

# Serbs and Ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina: Ethnic Conflict Placed within a Framework beyond Groupism

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What will be discussed in this article is the pattern of ethnic relations in the Serbian autonomous province of Vojvodina, with a special focus on the relations between ethnic Hungarians and the Serbian majority. Particular attention will be paid to the political engineering of ethnicity, at the elite level, and ethnic relations from a grass-roots perspective. What will be demonstrated is that instead of focusing on internally homogeneous and externally demarcated ethnic groups, the function of ethnicity in Vojvodina can be understood in terms of a continuous process orchestrated by interest groups. The ultimate aim of these interest groups, or organizations, is to forge an overriding sense of group cohesion among the Serbian majority as well as the ethnic Hungarian community. The impact of this process on ethnic relations is always subject to the persistence of a trans-ethnic substratum that manifests itself in the form of Vojvodinian regional identity.

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## Introduction

The autonomous province of Vojvodina is situated in the north of Serbia (Map 1). Vojvodina's diachronic significance for Serbia has been a dual one: As result of the endeavours by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Habsburg Serb intelligentsia and political entrepreneurs, modern Serbian nationalism was 'born' in this province. Therefore, Vojvodina is a territory with a historic-cultural symbolism of high importance for Serbs. On the other hand, however, Vojvodina is characterized by certain particularities, the most important of them being its richly multiethnic composition. Approximately 26 groups are estimated to be resident in Vojvodina, including Serbs (Table 1). While the Serbs constitute the local majority in 32 of the 45 municipalities of Vojvodina, the province's ethnic diversity is a catalyst that has had a definitive impact upon shaping Vojvodina's regional physiognomy. The largest and most politicized minority group in Vojvodina is the ethnic Hungarians.

Map 1



The subject of this article is the dynamics of ethnicity in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, with a special focus on the relations between the Serbian majority and the ethnic Hungarians. Particular attention will be paid to the political engineering of ethnicity, at the elite level, and ethnic relations from a grass-roots perspective. What will be demonstrated is that instead of focusing on internally homogeneous and externally demarcated ethnic groups, the function of ethnicity in Vojvodina should be understood in terms of a continuous process orchestrated by interest groups. The ultimate aim of these interest groups, or organizations, is to forge an overriding sense of group cohesion among the Serbian majority as well as the Hungarian minority. The impact of this process on ethnic relations is always subject to the persistence of a trans-ethnic substratum that manifests itself in the form of Vojvodinian regional identity.

Before proceeding to the empirical discussion, it is essential to place the subject of this article within a theoretical framework.

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## Theoretical Framework

### *Theoretical approaches to the phenomena of nations and nationalism*

As a matter of fact, there exists a plethora of theoretical approaches to the phenomena of nations and nationalism. An ongoing debate among theorists of nationalism is that between the primordialists and the modernists. Before proceeding into a comparative analysis of these two schools, one thing should be made clear: It is not feasible in this article to discuss the entire spectrum of literature on nations and nationalism adequately, neither this is my aim. My aim in this section is to sketch out some major approaches to the study of this subject and illustrate why and how a theoretical approach beyond *groupism* would serve the objectives of this case-study more efficiently.

In principle, the proponents of primordialism perceive contemporary nations as products of social and political processes that occurred during the modern era. This is a position with a wide appeal among specialists in the field of nationalism (Armstrong 1982). At the same time, though, primordialists attach a high importance to the persistence of ethnic heritages and traditions. They also seek to locate the long-term impact of ethnic heritages and traditions within the nation-building process(-es). Primordialists such as John Armstrong and Anthony D. Smith have underlined the necessity of ethnic roots for the subsequent development of national identity<sup>2</sup>. For primordialists, nationalism as *ideology* is no older than the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Nationalism as *identity*, however, goes a long way back in history. This, in the primordialists' view, becomes manifest in the emphasis added to ethno-cultural myths in all nationalist movements and other aspects of nationalist discourse. These are usually the myths of the *core* ethnic group around which the nation-building process has taken place (e.g. Greeks in Greece, Hungarians in Hungary, etc.) In Anthony D. Smith's words, ethno-cultural myths serve the following purposes:

1. *They link past to present (or future) and act as models;*
2. *They possess external references of comparison, even implicitly;*
3. *They designate a space and time for action, a territorial program;*
4. *They contain impulses for collective action, mobilizing people;*
5. *They are developmental, assuming the possibility of change;*
6. *They are partly voluntaristic, in that successive generations may add to the heritage and even regenerate themselves* (Smith 2000: 82-83).

For primordialists, the appropriation of ethno-cultural myths and their incorporation into nationalist discourse is the result of a process orchestrated by the nationalist intelligentsias. According to Anthony D. Smith, the nationalist

intellectuals play a pivotal part in incorporating ethno-cultural myths to political reality (Smith 1991: 64; Smith 1989: 356). Through the employment of certain images and phrases (e.g. *motherland/homeland* or *brothers*), ethno-cultural myths aim at forging a subconscious bond of integrity within a given nation. By locating the present in the context of the past of the nation, standardized cultural myths interpret social changes and collective aspirations in a way that satisfies the drive for meaning. Therefore, for Anthony D. Smith and the majority of primordialists, the modern nation can be summarized as follows: 'a named human population sharing a historical territory, *common myths and historical memories*, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all its members' (Smith 1999: 11).

