

"Restoration of Vojvodina's Autonomy: a Model of Multi-Ethnic Stability"

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Hungary and the Vojvodina

I welcome this unique gathering of well-meaning people discussing one of the thorny problems of South-Eastern Europe. We may disagree over the details but are close to finding the "magic formula" that can bring about the peaceful co-existence of peoples differing in language or religion.

In Hungarian mythology, historical memory the name Vojvodina, in Hungarian Vajdaság (or more traditionally Délvidék comprising the Bácska and the Bánát) does not sound as romantic as Transylvania or as stirring as the "Highlands," today's Slovakia. It is a flat country, with no particular natural attractions, it is part of the Great (Hungarian) Plain. But it was one of the first regions in the Carpathian Basin settled by Hungarians eleven centuries ago, it was an early stronghold of Western Christianity. It is a blood-soaked territory: for three centuries it was a battlefield fighting off the Ottomans, with the great victory of Nándorfehérvár (today's Belgrade) in 1456, the tragic fall of Temesvár in 1552, and the battles of Eugene of Savoy, liberating Hungary, standing out. As a result this area became totally devastated and depopulated. In the 18th century, however, it became Hungary's America, the legendarily fertile land that had to be reclaimed, but there was plenty of free land, open for settlers from the rest of Hungary and from all over Europe. Successfully re-cultivated, what was then called the Banat of Temesvar became the land of wealthy peasants, having perhaps the best soil in Europe. It was the most varied ethnic mosaic of Europe, and the Treaty of Trianon (1920) assigned it to the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (and a little part to

Romania) without allowing the people to say what they wanted. It became the scene of most regrettable atrocities in 1941 by Hungarian forces trying to wipe off Serb snipers, and far more terrible reprisals in 1944 by Tito's partisans. Although largely spared from brutal and open ethnic killings called euphemistically "ethnic cleansing," still it was the scene of great tensions in the last ten years, forcing tens of thousands of Hungarians and Croats to escape. The task we are all deeply interested in: how to make this province happy and prosperous again?

Hungary is vitally interested in establishing stability, security, market reforms and democratic structures in the Balkans. It has effectively supported such efforts within the framework of the Stability Pact, not only by providing a successful example of democratization, economic reforms and Western integration, but also by organizing and financing concrete projects aimed, inter alia, at promoting democratization and free media in Serbia, through the so-called "Szeged Process". These joint efforts have played a major role in ending the Milosevic regime. Genuine democracy in Serbia should be built on the local communities that played such an important role in the recent changes. It is in this framework that Serbia's national minorities, including Hungarians living in Vojvodina, should be given a new deal. That will require appropriate legal arrangements pertaining to their status. Hungary's attitude to the problem of the Vojvodina is very clear: it wants close, warm relations with all the neighbors, but there is one precondition: that cannot take place over the heads of the local Hungarians, to their detriment. Such a policy follows from the common history - but it is also a constitutional obligation (since 1989). Hungary's efforts to promote stability in its neighborhood are also dictated by self-interest, not to be associated with an unstable region.

The roots of tensions

In South-eastern Europe the major cause of instability, tensions, ethnic conflicts, war crimes in the last 150 years has been the real or presumed mistreatment of national minorities, the effort to assimilate or expel them, the futile hope that the ethnically heterogeneous population of a state can be "homogenized" and thus the nominal nation states can become real nation states. All these attempts failed and are bound to fail in the future, too. Threatened in their very

existence what the minority communities of Central and Eastern Europe are seeking is neither separation nor a change in borders, but the right to retain their language and culture, to have their children educated in the language of their forbears, and to have local officials and representatives chosen from their own community, who understand their way of life. This is what the claim for autonomy and collective rights is all about.

