

## **Situation report on former Yugoslavia with respect to the Hungarian minority\***

*Ethnic Hungarians* number 345 000 or 3,3 per cent of the total population of rump Yugoslavia. (Serbia proper with its two once autonomous regions, Kosovo in the south and Vojvodina in the north plus Montenegro) Virtually all Hungarians live – together with other national minorities i. e. Croats, Slovaks, Rumanians etc. – in *Vojvodina-Vajdaság*, until 1918 an integral part of historic Hungary, (counties Bács-Bodrog, Torontál and Szerém-Srem) with an evenly balanced Hungarian, South Slav (Serb and Croat), German and other national minority population. The multi-ethnic character of the region prevailed after the disappearance of the Germans (1944–48), with an ever-increasing Serb preponderance, the ratio of Hungarians having sunk below 20%.

They still constitute a clear majority in 7 „communes” (districts, townships) along and north-west of the Tisa-Tisza river.

Of all ethnic groups of the former Yugoslav state the Hungarians have the worst demographic profile. They have the highest mortality, abortion, divorce, and suicide rate, and an increasingly ageing population.

The social stratification of multi-ethnic Vojvodina was unfavourable for the Hungarians even as far back as the times of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

1/3 of the Hungarians are still private farmers. „Part-time peasants”, commuters living in villages and hamlets, and working in towns and cities number in the hundreds of thousands. Thus at least half of the Hungarians earn a living out of activities related to agriculture. But agriculture, as a whole, has been in an ever deepening crisis since the 1980s. The situation was aggravated in 1989, when the region’s autonomous status was abolished and again in 1991–92 with the Serbian aggression in Croatia and Bosnia and by the embargo resulting from it.

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In the decades of „socialist” industrialization and urbanisation nearly half of the Hungarian blue-collar workers remained unskilled. The Hungarians were under-represented among white-collar employees in general, and in top managerial and executive positions in particular. The ratio of persons with secondary school education was about half, and the university and college graduates hardly reached 1/3 of the national average. There were even less Hungarians among the M. A.s and PhDs. They made up a mere 1% of the scientific workers and researchers in Vojvodina in the 1980s. The percentage of Hungarians and other national minorities was and has remained similarly low in the communist party echelons, commanders of the armed forces (a privilege of Serbs and Montenegrins), and in the republican and federal hierarchy, with far-reaching detrimental consequences.

Since the mid-1950s, Hungarian and other minority language schooling has constantly declined, attributable to the decrease in the number of school age children, and to administrative measures. For example, the new education law in Serbia increased the minimum number of students necessary for starting a class in a minority language from 15 to 30. The minorities are not permitted to establish their own education network. The minority churches – Catholic and Protestant alike – have been excluded from compensation for property confiscated under communist rule. Since 1991 less money has been allotted to minority-language institutions, publications, and mass media with a worsening of timing and technical conditions (reception) of the most popular programmes.

A new law declared Serb and its Cyrillic alphabet the sole official language. The use of any other language in the administration and public life, including signs for towns, streets and shops was made optional, with no legal or financial support, to be determined by local officials.

With the introduction of a new constitution in Serbia in March 1989, Vojvodina and Kosovo lost their former quasi-republican status. Since then, matters of crucial and vital importance, such as policies on foreign relations, defense, internal security, economy, and last but not least education and information have been determined in Belgrade. In January 1992 a Belgrade decree divided Vojvodina into 7 administrative districts, replacing the 50 old ones. The new divisions have broken apart historically integrated areas and dissolved centuries-old geographic, historic, cultural and economic ties. Ethnic Hungarians have become a minority in all 7 districts and have been squeezed out of decision-making.