The modernist perspectives on nations and nationalism are distinctively different. As a matter of fact, the modernist school is internally divided into several sub-branches (Gorski 2000: 1431-1432). In this section, I will focus on modernist approaches that deal with the *content* of nationalism. A good example is Eric Hobsbawm's work on this subject (Hobsbawm 1990; 1983). Hobsbawm and other modernists acknowledge the importance of ethno-cultural myths and other such symbolic material in the construction of national identities. Nevertheless, the major qualitative difference between theorists such as Eric Hobsbawm and the primordialists lies in the following: The former view the emergence of nations and nationalism as the outcome of socio-political processes that can take place only under specific material circumstances and in specific historical eras (namely, modernity).

Hobsbawm, in particular, develops an instrumentalist theory of nationalism according to which national traditions are essentially *constructed* and generated by political elites in order to serve their interests and aims. In his contribution to the work *The Invention of Tradition* and in his study *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Hobsbawm focuses extensively on the locus of ethnic heritages and cultural myths inside the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-building processes. The author deconstructs these heritages or myths and disputes the assertion that they persist in a non-malleable form through the ages and from one generation to another. What Hobsbawm demonstrates in both his works is that ethnic heritages and myths have been largely adapted, transformed (even created) and, ultimately, standardized in more recent eras with the aim to serve certain political objectives. In other words, much of the subjective content of national identity is the outcome of sophisticated social engineering. The underlying motivation of this invention of tradition lies precisely in serving the political and economic interests of ruling elites. In a relatively similar vein, Ernest Gellner contends that the construction of uniform national cultures, during the same era, was triggered by the industrial state's and the capitalist elites' demands for mobile and culturally standardized

<sup>2</sup> As far as John Armstrong is concerned, see: John, Introduction.

populations that could be transferred according to economic needs (Gellner 1983; 1984: 1-19, 34-46).

My main argument in this article is that the functions of ethnicity and nationalism in Vojvodina should be understood in terms of a continuous process orchestrated by interest groups. Therefore, I tend to be more positively inclined towards the modernist and instrumentalist side of the debate. Nevertheless, there exist certain problems with modernist approaches such those already outlined: **a.** they are too 'group-centred'; **b.** they are not instrumentalist enough in order to outline efficiently how ethnic conflict occurs within different environments. In the case of post-Revolutionary France, for instance, the emergence of politicized minority identities (e.g. Bretons, Corsicans) can be interpreted as a reaction to the industrialization and cultural homogenization processes described by Gellner. This interpretative framework, however, does not seem to be very helpful in the cases of Central and Southeast European states where the formation of minority identities was linked to the dissolution of the old imperial states.

In order to reach an essential understanding of the politics of ethnicity in Vojvodina some other kind of approach is required: an approach that acknowledges the importance of ethnicity-engineering for serving political interests but, at the same time, is set beyond *groupism*. By *groupism*, I mean the tendency to view ethnic groups as internally homogeneous and externally bounded, regard them as the leading protagonists of conflicts and treat them as the key units of social discourse. Of particular value to this article would be to rely on Rogers Brubaker's concept of 'ethnicity without groups' (Brubaker 2002: 163-189). Ethnic conflict is obviously the conflict between ethnic groups. But these groups should not be perceived as compact entities or 'collective individuals'. Instead, group cohesion should be viewed as a continuous process that in some cases may be brought to completion but in others fail. Of particular importance within this framework of interpretation is the notion of *categories*. For example, 'Serbian', 'Slovak' or 'Hungarian' (as ethnic definitions) constitute categories but not groups. In order for these categories to generate a high degree of solidarity among a given number of people, become external markers and, ultimately, culminate into group cohesion (or *groupness*), a whole process is required.

The engineers of this process are certain actors, most commonly organizations, who claim to speak in the name of an ethnic group. These organizations may range from paramilitary formations and terrorist organizations to political parties and cultural associations. Consequently, the strategies employed by these actors in order to achieve *groupness* differ considerably from each other. They may range from armed operations to political engagement within mainstream structures. The common denominator, however, is the attempt to make good use of the historical background, collective myths, as well as an array of cultural and psychological

catalysts, in order to cement group cohesion. An instrument for achieving this aim is violence. For instance, the attacks of the PKK and the KLA against Turkish and Serbian security forces, respectively, resulted in state reprisals against the ethnic Kurdish and Albanian populations. This cycle of violence generated insecurity and increased group solidarity among ethnic Kurds as well as Kosovo Albanians. This was also the case with regard to the Kosovo Serbs and the Turks resident in the Kurdish-populated areas (Ibid: 170-173).

At this point, attention should be paid to the cognitive dimension of ethnic conflict. In other words, what is it, specifically, that makes an armed or political conflict an *ethnic* one? As a matter of fact, the 'ethnic' quality is not intrinsic to ethnic conflict. It is up to organizations and a variety of individuals (e.g. government officials, journalists and others) to frame and, ultimately, constitute a conflict as ethnic. Framing an incident as a 'pogrom' or a 'riot' is not just a matter of external interpretation but an act of definition that can have important consequences (Brubaker – Loveman – Stamatov 2004: 37, 47). The more an organization succeeds in constituting a conflict as ethnic or interpreting a governmental decision as detrimental to the group that this organization claims to represent, the more it succeeds in forging cohesion within the group. This success acquires a higher significance if the organization manages to internationalize its standpoints. For example, throughout the early '90s, the primary concern of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania was to portray certain policies of the Ceausescu era not as violations of civic rights but as a campaign of cultural genocide against ethnic Hungarians. This successful lobbying not only put the Hungarian minority behind the party's platform; it also made a number of Western political analysts and NGOs sympathetic to the party's line. In the following sections I will demonstrate how this interpretative framework beyond *groupism* can be applicable in sketching out the ways that ethnicity operates in Vojvodina.

