

CONSTRUCTION AND REDESIGN OF THE SERBIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY: ARCHIBALD REISS'S ROADMAP

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The Development of the Serbian National Identity began, even in its early phase, during the monarchist period at the start of the 20th century, to encounter specific challenges of the same or similar nature as those in this field today. These are identity-related issues that are, to a significant extent, caused by the ambivalent character of the Serbian national being. This refers to a specific character structure or collective mentality of the people.

It is important to emphasise that this is not unique to the Serbian people. Based on historical development, what can be singled out as characteristic of the Serbian nation is that its positive traits come to full expression primarily in difficult times. In contrast, quite the opposite occurs in peace and social stability periods. These manifest themselves across various areas of social life, and not only do they prevent the many potentials and capacities of the Serbian people from being realised to a fuller extent, but also lead to society's polarisation.

Design/Methods/Approach: This research aims to show how Reiss's precise mapping of the traits of the Serbian people provides insight into the two faces of the Serbian national character, while also serving as a foundation for creating a responsible and strategic identity policy. Such a policy would be directed toward overcoming identity-related deficiencies and flaws, while at the same time strengthening the positive characteristics. In this way, Reiss's model will effectively serve as a basis for conducting a SWOT analysis—a methodological tool widely used today in strategic public policy development.

Originality/Value: The methodological framework is based on applying qualitative content analysis, primarily of Reiss's crucial work *Listen, Serbs! Beware of Yourselves*, other scientifically relevant studies, and certain media documents. Supplementally, a degree of discourse analysis will also be applied.

Keywords: Serbian national identity, Archibald Reiss, Serbian characterology, SWOT analysis, identity policy

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NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE CHARACTEROLOGY OF A PEOPLE – CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS

Given the aim of this paper, this section will highlight some of the fundamental starting points in defining national identity and the character of a people. Defining national identity in the context of the modern state is a highly complex task (see Stojadinović, 2013: 31–46; 2020: 61–77). Therefore, only an overview of several fundamental concepts of national identity will be provided here, without delving into any deeper analysis (see Stojadinović, 2012).

Suppose we begin with Nikola Božilović (Božilović, 2007). In this case, the concept of national identity originates from an older idea of “national character”, developed in Europe in the 17th century, which, as well as the notion of a “national spirit”, is often associated with stereotypes and prejudices. Equally important is the warning Božilović offers: “We must bear in mind that works associated with the adjective national may have a positive role in constituting national identity, but also an extremely negative and destructive one, in the sense of encouraging those vulgar and animalistic (essentially anti-cultural) traits which are formed under the influence of extreme nationalism as a social phenomenon and its derivatives (chauvinism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism)” (46). According to David Miller, national identity is distinguished from other collective identities by the following characteristics: shared belief and commitment; embodiment of historical continuity; it is an exceptionally active identity; it connects people with a specific geographical territory; and it requires that those who share it have something in common — a common culture (Miller, 1995: 21–27).

Contemporary experience and the time in which we live increasingly confirm, day by day, that — contrary to late-20th-century predictions — not only have nations and national identities not become obsolete categories, but in the existing context of globalization and integration processes, primarily generated by them, the significance of national identity and the need of states to preserve and develop it have strengthened globally (see Mirović, 2012: 79–109).

Anthony D. Smith, at the very beginning of his well-known book *National Identity*, highlights the existence of a Western or “civic” and a non-Western or “ethnic” model of national identity (see Smith, 2010: 11–36). However, we consider such models to be grounded in mutually exclusive concepts based on a simplified, dichotomous approach, which results in an unacceptable opposition between the principles of ethnicity and civility, ethnos and demos, and even between tradition and modernisation. In reality, national identity always represents a complex mixture of ethno-cultural and civic, i.e., territorial-political components—only their proportions vary from case to case (see Mirović, 2008: 1383–1428).

Here, the distinction between the terms ‘people’ and ‘nation’ should also be emphasised. The ‘people’ in the ethnic sense, is a much older category than the nation, and there is no disagreement on this point



among scholars (see Đurić & Stojadinović, 2018: 41–57). Until the formation of the modern state, a people represented a loosely structured community that later became connected through stronger political and cultural values. According to Jerzy Smolicz, at least three models are used to differentiate between criteria defining national affiliation: the ancestry-based model (*ius sanguinis*); the territory-based model (*ius soli*); and a migration-derived model that enables cultural pluralism for diverse social groups forming today's pluralist democracies (Zajda, 2009: 2).

Contrary to those concepts emerging from a (post)modernist perception of the nation as a purely constructivist, virtual, or imaginary category, this paper adopts Smith's ethno-symbolist standpoint, according to which the creation of a nation in the modern sense — and its identity — requires the existence of an ancient ethno-symbolic core (Smith, 1995, 1996). National identity is understood as a category that is not only complex and multilayered, but also developmental and dynamic — not something given once and for all, immutable, but something that can and must be fostered and built upon in accordance with the current conditions of social development (Mirović & Janković, 2023: 134–178; 2025: 182).

It should be noted that contemporary scholarship avoids stereotypes of a “national character” as they easily become ideological, simplified, and unscientific. Instead, modern approaches examine cultural patterns, historical experiences, social institutions, value systems, and structural conditions (including economic, political, and geographical factors). Within this framework, one may speak of cultural-historical specificities that shape behaviour and social tendencies, but not of a fixed “national character”. Such research largely falls under the purview of ethnopsychology, an interdisciplinary field of scientific study. However, within Serbian scholarship, we find notable efforts to study the cultural-historical specificities of the Serbian people, their character traits, and collective mentality within a specific field of characterology of peoples. The most prominent examples include Cvijić's anthropogeographical characterology of the South Slavs and Vladimir Dvorniković's characterology of the Yugoslavs in his 1939 work of the same title; equally indispensable is the contribution of Slobodan Jovanović to the study of Serbian national character. Contributions were also made by numerous other authors such as Dragiša Vasić, Vladimar Karić, Dušan Nedeljković and others, whose analyses were compiled in *Characterology of the Serbs*, edited by Bojan Jovanović (see B. Jovanović, ed., 1992), who himself contributed to this field (B. Jovanović, 1992: 5–22).

When discussing the characteristics of Serbian national identity, Jovan Cvijić emphasised that Serbs belong to various “psychological types” shaped by geography and history. He particularly highlighted the Dinaric type, characterised by energy, a strong sense of honour, courage, patriotism, impulsiveness, and a tendency toward clan- or brotherhood-based organisation. He observed communal morality, solidarity, collectivism, and a pronounced family structure (Cvijić, 2011). Slobodan Jovanović, in turn, stresses that the Serbian political mentality is marked by tension between anarchic individualism and the need for a strong state. He distinguishes between the “patriarchal man” and the modern citizen, while pointing to the weakness of institutions and the historical inclination of Serbs toward charismatic leadership (S. Jovanović, 1990).

However, aside from all the aforementioned characterological studies of the Serbian and Yugoslav peoples, one stands out — not only due to the period of its origin, its systematic nature, precision, and comprehensiveness, but also because it was created by a foreigner who, as it will prove, understood the Serbs better than we understood ourselves. This is the characterology of the Serbian people and their traits as developed by Rudolf Archibald Reiss (1875–1929) in his work, *Listen, Serbs!* Given that the characteristics identified by Reiss have, for the most part, endured among Serbs to this day — something this paper will demonstrate — we may conclude that his characterology has reliably stood the test of time. Yet his contribution goes beyond this: in addition to his manifold contributions to



different spheres of Serbian national, social, and state development, Reiss also left us a kind of guide for building, improving, and preserving our own identity.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SERBIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY – CHALLENGES IN THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Although national identities—as well as nations and nationalisms—are modern, early-modern categories whose development is closely linked to the Industrial Revolution, one should not overlook their earlier, ethnosymbolic roots. The same applies to the Serbian national identity and its evolution. Namely, the genesis and formation of the Serbian national identity should be viewed as a complex, dynamic, and multilayered process spanning several centuries, and possessing, of course, its own medieval foundations. There are three key determinants from the medieval phase of pre-modern development that have not lost their fundamental, founding role to this day.

