic relationship of the Vojvodinians.

Furthermore, the two wars disturbed the national balance of the region and brought changes to the demographic structure of Vojvodina that existed for nearly two centuries and that consisted of almost even distribution of German, Hungarian and Serb population and several smaller ethnic groups.⁴³ Also, the postwar period is characterized by a population growth of almost all ethnic groups. Change happened during the Yugoslav wars of the '90s, which brought large numbers of Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while a number of national minorities left Vojvodina along with some of the Serb families who resided in the region since its foundation.⁴⁴ Sasa Kicosev points to the fact that in 1991 Vojvodina was populated by 54.6% autochthonous inhabitants (born in the province) and 45.4% immigrants.⁴⁵

As far as the current situation in Vojvodina is concerned, the demographic image resembles to some extent the one from the '90s. There have been two population censuses in Serbia in the current century, one in 2002 and the other one in 2011. Detailed information from the latest census, such as ethnic and religious belonging of the population, have still not

⁴² The passing of the Law on Restitution was controversial itself and it was the topic of several disputes between the Serbian government and the political leaders of the Hungarian minority. The text of the Law on Restitution in the original language can be found here: <http://www.restitucija.gov.rs/> and more information about its adoption and debates here: <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/serbia-hungary-wwii.d1b> , http://articles.boston.com/2011-09-26/news/30204997_1_restitution-law-serbia-restitution-bill

⁴³ Dragomir Jankov, "Serbia Can Get More from a Rich and Autonomous Vojvodina than it Drains from this Subdued and Poor One" [Srbija može više da dobije od bogate autonomne Vojvodine nego što cedi od ove podređene i siromašne] in Nadezda Radovic *Vojvodina – Dreams and Conflicts [Vojvodina – snovi i konflikti]*, VANU, 2007. pp.19-23,

⁴⁴ Sasa Kicosev and Drago Njegovan, *Development of the Ethnic and Religious Structure of Vojvodina [Razvoj etničke i verske strukture Vojvodine]*, IK Prometej , 2010. p.26

⁴⁵ Sasa Kicosev, quoted in Momcilo Subotic, *Serbian Vojvodina and its Minorities: historical-political Study [Srpska Vojvodina i njene manjine: istorijsko-politikoloska studija]*, Institut za političke studije Beograd, 2011. p.86

been published, but one does find the total number of the population of Vojvodina (1,916,889 persons) and Serbia (7,120,666 persons).⁴⁶ The 2002 population census showed that out of 2,031,992 inhabitants of Vojvodina nearly two thirds declared themselves as Serbs (1,321,807 persons) and the rest of the population belonged to national minorities.⁴⁷ The largest minority group was, and still is, Hungarians (14.28%), then Slovaks (2.79%), Croats (2.78%), Montenegrins (1.75%), Romanians (1.5%), Roma (1.43%) and other minorities that consisted less than 1% of the declared inhabitants.⁴⁸ These data show that Vojvodina has always been an area of migrations, which makes the region quite specific. At the same time, the region had elements to become both a fertile ground for peaceful cooperation and tolerance, but also for discrimination and ethnic frictions.

However, all factors and developments considered, Vojvodina's history is mostly a story of successful coexistence of different ethnic groups, or at the very least the inexistence of serious problems between them. Hence, Pavel Domonji cherishes Vojvodina's national heterogeneity and dispersion, multilingualism in the region and bilingualism of the people and emphasizes them as the main characteristics of the province.⁴⁹ He also says that the mutual exchange of cultural programs best illustrates the fact that it is through arts and cultural life that interethnic bonds and relationships are strengthened.

Moreover, educational system is another important tool for the strengthening of all ethnic groups in the region. To be precise, all ethnic communities can be educated in their mother tongue in Vojvodina's schools and where this is not possible due to population dispersion and insufficient numbers of students, courses of native languages with elements of

⁴⁶ Republic of Serbia – Republican Bureau of Statistics, 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia – FIRST RESULTS [Republika Srbija – Republički zavod za statistiku, Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u Republici Srbiji 2011 – PRVI REZULTATI] <http://media.popis2011.stat.rs/2012/DBR%2032272%20-%20Population%20Dashboard%20v16.swf> accessed on 29 Apr 2012

⁴⁷ Sasa Kicosev and Drago Njegovan, Development of the Ethnic and Religious Structure of Vojvodina [Razvoj etnicke i verske structure Vojvodine]. IK Prometej, 2010. p.8

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Pavel Domonji, "Identity in Practice [Identitet u praksi]" in. Borislav Djurovic (ed.) Autonomy of Vojvodina [Autonomija Vojvodine]. Beogradski forum za svet ravnopravnih, 2004 p.67

national cultures are organized.⁵⁰ In this respect Vojvodina is a very advanced region of Serbia, and the data can verify this. Namely, on the whole territory of Serbia excluding Vojvodina, only two municipalities exist with a complete education on the languages of national minorities on the primary school level. Conversely, more than thirty municipalities in Vojvodina offer school education in the mother tongues of national minorities and in case of Hungarians, who are the largest minority in the region, this is true for about 79% of primary schools and 67% of high schools.⁵¹ In this respect, it should also be mentioned that the official languages in Vojvodina are Serbian, Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian and Croatian.⁵²

Even though the province is linguistically rich, Serbian remains the language in dominant use in Vojvodina, spoken by a great majority of the people. In the research that was conducted in 2006, results showed that Vojvodinians whose native language is not Serbian, use it almost always while communicating with their colleagues (58.6%), neighbors (47.6%), spouse (47.6%), children (43.8%), friends (42.6%), parents (38.3%) and family (36.8%).⁵³ The researchers concluded that native languages which are not Serbian are preserved mostly within older generations, while younger generations generally use their non-Serbian mother tongues in communication with parents and close relatives.

This research also analyzed how often and in which circumstances are minority languages used by those whose native language is Serbian, and produced the following results. Those who speak any of the numerous minority languages in Vojvodina, typically use it in communication with friends (21.3%), neighbors (20%), spouse (18.9%) and children

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.68

⁵¹ Vladimir Ilic, "Incoherent Foreign Policy [Nekoherentna spoljna politika]" in Pavel Domonji (ed.) Vojvodinian Identity [Vojvodjanski Identitet]. The Library of the Helsinki Notebook, No. 24 [Biblioteka Helsinske Sveske, Br. 24]. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia [Helsinki odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji], 2006. p.113

⁵² Kosta Cavoski, "Vojvodina – State of National Minorities [Vojvodina – drzava nacionalnih manjina]" in Borislav Djurovic (ed.) Autonomy of Vojvodina [Autonomija Vojvodine], Beogradski forum za svet ravnopravnih, 2004. p.55

⁵³ Marko Skoric, Valentina Sokolovska and Zolt Lazar, Tradition, Language, Identity – [Tradicija, Jezik, Identitet], Filozofski fakultet Novi Sad, Odsek za sociologiju, 2008. p.34

(18.3%).⁵⁴ In terms of respect for minority rights, language and other rights of different ethnic groups, Vojvodina can be seen as a successful multiethnic model of living in Serbia. Still, improvements should be made in the actual implementation of the rights guaranteed by the law and Constitution, and one such example is encouraging the use of minority languages in everyday life because the data of the abovementioned research show a tendency of assimilation of the minorities, rather than multiculturalism.

One other important feature of Vojvodina's demography is its age structure. In fact, it is Vojvodina's main demographic problem because of insufficient population growth and ever increasing numbers of older people in comparison to young ones. This tendency is not specific only to Vojvodina, since the whole country is characterized by an old population. Vojvodina has had a negative population growth since 1980's and this is a trend that continues to this day.⁵⁵ Data show that in 2002 young people (age 0-19) in Vojvodina constituted only 22.7% of the province's population, while young middle-aged population (age 20-39) made up 27%, old middle-aged population (age 40-59) comprised 28.8% and old population (age 60 and more) was 21.5% of overall Vojvodinians.⁵⁶ In recent years, emigration characterizes the province more than immigration, which naturally results in the previously mentioned demographic changes. While the decrease in the population size of Vojvodina is a continual and persistent demographic issue, one should also point to the fact that it is not symptomatic only of Vojvodina, but of Serbia as a whole. Namely, according to the Republican Bureau of Statistics of Serbia, people who are 15 or younger compose only

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.33

⁵⁵ Sasa Kicosev, "Demographic Aspect of Vojvodinian Identity [Demografski aspekt vojvodjanskog identiteta]" in Pavel Domonji (ed.) *Vojvodinian Identity [Vojvodjanski Identitet]*. The Library of the Helsinki Notebook, No. 24 [Biblioteka Helsinske Sveske, Br. 24]. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia [Helsinki odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji], 2006. p.19

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.21

15% of the overall population of Serbia, while the percentage of the population older than 65 years is 17%.⁵⁷

