

ETHNIC INCIDENTS IN VOJVODINA

Summary

The so-called internationalization of the issue of ethnic incidents in Vojvodina during the fall of 2004 has brought a considerable decrease in the number of these incidents. Strengthened and improved activities of the police organs and their cooperation with the authorities of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina are particularly noticeable. The main problem which prevents further stabilization of the ethnic relations in Vojvodina is the absence of adequate reactions of the judicial organs. A suggestion offered to all concerned is to have the prosecution bring criminal charges against the perpetrators of the incidents on national basis. In addition, it should be stressed that regarding the actual ethnic distance, the ethnic groups of Albanians, Bosniaks, Ashkali and Roma are possibly the most jeopardized, especially in the case of uncontrolled entangling of the Kosovo issue.

Decline in number of incidents

The Centre for Development of Civil Society has finished a several months long detailed monitoring of the ethnic relations, tensions and incidents in Vojvodina. The monitoring has been carried out in Vojvodina, with a special focus on the municipalities of Subotica, Kanjiža, Sombor, Novi Sad, Temerin, Bačka Palanka, Zrenjanin, Stara Pazova and Žabalj at first, while later it has been extended to a series of other municipalities.

The main conclusions are as follows:

The interventions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council of 3 October 2005,¹ of the special representative of the Secretary General of the UN of 19 October 2004, monitoring of the OSCE (end of October 2004) and the EU (beginning of February 2005), the report of the Secretary General of the European Council of 16 December 2004, the visit of the OSCE High Commissioner for national minorities to Vojvodina on 16 February 2005, extraordinary session of the Committee for the Southeast Europe of the European Parliament on 6 June 2005 have all brought positive changes regarding the number of the incidents and the attitude of the authorities towards them.

¹ On that occasion the Chief of the delegation of Serbia and Montenegro, Mr. Zoran Šami said that “all competent state organs must do everything to find and punish the culprits and so return peace in this beautiful, multinational region such as Vojvodina”, which was the first time that the authorities in Serbia (and in the State Union S&M) admitted the existence of the ethnic tensions and the previous insufficient activity of the state organs. This way the conditions for further advanced steps are made.

In general, the number of the ethnic incidents in Vojvodina in the viewed period is considerably smaller than in 2004, although still noticeably larger than in 2003 and before.² A close cooperation between the police organs of the Republic of Serbia and the Provincial Secretariat for Regulations, Administration and National Minorities was recorded. A considerably more active attitude of the police during the past year including almost regular bringing of criminal charges against the perpetrators of the incidents is one of the two most important steps forward in the past year. The other important step forward is various, often mutually coordinated, educative and propaganda activities of the State Union organs and the organs of the Republic of Serbia and AP Vojvodina aimed to promoting the interethnic tolerance and respecting the rights of the members of national minorities.

Examples of good practice

The local self-governments in the municipalities of the Province give their contribution to overcoming ethnic tensions by forming the institutions of ombudsman and municipal councils for inter-national relations above all (in the municipalities of Zrenjanin, Kovačica, Bački Petrovac, Plandište, Bačka Palanka, Beočin).

It is also worth mentioning the undertaking of common actions of the organs of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Hungary (for example, the presidents of the Parliaments of these countries who together opened the camp of tolerance in Palić, municipality of Subotica).

By the end of September a campaign called “Affirmation of multiculturalism and tolerance in Vojvodina” has started off led by the Secretary for regulations, administration and national minorities of the Province, Mr. Korhecz Tamás, supported by the Government of Hungary, US Embassy, OSCE Mission in Serbia and Montenegro and the company “Bambi” from Požarevac. The main objective of the project is to pacify the inter-national tensions, develop a spirit of tolerance, mutual appreciation and confidence among the citizens of Vojvodina. The budget predicted for the campaign is 23 million dinars including ten million which will be provided from the budget of the Province and the rest will be covered by donations.

It is a pity that neither political parties nor the NGOs in Vojvodina show greater activity in this sense. However, the activity of the youth initiatives in painting over the graffiti of nationalistic content should be underlined.

There are more and more examples of good practice regarding overcoming ethnic incidents.