### **'Ethnicity without Groups' at Work: The Case of Vojvodina**

Having introduced the theoretical framework, I can now proceed to the empirical discussion of the relations between Serbs and ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina. This will cover the period from the early '90s until present day, including an account of the recent spate of 'ethnic incidents' in the province. In order to illustrate more aptly that instances of group cohesion (or *groupness*) in present-day Vojvodina have been the outcome of certain processes and not an essential condition, I structured the empirical discussion according to a retrospective pattern. First, I will assess the underlying causes behind the relatively high frequency of *groupness* in Vojvodina, during the first half of the '90s. Then, I will demonstrate how the persistence of Vojvodinian regional identity as a trans-ethnic

substratum has functioned as an effective catalyst for the regulation of high levels of group cohesion. Lastly, I will assess the cognitive dimension of the 'ethnic incidents' that have been witnessed in Vojvodina over the last few years.

The empirical sources that will be used in the following subsections belong to three categories: **a.** legal and constitutional documents; **b.** party documents; **c.** public surveys and opinion polls. This material was accumulated in a series of fieldtrip visits to Vojvodina that took place between 2001 and 2006. In the course of these visits, I had the opportunity to carry out: **a.** archive research in academic and other research institutions; **b.** semi-structured interviews with local political representatives, academics, journalists and individuals employed at the NGO sector. Setting in context how the legislative framework can produce and affect ethnic minority construction is in firm accordance with Rogers Brubaker's reflexive approach to ethnicity. The data derived from opinion polls and public surveys will help clarify how institutional provisions and elite-level politics can shape grass-roots perceptions of ethnic identity.

### ***The first half of the '90s: A high frequency of groupness***

The inauguration of the new Serbian Constitution (28 September 1990) was a watershed for Vojvodina and Serbia as a whole. As far as the two autonomous provinces (i.e. Vojvodina and Kosovo) were concerned, they were stripped of their legislative and judicial competencies. From that point onwards, the main competencies of the Vojvodinian and Kosovan assemblies would be to appoint executives to the local government and enact sub-legal acts of a provincial jurisdiction, always in accordance with republican legislation<sup>3</sup>. This inflicted a blow on legal provisions for ethnic minorities. With specific regard to minority education in Vojvodina, it should be reminded that before 1990 the Vojvodinian Constitution enabled the province to independently enact legal statutes, thus regulating educational matters within its territory. Article 4 of the Vojvodinian Constitution declared that 'each nation and nationality shall be guaranteed the right to develop and express freely its national characteristics, language, culture, historical and other features; to set up organizations for this purpose and enjoy all constitutionally defined rights'.<sup>4</sup> With the adoption of the new Serbian Constitution, all this was brought to an end. The period that followed the termination of Vojvodinian autonomy saw a state of polarization between the new Serbian elites and the ethnic Hungarian parties. Therefore in this case, as in many

<sup>3</sup> On this issue see the Articles 109-112 and 125 of the 1990 Serbian Constitution in 'Ustav Republike Srbije', *Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije*, broj 1/90.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'nations' ('narodi') referred to the 6 officially recognised South Slav peoples, while the term 'nationalities' ('narodnosti') to the ethnic minorities with a 'national homeland' outside the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. For more on this issue see SAP Vojvodina, Ustav Socijalističke Autonomne Pokrajine Vojvodine, Savremena Administracija: Belgrade (1974).

others, the chief protagonists have been organizations and not ethnic groups as uniform collectivities.

The new Serbian government formally endorsed minority rights and acknowledged Vojvodina's multiethnic character. The rights of the ethnic minorities in the Republic of Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (consisting of Serbia and Montenegro) were to be regulated by a variety of legal documents. Certain provisions were included in the Yugoslav as well as the Serbian Constitution. Nevertheless, as long as neither the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia nor its component republics had a special law on ethnic minorities, the constitutional rights of ethnic minorities were also codified in republican legal statutes. From a theoretical perspective, the aforementioned provisions were compatible with the international standards on minority rights. In this text, particular reference will be made to the guidelines of the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, issued by the Council of Europe<sup>5</sup>. Articles 46 and 32 of the Yugoslav and the Serbian Constitution respectively, as well as the provisions of the Serbian statutes on education the media and radio-television<sup>6</sup>, were fully consistent with Articles 12, 14 and 9 (paragraph 3) of the convention. Moreover, Article 48 of the Yugoslav Constitution was compatible with Article 17 (paragraph 1) of the convention. This is also the case with Articles 15 and 8 of the Yugoslav and the Serbian Constitution respectively, as well as with the Law on Official Languages and Alphabets<sup>7</sup>, which were consistent with the convention's Article 11 (paragraphs 2, 3). On the other hand, Article 77 of the Yugoslav Constitution went a step beyond the convention itself. In fact, Article 13 (paragraph 2) of the convention does not oblige the state's agencies to finance projects undertaken by national minorities. To all these might be added that Articles 55 and 44 of the Yugoslav and the Serbian Constitution respectively (i.e. on the prohibition of the dissemination of national, racial and religious intolerance and hatred) read compatible with Article 6 (paragraph 2) of the convention, when viewed within the context of ethnic relations.

