
VOJVODINA – THE POLITICAL ASPECT REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND INITIATIVES IN VOJVODINA

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VOJVODINA – A REGION BETWEEN MIDDLE EUROPE AND THE BALKANS

The plain stretching throughout the edge of the Pannonian plain in the north of Serbia, which comprises more than 21,506 km² of land and has more than two million inhabitants, is called Vojvodina. It is today an Autonomous Province within the Republic of Serbia with its Parliament, Government and courts of law. The capital town is Novi Sad.

People speak and study in six native languages, which also represent the six administrative languages of Vojvodina: Serbian, Hungarian, Croatian, Romanian, Slovak and Ruthenian, and also members of numerous nations and nationalities inhabit this territory. According to the newest statistics, there are 27 ethnical groups in Vojvodina. Those ethnical groups with the largest number of individuals have the status of a national minority. Living together for centuries people have developed friendly relations.

The fertility of this plain attracted many tribes and nations since the Roman times. Hence, Vojvodina represents a treasury of cultures whose material and spiritual remains lead back to a past more than 50,000 years old.

Present settlements are mostly from the eighteenth century; however, a considerable number of settlements were founded in the period of the Illyrians, Celts and Romans and were at that time exceptionally important military, economic and cultural centres. It is also a fact that the shortest roads from Central Europe to the Middle East have always crossed this territory. Therefore Vojvodina may be considered a cultural fusion of both dominant civilization forms and traditions – the European and Oriental one. According to this, we

may certainly say that Vojvodina is sui generis a multinational and, even more importantly, a multicultural region.

POPULATION – LAND OF CONSTANT ETHNOGRAPHIC CHANGES

The peoples living on this territory preserved a lot of their original traditions and customs although throughout time Vojvodina has been changing in many different ways.

Until the end of the 17th century Vojvodina was more or less a huge swamp. Except for smaller villages and monasteries in the hills of Fruška gora there were no inhabited places in it.

At the end of the 17th century a great migration of Serbs took place. Serbs, led by Arsenije Černojević, the Serbian patriarch came fleeing from Turks, mostly from today's Kosovo in Vojvodina. Under the reign of Maria Theresa the Austrian Empress, other large migrations took place during the 18th century. Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, Ruthenians and many other ethnic groups entered the plains of Srem, Banat and Bačka, as well as Baranja, regions within Vojvodina back then, the first three belonging to Vojvodina today, while Baranja is a part of today's Croatia.

This is how Vojvodina was practically created. This complexity of its ethnical and confessional structure makes Vojvodina a unique place in Europe. Today there are 27 ethnical groups in Vojvodina. The majority are the Serbs (ca. 75%) and the biggest minorities are the Hungarians, Croats, Slovaks, Romanians, Ruthenians and Romany. However, in Vojvodina we are accustomed to saying that we have 27 ethnic majorities.

HISTORY – BEYOND THE GLORIOUS PAST AND MYTHICAL HEROISM

The first time the name of Vojvodina was used administratively was in 1848/49 after the Revolution, when in Sremski Karlovci, a small but culturally important town near Novi Sad, today's capital of Vojvodina, Serbian Vojvodina was declared, an autonomous region within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By helping the Austrian Emperor, Serbs received all of those privileges which

actually made possible the creation of Vojvodina as unit and later the creation of a regional, Vojvodinian identity.

After the First World War Vojvodina became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and until 1974 it remained without greater political importance as a region. After the Constitution of Yugoslavia in 1974 Vojvodina became an Autonomous Province within the Republic of Serbia, having the status similar to that of a German “bundesland”. That means that Vojvodina had all the three domains – the legislative, executive and the judicative under its own jurisdiction.

THE MURDER OF VOJVODINA BY SLOBODAN MILOŠEVIĆ

The whole falling apart of former Yugoslavia practically began with the withdrawal of constitutional rights from Vojvodina’s administration, as part of the plan of Slobodan Milošević, all in order to “solve” the Kosovo problem. Since 1988 Vojvodina has had no real influence on the Serbian politics, which came about during the nineties.