3.2. Political Status of Vojvodina and Regionalization

The current political status of Vojvodina defines it as an autonomous province, whose multiethnic character is supported by the promotion of minority rights and interethnic cooperation. Vojvodina has its own government and assembly, whose functions are regulated by the constitution of the Republic of Serbia and statute of Vojvodina, which is the highest legal document of the province. While Vojvodina does not have its military, police, central bank or currency, it does have a recently opened regional office in Brussels, Vojvodinian Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Council of National Minorities that was formed within the Assembly of Vojvodina in 2010.⁵⁸

According to the Plan for regionalization of Serbia, by 2020 the country should be divided into seven regions, one of which is Vojvodina. In addition to other statistical and strategic reasons, regionalization is performed in order to facilitate the allocation of funds and donations from the EU.⁵⁹ Also, modern regions are a European tendency that is closely associated with the idea of the ‘Europe of the regions’. While regionalization has been successfully performed in Vojvodina, one cannot claim that it has been a process without difficulties so far. Namely, Serbia’s democratic transition has not been an easy development and along with the long period of economic crisis, it aggravated the consolidation process. Consequently regionalization, here understood as a (vertically and horizontally) carefully balanced division of power and not as a division of territory into administrative units, could

⁵⁷ “Serbia is Ageing, Prognosis is Equally Worrisome on the Global Level [Srbija stari, zabrinjavajuće i prognoze na globalnom nivou], *Tanjug/Press Online*, 07 Apr 2012, accessed on 19 May 2012 http://www.pressonline.rs/sr/vesti/vesti_dana/story/213450/Srbija+stari,+zabrinjavaju%C4%87e+i+prognoze+na+globalnom+nivou.html

⁵⁸ Momcilo Subotic, *Serbian Vojvodina and its Minorities: historical-political Study [Srpska Vojvodina i njene manjine: istorijsko-politikoloska studija]*, Institut za politicke studije Beograd, 2011. p.102

⁵⁹ Ibid p.106

not have been an easy process either.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it is a necessary step that will in due course make possible the European future of Vojvodina and Serbia as a whole.

Vojvodina is a specific case of regionalization also due to its pronounced cultural pluralism. Namely, regionalism and multiculturalism are often seen in a close mutual relationship in the context of transition. Milan Tripkovic et al. point to the fact that although there are many multicultural societies (in the sense that many cultures exist in them), not all of them strive to achieve multiculturalization.⁶¹ In Vojvodina many efforts have been made in order to promote the cultural richness of the province so one could infer that it is not only a multicultural society, but also one that is on a good path to accomplish multiculturalization.

As it was previously emphasized, regionalization is about the spatial and functional restructuring of the state and society and about optimal division of power and responsibilities. This task is not always effortlessly done and complications may arise when many parties with different standpoints are involved in the regionalization process, as is the case in Vojvodina. In addition, the political status of Vojvodina changed several times during the course of its existence and some of the rights that were revoked from the province have been slow to restore. In relation to these developments, the economic growth of the region was throughout history repeatedly hindered, which also fairly aggravated the regionalization process.⁶² However, the latest data show that economically Vojvodina has been doing well and that it contributes as much as 35% of GDP, although it constitutes only a quarter of the overall population of Serbia.⁶³ This is precisely the reason for the extreme proponents of increased levels of Vojvodina's autonomy to be unsatisfied with the region's current political status and this topic shall be the focus of the next chapter of the thesis.

⁶⁰ Milan Tripkovic (ed.), Multicultural Vojvodina in European Integrations [Multikulturalna Vojvodina u evropskim integracijama], Filozofski fakultet Novi Sad, Odsek za sociologiju, 2006. p.17

⁶¹ Milan Tripkovic, Ljubinko Pusic and Srdjan Sljukic Crossroads of Serbia [Raskrsca Srbije], Filozofski fakultet Novi Sad, Odsek za sociologiju, 2007. p.65

⁶² Ibid. p.62

⁶³ Momcilo Subotic, Serbian Vojvodina and its Minorities: historical-political Study [Srpska Vojvodina i njene manjine: istorijsko-politikoloska studija], Institut za politicke studije Beograd, 2011. p.68

3.3. Vojvodinian Regional Identity Today

Many important features of regional identity have been put forward so far, and the fact that it provides people with a form of a common non-national and non-ethnic identification is quite relevant for the Vojvodinian case study. Namely, in an area of migrations inhabited by more than 25 different ethnic groups, a common identity does provide certain assurance that ethnic frictions would not be common and that at the very least peaceful ethnic existence will remain, which really is the case in Vojvodina. Moreover, if cultural and ethnic pluralism are taken into consideration along with the historical circumstances, it is not impossible to imagine that Vojvodinians would have many different identities. The purpose of this thesis is not to establish a hierarchy of these identities, but rather to examine if Vojvodinian regional identity exists today and how important it is for the people from the region.

Aside from the physical, social and geographic integral elements of every region, the identity of each individual or a group that inhabit the region and consider themselves as a part of this geographic entity also constitute the region. According to Sabic and Pavlovic, every individual and group residing in a certain territory are the source of consciousness about belonging to this particular territory, or in other words they are the founders of the feeling of regional identity.⁶⁴ Hence, they conclude, individuality of a geographic region is affirmed by merging the geographic criteria and socio-psychological attitudes of the region's population about its regional identity.

Also, as a determinant of cultural identification in the literature of sociology and culture, regional identity is often interpreted as a “dam” to separatism, irredentism, nationalism and chauvinism due to its unique system of values.⁶⁵ Interestingly, among some

⁶⁴ Dejan Sabic and Mila Pavlovic, “Regional Consciousness and the Regional Identity [Regionalna svest i regionalni identitet]”, *Zbornik naucnih radova*, vol.LV, 2007. pp.151-158

⁶⁵ Ibid. p.152

ethnic groups living in the Balkans regional identity arises as a reaction to the Europeanization of society or other similar developments. In Vojvodina, on the other hand, the prominence of regional identity largely depends on the context in which it appears. For example, it is particularly strong in the political discourse, in which it is often used to point to the commonalities of all ethnic groups that live in Vojvodina, sometimes in opposition to the rest of Serbia. In such a context regional identity is used as quite a political tool that represents a point of distinction rather than a common point of reference. Vojvodinian identity can, thus, be considered to have a dual role from this perspective, due to its ability to be both an integrative and disintegrative element.

Literature on the Vojvodinian regional identity is diverse, but it can essentially be sorted into two groups. To be exact, one group of authors believes that it is virtually impossible to talk about regional identity in Vojvodina, since the growth of its population has throughout history been largely dependent on migrations, and as such the province does not consist of citizens who are aware of their regional belonging. What these authors are implying is that inhabitants of such a region have already been relating to some other territorial units in the past, or have not been relating to any territory at all, due to recurrent migrations. One such scholar is a well-known demographer, Sasa Kicosev, who does not think that one can plausibly speak of existence of a Vojvodinian identity today.⁶⁶

Additionally, in their historical review of the Vojvodinian autonomy Cedomir and Jelena Popov mention a couple more disintegration factors which, according to them, negate the possibility for the existence of a unique Vojvodinian identity. To be exact, although the different ethnic and national groups of Vojvodina have cohabited throughout history, their differing national identifications based on language, culture, ethnicity and religion led to disagreements and occasional conflicts, which eventually disrupted the building of a common

⁶⁶ Sasa Kicosev, quoted in Momcilo Subotic, Serbian Vojvodina and its Minorities: historical-political Study [Srpska Vojvodina i njene manjine: istorijsko-politikoloska studija], Institut za politicke studije Beograd, 2011. p.86

Vojvodinian regional feeling.⁶⁷ Moreover, even though Vojvodina had a long tradition as agrarian community resistant to centralizing forces, the authors maintain that a long absence of administrative, territorial and legal integration of the region, which lasted until 1945, had irreversible effect on the regional identity building.

It is in historical, economic and social specificities of Vojvodina that the authors who negate the existence of its regional identity find the arguments for their assertions. Nevertheless, there are always two sides to one coin, meaning that there is also a group of authors who base their counterarguments to the previously mentioned hypothesis in a similar vein. Namely, the other group of authors firmly asserts the existence of Vojvodinian identity based on its historical heritage, shared values of its inhabitants, ethnic tolerance and multiculturalism. The former president of the assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Bojan Kostres, goes one step further, stating that being Vojvodinian is a state of mind. He defines Vojvodinians not as a nation, but as people who live in Vojvodina, who accept diversity and live with it, considering this feature of their environment as the highest of all values.