In practice, however, the regime proceeded in 'nationalizing' policies. When used inside a multiethnic context, this term stresses a-yet not completed-process

<sup>5</sup> For some further information see Council of Europe Publishing House, *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, COE: Strasbourg (1994).

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the Serbian statutes regulating education see: a. The Law on Elementary Schools ('Zakon o osnovnoj školi', *Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije*, 50/1992); b. The Law on Secondary Schools ('Zakon o srednjoj školi', *Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije*, 50/1992); c. The Law on High Schools ('Zakon o visokom školstvu', *Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije*, 50/1992); d. The Law on Universities ('Zakon o univerzitetu', *Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije*, 54/1992). On the Serbian statutes regulating public information in minority languages see: a. the Law on Radio-Television ('Zakon o radio-televiziji', *Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije*, 1991/48); b. the Law on Media ('Zakon o informisanju', *Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije*, 1991/19).

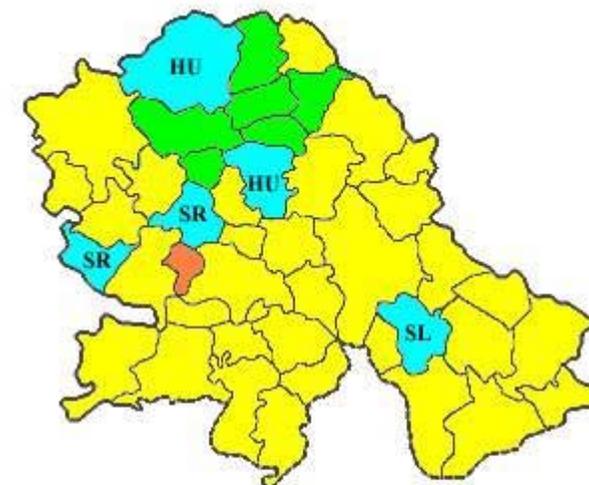
<sup>7</sup> On the Serbian statute regulating the official use of languages and scripts see 'Zakon o službenoj upotrebi jezika i pisama', in *Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije*, 45/91.

that aims at rendering the titular nation within a state dominant in every field of society. According to Rogers Brubaker, a 'nationalizing state' is that where '...the dominant elites promote (to varying degrees) the language, culture, economic flourishing and political hegemony of the nominally state bearing nation'<sup>8</sup>. In a heterogeneous region such as Vojvodina, the subtle strategy employed towards the achievement of this objective was consistent with the declarations of Slobodan Milošević's 'anti-bureaucratic revolution' (1988/89). Within the specific context of Vojvodina, the nationalizing dimension became manifest through irregularities in the implementation of the minority legislation, as well as alleged cases of discrimination against ethnic minorities at the employment sector. With regard to the former aspect, most federal provisions for national minorities, with the exception of those on the prevention of ethnic hatred and the right to public information in minority languages, were not included in the Serbian Constitution or any other republican legal document. This element acquires a key significance bearing in mind Article 6 of the Yugoslav Constitution and its authorization of the Serbian republic for the regulation of a variety of issues, pertaining to its jurisdiction, by the Serbian Constitution.

Therefore, there always remained an implication that certain federal provisions on national minorities might not be implemented to the proper extent. A good example, regarding the discrepancy between the federal and the republican provisions, was the field of minority education. For instance, although Article 47 of the Yugoslav Constitution (1992) granted national minorities the right to establish private educational institutions, Serbian legal acts on education rendered the establishment of private minority schools almost impossible. As a matter of fact, Article 12, in both the elementary and secondary education laws, limited the scope of private minority schools to music or artistic curricula, thus rendering the establishment of minority educational institutions with a general teaching profile non-authorized (Korhecz 1998: 5). Indeed, a decline in the number of students attending classes in minority languages in Vojvodina would be observed during the '90s (Ibid: 6-8; Samardžić 1998: 47-70). Nevertheless, it should be born in mind that this decline was also the outcome of combined catalysts such as: **a.** the process of 'conscious assimilation' among the minorities themselves; **b.** the lack of the adequate training for teachers wishing to be employed in minority education (Petsinis 2003: 1-37). As far as employment policies were concerned, there exists evidence that throughout the past decade, Serbs enjoyed relative advantages at various institutions. For example, by 1998, not a single president of a law court throughout Vojvodina was Hungarian (with the exception of the public prosecutor

in the municipality of Senta). At the same time, the employment of individuals coming from minority backgrounds at the police and the security forces was rather low (Korhecz 1998: 22-23; United Nations... 1996: 17). The new employment policies were not welcomed by the minorities in the province.

Map 2



Ethnic map of Vojvodina according to 2002 census

- Serb majority
- Hungarian majority
- Slovak majority
- Mixed population

Relative majority:  
SR - Serb, HU - Hungarian, SL - Slovak

The most vocal opposition was coordinated by the Vojvodinian Hungarian elites. In the beginning, the ethnic Hungarians rallied around the Democratic Union of Vojvodinian Hungarians-VMDK (established in April 1990). Later, in 1994, a group of dissidents left the party. This splinter group soon evolved into the Alliance of Hungarians in Vojvodina-VMSZ. Both parties opted, and still opt, for a tripartite concept of autonomy for Vojvodina's Hungarians. This consists of: **a.** personal autonomy; **b.** territorial autonomy; **c.** local self-administration (VMDK 1992; VMSZ 1996). The first notion addresses the fields of culture, education and public information with the aim to protect the ethno-cultural, linguistic and religious identity of the minority. Territorial autonomy refers to the self-government of certain municipalities in Northern Vojvodina, where the Hungarian concentration is particularly dense (namely, the municipalities of Ada, Bačka

<sup>8</sup> On this issue, see Rogers Brubaker, 'National Minorities, Nationalizing States and External Homelands in the New Europe', in *Daedalus*, Vol. 124, No. 2, Spring 1995, p 109.

