

An exchange on nationalism in Serbia

19 January 2002

Dear Editor,

I felt compelled to point out a few factual errors in your recent article “Montenegro: European Union opposes moves towards independence”, written by Mr. Paul Mitchell and published January 5, 2002.

In the 11th paragraph, the writer states:

“... He then warned about calls for independence from nationalist elements in the Hungarian-speaking region of Vojvodina and the possible secession of Kosovo.”

The Province of Vojvodina is not Hungarian-speaking. Vojvodina has a population of some 2.3 million and 70 percent of its inhabitants are of Serbian descent. The official language is Serbian. The languages of minorities are used in municipalities where there is a larger number of citizens who are not of Serbian descent.

With the exception of the University of Novi Sad (which uses 5 languages: Serbian, Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian and Ruthenian) and a few other institutions (TV and radio stations, public offices...), Serbian is the sole official language—as is the case with Serbia and Yugoslavia on the whole.

I would also like to point out that, contrary to the claims made by the writer, no Hungarian party advocates outright independence. Calls for some kind of autonomy are widespread, though, and are advocated by pretty much every political party in the Province.

I know that thousands of people visit your site regularly and it would only be fair for my letter to find its way to *wsws.org* and inform your visitors of these two very important facts:

1) Vojvodina’s population is 70 percent Serbian. Of the Province’s 2,300,000 citizens, a mere 275,000 are of Hungarian descent. The Hungarians make up less than 3 percent of Yugoslavia’s population.

Furthermore, out of Vojvodina’s 45 municipalities, the Hungarians constitute a majority only in seven northern municipalities: Kanyizha, Senta, Choka, Ada, Bechey, Mali Idyosh and Bachka Topola. (The map can be found here: <http://buzzbaby.netfirms.com/images/vosha.jpg>)

2) No party (Hungarian, Serbian, Romanian or any

other) advocates independence.

Regards,

MT

Zrenjanin, Serbia

P.S.

The only problem Vojvodina faces is the ever increasing meddling of the Budapest government in Serbia’s internal affairs. The current Hungarian government is full of right-wing nationalists and that surely is something very upsetting. I am sure WWS is well informed as to the Law passed by the Hungarians that allows Hungarian minority in Slovakia, Romania and Serbia to seek employment in Hungary without any restrictions. The Governments of Slovakia and Romania have strongly objected to this and so has the European Union but nothing has happened so far that would make the Hungarian nationalists back down.

Paul Mitchell replies:

Dear MT

Thank you for your email in response to my article, which mainly concentrated on developments in Montenegro.

The article makes only one reference to Vojvodina, and that was in reporting comments by retiring Yugoslav army general Radovan Radonovic, who spoke about the possible impact that the secession of Montenegro would have for the region. A recent article in the Financial Times says that according to Radonovic, “If Montenegro secedes, the secession of Kosovo is more probable and the possibility that Vojvodina will secede is higher.” I cited Radonovic’s comments in the context of what the Yugoslav army’s response to secessionist movements might be—a question that is rarely discussed in the media.

I certainly did not intend to imply that Vojvodina is a purely Hungarian-speaking region. Perhaps it would have been better to have written of “nationalist elements in the Hungarian-speaking areas of Vojvodina”.

Having said that, I must say I disagree with your presentation of current situation. You give the impression of a happy and peaceful Vojvodina immune from the

devastation wrought upon the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, disturbed only by the “meddling” of the Hungarian government. And you say nothing about the corrosive role played by Serbian nationalism in enabling the calls made by Hungarian nationalists for Vojvodinan autonomy to gain a wider hearing.

Vojvodina’s recent history shows the dangers of such an approach.

One result of the ethnic cleansing of the hundreds of thousands of Serbs from Bosnia and Croatia after the Balkan wars of the early 1990s was the expulsion of Hungarian speakers from Vojvodina. According to the Hungarian Human Rights Monitor, “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” (see: <http://www.newforce.ca/huncor/organ/HHRM/mission.htm>)

In its *World Report 1998*, Human Rights Watch say, “Most of the human rights abuses in Vojvodina have been committed by Serbian paramilitary organisations and armed civilians with the acquiescence of local authorities” The paramilitary groups “with the active assistance of the [Milosevic] regime terrorised non-Serbs and children of mixed marriages in a systematic campaign to drive them from their homes”. (see: <http://www.hrw.org/worldreport/>)

Last year, Nenad Canak, leader of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina and speaker of the Vojvodina Assembly, warned, “Vojvodina will go towards independence to the extent pressure is exerted on it from Belgrade. Unfortunately, I must say that this pressure is growing”.

Canak, like many bourgeois political leaders, presently calls for “greater autonomy” or a “redefinition of the relationship between Serbia and Vojvodina,” but what are the implications of this?

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the break-up of Yugoslavia “began with the drive by the emerging bourgeoisies in Croatia and Slovenia—republics which enjoyed a far greater concentration of wealth than the rest of the country- to cut themselves off from the poorer regions and consolidate their own relations with the capitalist world market.” (see: *Marxism, Opportunism and the Balkan Crisis*).

In an October 17, 2001 report headlined “Vojvodina:

Belgrade’s new headache,” BBC Online write, “As Yugoslavia’s breadbasket and producer of its modest output of oil, there’s growing support for the goal of keeping more of Vojvodina’s resources—and tax revenues—from going to Belgrade. That is a recipe for political wrangling and is bound to lead to further disputes with the central authorities.”

I would also remind you that until 1998, President Milo Djukanovic of Montenegro never called for independence, only for “greater autonomy” for the Republic of Montenegro.

The lesson from the Balkans over the last decade is that, in the absence of a unified socialist movement of the working class, all manner of petty bourgeois demagogues seek to exploit economic and social grievances for their own selfish interests.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is an implacable opponent of all forms of nationalism. Neither Serbian nationalism, nor the demands for Yugoslavia’s division into a collection of ethnically-based states, under the guise of national self-determination, has offered a progressive way forward for the mass of ordinary working people in the Balkans.

There is no answer to the problems of national divisions created by imperialism and its various agencies outside of a struggle to unite the workers of all nationalities on the basis of true social equality. For the peoples of former Yugoslavia this means the construction of the United Socialist States of the Balkans, with full rights for all national and ethnic minorities.

Regards,
Paul Mitchell



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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