

Why Bunjevci did not Become A Nation: A Case Study

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1. Introduction

‘Bunjevci are people of Norman origin.’ ‘Bunjevci are indigenous pre-Slavic population of the Roman province Transdanubia, at the time called Dardans.’ ‘Bunjevci are Ilirs. They are *catholici Valachi alias Bunievci*.’ ‘The core of Bunjevci people are old Roman inhabitants.’ ‘Bunjevci are Morlachs or Vallachs from Dalmatia and Herzegovina, who were Slavenized and accepted the Catholic faith.’ ‘Bunjevci originated from Bosnia and were members of the Bosnian Church, so called Bogumils, led to Vojvodina by Franciscan monks under the condition of accepting Catholicism.’ ‘Bunjevci are Serbs from Bosnia, converted by force to Catholicism, who then migrated to Vojvodina.’ ‘Bunjevci have always been Catholics, they are a Croat tribe, dispersed in Herzegovina, Dalmatia and Vojvodina.’ ‘Bunjevci are the fourth South Slav nation, besides Slovenes, Croats and Serbs.’

These are some of the ‘theories’ about the origin of Bunjevci, a small ethnic group situated in the northwest of present-day Vojvodina, a province of Serbia. Disputes over the status of Bunjevci have a long history. They date back to the 19th century, the time when nationalist movements were spreading across the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but their ‘national status’ has remained ambiguous ever since. The nationalist mobilizations sweeping through the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s have revived an almost century-old debate on the national status of the group. It has been argued that Bunjevci belong to the Croatian nation; that they are ethnic Serbs; and, conversely, that they constitute the ‘fourth South Slav nation’ of the country. The dispute has become considerably politicized, especially since the Yugoslav authorities included the category of ‘Bunjevac’ into the census in 1991, and the question on ethnic group affiliation was reanimated also in the census of April 2002.

The paper examines the reasons for the group’s ambiguous status in contemporary political

discourse. First, a historical analysis will be provided on the discussion of the national status of Bunjevci, i.e., the so-called “Bunjevci question.” This analysis will be based on secondary historical sources, with a focus on those that handle the issue from the point of the national ‘hetero-perception’ of the group. The historical overview will then be followed by examining the self-perception of the Bunjevci as reflected in the data of a survey on social and political attitudes conducted in Subotica, Serbia, in mid-1990s. In this survey, the primary question was to what extent did they perceive themselves as being a distinct ethnic group — the question that, according to Connor¹, is a defining characteristic of a nation. It was discovered that the majority of Bunjevci see themselves as Croats, but also that there is a significant minority not sharing that view. That result of the survey is particularly surprising given the strength of the nationalizing efforts stemming from the Croat political and cultural centers throughout the past decades, especially after 1989. Beside the immediate political implications, the remarkable gap between the prevailing nationalist ideologies and the Bunjevci’s actual self-understanding has also some important theoretical significance. Those theoretical facets will be explored at some length in the final part of the discussion.

The paper, thus, presents a case that is comparatively little addressed in the scholarship on ethnic minorities and nationalism, namely, a case when an ethnic group – in the present example, a minority group – does not develop a distinct and dominant national identity. Besides hopefully enriching the literature on national identity and nationalism, the discussion will render also some important political implications. In the geographical context of the former Yugoslavia that is often considered the “battlefield” of violent nationalisms, Bunjevci’s resistance to the nationalizing efforts puts serious questions to the existing academic stereotypes about the region.

2. The history of Bunjevci

As the purpose of this brief historical overview is only to contextualize the debates on Bunjevci nationality, it seemed most appropriate to focus solely on the most commonly accepted version of the group’s origin, and do so without making any attempts at evaluating historical accuracy.

The area where Bunjevci currently live, between the rivers Danube and Tisza in

¹ W. Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); W. Connor, ‘Beyond Reason: The Nature of the Ethnonational Bond’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16, No. 3 (1993), pp. 373-89.