Topola, Bečej, Čoka, Kanjiza, Mali Idoš, Subotica, Kneževac and Senta-Map 2). This would involve the merger of these municipalities into a Hungarian autonomous region; a 'special status' entity with a separate management. Finally, local self-administration should enable borderline communities with a predominantly Hungarian population to enter into cooperation with self-administrative bodies in Hungary.

Empirical surveys and other sources witness a high intensity of *groupness* in the first half of the '90s. At this point, it might be interesting to make a reference to a survey carried out by the sociologists Vladimir Ilić and Slobodan Cvejić in the mid-'90s<sup>9</sup> (Ilić – Cvejić 1997: 51). The results of this survey demonstrated a tendency towards national introversion on the Serbian respondents' part (Table 2). Serbian fears over their republic's integrity, as well as their adherence to national solidarity, were indirectly expressed through the high degree of admiration towards figures associated with: **a.** the Serbian ethnogenesis (e.g. Saint Sava); **b.** the 19<sup>th</sup> century national awakening (e.g. Vuk Karadžić); **c.** the unification of the Serbian lands (e.g. King Petar I Karađorđević) (Ilić – Cvejić 1997: 102). Nevertheless, a crucial detail should be set in context: With specific regard to Vojvodinian Serbs, particular attention should be paid to the impact of external catalysts. The most important of them were: **a.** the contemporary developments in the other parts of the former Yugoslavia (most notably the fall of the self-proclaimed 'Serbian Republic of Krajina' in Croatia-summer 1995); **b.** the gradual radicalization of the Albanians in Kosovo; **c.** Vojvodina's geographic proximity to the war-zone of Eastern Slavonia. Throughout the first half of the '90s, the moral obligation to support the 'struggle of the Serbian kin outside the motherland' formed central part of the oratory of the major Serbian parties. On the other hand, certain circles within the Serbian intelligentsia would elaborate highly romantic interpretations of the history of the Serbian nation, in terms of images emanating from the symbolism of national myths. This was the case, for instance, with the renewed emphasis attached on Kosovo as the symbolic capital of Serbdom and a master-symbol of the new wave of Serbian nationalism. Meanwhile, the economic crisis persisted. These combined factors roused nationalistic sentiments, deepened the Vojvodinian Serbs' mistrust of 'others' and resulted in 'collective monism'. This became manifest through instances of stress on group homogeneity as well as introversion and mistrust towards specific minorities (ethnic Croats and Hungarians in particular). In the long term, this would lead to the temporary segmentation of Vojvodinian society along ethnic lines.

<sup>9</sup> This survey, titled Nacionalizam u Vojvodini ('Nationalism in Vojvodina'), was carried out in summer 1995 and involved 1,100 respondents mainly of Serbian, Hungarian, Slovak and Romanian nationality all over Vojvodina.

The responses by the Hungarian sample, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a group reaction to the 'nationalizing' process. This reaction seems to have triggered a counter-nationalistic attitude and indications of mistrust directed against the dominant nationality, the Serbs. When viewed through the spectrum of Brubaker's triadic nexus concept, the allegedly marginalized minority's reaction to the 'nationalizing' policies is to adopt an equally homogenizing attitude within itself. Indeed, the Vojvodinian Hungarian opinion-formers (i.e. intellectuals and politically active individuals), questioned by Ilić and Cvejić, avoided to stress any sort of internal fragmentation among Hungarians (e.g. political, socioeconomic or territorial). Instead, they tried to present their group as a homogeneous one, especially as far as its grievances were concerned (Table 2). It might be interesting to add that, in a somewhat similar fashion to their Serbian counterparts, the Hungarian respondents demonstrated a high admiration for political figures who defended the national rights of the Hungarians in the past (e.g. Lajos Kossuth, Sandor Petöfy) and the present (e.g. the party leaders Jozsef Kasas and Andras Agoston at the Vojvodinian micro-level). The main part in coordinating the group homogenization process within the Hungarian minority was carried out by the VMDK and VMSZ local officials.

In all of this, an additional factor that should be taken into consideration is the role of what Brubaker terms the 'external homeland'. According to the author, nationalism in multiethnic societies is often a dynamic interaction among the 'nationalizing state', the national minority (or minorities) living in that state and the minority's (or the minorities') external national homeland. Each of these actors is not a static entity but a '...variably configured and continuously contested political field' (Brubaker 1995: 112). The interaction among these actors depends upon the relations and balances within each of them. Within this framework, the minorities' frequent response to the policies of the 'nationalizing state' is to push for more cultural or territorial autonomy and resist actual or perceived policies of discrimination. The external homeland's role is to monitor the situation of their co-ethnics in the state in question, protest alleged violations of their rights and assert the right, even the obligation, to defend their interests. Brubaker's matrix seems valid in the case of Vojvodina's Hungarians. The regime's nationalizing policies swiftly prompted the Hungarian minority's elites to demand further territorial and cultural autonomy. As for Hungary's synchronized reaction, this became manifest through a variety of statements by the then Conservative government in Budapest on the alleged discrimination against the Hungarian minorities in Vojvodina and elsewhere in Central Eastern Europe. Indeed, the Hungarian Conservatives' campaign for the rights of ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring states further contributed to the tension over the

