

Hungarian American Coalition Calls for Autonomy for Vojvodina
Memorandum Urges Restoration of Vojvodina's Autonomy
To Ensure Democracy and Durable Peace

Published on: Hungarian American Coalitions site
Url: <http://www.hacusa.org/press/990730.html>

In a Memorandum issued July 30, the Hungarian American Coalition called upon the United States government and its NATO allies to accept the autonomy aspirations of the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, a formerly autonomous province of Yugoslavia.

Vojvodina, whose self-governing provincial institutions were abolished by Milosevic in 1988, is home to most of the 350,000 ethnic Hungarians in present-day Yugoslavia. According to background information accompanying the Memorandum, the Milosevic government continues "an aggressive policy of Serbianization" by placing Serb refugees in the most important Hungarian settlements. "The present danger is that the war in Kosovo, and its aftermath will again provide an opportunity for the final expulsion of the remaining 350,000 Hungarians."

The Hungarian American Coalition calls for the reestablishment of Vojvodina's self-governing institutions. In view of recent demographic changes, however, the Coalition declares that "the autonomy concept must be revised to also apply separately to the northern one-fourth of the province." This region, where Hungarians constitute a clear plurality, is home to most of present-day Yugoslavia's Hungarian minority.

The Coalition calls upon the new Yugoslavian government to "desist from policies of Serbianization, including the settlement of more Serb refugees in Hungarian or other minority inhabited regions" and "keep Serb paramilitary units out of these areas," in addition to guaranteeing the security and human rights of all inhabitants.

Finally, in the event that Yugoslavia fails to observe these requirements, the Coalition Memorandum states, "then the northern one-fourth of Vojvodina should be detached from Serbia as a preventive territorial adjustment," in the context of an internationally supervised plebiscite. "It should become a generally accepted principle that a state abdicates its rights to govern the territorial settlements of its minority peoples if it threatens these peoples with extinction" as an ethnic collectivity.

Memorandum on the Situation of Hungarians in Yugoslavia:
Restore Autonomy in Vojvodina to Ensure Democracy and Durable Peace

The United States and its NATO allies are committed to peace and stability in Central and South Eastern Europe. It is in their common interest and in the long-term national interests of the individual members of their alliance to resolve the conflicts in this region and to encourage the adoption of democratic values, including the ideal of majority rule with minority rights. The prospects for achieving these alliance interests and commitments are directly linked to the realization of the autonomy aspirations of Hungarians in northern Vojvodina.

The airwar over Kosovo and over Yugoslavia, followed by NATO efforts to establish peace in the region, dramatically confronts the alliance with the limitations of the nation-state system which has been imposed on the region of East-Central and South Eastern Europe since the collapse of the multinational Ottoman and Czarist empires and the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. It incontrovertibly demonstrates the shortcomings of the "structure of peace" that was imposed on this part of the world following World War I and World War II. The break-

up of the Yugoslav Federation, Czechoslovakia and the USSR also indicate that the old order was flawed. Furthermore, as the ethno-national struggles throughout the former lands of Yugoslavia demonstrate, the process is not yet complete.

Now that Milosevic's Yugoslavia has been militarily defeated and NATO forces are making it possible for Albanian refugees to return to their homes in Kosovo, an opportunity exists to establish comprehensive region-wide peace and stability. However, to do this, the US and its allies must address the remaining conflict zones in the region, including the fate of Hungarians in Vojvodina and the fate of Muslims in the Sandjak region of Serbia. In the peacemaking and the peacekeeping process that should follow, policy-makers and implementers must address the outstanding problems so that the "one crisis at a time" approach does not jeopardize the gains made.

The aggressive nationalism of Milosevic and many other Serb leaders has been the major force behind the current confrontations. Although this is not new, but a legacy of the 19th and 20th centuries, it has become particularly acute under the current Yugoslav leadership. Milosevic has stoked the fires of ethnic hatred and a whole generation of followers have swallowed the Serb commitment to ethnic cleansing. This destabilization began when Tito's finely crafted balance between the different ethno-national communities was challenged by Milosevic's attack, first, on the autonomy of Vojvodina in 1988, and then his attack on the autonomy of Kosovo in 1989. It is only in response to this threat of a Great-Serb "nation-state", that Slovenia and Croatia seceded from the federation, soon to be followed by Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia as well. The Serb attempt to consolidate Yugoslavia under their control led first to the abortive war against Slovenia, then Croatia, and finally Bosnia-Herzegovina. While in the first two instances the Serbs came out as clear losers, in the latter case the verdict is not yet in, in spite of the Dayton Agreement. In the meantime the efforts to keep Kosovo and Montenegro within this losing enterprise have led to additional bloodshed and more and more "ethnic cleansing".

