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Trust and Legitimation – The Case of Serbia

Abstract

Social capital purports a certain "moral density" in the society which implies trust and establishing relations with others – individuals, groups and institutions, that are, in turn, a benchmark for the formation of one's own habitus, living strategies and behaviour. Serbia shares much of the experience of the post-socialist, transition countries both in the region (Western Balkans) and wider surroundings (Eastern Europe). However, it seems that some particular factors (war in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, the break-up of the SRY and Montenegro's departure, as well as the declaration of Kosovo as an independent state) and the general social and economic crisis, which have resulted in a "delay" in transition processes, have a specific impact on the recorded level of trust. The data also shows a very low level of civic participation, which can be interpreted as the final chapter in the post-October 5th era and the disillusionment with the new political elite, but in the political system in its entirety as well.

Starting from this data, we would like to identify the values upon which the citizens of Serbia legitimize their behaviour and establish relations with other people based on the analysis of empirical (quantitative and qualitative) data in this text. We would like to observe whether collectivistic or individualistic values guide people in their social actions. On the basis of the findings we can perceive whether the values adopted by our examinees induce traditionalistic social relationships or may encourage democratic empowerment of the society.

The text is based on the analysis of the results obtained in the research "Social and Cultural Capital in Serbia" (2011) (questionnaire and focus group interviews).

Key words: values, legitimation, trust, Serbia, social capital

The question of trust is definitely not a new one in social theory. It was dealt with by the forefathers of sociology themselves. One can recall Durkheim's celebrated phrase that 'in a contract not everything is contractual' (1984: 158), which states the position that stable collective life must be based on more than calculations of self-interest and that an element of trust is essential for a smooth flow of social interactions.

In a similar, perhaps a bit more dramatic manner, Georg Simmel states that without trust 'society itself would disintegrate' (2004: 177-8)[1]. Weber can also be mentioned in this context regarding his considerations in *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism* on the higher level of trust that is put in the American businessmen who belong to a particular protestant sect.

As far as contemporaries are concerned, Francis Fukuyama followed Weber in his exposition of trust as the indispensable ingredient of viable economic systems. Diego Gambetta, Piotr Sztompka, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Bernard Barber, and Anthony Giddens can be mentioned amongst others of the modern theoreticians who, at least at one point, made trust a central subject of their deliberations.[2]

Giddens defined trust as a 'confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses a faith in the probity or love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles' (1990: 34).

As noted earlier, trust becomes one of the chief resources of integration in the modern society.[3] In a time when 'old allegiances' lose their strength, when 'mechanical solidarity' is no longer the dominant principle which 'holds us together', a situation of *anomie*[4] can be diagnosed. As Durkheim states in his *The Division of Labour in Society*, the problem with trust and solidarity stems from the difference which is caused by the more developed division of labour in his concept. Modern society is based on the high division of labour, and on the high level of interdependence, thus making the trust in another a precondition of social life.

1   Simmel gives one sort of a definition of trust when he writes: 'To 'believe in someone', without adding or even conceiving what it is that one believes about him, is to employ a very subtle and profound idiom. It expresses the feeling that there exists between our idea of a being and the being itself a definite connection and unity, a certain consistency in our conception of it, an assurance and lack of resistance in the surrender of the Ego to this conception, which may rest upon particular reasons, but is not explained by them' (2004: 178).

2   A good overview can be found in Sztompka's: *Trust: A Sociological Theory* (1999).

3   See Giddens' *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990: 102) for a comparative display of the environments of trust in pre-modern and modern cultures.

4   In Durkheim's words: 'a rule that is a lack of rule' (2002: 218).

The issue of the level of trust which exists in a single society has particularly become relevant through the notion of social capital, and especially the part of it which comes from Robert Putnam. For Putnam, the cause of the compromised trust in a society lies in its differences, with special attention directed towards the ethnic ones. A higher difference present in a society is, according to Putnam (2007), in correlation with a lower level of trust. The second reason for the decreasing level of trust that Inglehart (1997) talks about lies in the great changes that societies have been faced with in recent decades.