² The Committee for the inter-national relations of the Assembly of Vojvodina has anonymously adopted the Information about the incidents on national basis which happened in the Province during 2003 and 2004. According to this information there were 178 recorded incidents in the said period in Vojvodina which could be characterized as the inter-national incidents or provocations which could cause them further on. Most of these incidents were against Hungarians – 82, Croats – 19, Serbs – 15, Albanians – 14, while the Roma were victims of such troubles in the total of 12 cases

The perpetrators of the incidents in Bačka Palanka were prosecuted.

The members of some national communities have stopped being the objects of the assaults. This also applies to the ethnic Ruthenians (who were being assaulted in Đurdjevo in 2004) as well as to the ethnic Slovaks (the homes and offices of whom were jeopardized in Stara Pazova and Bačka Palanka in 2004). It is especially worth mentioning that over the years repeated fights between the ethnic Serbs and Slovaks in the municipality of Beočin have stopped this year after the perpetrators from the Serbian village of Susek were sentenced for the first time. However, in Begeč and Kulpin there have appeared graffiti which frighten the local Slovaks. Furthermore, according to the information from Kisač the consequences of the recent frequent fights between the ethnic Slovaks and Serbs are still noticeable.

On 21 August a minor Rom killed one and seriously wounded another young man in Sivac, after which, according to the newspapers reports, the citizens of Sivac held a meeting in the building of the municipality of Kula on 30 August where they told that the deadline for the Roma to leave Sivac was 20 October. They said they were ready to finance the construction of a block of flats for the Roma in Kula by paying a local contribution to “pass the worries on from Sivac to Kula”. It could also be heard that the premises of the Cultural centre of the Roma “O djila” in Sivac should be destroyed with “bottles of petrol and a wick” and to the remark that the Roma should be banished albeit they were not “the inferior citizens” the reaction was expressed in shouts: “Who says they aren’t? Scum! We want Hitler!”. The President of the Roma association in Sivac said that threats to the members of the Roma population in Sivac had continued since 21 August and owing to that six families with 27 members altogether had left the settlement. The reaction of the police and the Provincial Secretary for regulations, administration and national minorities followed and it calmed the situation there so the ethnic Roma returned to Sivac.

In mid-September the inspectors of the crime department of the police in Ruma found out who wrote the nationalistic graffiti on the façade of the Secondary Technical School “Milenko Brzak Uča” in Ruma. He was arrested under suspicion that he had written the message “Beware of the Croats” and “Croats bring danger”. He is facing a charge of damaging a private property.

The ethnic incidents and those which are not

Different forms of physical assaults on the members of the minority communities are considerably fewer than before. There were still recorded fights of the young people and also threats towards the local ethnic Hungarians and Croats in the village of Boka in the municipality of Sečanj, a fight by the end of May in Palić near Subotica where a group of Serbs maltreated a group of Hungarians demanding their moving to Hungary, a fight in Temerin on 11 June because a perpetrator was bothered when he heard Hungarian language spoken publicly, in May an ethnic Hungarian was

heavily beaten up in Stara Moravica and according to the statements taken in Novi Slankamen there are still fights between the ethnic Serbs and the remaining ethnic Croats.

In comparison to the mentioned incidents there are those which were not proved to be ethnically based fights or were proved to be incidents with no ethnic motivation although the perpetrators were of the Serbian and the victims of Hungarian nationality. Here are included physical assaults on the students, the ethnic Hungarians in May in Novi Sad, beating up of two ethnic Hungarians in Temerin on 10 July 2005 and the case when by the end of July in Novo Miloševo a group of dangerous persons of the Serbian nationality forcibly dragged an ethnic Hungarian from the same village out of his car and then beat him up.

The Provincial deputy ombudsman Mr. *Góbor Zoltán* says that the absence of the duly informing of the public by the police and a tardy prosecuting of the cases paves the give way to a political manipulation. The same happened with one of the biggest fights in Novi Kneževac which turned out not to be of the interethnic character since both groups had young Serbs and Hungarians as well.

On 24 September one ethnic Hungarian was found dead in Kanjiža and an ethnic Serb was arrested on reasonable grounds that he had murdered him. Two days later the President of the municipality of Kanjiža said that the investigation proved that the murder had not been ethnically motivated as some media announced it while Minister Rasim Ljajić repeated it at the press conference held on 6 October.