Moreover, Vojvodinians are people who can adhere to any religion or nation, regardless of their origin and of the moment when they came to live in Vojvodina.⁶⁸ From this perspective, encouraging Vojvodinian identity can bring Serbia as a whole closer to Europe, and assist the whole country in becoming modern according to the contemporary European standards. Sonja Biserko adds that it is important to cherish the Vojvodinian identity because of its integrative potential that widens the space for ethnic tolerance and

⁶⁷ Cedomir Popov and Jelena Popov, The Autonomy of Vojvodina – Serbian Question [Autonomija Vojvodine – Srpsko pitanje], Krovovi, 2000. p.10

⁶⁸ Bojan Kostres, “Vojvodinian is a State of Mind [Vojvodjanin je stanje duha]” in Pavel Domonji (ed.) Vojvodinian Identity [Vojvodjanski Identitet], The Library of the Helsinki Notebook, No. 24 [Biblioteka Helsinske Sveske, Br. 24], Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia [Helsinki odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji], 2006. p.9

because it allows for each citizen of the province to nurture his or her particular ethnic identity under the wing of a territorially based identity.⁶⁹

According to Zolt Lazar and Dusan Marinkovic, Vojvodinian regional identity obtained saliency especially since the second half of the 18th century.⁷⁰ Namely, throughout a long history, a specific framework for coexistence of different peoples and cultures was formed, gradually gaining all the qualities of a specific, regional identity with discernible attributes. One of the main characteristics emphasized by the proponents of Vojvodinian regional identity is common values. Namely, they claim that aside from being a territorially based identification, Vojvodinian identity can also be defined through the universal values shared by the people from the province. In a survey from the fall of 2006, Zolt Lazar et al. asked the Vojvodinians to state which values carry the most significance for them.

The results were the following:⁷¹

VALUES	PERCENTAGE (%)
Love	31.9
Peace	23.1
Freedom	14.7
God	10.3
Justice	8.9
Material wealth	8.3
Work	2.8

69 Sonja Biserko, "The Anticipation of a European Future [Anticipacija Evropske Buducnosti] in Pavel Domonji (ed.) Vojvodinian Identity [Vojvodjanski Identitet]. The Library of the Helsinki Notebook, No. 24 [Biblioteka Helsinske Sveske, Br. 24]. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia [Helsinki odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji], 2006. pp.11-12

⁷⁰ Zolt Lazar and Dusan Marinkovic, "Regional, Local and Global Identity of Vojvodinians [Regionalni, lokalni i globalni identitet Vojvodjana]", Filozofski Fakultet Novi Sad, *Sociologija*, Vol.XLV, No. 2, 2003. p.156

⁷¹ Marko Skoric, Valentina Sokolovska and Zolt Lazar, Tradition, Language, Identity – [Tradicija, Jezik, Identitet], Filozofski fakultet Novi Sad, Odsek za sociologiju, 2008. p.111

Admittedly, it is hard to find comparable data to other regions of Serbia in this context which would make it possible to evaluate the veracity of the claim of ‘universal Vojvodinian values’. Also, the values that have been pointed out in the research are quite universal in general and could be emphasized as common for many different populations. Hence, such a claim could also be seen as simply a wish to distinguish this particular population from the ‘rest’, who do not live in Vojvodina.

As far as the territorial belonging of Vojvodinians is concerned, the same survey showed that most Vojvodinians identify themselves primarily with the place (town, city or village) that they come from and that Vojvodina comes second. Larger territorial units (Serbia, the Balkans and Europe respectively) carry attachment of a less significant degree. Furthermore, most Vojvodinians perceive the region as a home to all the people who reside on its territory (37%) or a province of the Serbian population and national minorities (35.8%). Almost 22% of Vojvodinians consider it as a province of different ethnic groups and peoples while 4.6% adhere to the nationalist model, stating that Vojvodina is a region of the Serbian population.⁷² Hence, these findings show that Vojvodinians are largely people who opt for a multicultural view of the region. They also correspond to the 2002 survey of Milan Tripkovic et al. which showed that 65.5% of Vojvodinians accept and acknowledges the reality of multiculturalism and that nearly 2/3 realizes that this feature of the province should be expressed through the organization of the state.⁷³

While it is evident that universal view on the topic of regional identity in Vojvodina does not exist, it should be mentioned that opinions tend to correspond to the political realities of different ethnic groups. One such example is the following statement of Antal Boz6ki, the president of ‘Argus’ (Civil Society of Hungarians in Vojvodina for the Rights of Minorities): “The hypothesis that all of us are Vojvodinians is sustainable only if that does

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Milan Tripkovic, Ljubinko Pusic and Srdjan Sljukic Crossroads of Serbia [Raskrsca Srbije], Filozofski fakultet Novi Sad, Odsek za sociologiju, 2007. p.70

not mean denying to national minorities their national and ethnic belonging, their cultures or individual and collective rights.”⁷⁴ This statement is not to be taken as the collective view of all minorities or the majority population of Vojvodina, but it does indicate that regional identity is in certain contexts accepted only given that it does not interfere with other forms of identification of the people or with the rights that belong to the different ethnic groups in the province.

One also comes across opinions of scholars such as Momcilo Subotic, who openly criticizes the support for Vojvodinian regional identity and thinks of it as an artificial creation with a clear purpose to extend the political authority of the province. Such comments mostly originate in the framework of a centralized state organization and represent a rather biased point of view. Subotic also asserts that only Serbs will accept such an identity, and possibly substitute their ethnic identity with the regional one, but that this will not be the case with Hungarians, Croats, Slovaks or any other national minority in the province.⁷⁵ Such a view is quite radical and essentially conveys the unwillingness for the decentralization of the country. It is also harshly criticized by the advocates of Vojvodinian identity who emphasize the many positive aspects of its further strengthening and dispersion.⁷⁶

The use of different social identifications for political purposes can be and often is the topic of heated debates. As was shown in the previous paragraphs, such is also the case with regional identity. Although preconditions for the emergence of Vojvodinian identity do exist, its specific features are at times exaggerated by its supporters and minimized by its

⁷⁴ Antal Bozoki, quoted in Momcilo Subotic, Serbian Vojvodina and its Minorities: historical-political Study [Srpska Vojvodina i njene manjine: istorijsko-politikoloska studija], Institut za politicke studije Beograd, 2011. p.76 The quotation in original language: “Teza da smo svi mi Vojvodjani odrziva je samo ako to ne znaci odricanje od nacionalne i etnicke pripadnosti, svoje kulture, kao ni individualnog i kolektivnog prava koja pripadaju nacionalnim zajednicama.”

⁷⁵ Momcilo Subotic, Serbian Vojvodina and its Minorities: historical-political Study [Srpska Vojvodina i njene manjine: istorijsko-politikoloska studija], Institut za politicke studije Beograd, 2011. p.70

⁷⁶ Sonja Biserko, “The Anticipation of a European Future [Anticipacija Evropske Buducnosti] in Pavel Domonji (ed.) Vojvodinian Identity [Vojvodjanski Identitet]. The Library of the Helsinki Notebook, No. 24 [Biblioteka Helsinske Sveske, Br. 24]. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia [Helsinki odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji], 2006. p.11

opponents. These features refer to the multiethnic composition, historical traditions, cultural and religious pluralism and relatively shared system of values, which are largely the consequence of similar living conditions and historical circumstances in the region.

Ideally, Vojvodinians of different religious, ethnic and national belonging should perceive their regional identity as a general framework for preservation and manifestation of cultural specificities, although different groups in the province have kept some level of homogeneity insisting on their ethnic identity.⁷⁷ While it is true that feeling of regional belonging should not be seen as a danger to other forms of social identities, the fact is that the motives behind its continual reproduction in the media and political discourse are at times murky, thus hindering the image of regional identity as a framework that allows for tolerance, peaceful coexistence and economic prosperity. Such a framework of regional identity is especially valuable for Vojvodina, which due to the rule of several different empires throughout history and recurring migrations has become home to a multitude of different ethnic and national groups and as such can only benefit from a common identity.

3.4. Influential Actors in the Regional Identity Building

That identity is being “built” is not an unprecedented remark. In fact, probably the most detailed analyses in the identity studies concern its origin and formation. So to say that regional identity is also being built basically means that in this respect it is similar to other forms of social and group identities. However, what it does not mean is that it can emerge where social, historical and cultural preconditions for its construction do not exist. It has already been indicated that such conditions did exist in Vojvodina, but what still remains to be analyzed is how big of a role political leaders, NGOs and other important actors have in the creation of Vojvodinian identity.

⁷⁷ Vladimir Ilic and Slobodan Cvejic, Nationalism in Vojvodina [Nacionalizam u Vojvodini]. Gradska biblioteka Zarko Zrenjanin, 1997. p.56

In this respect I will now look into the 2011 campaign “I am Vojvodinian – I am what I am” that appeared during the population census in Serbia. As was previously mentioned, creator of the campaign is an NGO, the League of Social Equality, whose members are mostly young Vojvodinians. The campaign was mainly managed via social networks and the NGO still continues to be very active in this domain. Although no political party officially confirmed its role in this campaign, the message of decentralization of the state and strengthening of regional identity that the campaign was sending was not refuted by several Vojvodinian political parties that seek to achieve these goals. One such example is the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV), which negated to have any connections with the campaign, although it did not have anything against the message that it was sending.⁷⁸

The message of the billboards was as follows: “You have the right to be who you are! On the forthcoming population census citizens will also answer the question about their national belonging. Many of them do not know that they have the right to declare themselves as Vojvodinians. It is important that you know: national belonging is a matter of your sentiment!”⁷⁹ Although regional identity as territorial and non-national identification is quite valuable to the populations of the region and by itself should be encouraged, this campaign did not exactly target these aspects. Actually, Vojvodinian identity was put forward as a form of national identity, giving a whole new and different meaning to regional identity.