The fall of the hard-line dogmatic regime in 1988, oppressive to all democratic and minority demands, brought a temporary relief. In a less-controlled public life the already existing institutions and media gave more attention to minority grievances and endeavours. In the transitional period from

Tito-shaped Yugoslav „national” Communism to great Serbian nationalism and dominance (which are to be blamed, much more than Slovene and Croat „separatism”, for the break-up of Yugoslavia), a sluggish process of democratisation began in Serbia, too. A handful of brave Hungarian intellectuals took the opportunity and the *Democratic Alliance (Community) of Hungarians in Vojvodina* – VMDK – was founded (December 1989 – March 1990). This is a grass-roots social organisation, not a political party, based on ideological principles. Nevertheless under the given legal circumstances, being the sole legitimate representative body of Hungarians, safeguarding their interests, it is functioning as a political party. Having gained 80 to 85 per cent of the Hungarian vote both at the 1990 and 1992 elections, the VMDK had 9 seats in the 250 member Serbian parliament and 3 representatives among the 138 MP-s in the „lower house” of the two-chamber federal assembly. Action committees have done praiseworthy work in the fields of economy, education, health care, culture and science, especially since the outbreak of the „war of Yugoslav succession”. Since they act as a parallel administration on local and regional levels, through these committees the VMDK can provide a democratic alternative for the non-Hungarian population, too. This fact was acknowledged and honoured by a greater number of votes: the VMDK candidates received 3,6 per cent of the popular vote in 1992.

In the latest elections the number of Hungarian MP-s sank to 5 – this reduction can mainly be attributed to the lack of 40 to 50 thousand ethnic Hungarian voters: these predominantly young, skilled males with higher education have left their homeland, possibly forever.

The VMDK’s goal is the assertion of individual and collective human rights for Hungarians in Vojvodina:

1. The right of proportional representation in the elected, administrative and judicial bodies;
2. Free use of the mother tongue in connection with the aforementioned authorities and in public life in general;
3. Public information in the mother tongue;
4. Equal opportunities in economic and social life;
5. Education in the mother tongue in elementary and secondary schools completed by an adequate arrangement on the university level; and
6. The right of establishing ties with institutions in the mother country and with international minority organizations.

In compliance with the recognition of individual and collective rights, embodied in the Carrington-documents, the VMDK elaborated a three-tier

autonomy scheme and A. Ágoston, its chairman submitted their proposal to the Brussels and The Hague conferences on Yugoslavia.

1. *Personal-cultural (non-territorial) autonomy* is to be based on individual human rights. It would work on similar lines as the Churches perform their activity, headed by a parliament (assembly of elected representatives) of the Hungarian ethnic group, a self-government council and a president. This structure could provide a full-scale network of education, cultural activity, and information in the mother tongue supported by state and/or regional budgets.

2. *Local self-government* would safeguard and put into practice the minority rights in communities (towns and villages) where a given national minority constitutes a majority. Providing a special status for isolated settlements, where a minority forms the bulk of the local population, is of great importance because 1/3 of Hungarians and a great majority of the other minorities live scattered.

3. Territorially contiguous communities and townships (districts) with a Hungarian majority and a special status are entitled to *territorial autonomy* by establishing a Hungarian Autonomous Area with 3 official languages, Hungarian, Serb and Croat.

This area would be governed by

- a general assembly,
- a territorial council and
- an area president, all elected for a term of 4 years with their seat at Subotica-Szabadka.

Their jurisdiction should be extended to

- economic and social affairs, including planning, finance and environmental issues;
- the administration of justice and the police;
- education, culture and information.

The combination of these three interdependent autonomies could provide an effective assertion and guarantee of human and minority rights, fully in accordance with the Recommendation 1201 (1993) of the Council of Europe, on an additional protocol on the rights of national minorities to the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the revival of extreme nationalism – fed by territorial gains – and autocracy all over rump Yugoslavia, Hungarians in Vojvodina have a fairly good chance to achieve at least some of their goals. Firstly, because their autonomy scheme has appeared in international documents and will inevitably be placed on the agenda of forthcoming negotiations to make an internally and internationally acceptable settlement in ex-Yugoslavia. So much the more because the VMDK „... demands no more and no less than the Serbs in Croatia.”

