

Vojvodina: A Hungarian View

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CDeliso writes "With this article from László Szentesi Zúldi, a Hungarian journalist and foreign affairs adviser in Budapest, our readers are treated to the Hungarian view on current relations with Serbia. Formerly a reporter for Hungarian Television and Duna Television, Lószly is presently editor of Budapest's [Magyar Nemzet](#) newspaper.

Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia, is one of the most multi-ethnic regions in Europe. It is a land that has been home to more than twenty different ethnic groups for centuries. Vojvodina could become the symbol of tolerance and fellowship of men, but at present it is rather a sort of time bomb, having ramifications for the whole region.

*In September 1990, Serbia stripped Vojvodina of its autonomy. Previously, it was an autonomous province with considerable self-government authorities. Starting in 2003, tension between some Serbian groups and individuals of other ethnicities sharply increased, which has led to some violent incidents. At the moment some 300,000 **Hungarians** are living in Vojvodina, mostly in the northern part of the province. This means that they make up almost 15 percent of Vojvodina's two million-strong population.*

*Over the past few years, **Hungarians** have been targeted by extremist Serbian nationalists.*

*The story began in the early 1990s when up to 300,000 Serb refugees came from Bosnia, Croatia, and then Kosovo. The main problem is that these refugees do not believe in peaceful solutions between the local communities. [Outside analysts have also noted](#) the effect of such unhappy immigrants on the "Hungarian Kosovo." The incidents in question have included acts of vandalism against cemeteries, graffiti on Hungarian churches and schools, and death threats against individuals. Slogans like "death to **Hungarians**" and "**Hungarians** go to Hungary" cover walls in many towns of Vojvodina. In March, vandals desecrated a Catholic cemetery in Subotica, where Catholic **Hungarians** and Croats make up the majority.*

*However the problem goes far beyond slogans. Many politicians have received threatening phone calls, including Jyzsef Kasza, leader of the VMSZ (Federation of **Hungarians** in Vojvodina). Physical incidents have increased dramatically. Young Serbs have beaten up young Hungarian kids in many places. Minority girls have been publicly sexually molested by Serbs. The latter have provoked fights, in which minority youngsters in many instances have required hospital care. Some of these cases were reviewed in [a recent article in the Budapest Sun](#) by American researcher Andrew Ludanyi.*

*On the other hand, in June five Hungarian young men severely beat a Serb in the town of **Temerin**. The Serbian press used this attack as the first sign of Hungarian anger against the Serbs, but failed to mention the previous attacks carried out against local **Hungarians**.*

The crisis has reached a point where the two governments had to begin talks about the situation. Hungarian foreign minister László Kovács phoned Serbian PM Vojislav Kostunica in April to call on Belgrade to “take a firm stance with respect to violent incidents against the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina.”

*Then Hungarian interior minister, Mynika Lamperth said on 18 June during her visit to Subotica that the Hungarian government is concerned about the attacks against local **Hungarians**. “If the Serbia & Montenegro authorities put an end to attacks on the members of minorities and enable them to live a peaceful and safe life, Hungary will do everything in its power to help Serbia & Montenegro prepare well and quickly for European integration processes. Otherwise, we will have to seek the protection of the Hungarian minority through the Council of Europe,” she added.*

At the same time, two major Hungarian-American lobbying groups in the US have begun to focus the attention of American policy-makers on the situation in Vojvodina.

The Belgrade response is not clear. “We do not want to underestimate these incidents in any way but it is a mistake to give them an importance they do not have,” Rasim Ljajic, human and minority rights minister of Serbia and Montenegro, recently told [Reuters](#). Serbian PM Vojislav Kostunica has responded by saying that these racially motivated attacks were “not characteristic of Serbian society.”

After talks with minority leaders, Mr. Kostunica has proposed that a multiethnic police unit be established in Vojvodina “in the very near future.” Local Hungarian leader József Kasza told the Novi Sad daily Dnevnik that this new unit would be deployed in multi-ethnic areas of the province to prevent inter-ethnic problems and incidents such as had occurred over the past seven months. The Belgrade daily Politika responded by warning Kasza that he was “playing with fire.”

In response, the [Hungarian newspaper Nepszabadsag](#) carried an editorial by Gabor Miklos, that posed the rhetorical question, “who is playing with fire?” and threatened that new EU member Hungary could make life difficult for the Serbs:

“...Serbia's European integration is out of the question as long as such incidents happen. The roads will be closed, there will be no talks about a visa-waiver system, investors will not come, and the pressure will not decrease.”