Consequently, this provoked many debates and clashes of opinions predominantly in central Serbia, causing outrage and indignation of the center-based nationalist parties who were most revolted by the idea of a separate, national identity of Vojvodinians. Probably the

⁷⁸ Miroljub Mijuskovic, “Official of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina Paid for the Billboards ‘I am Vojvodinian’ [Funkcioner LSV platio bilborde ‘Ja sam Vojvodjanin’]”, *Politika Online*, 22 Oct 2011 http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Politika/Funkcioner-LSV-platio-bilborde-Ja-sam-Vojvodjanin_ka.lt.html accessed on 5 May 2012

⁷⁹ The quotation in the original language: “Imaš pravo da budeš to što jesi! Na predstojećem Popisu stanovništva građani i građanke odgovaraće i na pitanje o svojoj nacionalnoj opredeljenosti. Mnogi ne znaju da imaju pravo da se izjasne kao Vojvodjani. Važno je da znaš: Nacionalna pripadnost je stvar tvog osećanja!”

most explicit in their resentment was the far right nationalist party, Serbian Radical Party, which saw the campaign as an attempt to create a new nation following the model of Montenegro where the number of the majority population decreased in favor of those who declared themselves as Montenegrins in a national sense. The vice-president of this political party, Milorad Mircic, publicly criticized the authors of this campaign of using regional belonging as a tool for the manipulation of citizens and added that it will most probably only be effective among the Serbs who are not nationally firmly decided because this new form of national belonging could offer them a new perspective.⁸⁰ This stream of thought also conveys that Vojvodinian identity would not be welcomed so much by the minority groups, as much as it would by the previously mentioned part of the majority population. The extremely negative reaction of the nationalist party to the idea of Vojvodinian identity does not come as a surprise if its traditionally centralist political orientation is taken into consideration. Regional identity is closely connected to decentralization and division of power, steps that this party would certainly not take willingly.

A complete opposite to this point of view comes from the different NGOs, whose role in the Vojvodinian identity building is considerable. A research conducted in 2011 by the NGO ‘Civic Initiatives’ about the current situation in the sector for the organization of civil society showed that approximately 15,600 NGOs exist in Serbia, most of which are registered in Vojvodina (37%).⁸¹ Results of this survey also showed that the relationship of the state towards the civil society is either characterized as lack of interest or somewhat positive attitude towards NGOs. Also, while most of them consider the cooperation with the state as average, relationship with local governments are given the highest grades.⁸² It is clear that in

⁸⁰ Dejan Stojicic, “Are You Vojvodinian? [Da li ste Vojvodjanin/ka?]” *Radio 021*, 3 Oct 2011 <http://www.021.rs/Novi-Sad/Vesti/Da-li-ste-Vojvodjanin-ka.html> accessed on 5 May 2012

⁸¹ “Results of a Big Research of NGOs in Serbia [Rezultati velikog istrazivanja o NVO u Srbiji]”, *Gradjanske Inicijative*, 1 Nov 2011 <http://www.gradjanske.org/page/news/sr.html?view=story&id=4228§ionId=1> accessed on 6 May 2012

⁸² Ibid.

order to maintain a productive civil society sector and thus a ‘healthy’ society that aspires to protect its values and identity more effort should be made to improve relationships with both the central and local governments. As concluded by Ana Devic, only a comprehensive cooperation with the authorities can yield relevant results in the field, or in other words the desired goals of multiculturalism and interethnic collaboration.⁸³

In addition, the impact of NGOs is multifaceted, because they have the ability to influence both the governments and the people. Although we have previously seen that the interaction with the governments is not always successful, it is important that it does exist and that it has the potential to grow. In the words of Aleksandar Popov, the director of the Center for Regionalism, “Nongovernmental organizations are, in a way, minefield cleaners because they clean the leftovers of politicians, generals and journalists. What is left behind is a contaminated terrain which needs to be cleansed and nongovernmental organizations are the first to begin the cleaning of the terrain, facilitating the subsequent work of politicians.”⁸⁴ Mr. Popov’s point of view is undoubtedly somewhat subjective, especially having in mind that he is one of the leading Vojvodinian NGO members. Nonetheless, it does depict the importance of active engagement of NGOs in organizing conferences, disseminating the ideas that will positively affect the society, in mediating discourse with the governments and media, and it also points to the possible positive consequences of such activities.

Residents of Vojvodina are important actors in the regional identity building as well, especially if this process is viewed through its discursive elements. To be precise, if a receptive audience for the Vojvodinian identity discourse did not exist in the province, the discourse would not be very fertile. In this context Devic has shown with her study of the

⁸³ Ana Devic “Guarding and Guiding Regionalism and Interculturalism: Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations in Vojvodina”, *Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Muabet project*, 2003. http://www.watsoninstitute.org/muabet/other_products.html p.17

⁸⁴ Aleksandar Popov “The Role of the Nongovernmental Organizations in the Process of Regional Cooperation [Uloga nevladinih organizacija u procesima regionalne saradnje]” in Pavel Domonji (ed.) *The Multiethnic Identity of Vojvodina: The Challenges of 2007-08 [Multietnicki identitet Vojvodine: izazovi u 2007-08.]* Biblioteka Helsinske sveske No. 27, Helsinski odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, , 2008. pp.25-26

regionalist politics and multiethnicity in Vojvodina that a strong regional identity and dedication to a multi or inter-ethnic ethos on the part of Vojvodina's residents undeniably exists.⁸⁵ She also acknowledges the fact that stereotyping and prejudice among the different ethnic groups in Vojvodina have not been uncommon in the previous decades, though she does not consider the Vojvodinian population responsible for such a development. It is rather the committees of the nationalist parties in central Serbia and their opponents in Vojvodina which are accountable for mismanaging the multiethnic and regional identity aspirations of the Vojvodinians and as a result causing infringements to the multiculturalist tradition of the province.⁸⁶ However, while it is true that the frictions between different political actors do not send a positive image to the population of Vojvodina, multiculturalism of the region does not depend solely on that. The people in the province have an equally important role in maintaining and strengthening regional identity.

Moreover, prominence of the regional identity talks in different forums, social networks and similar mediums of information exchange⁸⁷ does assert the fact that the people themselves play a significant role in its strengthening and diffusion and that a multitude of Vojvodinians consider this topic important. This by all means does not indicate that universal opinion on regional identity exists among the people. On the contrary, debates that can be followed on different websites are mostly intense and often divide people into two opposing groups. The situation is the same in case of the readers' comments to the articles in the online newspapers on the topics of Vojvodinian regional identity and autonomy. What it does mean,

⁸⁵ Ana Devic "Nationalism, Regional Multiculturalism and Democracy in the Province of Vojvodina, Serbia's 'Multiethnic Haven'", *Center for European Integration, SEE 2, 2002*. p.65

⁸⁶ Ana Devic "Guarding and Guiding Regionalism and Interculturalism: Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations in Vojvodina", *Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Muabet project*, 2003. http://www.watsoninstitute.org/muabet/other_products.html p.3

⁸⁷ Examples of such websites and other mediums of communication are: Slobodna Vojvodina www.slobodnavojvodina.org Autonomija www.autonomija.info VojvodinaCafe <http://www.vojvodinacafe.rs/forum/> B92 Vojvodina forum <http://forum.b92.net/topic/68756-nezavisna-vojvodina-vreme-je/page-st-1500> Forum Aladin <http://forum.aladin.info/topic/3356-slobodna-vojvodina/> Forum of Serbian Nationalists <http://forum.srpskinacionalisti.com/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=12458&p=184502> Forum Krstarica <http://forum.krstarica.com/forumdisplay.php/325-Vojvodina>

however, is that a receptive audience for the regional identity discourse exists and that a considerable number of people in Vojvodina have the feeling of regional attachment, which implies that such an identity truly can in a sense compete with other social identifications.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the previous paragraphs is that regional identity building is a more complex process than the constructivist approach suggests. Namely, although the political elites play a significant role in its creation, other leaders of opinion, such as NGOs and the media, along with the peoples of the region, also actively participate in the process of the Vojvodinian identity building. Hence, it is not wrong to assume that this process is as much a process “from below” as it is “top-down”.

