

Yugoslavia: Serbian Assembly restores partial autonomy to Vojvodina

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In February, the Serbian Assembly narrowly voted for an “omnibus law” restoring partial autonomy to the province of Vojvodina. Vojvodina and Kosovo are provinces in the Republic of Serbia that together with the Republic of Montenegro comprise the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY).

The issue of Vojvodina’s autonomy, like the status of Kosovo, which is presently administered as a NATO protectorate but where the ethnic Albanian government is pressing for independence, is unresolved. In Montenegro, the government has been campaigning for a referendum on independence, which was temporarily suspended as a result of a deal brokered by the European Union (EU) last week to rename the FRY “Serbia and Montenegro”. The agreement keeps open the possibility of a referendum on independence in three year’s time.

Since the overthrow of former FRY President Slobodan Milosevic, the policy of the United States and the EU has been official recognition of the FRY whilst calling for talks over its “redefinition”. When Milosevic was in power the US and EU supported forces pursuing separation from FRY to the point where Kosovo and Montenegro functioned as de facto independent states. At the same time, they imposed economic sanctions in order to destabilise the FRY. With Milosevic ousted, they switched to support of the federation and the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) coalition government that promised to implement a shock structural adjustment plan and resolve FRY’s huge indebtedness to Western banks.

The new government’s policies have worsened an already terrible social catastrophe. All of Yugoslav industry has been or is threatened with privatisation or liquidation in the next three years. Official unemployment stands at 50 percent. The resulting poverty, scarcity and scramble for the remaining resources of the federation are again destabilising Yugoslavia and threatening the disintegration of the DOS coalition.

Who controls the resources of Vojvodina and profits from their privatisation is at the heart of the dispute over autonomy. This particularly affects Vojvodina because it is highly industrialised, including the federation’s two oil refineries. The province is at the crossroads of the most important north to south Balkan communications route and the Danube canal system, a “geo-strategic knot” on the traffic corridors that have been targeted for special European investment funds. The fertile plains of Vojvodina are known as the breadbasket of Serbia producing 80 per cent of the country’s cereals. Those wanting more autonomy complain that Vojvodina provides 40 percent of Serbian state revenues, but only gets five percent of the budget.

The tension between the richer and poorer areas in Yugoslavia was one of the greatest problems facing the government of Communist Party leader Josip Tito after World War II. Large areas were functioning under semi-feudal conditions. Tito abandoned the call for a socialist federation of all the Balkan peoples and attempted instead to create a new Yugoslav nationalism that over time became increasingly tied to a pro-market policy. In such a backward economy, Yugoslav nationalism inevitably dissipated while regional and ethnic tensions emerged. The first signs

occurred in Croatia in 1971, with violent demonstrations and the virtual break of the Croatian Communist Party from Belgrade. Tito suppressed the Croatian separatists, but implemented many of their economic demands. The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution declared the republics to be economically sovereign and encouraged the independent development of both the republics and the newly created autonomous regions, including Vojvodina.

Vojvodina had acquired de facto Republic status and the power of veto in the Serbian Assembly.

In the late 1980s, in response to its increasing indebtedness, the Yugoslav government implemented an International Monetary Fund inspired austerity programme that saw the economy crash. This encouraged the richer republics of Slovenia and Croatia to split away and led to the establishment of the first “autochthonous” (indigenous, native) Vojvodinian organisations. In a bureaucratic attempt to prevent further separatist movements, the government of Slobodan Milosevic revoked the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosovo.

Under the new omnibus law, the Vojvodina Assembly will regain a measure of its former autonomy including greater control over the budget, privatisation, health and social security, agriculture, media, use of languages, water resources management and tourism.

The most populist proponent of autonomy is the leader of the League of Vojvodina Social Democrats (LSV) and Vojvodina Assembly Speaker, Nenad Canak. He has been an outspoken supporter of Montenegrin independence and often threatened a referendum on Vojvodina’s status to force discussion on autonomy. Last year Canak appeared wearing a bandanna saying, “Vojvodina is occupied today as it was 13 years ago... This bandanna is a symbol of the fact that the people of Vojvodina still do not own their own land, that they are tenants in their own homes, that Vojvodina’s property is being sold at will, that we are still putting up with insults and humiliation from Belgrade barons.”