Being held hostage by Milošević’s politics for ten years, Vojvodina, as the economically most developed part of former Yugoslavia took part in all the wars as provider of food and other, even human resources for a dictator’s policy of destruction. Novi Sad, the capital city of Vojvodina was also an important target on the bombing map of NATO in 1999.

Throughout those ten years there was of course a strong oppositional front of political parties in Vojvodina, one of the most important being the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, led by Mr. Nenad Čanak. He and his party, the League of Social democrats of Vojvodina, a party created in order to represent the interests of Vojvodina’s citizens created a political campaign, which was to be realised partially ten years later. The programme was completed in 1999 and it was often used by nationalists in Serbia as an argument against any regional initiative in Vojvodina. The campaign referred to a so-called Republic of Vojvodina. The reason for demanding a Republic instead of an Autonomous Province was the idea of this autonomy. Its shapes and values were defined by Milošević himself. This formal autonomy given by Milošević had to be replaced with a real autonomy, which according to Milošević’s vision of it could only be called a republic.

THE RIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT

There is no community on the territory of the European continent that is more complex and composite than the one found in Vojvodina. It is difficult to find even one similar region where, through history, national, economic and state interests have been mixed to such an extent as is the case with contemporary Vojvodina, bordered with rivers and national states.

Migrations on the territory of Vojvodina have made it and continue making it the community that possesses all European and Balkan traditions. The quality of life is defined in clear legal and civilisation frameworks without any traces of clan and tribe relations.

Vojvodina is not only a multinational or multiconfessional community. It is, among other things, such a community as well, but it is also a “multi-homeland” community. This specific characteristics contained in the fact that people who are representatives of the same nation and religion, but of different homeland origin, culture and customs live here, makes Vojvodina even more complex and national communities even more diverse and wealthier within themselves.

Therefore, the main opinion of all regional initiatives in Vojvodina is that Vojvodina cannot be considered as an anonymous part of this or that national, or a state based on national principle, neither it can be singled out of the total heritage of all different national and other communities that live on its territory.

Constitutional-legal solutions of the status of Vojvodina have to take into consideration all the above-mentioned specific characteristics and express its complexity.

Vojvodina is at its turning point today. Its past is not finished yet, and its future has yet to begin.

The past of Vojvodina is burdened with the remaining unsolved status of the federal unit and the autonomous province in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The traces of the Trianon Agreement from 1918 are still present today. The current position of Vojvodina is the one characterised by the non-existence of any subjectivity within the illegal and illegitimate Federal Republic of Yugoslavia or today’s Serbia and Montenegro. This state has already been in existence for ten years and faces numerous contradictions and conflicts, not only that it has not solved any of its problems, but that it also does not even have defined borders.

The post-communist and nationalist political concept of Slobodan Milošević constantly avoided setting up a long-term basis for the political functioning of these territories. It is responsible for the fact that seven (out of eight) federal units of former Yugoslavia became the battlefields of more or less severe conflicts of centralistic oriented quasi-representatives of certain national groups. These conflicts were not, as it was presented, any form of “national liberation” or “protection of national interests”, but were only the struggles for reconstruction of the balance of strength, power and influence over resources. The catastrophe in Bosnia is the result of the primary goal—transformation of nationally and religiously diverse territory into three national states—that has caused severe mutilations of the possibility to develop Bosnia on a multinational and multicultural basis.

In contrast to all other federal units of the former SFRY, such a form of “solving” the provoked national conflicts is not possible in Vojvodina.

Vojvodina does not have clear national enclaves. Ethnic mixture of population is not exclusively characteristic of the cities, but also of 95% of the rural settlements (villages) the populations of which have a mixed national structure. It is wrong, superficial and most often malicious to compare the problem of Vojvodina with any other that has been opened on the territory of former Yugoslavia up to now.

THE ROLE OF THE LEAGUE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATS OF VOJVODINA IN SAVING WHAT IS LEFT TO SAVE

Eventual solutions to all of the problems mentioned above were offered by the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina back in 1999. An excerpt referring to these possible solutions. This plan was almost totally implemented into the plan of the Parliament of Vojvodina beginning on October 5th 2000 and was fully accepted by all the parliamentary political parties. Even today, after the latest elections in October 2004, some of the points of this programme still play an important guideline in the regional politics of Vojvodina.