It is in this context that NATO could no longer afford to remain a passive bystander. The punitive air-strikes begun on March 24th, 1999 were the beginning of NATO's effort to stop the political destabilization of the region by targeting the military and general coercive capabilities of the Milosevic-Seselj Greater Serbia conspiracy.

While this NATO campaign has been justified by the need to defend the human rights of the Kosovo Albanians, the justification should also include that all people have a right to self-determination and self-defense if threatened by "ethnic cleansing," "colonization," abuse and harassment, and discrimination that limits or destroys their right or ability to preserve their cultural and historical identity. This is particularly true for the Hungarians in Vojvodina since they were transferred at the end of 1918 to a Greater Serbia (i.e., Yugoslavia) in direct violation of the democratic principle of self-determination. (No referendum or plebiscite was held!). It should become a generally accepted principle that a state abdicates its right to govern the territorial settlements of its minority peoples if it threatens these peoples with extinction as a religious community, culture, linguistic group, or ethnic collectivity.

Yugoslavia's defeat provides the opportunity to re-establish the self-governing institutions that existed before Milosevic abolished the autonomous existence of Vojvodina and Kosovo. However, they now need to be re-established in a different way, taking into account the political and demographic changes that have taken place during the past 10-11 years.

At a minimum the Hungarian American Coalition calls for an acceptance of the autonomy aspirations of the Hungarians in the Vojvodina. It is no longer enough to grant autonomy to the Vojvodina as a whole. During the past eleven years the region's demographic profile has been completely transformed, making the Serbs - through an aggressive colonization process - the overwhelming majority (64.3%) of the entire province. The autonomy concept must be

revised to also apply separately to the northern one-fourth of the province. Autonomy, local self-government must be granted to this sub-region.

We call your attention to this solution because, as the attached background study demonstrates, Serb-controlled Yugoslavia has a legacy of unmitigated oppressive policies against its Hungarian inhabitants - as against the Albanians. The peace concluding hostilities in the present war will provide an opportunity to keep the Serbs from continuing their abuse and will prevent them from attacking the Hungarians next and from spreading instability and conflict. It is therefore in NATO's and Hungary's long-term interests -- the one front-line NATO state in the region -- that the sacrifices of the victims of Yugoslav aggression and the efforts of NATO not be in vain. It is in the US's national interest to apply preventive medicine so that it can forestall having to intervene militarily a third time.

To protect the region against the continued expansion of the policies of ethnic cleansing, the region north of the Veliki canal (Nagy canal, formerly Ferenc canal) linking the Danube and Tisza (Tisa) rivers and the trans-Tisza region north of the Zlatica (Aranka) river should be given autonomy within Vojvodina. The borders of this region would include the area from Bezdán (Bezdan) on the Danube in the west to Bečej (Óbecse) on the Tisza in the east (See map 1). This region is the most densely populated Hungarian inhabited part of the Vojvodina and includes most of the 350,000 Hungarians of present-day Yugoslavia. The Hungarian population constitutes a clear plurality in this region. The Bunjevci (Bunyevac), Serb and Croat populations of this northern region are all minorities. In the case of the Serbs in this region, most were brought in during the present century as colonists (dobrovoltsi) following W.W. I, as colonists taking over Swabian German settlements following W.W. II, and as Krajina "refugee colonists" following the Dayton accord of 1995. The major settlements in this region include Subotica (Szabadka), Sombor (Zombor), Bajmok, Bečej (Óbecse), Senta (Zenta), Bačka Topola (Bácskatopolya), Srbobran (Szenttamás), Eőka (Csőka), and Novi Kneževac (Törökkanizsa).