Chapter 4 - Political Implications: Vojvodina's Autonomy

While the cultural and sociological aspects of regional identity certainly represent its core elements, it is also important to take into consideration the political implications of Vojvodinian identity. What has often times been a topic of heated debates surrounding the regional identity discourse is the level of the province's autonomy. This chapter will discuss the changes in the political status of the province and cite the important legal documents that defined the transformations of Vojvodina in the legal and political sense. Moreover, opposing views on the topic will be presented, pointing to the fact that virtually no neutral opinions exist in subjects related to the state's sovereignty and division of power.

4.1. The Short History of Vojvodina's Autonomy

The topic of autonomy is surely not a new one for Vojvodina. In fact, its recent history is imbued with frequent disagreements and contention of political leaders related to this particular topic. Several legal documents can be distinguished as crucial in the development and change in the political status of Vojvodina and these include mainly constitutions. Precisely, it was the 1946 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that established Vojvodina as an autonomous province with its own Statute and certain administrative and legal powers as well as broad jurisdiction in the economic, financial, judicial, health, educational and culture matters and in the matters of national equality.⁸⁸

Furthermore, the Constitution from 1963 did not substantially change the political situation in Vojvodina, but the plenary session at Brioni in Croatia in 1966, and the amendments made to the Constitution in 1967 and a year after certainly did do so. Specifically, the autonomous provinces in Serbia aspired to gain the same treatment as the constitutive republics of Yugoslavia and to become a permanent element of the Yugoslav

⁸⁸ Cedomir Popov and Jelena Popov, The Autonomy of Vojvodina – Serbian Question [Autonomija Vojvodine – Srpsko pitanje], Krovovi, 2000. p.96

federalism, instead of their status as administrative units in the Republic of Serbia. As expected, this motion did not find support among those who opted for a more centralized state, but the final outcome was actually that the provinces were granted the requested status after a couple of years.

Unquestionably the most liberal and most celebrated among the supporters of Vojvodina's autonomy is the 1974 Constitution, which brought substantial changes in the status, character and position of the province.⁸⁹ The federal Constitution was published in January 1974 and the Constitution of Vojvodina only a month later. The main provisions forbade any changes to the Constitution without the consent of the autonomous provinces⁹⁰, which got very similar rights and political status to the constitutive republics. To be precise, under this Constitution these administrative units became subjects of the Federation, instead of being autonomous provinces of Serbia. In addition, the state leadership of Serbia had jurisdiction over the provinces only in matters of national defense and finances.⁹¹ For many supporters of high levels of autonomy in Vojvodina this is the Constitution that they mostly refer to when suggesting a good and acceptable model of governance of the region. Furthermore, it is emphasized that Vojvodina achieved the highest economic growth during this period, implying that it is best for the province to independently manage its own resources.

However, the situation changed dramatically with the next Constitution published in 1990 while the country was under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic. As is well known, these were obscure times for the autonomous provinces because most of their rights

⁸⁹ Platform of the Conference of the Provincial Organization of the Socialist Party of Serbia in Vojvodina about the Autonomy of Vojvodina [Platforma konferencije pokrajinske organizacije socijalističke partije Srbije u Vojvodini o autonomiji Vojvodine] in Borislav Djurovic (ed.) Autonomy of Vojvodina [Autonomija Vojvodine], Beogradski forum za svet ravnopravnih, 2004. p.99

⁹⁰ Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo with Constitutional Laws for the Enforcement of the Constitution [Ustav SR Srbije, SAP Vojvodine, SAP Kosovo sa ustavnim zakonima za sprovođenje ustava], *Sluzbeni list SFRJ*, 1974, p.131 <http://eng.digital.nb.rs/document/RA-ustav-1974>

⁹¹ Cedimir Popov and Jelena Popov, The Autonomy of Vojvodina – Serbian Question [Autonomija Vojvodine – Srpsko pitanje], Krovovi, 2000. p.105

established some 15 years before were revoked and their autonomy was cut back.⁹² The province's jurisdictions were crudely restricted and the state became extremely centralized. Some authors, such as Milan Tripkovic, believe that Vojvodina's status has not been fully resolved since this unfortunate period during which its economic development also suffered greatly.⁹³ However, it should be emphasized that many steps were taken in the post-Milosevic era, since the year 2000, in order to redeem the injustices done to Vojvodina and to implement regionalization in order for the whole country to thrive economically, socially, culturally and politically. Admittedly, much still remains to be done, but the progress is evident.

4.2.The Two Sides of Autonomy

Vojvodina's autonomy is surely one of the most debated topics that are in any way related to the question of regional identity. The relationship between autonomy and regional identity is quite straightforward indeed. Namely, both the supporters and the opposition to the idea of Vojvodinian identity see the connection between accepting the reality of the existence of this identity and its possible political implications. However, the degree to which the two different groups consider this relationship to be developed varies, though admittedly extremes exist on both sides.

While the majority of opinion leaders among the supporters of the Vojvodinian identity today believe that the province's autonomy should be maintained and strengthened in the context of the Republic of Serbia, for some this is not sufficient. Therefore they require that Vojvodina becomes a republic of equal political status to Serbia, with whom it would coexist in a common state. Hence, Serbia would become a sort of federation with two

⁹² Louis Sell, Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia. Duke University Press, 2002. p.54

⁹³ Milan Tripkovic, Ljubinko Pusic and Srdjan Sljukic Crossroads of Serbia [Raskrsca Srbije], Filozofski fakultet Novi Sad, Odsek za sociologiju, 2007. p.62

constitutive republics. For example, Zivan Berisavljevic in a coalition with several national minorities' parties⁹⁴ issued a declaration in which they claim that Vojvodina and Serbia are two constitutive entities of the Republic of Serbia and that a new constitution should be written in order to make public the newly formed voluntary association of the two federal units which embody a common and complex civil union.

Furthermore, referring largely to a new constitution they add that a new historical agreement, based on the unification of Vojvodina and Serbia into a Federative Republic of Serbia, is the only possible way for the future coexistence of the two entities.⁹⁵ Although some support among Vojvodinians does exist for such a reorganization of the state, it is in no way substantial enough in order to actually be fulfilled. Such point of view is still represented by a minority of the people and does not seem likely to become prevalent in the near future.

On the other hand, an equally resolute standpoint exists, representing the other pole of the radical views of the Vojvodinian autonomy. To be precise, talking about Vojvodina as a separate administrative unit, which would manage its state affairs and social and economic policies on its own is virtually impossible from this perspective. The opposition to an extensive Vojvodinian autonomy mostly comes from the rightist political parties and those who opt for a centralized state, but support can also be found among other public figures and intellectual elite.

⁹⁴ Political parties that participated in the Fourth Vojvodinian Convention are Alliance of Romanians in Vojvodina [Alijansa Vojvodjanskih Rumuna], Banatean Party [Banatska stranka], Democratic Union of Croats in Vojvodina [Demokratski savez Hrvata Vojvodine], European Force of Vojvodina [Evropska snaga Vojvodine], Liberal Democratic Party, provincial committee [Liberalno Demokratska Partija, pokrajinski odbor], The Party of Pancevo [Pancevacka partija], Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians [Savez vojvodjanskih Madjara], Vojvodinian Alternative [Vojvodjanska alternative] and the Vojvodinian Party [Vojvodjanska partija]. Aside from the political parties, the Fourth Vojvodinian Convention was attended and supported by the following NGOs: "Argus", Center for Liberal Studies [Centar za liberalne studije], Forum V-21, Helsinki Committee [Helsinski odbor], Independent Association of Journalists in Vojvodina [Nezavisno drustvo novinara Vojvodine], Regional Center for Refugees and Displaced Persons [Regionalni centar za izbegla i prognana lica] and the Vojvodinian club [Vojvodjanski klub].

⁹⁵ Declaration about the Foundations of Democratic Unification of Vojvodina and Serbia into a Federative Republic of Serbia [Deklaracija o osnovama demokratskog ujedinjenja Vojvodine i Srbije u Saveznu Republiku Srbiju], *Koordinacioni odbor sazivaca Cetvrte vojvodjanske Konvencije*, 29 Mar 2012 accessed on 13 May 2012 <http://www.vojvodjanskakonvencija.com/cetvrta-vojvodanska-konvencija/>

The arguments for this standpoint are varied. For example, historians Cedomir and Jelena Popov claim that throughout history Vojvodina did not have a tradition of state formation, nor experience in these matters. They also claim that the lack of national identity is a *conditio sine qua non* for the formation of distinct administrative entities, reasserting that one cannot possibly speak of Vojvodinian identity.⁹⁶ Hence, they conclude that Vojvodina does not fulfill the basic conditions for the creation of a separate political unit, but also that its future would be insecure in case of separation from Serbia. Hypotheses exist about the likelihood of the dissolution of Vojvodina in such a case and its partitioning between its neighbors, with the argument that different ethnic groups would adhere to different neighboring countries where they would constitute the majority population, and that the future of Serbia would be uncertain.⁹⁷ This is not a very probable scenario, though it is quite recurrent in the texts that object to the Vojvodinian identity and autonomy.