It is a well-known fact that a bomb was thrown in front of the house of the president of the biggest Hungarian party. The Government of the Republic of Serbia strongly condemned this event saying it was an attack on Serbia. No perpetrator has been found yet.

There are several recorded cases that café bar owners in Horgoš (municipality of Kanjiža) did not want to serve the ethnic Roma because of their nationality. The same has been recorded in Feketić (municipality of Mali Idoš).

Regarding the verbal provocations pronounced orally, there have been nationalistic provocations towards children from Boka in the village of Sečanj the day after the mentioned fight, the Serbs bursting in the community meeting in Mužlja in 2005 when they protested because in this suburban area of Zrenjanin with the major Hungarian population they spoke Hungarian³, shouts in Sremska Mitrovica “We will slaughter the male Croats, we will rape the female Croats”, verbal assaults on the remaining ethnic Croats in Hrtkovci in Srem, in Novi Slankamen different shouts on national basis could be heard in the night, swearing at Croats, (for example in August 2005 a singing could be heard in the streets: “Brothers Serbs, make a salad, there will be meat, we will slaughter the

³ The local organization of the Serbian Radical Party condemned this event.

Croats”) and in Novi Sad there have been numerous verbal provocations reported, aimed to the ethnic Hungarians because they spoke their language publicly.

Obviously, there are following types of situation that should be differed from this one. The example of one of them comes from the ethnically Hungarian place of Toba (municipality of Nova Crnja) where the Serbian Radical Party promoted their president using a loudspeaker during the referendum for recall of the president of the municipality which the villagers of the Hungarian nationality understood as putting pressure on them. The example of another, less clear situations, is a case from July 2005 from Bečej where the police, according to the statement of the Humanitarian Law Fund, insulted one citizen with Albanian name because of his national origin while being taken to police station, which the police denied.

In this context there could be mentioned the case of 19 May when the bishop of Mileševo, Filaret, when blessing the church in Lazarevo near Zrenjanin, called upon the citizens to follow Jesus and Saint Sava and not the “Serbian sleazebags and traitors” and asked ”what does Serbia has to do with Europe?” The Assembly of Zrenjanin and the majority of the local branches of the political parties condemned this excess of the bishop.

Among the graffiti of threatening or generally nationalistic content there were those in Zrenjanin (in May), in Hetin (municipality of Žitište), on the walls of the Secondary medical school in Subotica on 12 June where the Croats were called “inferior beings” and are threatened with “slaughtering”, graffiti with the content of anti-Semitism and those which praised the crime in Srebrenica in several places in Novi Sad during June and July, graffiti in Palić with the content “death to Hungarians” (written at the end of July on one family house), the anti-Croatian graffiti in Petrovaradin, Gibarac, Vrbas, Slankamen and Kukujevci, etc. The youth NGOs have organized actions of painting over these or similar graffiti in several places in Vojvodina.

In mid-July in Novi Sad a few hundreds meters from the Synagogue a graffiti “Death to the Jews” was written and devil’s head was drawn on the family house of Stefan Stefanović. A swastika had been drawn and the Star of David had been crossed on the Synagogue in Novi Sad a week before. According to the newspapers these graffiti appeared after a series of dozens nationalistic graffiti which praised the crime in Srebrenica written by the so-called group “National formation”.

The members of the Protestant churches have been exposed to constant physical assaults (which is especially true for the Adventists in a series of places in Vojvodina). For example, on 5 May using a piece of concrete an unknown person broke a blind and a window on the flat where a priest of the Christian Adventist Church lived in Augusta Cesarca Street in Novi Sad. The assault on the Adventist Church repeated in October in Novi Sad. The Adventist Church was also assaulted in Zrenjanin and in the last six months there have been five assaults on the Adventist Church in Ruma. By the end of May the Vatican flag hoisted on the occasion of the death of Pope John Paul II was

taken down from the church in Bač. The local Radicals denied the accusations that it was them who took down the flag.

