

The Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia and Autonomous Region of Vojvodina, and the Need for a More Coherent U.S. Foreign Policy

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Overview

B.A. Robinson¹ wrote in 1999, “A religious/ethnic conflict is escalating in Vojvodina, (Vajdaság in Hungarian) the northern-most province of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. 350,000 inhabitants of the province are ethnic Hungarians. They are being pressured by the central government to abandon their homes and leave the country. The conflict has not yet reached the level of a civil war or genocide. However, if the past history of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo is any indication, the destruction of the ethnic Hungarian minority community is just a matter of time.”

Recent events, however, mean that Serb nationalists are stepping up their efforts to intimidate and terrorize. The “quiet” ethnic cleansing is becoming louder.

I. Faults in Western Analysis

American and Western foreign policy toward Central and Eastern Europe suffers from a fundamental misunderstanding of the region's complex history. There are two primary reasons for this: (1) The study of Central and Eastern Europe in the West was tied to Soviet Studies. As a result, the conflicts within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were seen as less important to U.S. foreign policy given the Cold War and the East-West confrontation; and (2) Central and Eastern European history is often studied in three periods, pre-World War I, the Peace Years (between the wars), and Post-World War II, rather than as a continuous process of history.

This division of history leads to poor analysis because it dismisses over a thousand years of historical development and nation building. The students of more modern Central and Eastern European affairs tend to view the region as a constant, with the countries existing after World War I and II as historical nations.

Therefore, the outbreak of the bitter ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia caught many off guard. Historically, however, many of these ethnic groups were often at odds due to differences in religion, culture, and economic and political development. It is therefore simply logical that these groups did not form a single historical nation on their own. It was Western influence that led to the formation of post World War I "nations" such as Yugoslavia. Without a correct historical analysis and thorough understanding of the region, development of a coherent and consistent U.S. foreign policy is made more difficult.

II. U.S. Policy

Following World War I and II, U.S. and Western policy makers and administrations did recognize that the new borders agreed upon in Central and Eastern Europe were far less than perfect and recommended revision. The U.S., however washed its hands of the problem and no longer pursued its recommendations. Though much has been written about the ethnic conflicts and minority problems in Central and Eastern Europe, there has been little talk about the need for a reevaluation of borders.

On his visit, George Bush said that the U.S. did not support the dissolution of Yugoslavia. But four years of a Milosevic communist regime and Serbian nationalist campaign led to bloody war and the complete dissolution of Yugoslavia.

III. Roots of Conflict in Yugoslavia

France saw the end of WWI as an opportunity to become the European hegemon. One of the first orders of business was to weaken rivals such as Germany, Austria, and Hungary. Secret alliances with Rumania (who changed sides weeks before wars end), the Serbs, Czechs and others, sought to guarantee France's rise to predominance. The resulting treaties created Yugoslavia after WWI.

Yugoslavia was a complicated combination of peoples, religions, and cultures. It was an unlikely mix of developed and predominantly Roman Catholic regions

such as Slovenia (formerly part of

the Austrian Empire) and Croatia (formerly confederated with

Hungary) joined with less developed and Eastern Orthodox Serbia. These regions were then joined with even more poorly developed Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which all have large Muslim and Eastern Orthodox populations. To further complicate the situation, Serbian claims to parts of Southern Hungary (Vojvodina) were also granted and incorporated into this new country.

The Yugoslavia which emerged from World War II was a six republic federation. From northwest

to south east, the political entities were Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. Each republic had a president and representation in a Federal Assembly. With an even number of 6 votes, coalition-building, it was thought, was required.

Under Tito, Yugoslavia enjoyed relative peace, protected by treaties which guaranteed Vojvodina autonomy after both World Wars. Tito angered Serbs by granting autonomy of both Vojvodina and Kosovo provinces by an addition to the Yugoslavian constitution in 1974.

Following the death of Tito, the Yugoslav republics attempts at coalition building were met with hostility. It was increasingly difficult to maintain autonomy from Belgrade who was increasingly using force and intimidation to exert its influence. B.A. Robinson put together a brief chronology:



The gradual unraveling of Yugoslavia and Vojvodina started in the 1980s:

- 1980's: Tito died. He had rigidly controlled Yugoslavia since the end of World War II. The 30 ethnic groups in Vojvodina coexisted with little friction except for some discrimination by the Serbs against the Hungarians and Croats.

- 1987: While investigating allegations that the minority Serbs in Kosovo were being attacked by the ethnic Albanian majority, Slobodan Milosevic had promised his fellow Serbs that "No one will ever beat you again." Milosevic quickly became a Serbian hero.