Vojvodina, Serbia, was inhabited by Slavic tribes as early as the 6th century,² but it was populated also by various other communities whose relative number varied over time. The most common view, both popularly and among scholars, is that Bunjevci, fleeing the Ottoman invasion in the 17th century, migrated from western Herzegovina and Dalmatia to Vojvodina. They were led by Franciscan monks, and were accepted by the Habsburg authorities who intended to create a military frontier against Ottomans on their southern borders. The largest single migration occurred in 1686, and that year is officially celebrated by the Catholic Church in Subotica as the anniversary of the Bunjevci migration.³

Sekulić argues, however, that this popular story is too much simplified, since Bunjevci arrived as a “kind of refreshment to the Slavic inhabitants already there”⁴, in a sequence of smaller or larger migrations from the 15th and 16th centuries onwards. The author contends that the migration of 1686 happened either some years earlier or later, or did not occur at all.⁵ Moreover, available evidence suggests that Franciscan monks only did not organize migrations. Ottoman authorities also did which, following the conquest, wanted to populate the rather deserted area of Vojvodina. Regarding their region of origin, Bunjevci most likely came from various parts of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Lika and Dalmatia. As for their ethnic origin, Sekulić asserts that they were Slavenized Vallachs, converted to the Catholic faith, though among the migrants of the time there were also some former Catholics converted to Islam.⁶ In their new settlement, Bunjevci were under the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian rule, respectively, until 1918. Thereafter, the majority remained in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and later in Yugoslavia. A smaller portion stayed on in the territory of present-day Hungary.

3. Demographic characteristics

In general, historiographic studies hesitate to give precise estimates on the number of Bunjevci who migrated to Vojvodina. This is understandable given the lack of historical records and the fact that they migrated over a rather extended period and in many groups of different size, from several dozens of families to several thousands in cases of larger

² A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati: Narodni život i običaji*. [The Bačka Croats: The People's Life and Customs]. (Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 1991).

³ In the same period, Serbs also arrived and similarly spread in southern Hungary.

⁴ A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*, p. 497.

⁵ At that time and at the place where Bunjevci were supposed to settle, the Austro-Turkish war had been going on (see A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*.).

⁶ A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*, p. 56.

movements.⁷ Similarly, there is little information from the periods of Ottoman and Habsburg rule. Records even from 19th-century Hungary are difficult to use, because of the inconsistent ethnic classifications applied in the subsequent censuses⁸.

Estimations based on censuses conducted in Yugoslavia are also hard to make because, prior to the 1991 census, Bunjevci were not counted as a separate group. Nevertheless, censuses from 1971 and 1981 show that, in Vojvodina, there were 140,000 and 110,000 Croats, respectively. However, not all of them could be regarded as Bunjevci. In the southwestern parts of the region a significant number of Šokci live, who make up an ethnic group in various respects similar to Bunjevci but still distinct of theirs. Also, certain Croat subgroups represent individual migrations from more recent times. Taking into account all these reservations, Kuntić estimated in 1969 that there were approximately 100,000 Bunjevci living in Vojvodina.⁹ It will be possible to update the estimates once the results of the April 2002 census are published.

4. National status of Bunjevci: Disputes and Evidence

In the disputes over the national status of Bunjevci, a number of standard arguments have been used that, concerning their essence, have much in common with those emerging in the discussions over many other cases world-wide. It has been attempted to find criteria that would prove a certain view in a supposedly unambiguous, 'objective' way. Some of the most frequently used arguments, and the corresponding objections, follow.

First, in order to solve the puzzle of Bunjevci national status, it has been attempted to trace back the group's origin as far in history as possible. The simple underlying assumption goes like this: if before migration to Vojvodina they were, say, Croats — then necessarily they are still Croats. However, there are many problems with that argument. First of all, it is not clear how far back one should go back to find the 'right' answer. Stopping at a certain point in time can give one answer, while doing so at some other would conclude in a different one. And, as Connor points out, one should arrive at a special 'Adam and Eve' stage for each and every nation. Hence, one could equally argue that Bunjevci are Slavs, or Morlachs, or Croats, as well as that they are a distinct nation. Another problem with such 'historical' arguments is the meaning of the word "nation". It

⁷ A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*; A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe za preporod bačkih Bunjevaca*. [Beginnings of the Struggle for the Renewal of the Bačka Bunjevci]. (Beograd: private publication, 1969).

⁸ Some censuses recorded only the denomination of citizens, but not ethnicity.

⁹ A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

should be proved, for example, that at the time of the Bunjevci migration the Croatian nation existed in the form as it is perceived with the present-day meaning of the concept. Thus, while on the one hand the lack of reliable historical records makes different historical interpretations equally suspect, on the other, according to 'modernist' theoreticians of nationalism, it is not necessary to go far in the past to find the answer to the puzzle of the origin of contemporary *nations*.