The first is the ruling Nemanjić dynasty, which, from the 12th to the 14th century, established the foundations of medieval Serbian statehood and the rudiments of what could be called a Serbian “proto-nation”. The second is the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and, above all, the figure and work of Saint Sava — Rastko Nemanjić — who, as a member of the then-ruling dynasty, renounced worldly power for monastic life. This decision would prove crucial to the Church’s autonomy (see Zorić, 2011: 6). In him, the strong and inseparable bond between Serbian Orthodoxy and the Serbian state-building idea becomes evident, regardless of the secular character of the modern Serbian state. Saint Sava was the founder of the SOC’s autocephaly and its first archbishop, but also a diplomat, a gifted writer, a great Serbian enlightener, and the founder of the Serbian legal tradition based on Byzantine legal sources. This enabled Serbia to be integrated into European and Christian civilisation.² Thus, “the cult of Saint Sava soon joined the cult of Stefan Nemanja. Father and son, Saints Simeon and Sava, thus became eternal symbols of the Serbian people, of their political and ecclesiastical independence—essential components of their national and spiritual consciousness, from which they have not disappeared to the present day” (Zorić, 2011: 6). The third medieval foundational element is the Battle of Kosovo and the Kosovo Covenant.

All these elements played a crucial role in preserving the continuity of the Serbian people’s identity during their challenging existential conditions under centuries of Ottoman rule. Of particular importance for the survival of the Serbian ethnos was the Serbian Orthodox Church, which later led to a certain integration of religious and ethnic identity. As this role of the SOC was once described:

“The Serbian Orthodox Church... during the time of foreign occupation... served as a kind of substitute for the destroyed state — as a pillar of culture and a factor of enlightenment, and as the instrument of the people in their daily life... It did not allow fanaticism, passivity, or fatalism to develop among the Serbs. Instead, it encouraged diligence, love of life, and a sense of responsibility for themselves and for humanity as a whole” (Đurić, 2007: 90).

This mentioned identity and spiritual heritage undoubtedly inspired and gave impetus to the Serbian Revolution (the First Serbian Uprising), as well as to other liberation wars of the 19th century. In this way, the medieval identity-symbolic foundations of the Serbian people played a constitutive role in shaping the modern Serbian nation and its national identity. Therefore, they constitute precisely that ethnosymbolic core of the Serbian nation, in the sense defined by Smith (Anthony Smith). Yet,

² This is Saint Sava’s *Nomocanon* or Code of Laws from the beginning of the 13th century, which was actually the first Serbian legal act and which, as its name suggests, encompassed secular and church law, and represented an authentic synthesis of Byzantine legal sources (so-called legal transplants) adapted to the Serbian social context. More about this in: Zorić, 2011.



they also provided the driving spiritual force behind the glorious liberation and defensive wars Serbia waged in the early 20th century—wars whose military legacy has likewise become a significant marker of Serbian national identity.

However, despite their foundational importance, nearly all of these identity elements are today subject to dispute and debate, both in the broader public sphere and within academic and scientific circles. For example, the Saint-Sava tradition of Serbian nationalism and its advocates have come under fire: “The first great trial of contemporary Serbian spirituality, though a trial ‘from the outside’, is the accusation that by nurturing national consciousness and especially national memory, religion among Serbs becomes politicized and is an expression of so-called clerical nationalism” (Đurić, 2007: 91–92). Yet, among other things, these “accusations are senseless because the ideal, program, and goal of the Church in this case is not political power, not the control or possession of political authority, but the defense and affirmation of the basic preconditions for the humane and spiritual survival of the nation” (91–92). The Battle of Kosovo and the Kosovo Covenant are likewise criticised as being nothing more than part of a so-called “Kosovo myth” and Serbian national mythomania. One must keep in mind that all modern nations possess national and political myths that serve essential integrative and cohesive functions. Moreover, the Kosovo question — especially today, at a time of severe suffering of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija — cannot be interpreted solely as a mythical issue. In addition, this territory contains the most essential part of Serbia’s spiritual and cultural heritage, making it not only the state-forming but also the spiritual and cultural core of the Serbian nation (see Mirović Janković, 2023: 959–964).

In addition to these, the Serbian people and state face numerous other challenges in the field of identity. Among them is the externally constructed identity, which carries a negative connotation related to the alleged “Balkan” character of the Serbian people. This idea has been scientifically interpreted and essentially explained (Todorova, 1997). Added to this is the identity burden stemming from Western, anti-Serbian political, media, and other propaganda, particularly aggressive during the last decade of the previous century, and continuing long afterwards. This suggests that, alongside internal manipulation, there is also external manipulation of the Serbian national consciousness. All this, working synergistically, has led a part of the Serbian people into a profound identity crisis, fostering negative sentiments toward their own national and political identity, with a desire to distance themselves from it or even replace it with another identity altogether (see Antičić, 2007).

In examining such manipulation as a form of social experimentation on the Serbian people and their identity, it has been observed:

“Most people react fearfully to the mere mention of the adjective ‘Serbian’. The association of the term ‘Serbian’ with every negative thing imaginable has reached such proportions that we react in the same way to any hint of this term... We have been frightened for so long that we have developed a habit of fearing even our own shadow. Anything that contains even the slightest national symbol or national culture evokes fear—as if it were a symbol of suffering and misfortune” (Damjanac, 2015: 101).

Therefore, all this shows that Serbian national identity and its survival at present face the same — or similar — existential challenges as in the past. Moreover, unless we overcome our own internal weaknesses and deficiencies and eliminate the threatening tendencies arising from them, these challenges will likely continue — perhaps in an even more dangerous form — to shape the future of the Serbian people.



THE CONTRIBUTION OF ARCHIBALD REISS TO THE SCIENTIFIC, SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF SERBIA AND THE SERBIAN PEOPLE

Rudolf Archibald Reiss was born into a wealthy family in the southern German province of Baden, in the town of Hechberg, in the settlement of Hausach on 8 July 1875. After completing his primary and secondary education there, he moved to Switzerland, where he continued his studies, earned a doctorate in chemistry, and later became a full professor at the University of Lausanne. In the same year, he also obtained Swiss citizenship (1906).³ Dr Reiss died, however, on August 8, 1929, in Serbia—his second (or third) homeland—where, according to his own wishes, he was buried in Belgrade at the Topčider Cemetery. In accordance with his personal and testamentary wish, his heart was placed in an urn inside a small chapel on Kajmakčalan (the peak of Mount Nidže, or in Greek, Voras, which at that time lay on the border between Greece and Old Serbia and was therefore called by the Serbs “the Gate of Freedom”),⁴ so that he might rest together with his wartime friends, i.e., the fallen Serbian soldiers. For this reason, he was remembered and remains known as “the Swiss on Kajmakčalan” (see Levental, 1984) or as a great man who was “German by origin, Swiss by education, and Serbian by heart” (*Politika*, 2023, August 9).

He arrived in Serbia — in Niš, then the wartime capital — in August 1914, at the invitation of the Serbian royal government, to collect and examine the evidence of violations of international laws of war, namely, crimes committed by the Austro-Hungarian army against the Serbian population during the earliest phase of its aggression against the Kingdom of Serbia — “during the first incursion,” as stated in Reiss’s report, referring to the offensive that lasted from 12 to 24 August 1914 (Reiss, n.d.: 1–3). The reason for such an invitation stemmed from the realisation of the Serbian authorities that, despite their appeals and warnings regarding the severe crimes committed by Austro-Hungarian forces in occupied Serbian territory, the European and world public — even within neutral and allied countries — still showed scepticism and distrust toward these claims (see Subošić and Zec, 2017: 482). On the other hand, in the book that represents a kind of his wartime diary — *What I Saw and Lived Through in the Great Days* — which he dedicated “to those who did not return” from the First World War, this Swiss scholar himself explained the reasons why he accepted the invitation of the Serbian government immediately and without objection: first, because such an investigation fell within his professional expertise, and second, because it offered a clear opportunity to provide his services to the Allies (Reiss, 2014: 19–20).

Based on Reiss’s assessment, it was established that there were around 4,000 Serbian victims in the Mačva and Podrinje regions in 1914 alone (Milić, 2010: 9). In that “monstrous campaign of the Austro-Hungarian army... the Catholic and Germanic Vienna revealed its intentions and aims. Filled with racial and religious hatred, and driven by the idea that ‘Serbia must perish’ — *Serbien muss sterben* — the Austrians, together with soldiers of other nations within their ranks, committed unprecedented atrocities” (Reiss, n.d.: 3).⁵ In the Preface to the London edition (1916) of Reiss’s report submitted

3 Professor Reiss taught photography and forensic photography at the University of Lausanne. In addition to the application of photography in the judiciary and criminology, he was also engaged in its use in medicine. For more on the life and work of Dr Archibald Reiss, see: “Arčibald Rajs” (n.d.), entry in srpskaenciklopedija.org; “Reiss, Rudolph Archibald” (n.d.), entry in encyclopedia.com; Trifković, 2011; *Politika*, August 9, 1929: 1.