[...]

Vojvodina has to have a legal framework made on the basis of absolute respect for the principle, of the right of an individual to be different, which is to be considered as the highest. This right is to be limited only and exclusively

by the right of other individuals to be different. Complete equality, physical, proprietary and legal security has to be guaranteed to all citizens of Vojvodina, no matter of what national, religious, homeland, race or sex affiliation.

Neither the individual nor the group can acquire their position on the basis of unwilling differences, namely those differences that are not the consequence of a free choice. The citizens of Vojvodina have to be granted the right and freedom to make links with others the organisation of which is in order to promote and protect collective rights and enjoy collective freedoms. Only rights and freedoms of other groups limit rights and freedoms of any group.

This is why the representational legislative body of Vojvodina, its Parliament, should have two Houses—The House of Citizens and House of Nations.

The House of Citizens would be elected by direct, free and secret voting at periodical elections. The elected members of Parliament would represent the will of the citizens of Vojvodina in bringing all the laws that are of significance for the life and functioning of Vojvodina as a whole. All adults of legal age who are citizens of Vojvodina have the rights to elect and be elected. The House of Nations would be the representing body that would be made of representatives of the Serbs, Hungarians, Croats, Slovaks, Romanians, Ruthenians and other organised national, religious and other groups. This House would decide on matters related to culture, education and information necessary to maintain and cherish the lingual, national, religious, homeland and other specific collective characteristics. The decisions would be brought unanimously.

The Constitution of Vojvodina that would be brought by the Constitutional Assembly of Vojvodina would regulate the work of Vojvodina Parliament. This would be the only task of this Assembly after the free elections.

The Constitution would define, apart from the above-mentioned principles, the relations with the Serbian state, or with a wider state community within which Vojvodina would find itself. It would also regulate the matter of utilisation of soldiers from Vojvodina outside its territory.

Vojvodina has to be the constitutive element of any federal community it may be the part of.

The strategic branches of the economy are the agricultural industry, petrochemicals and trade. The Vojvodina Parliament would be the highest body which would determine the routes of economic development directed towards

the closest possible co-operation with all neighbours, but based on market principles that would prevent the outflow of natural and newly acquired wealth from the territory of Vojvodina, which used to be the case during the course of the whole 20th century.

Market principles would also include links with countries of the European Union and they would favour those economic branches and activities that could be complementary to European economic resources and potentials, all in accordance with the highest standards of environmental protection.

The relations with the Republic of Serbia would have to be regulated on the basis of a principle of equality and upon necessary changes in its internal organisation.

Centralistic, quasi-national strategy from Belgrade split the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia itself, through exclusion of Kosovo out of its constitutional-legal organisation. It is not a partner of Vojvodina.

We see Serbia as a democratic federal state composed of federal units having a higher or lower level of autonomy. The responsibility for the fate of this state would be taken over by federal units of the approximately same size with about 2,000,000 inhabitants each and with defined economic, political and historical interests.

This is how Serbia could be stabilised in the political, economic and national sense and constituted as a modern European state. It is our opinion that the federal units should comprise Vojvodina, Šumadija, Southeast Serbia, Belgrade with its surroundings, Sandžak (the region of Raška) and Kosovo.

Democratic federal Serbia would have a Parliament with two Houses—The House of Citizens and House of Federal Units. The House of Presidents would represent the state.

Federal units would express their interests through the House of Federal Units that would decide on the strategic, political and development goals of Serbia.

The Government of the state of Serbia would decide on matters of national defence, foreign policy and monetary policy and it would propose basic principles of macro-economic programme. The House of Citizens would vote on these proposals.

The House of Citizens would also have the function of monitoring the functioning of state bodies of federal units and control the constitutionality of their work.

Vojvodina has to have the status of a republic within such a federal state. This is what historical experience leads to, as well as the fact that the autonomous province proposed as a solution is not stable enough and does not give the adequate guarantee for the stability of constitutional organisation. This could be seen after the putsch in 1988 and anti-constitutional abolition of autonomy in Vojvodina.