- 1988: The government of Yugoslavia incited mass demonstrations in Vojvodina. Members of the ethnically and religiously diverse provincial assembly resigned and were replaced by Serbs who were "loyal to Slobodan Milosevic's vision of a Greater Serbia." ² The use of the Hungarian language was phased out. Media leaders were replaced. ⁴

- 1989: Milosevic was able to force changes to the Yugoslav constitution through its Parliament. ³ This terminated the autonomous status of the provinces of both Vojvodina and the southern province of Kosovo.

- 1990: The Democratic Community of Vojvodinan Hungarians (VMDK) was organized to promote autonomy for the province. The central government has refused to even discuss the matter.

- 1991-1995: One by-product of the Croatian civil war (1991-1992) and of the Bosnian civil war (1992-1995) was the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Serbs. 130,000 to 200,000 were settled in Vojvodina. The Hungarian Human Rights Monitor claimed on 1996-JUL-7 that: "In many cases the settlers from Krajina have moved in by force into Hungarian homes while the Serb authorities failed to intervene. The Serb settlers from Krajina region are placed above the law and they receive preferential treatment over the indigenous Hungarian population in the areas of employment, housing and social assistance." ⁵ The European Parliament urged Yugoslavia to stop the resettlement; they were ignored.

- 1996- present: The Serbian government started to pressure ethnic Hungarians to leave Vojvodina. 50,000 have left in recent years; most have gone to Hungary.

- In its 1998 world report, the Human Rights Watch commented: "The large influx of refugees - ethnic Serbs from Bosnia, and Croatia - into Vojvodina, especially since 1995, continued to have a deleterious impact on the local minorities, with cases of coerced land swaps and state-sponsored seizures of homes." ⁸

The Hungarian government has attempted to discuss the problems of ethnic Hungarians in the province with the Yugoslavian government. The latter refuses to talk. Human Rights Watch reports that the emigrants experienced heavy intimidation, and beatings. Some were forced to leave at gunpoint. "Most of the human rights abuses in Vojvodina have been committed by Serbian paramilitary organizations and armed civilians with the acquiescence of local authorities..." The paramilitary groups "with the active assistance of the [Milosevic] regime...terrorized non-Serbs and children of mixed marriages in a systematic campaign to drive them from their homes." ⁶

- Some Hungarian language schools have been closed down. ⁷

- The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) confirmed voting fraud by Serbian authorities against Vojvodina Hungarian parties during the recent Yugoslav parliamentary elections. ⁷

- Slogans have appeared on homes and public buildings in the province saying: "Hungarians: Your God is dead and doesn't care for you anymore."

The Democratic Community of Hungarians in Vojvodina (DCHV) issued a statement referring to a "sinister plan for the final solution of purging Vojvodina of its non-Serb ethnic population."

Today, only about 17% of the province's population of 2 million are ethnic Hungarians.

IV. Roots of Conflict in Vojvodina

The Western media have virtually ignored the region of Vojvodina. Here, however, the stakes are the highest for the United States. As discussed earlier, Vojvodina is a formerly autonomous region situated on the borders of Southeastern Hungary, the Northeastern tip of Croatia, Southwestern Rumania, and Northern Serbia. After forcing changes in 1989 and 1990 to the Vojvodina constitution, Serbia declared a new two-member Federation of Yugoslavia that included Serbian-controlled Montenegro in 1992. They then adopted a new federal constitution that further weakened the provincial governments and took away the Vojvodina Provincial Assembly's power to make laws or levy taxes. The provincial government is now reliant on Belgrade for all revenues. Vojvodina is also without a provincial constitution.



V. The Treaty of Trianon

Vojvodina was part of Hungary for a thousand years. Tolerant Hungary who established religious freedom in the 16th century, was a haven for many ethnic groups and religions. Immigration, war, and population growth slowly changed the ethnic makeup of many of Hungary's border regions. The signing of the Treaty of Trianon following World War I cost Hungary two-thirds (2/3) of her land and one third (1/3) of her Hungarian-speaking population who now live outside the present borders (see <http://www.thehungarypage.com/trianon.htm>) Not even Germany, which lost only small amounts of territory, was "punished" to this extent.



The Treaty of Trianon, by any objective account, was extremely harsh and unprecedented. It is

the reason Hungarians today are the largest minority in Europe, numbering in the millions and, as the Helsinki Watch Committee wrote in 1989, "face discrimination, persecution, and destruction of their ethnic identity." 9

By the close of World War I, ethnic Hungarians formed 41% of the population of Vojvodina. Ethnic Germans made up 28%. B.A. Robinson writes "In late 1918, a National Assembly was held to decide whether Vojvodina should become part of Serbia. The area was under Serbian military occupation at the time. The vote was heavily in favor of Serb rule. This outcome was not surprising, because over 98% of the assembly delegates were Serbs."

Vojvodina (Vajdaság in Hungarian) was formally transferred from the Kingdom of Hungary to Yugoslavia in 1920.