In June the representatives of the Serbian Radical Party said that “the father of the Minister of Agriculture, Ivana Dulić-Marković, has founded a branch of Croatian Democratic Community in Subotica”. In July a member of the Radical party and a member of the Novi Sad Assembly distributed leaflets with the name of this Minister and the drawn Croatian national and state symbol – šahovnica on it.

In September all the signs written in Hungarian at the entrance of the village of Novi Itebej were painted over. All political parties and the managements of the municipality of Žitište and the village of Novi Itebej condemned this incident. The first to distance from it was a representative of the Serbian Radical Party considering that on three out of four repainted signs their abbreviation SRS was written.

On 26 July unknown perpetrators in Kersko cemetery in Subotica took out wooden crosses and put them in the shape of a pyramid, turning them upside down. This was done five days before the celebration of the church holiday “Proštenje Svete Ane” in this cemetery where the mass is performed in Hungarian and Croatian.

In the night between 5 and 6 July several tombs were destroyed in the Catholic cemetery of Srpski Itebej in the municipality of Žitište.

In Kukujevci it is still impossible to freely enter the church and the parson’s apartment.

According to the quotations of the association “Argus” from Novi Sad, on Easter Sunday in early morning hours, unknown persons broke the window above the entrance to the Catholic Church in Bečej in the centre of the town and put a garbage can inside it.

The context of the interethnic relations in Vojvodina which affects the ethnic incidents

The following spots should be underlined in order to complete the picture:

It should be stressed that regarding the actual ethnic distance, the ethnic groups of Albanians, Bosniaks, Ashkali and Roma are possibly the most jeopardized, especially in the case of uncontrolled entangling of the Kosovo issue.

During July there were high ethnic tensions between the members of the Croatian and Bunjevci national community. The representatives of the Croatian national community claim that segregation of Bunjevci had begun in Milošević’s time to disunite the Croatian corpus in Vojvodina and that the actual government in Belgrade maintains this artificial separation between Croats and Bunjevci, and the President of the Bunjevačka Party sent a letter to the Prime Minister and the President of Serbia in September as well as to the corresponding boards of the Assembly of Serbia where he accused the

government of Serbia “that its inactivity contributed to forming a political atmosphere” to make the assaults on the Bunjevci increase. In the central Bačka the priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church challenge in their preaching the existence of the Montenegrin nation and refuse to enter the Montenegrin nationality in the book of christened persons.

Almost in all places where the monitoring has been carried out, the existence of higher or lower tensions between the natives (regardless of their ethnic origin) and the refugees has been established. (“The situation is improving but slowly. It takes generations. People have come from many places and they are very different (Knin, Vukovar, Zadar). Now they are farming, and they have never done it before. Everything was hard for them, everything bothered them. Every adjective “Croatian” got on their nerves. They have infiltrated into power, they have managed. We have nothing to do with the power. The local power is not much of a help anyway.

In the areas where the members of the national communities are in majority on the local level (Kanjiza, Senta) or where there is a larger number of them (Temerin) a separation of the young people by the ethnic principle has been noticed, “parallel lives” are being lived. There are separate disco clubs and café bars.

Regarding the Slovakian national minority, segregation has also been noticed (“The incidents are an information about what is going on in the depth of society. In Stara Pazova the ethnic segregation typical for Milosevic has continued. When the book was presented in the Slovakian centre only Slovaks came while the presentation in the library was attended only by the Serbs. Segregation exists but not as much as among the Serbs and Hungarians who have their respective restaurants. The Slovaks used to go to a café bar in the Slovaks centre. Now they don’t, the bar is closed down and everybody goes to the same places.”)

As one interlocutor from Temerin said: “Mainly the young provoke incidents, but the contacts among the older still exist and they existed even before the 1920s. Of course the Serbs and Hungarians meet each other in some situations, in shops or in business contacts.” Another interlocutor from the Croatian community has similar opinion: “Incidents come up among the young. We are afraid to let our children go to a dance because we don’t want them to be beaten up. We, older people, meet in private houses so they can’t harm us. The easiest is to attack a Croat in a café bar. Segregation of older people on ethnic principle, in fact, withdrawing of the ethnic minorities from the public life has also been noticed. (“People live an unsociable life because of a bad experience, they rarely go to café bars. If you live only in your small kingdom between the walls of your own house, where can you get a chance to be discriminated? If the church made an announcement, they would raise a hue and cry against it. Since they live so unsociably there are fewer incidents. They do not interfere into public life, business, politics. Gethoization is where a whole collectivity is kept aside, and here individuals are kept aside. One could say there is gethoization in villages.

