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## **SYNERGY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES – AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF THE IDENTITY OF NATIONAL MINORITIES\*\***

In the recently published monograph issued by the Institute for Political Studies, *Controversies of National Identity: Bunjevci, Vlachs and Roma in Serbia (Raduški 2025)*, the complex and challenging – yet fundamentally important and still insufficiently studied – phenomena of national identity and its core determinants are examined. The selection of three ethnic groups without a mother state, together with the complex research structure of the study, immediately suggests that this is research of exceptional importance for an ethnically and culturally diverse society such as Serbia. Taking into account one of the most pronounced – though certainly not the only – values of this monograph, namely its grounding simultaneously in several social and humanistic sciences, this review therefore primarily focuses on identifying the analytical premises and theoretical approaches that constitute the essence of the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach. In much contemporary research, many studies end merely with an overview of available literature from several fields, while the interdependence of these fields remains unclear to the reader. In other words, interdisciplinary research should not represent a simple aggregation of knowledge but rather its synergy (Danermark 2019, 369), something that the new publication by Dr. Nada Raduški

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convincingly demonstrates. To illustrate this, the present review focuses on the analysis of three different synthetic procedures that can be traced throughout the chapters of the book: the combination of sociological and linguistic research; the integration of demographic factors, political science findings, and foreign policy challenges in the context of the status and characteristics of the Bunjevci, Vlachs, and Roma; and finally the integration of the study of the cultural heritage of a specific region with European and national legislative frameworks.

In the first chapter of the book, the concept, characteristics, and interpretations of national identity are analyzed in detail. Following the theoretical framework and research orientation of Dr. Nada Raduški, national identity can be defined as a strong, essential, and still relevant sense of belonging. It manifests itself through the interaction between society and the individual and depends on political, economic, and sociocultural factors (Raduški 2025, 11–20). A particularly interesting part of this section, especially for readers oriented toward the study of society and culture from a multidisciplinary perspective, is the identification of religion and language as key determinants of identity. The comprehensive and integrative approach to the importance of language and religion – viewed not only as significant determinants of identity but also in terms of their crucial role within the broader social context places this research close to leading sociolinguistic approaches in contemporary scholarship. These approaches emphasize that “the role, functions, and evaluation of a particular language depend on a number of social, political, economic, cultural, and other extralinguistic factors that determine its status, significance, and power within a given community” (Filipović 2018, 20). The author assigns language a dual role. It is one of the key factors in identifying a particular community, even when that community does not possess its own state. At the same time, it serves as a guarantee of that community’s survival and preservation. As for religion, religious affiliation often proves to be a “stronger cohesive factor of unification” (Raduški 2025, 17). At the same time, however, it frequently becomes a decisive reason for establishing boundaries toward other peoples. The findings that the author reaches through other important disciplines – such as demography and political science – make this work essential reading for sociolinguists as well. Using population census data, the author shows how these factors served as elements of social integration or division even when national affiliation was not explicitly expressed. Furthermore, based on the current status of certain minorities,

she confirms that linguistic awareness and the standardization of one's linguistic expression have also contributed to the articulation of national policy. Particularly successful is the combination of statistical results with political science findings in examining the dynamics of identity change in accordance with contemporary social circumstances. Analyses of population censuses conducted before and after 1991 confirm the conclusions of several increasingly influential critical studies. These studies view statistical data not merely as a simple aggregate of population figures but also as an indicator of the particular construction of social reality (Kertzer and Arel 2004; Simon, Piché, and Gangon 2015). Such an understanding of national identity and of the role of political systems in its construction had already been presented by Benedict Anderson. He demonstrated that census questions are closely connected with the ideologies and power relations of different ethnic groups (Anderson 1991). The statistical data, their political background, their results, and the historical overview presented in this book clearly demonstrate this interdependence. The author explicitly notes that "statistics are often forced to balance between science and politics" (Raduški 2025, 30), which is why census data must sometimes be interpreted critically. It is therefore interesting to compare the findings of this monograph with the population censuses conducted in 1991 in the states of the former SFRY, and to observe the influence of demographic data on the formation of new national and linguistic identities (Savić 2024).

Starting from the position, formulated in earlier research as well, that "the more heterogeneous the population is from historical, religious, linguistic, and sociocultural perspectives, the more thoroughly the causes and consequences of those differences must be illuminated" (Raduški 2023, 173), the monograph proceeds to examine the interdependence of identity, history, language, religion, and politics, through the perspective of three specific communities.

The Bunjevci, who today live primarily in Vojvodina, were first registered as a national minority in 1991, although they formed their ethnocultural identity as early as the eighteenth century (Raduški 2025, 27). The demographic picture of this collective is presented through the different dynamics of its development within broader sociopolitical communities. At the same time, attempts to politicize their identity – efforts that continue to this day – are critically examined. These include claims that the Bunjevci emerged through social engineering and represent an artificial nation (Raduški 2025, 36). Through this example,

the full complexity of the concept of national belonging becomes evident. Ideological manipulation proves not to be merely a feature of political systems in the past but rather a persistent challenge that remains highly susceptible to instrumentalization. Dr. Raduški also identifies this as a potential issue in Serbia's European integration process (2025, 68). This complexity is further intensified by numerous unresolved theories concerning the origin of the Bunjevci. Alongside awareness of language and religion as "endogenous factors" of differentiation in processes of self-understanding and self-construction (Raduški 2025, 43), the author also emphasizes the preservation of the rich heritage and tradition of this community. This heritage is demonstrated through the historical development of Bunjevci culture, their vivid cultural legacy, significant literary production, important institutions, and distinctive customs.

