

The Situation of Hungarians in Serb-Yugoslav Voivodina

Animosity between Serbs and Hungarians goes back to the early 16th century when Serbian mercenaries were called in to put down a peasant revolt. During the 16th and 17th century the Serbs (like the other peoples in the Balkans) were faithful subjects of the Ottoman Empire serving in the Sultan's armed forces doing much harm and causing horrible devastation and annihilation in Austrian, Slovenian, Croatian, Hungarian and Polish territories. At the end of the 17th century a part of the Serbs changed allegiance and sided with the Austrian liberation army. Retreating they left empty the whole Kosovo region and were settled by the Imperial Military Council along the southern marches bordering the Turkish Empire. The frontier guards (*graničari*) enjoyed full ecclesiastical-cultural autonomy and self-government: they constituted a state within the state and behaved accordingly. The new, well-trained and-equipped „task force” also proved to be an effective weapon against the „rebellious” Hungarians' struggle for freedom, both in 1703–11 and 1848–49, the most cruel and bloody war operations took place in the south, between Serbs and Hungarians. The difference, even cleavage between the warrior-minded, „trigger-happy” Serbs and the rest of the population, (Hungarians, Germans, Croats) became the source of ceaseless conflicts.

The situation and relationship worsened during the two world wars, Serbs and Hungarians fighting each other and changing the roles of oppressors and oppressed. Southern Hungary – including Croatia-Slavonia – was occupied by Serbian forces and ceded to the new Yugoslavia in 1918, although two-thirds of Voivodina's population was non-Serbian, mainly Hungarian, German and Croat.

In April 1941, a few days after the German attack on Yugoslavia, the Hungarian army reoccupied the Bácska-Baranya-Mura region. As a retaliation to the Novi Sad/Újvidék blood-bath of January 1942 with 3300 victims mostly civilians, among them 2200 Serbs, the Communist-led Partisan detachments massacred approximately 20 000 Hungarian (and many more German) innocent local inhabitants in October-December 1944.

According to the last census taken in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1910 the Hungarians constituted a relative majority (428 000, 32,6%) in the region later called Voivodina. Since then numerous waves of flights, expulsions, state-run settlements and land-(re)distribution schemes have profoundly changed its ethnic composition and reduced the number of Hungarians to about 300 000, 15%. The real loss is even greater because the young, educated and able have fled, approximately 40–50 000, in order to avoid killing or being killed in action in Croatia, Bosnia and now in Kosovo. Hungarians – like Croats, Slovaks and Romanians – have nothing to do with Greater Serbia and do not want to sacrifice themselves for the retention of Kosovo.

There has been no systemic change in rump Yugoslavia: Milošević's regime is more dictatorial than Tito's was. Yugoslavia is sinking into helpless self-isolation both in its politics and economy with 40-50% unemployment, 100% inflation and a corruption-ridden incipient privatization from which the non-Serbs and dissenters are excluded.

Apart from a threatened existence, the resurgence of Serbian nationalism – culminating in ethnic cleansing – poisons the general climate and inter-ethnic relations.

The all-round deterioration is aggravated by a desperate „maintenance of public order” and real war operations in Kosovo, costing \$1 million per day. According to reliable sources 40% of Voivodina's GDP has been poured into this bottomless hole for a decade.

The other main burden is *the influx of refugees*, predominantly Serbs from the lost „Krajina”-regions, Bosnia, and, recently repeatedly from Kosovo. Of the total 670 000 newcomers who landed in rump Yugoslavia an unproportional 270–300 000 have settled in Voivodina with several detrimental consequences.

1. The sheer task of providing accommodations, provisions, jobs and medical care, to such a mass of uprooted people makes the economic situation even graver.

2. A new conflict situation emerges between the indigenous population (Hungarians and other minorities) and the newcomers, where the latter enjoy preferential treatment in employment. For example at Topola (with a two-thirds Hungarian majority) from among 15 000 autochthonous people of working age only 4300 are employed, while among the 4000 refugees all the able-bodied have work.

3. In local communities, administered by Milošević's socialists, post-communist left and/or ultra-nationalist radicals (Šešelji-party), building sites are deliberately all allotted in Hungarian-inhabited settlements. This happened at Temerin (a township near Novi Sad/Újvidék) where 118 lots were given to Serbian families in the Hungarian quarter of the village. This was the first step for artificially changing this historical settlement.

The above mentioned case is only the tip of the iceberg, similar actions are reported from every corner of the region.¹

4. These ousted, driven away, resettled Serbs are prone to extremes and rabble-rousing: they provide the mass-support for all the chauvinistic, xenophobic, nostalgic-communist movements and parties. Naturally enough they hinder the process of democratization, eagerly supporting all the retrograde, witch-hunting forces, among them the Chetniks and Šešelj's Radicals.

5. They are not only dissatisfied and embittered, but – as their forefathers and predecessors – are well-armed and aggressive. They intimidate the local population and administration with their rowdyism, and bullying, beatings have become everyday occurrences.