Serbian Claims

Serbian evasive maneuvering is not new. It has been argued that because Yugoslavia, a signatory of the Treaty of Trianon, no longer exists, the entire validity of the treaty comes into question as do Serb claims to Vojvodina. Serbian claims to Vojvodina, however, date from a national assembly on November 25, 1918 in which participants voted that Vojvodina, then under Serbian military occupation, should become part of Serbia. Serbians claim that because this vote made Vojvodina a part of Serbia before the signing of the Treaty of Trianon, it is therefore a part of Serbia proper. Therefore, they argue, the Treaty of Trianon and the dissolution of Yugoslavia are of no consequence.

What is purposefully left out of this equation is that through World War I, Hungarians made up 40.5% of the population, ethnic Germans 27.5% and Serbians only 19%. The "national" assembly that voted to cede Vojvodina to Serbia was made up of 578 Serbs, 6 Germans, 2 Croats, and 1 Hungarian.

VI. The Nationalist Campaign

In 1986, with the ascension of the Milosevic regime, Serbian media were placed under state control. Milosevic, as President of the Communist Party, replaced prominent government officials with his supporters. The new state media started a nationalist propaganda machine to intimidate other Serbs into supporting the new regime and its policies. One method of gaining Serb support was through the spread of unwarranted fear of non-Serbian minorities. Unfair housing and other practices against Serbs and favoring Albanians in Kosovo were used by Belgrade to support claims of a larger and unfounded conspiracy: Croats in Croatia wanted to kick Serbs out of their homes and Hungarians in Vojvodina wanted to secede and again become part of Hungary.

The Milosevic regime wanted a much tighter Yugoslav federation controlled by Belgrade. One way to gain control of any assembly or voting body is to control its votes. Belgrade turned to a more deliberate scheme to consolidate its power and control and first focused its attention on the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

Vojvodina

In 1988, Belgrade planned and staged series of mass demonstrations in Vojvodina, culminating in a 200,000 strong demonstration in Novi Sad (Ujvidék) in front of the Provincial Assembly in which Serbs from Kosovo were brought in to denounce the largely anti-Milosevic Provincial Assembly. On October 6, 1988, under enormous pressure and intimidation, the provincial leadership collectively resigned their positions, Serbs, Croats, and Hungarians alike, rather than call out the police to disperse the crowds and risk bloody confrontation. State propaganda succeeded in convincing Vojvodina Serbs to elect pro-Milosevic Serbs to a new Provincial Assembly. The new provincial government soon fired all editors and senior officials of television, newspapers, and radio. Belgrade's efforts were extremely successful. By 1989, any real autonomy was eliminated in Vojvodina. Milosevic was now able to focus on Montenegro and Kosovo. See [Szabadka](#) or <http://www.subotica.co.yu/new/hu/index.php> (Subotica in Serbian) for a virtual tour of this beautiful town in the Vajdaság.

Montenegro and Kosovo

Belgrade followed the same formula in the Republic of Montenegro. Here, the Montenegrin Assembly first used police to disperse the demonstrators. Belgrade and the state media harshly criticized the action and demonstrations continued. The Assembly eventually gave in to the pressure, and the provincial leadership resigned. A similar, but more drastic action took place in

the Autonomous Province of Kosovo. The Serbian Assembly in Belgrade, in direct violation of the federal constitution, abolished the Kosovo Provincial Assembly, refused to meet with Assembly representatives, and used force to prevent its reorganization. Again, autonomy was lost.

Slovenia

The same scheme was attempted in Slovenia. Slovenians, however, were not caught unaware. Slovenia used its police to seal its borders and turned back all Serbs. This policy successfully prevented any planned demonstrations. In December 1990, Slovenia held a national referendum on independence that yielded an interesting outcome. Slovenes did not vote for outright independence, but rather for a resolution of the impasse with Belgrade and perhaps the creation of a looser federation. The Slovene action prompted 6 months of intense negotiations. Milosevic would not concede. After his actions in Vojvodina, Kosovo, and Montenegro, he now controlled four votes (50%) in the Federal Presidency and a majority in the Federal Assembly and used these votes to prevent any reorganization of the republic. He set the stage for a bloody tragedy.

Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina

Croatia saw that negotiation was futile and also declared independence. Belgrade refused to accept this declaration; war soon followed. Serbia still occupies parts of Croatia. Bosnia-Herzegovina, patient throughout the Serb-Croat war, also found that it could not gain independence without bloodshed. The Bush and Clinton administrations both sent mixed signals as to what our role would become should the Serbs continue their aggressive policies. We talked tough and did nothing. This waffling and policy of noninterference may have emboldened the Serbs to resist the dissolution of Yugoslavia by any means they felt necessary, including force. This may also serve to encourage further Serbian aggression and the pursuit of similar positions by other nations with similar ethnic frictions.