Within a state organisation defined in such a way Vojvodina would have, in the sphere of foreign policy, the sovereign right to establish trans-regional relations with other European regions. Should Serbia enter wider integration, the decision about that would have to be brought by consensus reached in the House of Federal Units, with the clearly defined status of Vojvodina within new circumstances.

Federalisation of Serbia and the Republic of Vojvodina would be a large step towards stabilisation of the Serbian state and would remove at the very foundation all separatist aspirations on the territory of Serbia.

The Republic of Vojvodina would also be the framework for expression of specific characteristics of all national and other communities in Vojvodina and it would be the warrantor of a long-term democracy in Serbia. The return of Vojvodina to the status defined by the Constitution from 1974 does not satisfy these demands. The Constitution from 1974 was created within different circumstances—in a one-party system and while the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia existed as a warrantor of its implementation.

Republic administration of Vojvodina would cost far less than the current “provincial” administration. The existing infrastructure would be used and the economic power of Vojvodina would be significantly increased. The Republic of Vojvodina would also have to be decentralised by lowering the responsibility for economic development onto all three traditional Vojvodina regions (districts)—Srem, Banat and Backa, then onto Vojvodina cities and all up to the level of municipalities.

The Republic of Vojvodina would guarantee the right of citizenship to all its citizens, no matter what their national, religious or homeland affiliation, as well as dual citizenship should the need for it occur.

The Republic of Vojvodina would have its own flag, anthem and coat of arms. They would be displayed in public in accordance with Vojvodina law, together with the flag, anthem and coat of arms of the state of Serbia.

[...]

The efforts of the League of Social Democrats among other democratic, pro-European political initiatives to preserve a peaceful common life of tolerance for all citizens of Vojvodina during the nineties resulted in “October 5th”. Together with the Belgrade oppositional forces the Vojvodinian political parties took part in the small revolution after the elections in September 2000 in which Milošević tried to transform into his new strategic forgery. Finally, on October 5th 2000 Milošević and some of his political vassals—unfortunately not all of them—had to leave their positions and the DOS (Democrat Opposition of Serbia) came into power in Serbia.

REGIONAL INITIATIVES IN VOJVODINA TODAY

Right after the October 5th “revolution” the Government and the Parliament of Vojvodina started again representing the will of Vojvodina’s citizens and they have until the present day a big role in the reformative processes Serbia is going through on its way to the European Union.

After strenuous efforts to present Vojvodina in the European context the Vojvodinian Parliament with its boards and working groups for international and interregional co-operation has managed to bring at least one part of Serbia among other countries and regions of Europe. On November 27th 2002, Vojvodina became a full member of the Assembly of European Regions, an organisation on whose initiative all the other commissions and boards of the European Union were founded.

Becoming a member of DKMT Euro-region even under Milošević, Vojvodina started acting and functioning fully within this co-operation after 2001. A year later Vojvodina chaired this Euro-region. The importance of this interregional co-operation became great after May this year because now this Euro-region is a region, which comprises districts, and regions both from a

EU country and from non-EU countries. This co-operation at the border of the EU is an important step to a further integration of Serbia into European structures.

During the last four years the Parliament of Vojvodina also regained contacts to many regions from the former Yugoslavia, as well as from other EU countries. A series of meetings and conferences took place, in Novi Sad and abroad, where politicians from Vojvodina had conversations with politicians from other regions.

The most important goals achieved by Vojvodina's administration are the following:

- Defining a strategy of representing Vojvodina in an international and interregional context
- Creating and supporting the Commission for international and interregional co-operation
- Creating a team of councillors which are to co-ordinate the co-operation with the Assembly of European regions – their efforts resulted with the representative role of Vojvodina which was selected as the European region of the year 2006
- Supporting the co-operation of Vojvodina's economical representatives with other neighbouring regions within the Euro-region DKMT
- Regaining good relationship with regions from former Yugoslavia
- Supporting and distributing contacts to all of the important institutions in Vojvodina – the University of Novi Sad, the Chamber of Commerce of Vojvodina etc.

