

ETHNIC INCIDENTS IN VOJVODINA AFTER INTERNATIONALIZATION

Summary

It is the general conclusion that the internationalization of the incidents in Vojvodina considerably lessened their number. On the other hand, according to the statement of the interlocutors at the group interviews, there are a great number of verbal incidents of a low intensity which are not reported to the police. It is also noticed that the area where the incidents occur has spread from Bačka to other parts of the Province.. The Belgrade media are more open towards this problem than before 6th July 2004 when the OSCE Mission Chief, Mr. Maurizio Massari, as the first public factor outside Vojvodina mentioned “sporadic ethnic incidents in Vojvodina”. It is particularly bad that there is a big gap in the opinions about the ethnic incidents in Vojvodina between the international organizations, minority communities and the organs of the provincial administration on one, and the organs of the Republic of Serbia and the Federal Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, on the other hand. However, some movements towards the engagement of the state organs which lessened the number of the incidents show that with the cooperation of all factors from all levels the ethnic incidents in Vojvodina can be controlled.

A series of ethnic tensions in Vojvodina has begun its third phase marked by decreasing the number of ethnically-motivated incidents and some other characteristics.

It is important not to make a logical mistake *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* while treating this subject although the boundaries between certain phases in the problem development are pretty clearly marked. Nevertheless, it is important to establish the time train of events so that the whole process could be analyzed later. Consequences cannot precede causes. The first phase started after the state of emergency had been called off when the number of incidents increased gradually. Their escalation was after the parliamentary elections of 26th December 2003 with two eruptive discharging, one during the “Kosovo events” in March 2004 and the other before the local and provincial elections in September when the number of incidents considerably increased¹. The internationalization of the problem initiated by the Republic of Hungary directly preceded the decrease of incidents.

The elementary methodological problem is making difference between the incidents where the members of different nationalities were involved from those ethnically-motivated *in stricto sensu*. This problem impedes the work of human rights organizations and lightens different ways of political manipulation of the problem.

According to the data of the Provincial Secretariat for Regulations, Administration and National Minorities published in November 2004 it was pinpointed that among roughly 300 incidents

¹ www.cdcs.org.yu/docs/ethnical_fn.doc

where the members of different nationalities were involved, one third of them had the inter-national origins. This problem will be discussed later in the text.

Without any ambition to offer the full range, in the period from 1st October 2004 until 15th January 2005 in Vojvodina there were various incidents like writing graffiti which threatened the members of certain minorities, often on religious buildings, several times in Novi Sad, Sremska Kamenica, Petrovaradin, on the building of Croats-Bunjevci-Sokci's Party in Subotica and elsewhere, false bomb threat in the Consulate of the Republic of Hungary in Subotica, ethnically-motivated beating up the minors in Novi Sad, vandalism in the Catholic cemetery in Sombor just after the holiday of All Saints, nationally-motivated fight in Subotica, fights of high-schoolers of different nationalities in Temerin, fights among youngsters from major Hungarian and major Serbian places Torda and Banatski Dvor and Nova Crnja and Aleksandrovo.

Some of the participants in public discussions held in Sombor, Kikinda, Novi Sad and Subotica witnessed the ethnically-motivated insulting and fighting in some of these places and in villages in Srem where a part of Croatian population still lives even after the mass exodus in the wartime. There were actual examples cited that the press did not write about so it could be assumed that the number of incidents even surpass the attention given in the media.

While before the internationalization of the ethnic incidents in Vojvodina apart from the provincial media only B92 and "Danas" wrote about them, the Belgrade media have become much more open to these problems only in recent months. There is still the focus on the incidents between the ethnic Serbs and Hungarians above all with neglecting of others.