4 The heart of Dr Reiss, which had been kept in an urn on Kajmakčalan, has disappeared. As the chapel where it was placed was heavily damaged during the Second World War by the Bulgarian army, it is believed that Reiss’s “golden heart” — as the words engraved on the urn read — was taken away or destroyed by Bulgarian soldiers at that time, as an act of revenge for their defeat at Kajmakčalan in September 1916, but also because of Reiss’s irrefutable evidence of the war crimes committed by the Bulgarian army during the Great War. For more on this, see: Mladenović, n.d.; *Novosti*, August 7, 2010.

5 Thus begins the text titled “*Instead of a Preface*”, published together with segments of Reiss’s report in the book *Austro-Hungarian Atrocities*, issued by the Holy Trinity Monastery near Ovčar (available at <http://www.zlocininadsrbima.com/PDF/Arcibald-Rajs-Austrougarska-zverstva.pdf>). It states that the entire report by Reiss, translated initially in the eponymous



to the Serbian government, reference is made to the “barbaric methods of warfare” employed by the German army and its “cruelty toward civilian populations” in the occupied countries, concluding that, based on Reiss's findings and evidence, the Austro-Hungarian army had surpassed even the Germans in its crimes against the Serbs: “These investigations and the report of a distinguished scholar... actually prove that the ‘pleasant Austrian people’ and the ‘proud and chivalrous Hungarian race’ had the inglorious distinction of exceeding in bestiality, if that is even possible, their Prussian friends” (Reiss, n.d.: 5). The crimes of the Austro-Hungarian army reported and documented by Reiss covered a wide range of atrocities: from deportations, executions, and hanging of civilians, to the burning of villages, the destruction of crops, the killing of the wounded and prisoners, the use of prohibited munitions, and acts of plunder and destruction of both private and state property, including cultural heritage and religious sites (see Subošić and Zec, 2017: 481–482). Reiss's investigations clearly demonstrated that these crimes were not incidental results of wartime operations, but were premeditated acts, part of the Austro-Hungarian “punitive expedition”. According to specific interpretations, such conduct was the product of the dominance of the so-called wartime faction in Vienna, which even before launching its aggression against Serbia advocated a preventive war to secure the survival of the Dual Monarchy and its influence and position in the Balkans — a policy that also suited German militarists and their *Drang nach Osten* strategy (Subošić and Zec, 2017: 479).

Although trained as a doctor of chemistry, Reiss became a globally renowned and respected expert in forensic science and criminology. His scholarly and professional contributions to these fields are indisputable. At the University of Lausanne, he was a professor of forensic photography and co-founder and editor of the Swiss photography journal, *Revue Suisse de Photographie*. He was also the founder and director of the Institute of Scientific Police (*Institut de Police Scientifique*), the world's first institute of its kind, which today, under the name School of Criminal Sciences (*École des Sciences Criminelles*), remains one of the world's most prestigious forensic institutions (“Reiss, Rudolph Archibald,” n.d., encyclopedia.com). Reiss is even regarded as the “founding father of scientific police studies,” oriented toward scientifically based police techniques and the adoption and integration of technological innovations in this field (Krstić-Mistridželović, 2019). The development of this new scientific discipline enabled the establishment of modern policing. In post-war Serbia, Reiss contributed not only to improving the criminal justice system and training Serbian forensic experts but also to establishing forensic science as a distinct discipline, as well as to the building and development of police education and the reform and modernization of police services (see Lazarević and Kolarski, 2023: 48–49; Krivokapić and Ristović, 2002: 117–126; Krstić-Mistridželović, 2011: 165–172; Milošević, 2021: 91–104).

Reiss's extensive experience and knowledge in the aforementioned fields undoubtedly contributed to his successful efforts in proving the crimes committed against the Serbian people and army — not only those perpetrated by the Austro-Hungarians, but also those carried out by the German and Bulgarian armies during the Great War (videti Pršić, ed., 2019). For instance, by pointing to the atrocities that the Bulgarians committed against Serbian civilians and soldiers, and to their treatment of Serbian prisoners of war (providing the information that 18,000 of them were killed near Prilep during the retreat of the Serbian army, and that only 50,000 of the 100,000 Serbs taken to Bulgarian camps ever returned), Reiss proved their violation of international conventions on prisoners of war (Milić, 2010: 10).

Professor Reiss, however, was also a publicist and war correspondent who reported for Swiss, French, and Dutch daily newspapers, while his texts were published in French, English, and German. It is recorded that during the war, he published several books and approximately 800 articles about the Serbs (Reiss, n.d.: 4; Milić, 2010: 7; “Arčibald Rajs,” n.d., srpskaenciklopedija.org). This, along with his dedicated, highly professional, and objective work based on credible investigations, contributed

book published by Dečje novine from Gornji Milanovac (1995), represents “valuable evidentiary material on the genocide committed against the Serbian people in Mačva and Podrinje at the end of the summer of 1914” (Reiss, n.d.: 5).



to ensuring that the truth about the suffering of the Serbs in the Great War reached the European and global public. Thus, Professor Reiss has been remembered among the Serbian people and beyond as a “soldier of justice, truth, and law”.⁶

Reiss, however, did not write only about the crimes of the occupying forces. His thematic scope was much broader. In this way, Reiss conveyed his other insights about the Serbian people — their history, values, and traits, as well as their national aspirations — while a matter of particular importance was his explanation of Serbia’s war aims. This significantly strengthened his contribution to the (re) positioning of Serbia and the Serbian people in the international arena, to the transformation of their previously largely negative image, and to the building of their reputation. This has been confirmed by the results of a more recent study (Subošić and Zec, 2017), based on an in-depth analysis of Reiss’s reports, which demonstrated their influence on reshaping media portrayals of Serbia and the Serbian people in Western European countries. The conclusion reached was that “Reiss became one of the most important and most reliable links between Serbia and international public opinion” (495).

Namely, the previously negative image of Serbia and the Serbs relied on stereotypes that emerged from the pre-war smear campaign — driven by the geopolitical interests of the great powers, primarily Austria-Hungary itself — which escalated on the eve of the Sarajevo assassination in 1914.⁷ This was further reinforced by Austro-Hungarian war propaganda portraying Serbs as “barbarians” and “savages,” prone to plunder and murder. Such an image, constructed with the help of the Vatican, was disseminated by Austrian, German, and Bulgarian press, as well as by “indoctrinated Austrian officers” themselves (Reiss, n. d.: 4). In contrast, Archibald Reiss proved, based on testimonies collected from both Austrian and Serbian soldiers and prisoners of war, that the Serbs truly fought chivalrously, honorably, and heroically.

To emphasize the immeasurable importance of Reiss’s work during the war and his merits in improving the position of Serbia and the Serbian people internationally, it is often said and written in our country that “this brave and fearless humanist — ‘a soldier of justice, truth, and law’ — was worth more to our homeland than a whole division of soldiers on the battlefield” (Milić, 2010: 7).

In addition to everything already mentioned, it should also be noted that Reiss, as a Serbian volunteer in the Morava Division and a Salonika Front fighter, received the status of honorary captain of the Serbian army in 1926, and that he was a member of the Yugoslav delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 (“Arčibald Rajs” n. d., srpskaenciklopedija.org; Trifković, 2011). Professor Reiss, having numerous contacts both among distinguished people at home and abroad and among ordinary people in Serbia, certainly played a role in the development of cultural and social life in the country in the post-war period, as well as in the development of humanitarian work, since he helped secure education for Serbian war orphans in Geneva (Novosti 2010, August 7), and participated in the founding of the Red Cross of Serbia. It is also considered that Professor Reiss, through his role as a “criminologist-diplomat” contributed to the improvement and development of relations between Serbia and Switzerland in various fields (videti Lazarević and Kolarski, 2023: 39–51).

6 On the monument to Dr Archibald Reiss in Topčider Park in Belgrade, among other inscriptions, the following words are engraved: “To the soldier of justice, truth, and right.” The monument, unveiled on August 9, 1931, was erected by the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors in gratitude to their wartime comrade and friend of the Serbian people in their darkest days. The sculpture was created by the sculptor Marko Brežanin (Politika, August 9, 2023). It is noteworthy that this monument is included on the list of cultural monuments of Serbia and is designated as an immovable cultural heritage site (Vujanović, 2023: 117).

7 This refers to the anti-Serbian propaganda initiated by Austria-Hungary even before and during the Balkan Wars, which intensified particularly after the First Balkan War, accompanied by narratives about alleged “war crimes” committed by the Serbian army in the liberated territories, and accusations of “extermination of the Albanian people”. The goal was to discredit Serbia, as its strengthening and territorial expansion did not align with the interests of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. For more on this, see: Subošić and Zec, 2017: 479–480.