In this paper we will try to determine which values ('abstract principles') the people of Serbia find to be 'the correct' ones – those that are usually labelled collectivistic or those often referred to as individualistic. Values, in their turn, give legitimacy, moral grounding, to human behaviour and establishing of specific types of relations between people. By identifying the dominant values, we can assess the type of the stimulus that is at work in contemporary Serbia – the one towards the traditional relations of the community or the one that leads to a democratic empowerment of society.

A state of turmoil which is characteristic of the post-socialist societies, such as the Serbian, also engenders anomie, a social interregnum in which, at least, two value conceptions struggle for hegemony. In our case, the one being oriented towards the national, local and suspect of everything and anything that bears the label of 'Western' or 'European', and the other striving for the civic, cosmopolitan, and embracing liberal principles which originate from the tradition of enlightenment.

Such conditions are the background for the debate on the relation between the traditional and modern elements in social reality, the wish for modern social relations and the longing for traditional ones. This debate exists in the expert circles, as well as in the public opinion. The Serbian public opinion often contains the discourse that sees the approach to the EU as part of the sovereignty of Serbia and national identity, and this debate fits into the existing debates that render the modernization and globalization processes as dangerous for the traditional forms of life – "the Serbian way of life" (Gavrilović & Zaharijevski 2011: 209).

Inglehart's study *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economical and Political Change in 43 Societies*, begins with the debate on the nature of modernization, poses the question of multiple modernizations and identifies post-modern elements in contemporary societies, while in Serbia the debate concerning traditional-modern, and individualistic values

as the precondition for the democratization of the society vs. collectivism as the dominant value, is still relevant.

Serbia: an attempt at diagnosis

Serbia shares much of the experience of transition countries, both within the region (Western Balkans) and the wider surroundings (Eastern Europe). However, some specific factors, such as the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, split with Montenegro, and the proclamation of Kosovo's independence, as well as the overall social and economic crisis, resulting in a 'delay' of transition processes, are likely to have also influenced the level of trust in Serbia. The data also shows a very low level of civic participation, which may be interpreted as the final chapter of the post-October 5th era and the disillusionment with the new political elite and the political system in general. To this picture, one should add the enormous economic problems encountered by the citizens of Serbia as transition losers. Analyzing 43 societies, Inglehart observes that the connection between the economic development and identified values exists. In poor and transition countries, his research shows, the connection between the age and value orientation is much more explicit than in the case of developed societies which have had a continuous evolutionary development. It is to be expected having in mind the fact that a re-evaluation of values has occurred in former socialist countries, and that new generations are being socialized in completely different circumstances (Inglehart 1997).

The great majority of people in Serbia share one common feature. This social situation reflects on their psychological, as well as physical, health. Every second person in Serbia does not feel well, or suffers from some mild depression symptoms, and in 4.4% of women and 2.4% of men depression was identified as a disease, according to a survey of *The Batut Institute*. More than half (55.8%) of the people feel anxious, depressed, sad, exhausted and tired. On the other hand, only 4.4% feel enthusiastic, serene, calm, happy and energetic, in a word: well. Most of them are citizens of Belgrade who have enough money to live (s.n. 2010). The *Gallup Balkan Monitor* survey reports that Serbia is among 5 countries with the most depressed population, thus depression can be regarded a national disease.

Inglehart (1997) finds a positive correlation between the level of trust and the level of satisfaction with life. If the abovementioned is to be taken into account, Serbian people do not have the basis that is required for the

high level of trust. The data from the 2008 *European Values Study* (EVS) confirm this: only 11.6% of examinees think that the majority of people in Serbia deserve their trust, while 86.2% of them believe that in Serbia one should 'have eyes in the back of one's head'. This level of trust positions Serbia among the countries with the lowest level of trust in Europe (Adam, 2007: 189).

To identify the social networks in which a certain level of trust exists and which represent the social environment of our examinees, therefore, the citizens of Serbia who ask for help in difficult situations, we put the question "Do people ask you for help?"[5] The analysis shows that 19.5% of examinees from Serbia answer 'often', 49.7% 'sometimes', and 17% 'rarely'. This data does not speak much unless we determine the contents of that interaction. Table 1 shows the distribution of answers 'often' and 'sometimes' depending on who asks people for help.

