

## EMIGRATION UNDER PRESSURE

Vojvodina is ethnically and religiously the most heterogeneous region in Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The majority of the population are the Serbs, but about 40% are other nations: Hungarians, Slovaks, Romanians, Gypsies, Ruthenians, Croats, those who declare as the Yugoslavs, etc. Confessional, lingual and ethnic differences mainly coincide, but also interfere in a measure which is not negligible. The Constitution of 1974 gave Vojvodina a very wide autonomy and actually it was equal to the six Yugoslav republics and in the field of collective rights of the minorities there were very high standards developed, which the former regime used, among other conceal an extreme disinclination towards individual rights.

The turnover came towards the end of 1980s with the nationalistic regime in Serbia. With the constitutional reform of 1990, made by nationalistic programme, Serbia was organized as a very centralized state, autonomous regions were actually abolished, the jurisdiction of the municipalities was drastically narrowed, and the rights of the minorities were reduced. At the beginning of the 1990s the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated and the wars broke out in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. A great number of refugees from the territories at war found their shelter in Vojvodina, officially about 250000 of them, which further complicated ethnic relations in the province making a suitable basis for radicalisation of political and social situation. During the period from 1991 to 1994 there were open conflicts between smaller organized groups of refugees and the local population, mostly the Croats, who began to emigrate in great numbers.

The status of minor communities and the formation of juridical institutes in this field are decisively influenced by the events in the other province, Kosovo and Metohija. Since the beginning of the 1980s there has been a permanent, profound, political crisis in this province which the newly established regime in Serbia tried to solve at the end of 1980s by strengthening the repression, factual abolition of autonomous provinces in Serbia and by reducing the rights of minorities. Although the aim of these measures was at first to repulse the Albanian separatistic movement in Kosovo, they also caused aggravation of the status of the minor communities in Vojvodina.

In the last years the tendencies of „ethnification of politics“ have been stressed in Serbia and Vojvodina. Social and political separations are not predominantly ideological or those of the interest, but they follow the ethnic separations. The ethnic belonging became the key qualificativ for participation in the political life meaning that the members of the ethnic groups which are not dominant are in an unfavorable position at the very start, with a small or no chance to realize their rights or interests in the political competition based on the principle of majorities. The relations between political majorities and minorities are ethnically founded and constant. The domination of the major nation is not corrected by the mechanisms which would enable the members of minor communities to realize their interests and to take part equally in the process of making political decisions. In the 1990s in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia there has been a continuous and dramatic economic and social crisis followed by a drastic decrease of the standard

of living of the population, especially in the period between 1992 and 1995 when the strict economic sanctions of the international community were passed.

All those events caused the coding down of inter-ethnic relations in Vojvodina, and the members of the minorities complain more often that they are exposed to the ethnic and religious discrimination, that their status becomes worse, that they are not adequately involved in the authorities, that their identity is menaced, etc.

Every researcher of the status of the minor communities in Vojvodina meets numerous problems, particularly when gathering relevant data. Our official statistics are becoming poorer and more irregular and the state administration is traditionally closed to the independent researchers. Besides, the lack of academic studies in this field is noticed.

The ethnic structure in Vojvodina has been changed by the wide emigration of the Croats from Vojvodina, provoked by different pressures which included even physical violence. According to the Fund for humanitarian law, only during July and August 1992, more than 10000 of the Croats in Vojvodina exchanged their property with the Serbs from Croatia and emigrated. The pressures for emigration were organized, and, according to the Fund, for intimidation were particularly responsible Vojislav Seselj, the Serbian radical party and the local authorities which, as a rule, were formed by the radicals and the militant groups of refugees. Higher authorities generally did nothing to prevent the emigration of Croats. As stated by the fund, a terrorism of the weaker intensity was practically applied: planting of explosives, bombs or setting fires but in the way that the property was not destroyed. Catholic churches, parish bureaus and the priests were especially aimed. It is worth mentioning that the chauvinist campaigns of the media contributed mainly to intimidation not only of the Croatian but also of the population of other minorities in general. It is difficult to say how many Croats have left Vojvodina, the Helsinki Committee estimated about 30000. According to the same source, Kosovo and Metohija left about 6000 Croats, and the other parts of Serbia, particularly Belgrade, about 5000.