A complex picture of ethnic relations in Vojvodina in recent months is additionally complicated by irredentist meeting of radical Hungarians in Mali Idjos, nationalistic graffiti with irredentist content in Becej, problems with television informing in Croatian language and the request of the Community of Romanians in Serbia for acknowledging Romanian Orthodox Church in Serbia.²

During group interviews in the towns of Sombor, Kikinda, Novi Sad and Subotica the ethnic competition for managing positions and other resources, work places above all were mentioned as the sources of ethnic tensions on the micro level.

The attribute of this "third phase" of new ethnic tensions in Vojvodina is not only reducing the number of ethnic incidents but also their moving to the central and southern part of the Province. As a question which requires a careful analysis there is a problem of "focusing" of incidents, i.e. incompletely confirmed impression that the majority of incidents is periodically directed towards the members of certain ethnic groups (in January 2004 towards Croatians, in February 2004 towards Hungarians, in March towards Albanians, Ashkali and Roma with the minor involvement of

² About discrimination of the Romanian Orthodox Church see www.cdcs.org.yu/docs/ver-eng.doc
Center for the Development of Civil Society, 23000 Zrenjanin, Makedonska 11, www.cdcs.org.yu
tel/fax:+381 (0)23 511 066; mob: +381 (0)63 81 47 011, e-mail: cdcsweb@cdcs.org.yu, zrcentar@yahoo.com

Ruthenians and Slovaks, in recent months perhaps towards Hungarians and Croats again). This question would require a completely separate research and analysis.

The change in attitude of the relevant factors during the recent months

The attitude of the relevant political factors has changed from the time of the internationalization. The internationalization has brought considerable changes in the behavior of the authorities, the police and prosecutors above all.

When at the beginning of October 2004 the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council adopted the resolution about functioning of the democratic institutions of S&M, the chief of the delegation of Serbia and Montenegro, Mr. Zoran Sami, said that “all competent state organs must do everything to find and punish the guilty and therefore return peace in this beautiful, multinational environment as Vojvodina is”, and thus admitted the existence of the tensions and the insufficient activity of the state organs.³

Soon after that the chief of the leading party of the Hungarians in Vojvodina, Mr. Kasza said: “We also agreed that the word atrocity is too strong a formulation from my part...”. Mr. Kasza also added: “If the police had done its job like it did after the internationalization, we would have had fewer problems.”⁴ An actual favorable estimation was given by Mr. Laszlo Jozsa, the president of the National Council of Hungarians: “According to Laszlo Jozsa, the interethnic relations in Vojvodina are presently “in a much better condition” than in the past period. “I have come to the information that the police pay more attention now to the cases suspected to have the ethnic character and that the preventive action gives its first results. But we still do not see the perpetrators of the incidents being prosecuted”⁵ However, only a few weeks later Mr. Kasza said that the police did nothing to prevent the inter-national incidents.⁶

The warning came from the UN Human Rights rapporteur, Mr. Ambeyi Ligabo who said that unfortunately, the ethnic violence in Serbia and Montenegro can escalate in every moment. “the special reporter of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights suggested that the situation in Vojvodina, although peaceful at first sight, should be under constant survey of the international community in order to avoid some unexpected inconveniences. When speaking about the situation in Kosovo and Metohija, Mr. Ligabo underlined that there is still a lot to achieve to have the viable level of peaceful coexistence and tolerance between all ethnic groups.”⁷

According to what Mr. Esad Dzudzevic, the President of the Committee for Inter-ethnic Relations of the Assembly of Serbia, said in mid-December, the authorities of the Republic of Serbia