As one interlocutor from Temerin put it: “Those corpses are even very clearly located. There are parts of Temerin meant for the Serbs long time ago and some locations which are for the Hungarians. Take for example this part which has been merged with Bački Jarak for a long time and which was called Kolonija by the way, it is a Serbian part, while the central part is predominantly Hungarian, Simset.” As for Temerin, according to what the interlocutors said, “as for 2005, there is something hidden, conflicts of low intensity. Temerin is unfortunately very paradigmical because many times mentioned segregation tendencies are quite obvious in everyday life. For example, the Hungarian part of the village celebrated the village’s day a few days ago. This event does not affect at all the other part of the corpus so it is in fact a totally separated life. A feeling of embarrassment and uncertainty reigns.”

Exercising of collective rights of minorities and ethnic incidents

The intention of this material is not to describe exercising of particular collective rights of the members of national communities. It is sufficient enough to give a few comments to understand the context of events this material deals with. Regarding education the percentage of members of minority communities educated in their mother tongue is still high (among Hungarians it is about 77-78% on primary school level and 67-68% on secondary school level). However, according to what Hungarian intellectuals claim the history textbooks subjectively treat “a collective sin” of Hungarians. Among the members of Slovakian, Romanian and Ruthenian national community the percentage of members of minority communities educated in their mother tongue is high, there are attempts to organize it for the Bunjevci and education in their mother tongue is not at all organized for some of the most numerous communities in Vojvodina (e.g. the Yougoslav community).

In the municipalities where the members of the ethnic minorities are in majority, a separate problem is an aggravating possibility of language using in official communication with the administration and self-governing organs, either because they do not speak the language of the members of the minority communities or because of the lack of the forms. (Cf. the statement of the members of Slovakian national community: “Quite a big problem is acquired right of official use of language and alphabet. It is nothing but having bilingual signs in public institutions and streets. That is the most of it. Bilingual street names can be put only in the places where there is more than 15% of minority population out of the total population. Documents are issued depending on the place. It depends on the good will and then there are no forms... You cannot even get a certificate of birth or marriage. Documents are issued in Serbian written in Cyrillic. The forms are identical for the whole country. Regardless of the fact that you have the official use of language and alphabet in a particular municipality laid down by the statute, there have not been these forms for I don’t know how many years. Then it happens very often that you cannot get your identity card in your native language or in

both languages. They can be obtained only in Cyrillic. It is a dogmatic enforcing of the law because you all have acquired right, but only by law.”)

Regarding exercising the right of being informed in native language there are higher tensions, above all within some national communities. The Forum of civil Hungarian organizations of Novi Sad which form “Argus”- Civil association of Hungarians in Serbia for minority rights, the Scientific society of Hungarians in Vojvodina, Society for protection of cultural monuments and preserving national heritage and Association of teachers Hungarians in Vojvodina stated their opinion at the round table discussion held on 12 May 2005 “degrading of information in Hungarian language is continuing in Vojvodina and even some signs of deliberateness could be noticed”. It should be borne in mind that a share of the program in Hungarian has been reduced from about 20% in 1990 to a little over 3% in 2005. The stated opinion is advocated by prominent Hungarian intellectuals Gaál György, Ribár Béla, Papp Ferenc, Nagy Margit and Bozóki Antal.

This is worth comparing with the statement regarding exercising the right to be informed in Slovakian language: “We have 6 hours of program on the radio, and the news is on TV every working day for 10 minutes, there are weekly programs, monthly programs. The problem is that those programs can’t be watched or heard where they should because since the bombing the radio and TV transmitters have been destroyed. Nothing has been invested here. All donations and money go to Belgrade and then they either give us something or don’t, that is the problem. It’s not enough. Now a Law of radio broadcasting should be reorganized, it was passed a long time ago, but is not enforced. Briefly, there is no will to solve the problem in the media, and on top of that the problem in RTV Novi Sad, which broadcasts program in seven languages and was a brand of Vojvodina in informing in native language back in 1980s. So, we do have some acquired rights, some experiences of our own. Slowly but surely this station is vanishing. Who will be held responsible and how are we going to protect our acquired rights, nobody knows. The RTS should be transformed into a public service, the Province should have its public service, too. The Law of radio broadcasting says two public services, the one of the Republic and the one of the Province, but nothing has been done in this sense so far.”