'Hungarian question' in Vojvodina and elsewhere in Central Eastern Europe (e.g. Transylvania) over the previous decade<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Vojvodinian regional identity: A regulatory catalyst***

At this point, however, an important observation should be made: Parallel to the promotion of collective monism (or *groupness*) at the political elite level, there co-existed a state of 'cultural heterophony' at the social micro-level. A bi-cultural, or more precisely intercultural, social practice has been the case in Vojvodina. This becomes obvious in the results of various public surveys that were carried out in the early and mid-'90s. According to these surveys, the majority of Vojvodinians did not seem to put high importance on the ethnicity of their partner or the ethnic composition of their workplace (Ilić – Cvejić 1993: 538-540). Throughout the same period, nationalistic orientation remained lower in Vojvodina than in Serbia proper. In addition to these, the Vojvodinian respondents demonstrated a more cosmopolitan attitude towards other nationalities in comparison to the respondents from Central Serbia<sup>11</sup>.

Cultural heterophony, at the grass roots level, is the by-product of Vojvodina's longstanding tradition of multicultural cohabitation. This heterophony became institutionalized during the Communist era and was reinforced through the contraction of ethnically mixed marriages, especially in the '70s and '80s. Even until nowadays, the concept of *Vojvođanski Identitet* (or 'Vojvodinian regional identity') provides a powerful umbrella that transgresses ethnic boundaries. This has encouraged a more positive outlook on the legitimate demands of minority groups, as far as institutional representation and the preservation of their cultural identity are concerned (Tables 3 and 4). In most cases, catalysts such as the workplace or the neighbourhood still seem to take precedence over ethno-cultural or religious cleavages. Furthermore, in multiethnic rural communities the locals often celebrate religious and other '*seoške*' ('village') feasts together, regardless of their ethnic affiliation and regardless of whether the religious festivities are Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic. All these hint that in Vojvodina there exist ethnic group cultures but beside these cultures there exists a common substratum which becomes manifest in the form of Vojvodinian regional identity. Regional identity establishes common human values, developed as significant or even existential by diverse ethnic groups. On such an occasion, the part played by similar living conditions, historic links and mutual reliance should be taken into

<sup>10</sup> An early sign of this campaign was Prime Minister Jozsef Antall's awkward statement that he was 'the spiritual leader of 15,000,000 Hungarians' (March 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Nationalist orientation was evident among 21.6 percent of the Vojvodinian respondents (Central Serbian respondents: 41.7 percent) whereas 36.4 percent of the same sample demonstrated a rather cosmopolitan attitude towards other nationalities (Central Serbian sample: 18.0 percent). On this issue see Zagorka Golubović et al, *Društveni karakter i društvene promene u svetlu nacionalnih sukoba*, Filip Višnjić: Belgrade (1995), pp 159, 219, 248, 252.

account. This persistence of cultural heterophony would cause the high propensity towards *groupness* among Vojvodinian Serbs to progressively decline, despite the endeavour of certain actors among the Serbian elites to politicize ethnicity.

Similar attitudes would be observed among ethnic Hungarians as well. Although the majority of Vojvodina's Hungarians still rally around the ethnic Hungarian parties, this does not mean that they are perfectly aware of these parties' programmes or that they fully agree with their agendas. Recent opinion polls demonstrate that a good percentage of Vojvodinian Hungarians do not offer their assent to the ethnic Hungarian parties' proposals for the establishment of a Hungarian autonomous region in Northern Vojvodina (Table 5). Therefore, to take at face value nationalist rhetoric or the claims of nationalist organizations to speak for the groups that they claim to represent is to overlook the daily contexts in which ethno-cultural categories obtain meaning and the processes through which ethnicity actually operates in everyday life. In addition to these, ethnic networks in Vojvodina can reproduce themselves without the necessary politicization of ethnicity or the high frequency of *groupness*. Some empirical evidence in support of this argument can be derived from the cases of minorities which are not organized around political structures. Two appropriate examples are the Vojvodinian Slovaks and Ruthenes. Both communities are shrinking in terms of their demographic strength and live in predominantly rural settlements. Apart from these, no ethnic Slovak or Ruthene parties have ever functioned in Vojvodina and the younger generation of both communities has been keen on moving to Belgrade or emigrating abroad (e.g. Slovakia, the Ukraine) for better employment prospects. Nevertheless, in spite of all these, ethnic networking within these communities remains a living reality through: **a.** a relatively high degree of ethnic endogamy (Table 2-on Slovaks); **b.** the operation of channels of internal sponsorship within both communities, as far as business entrepreneurship is concerned.

### ***'Ethnic incidents': The cognitive dimension***

At this point, I will switch my focus on certain developments that have occurred in post-Milošević Vojvodina. Between 2003 and 2004, a spate of incidences often categorized as 'ethnic' took place in Vojvodina. These incidences ranged from hate graffiti to acts of vandalism directed against churches or graveyards (Gruhonjić 2003). In most cases, however, they involved violent clashes between individuals or groups of youths belonging to different ethnic affiliations (most commonly, Serbs and Hungarians or Croats).