The most intensive pressures and violence towards the Croats were in Srem. According to the Bishopric of Djakovo and Srem, the catholic population was reduced from 37682 to 22444 in the period between 1991 and 1995.

In the further text we will state some of the drastic examples of violence towards the Croatian citizens in Vojvodina. Beside the reports of the Fund for humanitarian rights, already mentioned, we used the documentation of the local catholic parish bureaus where there were the data about the number of emigrated Croats with their names, family names and addresses. By comparing these data to the data gathered in population registration in 1991, we will try to show the dimensions which this undoubtedly organized action of exchanging the population had in Vojvodina. We repeat again that the number of the Croats was greater than that given in the registration because many of them declared as the Yugoslavs.

In Hrtkovci, the municipality of Ruma, by the registration of 1991 there were 2684 inhabitants, 1080 Croats, 445 Yugoslavs, 515 Hungarians, 555 Serbs and Montenegrins... according to the Fund, until 1 June 1992 about 30 Croatian families had emigrated. A most emigration of the Croats from Hrtkovci began in May 1992 and until August the same year 450 Croatian and inter-ethnic families had emigrated. The Fund stated that the decisions to emigrate were made after the local bureau of Serbian radical party had been founded on May 6<sup>th</sup>. (Seselj's Djurdjevdan) During the initiating assembly which was attended by more than 2000 people, mainly the refugees, Vojislav Seselj said that „ all Croats who made a mistake should go“ ... ,

and then a local leader of the party read the names of seventeen Croats who emigrated immediately after that. After Seselj's visit, Hrtkovci was visited by groups of refugees every day who rushed into the houses of the Croats and threatened to destroy their property. In the period between 10-05-1992 and 1-07-1992, according to the Fund, about twenty Croatian families were forced to leave their houses this way. On June 29 1992 a Croat from Hrtkovci, Mijat Stefanec, (born in 1949) was killed. His body was found in the field somewhere between Hrtkovci and Nikinci. The police arrested four refugees in connection with this crime. An organized group of refugees, led by Ostoja Sibincic, took over the governing of the local community, changed by force the name of the village into Srbislavci as well as the names of the streets which proved the presence of the Croats in the village. After many interventions of the villagers and a group of the Belgrade intellectuals, a special police unit was sent to the village, but only after a great number of Croatian families had left Hrtkovci. On August 10, 1992 Ostoja Sibincic was arrested together with other four refugees from g.p. under suspicion of committing a harassment and illegal possession of weapons. Not long after their arresting, they were released to defend from outside. In May 1993 Sibincic and one of accused were sentenced to prison, the punishment being short and on parole while the rest of them were acquitted. The local Serbs who protested against the violence towards the Croats, were themselves threatened and the police arrested and searched the house of the president of the local bureau of the Serbian renewal movement. As a result of violence, threatening and various harassment 280 families with 805 members left Hrtkovci and moved mostly to Croatia according to the data of local parish.

A certain number of villagers of Hungarian nationality were forced to emigrate, even some Serbs who were against this kind of ethnic cleansing. The militant group of refugees was finally sent away from the village in September 1993. The Serbs who moved into the houses of the Croats had been, as a rule, also exposed to violence and terror while in Croatia, so they had been forced to leave it.

In Nikinci, a village also in the municipality of Ruma, there were 2226 inhabitants including 427 Croats according to the registration of 1991. The report of the local parish says that between 1991 and the end of 1995 225 persons emigrated, mostly the Croats. 165 Croats out of 549 moved from Platicevo.