A special problem is a national structure of the police⁴, while the national structure of the administration and self-governing organs is approximate to the national structure of the population. On 24 July 2005 Democratic Association of Croats in Vojvodina reacted to the appointed judges and attorneys which, as they said, showed once again that nationality is important for being appointed in the juridical organs and not qualifications and expertise and that the candidates for the judges of Croatian nationality in Subotica and Novi Sad had been discriminated due to their nationality.

The problem of refusing to give recognition to the Romanian Orthodox church persists.

⁴ The government of the Republic of Serbia is making efforts to change this. The advertisement for admission to the Safety-informative agency has been published in Hungarian for the first time.

According to the press reports about possible causes of the interethnic incidents the Provincial Secretary for regulations, administration and national minorities, Mr. Korhecz Tamás, said “that in the surveyed period there have been escalations of incidents with national prefix, but, apart from the cases of graffiti writing, it was very difficult to establish their national motivation”. “In the origin of these incidents is national intolerance and absence or a very low level of inter-national tolerance, which originate from the social circumstances and prevailing political climate arisen in the 1990s which, according to the expert researches, have prevailed among the younger part of population”, Korhecz said. He continued “so it is very important to focus our full attention to general prevention and take steps in improving the inter-national tolerance and promoting the values of diversity.

Some new moments

By completing this and other projects in the field, the Center for Development of Civil Society has established that the inter-ethnic relations in Vojvodina are burdened with mistrust with a considerable ethnic distance, yet stable in the given circumstances. Decreasing in the number of incidents on ethnic basis is quite noticeable. Considering the experience from March 2004 it is necessary that the negotiations on the future of the State Union Serbia and Montenegro and negotiations on the future of Kosovo are accompanied by a more intensive monitoring of the ethnic relations in Vojvodina.

On 3 June, the Presidency of the Association of the Hungarians in Vojvodina decided that filing criminal charges against the leaders of that party is “a covered up assault on the Hungarians in Vojvodina” and that it is about “a political witch-hunt against the party with the highest rating among the Hungarians in Vojvodina”. The VMSz announced it would address international forums to protect their president Kasa, the other officials and members of the party who were “a target of an unfair campaign of the authorities against protectors of one national community. “... the Presidency of the party considers as intimidating the vilification of the deputy president of the party, Mr. Bunyik Zoltán, by the SRS ... (“Against these incidents on national grounds against the VMSz, they have decisively protested as well as against incapability of the police and juridical organs, and the authorities have responded in a characteristic, Balkan way...the activities of the newly appointed attorneys is mostly aimed against the members of the Hungarian nationality...”)

It should be borne in mind that in mid-July a prominent Hungarian politician Orban Victor demanded international protection for Hungarians in Vojvodina.

The President of Serbia Boris Tadić was in an official visit to Hungary on 3 and 4 October 2005 invited by the President of Hungary Sólyom László. Mr. Tadić met the Prime Minister of Hungary Gyurcsány Ferenc and the president of the Parliament of Hungary Ms. Szili Katalin. Tadić and Sólyom estimated that the position of the minorities is important for the relations between the two

countries and that the culprits of the ethnically motivated incidents in Vojvodina must be prosecuted. Tadić and Gyurcsány agreed that the cases of ethnically motivated violence in Vojvodina should be solved through court processes so that the incidents should not repeat and strain relations between the two countries.