On this occasion, the impact of external catalysts comes to the fore again. As a matter of fact, the recent wars for secession in the former Yugoslavia were largely conditioned by the concept that internal political stability and socioeconomic

progress equal national homogeneity (i.e. the so-called 'Slovenian model'<sup>12</sup>). Hence the renewed and intense drive towards national homogenization in the breakaway Yugoslav republics, which, in the ethnic wars of the '90s, often escalated to violent excesses (e.g. the ethnic cleansing of Croatia's Serbs in the course of the 'Operation Storm'; the attempts by all warring factions in Bosnia-Herzegovina to cleanse the territories under their control). The equation of internal stability with national homogeneity soon found acceptance among international policy makers as well. This was reflected, for instance, in the constitutional structuring of Bosnia-Herzegovina along the lines of ethnic partition by the Dayton Agreement. With specific focus on the Serbs, they have also been target of the aggressive drive towards national homogenization in the other parts of the former Yugoslavia and this has certainly inflicted a wound on the Serbian collective subconscious, the Vojvodinian Serbs being no exception. With respect to the Serbs of Vojvodina, the presence of a considerable number of Serb refugees in the province serves as a constant reminder of what many Vojvodinians perceive as the 'historical injustice' against the Serbian nation. This has not solely been the case with the 1995 'Operation Storm' or the developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina over the '90s but also the 'silent' ethnic cleansing of the Serbs from Kosovo since 1999. Therefore, a greater percentage of Serbs in Vojvodina and Serbia as a whole have come to adhere to the principle 'internal stability=national homogeneity', thus indirectly condoning acts of ethnic intolerance. Despite the non-negligible significance of the external dimension, however, it was internal orchestration by domestic actors that played the key part.

A bar brawl between a Serbian and an ethnic Hungarian youth, in an ethnically-mixed town in Northern Vojvodina, might have as much or less to do with ethnic prejudices as with the random consequences of alcohol-infested behaviour. So, it is exactly at this point that we return to the cognitive dimension of ethnic conflict and the endeavour by specific agents to constitute certain actions and incidents as 'ethnically motivated'. In the case of Vojvodinian Hungarians, this project was undertaken by the two ethnic Hungarian parties. Both the VMDK and the VMSZ were quick on their feet to label these incidents as a well-orchestrated campaign with the aim to terrorize ethnic Hungarians. Both parties also tried to promote their case in international forums, such as the OSCE, though with little success. At the Vojvodinian micro-level, the VMDK and VMSZ officials informally declared a 'state of emergency' for the ethnic Hungarian community. Meanwhile, both parties tried to pose as the only agents with the ability to defend the Hungarian community's interests under these adverse

<sup>12</sup> Slovenia is the most developed of the ex-Yugoslav republics. It is also a state where ethnic minorities make up roughly 7 percent of the total population (2002 national census).

circumstances. At a first instance, this stance resulted in the deterioration of the relations between the two ethnic Hungarian parties and their regional partners among the Serbian mainstream parties (e.g. the Democratic Party-DS). Moreover, it was an additional catalyst that contributed to: **a.** the temporary intensification of ethnic solidarity among Vojvodinian Hungarians; **b.** an increase in ethnic segmentation in certain Vojvodinian towns with a predominantly Serbian and ethnic Hungarian population (e.g. Temerin and Stari Bečej in Bačka)<sup>13</sup>.

With regard to the Serbian majority, the key part was played by the Serbian Radical Party-SRS ('*Srpska Radikalna Stranka*'). This is a party with a strongly nationalist agenda and the main opposition party in Serbia at the moment<sup>14</sup>. Throughout the '90s, the SRS seriously questioned the loyalty of certain Vojvodinian minorities to the Serbian state. Nevertheless, the party's strategy has demonstrated qualitative differences in relation to each minority group. As far as the ethnic Croats are concerned, for instance, the Radical functionaries even demanded their mass expulsion from Vojvodina (e.g. early '90s). This, according to the party's leadership, might be a 'justified response' to instances of ethnic cleansing directed against Serbs in Eastern Slavonia<sup>15</sup>. In the case of ethnic Hungarians, however, the Vojvodinian Radical officials were careful enough to direct their accusations against the ethnic Hungarian parties specifically and not Vojvodinian Hungarians as a whole<sup>16</sup>. This serves as (if only) a rough indication that the SRS leadership was sceptical towards practices that might seriously jeopardise inter-group relations in the province and, ultimately, bring about little political gain for the party.

Between 2003 and 2004, the party leader, Tomislav Nikolić, and Vojvodinian Radical functionaries sought to gain political capital out of violent incidents in which the victims were Serbs and the perpetrators Hungarians or other 'ethnics'. Such occurrences were swiftly interpreted as the shape of things to come for Vojvodinian Serbs and placed within the broader framework of 'shrinkage of Serbdom', together with the expulsion of Serbs from the Croatian Krajina and the Serbian emigration out of Kosovo. This rhetoric obviously aimed at declaring a 'state of emergency' and increasing the party's mobilizing potential among the Serbian majority. The strategy of the Radicals found some appeal among the Serbian refugees from Bosnia and Croatia. This is a rather vulnerable segment of

<sup>13</sup> Interview with academic specialist in ethnic relations; University of Belgrade, 18 November 2005.

<sup>14</sup> It should be also born in mind that, over the last few years, the Radicals have had a rather successful performance in Vojvodina. This was the case, for instance, with the 2004 Serbian presidential elections. In the first round, Tomislav Nikolić managed to garner 32.7 percent of the vote to the 32.4 percent gained by his main rival, the Democrat Boris Tadić, in Vojvodina. On this issue see 'Predsednički Izbori 2004', at: <http://www.cesid.org>

<sup>15</sup> On this issue see Vojislav Sešelj's interview (SRS leader during the '90s) in Osmica, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with SRS functionary in Novi Sad; 1 April 2002.