It is interesting to note that Cedomir and Jelena Popov recognize the fact that economic connectedness and social structure did provide the province with conditions to politically integrate the region. Nevertheless, due to the lack of the two core conditions that were previously mentioned, the authors claim that a deep political and legal integration of the province eventually could not happen and consequently Vojvodina never became what in America is known as a ‘melting pot’.⁹⁸ However, it seems rather unfair to be using this analogy in the evaluation of the features of multiconfessional and multiethnic society that Vojvodina is today. Namely, it is actually a syntagm specifically used in the American context and thus Vojvodina is not the only region in Europe that is home to different ethnic, cultural and religious groups while usually not being characterized as a ‘melting pot’.

⁹⁶ Cedomir Popov and Jelena Popov, The Autonomy of Vojvodina – Serbian Question [Autonomija Vojvodine – Srpsko pitanje], Krovovi, 2000. p.108

⁹⁷ Cedomir Popov, “Vojvodina’s Autonomy – 12 theses [Autonomija Vojvodine – 12 teza]” in Borislav Djurovic (ed.) Autonomy of Vojvodina [Autonomija Vojvodine], Beogradski forum za svet ravnopravnih, 2004. p.9

⁹⁸ Cedomir Popov and Jelena Popov, The Autonomy of Vojvodina – Serbian Question [Autonomija Vojvodine – Srpsko pitanje], Krovovi, 2000. p.107

Nevertheless, awareness of the specific mentality, and cultural, spiritual and even political individuality of Vojvodina do exist. That is why even those who are more reserved about Vojvodina's rights and duties consider that more balance needs to be introduced in all spheres of life in the province, and particularly in the allocation of funds.⁹⁹ Namely, one of the biggest grievances of Vojvodinians is that the region is being used as a 'milking cow' by the rest of the country and that it has been economically contributing much more to the national budget than other regions.

According to Dimitrije Boarov, the findings show that Vojvodina 's contribution to the GDP of the country continues to grow exponentially.¹⁰⁰ The province is also part of the country in which most foreign companies and businesses invest.¹⁰¹ It does not surprise, then, that the majority of local politicians consider managing their own resources as the best option for the province, which is still not fully realized in Serbia that is yet to finish the road to decentralization. Therefore, being in charge of the management of their own budget is one of the most important tasks that the regional politicians want to be able to fulfill.

It should still be acknowledged that important steps have been taken in order to recognize cultural, economic and political specificities of the province. With the 2012 Vojvodinian budget increase, founding of the Vojvodinian Academy of Arts and Sciences, opening of the regional office in Brussels, publishing of the Omnibus Law in 2002 and most importantly the Vojvodinian Statute in 2009,¹⁰² important foundation has been laid for the

⁹⁹ Cedomir Popov, "Vojvodina's Autonomy – 12 theses [Autonomija Vojvodine – 12 teza]" in Borislav Djurovic (ed.) Autonomy of Vojvodina [Autonomija Vojvodine], Beogradski forum za svet ravnopravnih, 2004. p.9

¹⁰⁰ Dimitrije Boarov, "Economic Aspects of the Autonomy of Vojvodina [Ekonomski aspekti autonomije Vojvodine] in Pavel Domonji (ed.) Vojvodinian Identity [Vojvodjanski Identitet], The Library of the Helsinki Notebook, No. 24 [Biblioteka Helsinske Sveske, Br. 24]. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia [Helsinski odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji], 2006. p.25

¹⁰¹ Vlastimira Stankovic, "FDI in Vojvodina in the First Quarter od 2012 [Direktne strane investicije u Vojvodini u prvom kvartalu 2012.], *Vojvodina Investment Promotion*, 5 Apr 2012 accessed on 14 May 2012 <http://blog.vip.org.rs/?p=200>

¹⁰² The Vojvodinian Statue provoked a very negative response from the part of the rightist parties. It took a year and several political scandals in order for the Statute to be adopted by the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. Remarks of the rightist parties were taken into consideration and the proposal of the Statute was eventually

validation of this province as a particular multicultural and administrative entity with an economic development and growth different from the rest of the country which it is part of.

From the previously mentioned steps, the most contested is probably the Statute. In the Article 2 of the Statute, the legal status of the autonomous province of Vojvodina is clearly defined. To be precise, “the Assembly of AP Vojvodina by the provincial Assembly decision determines the body of the AP Vojvodina which will represent the province as a legal entity and thereby performs rights and obligations of AP Vojvodina as a founder of public companies and institutions and other organizations in accordance with the law.”¹⁰³ It is important to emphasize as a point of reference that, for example, the EU got the status of a legal entity with the Lisbon agreement, which is an important contribution to the future federal approach because nowadays the EU countries act in front of other international organizations as a single entity. Possibility does exist for future developments to include a formation of a single state, although evidently this idea only exists in theory. Nevertheless, it does give enough reference to consider the Vojvodinian case in this context and most certainly sufficient incentives for the opposition to the Vojvodinian autonomy to voice their complaints.

The adoption of the Statute was thus preceded and followed by heated debates about what this document really means and what it represents for the future of Vojvodina. The

somewhat changed. The main opposition parties were the Serbian Radical Party, Serbian Progressive Party, Democratic Party of Serbia, The New Serbia and the Movement 1389 and their chief concern is that the Statute of Vojvodina creates a ‘state inside the state’. On the other hand, the Democratic Party, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Socialist Party of Serbia supported the Vojvodinian Statute. Their view is that the Statute is not a secessionist document, but one that brings basic autonomy to the province. Namely, according to the Statute, Vojvodina is an autonomous province of all of its citizens with Novi Sad as its main administrative center. It has a flag and a coat of arms. Its territory consists of three geographic areas (Banat, Backa, Srem) and cannot be changed without the consent of the citizens of Vojvodina on a referendum. The province does not, however have its own military, police, diplomatic missions, central bank or currency, which are some of the key features of a modern state.

¹⁰³ Statute of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina: Article 2 [Statut autonomne pokrajine Vojvodine: član 2], 2009, p.1, accessed on 19 May 2012

http://www.puma.vojvodina.gov.rs/dokumenti/zakoni/Statut_APV_2009.pdf The text in original language: “АП Војводина има статус правног лица. Скупштина АП Војводине покрајинском скупштинском одлуком одређује орган АП Војводине који заступа АП Војводину као правно лице и при томе врши права и обавезе које АП Војводина има као оснивач јавних предузећа и установа и других организација у складу са законом.”

President of the Assembly of Vojvodina, Sandor Egeresi, gives a good summary of the current situation in his following statement: "This Statute does not challenge the Constitution of Serbia in a single sentence. Three models of autonomy exist in Europe: federal concepts, such as the one in Germany, where provinces have important functions and influence, second is pre-federal like in Italian provinces and the third model is asymmetric, like the Spanish one. We need to be aware of the fact that modern regions are a European tendency."¹⁰⁴ Similarly, I would also suggest that it is prudent for modern European states to have strong, developed and prosperous regions and that they should not fear the possible outcomes of such developments, but instead carefully balance the duties and responsibilities between the central government and regional jurisdiction.

¹⁰⁴ Momcilo Subotic, Serbian Vojvodina and its Minorities: historical-political Study [Srpska Vojvodina i njene manjine: istorijsko-politikoloska studija], Institut za politicke studije Beograd, 2011. p.105 The quotation in original language: "Ni jednom recenicom ovaj statut se ne sukobljava sa Ustavom Srbije. U Evropi postoje tri modela autonomije: federalni concept, kao u Nemackoj, gde pokrajine imaju ozbiljne funkcije i uticaj; drugi je predfederalni kao u italijanskim pokrajinama i treci asimetricki kao u Spaniji. Moramo biti svesni da su modern regije evropska tendencija."

Chapter 5 - Answers from the Focus Groups and Interviews

Previous chapters for the most part presented the data and results of analyses gathered from a wide literature on regional identity. The majority of books and articles on the Vojvodinian identity came from the National Library of Serbia though a considerable number of articles were also downloaded from the digital database of this library as well as from the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) Repository.¹⁰⁵ This chapter will not be based on the existing literature, but it will focus on the analysis of the answers from a small-scale research that was conducted on the topic of regional identity feelings of the young people from Vojvodina. Focus groups and interviews were the two methods of research that were used, although it should be emphasized that due to organizational reasons, percentage of interviews is higher than the percentage of focus groups.

5.1. Subjects and Method of the Research

All the participants of this research were young people, precisely graduating high school students and university students (18 to 27 years of age). I chose this age group due to several reasons. Firstly, I was interested to find out how salient the ‘I am Vojvodinian’ campaign was to the young people, because to a certain extent these billboards did re-open the debate about the Vojvodinian identity in the political circles. Secondly, while researches on the existence of regional identity in Vojvodina are not nonexistent, they really are scarce, and even scarcer are those researches that focus on the youth. Thirdly, as a young person myself, I was interested to know what my peers from Vojvodina think about their regional identity.