An important first step was the regaining of trust in our immediate neighborhood. This is why treaties and parliamentary contracts of co-operation were signed with the Vukovar and the Osijek districts in Croatia. This was an important element of reconciliation, which is in progress between Serbia and Croatia. Vojvodina also made an agreement with the Croatian region of Istra.

Furthermore, the city of Novi Sad has established good co-operation with the city of Tuzla in Bosnia, a co-operation that brought a healthy relationship between the University of Tuzla and the University in Novi Sad.

Although this co-operation with regions from Former Yugoslavia still mostly represents co-operation based upon projects of cultural exchange, it is a

very big and important step towards the full reconciliation of these regions with Serbia as a state.

The work on interregional communication and parliamentary contacts in the last three years brought up several agreements and also led to better relationships with German and Austrian lands. I would mention only the most important contacts—these are the contacts with Baden-Württemberg, Bayern and Rheinland-Pfalz in Germany and Oberösterreich and the land of Vienna in Austria.

The co-operation between Vojvodina and these regions exists on several levels and in different domains—there are contacts between the officials of those lands, between their cities on an administrative level on the one hand, and within different projects in economy, culture and education on the other hand.

An important issue in the regional, as well as in international communication is the aim to search for common elements within different states, cultures etc.

DANUBE – RIVER OF COMMON INTEREST

A common element for many European countries is the river Danube. The Danube states, as they are called, have organised themselves in different kinds of associations and institutions. So we have an international Conference of Danube Cities, just to give an example. By entering some of these institutions Vojvodina has come again one step closer to the European Union, through this bringing to the whole Serbia a small piece of land closer to the common goal—the EU.

An important event for Vojvodina was the founding of the Danube office – donau.büro in Novi Sad. The original donau.büro.ulm from Ulm, Baden-Württemberg, Germany was founded two years ago in co-operation with the Chamber of industry and commerce of Ulm and represents one of the most important institutions which are involved in the interregional co-operation along the Danube.

Today there are Danube offices in Bratislava, Budapest, Baja, Novi Sad, Vidin, Tulcea etc. and there are more to be founded. All these offices co-operate on a variety of projects, a couple of years ago mostly cultural, but today more and more concerning the economy and administrative issues.

One of the interesting projects Vojvodina took part on was the presentation of Vojvodina at the 4th International Danube festival in Ulm in June this year. For the first time, visitors from all over the Danube countries could enjoy an interesting presentation of Vojvodina's music, arts and history, but also learn something about Vojvodina's economy and tourist sights. Judging from the beautiful mood of the entire festival and positive reports in the local media this presentation was a full success.

The Danube was an eternal inspiration for the people who have been living along it for centuries. Today this river is being seen as a one which brings people from different places together. It is more and more likely that the Danube is to take over the role which the river Rhine had after World War II. A river of separation is becoming every day rather a river of healthy co-existence and co-operation among the people who live along it. The spirit of a good common life, tolerance and mutual respect among people is a characteristic of Vojvodina. That is why Vojvodina could so rapidly join all the other cities, regions and countries in this growing-together process.

NGOs AND STUDENT INITIATIVES AS PLATFORMS OF REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

Guided by subsidiarity in its politics Vojvodina has been perfect ground for development of a great number of NGOs. I would like to give just one example of how NGOs participate in this common spirit of co-operation with other regions.

The NGO "World and Danube" from Novi Sad took part on a project which had the aim to establish new contacts between NGOs in cities along the Danube. This was to be realised through hosting the participants of the "Tour International Danubien", an international regatta, which every year brings together people from different Danube countries who row along the Danube from Ingolstadt in Germany to Silistra in Bulgaria. On their way they stop in different cities. In 2000, for the first time after many years, they made their stop in Novi Sad. The NGO "World and Danube", which also publishes the magazine "Saint Danube", created a team of young people called "the Danubians" to organise the accommodation for the group of rowers. Apart from excellent accommodation, the team also offered them a sightseeing tour of Novi Sad and the Fruška gora monasteries. A year later this event was widely reported

by local media and two years later the whole event was organised by the official Tourist association of Vojvodina and sponsored by the officials of Vojvodina.