The harassment of the minorities is not only a domestic affair, it has immediate international ramifications when the minority concerned belongs to a nation with a state of its own just beyond the frontier, as the case is with the Russian, Hungarian, Albanian, Serb, Croat, Armenian and so many other minorities, to take the most obvious examples. The only real solution for the 40-50 million people who form national minorities in the states of Central and Eastern Europe is to have democracy on every level, in which every national group could participate in accordance with its proportion. Where the minorities are more dispersed they could still enjoy the institutions of cultural autonomy along the pattern of the various denominations whose churches enjoy autonomy in every European country.

A basic principle observed by Hungary in dealing with the issue of the close to three million Hungarians who live in the states neighboring Hungary is not to attempt to speak for them, but to support their modest and legitimate claims and aims. Aims that are in accordance with European principles, set down in a large number of recommendations, conventions and sometimes laws, and also in accordance with practice in the South Tyrol, in Spain, in Finland. In line with that the Government of Hungary fully support the three-level autonomy concept put forward by the Hungarians of the Vojvodina.

The Vojvodina could indeed become a model for multiethnic coexistence and harmony, something that the civilized world, and esp. the U.S. and the EU are committed to. Even after the massive changes in the ethnic composition of the province, brought about by the Serbs, it still is a remarkable ethnic mosaic of Serbs, Hungarians, Croats, Slovaks, Romanians, Rusyns, even Bulgarians. That also means that as many countries are involved in the future of this territory. As it has been pointed out, the majority of its population, represented by parties that did very well at the last

elections, is committed to democracy, the rule of law, western values, and the autonomy of the Vojvodina. Tensions are largely imported from the outside, especially by newly arrived refugees, who want to take over the land, the jobs and the houses from the indigenous population, mainly the Hungarians and Croats.

Self-determination, devolution and the cantonal arrangement

Local self-government is the foundation of genuine democracy, but the "successor states" that emerged out of the ruins of the large multinational empires after World War I all denied the right of their national minorities to run their own affairs, to have a decisive say over the allocation of taxes collected from them, to have their own educational system in their mother tongue, to have officials and policemen who understand and speak their own language. The Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe in general is not a melting pot, the present national minorities emerged not by people crossing borders but by borders crossing people. Any attempt at turning this region into a melting pot turns it into a powder keg, as older and most recent history amply testifies.

Personally, not speaking for my government, I believe that an international conference should be convened with the intention of applying the rules of democracy to the ethnic mosaic of the Balkans. The new guiding principle should be self-government along the line of primary loyalty, which is nationality. The aim need not be the drawing of new borders along national lines but allowing the people a genuine choice not only over which party to support ("ballots rather than bullets," as Lord Robertson likes to say) but also what national unit, country or canton, they would like to belong to.

Whereas there is a general commitment not to allow new ethnic cleansings, there is no similar commitment for preventing the slow, creeping version of artificially induced ethnic change and all the concomitant suffering and conflicts. In my opinion the best guarantee for ethnic peace in South-Eastern Europe lies in adopting the cantonal model, which has been found working so well in Switzerland. Sadly that is not what the international community is striving for. There is much talk about the need for a multiethnic society in the former Yugoslavia and beyond that. Older history and

the events of the last ten years show us that the way to achieve and preserve such a model lies not in mixing peoples that speak different languages, follow different religions and even use different alphabets, but by allowing each national group autonomy, self-government. In most cases this autonomy can have a territorial basis, and where it cannot, it can be based on the voluntary association of the individuals, like the various denominations are organized. Already hundred years ago that was proposed in the Habsburg Monarchy under the term "cultural autonomy." Why not following the Swiss model of autonomous units, Kantons, bound together by geography, common traditions and economic interests. It has been found working not only in Switzerland, but also in South Tyrol, in Catalonia, and hopefully it will work in Corsica. That model should be introduced in Serbia, particularly in the Vojvodina and the Sanjak. That is what the millions of Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania are striving for. An "Eastern Switzerland" in the Danubian Basin was a dream once, advocated by many. South-Eastern Europe, composed of several countries made up by autonomous Kantons can find not only peace but also unity within the framework of European integration.