Language is another kind of 'evidence' frequently used in these disputes. Contemporary Bunjevci, who still use their local dialect in communication, speak the *štokavski* dialect with *ikavski* pronunciation. From that it has been argued that Bunjevci 'clearly' belong to the Croatian and Serbian nations, as well as that they are a separate nation (of course, these diverse arguments were raised by different authors). The *ikavski* pronunciation is specific also for some parts of Dalmatia, thus, its use is often interpreted as a connection with Croats. The *štokavski* dialect is specific for all Serbs and some Croats¹⁰, hence Bunjevci can be seen also being of Serbian origin. Vuk Karadžić, the architect of the modern Serbo-Croatian language, believed that most Croats were in fact Catholic Serbs, because they spoke the *štokavski* dialect. In fact, up to the mid-19th century only the *kajkavski* dialect was called Croatian, while the *štokavski* dialect that later became official Croatian, was called *Illiric*.¹¹ The third linguistic argument rests on the fact that the language of Bunjevci, besides similarities with Serbian and Croatian, has some specific features, and therefore could be regarded as a separate language. There are a number of texts from the 18th century written in the dialect of Bunjevci. The fact is, however, that larger variations exist between local dialects in both Serbia and Croatia, than between the official versions of the two languages. The language of Bunjevci, not surprisingly, is most similar to the dialect spoken by Serbs from Vojvodina.

Customs, traditional beliefs, oral literature and similar ethnographic evidence are also frequently used for 'proving' the nationality of Bunjevci. Some authors argue that their oral literature is identical with that of Serbs,¹² and various customs are also much the same in the two groups¹³. Others believe that Bunjevci customs are basically of Croatian origin,¹⁴ while yet others emphasize the specificity of a set of Bunjevci traditions that cannot be found either among Serbs or Croats. As a matter of fact, one can detect certain elements in

¹⁰ *Štokavski* dialect is official in Croatia, but in some parts of Croatia *kajkavski* and *čakavski* dialects are spoken too.

¹¹ Buljovčić, *Filološki ogledi*. [Philological Examinations]. Subotica: Studije, Subotičke novine, 1996), p. 14.

¹² A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

¹³ M. Peić in *Žig*, Vol. 2, No. 49 (June 1, 1996), Subotica.

¹⁴ E.g., A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*.

Bunjevci customs which are truly specific; still, the majority of customs and traditions are similar to the respective Croat, Serbian and Hungarian ones. This is no surprise: after all, such a state of affairs is a natural consequence of the lasting impact that these cultures left on Bunjevci traditions during the course of history.

It is particularly illustrative how immense attention in literature on Bunjevci is devoted to listing all surnames that could be found among Bunjevci.¹⁵ The underlying assumption is that surnames can prove the clue to *biological* relatedness of Bunjevci, both among themselves and with other nations. Such an understanding perfectly fits Connor's view on the sources of national feelings.¹⁶ Though these kinds of data are always interesting, the overlap in surnames between Serbs, Croats and Bunjevci again makes the efforts considerably inconclusive.

Written evidence on how others used to refer to Bunjevci is also utilized as an indicator of their nationality. The results are, of course, ambiguous. To the Austro-Hungarian authorities, for example, they were known as Serbian Catholics, Dalmatians, Racz Catholics, Vallachs – Catholics, Bunievctzi and, rarely, as Croats.¹⁷ It seems that the administration of the Austrian Empire also applied some class criteria in determining the subjects' ethnicity.¹⁸ These kinds of evidence are inconclusive, no less than the bulk of results driven from various other, supposedly more scientific investigations.¹⁹

¹⁵ E.g., A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*; *Žig* No. 49; T. Vereš, *Bunjevačko pitanje danas*. [The Bunjevci Question Today], (Subotica: Studije, Subotičke novine, 1997).

¹⁶ W. Connor. 'A Nation is A Nation, Is A State, Is An Ethnic Group, Is A ...', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1, No. 4 (1978), pp. 377-400.

¹⁷ See A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*; A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*; T. Vereš, *Bunjevačko pitanje danas*. The name Croat appeared in Hungarian census only in mid 19th century. See *Žig*, Vol. 2, No. 50 (June 15, 1996). In the broader territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, various groups of present-day Croats had been put in various categories, e.g., as Croats, Šokci, Bunjevci, Dalmats, Ilirs, Bosnians, Krašovans, Slavs. See M. Černelić, 'Nastojanja da se bačkim Bunjevcima ospori pripadnost hrvatskom narodu' [Attempts to deny the Bunjevci of Bačka the right to belong to the Croatian nation], *Stud. ethnol. Croat.* Vol. 6 (1994) pp. 85-103. As another illustration, it is interesting, how Czartoryski, a known Polish pan-Slavist from the first half of the 19th century, saw South Slav national composition. In his view, there existed Dalmatians, Croats, Slavonians (not Slovenes), Banatians, Ilirs, Montenegrins, Herzegovinians, Bosnians, Serbs and Bulgars. Presently, only some of them 'possess' their own states and are regarded as 'nations'.