A far larger project, that of putting together the broken mosaic of Former Yugoslavia is the EXIT festival. The festival was for the first time organised in 2000 in Novi Sad, where it has taken place every summer ever since. It is a musical but also a cultural festival organised by and for young people. The concept of this festival was developed by students, members of the largest students' organisation of Vojvodina and Serbia, the Students' Union of the University of Novi Sad. Today the EXIT Team functions as an NGO. Every summer the EXIT festival brings hundreds of thousands young people from all over the world, but mostly from former Yugoslav republics. With such guests as the famous artists and artistic groups as Iggy Pop, Ronny Size, Morcheeba, Kosheen, Massive Attack, Cypress Hill, Asian Dub Foundation, Stereo MC's, Chumba Wamba and other artists from all parts of former Yugoslavia, the festival represents the largest festival of this kind in South Eastern Europe.

The Students' Union of Novi Sad itself is an NGO-like organisation and member of the ESIB, the European students' union and belongs to the founders of the Balkans Students' union.

Beside this regional networking, changing and reforming the existing manner of study as well as providing better conditions for students are the main goals of the Students' Union. Students have the opportunity to develop their own ideas through several projects. Some of these projects also deal with the question of regional co-operation between different regions and their universities.

THE PRESENT SITUATION – A VAGUE AND UNCERTAIN CONCLUSION

In the hope that interregional co-operation will continue to exist in this form in Vojvodina in the future and that it will widen out to more regions in Europe I will try to slightly cast light upon the very much complex present political situation in Vojvodina.

Before the regional elections in Vojvodina, which unfortunately showed how everything still depends on politics—as complex as in any transition state—in our country, there were different expectations concerning the results and their consequences.

Both pro-reformist and nationalistic political parties in Vojvodina aired their policies for these elections, which were considered an internal political issue, regardless of eventual changes in the present concept of Vojvodina's politics possibly leading to a new isolation of our region in an international frame.

As predicted, the elections were a new step backwards into the centralist and nationalist political environment, which is somehow appearing to be immortal in Serbia. The Serbian radical party, a product of Milošević's regime, as consequence of the fact that only approximately 30% of the voters actually did vote, gained over 30% of votes for the Parliament of Vojvodina.

Fortunately, a coalition was made of the Democratic Party, the League of Social Democrats and the Union of Vojvodinian Hungarians, a coalition of parties out of which the old Parliament mainly consisted. Through this political compromise the Parliament of Vojvodina assured a regionally oriented politics of Vojvodina for the next four years, a period of time which is to bring several important changes on the political scene in Serbia.

For all the regional initiatives in Vojvodina this means four more years to strengthen good relations with existing partners and to create new contacts with other regions of Europe. The effective determination of Vojvodina's administration to keep on developing its regional co-operation is also to be seen in the latest plans of the actual president of the Parliament of Vojvodina, Mr. Bojan Kostreš. After his visit to Vienna on November 24th he agreed with the general secretary of the Assembly of European Regions Mr. Klaus Klipp upon an international conference on regionalism, which is to be held in Novi Sad at the beginning of 2005. Guests at this conference should also be representatives of international institutions like the Council of Europe and others.

In spite of all predictions of decreasing democratic initiative in Vojvodina my personal opinion on the topic is that something like this is not going to happen, exactly because of all the relationships Vojvodina has made or renewed with other regions in the last couple of years, but there is always this certain fear of the well-known political scenario distributed throughout all the transition states, which predicts the return of a regressive political regime after a short period of reforms.

However, this is just one reason more for individuals and NGOs in Vojvodina to continue believing in the best concept of an united Europe—the Europe

of Regions—and to keep on working on this concept, by communicating, travelling, meeting people, supporting the exchange of ideas, the transfer of thoughts and spreading the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect.

The concept of Europe as a Europe of regions is at least in this form and this interpretation perhaps the only concept which could replace the negative nationalist concept of all states of the former so-called Eastern bloc.