In Petrovaradin there were 2236 Croats in 1991. Between 1991 and 1996, 144 families with 514 members moved from the two districts of Petrovaradin. The names of the streets and institutions which showed the Croatian presence in Petrovaradin were mostly changed. Thus, the primary school „Vladimir Nazor“ changed its name into „Jovan Ducic“.

From Sremska Mitrovica where there were 752 Croats in 1991, 116 of them emigrated between 1991 and 1996. From Beocin where in 1991 there were 619 Croats, eleven Croatian families moved from 1991 to 1996, and 11 more families from the villages of Rakovac and Cerevic in the same municipality. In 1991 there were 234 Croats in Cerevic. In Sremski Karlovci there were 1364 Croats in 1991. According to the Catholic sources, 285 Croats emigrated between 1991 and 1996. From Novi Banovci, the municipality of Stara Pazova, 144 Croats moved, the same sources say; in 1991 there were 550 of them. In Golubinci, a village which had 4497 inhabitants in 1991, 1798 Croats lived. 855 of them emigrated between 1991 and 1997. The Fund for humanitarian rights registered twenty cases of bomb planting in the village. Marija Puric, a 28-year-old Croat, was killed on February 7, 1994 in her house.

One of the biggest Croatian communities in Srem before the war was in the village of Beska (the municipality of Indjija). In 1991 the village had 6166 inhabitants, among them 1449 Croats. In the period of 1991-1995, 1005 of them emigrated. From Maradić moved 16 Croats (in 1991 there were 136 of them), and from Indjija 151 (in 1991 there were 778 of them). As the Fund for humanitarian rights reports, the Croats of Vojvodina who lived near the Croatian border were for months exposed to the violence of „some regular police units and military groups of the Republic of Serbia“. In the community of Sid there were 36317 inhabitants, 6047 Croats among them, according to the registration of 1991. In the town of Sid 1261 Croats lived, said the same registration. (8,8% of the town population); in Kukujevcı 1622 Croats made up 92% of the village population; in Gibarac there were 728 Croats or 90% of the population. Bigger Croatian communities were in Morovic, with 598 Croats, Sot 472, Vasica 420. According to the Fund, during 1992 and 1993, the Croats from Sid and the surrounding places emigrated because of the pressure organized by the Serbian radical party, militant groups of refugees and the village authorities with the authorities of the municipality and the republic knowing about them. The Fund also says that the Yugoslav Army obtained weapons for the Serbian population in these regions. According to the same sources, the first cases of emigration were registered in the spring of 1991, when there was a special unit of policemen from that unit near Kukujevcı, allegedly to secure the Croatian border. A group of policemen from that unit, led by Nenad Bucin, went to Kukujevcı every day by an armored car since the beginning of July 1991. These policemen took the Croats out of their houses and into a hangar and a silos outside the village where they beat them. This atmosphere lasted for months and it was only after a group of villagers talked to the chief of the police of Sid that the harassment stopped, and a special police unit from Novi Sad and Belgrade was sent to the village. As the Fund reports, Nenad Bucin was never prosecuted for the events in Kukujevcı. The villagers testified that more than 40 Croats were beaten and one was stuck by a knife. On July 1993 a married couple from Agica and Nikola Ockmokić and their cousin Marija Tomić were killed, which caused more Croats to emigrate. On October 15, 1993 several people, members of the Serbian radical party, were arrested under suspicion of committing these murders as well as other acts of burglary, terrorism and illegal gun possession. However, the pressures over the Croats from Kukujevcı continued, fires were set, bombs were thrown on the houses and estates of the Croats. As a result, 1043 Croats emigrated between 1991 and 1994 and during 1995 the new 137 ones which is 1180 in total or 73% of the Croats who lived here in 1991, according to the local parish bureau. The similar events happened to the Croats in Morovic, a village at the very border of Croatia. Beside many threatening letters, marking the Croatian houses by „U“, the Croats of this village were often beaten, the Fund says that there were about twenty bombs thrown to intimidate the Croats and to force them to emigrate. In the period of 1991 - 1996, by the report of the local parish, about 406 Croats emigrated or 68% of their number in 1991. According to the Fund, there were no bomb throwing in Sid and the first Croats harassed by the extreme chauvinists were those having the prestigious positions and the experts. At the beginning of the 1990s there were about eighty firms in Sid, and at least thirty managers were not the Serbs. Until December 1993 only three of them had kept their positions. Some prominent Croats, such as the former president of the municipality, Jelena Dodik, left Sid because they were harassed by the police. Karlo Nikolić, the manager of the „Srem“ factory was beaten by the workers of the same factory in front of his house. Because of various