¹⁸ Kuntić shows how highschool students in Subotica in the late 19th century were differently labeled, depending on their social status and quite regardless of ethnicity. Students of *nobiles* strata were called as *Hungari* regardless of their Slavic names and surnames and even if some were of the Orthodox Christian faith; students of *cives* origin were categorized as *Iliri* as well as students with Hungarian names and surnames who were of *plebeus* origin. See A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*, p. 372.

¹⁹ Kuntić presents attempts of some authors to solve the problem of Bunjevci by anthropological measures. For example, one author found that various indices of the shape of Bunjevci's head were more similar to Serbian than to Croat heads. See A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

In the light of the above brief summary, it is of particular interest to review those aspects of defining the national status of Bunjevci that are *not* considered relevant in the discourse on the subject. An example is national self-understanding of Bunjevci. Even those authors who declare that self-understanding is of the greatest importance for national self-determination pay only minimal attention to it.²⁰ In cases when self-understanding is considered, it's presentation remains on an anecdotal level and is restricted to the introduction of the views of a few leaders of Bunjevci national revival from 19th and early 20th century. However, they themselves present opposing views, and it could be argued that they expressed views of elites into which they were assimilated.²¹ Thus, it can be stated as a fact that there does not exist any reliable evidence of the popular national self-understanding of Bunjevci, whether over history or at the present time. It seems that those who had resources for such examination were not interested in popular views, but rather to 'enlighten' Bunjevci of their true nationality, whether Croat, Serbian, or Hungarian. Some data relevant to this problem will be presented below.

Another rather neglected topic in the arguments about the nationality of Bunjevci is religion. It would be difficult to find an author who argues that Bunjevci are Croats *because* they are Catholics. One could say, of course, that religion has nothing to do with nationality, because, for example, descendants of Incas in Latin America are also Catholics. The problem is that "nations" in central Yugoslavia have been constructed largely according to religious lines, rather than to ethnic ones. An obvious case was the creation of the Muslim (Bosnian) nation by Tito's government decree, but similar is the contemporary case of Serbs and Croats. The question then is why religion is not used as a decisive argument regarding the nationality of Bunjevci, when it is obviously the clearest *objective* distinction within the Yugoslavian context?²² The answer could be again found with the help of Connor's theory, and will be discussed in more detail below. It seems that nationalist activists have been keenly aware of the importance of the sense of common kinship.

Two inferences can be made from the previous exposition. First, it can be seen that all the 'objective' evidence proves to be inconclusive — concerning their national status, Bunjevci equally could be Croats, Serbs or themselves. Second, the brief summary demonstrated that the disputes have given the greatest importance to those indicators that

²⁰ E.g., A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

²¹ This is of course a matter of preferences whether one would say that, say, Catholic Bishop Ivan Antunović in 19th-century Subotica was *assimilated* or *nationally conscious* when argued that Bunjevci are Croats.

²² In fact, some pro-Serbian authors argue that before Bunjevci converted to Catholicism, they were Orthodox, consequently, they were of Serbian origin.

somehow can be used to determine the genetic makeup of Bunjevci, i.e. whether they share ancestors in common with Croats or Serbs.

5. What Bunjevci think of themselves: self-understanding in its historical context

The question of Bunjevac nationality will be settled when a certain identity becomes predominant among the members of the community.²³ Therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to their national self-understanding.

It is rather difficult to assess the identity of Bunjevci in times prior to their migrations. However, it seems unlikely that they perceived themselves as a single related group, internally homogeneous, externally bounded, to use Brubaker's²⁴ terms. They came from different places, in several waves of migrations over a considerably lengthy period. Therefore, the common identity of 'Bunjevac' most probably emerged later.

It seems justified to assume that between the early waves of migration and the national revival emerging in the mid-19th century it was various local identities that were dominant, however, the perception also of a sense of relatively broader relatedness cannot be entirely excluded. A degree of differentiation from the 'others' quite likely played a role, because rather clear 'markers' existed: language in relationship to Magyars, and religion with regard to Serbs. It was already mentioned that *others* (at least, the authorities) distinguished them in official documents, though under various names. Conditions of low mobility, both vertical and horizontal, infrequent intermarriages (except for very few members of the upper classes), in other words clear group boundaries, worked in favor of maintaining a sense of relatedness, i.e., of common descent.