Within this region as well as throughout Yugoslavia, the Yugoslavian government must guarantee the security, human rights and citizenship rights of all inhabitants, including the non-Serb peoples in Vojvodina. It must desist from policies of Serbianization, including the settlement of more Serb refugees in Hungarian or other minority inhabited regions. It must keep Serb paramilitary units out of these areas and punish all those, like Seselj and Arkan, who incite ethnic hatred, spread fear and intolerance, and engage in any other activities that threaten these historic minority communities.

Finally, in the event that Yugoslavia continues to deny internationally recognized obligations regarding the rights of its minorities -- including personal, cultural and local autonomy for Hungarians -- then the northern one-fourth of Vojvodina should be detached from Serbia as a preventive territorial adjustment. The latter should be legalized through an internationally supervised plebiscite which would determine the wishes of the inhabitants of the region.

Vojvodina: Backgrounder

Vojvodina is a region of East Central Europe that has been neglected in the news media and in public policy discussions. In spite of this neglect, events on the ground there have reflected many of the same problems and concerns as those, which led to the conflict in Kosovo, Bosnia, Croatia, and other parts of the former state of Yugoslavia. Consequently, the situation in Vojvodina carries the same potential danger as the ones which led to "ethnic cleansing" in these regions. However, the preventive intent of our proposed intervention requires that we review the developments that make this proposal necessary.

Vojvodina is rump Yugoslavia's northernmost province. It is located north of the Sava and Danube rivers and currently includes the regions of Bačka (Bácska), Banat (Bánság), and

Srem (Szerémség). This province is 21,506 sq. kilometers in size and has over 2.2 million inhabitants. (See Map A for its location and its 1991 "ethnic profile".) Prior to World War I this province was part of Hungary for most of its recorded 1,100 years of history, with an interruption of a little less than 200 years of Turkish occupation from 1526 to 1699/1718. That occupation, however, devastated the region and led to its total depopulation. Habsburg monarchs began to repopulate the region with German and Serb settlers, the latter providing the empire with its southern military border district from the 1690's onward. Hungarians also began to re-settle the region by the middle of the 1740's.

By the time of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy in 1918, the population of this region was the ethnically most diverse part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and perhaps of all of Europe. According to the 1910 census, the 1,320,000 inhabitants of the region included 30.2 percent Hungarians, 25.2 percent Serbs, 23 percent Swabian Germans, 10 percent other South Slavs (including Croats, Bunjevci, Sokci), and 10 percent others (Romanians, Slovaks, Ruthenians). (See Map B for the 1910 "ethnic profile" of Vojvodina.) It is very unlikely that this region would have become a part of Yugoslavia had Woodrow Wilson's principles of "self-determination" been respected. But the Serb-French military occupation at the end of World War I determined its fate for the rest of the 20th century. From 1920 (Treaty of Trianon) the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (renamed Yugoslavia after 1929) began an aggressive policy of Serbianization within this province by a systematic colonization of Serbs, expulsion of non-Serbs, and an aggressive cultural and educational program against non-Serbs, as well as discriminatory administrative, legal and economic policies that strengthened the position of the Serbs and weakened the position of the non-Serbs. These efforts can already be measured by the census results of 1931, according to which the Serbian share of the population grew to 37.8 percent. (See Map C for the Serb colonization of the interwar years.) World War II provided a second opportunity for ethnic cleansing, under the pretext of eliminating the guilty "collaborators" of Nazi Germany. The Swabian Germans were held collectively guilty and massacred in large numbers and expelled en masse during the autumn of 1944. They were replaced by Serbs and other South Slav colonists, mainly from the Krajina regions of Croatia and Montenegro. By 1948 the Serb proportion of the population grew to 50.4 percent while the Hungarian share declined to 26.1 percent and the Swabian-Germans did not even show up in the population enumerations.

These first two waves of "ethnic cleansing" did not receive publicity because Yugoslavia was a member of the Allied coalition that helped defeat Hitler. However, it is very disheartening, that this silence continued all the way to the present, and little or nothing has been said in the West about the third wave of "ethnic cleansing" that has just taken place in the 1990's.