Table 1: Who asks people for help

Who asks for your help?	Often	Sometimes
Relatives	13,7%	49,2%
Godfather/Best man	5.1 %	23,4%
Countrymen	9,3%	32,7%
Neighbours	15,6%	49,2%
Friends from the neighbourhood	18,9%	42,9%
Friends from school	8,7%	22,8%
Co-workers	14,1%	22,4%
Business friends	7,3%	15,4%
Members of their party	2,1%	2,6%
Members of a religious community	3,3%	4,5%
Those who were done a favour	4,6%	34,0%

Most often, it is the people that we come into face-to-face relations (friends from the neighbourhood, neighbours, co-workers) or who are part of the larger family (relatives). Sometimes they are countrymen or those that need a favour returned.

To make a more complete picture of interpersonal trust, we present the data on how many and which people can our examinees rely upon in difficult situations.

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5   The research "Social and Cultural Capital in Serbia" conducted in 2011 by the Centre for Empirical Cultural Studies.

Table 2: How many people can you rely upon?

	1	2	3
Relatives	10, 5%	24,6%	17,7%
Godfather/Best man	21,0%	26,7%	7,2%
Countrymen	7,1%	13,8%	9,4%
Neighbours	11,1%	25,3%	17,4%
Friends from the neighbourhood	9. 0%	19,9%	13,2%
Friends from school	8,5%	14,8%	10,2%
Co-workers	8,7%	15,2%	13,0%
Business friends	5,4%	8,1%	7,9%
Members of their party	1,3%	2,4%	4,4%
Members of a religious community	2,0%	3,0%	5,0%

Here, we also find the same social network which comprises closest relations, mainly specific for a traditional society, such as relatives and neighbours.

As for the civic activism, as yet another indicator of trust, EVS findings show that the level of activity and voluntary work within the civil society is very low. Only 2.3% of examinees participate in associations which deal with various forms of social care, 4.4% in cultural activities, 5.7% in unions, 2.1% in local community actions, 1.1% in associations for the protection of human rights. The situation is similar with the participation in associations for environmental protection, and women's or peace movements. No less than 77% of examinees claim that they do not belong to any group or association. The individual action through associations of like-minded people is not a form of activity which is greatly present in Serbia. Serbia is not a country of active citizens which fight for their interests. Although we are about to see (Chart 1) that politics occupies the last position based on the importance attached by the citizens, the "usual political behaviour" is still the dominant form of activity, despite the fact that the membership in political parties due to one's own interest is stigmatized.

When it comes to the trust in institutions, Serbia fares low. The influence of institutions on the level of trust is limited, and it is further weakened in Serbia because of the weakness of institutions themselves. The research conducted in July 2010 on the territory of the Western Balkans (*Gallup Balkan Monitor*) showed that the military and church were the institutions most trusted in Serbia since 2008. However, the military has taken over the first place from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in the last

three years. The trust that the military enjoys has increased from 63% to 77%, while at the same time the trust in church has decreased from 75% to 66%. The church is followed by the police that enjoys the trust of 59.6% examinees in Serbia, while significantly lower numbers of citizens trust the media (41.6%), the judiciary (38%), and the government (33%). This case, of military and church being the most trusted institutions, points to the prevalence of traditional consciousness, in which order, stern hierarchy and unquestionable authority, being spiritual or corporeal, are emphasized as chief merits. Inglehart's research shows that in the developed Western countries the trust in institutions is also diminishing, but that such a state implies the activity of the individual on the improvement of social life conditions. The data presented here, which deals with Serbia, shows the lack of trust in institutions such as the Serbian Government, president of the state, yet it does not result, as we can see, in personal activity within civil associations, but in the return to the nearest surroundings and turning to "remote institutions" such as the SOC, which have a relatively small influence on the real life.

On the other hand, elections turnout, as one of the indicators of trust, in the Presidential elections in Serbia in 2008 was 68.14%, and in the Parliamentary elections in 2008 – 61.35%. Both figures are rather high. This data could imply the existence of hope that something could still be done in Serbia. The other reason is that every election in Serbia is connected with a great danger that in the situation of profound value dividedness between "two Serbias" the other value option which is in complete opposition to the one that the examinees choose might win.