A considerable influence on Bunjevac self-understanding came from national movements among Magyars, Croats and Serbs since the beginning of the 19th century. On the one hand, these movements emphasized boundaries between groups, but on the other, they also attempted to secure the loyalty of Bunjevci by incorporating (assimilating) them into these 'larger' nations. The forced nationalizing attempts of the Magyar state, in spite of harsh assimilationist measures towards Bunjevci, perhaps only reinforced the Bunjevac self-consciousness due to the prevailing language differences. In 1827, for example,

²³ See W. Connor, 'When is a Nation?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13, No. 1 (1990), pp. 92-103; W. Connor, 'Beyond Reason'; W. Connor, 'More Recent Developments' in W. Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, pp. 67-86.

²⁴ R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: nationhood and the national question in the new Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Hungarian became Hungary's only official language.²⁵ At least partly as a reaction to this, mid-19th century saw the awakening of the Bunjevac national movement, leading to such practical developments as the foundation of schools, printing of newspapers, and the foundation of Bunjevac political parties. The Educational Law of 1868 gave permission for the usage of national languages in schools. Nevertheless, Bunjevac schools in Subotica were closed in the 1870s, and again, it was Hungarian language that was exclusively used until 1918.²⁶

The indigenous national movement was led by the newly-emerging national intelligentsia, among whom the most influential were Ivan Antunović, a Catholic Bishop in Subotica, and Boza Šarčević, a journalist and ethnographer. Their activities largely concentrated on language rights and preservation, and on ethnographic work. In 1880, an indigenous political party -*Bunjevačka stranka*- was founded.²⁷ In 1895, a commissioner of the *Matica Hrvatska*²⁸ arrived at Subotica to spread the ideas of Croatian nationhood.²⁹

Two examples are sufficient to illustrate these new activities. One is a request presented to the local authorities in Subotica, in 1905, that at least one member of the police patrols should be able to speak Croatian (the authorities refused the request), and the other is a request for church services to be held in the native languages.³⁰ At the same time, according to Kuntić, towards the end of the 19th century Serbian national leaders from Vojvodina rather neglected Bunjevci, equating the Orthodox faith with Serbian nationality.³¹

The idea of the single Yugoslav nation consisting of several 'tribes' such as Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, began to spread among the masses and some elite around the beginning of the 20th century. There is some evidence that this conception was welcomed by Bunjevci, as a kind of 'middle road' between Croats and Serbs, though some interpreted it as the arising ideology of the 'Greater-Serbian' conspiracy.³² At this time, around the

²⁵ As a result, for example, a Serbian school in Sombor founded in 1816 had to change the teaching language to Hungarian.

²⁶ A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*, pp. 70-71, 74-75.

²⁷ A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*, p. 79

²⁸ Cultural organization, very influential in the process of the Croatian nation formation.

²⁹ A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*, p. 81.

³⁰ A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*, p. 82. The same source also cites cases of separating churches in two parts for service in Hungarian and Croat. More radical events also happened, when, for example, one group of 1200 Bunjevci, angered by the Hungarian language policy, converted to Orthodoxy.

³¹ A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

³² See T. Vereš, *Bunjevačko pitanje danas*; M. Černelić, 'Nastojanja'.

First World War, a new idea was articulated according to which Bunjevci were not only a distinct group, but they should be treated as the fourth, though the smallest, Yugoslav nation.³³ Most authors agree that the creation of the new South Slav state after the war was fully welcomed by Bunjevci,³⁴ though it is unclear to what extent the new Yugoslav identity was accepted in the ethnic sense, or only as a political program.

Between the two world wars, the disputes regarding the national status of Bunjevci reached their peak. There were supporters of all three positions: pro-Serbian, pro-Croatian and 'Bunjevci on their own'. There is an abundance of newspaper articles on this topic. This was the period when also the first serious historical and ethnographic studies about Bunjevci came into light.

Political processes of the time also had profound influence on Bunjevac self-perception. Political parties were largely constituted along ethnic lines. Bunjevci votes were attractive for both Serbian and Croat parties. Kuntić shows that members of this small community were mostly supporters of the Croatian Peasant Party, which was rather populist and nationalist in profile.³⁵ His work suggests that the Croatian nationality policy had a certain degree of success in mobilizing Bunjevci at least partly on the grounds of offering national identity. As ethnic boundaries between Serbs and Croats hardened along religious lines, it was natural that Bunjevci increasingly felt themselves closer to Croats. Therefore, it could be argued that their voting preferences resulted in the increasing proportion of those community-members whose national identity was considered Croat - both by others and by themselves.