There are, however, some additional contributions by Reiss in areas that have until recently mainly remained outside the focus of attention when assessing the importance of his work in Serbia, i.e., in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. For example, his studies of Serbian and Yugoslav interwar society hold significant importance in the field of sociological research — not only regarding issues in general sociology (such as social stratification), but also within specific branches of sociology or applied sociologies, which, in addition to criminology, include the sociology of elites, the sociology of education, the sociology of religion, and political sociology (Šuvaković, 2025: 17–43). Likewise — and this is something particularly overlooked by contemporary researchers — Reiss, through his characterology of the Serbian people in the work *Čujte, Srbi!* (*Listen, Serbs!*), made a highly significant contribution to the field of ethnopsychology and the increasingly popular studies of national identity; while, as will be shown further in this paper, in the field of studying Serbian national identity, his role is truly invaluable. By considering Reiss's entire oeuvre, his life and work, it becomes clear that all those contributions discussed here — across various domains of activity of this great man and scholar — were grounded in “a just reasoning of the events of his time, a sincere approach to his work, high moral qualities, a humanistic soul, an altruistic character, and philanthropic activity” (Lazarević and Kolarski, 2023: 41).

Here, however, the primary aim is to emphasise the significance of Reiss's model, which is grounded in his analysis of the key — or, we might even say, typical — characteristics, i.e., traits of the Serbian people as elements of their identity. This model, which precisely and systematically identifies both the positive sides — or, using Reiss's terminology, virtues — and the negative characteristics, i.e., flaws, outlining the two sides or two faces — indeed, the face and the reverse — of the Serbian mentality and national spirit, provides a reliable analytical framework — confirmed over time, as shown by some recent empirical research — for studying the strengths and weaknesses of Serbian national identity. Based on that model, and utilising modern analytical methods and techniques such as SWOT analysis, it becomes possible to establish a strategic foundation for a new and serious identity policy in contemporary Serbia. In this sense, Reiss's study serves as an actual guidepost in the development and redesign of the Serbian national identity. We believe that this approach would also constitute an innovative way to examine the contributions of Dr Archibald Reiss and his multifaceted, far-reaching role in the modernisation and development of the Serbian people, Serbian society as a whole, and the state of Serbia itself.

SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE ELEMENTS OF SERBIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY BASED ON REISS'S CHARACTEROLOGY OF THE SERBIAN PEOPLE

In this part of the paper, based on Reiss's observations and analyses presented in *Ecoutez, Serbes!*—which we have identified as a *sui generis* characterological model—we have sought to identify certain identity elements that represent the strengths and weaknesses of the Serbian national identity, and to categorize them, in accordance with the SWOT methodological technique, as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (see Figure 1). In this way, we aim to demonstrate that Reiss's characterology of the Serbian people—or, as we have termed it, the Reiss model—may serve as a practical analytical framework for the application of contemporary methods in the creation of public policies in those areas that relate to identity.





Figure 1: SWOT Analysis of Identity Elements Based on Reiss's Model
(Source: Authors' work)

Within the given SWOT analysis, we first identified those characteristics that Reiss viewed as the positive foundations of Serbian identity. When discussing the positive attributes of the Serbian people — categorised here as identity elements that constitute strengths — it must be emphasised that Reiss primarily associated them with the ordinary people, whom he deeply admired for this very reason. Conversely, he believed that among members of the so-called political and intellectual elite, a severe deficit existed in certain value-based and identity-related qualities.

Among the identity elements that constitute the strength of the Serbian people, patriotism holds a foremost position — as a love for the homeland and a sincere, profound sense of belonging, expressed through self-sacrifice in the defence of the country and its freedom. According to Dr Reiss, Serbs are not patriots because they are forced to be by those in power; rather, their patriotism arises from a love of freedom that permeates their entire culture. Serbian patriotism is grounded and inspired by a deep respect and remembrance of national heroes who gave their lives for the freedom of the homeland (see Reiss, 2010: 15). He was most impressed by the patriotism of the so-called common man—the peasant-soldier, the volunteer (see Reiss, 2011). He believed, however, that among the social class known in

Serbia as the “intelligentsia”, patriotism was lacking. Speaking about the Serbian “intelligentsia” during the Great War and its moral decline — criticising its opportunism and cowardice — Reiss wrote:

“...the primary concern of the intelligentsia when the Great War broke out was to secure their own safety... If they could not avoid military service, they would do everything in their power to be stationed in the rear or attached to some commission abroad. Too many university men, ‘intellectuals’ — often reserve officers — sat in the trenches of Geneva, Paris, London, and other places... To justify themselves, they would say that Serbia would need their intellect after the war... A poor excuse... Real people well understand that those who give nothing to their homeland have no rights to it. The pompous ‘intelligentsia’ distinguished itself during the war by cowardice and — what is even worse — some intellectuals used the ordeals of their own people for personal enrichment.” (Reiss, 2010: 39–41)

Despite numerous negative examples — especially among university professors — Reiss did highlight specific praiseworthy examples of intellectual devotion and patriotism, particularly among physicians and grammar school teachers. There is, of course, no shortage of examples of Serbian patriotism, especially during the Great War. One such instance was when, during the Austro-Hungarian offensive, King Peter I the Liberator, learning of the army's exhaustion and despair, stepped among his soldiers and said: “I know you are weary after so many battles, but today — more than ever before — the homeland needs your help. I understand your longing for your loved ones, and therefore I, your King, release you from your oath to me. Go home, but know that I, with my two sons, will remain here to die defending our native soil — and that the enemy shall enter our homeland only over our dead bodies.” (Atlagić, 2011: 403)

Recent research also suggests that citizens of Serbia today consider patriotism an essential characteristic of the Serbian people (over 83% of respondents believe that Serbs are patriotic) (Topalović & Berić, 2023: 58–59). They also largely agree with Reiss's view regarding the deficit of patriotism among members of the political and social elite in Serbia. Nearly 66% of respondents — more than two-thirds of whom are highly educated — agreed with the statement that “many members of the ‘intelligentsia’ would readily sacrifice the freedom and survival of the country if it benefited them personally”; while a significant proportion (75.9%), including many young people, believe that Serbian youth are not prepared to sacrifice for their country (Topalović & Berić, 2023: 61–62).

Nevertheless, experience teaches us — and this was confirmed in more recent Serbian history, e.g., the battles of Košare and Paštrik during the 1999 NATO aggression against Serbia and the FRY — that in times of national peril, patriotism, solidarity, loyalty to the state, and willingness to sacrifice for the defense of the homeland and its freedom emerge strongly among Serbian soldiers and citizens (see Mirović Janković, Ed., 2025). Thus, love of the motherland — described elsewhere as a “religion of the heart” (Atlagić, 2011: 403) — remains a vital component of identity and a developmental strength of the Serbian people and state.

The following characteristics, which form part of the strength of Serbian identity, are courage and heroism. These also represent historical and moral virtues, which are often displayed especially in times of war and adversity. Archibald Reiss wrote with deep emotion about the bravery of the Serbian people in the First World War. His depictions are simultaneously testimony, analysis, and the personal sentiment of a man who loved the people whose suffering and resistance he witnessed firsthand. Addressing the Serbs, he wrote:

“Your people are brave, and their courage often rises to heroism. I can say this with full right, for I have watched your soldiers — and they were nothing but the people themselves — in nearly all the battles of the great war of liberation...

I have seen your wounded... Rarely would a groan or even a sigh escape their lips...” (Reiss, 2010: 15)



Reiss believed that courage was one of the most prominent traits of the Serbian people — and that Serbian courage was defensive in nature, without hatred for the enemy. Modern examples confirming continuity of this identity element include the Serbian “Spartans” of Košare and Paštrik — border guards and other members of Serbian and Yugoslav security forces — whose bravery and chivalry are today compared to the legendary Thermopylae (see Mirović Janković, 2025: 174–182).

