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Institute of Social Sciences of Serbia
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Political and Economic Self-Constitution: Media, Citizenship Activity and Political Polarization

Proceedings of the VII international scientific and practical seminar
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IDEOLOGICAL SELF-DESCRIPTION AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS KOSOVO SECESSION IN SERBIA

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INTRODUCTION

Ideologies are often understood as general principles that connect attitudes towards various political issues into (more or less) coherent belief systems. On the psychological level, ideologies also function as self-categorizing labels that help placing oneself vis-à-vis political objects, and thereby perform a political orientation function. Yet, doubts have often been expressed about citizens' levels of political interest and sophistication that are deemed necessary for establishing and maintaining the connection between ideological labels and political opinions.

This is especially seen as a potential problem in the so-called young democracies. In order to address this problem, the paper analyzes the relationship between ideological self-labeling and political opinion in Serbia. Opinion in question concerns the attitude towards the secession of Kosovo, a southern autonomous province in Serbia.

Academic literature on the sources of attitude constraint, i.e. factors that influence co-variation between attitudes towards different political objects, outlined several main factors. According to Ellis and Stimson (2007, 2012), the principle sources of constraint include ideology (principled reasoning), framing effects of elite political discourse, and the influence of non-political identities and values.

Presently, we emphasize the connection between ideology and political identity. Namely, ideological labels also serve the function of political self-description, and help orientation in the political world. According to Conover and Feldman (1981), ideological self-placement reflects affective attachment to ideological labels and to the people and symbols associated with those labels.

More recently, Popp and Rudolph (2011) elaborated the distinction between the operational and symbolic ideology. The operational ideology reflects “principled beliefs”, and is associated with core values, while the symbolic ideology comes from group identifications (ideological groups, labels). As a result, different labels may be associated with specific political attitudes differently – reflecting principled beliefs or / and group identities.

In the present study we focus on attitudes towards the secession of Kosovo among the Serbian respondents. This has been one of the main political issues over the last three decades in Serbia, and therefore it is likely that respondents have formed attitudes about it. Following Popp and Rudolph (2011), we expect to find evidence of both symbolic and operational sources of constraint in attitudes towards the Kosovo issue.

Based on the principled reasoning, we would expect that, for instance, the label ‘Nationalist’ is associated with more nationalist views of the Kosovo

status. Likewise, label ‘Socialist’ should predict less nationalist views.

However, symbolic sources of constraint (political identities in this case) would suggest that the label ‘Socialist’ is associated with more nationalist views, as the Socialist Party has been associated with sovereignty policy towards Kosovo. In addition, based on elite framing, we would expect that non-politicized labels should not be associated with political attitudes. Thus, label ‘Conservative’ should not be associated with these attitudes because there are no clear political referents in Serbia, while ‘Liberal’ is likely to correlate because of a pronounced policy position of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

OBJECTIVES

The paper addresses the question whether there are meaningful associations between ideological self-identification and political attitudes? A negative answer could be expected given the generally unsophisticated, uninterested, uninformed public, especially in a relatively unstable ‘young democracy’ such as Serbia. However, relying on the literature on the sources of attitude constraint, we expect that ideological labels are actually predictive of political attitudes, both because of principled ideological reasoning, and because of symbolic meaning of ideological labels.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

The data from the 2012 Serbian election study are used. The Serbian

election study is a post-election public opinion survey conducted after the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. It is based on a probability sample of 1568 voting age citizens of Serbia. The survey was conducted using the computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) method.

Ideological self-identification is captured via questions that asked respondents to express their identification with ideological labels such as Liberal, Conservative, Socialist, or Patriot on an eleven-point scale.

The questionnaire text was the following. *“People use different terms to describe their political views. I am going to read a list of words. After I read each word, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that the word does not describe your views at all, and 10 means that the word describes your views perfectly”.*

“How well does the word conservative describe your views?”

Seven additional ideological labels were included: Liberal, Social-democrat, Socialist, Patriot, Nationalist, Traditionalist and Communist. Descriptive analysis showed that the most accepted labels are patriot and traditionalist, while least accepted are communist and liberal. The survey also included a standard 11-point left-right ideological self-identification question.

Opinion of Kosovo secession is operationalized by two opposing five-point agreement-disagreement scale items:

“Kosovo should remain part of Serbia”.

“No matter what we do, Kosovo will become an independent state one day”.

About 86 % of respondents strongly or somewhat agree that Kosovo

should remain part of Serbia. Yet, only about 23 % strongly or somewhat disagreed with the statement that Kosovo will anyway become independent one day. These two questions are negatively correlated ($r = -.28, p < .001$)

RESULTS

Correlation coefficients between ideological self-labeling questions and attitudes towards Kosovo secession are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations between ideological identifications and attitudes towards Kosovo secession

Ideological self-labels	Kosovo should stay part of Serbia		Kosovo will become independent state one day	
Conservative	-.01		-.07	*
Liberal	-.11	**	.12	**
Socialist	.08	**	-.07	*
Nationalist	.12	**	-.21	**
Patriot	.23	**	-.18	**
Social democrat	-.02		.10	**
Traditionalist	.14	**	-.17	**
Communist	.09	**	-.05	
Left-right	.08	**	-.08	**

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

The results show that there are negative, statistically significant

associations between ideological self-identification and attitudes towards Kosovo secession, though of modest magnitude. The results presented in Table 1 demonstrate that the respondents who tend to identify with labels Socialist, Patriot, Nationalist, and Traditionalist tend to be more opposed to Kosovo secession as well. At the same time, they are less convinced that the independence of Kosovo is inevitable. The opposite tendency is observed for respondents identifying with the label Liberal. This ideological label is associated with weaker emphasis on Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo ($r = -.11, p < .01$), and stronger conviction that independence of Kosovo is unavoidable ($r = .12, p < .01$). Left-right ideological self-identification is only weakly associated with these attitudes: leftist identifiers are more pro-sovereignty, and less fatalist about Kosovo independence. It is also worth noting that ideological labels that are not particularly politically salient in Serbia (Conservative, Social democrat) are not associated with the attitude that Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. Although this attitude is a stronger statement of one's political preference concerning Kosovo, these labels do not have the symbolic (group identity) nor strong principled force to constrain this attitude.

Additional multivariate analyses, not detailed here, showed that the presented associations remain significant after controlling for the influence of the main socio-demographic variables (age, education and income levels) and some measures of political sophistication (political knowledge scores).

CONCLUSIONS

Attitudes towards Kosovo secession are significantly associated with ideological self-identification in Serbia. The strongest associations involve labels Nationalist, Patriot, and Liberal. The relationships remain significant after controlling for the influence of the socio-demographics and measures of political sophistication.

The observed relationships reveal the influence of both operational (principled) constraint, and of symbolic influences. Labels such as Nationalist and Patriot imply the importance of national sovereignty and opposition to irredentism. It is part of the conceptual definition of these ideological orientations. Hence, the associations observed for labels such as Nationalist and Patriot disclose the relevance of the operational ideology. Symbolic ideology, on the other side, is noticeable with the associations observed for labels Socialist and Communist. These labels are often associated with the opposition to nationalism. However, in Serbia, it is the Socialist party that has been associated with nationalist politics, especially during the 1990's.

Overall, the results demonstrate that Serbian respondents use ideological labels in a relatively consistent and coherent manner, which makes them useful cognitive devices for political orientation. The basis for the observed consistencies, however, is both symbolic and principled.