When asked 'What is important in your life?', by far the greatest number of people (85.5%) put family first, as shown in Chart 1. This is an indicator, albeit a weak one, of the prevalence of the traditional values. However, deeper research into this phenomenon (the family is dominant in the life of the citizens in Serbia as an identification marker and that has been maintained for a number of years) shows that it is not the case of the traditional patriarchal family, but of the family which interiorizes various "modern" elements. It appears that people in Serbia are tired of "great stories" and that they turn to their families through which they live their collective life and identities.

CHART 1: WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN YOUR LIFE? (%)
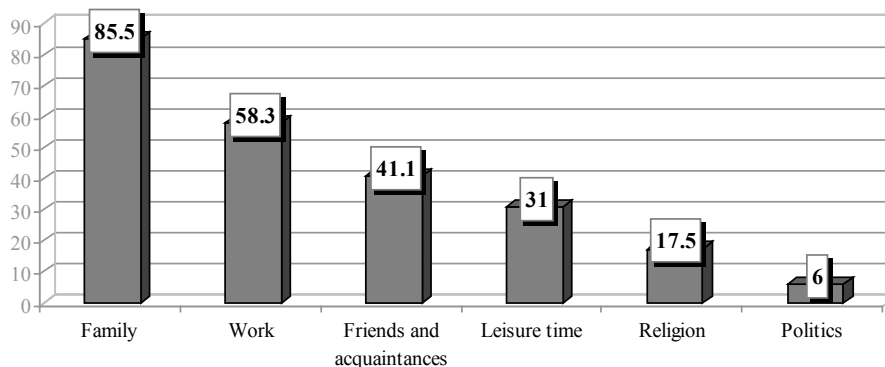
It is interesting that only 17.5% of examinees state that religion is important in their lives. This to some extent contradicts the findings that the church is one of the most trusted institutions in contemporary Serbia. Finding that only 6% of them state that politics is important corroborates the thesis of general disillusionment with the new Serbian political elite and common ways of 'doing' politics in Serbia. This is a very unusual finding for a country where politics dictates the basic conditions of every-day social life. With the fall of socialism, re-traditionalization and repressive forms of the processes of social transformations and confined socio-institutional framework drastically jeopardize the family by imposing on it the consequences of long-lasting repressive tendencies. Family relations, family structure and family functions undergo moments of crisis in the midst of negative events which produce high level of traumatization in individuals and families (Milić 2004). The family is now more than ever left to its own. Impoverished and burdened by numerous problems it necessarily goes back to obsolete forms of community in order to secure survival. Hence, there is no surprise in the findings of sociological research: in the situation of social transformation, the family is seen as a domain with the central spot in everyday life and it represents the greatest value (Zaharijevski 2005). The "awakening" of old models of marital and family fellowship with already established models of family relations is a specific answer to the challenges of social changes.

Politics is marked as the least important area in the lives of the citizens of Serbia, the ones engaging in politics are usually addressed derogatorily and associated with dishonesty. It is shameful to enter politics in Serbia

today. However, the citizens of Serbia cannot allow themselves the luxury of not participating in elections, because all of them are fateful and politics determines every aspect of their lives to a great extent.

Value discourses in focus groups

In the course of the project Social and Cultural Capital in Serbia (2010), conducted by the Centre for Empirical Cultural Studies of South-eastern Europe, a total of 8 focus groups were implemented. Participants were chosen depending on their gender, age and education levels, with the aim of providing the equal number of males and females, young and old, and more and less educated. The research was conducted in Novi Sad, Belgrade, Niš and Novi Pazar[6], cities which differ in size, ethnic and religious composition, and which were chosen as regional centres, and Belgrade as the capital. Themes for the discussions – 'What is appreciated/valued in Serbia today?', 'What is the formula for success in Serbia?', 'How do you think things should be?', 'What is the right kind of upbringing, what should children learn, who would you like to see as a role model for your children and why?', ... – were devised in order to pinpoint the dominant value discourse of the participants.

