

Protest against the atrocities committed against the Vojvodina Hungarians

**Ladies and Gentlemen,
Honourable members of councils and parliaments!**

The harassment and physical assault of non-ethnic Serbs including children, threats against ethnic Hungarian and pro-autonomy leaders, desecration of cemeteries, vandalism of property and the proliferation of racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic graffiti are becoming near daily occurrences in the province of Vojvodina in Serbia-Montenegro.

HUNSOR – as an independent Non-Profit information resource, which monitors Hungarian minority and human rights issues/events on a daily basis, is seriously concerned by the risk of deteriorating inter-ethnic relations in Serbia, and particularly in Vojvodina.

HUNSOR calls on the Serbian authorities to properly investigate and sanction any ethnically motivated incidents, but also to reinforce the dialogue with the representatives of the minority in order to prevent any attempts to deteriorate the inter-ethnic relations in the country.

HUNSOR is attaching a Protest letter signed by 350 persons living worldwide, which calls upon an immediate action from the Serbian authorities on stopping the atrocities committed against Vojvodina Hungarians and other minorities in Serbia.

After the fall of Milosevic (in october 2000) and the rise of Vojislav Kostunica, it was assumed that the new Yugoslav/Serbian administration would address the question of minorities. Instead, obfuscation, delay and avoidance has characterized the Kostunica policies.

In the Vojvodina, with its almost 300,000 Hungarian minority, this has had ominous consequences.

Since the assassination of Djindjic in the spring of 2003, the Hungarians have been targeted for abuse and mistreatment by the extreme nationalists.

In an increasing crescendo, the Serb nationalist press has been inciting the majority against the Hungarian and the other non-Serb minorities of Vojvodina.

Hungarian and other minority cemeteries and churches have been desecrated. In cemeteries, a whole series of atrocities have occurred during the past year, grave stones, crosses and grave markers have been destroyed in large numbers.

Catholic and Protestant churches have had graffiti sprayed on their walls, frequently in both Cyrillic and Latin script, that "this is Serb land", "the Serb orthodox faith is the faith of the land", "Hungarians go back to Hungary" and, even more to the point, "Death to Hungarians". Beyond the symbolic atrocities, ethnic Hungarians have been targeted for abuse on the streets, in places of entertainment, the workplace and in school yards.

Minority girls have been publicly groped and sexually molested by Serbs to provoke fights, in which minority youngsters almost always end up with severe beatings, in many instances requiring hospital care. School authorities and the local police have turned a blind eye toward these abuses.

After the assaults, when the police belatedly show up, the majority youngsters usually receive mild rebukes, while the minority youngsters may be accused of starting the altercation and at the very least are taken in for questioning. In recent history, Serbs have not been held accountable for their abuse and humiliation of minorities and the incidents have become numerous, almost everyday occurrences, intimidating the minorities with the hidden, but implied agenda of ridding the land of all non-Serbs.

1. HUNSOR is concerned that the situation in Vojvodina, Serbia is threatening the Hungarian population living in the area.
2. It is particularly worrying that the atrocities and maltreatments of the Hungarian population are on the rise.
3. HUNSOR is concerned that the attacks carried out against Hungarian individuals and institutions in Vojvodina mark the deterioration of the situation and status of minorities in Serbia.
4. HUNSOR welcomes the recently adopted laws on autonomy, self-government and the protection of national minorities but notes that the protection of minorities in Serbia is not yet properly ensured and the framework for autonomy is still not satisfactory.
5. HUNSOR notes that particular government policies of helping the Serbian refugees settling down are creating tensions in Vojvodina and that the policies are against the spirit of the adopted law on the protection of national minorities.
6. HUNSOR welcomes the willingness of the Serbian government to co-operate in solving the issue and to prevent further acts of vandalism against Hungarian and other minorities in Serbia.

Therefore, HUNSOR recommends that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe :

- i. to investigate the atrocities committed against Hungarians in Vojvodina
- ii. make efforts to urge Serbian authorities to do their best to identify, prosecute and punish the perpetrators of these crimes;
- iii. take further measures to ensure that the dignity and integrity of minorities including Hungarians in Vojvodina are protected and minority rights in general are respected.