On 6 October 2005 the Minister for human and minority rights, Mr. Rasim Ljajić, started a tour around the Province to get a real picture before submitting the report on 13 October in Bruxelles. He said that the most important was to show transparency in Bruxelles and to invite representatives of the international community to Vojvodina to assure themselves of the real situation and position of the minorities. According to the data collected there were 21 physical assaults reported in Vojvodina, 14 fights, 40 damagings of religious premises and 45 cases of written graffiti. It was announced that this problem should be examined by a commission which would be formed at the initiative of the Provincial Secretary for minority rights Korhecz Tamás and which would include representatives of the State Union, Republic and the Province as well as one representative of each non-governmental organization and of the national council of Hungarians.

According to the press reports from the meeting on effects of the results of the general convention for national minorities protection organized on 10 October 2005 by the Ministry for human and minority rights and the European Council, Mr. Rasim Ljajić said that there was solid legal grounds in Serbia and Montenegro as well as an adequate political atmosphere for the protection of the minorities. The representative of the General Secretary of the European Council in Serbia and Montenegro, Mr. Stefano Valenti, stated that the Ministry for human and minority rights had done a lot for the protection of human and minority rights.

According to the media reports, another debate on the position of the national minorities in Serbia and Montenegro was held on 13 October 2005 in the Committee for foreign affairs of the European Parliament in Bruxelles attended by the representatives of the state organs of Serbia and Montenegro, Serbia and Vojvodina and of the National Council of Hungarians in Vojvodina and non-governmental organizations. The Minister for human and minority rights Mr. Rasim Ljajić said that the incidents on ethnic grounds were enormously exaggerated in the debate about Vojvodina in the European Parliament. In the European Parliament in Bruxelles Mr. Ljajić said that he was extremely surprised by the sharpness in declarations of the political representatives of the Hungarians and Croats from Vojvodina who stated serious accusations while they had missed to mention any improvements made in Serbia and Montenegro. "I do not want to minimize the importance of the incidents some of which were on ethnic grounds.", he said, but added that their number had reduced in this year. All the incidents involving members of the Hungarian nationality have been solved and the culprits were prosecuted. It is partly true that the courts work slowly when investigating the incidents, Mr. Ljajić said, adding that it was a general phenomenon, not particular only for the problem of the interethnic

incidents. The Minister categorically rejected the claim of the representatives of the Croatian minority that there was an institutional segregation between the Croats in Vojvodina by establishing Bunjevci as a minority.

Political representatives of the Hungarians and Croats in Vojvodina as well as the European, mainly Hungarian members of the Parliament, demanded that Vojvodina was given back its autonomy from 1974 and expressed sharp reproaches to the absence of will and activity of the authorities in Vojvodina and Serbia, especially on the local level, to prevent ethnic incidents and to punish the culprits of these wrongdoings.

A favorable circumstance regarding the inter-national relations in Vojvodina is the fact that according to all the findings, so far no foreign factor has supported forming of the territorial autonomy in the north of Vojvodina in the parts where the representatives of national communities make up a majority of the total population.

Conclusions and recommendations

A part of the incidents has not been reported to the police which was evidenced in numerous statements of individuals and in those which could be heard in public discussions organized by the Center for Development of Civil Society.

The achievements after the intervention of the international organizations are in connection with considerably more effective work of the police and with even better coordination of the administration on different levels with the aim to prevent ethnic conflicts. The greatest problem is still a passive attitude of the prosecution which can encourage possible perpetrators of the ethnic incidents. (According to what members of the national communities said: “The police say that they catch the perpetrators, but the judicial organs have mild penalties. The whole system needs changing. Laws are necessary. The police catch the perpetrators but have to release them and then they laugh at them”. Or: “The problem is that the police either do not bring adequate charges in compliance with the article 134 of the Basic Penal Code, or the prosecution does not apply this article so the inter-ethnic violence has extremely mild sentences”).

This also applies to the incidents which happened earlier. Criminal acts committed against the members of the minorities during the wars have still been prosecuted. On 6 May 2005 the Reformists of Vojvodina reminded in this regard of 13 years of exile of non-Serbian population from a village of Hrtkovci in Srem. In their announcement the Reformists of Vojvodina call upon the competent juridical organs to finally start a prosecution against those responsible for the incidents in this village. “Hrtkovci is not the unique example of harassing citizens of Croatian nationality in Srem and Vojvodina-wide...”