My intention was to organize different focus groups according to the national or ethnic belonging of the participants. It was not intended to obtain answers from the members

¹⁰⁵ Digital Object Identifier (DOI) Repository Serbia <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/>

of each of Vojvodina's 25 different ethnic groups because such a large-scale research would have been virtually impossible to do in the framework of this MA thesis. Instead I focused on four ethnic groups of different size. Namely, the research included the majority ethnic group (Serbs) and the largest minority group (Hungarians), as well as one moderately sized ethnic group (Romanians) and an ethnic group with a very small percentage in the overall population of Vojvodina (Greeks).¹⁰⁶ The idea behind the selection of these groups was that it brings diversity to results, with the initial assumption that smaller and larger groups of different ethnicities may have incomprehensive views on regional identity and feel differently about regional belonging.

Moreover, most participants of all ethnicities are from Novi Sad, the main administrative center of Vojvodina, except for all the Hungarian interviewees who are from Subotica and four university students from Backa Palanka who formed one focus group. Interviews were done with the youth from the Romanian, Hungarian and Serbian groups, while two focus groups were done with the members of Serbian community and one with the youth from the Greek community. Also, it should be emphasized that in the case of the Hungarian participants, some answers were also obtained with the help of the Youth Forum of Vojvodina and their director Lidia Jakus,¹⁰⁷ to whom I am very thankful.

Regarding the focus groups, the total number of three is included in this thesis. Furthermore, none of the focus groups in this research consisted of more than four people. As someone who has never moderated a focus group before, I felt that I would manage a mini-group better and that the results will therefore be more useful for my research. Hence, one focus group consisted of four university students from Backa Palanka, a city in the northwest of Vojvodina, who were all members of the Vojvodinian Serbian community with Bosnian

¹⁰⁶ According to the 2002 population census, the estimated percentage of the above mentioned ethnic groups in Vojvodina is the following: Serbs – 65%, Hungarians – 15%, Romanians – 1.5% and Greeks - < 0.25%.

¹⁰⁷ Youth Forum of Vojvodina <http://vifo.rs/>

origins. To be exact, they all came to live in Vojvodina after the war in Bosnia in 1995. The second focus group consisted of three members of the Greek community from Novi Sad. Unexpectedly, this group expressed the least strong feeling of belonging to their ethnic group, which is further explained later in the thesis. Lastly, the third focus group consisted of four graduating high school students of Serbian origin from Novi Sad, and these were the youngest participants in the research.

As far as the ethnicity of the participants is considered, the idea was that the number of participants in each group should be proportional to the percentage of each respective group in the region. As a result the majority of the interviewed young people are of Serbian origin, the next largest group is Hungarian, then Romanian and lastly the Greek ethnic group. Table 1 graphically demonstrates it:

Ethnic/national group	Number of people who participated	Focus groups		Interviews
Serbian	14	High school students from Novi Sad	University students from Backa Palanka	7
		3	4	
Hungarian	6			6
Romanian	4			4
Greek	3	3		
TOTAL	27	10		17

Table 1: The structure of participants according to their ethnic/national belonging and methods of research

5.2. The Nature of the Questions

The questions were designed in such a way to gradually come to the main interest of this research – how important is the Vojvodinian identity for the youth of the region? Does it manage to compete with the participants' other forms of identification? The original hypothesis was that it does manage to compete with young people's ethnic, national religious and other forms of identification, because the theoretical part of the thesis showed that circumstances in Vojvodina exist for its development. Moreover, it was also hypothesized that disparity in the regional identity feeling can be found between the students of different ethnic groups, although it was not assumed that it would be striking.

As the focus groups and interviews confirmed, it was best to begin with some general remarks and statements about the region itself, and to enquire about how informed the participants were regarding the "I am Vojvodinian" campaign from 2011. Therefore, the first two questions were as follows:

1. What have you heard about the campaign "I am Vojvodinian – I am what I am"?
2. Have you seen the billboards with the previously mentioned slogans in Novi Sad?

Moreover, I was also interested to know how much the Vojvodinian youth relates to Europe as a wider region. This question was also inspired by one quite often read and heard statements from predominantly elder generations, that the Vojvodinians have deep European roots dating back to the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Such a claim is most often used as a parameter in the comparison with the citizens from the other parts of the country.

3. When you see the following slogan, what comes to mind first? "I do not want a path to Europe, but a return to it."

The following questions attempted to establish some general characteristics that the youth sees as typical for the regional identification and also to inspect the strength of the

regional identity feeling. It is worth mentioning that although diverse opinions were shared when participants were asked to describe a ‘typical Vojvodinian’, a high percentage of answers stressed tolerance as one of the main characteristics, so one could conclude that a sort of consensus exists on at least one shared value of Vojvodinians.

4. What does it mean for you to be Vojvodinian? Describe a typical Vojvodinian person.
5. How do you react to the following quote: “I feel Vojvodinian.”

The last two questions were written on a piece of paper. The purpose was to establish to a degree a hierarchy between different identifications of the students with question number six. Although this was not the main purpose of this thesis, I found the answers to this question somewhat unexpected but certainly exciting. The last question provoked quite a reaction from several participants, possibly due to their multiplicity of meanings (language, identity, autonomy, Europe).

Furthermore, an unexpected but quite fascinating debate developed upon the mention of the term ‘language’ in the focus group of university students from Backa Palanka. Precisely, they started the discussion about the way of speaking and stressing of words and whether those who immigrated to Vojvodina should adopt the Vojvodinian manner of speaking, characterized by drawl and slowness in speech, or whether they should retain the accentuation and pronunciation that is more in the spirit of their birth place and place of origin. This debate opened up some interesting questions about the integration of immigrants and preservation of their ethno-linguistic specificities also providing more material than can be analyzed in this thesis, which are certainly interesting enough to be the focus of some further research. In addition, as regards the anthem the very mention of it provoked some nostalgic reaction about the former Yugoslav hymn ‘Hej Sloveni’, but this will also be thoroughly analyzed in the last part of this chapter. The last two questions were as follows:

6. Rank the following terms from 1 to 5, 1 being the term with the highest significance to you and 5 with the least significance:

STUDENT	SERBIA	VOJVODINA	NATIONAL/ETHNIC BELONGING	PLACE YOU COME FROM
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7. What comes to mind first when you hear the following words:

<i>BOZE PRAVDE</i> (the official anthem of the Republic of Serbia)
<i>LANGUAGE</i>
<i>IDENTITY</i>
<i>AUTONOMY</i>
<i>EUROPE</i>

5.3. Analysis of the Answers

While the research was done without a representative sample due to logistic and time constraints, important conclusions were still drawn from both the focus groups and interviews. Namely, the most surprising findings show that only 5 out of 27 interviewed people (including focus groups) have even heard about the “I am Vojvodinian” campaign or seen the billboards in Novi Sad. A great majority of students from all ethnic groups have not heard anything about this campaign, although a minor number of participants have recollections of both the criticism and support for the idea behind the billboards, implying that they were aware of the surrounding debate but also that they did not attach much significance to it.

Moreover, the question referring to the ‘European path’ and whether it is a thing of the past or future did not associate the participants to the above mentioned campaign. Instead, the high school focus group mostly identified Europe with the EU and expressed slight pessimism about the progress in the European integrations because of the “mentality that people need to change in order to become a part of Europe again.” Half of the Hungarian participants pointed out that the slogan “I do not want a path to Europe, but a return to it” is a biased statement and identified it as a rhetoric tool and propaganda, while two of them expressed disappointment with the current European prospects. Also, it should be revealed that several interviewees from both the Serbian and Romanian group (4 and 2 respectively) expressed uncertainty of how much ‘they’ really belonged to Europe in the past and this is well expressed in the following quote: “Destination is destination, it’s irrelevant if we have already been there. Neither are we the same, nor is Europe.”

As far as the characteristics and common values of Vojvodinians are concerned, the research showed that certain values are indeed emphasized as ‘typically Vojvodinian’. Namely, the Greek focus group especially emphasized tolerance and openness to other cultures as the core values of Vojvodinians, and so did the majority of Hungarian (5) and Serbian (4) interviewees. Conversely, 2 out of 4 Romanian interviewees do not see the existence of any characteristics that are particular for Vojvodinians, asserting that the features that other people think of as ‘specific’ are merely stereotypes. Probably the most exciting answers to this question refer to the emphasis on the feature that is very often ascribed to Vojvodinians, and that is being gourmand.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, the question about ‘feeling Vojvodinian’ produced some intriguing answers as well. Of all the participants, it was mostly young people of Serbian and Greek

¹⁰⁸ The stereotypes for Vojvodinians indeed often include references to gastronomy and appreciation for tasty food, but the Vojvodinian cuisine is also famous throughout the country for being exquisite. Other stereotypes for Vojvodinians include a generally relaxed attitude towards the world and slowness in motions and speech.

nationality who acknowledged and attached importance to their Vojvodinian identification. Close to 70% of Serbian participants expressed either support for such identity or at the very least not having anything against such identification. Interestingly, one interviewee pointed out that she had previously been told that “Vojvodinians do not exist. Still I do make a clear distinction between Vojvodinians and Serbs south of Danube.” Although it is a sole example in this research of such a statement, it should be pointed out that on online forums and debates one does frequently come across similar statements.