Vojvodina's population, with a traumatic and easily manipulated collective memory. As a matter of fact, quite a few refugees had active involvement in the incidences earlier described (Ilić 2001). Nevertheless, not even on this occasion did the organizations involved manage to galvanize an overriding sense of groupness among either Serbs or Hungarians. According to reports by the Serbian government as well as external observers, the intensity of 'ethnic incidents' in Vojvodina seems to be in a phase of decline since late 2004. Moreover, according to the same reports, the underlying causes behind the incidents have more to do with the frustration of a considerable percentage of the Vojvodinian youth with the deteriorating standards of living rather than a single overriding distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Indeed, field research in the towns of Sombor, Kikinda, Novi Sad and Subotica has demonstrated that competition for employment has been the major underlying cause behind ethnic tensions at the regional and local micro-levels (Centre for Development... 2004: 1-6).

This issue requires some further elaboration. In the light of this socioeconomic antagonism, ethnic Serbian refugees perceive Vojvodinian Hungarians as the intruding 'other' in terms of ethno-cultural categorization. The refugees perceive Vojvodina, and by extension Serbia, as a safe haven from persecution where they can live together with the rest of their 'ethnic kin'. Therefore, from the refugees' perspective, their needs should be granted greater priority in comparison to those of ethnic minorities. For Vojvodinian Hungarians, on the contrary, the Serbian refugees are external intruders and usurpers of scarce employment opportunities and social benefits. However, what is of primary importance, at this point, is the fact that this is exactly how some Vojvodinian Serbs have viewed ethnic Serbian refugees as well. Since their very arrival in Vojvodina (early '90s), the refugees have frequently been target of negative stereotyping by local Serbs. Perhaps most important has been the resurfacing of other-regarding prejudices and group stereotypes which are associated with the social implications of the mountain and plain dichotomy. In other words, stereotypes which juxtapose the 'civilized and sophisticated Vojvodinians' to the 'primitive and backward highlanders from Bosnia and Krajina'. Such instances of negative stereotyping have often generated cleavages and obstructed the integration process of refugees into Vojvodinian society (Lazar – Marinković 2001: 179; Nikolić 1994: 202-203). It is not my aim to expand further on this issue, in this piece of work. However, this is one more indication which hints that the project to frame these violent incidents as primarily (or exclusively) ethnic has not taken into adequate consideration the significance of socioeconomic catalysts in generating cleavages.

## Conclusion

The case of Vojvodina is one more example which demonstrates that in order to comprehend the function of politicized ethnicity it would be helpful to begin not with 'Serbs' and 'Hungarians', as bounded groups, but with 'Serbs' and 'Hungarians' as malleable categories. In this case, we focus on processes and relations among all

factors involved rather than substances. In Vojvodina, the main factors involved are the objectives of interest groups and the trans-ethnic substratum of Vojvodinian regional identity. The first half of the '90s saw a high intensity of group cohesion among the Serbian majority as well as the ethnic Hungarians. This development was conditioned by: a. the new legal and constitutional realities in Serbia (internal catalysts); b. the impact of the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, as well as the rising tensions in Kosovo (external catalysts). The pivotal part in coordinating the group cohesion process among the Serbian majority was carried out by local representatives of the main Serbian parties as well as certain circles within the Serbian intelligentsia. These actors managed to generate a sense of groupness among Vojvodinian Serbs through the combined emphasis on: a. ethno-cultural myths; b. the moral obligation to support the 'struggle of the Serbian kin outside the motherland'; c. the need to effectively re-incorporate Vojvodina into the rest of Serbia. As far as the ethnic Hungarians were concerned, this endeavour was undertaken by the Vojvodinian Hungarian elites. Throughout the first half of the '90s, these actors managed to galvanize a sense of groupness among the Hungarian community by: a. avidly protesting against the new legal and constitutional provisions for national minorities; b. demanding ethno-territorial autonomy for Vojvodinian Hungarians; c. operating as a bridge between Vojvodina's Hungarian community and Budapest.

Nevertheless, parallel to the promotion of collective monism (or groupness) at the elite level, there co-existed a longstanding state of cultural heterophony at the social micro-level: The concept of Vojvodanski Identitet (or 'Vojvodinian identity') has operated as a common substratum that transgresses ethnic cleavages. Regional identity establishes common values, perceived as significant (or existential) by a variety of groups. This persistence of cultural heterophony would regulate the high intensity of groupness among Vojvodinian Serbs and Hungarians alike, despite the endeavour of certain interest groups to politicize ethnicity. This means that to take at face value nationalistic oratory is to overlook the processes through which ethnicity operates in everyday life as well as the particularities of regional/local settings. Similarly, the endeavour by the same interest groups to 'ethnicize' certain violent incidents that occurred between 2003 and 2004 signified an additional weakness in their project: the underestimation of the significance that socioeconomic factors can have in generating cleavages and tensions. This critical overview of the pattern of relations between Vojvodinian Serbs and Hungarians provides some additional empirical evidence with regard to why some processes can culminate into groupness (fully or temporarily) while others fail. This, in turn, calls for a more critical attitude towards the claims of political organizations to represent an entire community, as well as their attempts to constitute certain incidents or courses of action as 'ethnic'.

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