Secondly, a considerable segment of the rest of Vojvodina's population – not only the national minorities, but the indigenous („prečani”, not colonist newcomers) Serb population shows sympathy towards a kind of autonomy for their homeland like the Ruthenians in the Subcarpathian Region of Ukraine.

Thirdly, the position of the Milošević government has been weakened by a forceful challenge from the fascist Radical Party of V. Šešelj, the Chetnik leader. Incredibly, though, the communist-turned-nationalist Milošević and his „socialist” administration has by now become a stabilizing force, and an inconclusive rapprochement is taking place between the Socialist Party and the VMDK in Vojvodina. As a matter of fact, both the Socialists in power and the Serbian opposition parties are basically against Hungarian autonomy; some of them, first of all the leftists, are striving for – at least partial – restoration of Vojvodina's autonomy instead.

*What could the future bring?* One can start with the sobering, unpleasant fact, that the democratic forces, south and east of Hungary, are tragically weak, and, as a consequence, in opposition, with no hope of coming to power in the foreseeable future.

For Yugoslavia, i. e. Serbia there are four options:

1. Under the pressure of economic hardships<sup>2</sup> and international isolation, Milošević will make approaches to the West, fulfilling some of its demands, first of all stopping support for the breakaway Bosnian Serbs. Although the blockade could easily be lifted in exchange, the right radicals – whose aim is to create a Greater Serbia, by carving out and incorporating 1/3 of Croatia's and 3/4 of Bosnia's territory – might turn against him. In such a case Milošević will have to suppress the rebellion; a repetition of the 1917 Salonika „purge” can occur. Anyhow, the army will determine the fate of the country.

2. A military coup d'état led by a group of pro-western generals, with a similar scenario.

3. A military takeover with the opposite intention to preserve the territorial gains and the privileged position of the „old guards” and the new war-profiteers. Milošević might step down, opening the gate to either variant.

4. A fascist dictatorship of Šešelj or another right-wing radical – in all probability with the tacit backing of the military – would be dreadful for the ex-Yugoslav peoples including the Serbs themselves, and most of their neighbours. The probability of such a coup is alarmingly high, because the radicals are known as the crusaders of creating or rather preserving Greater Serbia, in its extravagant form: where a single Serb lives or a Serb tomb can be found – an unmistakable hint to Kosovo – that place must belong to Serbia. They have an unmatched influence among the well-armed and battle-hardened para-military detachments as well as among the 5 to 6 hundred thousand

refugees, embittered and susceptible to any kind of extremes. Šešelj has many followers in the armed forces, especially in the security service. Complete disaster would ensue with the country sealed off from the rest of the world, Vojvodina plundered and „cleansed” of all non-Serbs, Macedonia attacked and (re)conquered, the reign of terror intensified in Kosovo and in the Sandjak resulting in an international conflict with incalculable consequences.

As regards *Bosnia-Hercegovina*, a combination of lifting the arms embargo against the Moslems and air strikes of „surgical accuracy” could not only put out Serbian heavy weaponry and supply lines, but „bomb” the Serbs to the negotiating table paving the way to a mutually acceptable territorial settlement and an internationally guaranteed peace treaty. Calculations and random statements concerning the inevitability of sending 200 to 600 000 NATO or WEU troops to make peace in Bosnia are totally misleading and exaggerated: a well-armed Moslem (and Croat) army could match the Serbs and liberate the territory lost.

Should scenario N 1 or 4 be implemented, a civil war in Serbia proper could erupt. The Albanians will surely take the opportunity and secede, in order to unite all Shiptars in one state, preferably with Pristina as the capital.

On the other hand *Hungarians in Voivodina* are threatened in their very existence. They share the common misfortune of their fellows-citizens: economic decline, uncultivated fields, 6 to 10% inflation rate per day, systematic ransacking of the whole region, plus providing shelter and food for 150000 refugees from Croatia and Bosnia.