However, we must also consider certain limitations that have prevented Serbs from constantly transforming their courage into “organised collective strength” — as noted by Slobodan Jovanović, who connected this issue to the Dinaric dynamism of the Serbian national character:

“The Dinaric type possesses heroism, but also self-overestimation and self-assertiveness, which make him inflexible and resistant to discipline... In Dinaric exploits, there is more energy and momentum than there is planning and organisation. Examples of personal bravery are countless, but the results achieved are in no proportion to the strength expended and the sacrifices endured.” (S. Jovanović, 2005: 38–39)

Yet, for Reiss, Serbian courage was not merely wartime bravery; it was a way of life and a cultural category: “Your peasant is an everyday hero — he does not speak much, but when necessary, he knows how to die for his land.” (Reiss, 2011)

Hospitality, generosity, and nobility are also essential and recognisable identity determinants of the Serbian people, representing a significant source of their developmental strength. These qualities of the Serbian individual are reflected primarily in their openness toward others and in their readiness to help and share, even the little things they possess. Reiss spoke with great respect about mercy and compassion as “beautiful human qualities” that he had the opportunity to observe among Serbian soldiers, even in completely unexpected situations, such as when they would “give the last piece of bread from their pockets” to prisoners from enemy troops (Rajs, 2010: 18). In *Listen, Serbs!* Reiss repeatedly emphasises that the Serbian people are exceptionally hospitable, and that this hospitality is not formal or interest-based, but cordial, natural, sincere, and deeply rooted in tradition. Folk festivities have, among other things, preserved the custom of hosting guests (“the first piece of the Christmas bread is kept for the passerby”) (17). According to Reiss, the Serb does not host people for the sake of “showing off” but because it is a moral and human obligation (see Rajs, 2011). As noted in a contemporary study, Serbs “find greater satisfaction in giving than in receiving, even if they are of modest economic means. This is, traditionally, part of hospitality, openness, and human solidarity in conditions of scarcity — qualities nurtured for centuries” (Đurić, 2007: 89). Hospitality has become a constitutive element of Serbian national culture and its principal character trait. Moreover, as a distinct cultural-social category, it is present in Serbian linguoculture, and thus in the very linguistic personality of Serbs:

“The linguistic expression of the concept of hospitality in the Serbian language is characterised by a multitude of lexical and phraseological units and numerous proverbs that interpret the culture of hospitality. Lexicographic material from the SASA Dictionary, the first and second editions of the Serbian Dictionary from 1818 and 1852, dialectal dictionaries, as well as proverbs from Vuk’s Folk Proverbs (1836), indicate the significant place of hospitality in Serbian traditional culture and show the model of conceptualisation of this cultural-social category in the linguistic cognition of the Serbian linguistic personality. Linguistic units and their semantic interpretations encode the specific features of Serbian linguoculture” (Milosavljević, 2019: 43).

Serbian hospitality, characteristic of both the people and society as a whole, remains highly valued and recognised by foreigners who reside in or visit Serbia today. Yet, according to the findings of the aforementioned study, the citizens of Serbia themselves are also largely aware of this particular trait, given that more than 95% of respondents stated that they agreed with Reiss’s views on this Serbian

characteristic (Topalović and BeriĆ, 2023: 58–59). What is important to note from the perspective of the developmental potential of this identity element is that hospitality is an essential part of the human resources of contemporary Serbia, one that may contribute to redesigning and repositioning the national identity, attracting foreign visitors, foreign students, as well as investment, etc. — all of which are today crucial for building a successful and internationally competitive national brand (see Mirović Janković, 2023: 872–874).

Another quality that may represent a potential strength of the Serbian people and their identity is solidarity and the spirit of community, which becomes particularly evident in moments of crisis and national misfortune. In his political testament to the Serbs, Reiss writes that solidarity is one of the virtues they must preserve to survive as a nation. He warns that solidarity is stronger among the people and weaker among the so-called political elites, and therefore calls upon the Serbs to return to their tradition of unity and mutual assistance continually. Solidarity and the feeling of kinship among the Serbs have their roots in Christianity and the Orthodox faith: “In the feelings of a Serb in Serbia, thanks to the Orthodox religion, it is significant and wonderful that he regards all his compatriots as a kind of kin” (B. Jovanović, 1992: 57).

According to some interpretations, solidarity among Serbs is closely related to a strong sense of equality that developed due to a relatively levelled social structure during the restoration of the modern Serbian state:

“Well-known explanations refer to the sensitivity of Serbs to excessive inequalities in society, especially if they do not arise from differences in work and ability. Interpretations... boil down to the idea that the origin of the feeling of equality and justice is linked to solidarity in joint struggles against foreign rule, that the higher social stratum had been destroyed under foreign empires, and that the modern Serbian state began... from a leveled social structure... (which was — author's note) of relatively modest social standing” (Đurić, 2007: 88).

Elements of identity that contribute to the strength of the Serbian nation also include qualities such as national pride, folk wisdom, and honesty. Reiss highly valued the pride of the Serbian man, seeing it as “respect for one's own personality” and considering such pride without haughtiness to be a trait characteristic exclusively of good people (Rajs, 2010: 18). However, when it comes to national pride and self-respect, it is noticeable that today these qualities have been significantly weakened among members of the Serbian nation — something closely connected with the negatively-framed identity constructs imposed upon them, as discussed earlier.

In *Listen, Serbs!* Reiss singled out the clarity of mind among Serbs: “...you are a clear-minded people,” he says, and adds, “one of the clearest I have seen in my life. You understand quickly and correctly” (18). Professor Reiss openly writes that the Serbian peasant is intelligent in his simplicity, able to distinguish truth from falsehood, being primarily bound to morals and common sense. He emphasises that Serbian folk wisdom is practical rather than theoretical — wisdom that serves life rather than rhetoric. Likewise, he attributed extraordinary value to the honesty of Serbs, particularly the integrity of ordinary people, seeing it as one of the nation's most deeply rooted moral virtues.

There are also qualities that Reiss criticises as flaws in the Serbian people, and which may be viewed as internal weaknesses of the Serbian national identity. Foremost among these are indiscipline and disorganisation, referring to the lack of systematicity, planning, and respect for rules. Reiss observed indiscipline as a societal problem in Serbia, particularly in matters of organisation, wartime conditions, and specific social contexts. His critique was primarily directed toward collective and institutional discipline — or the lack thereof.



Slobodan Jovanović also highlighted the issue of developing self-discipline among Serbs, which he attributed to the Dinaric type of national character and linked to national neglect, primarily in the cultural and educational spheres (see *Novosti*, April 9, 2021; *Pravoslavlje*, June 1, 2008). He therefore emphasized the strong need to develop self-discipline as an integral part of national character — one that would be “freely accepted” out of “free conviction”, rather than imposed — arguing that this can be achieved only through the educational system and through an enhanced role of scientific, academic, and cultural institutions in all spheres of social life (Jovanović, 2005: 38–39; Mirović Janković, 2025: 194). However, the Dinaric psychology of the Serbian people has not always been an inhibiting factor in achieving national goals: “When Slobodan Jovanović presents various historical situations in which the Dinaric psychology (combativeness, rebelliousness, defiance in the face of danger, the ethic of strong will, indiscipline, the sense of justice) was functional and obstructive from the standpoint of national objectives, it is essentially claimed that there exists a collective mental matrix that is useful in some times (defensive wars) and harmful in others” (Avramović, 2020: 55).

Closely related to the absence of (self-)discipline and disorganisation is also the Serbian tendency toward improvisation, as another weakness of the national character. This implies reliance on one’s own resourcefulness rather than on long-term strategies. In many passages of his work, Reiss highlighted this inclination toward improvisation among Serbs, viewing it as one of the key traits of the Serbian character. However, he regarded this trait as a natural consequence of historical circumstances and life under uncertainty, not necessarily as a reflection of chaos or a negative characteristic in itself. This trait has not only been preserved to the present day, but has become visible in nearly all spheres of life and work in contemporary Serbian society. For example, in the area of political practice, a strategic approach is often absent across multiple policy domains, so that policymaking and implementation rarely proceed from well-designed and long-term plans; instead, they take the form of ad hoc actions.

This character trait is also connected to another predisposition among Serbs, which Reiss identified as a flaw — the tendency to work little. He observed two reasons for idleness, or the lack of a work ethic among Serbs. The first reason he linked to historical circumstances and centuries of hardship: “... under Turkish rule even the hardest work profited you very little. Its fruits were taken only by your oppressor. Over the centuries you became accustomed to working only as much as necessary” (Reiss, 2010: 21). The second reason, according to Reiss, lies in the natural wealth of the land: “... your land is so fertile. With very little work you have everything you need for life” (21).

Among the internal weaknesses of Serbian identity, Reiss also included superficiality and forgetfulness. When we speak of Serbian forgetfulness, we primarily refer to the tendency to overlook lessons from the past and easily abandon ideals. However, since the consequences of this collective oblivion and the absence of an adequate politics and culture of remembrance will be analysed in more detail in the chapter on threatening tendencies, here we shall focus on superficiality as a weakness of Serbian identity. In his analysis, Archibald Reiss wrote about the superficiality of Serbs primarily in the context of the social conditions of the time. He did not criticise Serbs for having an inherently poor character in this regard. Instead, he pointed to certain simplified or superficial reactions in specific situations, particularly in culture, education, and administrative affairs. For example, he believed that university education in Serbia at the time was extremely superficial, amounting to “paragraphs learned by heart from books,” so such diplomas were worthless in a professional sense. In this regard, he particularly criticised jurists, noting that when a lawyer with such superficial education enters the administration, “he can only become a poor civil servant” (Reiss, 2010: 21). His point was that the essence of university education should lie in professors conveying lessons to students and acquainting them with proper methods of reasoning.

