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WHY BUNJEVCI DID NOT BECOME A NATION
A Case Study

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 politi-
cal attitudes conducted in Subotica, Serbia, in the 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 Connor, 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.

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 Vojvodina, Serbia, was inhabited by Slavic tribes as early as the 6th century, 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 In the same period, Serbs also arrived and similarly spread in southern Hungary.