While the members of the Romanian group did not generally express any strong sentiments towards the regional belonging, reactions from Hungarian interviewees varied from a wholehearted support and pride in the Vojvodinian identity to a complete negation of having any such feelings. The following statements capture this tendency: “Feeling Vojvodinian is a sort of brainwashing. I feel like the resident of planet Earth” and from the other side: “I absolutely feel Vojvodinian and I like the expression because it is really a special region and by this a special category, state of mind, surrounding, feeling...” The answers in this group were quite diverse so no general conclusions could be made here.

Among other tasks, one goal of this research was to try to establish if one can speak about hierarchy of identities among Vojvodinian youth. Certainly, this is a topic that requires a much more extensive research and more participants in it, but still some of the findings that resulted from the question number six were quite unforeseen. Namely, since the focus of this research was regional identity and feelings of belonging to a specific territorial identification, it was not expected that the young people would be mostly identifying themselves with their occupation. To be precise, of all the questions asked, the most unequivocal answers were received to the one referring to the hierarchy of identities. Namely, a great majority (about 90%) of the overall answers showed that being a student was the primary identification of young Vojvodinians. Also, most of the Hungarian (75%) and Serbian (65%) students situate

the city/town they come from as the second most important identifier, while the Greek youth of Vojvodina largely positions their place of origin, which in this case is Novi Sad, on the first place.

In so far as the identification with Serbia is considered, it takes the last place among the Hungarian interviewees, and second to last in the Greek focus group. It is also on the fourth place for the majority of Romanian students, just before the national identification, as well as for the half of the young participants of Serbian nationality, who place Vojvodina as the third most important identifier. Vojvodina also comes third for half of the Hungarian respondents and second for the majority of Greek and Romanian respondents. National or ethnic belonging provided quite mixed answers in each of the focus groups, except among the Greek students who thought of their national belonging as their least important identifier.

Of all the terms given in the last question, the hymn provoked the most debate. To 2 of the Romanian interviewees, it resonated with nationalism and one pointed out that the previous hymn ('Hey Slavs')¹⁰⁹ was much better. Similar answers to the latter were given by the focus group of university students from Backa Palanka, stating that a better hymn could

¹⁰⁹ "Hej Sloveni" or ("Hej Slaveni") was composed in the mid nineteenth century by a Slovak in response to the loss of cultural identity in his homeland. Taking inspiration from the Polish anthem (which the melody is almost identical to), he composed an anthem that soon became popular with the whole Slavic community, in fact becoming the anthem of Slovakia during World War II (with Slovak words). Being a confederation of mainly Slavonic states, the song seemed to be a natural fit for post-royalist Yugoslavia. It was sung at the first meetings of the resistance movement (later, the government), and became the temporary national anthem upon the re-establishment of Yugoslavia after the Axis defeat. A search was undertaken for a permanent anthem, but "Hej Slaveni" remained the most popular choice with the citizens; it was declared the temporary anthem in 1977, and was finally made official in 1988. After most of the members of the Yugoslav federation had declared independence in the 1990s, the nations that were left in the federation changed the name of the country to Serbia and Montenegro, and retained the old Yugoslav anthem. Since that time, there were proposals to change the national anthem, one of which by Slobodan Markovic recieved government attention, which consists of all but the last line of the Serbian "Bože pravde" followed by one verse of the Montenegrin "Oj svijetla majska Zoro", and was being considered to replace "Hej, Sloveni" in time for the 2004 Olympic Games. (It would have been interesting if this proposal were to be adopted, as the first Yugoslav anthem also combined the anthems of its constituent parts to form the national anthem.) "Hej Slaveni" remained the anthem during this time, despite the local anthems of the two republics in the federation being more popular. With the independence of Montenegro, and then Serbia in 2006, the union was dissolved and the anthem had no more legal standing. Source: <http://www.nationalanthems.info/yug.htm>

have been chosen and that it is a “complete horror imposed for unknown and bizarre reasons”. It should be pointed out that the current hymn was originally the hymn of the Kingdom of Serbs until 1918, which is the year of the formation of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that the majority of participants from the national minorities’ groups did not have any particular feelings towards the anthem.

The overall conclusions of this research did confirm some of the initial hypotheses, while some answers came as a surprise. Namely, it was confirmed that regional identity feeling among the Vojvodinian youth does not develop predominantly in one ethnic group, although the findings also showed that the Serbian and Greek respondents were the ones with the most positive or at least the least negative sentiment towards Vojvodinianism. As far as the ability of Vojvodinian identity to compete with other forms of identification is considered, the conclusion is that in the minds and hearts of the majority of the interviewed young Vojvodinians there is certainly the place for such identification. Also, some values such as tolerance, respect for other cultures and hospitality remain specific Vojvodinian traits for a significant number of young Vojvodinians. In general, the youth from the four ethnic groups that participated in this research, did not provide diametrically opposite answers to the questions they were asked, although naturally some differences can be found among the participants from every single group. Universality of opinion and views on any topic should not be assumed, and this is particularly true for sensitive topics such as regional identity among the Vojvodinian youth.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis was to establish if regional identity can emerge as an equally powerful type of identification as the national, ethnic and religious ones, and to determine circumstances under which this is possible. Moreover, analysis of the features that make regional identity attractive and different from other social identifications was also an important part of this research. The main findings indicate that regional identity does have the potential to emerge as a strong identification of the people when they feel emotional attachment to that particular territory and also if a feeling of distinctiveness from the population of the rest of the country exists. Reasons for such a feeling can be found in disparate socio-historical conditions that as a consequence resulted in the diversification and special developments in the regions of a country, or, like in the case of the Basque people, basis of regional identity can lie in the different ethnic belonging of the regional population from other ethnic and national groups living in the country.

In addition, certain attributes indeed make regional identity able to compete with other very powerful social identifications. Namely, since it is territorially based, regional identity does have the potential to overcome national differences in a region inhabited by a multitude of ethnic groups, as is the case in Vojvodina. Nevertheless, in some cases regional identity also has the potential for fragmentation of a country precisely because it is territorially based and as such could be the origin of disintegrative political aspirations. In this context it is very important to understand the motives of the politicians, intellectuals and civil society actors whose role in the regional identity building is crucial. In this respect, a significant fact is that the support for the reemerging regional identity discourse comes from the actors who also support decentralization of the country. In order to determine how much veracity exists in the discourse of the previously mentioned actors regarding regional identity,

it is best to analyze the narratives of the people from a particular region and their view on regional identity.

The analysis showed that in the Vojvodinian case preconditions that usually make the emergence of regional identity possible do exist and are often reproduced in the political discourse in the province. The feeling of distinctiveness is largely based on the different social, historical and cultural developments and demographic elements, and it is most often expressed as a point of diversification from the population living in other parts and regions of the country. Another feature that is often stressed by the supporters of regional identity are common values of the Vojvodinians, but since very little comparable data to other regions of the country are to be found in relation to this topic, such statements should not be taken as self-evident. Still, even though the universal values are a point of reference commonly used in the regional identity building rhetoric, the findings of the research show that it is an idea generally well received by many Vojvodinians.

Furthermore, the research and analysis of a number of academic works, books, documents, internet forums and newspapers articles showed that regional identity is a prominent element of the political discourse, that it does inspire debates and that it does have a receptive audience in Vojvodina. Hence, a conclusion is drawn that without an adequate and at least moderately receptive audience, regional identity would not be seen as competitor to other important social identifications. Nonetheless, it should not be assumed that it is the most important identification for the majority of Vojvodinians, but simply that it takes an important place in their identification and that its appeal finds its place among other powerful identifications.

It was also suggested that regional identity should be promoted as a framework that encompasses different ethnic, religious and cultural identifications of Vojvodinians,

acknowledging that the support for such idea does not come universally. Namely, the intentions behind its reproduction in the public discourse are not always directed at promoting multiculturalism and cherishing the specificities of the region, and the opposition to the diffusion of regional identity does not only come from theoretic considerations. It is the political implications that add to the complexity of the topic of regional identity and they are also often understood as motives for both the dispersion of and opposition to the idea of Vojvodinian identity.

The aim of this thesis was not to demonstrate the prevalence of regional identity over other forms of identification, but to emphasize that it indeed can and does emerge as an important social identification and also to point to its diverse potentials. As a platform for peaceful ethnic coexistence, mutual cooperation, cultural pluralism and a tolerant society, regional identity should be promoted and diffused. It is only in this framework that Vojvodinian identity can fully reach its integrative and bonding potential thus contributing to the economic prosperity and social cohesion of the country.

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