Envy and disunity, often exhibited in Serbian traits, also fall into the category of identity-related weaknesses. However, Reiss considered these to be individual rather than structural social or national defects. He interpreted them as products of historical difficulties, as well as local conflicts and material inequality. Although Serbs are keenly aware of the negative consequences of their disunity on their survival and ability to achieve goals (reflected in the well-known maxim and slogan of the four Cyrillic S letters — “Only unity saves the Serbs”), and although calls for unity intensify in times of crisis, this trait persistently endures. Reiss also believed that jealousy leads to another flaw — excess or lack of moderation: “You want to equal others, even to surpass them, and you exaggerate in supporting them” (Reiss, 2010: 28). He particularly noted jealousy among the so-called intelligentsia, which in this case correlates with their superficiality: “Your intelligentsia,” Reiss writes, “slavishly follows every whim and absurdity of the so-called modern life, and exaggerates in doing so — whether it be in fashion, painting, sculpture, sport, etc. These people fail to see that they become ridiculous in their effort to reach and surpass others only to satisfy their jealousy” (28).

Finally, but no less importantly, we classify among the identity weaknesses of the Serbian people and society as a whole the phenomena of corruption and the prioritisation of personal interests over the common good, which are seen as consequences of the moral decline of individuals and institutions in relation to the national ideal. Reiss devoted considerable attention to corruption in Serbian society, particularly in politics, as well as to its critique. Moreover, the widespread presence of this phenomenon at all levels of administration and politics (“from the lowest clerk... to the minister”) and its deep-rootedness was one of the reasons for his disappointment in the postwar situation in the Kingdom of SHS (Reiss, 2010: 32). He emphasized that corruption had particularly infected the so-called intelligentsia of Serbia, pointing to numerous examples of high-level corruption — that is, naming poor men who, upon entering politics and becoming deputies or ministers, had suddenly become enormously wealthy. In this context, he believed that the predictions of German Chancellor Bismarck (Otto von Bismarck) had been confirmed; during the Berlin Congress of 1878 he stated: “If in Serbia you meet a man wearing his shirt over his trousers, you may rely on him. He is an honest and decent fellow. But if he tucks his shirt inside his trousers, he becomes a scoundrel” (21). Yet, according to Reiss, bribery had become part of almost any administrative affair in Serbia. For example, “freight wagons often would not depart unless set in motion by a bundle of banknotes... items at customs ... are delayed unless there is an incentive in the form of a tip” (33). Still, Reiss distinguished “bureaucratic” or “administrative” corruption from high-level political corruption. In describing the former, he notes that given their low wages, “these subordinate officials merely follow the example set from above” (59-60). And while he had, if not justification, then at least understanding for that type, he saw political corruption as unacceptable (for it “has no mitigating circumstances”) (34).

Today, Reiss's views on corruption in Serbia are often invoked, his examples of such practices and descriptions of bribery and abuse of office cited to support arguments that such socio-political pathological phenomena remain present in contemporary Serbia. In this sense, it is noteworthy that “in the public sphere his name (Archibald Reiss — authors) is often instrumentalised, and the memory of his character and work is used to point to certain phenomena in Serbian society today or to reinforce arguments about some of our traits” (Vujanović, 2023: 120).

Nevertheless, Reiss emphasised that these phenomena were not reflections of the fundamental moral pattern or the true national character of the Serbs, but rather consequences of complex lives, poverty, and prolonged insecurity. He even explained that corruption among Serbs developed because, driven by the desire for a better life and enrichment without much effort and lacking work habits, they adopted the former Ottoman model. He spoke of this as a “centuries-old notion of Turkish Oriental bribability” (Reiss, 2010: 32).



When, within this SWOT analysis, we speak of opportunities, we mean the possibilities and chances available to Serbia and the Serbian people, arising from the positive potentials of national identity as understood by Archibald Reiss.

First of all, among such opportunities is the necessary renewal of moral values and national consciousness, primarily through education and culture. In other words, the Serbian people would have numerous opportunities if they were to overcome the condition in which they have long found themselves, which Slobodan Jovanović (S. Jovanović, 2005) long ago described as a “national neglect”. In this respect, the system of education and upbringing, as well as cultural institutions, must play a primary role in shaping the future of our society. Yet, in this process today — more than ever before — the role of the media is also significant, especially that of public service broadcasters (see Mirović, 2006: 197–212), for alongside the family, these are crucial channels for transmitting and socialising specific values, thus encouraging their internalisation at the individual-psychological level.

Achieving national unity, that is, overcoming deep divisions and fragmentation by establishing a shared goal and responsibility for the future of the state, would open up major possibilities and new opportunities for development in Serbian society. This implies achieving a national-level consensus regarding fundamental values and objectives, as well as the country’s future development directions.

We have also included in the category of opportunities the development of (self)discipline and the building of institutions that uphold the law and principles of justice. The importance of self-discipline has already been discussed; therefore, we will add that it is a necessary precondition for progress, both individually and socially. The establishment of responsible and efficient institutions grounded in respect for the rule of law and justice, with transparency in their work, is essential not only for institutional integrity itself but also for restoring citizens’ trust in them, which, overall, is at a very low level in Serbia. According to a 2024 study (Demostat), distrust in social and political institutions in Serbia was expressed, on average, by 49% of respondents (while 22% expressed trust). The most significant dissatisfaction with institutional work and results is found in the areas of combating corruption and crime (67% dissatisfied), followed by the judiciary (53%), which has the same level of dissatisfaction as education and schooling (53%) (Mihailović, 2024). Equally interesting are the findings of another study from the same year,⁸ focused solely on young people, according to which political institutions enjoy the lowest level of trust (an average score below 1.5). In contrast, the army (average score 2.82) and the Church (2.6) remain the institutions with the highest trust among youth, the latter being the only institution whose trust levels have increased relative to the same study five years earlier (2019 – 2.4). These are institutions that have traditionally enjoyed high levels of trust among Serbian citizens. It is also noteworthy that young people expressed the highest level of confidence in science and scientific institutions (the only average score above 3 — specifically, 3.15), which were included in the scope of this research for the first time (according to *Danas*, 2024, August 3).

Building trust in institutions also presupposes changing attitudes toward citizens—for example, in institutions of local self-government or social welfare. A low level of trust in social and political institutions inevitably leads to growing distrust in leadership. According to the same research on youth attitudes regarding trust in leaders of key institutions, this category of the population expressed the highest trust in the Serbian Patriarch (average score 2.39) (*Danas*, 2024, August 3).

When discussing opportunities for Serbia and the Serbian people rooted in their cultural identity, it is essential to emphasise the importance of utilising tradition as a foundation for modernisation. This refers to a potentially positive fusion of tradition and spirituality, on the one hand, and progress or modernisation processes, on the other. This must be kept in mind because within Serbian society, there

⁸ This refers to a study whose results were presented in the Alternative Report on the Status and Needs of Youth in Serbia for 2024, published by the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMs).



is a segment that is radically anti-traditionalist and rejects any form of traditionalism—even one that is neither extreme nor orthodox—as inherently harmful and backward (Mirović, 2008b: 1387–1395; 2008a: 187–210). In doing so, the very concept of tradition—wrongly reduced to an exclusively static, retrograde, and decaying phenomenon, allegedly characterised by non-reflectiveness and irrationality—is often confused with traditionalism, which represents “a kind of ideologization of tradition” (Mirović, 2008b: 1392). In this way, tradition is placed in opposition to (post)modernity, which is attributed exclusively positive traits, such as self-reflexivity, rationality, development, and progressiveness. Yet tradition may be defined as “the totality of established behavioural patterns, moral standards, customs, and values formed in the past and transmitted as cultural heritage to new generations, thereby ensuring the cultural continuity and identity of a people, groups, and individuals” (Kuzmanović, 1998: 260). Theoretical arguments and empirical examples from some developed societies show that tradition and traditional identities need not necessarily stand in opposition to modernization processes; instead, “some traditions possess great vitality precisely due to their self-reflexivity and rationality, which enable them—through a degree of adaptation and change (thus allowing dynamism and developmental ability to be their inherent characteristics)—to endure and survive through time” (Mirović, 2008b: 1390). After all, modernisation without reliance on tradition would lead to an impersonal society with homogenised needs and values, lacking recognisable identity and national specificity.

Furthermore, significant opportunities and development prospects for Serbia and its people depend on building, strengthening, and protecting the country's international reputation. It must be taken into account that the process of creating a state's reputation is long-term, unlike its image — a vital identity category — but one that rests on current perception (see Mirović & Janković, 2023: 867). The construction and redesign of Serbia's contemporary identity, as well as the development of its international reputation, must be based on national specificities and authentic moral, cultural, and other values. Today, only in this manner can the nation be successfully repositioned in the international arena.