According to the 1991 census 56.8 percent of the population was composed of Serbs in Vojvodina as against 16.9 percent of the Hungarians. Almost overnight, the wars in Croatia and Bosnia brought new waves of refugees to Vojvodina. Since the Dayton Accord was signed 257,739 refugees settled in Vojvodina. Of these 94 percent are Serbs. This has lowered the Hungarian proportion in the over all population to 12.9 percent, while it has increased the Serb ratio to 64.3 percent of the total population (which at the present time is estimated to be 2,213,000).

Vojvodina has been the favorite re-settlement location of the Serbian refugees. This is no accident; this is simply the result of the continuation of an aggressive policy of Serbianization. Of all the Serb refugees who have been resettled in rump Yugoslavia, 47 percent have been settled in the Vojvodina, 25 percent in Belgrade and its suburbs, 25 percent in the rest of Serbia, and 3 percent in Kosovo. Furthermore, of those who have settled in the Vojvodina, the overwhelming majority has indicated that they want to remain there. Only 8.8 percent have

said that they want to return to their former homes in Croatia or Bosnia-Herzegovina. (See Map D for the latest wave of Serb colonization.)

The Hungarians are the major targets of this long-term cleansing. In living memory, most Hungarian families have become the victims of this brutal policy, either directly or indirectly. During the concluding days of World War II, a rampage of murder and terror was carried out by Serb Partisan units along the Tisza river. Anywhere between 20,000 and 35,000 Hungarian men and boys were massacred from October to December 1944. This was done, ostensibly in retaliation for the execution of 3,300 Serbs and Communist activists by renegade officers of the Hungarian army of occupation in the winter of 1941-42. (See Map E for the comparison of Serb and Hungarian losses during W. W. II in Bačka.) The terror that swept through the region also led to the flight of 40-50,000 additional Hungarians across the border. This, in combination with the "guest worker" program of the Yugoslav government under Tito led to the reduction of the Hungarian population at the same time that the Serbs increased dramatically. In eighty years they have transformed this multi-ethnic region into a Serb dominated region.

The present danger is that the war in Kosovo, and its aftermath will again provide an opportunity for the final expulsion of the remaining 350,000 Hungarians. The overall pattern of the past eighty years, but particularly of the past eight years, has led to the consolidation of Serb dominance within the province.

While to the present Vojvodina has been spared the kind of ethnic cleansing that has ravaged Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, some disturbing instances of these brutal methods have surfaced in the central and western parts of the province as well as in the Muslim inhabited Sandjak region in the strategic area just east of Bosnia and Montenegro and north of Kosovo. Examples of ethnic cleansing and engineering can be found in both Croatia and Hungarian settlements in Vojvodina. The Croatian settlements that suffered this fate in the Srem and Bačka among others include Apatin, Indija (India), Hrtkovci (Herkóca), Sombor (Zombor), Sonta (Szonta), Kukujevcí, Gibarac, and Novi Slankamen (Szalánkemén). The two Hungarian settlements that were subjected to this process include the towns of Svilojevo (Szilágyi) and Kupusina (Bácskertes) both in the western Bačka. In these formerly compact Hungarian settlements of 1,321 and 2,500 inhabitants respectively, you now have a Krajina-Serb population living in the homes of evicted Hungarians. The fate of these towns foreshadows the prospects of the remaining Hungarian settlements. That this historically Hungarian region is not immune from the established pattern of Serb "ethnic engineering" is evident from the placement of additional Serb refugees in the most important Hungarian settlements during the past decade. Subotica received 6,401 Serbs, Temerin 3,444, Bečej 1,471, Palić 1,359 and Bačka Topola 1,200. In some settlements since 1996 the Hungarians lost their status as a majority, particularly Palić and Bečej, and the Serbs became a plurality of the population in Bajmok and Temerin. The immediate consequence of this imposed demographic change is the reduction of Hungarian educational and cultural opportunities in each one of these settlements.

Fortunately, the northern sector of Vojvodina is still inhabited predominantly by Hungarians and other minorities (Croats, Bunjevci). (See Table I and Figure I for the population profile of the "Hungarian Ethnic Block" in the northern Vojvodina.) Therefore an opportunity still remains to preserve its multi-ethnic character. However, this is only possible if Serb colonization and cleansing are brought to an end.