pressures, threats and physical violence, 92 Croatian families, about 300 persons, left Sid.

On April 1993, Stevan Korslak, a Ruthenian, was killed in Sot. The same group of members of the Serbian radical party was accused for this murder as for the murder of Ocmokic family in Kukujevci. The murder of Korslak, provoked a feeling of fear among non-Serbian population, and a further emigration as well. According to the catholic sources, 233 persons emigrated from Sot between 1991 and 1996. The same sources say that from other places of the municipality of Sid (Molovina, Bikic Do, Bingule, Ljuba, Erdevik and Vasica) 380 Croats emigrated, from Morovic about 400, from Gibarac 308.

In other parts of Vojvodina the cases of violence towards the Croats were rare. The reports of the Fund for humanitarian rights say that during the summer of 1992 a bomb was thrown on a monastery in Bac, on a pastry shop owned by an Albanian and in the yards of six houses owned by the Croats. Smaller incidents were reported in Banat.

In August 1995, when dozens of thousands of Serbian refugees came the Vojvodina after the fall of Kninska krajina, the incidents with the Croats were renewed, but then the police interfered, so many Croats, especially in Srem, who had been forced to leave their homes, came back followed by the police. However, these police interferences were not always prompt nor effective.

In the report sent in August 1994 the government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the UN Committee for eliminating racial discrimination stated that the ethnic intolerance between the Hungarians, Croats and the Serbs was noticed in Nikinci, Ruma, Ruski Krstur, Golubinci, Kukujevci, Novi Slankamen and Beska. The same report said that there were problems in the village of Hrtkovci, „where there are about 500 families of refugees, the Serbs who came from Croatia, among whom there are 350 former combatants. About 200 families, i.e. about 600 persons emigrated from that village to Croatia, mainly by legal exchange of the property.“ The report further states that a great number of young men from Hrtkovci were engaged in the Croatian army, so the villagers collected a considerable financial support to help the fight of Croatia, which the president Tudjman particularly approved.

It is also said that twenty cases of explosive planting were solved and that bombs were also used. These cases were investigated and twelve persons were imprisoned. It is also said that eight persons were prosecuted and as many persons were imprisoned charged of endangering the freedom and rights of the people of other nation, and that they were or are prosecuted; charges were pressed against 145 people for illegal gun possession (their nationality is not named), and a considerable quantities of weapons and ammunition were confiscated. Organized violence over the Croats in Vojvodina stopped after the Dayton agreement had been signed, but it is likely that the emigration is still going on, but not as massive as it was before.

During the war in Croatia in 1991, the mobilization in Vojvodina was proportionally larger than in the other regions in Serbia. In order to avoid taking part in the civil war, thousands of young people of all nationalities left the country. (In some estimations so far there were dozens of thousands of them.) By May 1996 the Federal Parliament passed the Amnesty Law which granted amnesty to all the persons who committed a crime of not responding to the army invitation and avoiding the army service or a crime of barely deliberate of escaping from the Yugoslav Army. The Amnesty Law meant a precondition for return of a great number of young people. Although in the practice of this law there were certain problems, a great

majority of young men who left the country in 1991 and 1992 to avoid mobilization, returned to Vojvodina.

The presented data show that the ethnic structure of Vojvodina has changed since the last registration of population. Although the return of the refugees in Croatia has been intensified, it was particularly intensive during 1998, it is obvious that the greatest number of those who are in Vojvodina will stay, especially those younger and more educated.