But the greatest blow is conscription and military service. The Hungarians – together with other minorities, to say nothing of the Croats – have nothing to do with the fratricidal war between South Slavs: they do not want to kill or to get killed for the sake of Greater Serbia. Young men belonging to national minorities have been drafted into the Serbian army in great excess of their proportion in Vojvodina’s population. For this reason approximately 25 000 able-bodied young Hungarians have fled from their birthplace and tried to survive scattered all over the world, most of them in Hungary. They are mainly college graduate males in their 20s and 30s. Due to their forced emigration Hungarians are squeezed out of the management in state-owned firms and newly established private businesses in Hungarian hands have suffered a 10% decrease. It is a less well known fact that another 200 000 liberal-minded Serbs and half as many Croats felt compelled to leave their warring homeland. This forced exodus has considerably weakened the position and chances of a democratic opposition in Serbia.

And the worst is to come: should the West make up its mind and force the Serbs to give up territories they are in possession of, well exceeding their percentage in terms of population (1991: in Croatia 12%. in Bosnia 32–33%) and/or the competing allies could break the superiority of Serb(ian) forces, a new

exodus would ensue, with an additional hundreds of thousands of ethnic Serb refugees. The only suitable place in rump Yugoslavia where they can be settled seems to be the fertile and peaceful Vojvodina, Bačka-Bácska in particular. In this case the 600 000 strong minority population could be evicted first, and a new, huge wave of forced migration would inundate Hungary and the countries farther in the West. Rumania and Slovakia could be tempted to follow suit. In the worst case a potential spill-over from the fighting might develop into a large-scale Hungarian-Serbian armed conflict resulting in terrible losses in terms of life and material and producing further millions of homeless.

Conclusion: the well-armed and fanatical Serb para-military detachments under no control and the nominally federal, essentially Serbian armed forces – far the strongest in South-Eastern Europe – represent the greatest threat to the stability and security of the Balkans and East-Central Europe. No lasting peace can be achieved or compromise reached until the insurgents are disarmed, disbanded and the Serbian army is radically reduced and deprived of all its offensive heavy weaponry.

According to the 1991 census, 24 000 ethnic *Hungarians* lived in *Croatia*, but their real number can be put at about 36 to 40 000. Their homeland in Baranja –Baranya (Danube–Drava) triangle and in Eastern Slavonia (around Vukovár) became the worst-hit civil war-zones in 1991. Approximately 1/3 of the Hungarians – together with Croats, Slovaks, Czechs etc. – have lost their homes and been expelled by Serb irregulars. 2 villages and several churches were completely destroyed. The number of ethnic Hungarians, who have perished on both sides – civilians and army conscripts and reservists – can be put at about 1500. An estimated 6 to 8000 Hungarians have taken refuge in safer parts of Croatia and in Hungary. And again: it is the ablest, young with children and high qualifications who have left. Education and cultural activity in the mother tongue have come to a standstill.

Since late summer of 1991 the non-Serb population in the occupied areas have been subject to intimidation, plunder, armed robberies, arson, beatings and sheer murder. They are isolated from the outer world. These atrocities are being committed before the eyes of the „peacekeeping force”, and the UNPROFOR are unwilling or incapable of stopping these and a new colonisation, forcibly altering the ethnic breakdown in favour of the Serbs.

These areas were proclaimed to be parts of Serb „Krajinás” and there has been speculation that the Croat leadership might relinquish these lost territories in the east to gain some others in central and/or south-western Croatia.

In a word: Hungarians in Croatia are facing near extinction.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Section 3, Art. 3, 7–10, and particularly Art. 11; „... In the regions where they are in a majority the the persons belonging to a national minority shall have the right to have at their disposal appropriate local or autonomous authorities or to have a special status...”

<sup>2</sup> Nearly half, in some places 80% of the industrial production has been halted, with a corresponding proportion of the employees on forced leave as a result of the isolation and embargo.