Canak said the return of assets he claimed have been “confiscated” by Serbia is of “paramount importance”. Last December he accused Serbian Privatisation Minister Aleksandar Vlahovic of illegally selling the Beocin Cement Plant in Vojvodina to the French company Lafarge for \$51 million. Canak said Vojvodina “is adamantly opposed to five percent of the proceeds from privatisation being the final amount of funds earmarked for the Vojvodina province.” Eventually it was agreed that half of the money from privatisation would go to finance programmes in Vojvodina, but only after approval by the Serbian government. The province and Beocin town council would receive five percent each.

The LSV call for the “self-definition” of Vojvodina and insists the term does not mean self-determination or secession. Canak says he does “not see Vojvodina outside Serbia, but within a democratic and decentralised Serbia”. However, the party’s main document is called, “Republic of Vojvodina—Road to Peace, Development and Stability”.

The largest party voting for the omnibus law was the Democratic Party of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic. The Western powers see

Djindjic as the most reliable instrument for carrying out structural adjustment and privatisation. A New Left supporter as a student, Djindjic left Yugoslavia to study under Jürgen Habermas in Germany. He returned to Yugoslavia and became a founder member with current FRY President Vojislav Kostunica of the Democratic Party in 1990. The party was committed to the market economy, decentralisation of power and privatisation that would “reintegrate Serbia and Yugoslavia into the international community”. In a recent article in the *Economist*, Djindjic, was described as a pragmatist who is “bravely thinking about a humbler kind of country”. He represents the new Serbian elite who want to cut the costs of the overlapping Serbian and federal bureaucracies and are prepared to jettison the poorer areas of the federation. The vote for limited autonomy in Vojvodina is an attempt to keep the richer area within Serbia and pre-empt a breakaway movement.

Others see the vote for limited autonomy as just the beginning. Miodrag Isakov, president of the Vojvodina Reformists, said, “Personally, I do not expect that the omnibus [law] will bring any essential changes in the position of Vojvodina and its residents. What is important to us is that its passing opens the process of restoring autonomy.” He reiterated his statement made in 1998, “We’re not asking for much ... we just want to be the bosses of our own land.”

The majority of pro-autonomy parties have said the autonomy dispute does not involve any ethnic struggle. However, there have been attempts to prove the Serbs in Vojvodina are different to Serbs elsewhere in the FRY. They are portrayed as a more homogenous and established grouping, home to two of the oldest Serbian institutions—the Serbian Library and the Serbian National Theatre—founded in the early 19th century when the area was ruled by Hungary.

The question of Hungarian influence is explosive. Vojvodina was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After its defeat in World War I and the crushing of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet of Bela Kun, Vojvodina became part of Serbia under the Treaty of Trianon. At the time Hungarian speakers comprised about 40 percent of the population. Since then this figure has declined to 10-15 percent through a combination of emigration and the arrival of Serb refugees.

With the intense NATO bombing of Vojvodina in 1999, the collapse of the Yugoslav economy and mass unemployment, the emigration of Hungarian speakers has increased. Lying just across the border, Hungary has—at six percent—one of the lowest unemployment rates in Eastern Europe, the highest inward investment in the area and has experienced consistent growth rates of 4-5 percent. The government has recently awarded significant minimum wage and pension increases.

To prevent further immigration into Hungary—there are 340,000 Hungarian speakers in Yugoslavia, 600,000 in Slovakia and two million in the Transylvanian region of Romania—the Hungarian government introduced a new status law granting preferences to ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries in January. Those who apply will receive the same employment, education, healthcare and travel provisions experienced by Hungarian citizens. However, anyone who applies for full citizenship in Hungary and fails could lose their right to the provisions. The EU has described the law as discriminatory and demanded Hungary drop the extension of the law to ethnic Hungarians living in the EU member state of Austria.

Jozsef Kasza, chair of the largest Hungarian party in Vojvodina, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, said, “The preference law is not about preferences, not about jobs, but about the fact that at last, the Hungarian nation can belong together, at least spiritually, and that these threads can be tied to the mother country. There was no precedence for this in the past 80 years and this feeling urges the Hungarian population in Vojvodina to make use of the opportunities.”