³ www.B92.net, 5/10/2004

⁴ Dnevnik, 11/10/2004

⁵ Dnevnik, 21/10/2004

⁶ Dnevnik, 6/11/2004

⁷ Srna, 19/10/2004

envisaged a project about the state of inter-national relations and the position of the minorities in Serbia. The aim of the project should be making of mechanisms which would contribute to making the atmosphere of tolerance. However, the disagreements regarding the incidents in December again marked the relation of the Hungarian community, which is the biggest minority community in Vojvodina, with the official forces. Mr. Kasza indicated very severely to the behavior of the Minister for Human and Minorities Rights, Mr. Ljajic, "He supported his attitude by the arguments that Ljajic did not react to the recent fight in Torda, the municipality of Zitiste, when the boys of the Serbian nationality from the neighboring village burst in and beat up the local boys of the Hungarian nationality and according to Kasza, this event was a warning that the blood must not be spilt and that the Hungarians will not stand endless maltreating".⁸ A few days later Mr. Ljajic said: "It is true that there were incidents but it is also true that their exaggerating caused immeasurable damage to the state above all, but also to the interethnic relations in Vojvodina."⁹ The activities of the provincial administration of Vojvodina aimed to pacify the ethnic tensions as well as the Provincial ombudsman Dr Petar Teofilovic's visits to Torda, Banatski Dvor and Zitiste because of the incidents, drew minor attention of the Belgrade's public. The activities of the vice-presidents of the Executive Council of Vojvodina, Dr Lodi Gabor and Dusan Jakovljevic, to pacify the tensions caused the reaction of the Radical Party members of the Assembly of the AP Vojvodina.

Estimating the ethnic problems in Vojvodina in January 2005, Minister Ljajic also said: "In the south of Serbia we had armed conflict and in Vojvodina the fights in the pubs which sometimes had elements of ethnic conflicts and sometimes classic fights of people in alcoholic state, but undoubtedly all these incidents had political repercussions. It served as a pretext for political and media exploitation and internationalization. (...) I cannot be in every pub to keep people apart. (...) So I believe it is a problem blown out of proportion and the international community is becoming more and more aware of it. Many representatives of the international community have told me that they could not answer negatively to the first request of Hungary which joined the EU, so they have opened this issue in that way deeply aware that the problem is not as it is presented."¹⁰

Meanwhile, on 16th December 2004 a report of the CoE appeared as the most relevant document about these issues so far which covered the period from September 2004 until November 2004. In this report it is concluded that in Vojvodina "the situation deteriorated in the early months of 2004 following a series of ethnically-motivated incidents". As a result of the monitoring mission of the CoE it was concluded the following: "25. I No interlocutor denied that the earlier months of 2004 were

⁸ Beta, 8/12/2004

⁹ www. B92.net, 13/12/2004

¹⁰ Vreme 13/01/2005 p. 18

characterized by a worrying and unacceptable increase of ethnically-motivated incidents against representatives of national minorities, primarily the Hungarian and Croat minority (...)

25. III All interlocutors (including representatives of national minorities) were of the opinion that this series of incidents were not part of a global, concentrated plan by official forces against national minorities in Vojvodina. (...)

25 VI. All interlocutors put the responsibility on the authorities in Belgrade for their late reaction to the events. Diverging ideas were expressed concerning the real impact and follow-up of the visit of Prime Minister Kostunica to the region in September.

25.VII Some interlocutors (mainly representatives of national minorities) indicated that only the international interest and pressure made the authorities of Serbia react.

25. VIII The most important conclusion is the complete agreement of all interlocutors on the lack of adequate reaction by the police and law enforcement agencies, the absence of proper investigation of the events and the slow judicial procedures. (...) This lack of proper investigation into the incidents and prosecution of the perpetrators can be explained by a lack of professionalism of the police and prosecutors or by certain complicity with political forces having an interest in creating tensions before elections. It is to be noted that these two explanations are not mutually exclusive".¹¹

In the first half of January 2005 due to the development of the situation regarding the changing of the Constitution of Serbia, the public started connecting the problem of Kosovo with the problem of ethnic incidents in Vojvodina. The leaders of political parties of Hungarians from Vojvodina took rather different attitudes regarding this varying from a very consistent advocating for the cultural autonomy (VMSZ) to not completely unambiguously request for according the same legal status of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo and ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina (Mr. Agoston Andras).