Demographic research shows that the Vlachs maintain an extremely stable relationship with their mother tongue and religious affiliation while simultaneously displaying frequent fluctuations in their declaration of nationality (Raduški 2025, 69). Addressing the linguistic identity of the Vlachs – described as "a more objective indicator of national origin" (Raduški 2025, 85) – the author argues that it reflects a mixture of Romance and Slavic influences. Precisely because of this composition and historical development, the Vlach language distinguishes the Vlachs from both Serbs and Romanians. What nevertheless brings them closer to these neighboring peoples is the fact that Vlachs, Romanians, and Serbs share the same religious affiliation. For this reason, disputes still exist between Serbia and Romania regarding the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church and the authenticity of the Vlach community. As in the case of the Bunjevci, certain issues of national identity extend far beyond the sense of belonging and become instruments in foreign policy relations. However, when attention shifts to questions of culture and tradition, no unresolved doubts remain regarding the autochthonous character of the Vlachs. Their long-standing and distinctive cultural heritage – presented in detail and illustrated across several pages – demonstrates the richness of the Vlach national minority and confirms its undeniable historical presence in Serbia.

Unlike the first two groups, whose identity is partly expressed through their relationship to the territory in which they live, the Roma constitute a transnational community dispersed throughout the world. In contrast to the Bunjevci and Vlachs, whose historical development – though sometimes controversial – is nevertheless known, "until recently

the Roma neither knew nor studied their own origin” (Raduški 2025, 117). Compared with the written and oral traces of Bunjevci and Vlach heritage, the Roma “left behind almost no written record” (Raduški 2025, 117). The Roma thus illustrate particularly clearly how other determinants of identity may remain fluid while a single stable factor – in this case, language – can preserve a centuries-old culture. The Romani language possesses a remarkable feature relevant to linguistic and broader scholarly research. It represents an inexhaustible repository of Roma culture and history while simultaneously constituting a mosaic of the cultures with which the Roma have come into contact. The religious identity of the Roma is also described as “dual”. Thus, “beliefs determine Roma identity, while the local religion (as a rule the religion of the majority) determines their local identity” (Raduški 2025, 129). Although one “cannot speak of a distinct Roma religion” (Raduški 2025, 131), Roma culture – often described as exotic and rooted in principles of freedom, music, and dance – is widely recognizable and deeply rooted in Serbia as well. The sections devoted to the Roma, as well as those concerning the Bunjevci and Vlachs, introduce an additional level of vitality and emotional depth into the monograph. They make the analysis of national minorities comprehensive and multilayered while presenting the lives of these communities in a vivid and accessible manner.

The three-part analysis logically leads to a chapter devoted to the minority policy of the state. Starting from the fact that Serbia is undeniably a multiethnic society – clearly illustrated by the analysis of the most recent population census from 2022, as well as by the previously presented statistical data – it must also function as a multicultural one. If multiculturalism is understood as the idea of the harmonious coexistence of different ethnic and cultural groups (Stojadinović 2012, 35), then the author’s conclusion that “the functionality of the state is directly correlated with its possibilities and capacity to manage that diversity” (Raduški 2025, 150) appears entirely justified. Accordingly, the final section of the book places the legislative framework of the Republic of Serbia and the institutional protection mechanisms at European and international levels in direct relation not only to the preservation of the cultural heritage of national minorities but also to the country’s internal and foreign policy. The analysis of the Constitution of Serbia and of various laws guaranteeing minority rights also identifies numerous obstacles to their effective implementation. These include the practical enforcement of legislation, the need for more detailed secondary

regulations, the slow functioning of the judicial system, and the necessity of establishing a systematic mechanism for monitoring the position and rights of minorities (Raduški 2025, 160).

Throughout the study, the issue of social engineering – and, consequently, linguistic engineering – reappears as an important theme. This provides a particularly stimulating basis for raising a broader question relevant to the entire Balkan region: where does the boundary lie between a political minority and a national minority? When language is concerned, it is particularly interesting to compare the findings regarding the application of the international legal framework within Serbia's integrative minority policy with the status of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in other Balkan states, for example Slovenia (Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages 2025, 40), especially in highly conflict-ridden societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (Savić 2016).

Finally, considering the scientific significance of this monograph – reflected in its interdisciplinarity, its professional dimension demonstrated through the analysis of demographic development and minority policies, and its cultural dimension illustrated through the presentation of the heritage of the three national minorities – we may also speak of its transdisciplinary contribution. If we take into account that transdisciplinarity implies that scientific research should be based on dialogue “among academic communities, policy makers, and interested non-scientific communities of practice in order to develop long-term sustainable solutions that may ultimately lead to a more equal distribution of social power in our societies” (Filipović 2015, 5), then Dr. Raduški's monograph represents a clear example of combining a scientific perspective with an analysis of life in authentic communities. This is particularly important because the book also offers concrete recommendations for the proper implementation of integrative minority policy – policy that contributes to the creation of a stable multicultural society. Finally, we may conclude by expressing the hope that other minority communities will soon be examined through similarly detailed and comprehensive research and by expressing confidence that the author, building on the same intellectually engaging perspective so necessary for the social sciences and humanities, will illuminate their position in future studies as well.

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