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Vojvodina - The Hungarian Kosovo

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In October 2005, Parliamentary Assembly of Europe members tabled a draft resolution castigating the human rights situation in the province of Vojvodina. As EU accession looms larger for Serbia and Montenegro, such resolutions are bound to proliferate. Vojvodina is widely regarded as a test case and the touchstone of Serbia's post-Milosevic reforms.

Milosevic is still a hate figure in Vojvodina. Until he abolished it in 1989, the northern region, bordering on Hungary, enjoyed an autonomy granted by Tito's successive constitutions. Vojislav Kostunica, the current prime minister of erstwhile rump Yugoslavia and a one time winner of the first round of elections for the presidency of Serbia has replaced the deposed autocrat as chief villain. His opponent, the reform-minded Miroljub Labus, won convincingly only in Vojvodina and southwestern Serbia in the self-same elections.

Exactly four years ago, the provincial assembly of Vojvodina sacked the region's deputy prime minister, a Kostunica crony, and upgraded the status of Novi Sad to "capital city". The assembly's speaker stormed into the building of Novi Sad's TV and radio to protest a Belgrade appointment.

Serb radicals demanded full self-government, the large Hungarian minority - one eighth of Vojvodina's two million strong populace - petitioned for self-rule in locales with a Magyar majority, moderates urged Belgrade to start negotiating soon. Hungary, under the previous prime minister, Viktor Orban, agitated aggressively on behalf of its ethnic kin. It looked as though Vojvodina is about

to join the ranks of independence-prone Kosovo and Montenegro. Many Vojvodina Serbs still regard it as central European, having been part of the Habsburg empire until 1918.

Vojvodina's denizens - pro-Western, highly educated, intellectuals, members of the free professions, and globe-trotting businessmen - were horrified by the barbarity of Yugoslavia's tortured demise. They now act as the self-appointed conscience of Serbia and Montenegro.

In June 2002, Nenad Canak, the head of the provincial parliament, demanded the prosecution of journalists who contributed to "warmongering" during Milosevic's reign. As reported by Radio B92, the organizers in Novi Sad in August 2002 of "Blood and Honey", an exhibition of photo-journalist's Ron Haviv's work in the Balkan in the 1990's, wrote in a letter addressed to Kostunica, among others:

"Why do you keep silent regarding nationalistic and chauvinistic behavior? Why is this problem being ignored? This is obviously not an isolated incident, but an organized, planned and financed action. Does this mean that you are turning a blind eye to the truth? The [truth] is simple - wars happened and crimes were committed in them, crimes that we will have to face, sooner or later."

Even their dismay at NATO's surgical demolition during the 1999 Kosovo campaign of their three economically-critical bridges over the Danube and their only oil refinery did not turn them into anti-Western xenophobes.

Finally, in January-February 2001 and again in January-February 2002, the Serbian parliament restored some of the territory's previous powers and privileges - over its finances, agriculture, health care, justice, education, tourism, sports, the media, and social services. Mile Icakov, a triumphant parliamentarian, from the late Djindjic's DOS umbrella grouping of reformist parties, quoted by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, uttered this veiled admonition:

"That's something we had and that's something that belonged to us and nobody has to grant it to us, but to return back what was taken away against the law and against the constitution... Everyone in Serbia has already agreed on the largest-possible autonomy for Kosovo. Nothing will change if they do the same for Vojvodina. It would be fair to give Vojvodina the [same rights]. It's not fair that the bad kid gets everything he asks for and the good kid gets nothing."

Yet, the omission to tackle Vojvodina's grievances - or even to consult it - in the March 14, 2002 EU-sponsored Agreement on Restructuring Relations between

Serbia and Montenegro irritated the disgruntled province. Vojvodina is not only Yugoslavia's bread basket, it also harbors its nascent oil industry, and many of its blue-chips.

As a result, it is a net contributor to the federal budget and subsidizes the other parts of the rump Yugoslavia. It produces two fifth of Serbia and Montenegro's dwindling GDP and attracts two thirds of its foreign direct investment - with only one fifth of its population.

In January 2002, the French multinational Lafarge bought a majority stake in the Beocin cement factory near Novi Sad. It paid \$51 million of which Vojvodina is likely to see very little. Five loss making sugar factories were next in line. Serbia's privatization minister pledged to plough back one quarter of all future privatization receipts into the local economy.

Then Serbian Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Dragan Veselinov, offered to subsidize sugar beet, soybean, and sunflower crops and to buy 280,000 tons of wheat in 2003. But these belated pre-election bribes did not soothe jangled nerves.

During the 1990's Vojvodina was reluctantly flooded with Serb refugees from Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo. The "invasion" altered its character. The erstwhile bastion of tolerant Austro-Hungarian culture has been Balkanized and rendered discernibly more nationalistic, corruption-ridden, and fractious. Neo-fascist, anti-Semitic, revisionist, racist, pro-Greater Serbia, and skinhead organizations proliferate.

The two pillars of the movement for self-governance are, therefore, nostalgia and money. It is a belated reaction to the convulsive and blood-spattered disintegration of the federation. But it is also a rejection of Vojvodina's exploitation by the other provinces.

Like Scotland and Flanders, northern Italy and Quebec, and the Shiite and Kurd regions of Iraq, Vojvodina would like to retain a larger share of its resources for local consumption and investment. In a "Europe of regions" and a world of disintegrating nation-states, this was to be expected. In August 2002, the Committee for International Cooperation and Relations with Euroregions of the Vojvodina parliament voted to join the Assembly of European Regions (AER).

Vojvodina still faces the outcomes of a decade of Western economic sanctions and NATO military action. Sanctions-busting smuggling operations during Milosevic's rule criminalized some parts of the economy. Novi Sad's water, natural gas, the railway to Budapest, river cargo transport, and telecommunications

infrastructure were rendered idle by the decimation of its bridges.

The reconstruction of the first, largest bridge, "Sloboda" (or Liberty) was completed in 2004 and cost 34 million euro in EU funds, according to "Balkan Times". Two temporary crossovers cater to the needs of Novi Sad's population - but they are poor substitutes. Rail links to the rest of Europe, for instance, have yet to be restored. The expensive and intricate clearing of the Danube of unexploded ordnance has been completed only recently.

Vojvodina strives to become a regional commercial hub. HINA, the Croat news agency, reports that the Serb province and the neighboring Vukovar-Srijem county in Croatia have agreed to rebuild bridges, in both the literal and the figurative senses. Vojvodina vowed to help Vukovar secure the return of art expropriated by the Serbs during the internecine war, demine its environs, and find the whereabouts of missing Croat soldiers and civilians.

Vojvodina's parties are members of the ruling, Western-orientated, formerly Djindjic-led, coalition in Belgrade. The Vojvodina Reformists, who backed Kostunica in the recent bout of elections, once have teamed with a DOS breakaway faction to form a new, left of center, political force. Vojvodina plays a crucial role in Serb politics.

Even the leader of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, Jozsef Kasza, admitted to the Yugoslav daily "Dnevnik", that the status of the Hungarian minority is improving "step by step", though "Hungarians are still not adequately represented in the judiciary, prosecutions, in leading positions in the economy."

He elaborated: "During the Milosevic era they wouldn't let us have our schools, media, they banned the official use of the language. The situation has now improved, the Law on national communities has been passed which needs to continue its implementation more and more."

In an inversion of the traditional roles, the Beta news agency reported that Vojvodina's then secretary for culture and education, Zoltan Bunjik, announced a series of assistance programs targeted at the Serb minority in Hungary, including a Serb history and culture curriculum.