Serbia and Montenegro is a country that has changed enormously, but not yet enough, Milos Budin (Italy, SOC) and Jonas Cekuolis (Lithuania, LDR) conclude that in their report to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the functioning of democratic institutions in Serbia and Montenegro, due for debate in the Assembly's October session.

A draft resolution, submitted by the two Assembly rapporteurs and adopted by the Monitoring Committee in Paris 2004-09-15, therefore concludes that the Assembly should continue to monitor the honouring of commitments and obligations by Serbia and Montenegro.

Serbia and Montenegro has changed, but not yet enough, according to the rapports.

Many have received threatening phone calls. They have been confronted for speaking Hungarian to one another. Gangs of young Serbs have beaten up young Hungarian speakers and ordinary citizens on the streets of Vojvodina, just because they speak Hungarian.

Fortunately, the newly elected Serb president, Boris Tadic, distanced himself from the extremist press and politicians by saying that "this incident should not be used as a pretext to incite national hatreds". He also contended that if the attack was based on ethnic hatred then it should be countered with the most severe application of the law and that this should also be the case when other hate crimes are committed. Indeed, living

memory can testify to the destabilizing effects of national hatreds and the Serbs more than anyone else should be aware that what happened in Bosnia and Kosovo should be prevented from spreading to Vojvodina.

The challenge for Tadic is that many of the evicted Serbs from Krajina, Knin and Kosovo have been re-settled in Vojvodina. This restless mass of about 220,000 refugee Serbs now constitutes 10% of Vojvodina's population.

They are conflict oriented because in their former homelands they have lost their properties, while in their new setting they are envious of the properties of Croats, Hungarians, and other non-Serbs. (Furthermore, many of them still have weapons stashed away from their previous conflicts.)

Most of the trouble stems from this "refugee group". They do not believe in peaceful coexistence with others and they are the most vociferous supporters of the extremists. Finally, Kostunica, "the tuxedoed Seselj", has done nothing to address this issue. This means that Tadic faces potential sabotage. In fact Kostunica has been the master of the double standard.

Just one example of this is his April, 2004 demand for Serb autonomy in Kosovo, but the rejection of Hungarian autonomy in Vojvodina at every level. Another is that during his watch, the war profiteer Serbs have bought up many of the enterprises in Vojvodina, replacing all management level Croat and Hungarian positions with Serbs, and in the downsizing of these enterprises, Hungarian and Croat employees always lose their jobs first.

This ethnically based counter-selective socio-economic policy, has remained in place under Kostunica to the present time. It is hard to believe that all these abuses could exist absent governmental collusion.

The foreign policy formulators of the European Union in particular should be concerned. In the global context of European interests Vojvodina may seem to be of minor significance. But in the overall scheme of consolidating a stable Eastern and South Eastern Europe, the unrest and the polarization of ethnic communities may signal the unravelling of the peace process that followed the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The EU's present focus on the Enlargement issue makes it easy to miss these signals, but such an unraveling could undermine long-term European interests in an important part of the world and destabilize the efforts on peace and stability for whole Europe.

HUNSOR calls on the Serbian authorities to properly investigate and sanction any ethnically motivated incidents to do their very best using all democratic means on stopping the atrocities against Vojvodina Hungarians.

HUNSOR calls on the Hungarian EU EP delegates to take further steps on these issues in front of Council of Europe and in the European Parliament, to propose a new draft resolution, which will include concrete sanctions against Serbia-Montenegro if their authorities fail to do necessary measures on stopping harassment, beatings or any form of human right abuses.

HUNSOR addresses the attention of the minister for minority issues Rasim Ljajic of Serbia-Montenegro, to make all the necessary steps toward stabilization of inter-ethnic tensions in the province of Vojvodina. The harassments, abuse and mistreatment of minorities must come to its end. Serbia and all of its citizens, -after all the wars against those who thought different-, need stability, peaceful democratic prosperity for all of its citizens, including minorities.

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