Finally, some factors threaten the identity — as well as the moral and broader development — of the Serbian people and society as a whole. Among such tendencies — which, based on some negative characteristics of the Serbian people as understood by Archibald Reiss, we categorise as threats to the survival and further development of the Serbian nation, the preservation of its identity, and the overall progress of society and the Serbian state — foremost is the importation of foreign moral models and associated negative influences. What we are dealing with is an imitative practice — the adoption of foreign value patterns, primarily from Western societies — which are in many respects fundamentally at odds with the traditional value system of Serbian society. A clear example of the consequences of this dynamic can be seen in the acute erosion of the family and education — the fundamental pillars of society. The erosion of the family, which is of paramount importance and — given the continued multi-year decline in the birth rate in Serbia — an existential threat to the Serbian people and society as a whole, is undoubtedly a reflection of the erosion of Orthodox culture and of traditional Christian values in general. Commenting on these negative tendencies in a new phase of neoliberal capitalism, in which “the state is losing its power” and which are increasingly gaining momentum in Serbian society, the celebrated film director Emir Kusturica remarked: “That world which is carrying out these changes with an assaulting force actually wants to change not only our hearts but also our souls, our social being, to practically abolish the freedom we once had, and to bring us to respect laws that undermine Orthodox culture” (Media Center, 2021). This inevitably leads to a moral crisis and a profound identity crisis.

This importation of foreign value models represents nothing other than what, in contemporary political science terminology, could be referred to as value isomorphism. However, in modern Serbia, we are also witnessing institutional isomorphism, which refers to the practice of adopting and simply grafting foreign institutional models and solutions without any adaptation to the domestic socio-his-



torical context — namely, the institutional traditions, specific characteristics such as identity-related conflicts, and the needs of Serbian society itself.⁹

Closely connected to this isomorphic practice in the field of values is another threatening tendency, referred to as moral and cultural decadence, reflected, among other things, in the loss of respect for tradition and spirituality. Archibald Reiss already observed that, although the religion that became part of the people, in the sense of the existence of a “people’s church” and “people’s tradition”, was one of the primary means of survival for the Serbian people. In order to preserve their identity during the difficult times of foreign rule, Serbs are, in fact, not religious in the classical sense of the term. He was referring to ecclesiastical or institutional religiosity. Nevertheless, it is essential to bear in mind that “religiosity differs from religion as a broader concept, since it is an individual attitude, a subjective experience that may even be mystical, and therefore difficult to empirically verify” (Radisavljević Ćiparizović, 2006: 59).¹⁰

Interestingly, Reiss perceived even at that time that the lack of classical religiosity was characteristic primarily of the male population in Serbia (within the Kingdom of SCS): “You will hardly ever find men in church. How many times have I entered your temples at the time of service and found only a few rare believers there, almost exclusively women” (Reiss, 2010: 17). This observation by Reiss corresponds to the view of his contemporary—Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović—who noted that, at that time, European culture still “had not corrupted the women here. The Serbian woman,” — said Saint Nikolaj of Ohrid and Žiča (canonised in 2003)— “is an ascetic, a woman of prayer, a saint, risen to the heavens” (Tucić, 2023).

Indeed, in the postwar period, during socialist Yugoslavia, when the suppression of Serbian cultural and national identity was at its height, it turned out that it was Serbian women who, often in secret, baptised children, preserved customs related to religious holidays, and in this way maintained, within their families, at least some connection with Orthodoxy and the Church. Some later studies also showed that during the 1980s, the average believer came primarily from the ranks of women and the older segment of the population (Đorđević, 1990). From the late 1980s onward — and especially after the disintegration of the second Yugoslavia — there was a revitalisation of religious identity and a rapid increase in religiosity, or at least its external manifestation, throughout the territory of the former common state. Whether this occurred due to the prolonged suppression of religious traditions or as an instrument of homogenization and mobilisation of newly formed — or restored — nations is another matter (see Radeljić and Topić, 2015). This trend was also recorded in Serbia.

However, although there was a dramatic rise in those who, based on religious self-identification, categorize themselves as believers — with a simultaneous drastic decrease in non-religious persons in the general population — research at the end of the last decade of the 20th century shows that among traditional forms of relationship toward religion and the Church, the most prevalent were the baptism of children, church rites, and the celebration of religious holidays and the *slava*. By contrast, when it comes to other forms of religious behavior (so-called actual religiosity), such as the practice of prayer and fasting — and especially church attendance and participation in liturgy — as well as reading reli-

9 For more on institutional isomorphism and its various types, see: DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 150–154. On the widespread isomorphic practice in Serbia — not only in the institutional and value spheres but also in the scientific field — see: Mirović Janković, 2023: 189.

10 When it comes to the quality and intensity of people’s religiosity, theology has long used various descriptive terms to denote different types, such as “zealous”, “nominal”, “marginal”, “lukewarm”, “drowsy”, “seasonal believers”, “folklore conformists” or “non-practitioners” etc. (Jukić, 1973, according to Radisavljević Ćiparizović, 2006: 59). In contemporary research within the sociology of religion, the following categories, for example, are also used to determine and measure the intensity or degree of religiosity: “convinced believer”, “non-denominational believer”, “doubtful”, “indifferent”, “non-religiously tolerant”, and “antitheist” (see Radisavljević Ćiparizović, 2006: 115).

gious literature, their prevalence is much lower among members of Serbian society, even among those categorized as “convinced believers” (see Radisavljević Ćiparizović, 2006: 65–95, 115).

Partisanism¹¹ and political corruption are yet another set of characteristic — but also threatening — phenomena in Serbian society. Such phenomena were already strongly present in the period of Reiss's stay in postwar Serbia. Partisanism, in the sense described by Reiss, refers to party fanaticism and the pursuit of narrow party interests that often serve to mask personal interests, all at the expense of citizens and the broader national interest. Partisanism is to a great extent based on a form of cronyism that involves allocating positions according to party affiliation. Yet, other forms of cronyism are also present in Serbia, where obtaining a position often depends on friendly or school connections, god-parent ties, and the so-called bureaucratic relations, which involve belonging to the same generation or certain Masonic or other lodges (see Šuvaković, 2025: 36–37).

Although discussions on the nature and causes of this phenomenon are possible —whether it is a character trait or part of the national mentality, as Reiss believed, or instead connected to the nature of particular political parties and their policies — the fact remains that it produces several negative implications for the development of society and the state (36). The foremost bearers and promoters of this practice are “party-politicians”, whose primary motive for political activity is personal gain — that is, whose party fervour is driven solely by lucrative reasons (25). Reiss thus distinguished these “party-politicians” from “statesmen-politicians”—those guided exclusively by what they believe is good for the state and who would have the strength to oppose narrow party interests in favour of general or state interests.

Partisanism is fertile ground for political corruption. Speaking about the prevention of detection and punishment of corruption in Serbia, Reiss noted the presence of partisan networking — even among political opponents, that is, different and opposing parties — for mutual protection:

“Then your party-politicians would establish parliamentary inquiry commissions, which never produced any results, because wolves do not eat wolves. Various political parties would insult each other for their own advertisement. Still, they were cautious not to dig too deep, since they knew well that corruption is not the prerogative of one party, but of all of them” (Reiss, 2010: 59).

We have already discussed Reiss's understanding of corruption — its nature and its conditioning by the socio-historical development of the Serbian people — in the section on the weaknesses of Serbian identity. What should be emphasised here is the current perception of corruption in Serbia, which demonstrates the validity of Reiss's assessment of corruption as one of the main “ailments” of Serbian society. According to data for 2022 provided by Transparency International (i.e., Transparency Serbia), based on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Serbia is, along with Albania, the worst ranked country on the European list (which includes EU member states and regional non-members); while on the global list it ranked 101st (out of 180 countries) (Topalović and BeriĆ, 2023: 64; Vujanović, 2023: 119).

Yet another, and perhaps the greatest threat to Serbian society and the Serbian people is their fragmentation and division along political, ideological, and identity lines — so deep that national unity itself has become endangered. To the old symbolic divisions (such as those related to dynastic conflicts or divisions between monarchists and republicans, Chetniks and Partisans, etc.), new ones have been added, which are, in essence, predominantly identity-based. They generate deep social cleavages along

11 It is essential here to make a terminological note regarding the concept of *strančarenje* (party factionalism), which in the Serbian language is actually used as a synonym for partisanship (in the sense of fervent supporters of political parties or currents), since this latter term, although used in earlier times, is nowadays avoided because of possible terminological and conceptual confusion with the similarly named fighters of the communist anti-fascist movement. For more on this, as well as on the origin of this Reiss's term, see: Šuvaković, 2025: 46.



various axes or lines of division: from those concerning the type of identity model that is accepted and promoted — civic vs. ethnic; to divisions between traditionalists and modernists; to divisions along the majority vs. minority identity line, or in general based on conflicts among different particular identities; and finally to divisions based on identity orientation toward the outside world (see Mirović, 2008a: 187–210, 2008b: 1383–1428; Mirović Janković, 2023: 476–477). Such divisions prevent the establishment of any consensus regarding fundamental social values, common goals, and the strategic directions of national development.