In settlements of ethnically mixed populations or in settlements with a Hungarian majority, organized gangs of Serbian youngsters systematically beat up their Hungarian counterparts. In some places, for instance at Temerin, Sajan, they use clubs, iron rods or kick their victims. Gangs of 4-6 stop boys and girls in the streets or pubs asking whether they are Hungarians. If the answer is affirmative, beatings and kicking follow, resulting in hospitalisation with cracked skulls, broken arms and ribs. At Feketić a boy and his girlfriend were severely beaten. The head of the local council wanted this attack to be discussed at the following meeting but the Serb members of the council vetoed it. At Sajan (with 1600 Hungarian inhabitants or 96% of the village population) the 200 armed Serb refugees, all Šešelj's partisans, terrorized the indigenous population whose houses they wanted. With threats they wanted to intimidate the local Hungarians to move to Hungary leaving everything behind.² Beatings in the pubs are common; if one calls for the police, nothing happens, because „... all the police are now in Kosovo”.

There are *similarities and parallels between Voivodina and Kosovo*. After 1974 both regions enjoyed the status of being „autonomous provinces” inside the Serbian Republic and the Yugoslav federation. Under the concerted attack of Great Serbian nationalism both provinces were deprived of their privileged position in 1988–1989. The only hope to regain autonomy lies in the process of democratization in Serbia and in the support of the international community. There are other and also more direct consequences: in June–October 1998 and in February 1999, when military intervention was imminent in Kosovo, a large-scale mobilization swept over Voivodina, with hundreds of Hungarian (and other minority) reservists called to serve in Kosovo. The number of Hungarians from Voivodina amounted to 500 by March 1999.

There are also obvious *differences*:

– while 90 to 95% of Kosovo's population is Albanian, and they are to be represented in such a ratio in all the self-governmental organs, police and

institutions, as envisaged in the Hill-Milutinović plans, Hungarians constitute a mere 15% in Voivodina. In other words: while Albanians strive for self-determination and secession, Hungarians could be satisfied with personal-cultural autonomy, local-municipal self-governments and a kind of limited territorial autonomy.

– The ultimate aim of Albanians is to create an independent Albanian Republic of Kosovo. (Absorbing in time the surrounding Albanian-inhabited parts of Macedonia, Montenegro and Southern Serbia). A mutually acceptable compromise is now taking shape: a third Albanian republic, on equal footing with Serbia and Montenegro, within a federal Yugoslavia, but definitely not subjugated to Serbia. Hungarian autonomy within Yugoslavia can be partly achieved through some form of autonomy for Voivodina or more specifically for the northern one-third of this province.

– In the Balkans conflicts are usually and traditionally solved by resort to arms. It is a typical Serbian method called the „log revolution” (blocking roads) of the Krajina Serbs beginning in May-June 1990 and the armed uprising of the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina between 1991 and 1995.

After 17 years of deprivation of civil rights, martial law, and brutal oppression the Kosovo Albanians took arms in February 1998 as an „ultimo ratio”.

On the contrary there is no such tradition in Voivodina, i. e. in the southern part of Historic Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy up to 1918. Hungarians and other minorities in the region (Croats, Slovaks, Romanians and others) are waging a political campaign for their individual and collective rights by peaceful means. The terrain and social environment are unfit for the WW II or the Bosnian-Kosovo type of guerrilla warfare. In spite of this, tension is growing particularly when Yugoslavia is manoeuvred into a collision with the international community by the Milošević-Šešelj leadership. On such occasions Hungarians and all the non-Serbs are endangered. In October 1998 when Romania assented to NATO overflights, two activists of Šešelj’s Radical Party went to the home of an ethnic Romanian teacher in Voivodina and told him directly: „You’ll be the very first to be hanged if American bombers fly into Yugoslavia from Romania.”

In order to prevent and curb acts of violence in Voivodina it is highly desirable and recommended to re-establish the monitoring mission of the OSCE in Subotica/Szabadka parallel with the deployment of a peace-keeping (-making?) force in Kosovo.

While the situation in Kosovo is really dramatic and requires immediate intervention and a long-range settlement, sinister signs exist in Voivodina also. Parallel to or soon after the Kosovo settlement old-new grievances of other minorities in Yugoslavia, Hungarians of Voivodina and Muslims of the Sandjak

must be settled also. The seriousness of the problem is shown by the fact, that 37 to 50% of the population in rump Yugoslavia is still non-Serb.

A solution satisfying all the interested parties (Yugoslavia and the surrounding countries, majority Serbs and minorities) and a lasting peace cannot be achieved until the army and the police (another camouflaged armed force, highest per capita in Europe) are reduced according to the CFE Treaty. These huge, overmanned, well-equipped and trained armed forces – with Russian backing – represent a constant threat to the stability and security of south-eastern Europe. Similarly, the extremist and paramilitary organizations (Arkan's bands, Chetniks) must be disbanded, and, together with the refugees, disarmed, as a precondition for a nation-wide democratic transformation.

(Written before 24th March 1999)

Notes

¹ At Moravica – originally a 6000, purely Hungarian – Calvinist (Presbyterian) township – refugees are continuously arriving, recently 15 Roma (Gypsy) families have appeared from Kosovo. Their total number exceeds 300.

² These atrocities took place in August–October 1998.