The Hungarian-American Coalition (HAC) in the US, which has close connections to several senators in Washington, openly advocates

Hungarian nationalism. Edit Lauer, the chair of HAC, says the organisation wants, “to put an end to the Hungarians’ inclination to assimilate... to prevent massive Hungarian migration [and] bring about spiritual togetherness.” During the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia, just after Hungary became a NATO member and allowed the refuelling of bombers, HAC campaigned for NATO to “detach” the northern Hungarian speaking quarter of Vojvodina.

The Hungarian government has always downplayed its regional interests, claiming the status law was the idea of Hungarian organisations outside Hungary. According to Prime Minister Viktor Orban, “If the Vojvodina Hungarians raise that the Hungarian government should move towards dual citizenship, then we will do so.” Using this same pretext of demands emanating from separatists overseas, the government has “mediated” a “three-tiered autonomy plan” for Vojvodina’s Hungarians with the Vojvodina parties. The first stage comprises “personal” autonomy, i.e. language rights, then “local” autonomy—control of police and councils—and finally “territorial” autonomy. At last August’s National Day in Hungary, Orban made a provocative call for “the cross-border reunification of the Hungarian nation” that even drew criticism from Jozsef Kasza.

Kasza, who is also Serbian deputy prime minister, has criticised Canak in the past as an extremist—including his threats to hold a referendum. However, Kasza himself is playing with fire. Recently he had to make it explicit, “there will be no referendum on the status of Vojvodina” of the sort promoted by Canak—after apparently calling for one himself. “I made the statement on a referendum in Vojvodina jokingly,” Kasza continued. “Journalists were provoking me and I made a passing remark that ‘there will be a referendum, after the Montenegrin one’. No, no way. Any kind of referendum is out of the question.”

Those who voted against the omnibus law see in Vojvodina a “province significant and advantageous for Serbia”. The federal structures are seen as a source of employment, a vehicle for control of privatisation and enrichment and a bulwark of Serbian nationalism. For Borislav Pelevic of the Party of Serbian Unity, “The agreement reached among the Vojvodina parties is the first step towards the creation of an independent republic of Vojvodina. After that there will follow the requirements by Jozsef Kasza to make Vojvodina a part of Hungary. It is sad that Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica is not informed again and that he keeps silent.”

Kostunica’s Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) abstained in the omnibus law vote. His view is, “We must resist centrifugal aspirations which threaten to divide us, fragment us, to pluck at our state and national tissue and carve up border zones in our homeland.” He said these words at the 175th anniversary of the Serbian Library. Beside him was Bosidar Kovacek, president of the organisation, who complained of “the stress on ideology of integral Yugoslovenism... the sidelining of Serbian national institutions in post World War II... subjected to a quiet but persistent and covert dictate of internationalism which neutralised its national unity, power and sway.”

The DSS is proposing a new constitution that divides Serbia into five regions centred on Belgrade, Kragujevac, Nis, Novi Sad (provincial centre of Vojvodina) and Uzice. “Kosovo-Metohija is an integral part of Yugoslavia and thereby Serbia and it would be the sixth region in Serbia after the issue of its status is resolved,” said Dragan Marsicanin, deputy chair of the DSS.

The DSS proposal for five regions is similar to one launched previously by Canak’s LSV. Canak criticised the DSS version, saying, “they are advocating an equalising approach, that all regions have symmetrical status. And I have to draw your attention to the fact that, unlike other regions, Kosovo and Vojvodina were federal elements of the former federation... So, there is a serious misunderstanding here. You cannot equal, with all due respect, the region of Nis with Vojvodina. In order to dress six different persons well, six different sizes need to be done... What

I do not agree with is that a constitution be made according to the one man-one vote principle... Three murderers cannot agree on murdering one person. That is not democracy, that is violence.”

It is clear that the autonomy issue has aggravated the tensions in FRY and the DOS coalition. All the pro-autonomy parties and Kostunica’s DSS are currently members. Immediately after the omnibus law was passed, Canak announced a government reshuffle of the Vojvodina Assembly, saying, “there will be no room... for representatives of the DSS and other parties that are obstructing the efforts to achieve Vojvodina’s full autonomy.” The Assembly voted in a new executive committee excluding representatives of Kostunica’s DSS and Canak is campaigning for it to be thrown out of DOS altogether.



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