In the socialist Yugoslavia, Bunjevci were officially regarded as Croats and were categorized as such in all official documents. In the context of the official national policy of 'brotherhood and unity', the question of Bunjevci appeared as being resolved. However, in local schools the Serbian version of the Serbo-Croatian language in Latin script was used.³⁶ This language policy has been sometimes interpreted as a tacit attempt to assimilate Bunjevci into the Serbian culture.³⁷ This interpretation appeared as justified especially during the 1990s, when the Cyrillic script was introduced as the first script children learned in schools. According to the new Serbian Law on national minorities, adopted in February 2002, Croats are recognized as a national minority with the right to have schools in Croat

³³ See A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*; A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

³⁴ E.g., A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*; A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

³⁵ A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

³⁶ *Ekavski* pronunciation, not *ijekavski* as in mainland Croatia.

³⁷ M. Černelić, 'Nastojanja'.

language. However, the first response from Bunjevci seems to be ambiguous. Although eight primary schools in Subotica municipality obtained permission to establish classes in Croatian, it seems that many of Bunjevci parents are reluctant to use this option.³⁸

Because, concerning Bunjevci national self-understanding, it is difficult to rely on official census data from all these periods, it is necessary to look for indirect evidence. In this regard, it is indicative that many young Bunjevci took their university degree in Zagreb. This pattern became especially pronounced after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Croatia introduced special stipends for the 'Croats in Diaspora'.³⁹ These are all signals of the fact that an increasing proportion of Bunjevci has considered Croat identity as their primary national identity.

According to the 1991 census, 74,808 Croats and 21,434 Bunjevci were living in Vojvodina.⁴⁰ In the district of Subotica, there were approximately equal numbers of declared Croats and Bunjevci: 16,369 and 17,439, respectively. Considering the fact that, in Subotica, they are both generally descents of Bunjevac migrants, it follows that half of them declare primarily Croat identity and the other half Bunjevci identity. It is also important that many of Bunjevac origin declare themselves as Yugoslavs. Examining the data of those villages that remained predominantly Bunjevac throughout the last three centuries can reveal this. Taking the example of the village of D. Tavankut, census-data show that out of its 2,710 inhabitants, 877 (32 percent) declared themselves as Croat, 989 (37 percent) as Bunjevac, and 600 (22 percent) as Yugoslav.⁴¹ Such a large number of declared Yugoslavs cannot be attributed only to intermarriages. The declaration of Yugoslav identity was probably rather a reaction to the then contemporary political manipulations with the nationality of Bunjevci.

Further, and very important, source of evidence of Bunjevac national self-understanding can be interviewing people and directly asking them about their self-perception. In 1996, a survey of social and political attitudes was conducted in Subotica, a region of Vojvodina where the majority of Bunjevci reside.⁴² For the purpose of this paper,

³⁸ E.g., *Subotičke novine*, Vol. 57, No. 22 (May 30, 2002); No. 23 (Jun 6, 2002).

³⁹ From the point of view of Brubaker's theory, Croatian citizenship policy is particularly interesting. Namely, similarly to German regulations, whoever is of Croat origin can acquire the Croatian citizenship regardless of the place of residence. Throughout the 1990s, a certificate from the Catholic Church authorities has been usually the sufficient documentation. As a result, it became a custom in Subotica area to own both Yugoslav and Croatian passport.

⁴⁰ *Statistički bilten, br. 1934* (Beograd: Savezni zavod za statistiku, 1991).

⁴¹ *Bunjevačke i Šokačke novine*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (February 16, 1994).

⁴² The survey was conducted by the Center for Social Research, Subotica. It is an unpublished survey, ordered by the local self-government. I am thankful to the CSR for allowing me to use the data. The sample was

the following question was of particular interest: *'Do you agree that Bunjevci are part of the Croatian nation?'* At the aggregate level, nearly 60 percent of the respondents moderately or strongly agreed with such a statement. However, when national sub-samples were analyzed separately, it became obvious that this question strongly differentiated Bunjevci from Croats. Virtually all declared Croats (94 percent) moderately or strongly agreed that Bunjevci were part of the Croatian nation, while such a view was supported only by 39 percent of Bunjevci.⁴³

This finding suggests that there are several 'kinds' of Bunjevci. Some accept Croatian national identity but regard it secondary to their Bunjevac identity (these are those members of the community who declare themselves as Bunjevac, but accept that Bunjevci 'belong' to the Croatian nation). In the second group are those Bunjevci who do not accept Croatian national identity at all (they declare themselves Bunjevci and do not think that they in any sense belong to the Croatian nation). Another group would be some of those who declare themselves as Croats, but maintain Bunjevac as their secondary identity (they are those who are considered 'Bunjevci with appropriate national consciousness' - as it is often put by some Croatian nationalist writers).⁴⁴ Still another possible sub-group comprises those who have only Croatian national identity, i.e., who do not regard themselves as Bunjevci either in ethnic or national sense. Thus, the auto-perception of the Bunjevac national status is heterogeneous.