Equally significant is a threat stemming from the current tendency of the Serbian people to forget their historical sacrifices and ideals of freedom, which may lead to the loss of identity continuity. One of the very virtues of the Serbian people, particularly admired by Archibald Reiss, who recognised an essential source of their patriotism and which he spoke about with great personal respect as a “magnificent gift”, was the people’s vivid remembrance of legendary national heroes:

“I do not know of any other nation in which legendary national heroes live so deeply in the soul of the people as among you. And you have that magnificent gift that the memory of these heroes can inspire you so greatly that your own life no longer means anything to you. It is because the image of those legendary heroes comes forth from your very selves” (Reiss, 2010: 15).

However, in contemporary Serbia, this virtue is diminishing. It is enough to recall once again our heroes from Košare who, guided precisely by the national ideal of freedom, showed extraordinary sacrifice and personal heroism in defending the country and its people — and who, long after the 1999 war, essentially throughout the following decade and a half, just like the very topic of the Battle of Košare itself, despite being one of the most significant battles in modern Serbian history, were subjected to “deafening silence,” remaining outside the realm of public discourse or remembrance of any kind (see Mirović Janković, 2025).

A similar attitude of the state existed toward those who “bled for the liberation of the country” after the First World War and after the war of 1999. When it comes to the participants in the latter war, it may be said that they fared even worse, “because in Reiss’s time there was no so-called Hague Tribunal to put King Peter, Regent Alexander, and Serbian *vojvodas* on trial for the crime of defending their country — while today that ‘institution’ has fulfilled its purpose by convicting the entire Serbian political, military, and police leadership from the period 1990–2000, while acquitting even the direct perpetrators of crimes against Serbs...” (Šuvaković, 2025: 35).

However, the practice of “forgetfulness” is often present when it comes to other historical events as well, both from our recent and more distant past. Particularly illustrative are the experiences with attempts by certain global and regional media, as well as other public actors and even some scholars, to engage in historical revisionism and instrumentalise the commemoration of events such as the Great War for day-to-day political and propagandistic purposes. That war represents the brightest military tradition of the Serbian people, who at that time made immense sacrifices (see Milošević & Mirović Janković, 2020: 172–219). Dr Dušan Milić, retired colonel, in the preface to one of the editions of Archibald Reiss’s *Listen, Serbs!*, criticising the political concept of so-called “facing the past” that has for decades been imposed on the Serbian people, wrote:

“To avoid new enslavement in the 21st century, the Serbian people must confront everything they experienced during the First World War, for that is their true past, representing the brightest part of their history. Among all the Allied countries of the Entente, Serbia suffered by far the greatest losses, from which even those who attack it today greatly benefited... Just as we must not forget the messages left to us in this unique testament by our proven friend (Archibald Reiss – author’s note), Serbia can never forget the suffering of its people and army during the First



World War. In this war, Serbia lost 30% of its population, of whom 54% were between 18 and 55 years of age – that is, the reproductive segment” (Milić, 2010: 5, 9).

Archibald Reiss was a direct witness to this terrible suffering of the Serbian people, and it was on this basis that he was able to inform the world public about all the atrocities and crimes committed against Serbs by the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Bulgarian armies. All of these points lead to the conclusion that there is a pressing need to revitalise and further institutionalise the culture of remembrance in Serbia today. During the commemoration of the 82nd anniversary of the death of “one of the greatest Serbs” in 2011, the following was noted, among other things:

“The identical nature of the facts listed by Reiss in his book written in 1928 (*Listen, Serbs!* – author's note) and the current socio-political situation is astonishing. It is devastating that, over the course of eight decades, the situation has not improved, and I dare say it has actually worsened. It appears that the stratum of people whom Reiss refers to as the so-called intelligentsia has undergone several generations of mutation, reaching its peak in the 21st century... Unfortunately, it seems that the disease Reiss spoke of has penetrated deeply and, rooted in this society, has begun to metastasise. The heroes never regained the strength and energy lost in wars, but the so-called intelligentsia has expanded to unimaginable proportions.” (Trifković, 2011).

We may also add that this trend has continued, and even on the eve of the centenary of Reiss's political testament to the Serbs, there has been no progress in overcoming the weaknesses of Serbian society or eliminating the threatening tendencies based on them. This is confirmed by the results of the aforementioned research (Topalović and Berić, 2023), according to which a significant share of respondents agreed with most of Reiss's views and claims about the characteristics of Serbian society — particularly the negative ones, such as the lack of patriotism among the political and social elite, the corruption and inefficiency of political institutions, partisanship, problems in education, and so forth. An important conclusion reached by the authors of this study is that, “despite clear indications that Reiss's observations and assertions about the flaws of the Serbian people persist to this day, it is encouraging that the people are aware of them” (72). In other words, there is hope in the fact that, as with any problem or deficiency, awareness of them is a necessary precondition for their overcoming. However, it is disappointing to note that some experts devoted to the study of Dr Reiss's oeuvre, as well as those well acquainted with his life and work, claim that this great man — who, as the verses of Vojislav Ilić the Younger say, “gave to beloved Serbia his dreams, his youth, and his whole life” — “is insufficiently visible in Serbian public life, and that the vast majority know only that he wrote *Listen, Serbs!*” (Vujanović, 2023: 117). Simply put, the thematisation of Dr Reiss's life, his role, and his manifold contributions in various fields of Serbian society and state development is insufficiently represented in both media content and the education system. These assessments are further confirmed by the findings of another recent study (Spasojević and Matijević, 2023), at least when it comes to today's youth in Serbia — specifically, the segment belonging to the university community (the research sample included students of the University of Belgrade) — which revealed a low level of familiarity with the figure and work of Professor Reiss, as well as with his importance for Serbia (93–102).

The analysis presented above demonstrates the continued relevance, value, and utility of Reiss's model as an analytical instrument even today. It undoubtedly offers a conceptual framework for better self-perception as a people, providing a strong impetus for critical self-examination to realise the full potential and developmental capacities that we, as a nation, undoubtedly possess. In this sense, another warning left to us by Reiss is worth recalling: “With your intelligence (meaning mental sharpness – author's note) and the natural wealth of your land, you ought to have one of the leading roles in Europe. Your flaws, especially the flaws of those whom you call your ‘intelligentsia,’ prevent you from achieving this” (Reiss, 2010: 18).



Translated into the language of contemporary science and expertise, the human and natural resources Reiss referred to are not lacking; indeed, they constitute some of the key comparative advantages of modern Serbia and the Serbian people. We must make the best possible use of them, while simultaneously overcoming our weaknesses and shortcomings, if we wish to be competitive and better positioned in the external environment. This is, of course, what is today referred to as the strategic management of national identity (see Mirović Janković, 2023: 865–895).

CONCLUSION

The SWOT analysis of the identity elements of the Serbian people presented in this paper, based on Reiss's observations — what we have termed Reiss's characterological model — shows that Serbian identity is rich in noble and heroic traits but also burdened with internal flaws that hinder social progress and the full use of our own developmental potential. Reiss urged the Serbs to return to their best virtues — honesty, unity, and solidarity, as well as love of truth and justice, and love of the homeland — and through them to restore their moral and national integrity.

His message still carries great significance today: the strength of a people lies in its morality, and the preservation of identity requires constant self-examination, self-criticism, education, and responsibility — both toward one's own tradition and toward one's future.

If we were to restore and preserve what is best within us, grounded in the brightest Serbian traditions, safeguarding all those values that belong to the category of excellence and to our national authenticity, while at the same time overcoming our deficiencies and weaknesses, we could undoubtedly develop and enhance our not-so-small capacities, seize numerous opportunities, and eliminate threatening tendencies.

This would mean that we have finally understood — and, more importantly, acted constructively upon — Reiss's famous warning that our destiny depends primarily on ourselves: "Despite everything, I believe in the future of your people. The spirit of Kosovo, Karađorđe, Kumanovo, and Kajmakčalan will awaken again. Yet it must awaken quickly, for without it you may once more experience a time of enslavement... Your destiny lies in your own hands: a bright future or renewed servitude." (Reiss, 2010: 90).

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