A very strong recommendation to all the parties concerned with the ethnic peace in Vojvodina is to have the prosecution start by applying the law, i.e. press charges against perpetrators of the incidents on national basis.

Regarding activities of prevention, beside the above mentioned it should be said that a meeting initiated by the Provincial Secretary for regulations, administration and national minorities Mr. Korhecz Tamás was held on 26 September 2005 dedicated to the security situation in Subotica after the fights in secondary schools which involved members of different nationalities while the victims were members of the Hungarian nationality. The participants agreed that the problem of national tensions and intolerance was an inherited problem from the period of wars and isolation, which could be successfully fought against by implementing prevention strategy and educating the young generation in the spirit of mutual appreciation and tolerance. A full cooperation of the police organs of the Republic and the local self-government is therefore necessary. A hope was expressed that the project "Safe community" of the Ministry of internal affairs, Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, state attorney's office and local self-governments would be effected as soon as possible.

Apart from prevention, the Provincial administrative organs of AP Vojvodina showed energetic treatment of concrete incidents and strong readiness to cooperate with the police, Federal Ministry of human and minority rights, local self-governments, national councils and monitoring missions of international organizations. These attempts should be supported.

As for the recommendations addressed to the general public and the media it should be said that the issue of the so-called internationalization of the ethnic incidents is very often politicized in an unproductive way. The so-called internationalization of the ethnic incidents in Vojvodina in early October 2004 preceded a considerable reducing in their number. Not only the media and the general public but also the international organizations should take this chronology into consideration but without making a mistake of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

Like last year, the experience in the field work once again points out that the authorities in the Republic of Serbia are in no way involved in provoking the ethnic incidents; on the contrary, they endeavor to prevent them and to find the culprits.

In this regard during the field work the rumors about alleged connection between some individuals now employed in the agencies of the Government of Serbia and the culprits of the assaults on ethnic grounds during Milosevic's ruling and especially the assaults on the ethnic Albanians in March 1999 during the state of war were in no way confirmed. These rumors which indicate the alleged connection between the criminals and the police which in some parts of Vojvodina dated from the time when the ethnic incidents mentioned earlier happened and which, allegedly, partly obstruct discovering the culprits of the actual incidents, are best denied if the culprits of the new incidents are found and prosecuted. This is not unimportant also because unlike the period until October 2004, the

Center for Development of Civil Society faced various kinds of threats while working on collecting data and informing the public about ethnic incidents in Vojvodina. The international organizations are required not only to survey the situation regarding the interethnic relations in Vojvodina, but also to show readiness to intervene effectively in the cases of jeopardizing the activists of organizations for human rights, which, considering the circumstances, is not likely, but it is possible.

Constituting of the Federal council for inter-national relations presents a potentially useful possibility which has been missed for several years.

A more permanent solution of the problem of financing the national councils and continuing and intensifying their communication with the Federal Ministry for human and minority rights and with the Council for inter-national relations of the Government of the Republic of Serbia would significantly enforce the institutional capacity regarding prevention.

Introducing the institution of the Protector of the rights of citizens of the Republic of Serbia should not limit the scope of activities of the Provincial ombudsman office for Vojvodina.

Forming the municipal councils for inter-national relations should be strongly supported and their forming should be stimulated in the municipalities where they have not been formed yet or where they do not work effectively.

The Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Executive council of Vojvodina should be encouraged to find a solution together for functional reorganization of those services within the police which deal with the public order to make them closer to the citizens of Vojvodina. In this regard attempts to arrange the ethnic structure of the police according to the ethnic structure of the local population should be supported.

As it has been said for many times before, the Government of the Republic of Serbia has managed to increase the effectiveness of the work of the police, but not considerably the work of the courts and attorney's offices as well. Regarding the experience from March 2004 when the ethnic violence passed from Kosovo to Vojvodina the agencies of the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Federal Ministry for human and minority rights all should focus their attention to prevention of possible violent behavior towards the members of potentially most jeopardized groups: Albanians, Bosniaks, Ashkali, and Roma. There is a strong impression that among the members of these groups there are most of those who do not report the cases of violence they have been exposed to.

The Center for Development of Civil Society intends to proceed with the monitoring of ethnic relations and possible tensions in Vojvodina.

24 October 2005