The first impression one gets when listening to the recorded discussions in focus groups is that the most of the participants spoke from the position of 'humiliated and insulted' – bitter feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and deceit surfaced during the sessions. Money and material values, along with resourcefulness (in a negative sense – carelessness), fast success, condescension and having (political) power, were listed as most appreciated in present day Serbia. Diagnosing what is wrong in society usually centred around the existence of clans, corruption, party state and mass rip-off. All these characteristics summed up, indeed, do not paint a pretty picture of the contemporary Serbian society.

That is why it is not surprising that almost everyone showed deep distrust. One participant depicted people around him as 'uncaring, dishonest, rude'. The other stated that 'the only thing that's left for a man is to turn to oneself, to take care of himself... and to a few people around himself... literally to close himself in his own world'. One woman from Novi Pazar said: 'I no longer believe in anyone or anything!'[7]. The general lack of soli-

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6   With two focus groups in each of these cities.

7   Originally in Serbian, this sentence contains triple negation: "**Ником** више **ништа не вјерујем**!".

darity was often mentioned, as well as too many 'hypocrites', 'selfish' and 'shrewd' people, and along with this went the lamentation for the 'good old days' of socialist past.

The disillusionment with the political, as well as moral order, soon followed from the feelings of distrust, and was thus formulated: 'We have entered democracy too soon'; 'I think that today all those who do not act according to the moral code fare well. That, I think, is the definition'; 'I gathered that the worse you are, the better you fare'. This entailed mentioning of the typical pre-modern categories of 'Fortuna' or 'destiny', which is not hard to understand since in a situation of anomie one cannot 'calculate' and 'forecast', but must rely on 'the Lord's intervention'.

It is puzzling, then, why the participants stated that they appreciate and pass on to their children 'the right values' – values that do not enable a person to succeed in society that was depicted as tainted and corrupted. Those being: values of education, good company, fellowship, friendship, good manners, humility, non-aggression, kindness, being prepared to help, to sacrifice, 'to be honest and hardworking', honourable. Participants also stated that they encouraged their children to be 'creative', 'individualists' and 'professionals' – which are all *par excellence* modern characteristics.

Some specifics of the groups became visible. Poorer and less educated, for instance, proved almost obsessed with the tycoons and politicians, and finding and keeping a job. They showed pronounced criticism and distrust in institutions, as well as heavy reliance on relatives and friends. On the other hand, more educated participants clung to individualistic values, reliance on individual, not on institutions[8]. Older people more often showed deep commitment to the collective – 'I would never betray my people' – while the younger took a more 'pragmatic' approach: 'I would betray anyone'; 'Life on the West, so much work, that is not a life for me!'. Furthermore, in groups from the capital city, having origins from Belgrade was highly appreciated.

Concluding remarks

We can conclude by giving some provisional answers to four questions.

'Who' creates/produces trust? The trust that is generally low is based on the trust in the inner circle of people – relatives and friends. Since trust is the basis for connecting to the future, as we conduct this research we

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8   As one participant stated: 'So the question *what does it mean to be well* is for me very, very individual, and it's pretty hard to talk about it, I can confirm only specific examples... of persons who I think are well'.

come to the conclusion that people live in a 'day-to-day' mode, rely on good fortune, and do not believe in institutions.

What are the sources of legitimation of behaviour? The behaviour is, according to the participants of the focus groups, legitimized by 'the good old values', which are not held in high regard today and do not lead to success in society, yet they are still passed on to children.

In the matter of *'collectivism vs. individualism'* – collective values prevail, primarily that of the family.

And in the matter of *'traditional vs. modern'* – older participants recall tradition and collectivist values, while individualism and professionalism are appreciated among the educated and the younger.

Inglehart speaks of the culture of trust and interpersonal trust as its consequence being the necessary preconditions for the development of democracy.

Democratic institutions depend on the trust that the opposition will accept the rules of democratic processes. One must view one's political opponents as a loyal opposition who will not imprison and execute them if they surrender political power to them, but can be relied on to govern within the laws, and to surrender power if one's side wins the next election. (Inglehart 1997)

Similarly, the mass legitimation must exist for democratic institutions, which might, at first, be imposed by the elite or even external forces, as is the case in Serbia, but for the democratic institutions to have a stable life they have to become part of the legitimation field of the population. The findings revealed in our research speak of the undeveloped Serbian civil society and the lack of the culture of trust in individuals and institutions, but also in one's own strength.

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