The report of the Human Rights Watch from mid-January 2005 came into public focus. The researcher of the HRW for the former Yugoslavia, Bogdan Ivanisevic, indicated that Serbia had regressed in its relation towards the minorities. There is one correction that should be made in opinion of Mr. Ivanisevic in relation with the behavior of the police in Novi Sad on 17th March 2004. The statement from the report of HRW that "in the same night the police in Novi Sad stood aside while the demonstrators attacked and seriously damaged the local center of the Islamic community as well as the cake-shops and bakeries owned by the ethnic Albanians and Muslims" is true, but the context is neglected. The police let the façade of the building of the Executive Council of Vojvodina be damaged along with the cited buildings because in coordination with the Executive Council it was estimated that it was better to let the hooligans demolish the center of Novi Sad so that the concentrated police forces could save the Ashkali settlements Adice and Veliki Rit which were attacked by some two thousand delinquents. Protecting the lives and property of the inhabitants of these settlements the police acted

¹¹ [www.dsp.coe.int/Monitoring/docs/SG-inf\(2004\)33_E.pdf](http://www.dsp.coe.int/Monitoring/docs/SG-inf(2004)33_E.pdf)

very robustly by using the physical force, tear gas and water hosepipes. In this event about ten policemen were injured. This correction is not insignificant because behavior of the police of Novi Sad in March 2004 is unfortunately not a very frequent example of the efficient and professional acting in applying the Constitution and the law in protection of the members of ethnic minorities.¹²

Hence, according to one announcement made in October by the police of Novi Sad “on the wall of the building of the primary school “Sonja Marinkovic” in Puskinova street there is a writing in Serbian: “Death to gendarmerie”. “Antipolice Grbavica.” Then, in English it was written: “Serbia to Serbs, ax to Hungarians”. “Welcome to the Serbian school”¹³ It seems that the protagonists of ethnic incidents notice the connection between behavior of the police of Novi Sad and the protection of the rights of minorities. In the researches that CDCS had by the end of August 2004 in the areas particularly affected by the incidents, the inhabitants underlined the need for the police to come closer to the people by forming the autonomous police of Vojvodina or the local police because they thought it would act more efficiently than the police organized in the present way.¹⁴

It is the general conclusion that the internationalization of the incidents in Vojvodina considerably lessened their number. On the other hand, according to the statement of the interlocutors at the panel discussions, there are a great number of verbal incidents of a low intensity which are not reported to the police. It is also noticed that the area where the incidents occur has spread from Backa to other parts of the Province.(In the first half of 2004 as an exception in this sense it was reported the fight between the ethnic Serbs and Slovaks from the village of Lug and Susek in the municipality of Beocin). The Belgrade media are more open towards this problem than before 6th July 2004 when the OSCE Mission Chief, Mr. Maurizio Massari, as the first factor outside Vojvodina mentioned “sporadic ethnic incidents in Vojvodina” at the press conference of the Center for regionalism in the Sava Center in Belgrade. It is particularly bad that there is a big gap in the opinions about the ethnic incidents in Vojvodina between the international organizations, minority communities and the organs of the provincial administration on one, and the organs of the Republic of Serbia and the Federal Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, on the other hand. However, some movements towards the engagement of the state organs which lessened the number of the incidents show that with the cooperation of all factors from all levels the ethnic incidents in Vojvodina can be controlled.

¹² Danas, 14/01/2005; behavior of the crisis headquarters and the police in repressing the ethnic turbulences in Novi Sad on 17th March 2004 was described by Duško Radosavljević, the ex vice-president of the Executive Council of Vojvodina at the press conference of CDCS in Media Center in Belgrade on 16th September 2004. See the previous report of CDCS on www.cdcs.org.yu/docs/ethnic_fn.doc

¹³ Dnevnik, 1st October 2004

¹⁴ www.cdcs.org.yu/docs/ethnic_engl.doc