VII. Ethnic Cleansing

Little has been written about the "quiet" ethnic cleansing taking place in Vojvodina. The Serbians have been very successful in keeping their actions quiet because most in the West, especially the media, show a profound lack of understanding of and interest in the situation. It is as if this region and this potentially explosive problem do not exist. When the media, for example, show maps of the region in print or on television, they clearly show the borders of other former provinces and republics, but in most cases neglect to show the borders of Vojvodina, which happens to be also on the border of Bosnia.

The Treaty of Trianon stipulated that minorities and their institutions be protected, such as schools and their school boards, native language instruction, churches, and the press. The Serbian government, however, has been replacing previously elected school board members of Hungarian, Croat, or other ethnic descent with Serbs, and is thus able to alter curriculum and language instruction.

There are a few remaining free and independent newspapers in "Greater Serbia." There are still a few surviving in Vojvodina and are Hungarian operated. While not being openly shut down, which could shift Western attention to this region, they cannot purchase newsprint because Serbian producers refuse or are instructed not to sell to these news organizations. The tense border situation has made it very difficult to purchase and import goods from across the border. The mass exodus of Hungarian and Croat refugees into Hungary and Croatia meant that these people, opponents to Serbian government policies, were not able to vote in the elections of December 19, 1993. As a result, Milosevic further increased his power and legislative majority.

The number of Hungarians living in this region today is disputed. However, most conservative sources place the figure at around 350,000 and rapidly decreasing. In the Serbian occupied regions of Croatia, 90% of the Hungarian population has been expelled.

VIII. U.S. Interests and Humanitarian Appeal

There has been much attention given to the bloody ethnic and national conflict between Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims. This conflict, however, is a local and relatively small part of a more "global" regional conflict that is continuing to develop and may easily accelerate to a full scale international war. Already, concerns over Albanians in Kosovo, Greeks in Macedonia, and Muslims in Bosnia have led some to worry about the possible escalation of the conflict to involve the countries that neighbor Serbia or those countries that have interests in protecting whom they consider to be their "own" beyond their borders.

U.S. economic interests are at stake as well. Half of all new Western investment in Central and Eastern Europe is taking place in Hungary. The United States is the largest total investor, owning over 50% of the investment in Hungary.

Given the implications of continued instability in the heart of Europe, it was perplexing that some Western analysts argued against military intervention in Yugoslavia. Though NATO troops have been stationed in Bosnia and Macedonia, the West's emphasis on peace in Bosnia while ignoring other developments is a dangerous tendency that could leave us unprepared should the conflict escalate. If this "quiet" ethnic cleansing in Vojvodina continues or becomes more overt and perhaps bloody, will the Hungarian government intervene? If they decide to intervene, will they ally themselves with the Croats? Will Slovakia, which was part of Northern Hungary and with a large Hungarian minority and where some radical leaders have expressed further designs on additional Hungarian territory, take the opportunity to attack Hungary while she is involved in a war on her Southern frontier? Will the Rumanians, where some also claim additional Hungarian territory, then also attack both Hungary and the Hungarians of Transylvania to "cleanse" that region? Who else would get involved? Of course, instability in the former Soviet Union further complicates the situation.

The suffering in this conflict is universal, affecting the parents and children of all nationalities in former Yugoslavia. But there is hope. Many Serbs do not agree with Serb government policies, and there is a growing peace movement in Serbia. Aggressors will be less likely to act if they know we are aware, watching, and prepared. We must develop a coherent policy based on a comprehensive and correct understanding of the issues.

IX. Notes / Updates

Since this paper was written, my predictions of increasingly overt attacks against Hungarians have unfortunately been realized. Minority communities in Serbia's former Hungarian northern province of Vojvodina (Vajdaság) are feeling the heat after recent stunning gains by Serbian ultra-nationalists raised fears of a return to the ethnic violence of the 1990s.

Residents in the province's capital, Novi Sad (Ujvidek), were woken by drunken mobs over Serbian New Year on January 13-14, 2004 shouting, "Hey Serbs let's butcher the Croats! Hey Serbs, let's butcher the Hungarians!" In recent developments, Serbs riot and set historic landmarks on fire and spray graffiti saying "We Will Kill Hungarians." Mobs attacked the Magyar Szinhaz (Hungarian Theater), a symbol of Hungarian culture in Vojvodina. Reports state that following a performance, a shouting crowd marched in front of the

theater and broke the doors and windows as well as ripped off the posters and pictures promoting the show. The Tanjug News Agency on March 22, 2004 reported several injuries during the protest.

According to Radio B92 in Belgrade, nationalist graffiti was found on a cathedral saying "Death to Hungarians" in the northern city of Novi Sad (Újvidék). There have been many cases of anti-Hungarian graffiti in the city.

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