Further analysis of the survey data showed that Bunjevci and Croats differ in a number of characteristics. In general, declared Bunjevci expressed a more positive attitude toward the then ruling regime in Serbia; at the same time, they were less in favor of greater autonomy and special provisions for national minorities; and were less interested in strengthening the links with Croatia as the 'external homeland'. Declared Croats expressed adverse opinions and attitudes.

These findings suggest that declared Croats represent a nationally mobilized minority, and in their political and attitudinal outlook, they are closer to the local Magyar minority than to Bunjevci - though with the latter they share the same 'origin'. Bunjevci, on the other hand, appear as 'loyal' local citizens, without having any external homeland to be mobilized for. Thus, one can note that national identity is strongly embedded in social and

constructed on the basis of census data, but nationalities were disproportionately represented in order to have larger number of Croats and Bunjevci for statistical analyses. The sample (N=548) consisted of 33% Croats, 25% Bunjevci, 15% Serbs, 13% Hungarians, and 14% declared themselves Yugoslav.

⁴³ Declared Yugoslavs and Serbs particularly disagreed with the question, while Magyars were close to Croats.

⁴⁴ M. Černelić, 'Nastojanja'.

political processes; in other words, it is far from being informed only by history or genetics. Political attitudes and beliefs appear to be manifestations of identity (in this case: national identity), but at the same time they are important constituents determining the identity of the members of a given community, at least in cases when these identities are not yet crystallized and fully institutionalized.

Throughout their history, Bunjevci have been exposed to factors that both enhanced and hampered the homogenization of their national identity, whether as a separate nation or through incorporation/assimilation into neighboring nations. Between the two world wars, the option of incorporation into the Croatian nation started to predominate, but this process was in a sense ‘frozen’ during socialist times. When the ghosts of nationalism were released at the beginning of the 1990s, Bunjevci could not avoid facing the question of their national identity. As the above discussion has proved, their answer, contrary to the spirit of the nationalist credo, has not been uniform.

The elaboration of the historical and attitudinal indicators of national self-understanding of Bunjevci has shown us, how complex is the nexus of nationalizing states, mobilizing minorities, external homelands,⁴⁵ language policies, socio-political, and economic factors. Let us turn now to the closer discussion of the mutual interaction among the psychological, economic and political factors at play here.

6. Discussion and conclusions

According to Connor, a nation comes into existence when belief in common origin and blood kinship becomes pervasive in a group.⁴⁶ The largest group to which such belief is applied is in fact a nation. This explains the emotional strength of national attachment. As long as local identities are dominant on a certain territory, and as long as group-attachment is solely based on the sense of common descent linked to narrower groups such as extended family and tribe, it cannot be said that a nation really exists.

The evidence presented in the previous sections suggests that certain favorable conditions have existed for Bunjevci to become a nation. Various factors, such as clear boundaries in relation to neighboring groups, fostered their sense of common descent. Attempts at tracing the kinship relationships through a careful examination of surnames, show that the ‘entrepreneurs’ of nation-building worked under the hypothesis of common

⁴⁵ See R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*; R. Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴⁶ W. Connor, ‘When is a Nation?’; W. Connor, ‘Beyond Reason’.

descent. Various indicators of Bunjevci's self-understanding show that such sense indeed has developed. Despite the favorable conditions, a smooth path to the development of a distinct national identity still has not been followed. This fact indicates that solely the believes in a common descent are not sufficient constituents of nation formation. In case of Bunjevci, the sense of kinship could be and is attached to different groups: to Bunjevci themselves, but also to the broader group of Croats. Connor's theory does not contain conceptual tools to deal with this problem of multifarious bondages. External, non-psychological factors have to be considered.

Confusions around national identity have emerged with the rise of nationalist movements in the area. Hungary in the 19th century was a rapidly nationalizing state; Croatia was a nation-in-search-of a-state; and Serbia acted as an 'external homeland' attempting to mobilize its minority in Vojvodina.⁴⁷ A similar situation existed after the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, though with an already diminished influence of Hungary. Nationality of Bunjevci became a topic of concern for Belgrade's and Zagreb's political elite.⁴⁸ After World War II it seemed that the question was settled by categorizing Bunjevci as Croats in official statistics. However, in the 1990's, the disintegration of Yugoslavia increased the salience of ethnic identities and divisions. In this context, the concept of national/ethnic identity has become again loaded with additional meaning, primarily concerning the issue of political loyalty (or, at least, political attitude) towards Serbia and Croatia.

These processes and relationships can be efficiently conceptualized in Brubaker's terms of nationalizing states, mobilizing minorities, external homelands. When interpreting Bunjevac national identity, it is necessary to take into account social and political processes, particularly the relationships between political actors and the various 'national' elites. However, Brubaker's theory would predict more complete integration of Bunjevci into the Croatian nation than what has happened in reality.

After applying the analytical suggestions of Connor and Brubaker, a third approach has to be considered: that of Ernest Gellner.⁴⁹ In Gellner's view, "nationalism engenders nations, not the other way round"⁵⁰, meaning that the industrial economy requires and creates homogeneity in the political space which then finds political expression in

⁴⁷ The role of Serbia in nationalist mobilization in Vojvodina is extensively discussed in A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

⁴⁸ See for example Černelić's account of 'Serbianizing' policies in that period (M. Černelić, 'Nastojanja').

⁴⁹ See, for example, E. Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1991); E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

⁵⁰ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

nationalist ideology. In this way, nationalism is “rooted in *certain kind* of division of labor”⁵¹. During the Austro-Hungarian times, Hungarian countryside to which Bunjevci belonged, was economically rather backward, predominantly agrarian in nature.⁵² Economic forces which would foster homogenization were missing. Prospects for mobility, whether vertical or horizontal, which would reinforce assimilation were very weak. Sekulić shows that “the core of the nationality remained among peasants | they resisted Magyarization”⁵³, while those who moved upward on the social ladder (who achieved the status of nobility; bourgeois positions were rather rare) tended to assimilate. Bunjevci, being peasants, were not specially targeted by assimilationist activities, and were also not particularly attracted by their prospects in case of assimilation.

For various reasons, Croatian nationalizing influence was only partly successful. Most of the time, Bunjevci were outside of the direct political control and influence of the Croatian political power. Therefore, it was difficult to manage the processes of intra-national homogenization via e.g. language standardization. Bunjevci were obviously out of the scope of homogenization of the Croatian political space and therefore remained relatively detached from Croatian national identity. On the other hand, the insurmountable obstacles of differences in religious denomination prevented Bunjevci from adopting Serbian national identity.

While the aforementioned factors prevented more complete assimilation of Bunjevci, the lack of indigenous elite, caused partly by the group’s small size and partly by weak economic and political resources paired with the lack of nationalist radicalism,⁵⁴ prevented more complete development of the idea of Bunjevci being a separate nation. Institutional completeness is obviously a factor favoring development of the distinctive group identity. Throughout the time, however, Bunjevac communities have arrived to a rather incomplete arsenal of institutions.

In order to put the events and processes discussed above into a comprehensive theoretical framework, it proved useful to adopt a mixture of different approaches in our analysis. In this regard, theories of Connor, Gellner and Brubaker were particularly useful. Connor’s approach illuminated subjective and emotional aspects of ethnic and national identity. Gellner’s theory brought to light socio-economic aspects or conditions for the emergence of successful nationalism. For incorporating nationalist movements into political

⁵¹ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 140.

⁵² A. M. Kuntić, *Počeci borbe*.

⁵³ A. Sekulić, *Bački Hrvati*, p. 81.

⁵⁴ Many of the Bunjevci national revival leaders were Catholic priests, who by definition were not particularly ‘revolutionary’ minded.

relations, great profit could be made of Brubaker's concept of the nexus of interrelated factors.

These three approaches are not mutually exclusive. They could be seen as concentric circles regarding their explanatory domain. Connor explains psychological aspects of the bond between the individual and the group. Gellner's theory does not deal with individuals but with society (largely in its economic aspects) within which groups, potential nations, exist and transform. Brubaker helps to conceptualize relationships between political entities, i.e., interactions of states, nations and ethnic groups, what is actually a framework in which forces that Gellner discusses do operate.

Regarding the 'national prospects' of Bunjevci, it seems that their position today is similar to what Serbs and Croats had toward broader Yugoslav identity in the recent past. In the latter case, the more general entity could have been understood in terms of common ancestry but it did not prevail. It is the future which will show whether Bunjevci will opt for their uniqueness, or for the Croatian national identity. But, most probably the process will follow what Gellner predicts for small ethnic groups without their own institutions of 'high' culture. They are bound to "see their culture...slowly disappear, dissolving into the wider culture of some new national state"⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.